

Between the Acts of Peace and Polemos: Eros, History, and Jan Patočka

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Abstract

Delving into the individual honeycomb, Virginia Woolf sets off on a literary exploration for the ultimate source that would eventually connect the dissimilar and the disparate. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf, preoccupied with war, reinvestigates the unity and dispersal of *we* in the history of humanity through a community pageant held on a national/family heritage site. The frustration of individuality, the distress between uncommunicative family members and conflicting social groups, the changes of each historical epoch and beyond—each of these mirrors the national and pan-European crisis, reconfirming *Eros* as the grand matrix of modern achievement and social tension. What prevails through history is the “fatal conceit” in human intelligence that differentiates itself from nature but is nonetheless part of nature. Such is the unsolved paradox of human civilization that Jan Patočka raises in his *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, taking war and the demonic eruption of *Eros* as inherent in the light (reason) and peace of the rational, responsible life. Rather than being divisive, war—as the expression of the orgiastic secrecy of humanity, sublated through culture—unifies and touches “that source of all being and is thus divine,” as Patočka concludes. Wedged in Patočka’s contention, this study professes that Woolf, speculating above the origin of contemporary conflict, ingeniously stages the kernel play between human intelligence and *Eros* (the demonic propensity of humans) in *Between the Acts*, extending from the individual to the socio-political sphere that drives history onward. Alternating between war (*Polemos*) and peace, between ages that come and pass, the profound nature of life remains unchanged.

Keywords: history, *Polemos*, *Eros*, nature, intelligence, Jan Patočka, Virginia Woolf

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Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen!
 Then at the wall; and ask how's this
 wall, the great wall, which we call,
 perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built
 by orts, scraps and fragments like
 ourselves? (*Between the Acts*)

Between the Acts (1941) as Virginia Woolf's final reflection on history—a history of Britannia and broadly a history of humanity correlated with Western metaphysics—intentionally re-stages the problematic modern subject in contest for an advancement of life liberated by science and technology. Woolf's attitude towards the modern mechanical world has always been ambivalent. According to Bonnie Kime Scott, Wyndham Lewis “place[s] Woolf in a negative relation to technology and science,” while recent scholars such as Gillian Beer begins to reverse the point (101). The sounds of the modern mechanical world pervade *Between the Acts*, and in Scott's words, “*Between the Acts*, more than any of Woolf's previous novels, is beset with machines and commodities, and it is of a piece with *Three Guineas*” (104).

With its structural conformity to the three unities of a Greek tragedy, the unity of time, place, and action, *Between the Acts* calls for a Nietzschean attention to the present techno-scientific age where grand tragedy gives way to family melodrama, heroic action to conscious paralysis, and the progressive search for meaning to the meaningless halt in the contention of the two world wars. *Between the Acts*, following the criticism on the social plastering of the rift at the heart of modern subjects in *The Years* (1937), questions the organic relation between peace and *Polemos* of modern civilization through a village pageant that reveals “real little incongruous living humour” (*Diary*, 26 April 1938). Modernity though seemingly promises a brave new world where “Each of us a free man; plates washed by machinery; not an aeroplane to vex us; all liberated; made whole. . . .” it also brings on a “civilization in ruins” as “the irreverence of the [young] generation . . . who can't make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole” (*BA* 163-64).¹ And it is here where Woolf's modern aesthetic experimental writing coincides with Jan Patočka's dark, “heretical” intellection of a Western history. For Patočka, peace is only a visage of modern techno-scientific civilization, concealing beneath a drive of life that is first and foremost orgiastic and demonic. Instead as a disruption, war (*Polemos*) is considered by Patočka as an inherent part of what appears to be the

¹ The abbreviation *BA* in citation refers to *Between the Acts* in the following text.

progress and peace of modernity. And, as this article seeks to argue, it is along this re-conceptualization of modernity and the ambivalent mutuality of peace and war, of orderly progress and liberated anarchy, that the disarray voices and the disjointed historical pageant play in *Between the Acts* can best be understood. Delving into the bedrock of the nature of intelligence, *Between the Acts* attributes the conflagration that has troubled Europe intermittently for over three decades to the central controversy between the correlation and conflict of intelligence and its organic body—"a center" around which "all lit" (*Diary*, 26 April 1938).

At the final phase of *Three Guineas*, Woolf, tormented by an acute sense of the emptiness of life incited by the unexpected death of her nephew, Julian Bell, in the Spanish Civil War, starts to conceive a new work that is to be "dialogue: & poetry: & prose" (*Diary*, 6 Aug 1937). At times, Woolf questions: "Oh why was I born in this age? It is a terrible age . . . A veil of insanity everywhere: & whats to be done, save keep pegging round one's little plot?" (*Diary*, 10 March 1938). The unhappiness, the anxiety, and the distress over the inanity of life clouds over Woolf during this period as England awaits for the imminent action of Hitler. At the crisis of a Western civilization when the achievements of human intelligence, rational order and scientific progress, are applied to human destruction rather than the advancement of a better, liberated life from its coarse foundation of the body, Woolf grapples along with her own nervous condition the fatal fallacy of the rational mind to believe in its own independence from the body. Intelligence, the surveillance system, born from the very life instinct located in the body to preserve and prolong itself and thereby first and foremost part of nature, has come to behold the organic life of the body as an object capable of being examined objectively and controlled apathetically. As Jan Patočka retraces through his questioning of "the crisis of modernity," philosophy begins when life is no longer taken for granted as it is, but called into question. Therefore, "what we are wont to call the 'crisis of modernity' and trace to the seventeenth century and its heirs, to Descartes, Hume, and Kant, is actually as old as Socrates" (Kohák 4). This alienation of the mind from the body is what, in Paul Ricoeur's opinion, Patočka discerns as "the quasi-simultaneous origin in Western Europe of *politics*, *philosophy*, and *history*" (*viii*, original emphasis). Patočka, taking up the discourse of Phenomenology left by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger to resolve the Cartesian dualism in the pursuit of science (to know the natural world as it is), transfers the fundamental paradox of life that has induced "the crisis of modernity" from the individual to the whole of European society and argues for "the dominance of war, of darkness and the demonic [that abides] at the very heart of the most rational projects of the promotion of peace" (Ricoeur *viii*). In an attempt

to understand the historical rupture of the early twentieth century that almost renders the progress of the entire Western civilization completely meaningless, Patočka re-interprets the wars as the eruption of the demonic orgiastic energy that is essentially human and essentially part of the techno-scientific civilization. With thus, what is at first perceived as break and discontinuity is re-interpreted and conceived as part of the whole. And such is exactly the essential message of *Between the Acts*: humans have “limit life” to themselves, chopping life, the society, and the world into “scraps, ors and fragments” with their partial understanding, while, in nature, “each is part of the whole” (BA 172-73).

Nora Eisenberg once noted that “the old world dug up in *Between the Acts*, it has been suggested, is the rich old world presided over by the ancient mother goddess” (253). But just as important as the body and the mother goddess, is the father figure of *Polemos* that resides along with the primal urgency of life-preservation. It is in the very life-preservation itself that antagonism and enmity of life begins. Whereas intelligence enshrined by its self-belief in its objective knowledge distinguishes itself as a transcendental being from other external material objects, nature is that common ground where the active thinking *I* and other natural objects are conjoined. For Maria DiBattista, *Between the Acts* portrays “the gaps in time and the leaps in consciousness that constituted the gradual, unrecorded advanced from a state of nature to a state of culture” and construes “‘Present Time’ as an epoch of cultural and personal disintegration” (137-38). Disintegrated, for humans continue to deceive themselves with an ideal image of a transcendental, godlike figure they fashion for themselves (BA 173). Sigmund Freud does take such detachment of the conscious *I* from other material objects to result in “a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling—a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world,” resembling Heidegger’s contention for “openness” (*Civilization* 13). However, by taking that which is pleasuring and therefore much desired by the individual as “nevertheless part not of the ego but of an object,” Freud though recognizing the orgiastic potency of the *id*, perceives it as barbarous and must be contained or civilized (*Civilization* 12-13). The purpose of psychoanalysis is after all to conduct its patient back into accepting the norm of the society and be functionally mentally healthy. Indeed, as Freud’s most truthful critic, Karl Kraus has famously commented: “Psychoanalysis is the disease of which it claims to be the cure” (qtd. in Szasz 24). Also in agreement is Michel Foucault who takes the bourgeoning of psychology and psychoanalytic theory in the nineteenth century as part of “an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy,” diverting the very energy of sex into

a social regulating power that talks about sex (23). In this sense, Freud becomes the very embodiment of that modern institutionalizing power of science that dissects and separates. It is part of that modern political system, once championing reason, order, and peace, but which is now deteriorating into conflict and anarchy that *Between the Acts* has sought to contest. And if critics of *Between the Acts*, as James Naremore has noted, continue to assess the novel by its disjointed quality and find fault with its “extraordinary vacancy and pointlessness,” or failing to conform, it is because they are still more obsessed with the apparent system of unity than the inherent flow of nature and thereby completely miss the point of *Between the Acts* (qtd. in Naremore 220). Just as Naremore has argued, “*Between the Acts*, however, is not an impressionistic hodge-podge, and it should not be attacked for failing to conform to a rather amorphous genre” (220).

The indistinguishable mutuality between the body as a natural object and the transcendental mind quite dismays humans with the suggestion of not only animality but vulnerability and nonmeaning. As Friedrich Nietzsche has suggested and current neuroscientists come to confirm, the first thing which consciousness hides from itself is the body it arises from (115). The desire of the human mind for a meaningful “self” is the key momentum of civilization. Ironically, such desire for meaning is also a primal life-drive, which I refer to as *Eros*, of self-preservation and for the continuation of life. What the body desires in progeny, the mind seeks through distinctive meaning and identity. From Plato, Descartes to Nietzsche, the entire history of Western civilization in correlation to its philosophical paradigms is conducted by an underlying dialectical process between primal human bodily nature and intelligence, which rises from the body but strives to deny its organic origin. The human self-reflexive *I*, enabled by intelligence, has long been recognized as the nucleus for an understanding of the world. Yet, it is also this capacity to rise beyond the self-evident, demanding its justification and apprehending its precariousness, that initiates philosophy and “the care of the soul.” Self-alienation, prompted by intelligence that albeit arises out of a self-preserving instinct estranges and hides the material body from itself. It writes off most of the first-hand interaction with the exterior world. With intelligence, science is made possible, but along with it a full openness to the world is nonetheless impossible. The manifested phenomenon may only be a fragment resulted from percipient partiality which greatly unsettles the human ideology of reality, meaning and truth. Insofar as such, true objectivity is merely an illusion and responsibility for one’s action is almost implausible. “Nature” nevertheless takes her part in the course of human history, and such is the axiom of life which *Between the Acts* attempts to show. In the words of Harriet Blodgett, “*Between the Acts* contemplates how actively ‘nature takes her

part' in human existence, as both outer and inner reality" (28). Through a village pageant festival, secluded in midland England, that is rendered forgetful of the distant war on the European continent, *Between the Acts* as a "cosmic drama" interrogates a making of human history with the backdrop of a perennial nature of life which humans though still embody relentlessly deny (DiBattista 137). Although such nature constantly poses threats against the design of human art and narrative that attempts at meaning and creates history, it is often that which cleaves the orts, scraps and fragments, annihilates the gap, and builds the whole (BA 126).

Patočka begins his *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* with a nutshell of Western metaphysics that has directed the trend of "modern mathematical natural science" and is still greatly caught between a Cartesian dualism and "neutral monism" (Patočka 2). Taking Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* and its struggle with Cartesian dualism as the launching point, Patočka reengages himself with the debate over the corporeality of the mind and the violent nature of life. He reworks "Aristotle's conception of three basic functions of the soul (*psychē*), the vegetative, the animate, and the rational" into acceptance, defence, and transcendence (*ek-sistence*) and places a renewed emphasis upon the interaction between the body and the lifeworld (the *Lebenswelt*) (Kohák 33). With thus, he contends, with what Ricoeur calls a quasi-Nietzschean tone, of a "lived corporeity" which stresses on the movement and process of existence that departs from the implicit immobile substrate of absolute reason. He postulates that underneath the peaceful surface of civilization, of the Apollonian rational daylight, lies permanently the dark orgiastic energy of the night which eludes the control of the mind and problematizes knowledge and responsibility (Martínková 59-60). By shifting from the point of view of the day and the light, of the obvious, to the point of view of the night and the orgiastic, of what is concealed and obscured, that which first appears to be an inaccessible discontinuity of human history begins to yield its internal totality. Adhering to a Nietzschean ambiguity between mysticism and epistemology, romantic aesthetic and existential nihilism, Patočka challenges the hypocrisy of human reason and science to make order, establish meaning and demand responsibility in a transcending position. Patočka's phenomenological reading of history is an approach to resolve the binary opposition of the pure objective and subjective through a continual dialectic process to determine how the irreducible other is perceived and integrated into the subjective narrative. According to Kohák's reading of Patočka, "the meaningful reality of the cosmos and of being human alike are not merely subjective, contingent on arbitrary human preference, but neither are they merely objective, simply there" (7).

Intelligence, as essentially a surveillance mechanism that fears for its own survival, binds the self to an apprehensive awareness of its own mortality and thereby instead of uplifting its freedom, greatly diminishes it. Contrarily, the return to the natural world of life also means “the loss of all security, a loss which completely exposes man and his freedom” (Ricoeur *xi*). Paradoxically, both the desire for freedom and the desire for a secured life are desire for self and life, which I refer to as *Eros*. Such desire for self is the simultaneous spring of the destructive power of the *Polemos* as well as the fountainhead of the establishment of an orderly political system such as the Greek *polis* and its accolade of logic. It is the fundamental momentum of civilization but also the very intrinsic darkness that would eventually overturn civilization, revealing the *Polemos* and danger that is masked by the apparent good and peace. It is that which rouses humanity into endless conflict, and has driven modern Europe into the suicidal warfare of the early twentieth century. For Patočka, the goal of the problematic human in a historical epoch is a “free life as such” (39). Yet, this desire for individual freedom of expression, for “givenness of meaning” is also the source of “discord and struggle” (Ricoeur *xiii*). For, meaning is in eternal conflict with “free life as such” (Ricoeur *xiii*). There is no meaning that is not arbitrary and dogmatic, or identity that does not diminish selfhood. In the end, it is a misplaced hope. Absolute freedom, as Patočka has claimed, is only possible on the anarchic battlefield where all boundaries between the self and other are complete dissolved. While desiring absolute freedom, the immediate confrontation with the unaccountable fluidity of meaning in process, where there is no certainty, *shakes* the self. Ironically, “only by coming to terms with this threat [of uncertainty and permanent precariousness of life], confronting it undaunted, can free life as such unfold; its freedom is in its innermost foundation the freedom of the undaunted” (Patočka 39). *Polemos* is but the dark counterpart of *Eros*. The genuine energy of life is never a placid one, just as it is illustrated in *Between the Acts* how life manifested itself in a bashing assault: “suddenly the starlings attacked the tree . . . A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. 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” (BA 188-89). *Polemos* that lingers behind the trivial domestic affairs and is silenced by the genteel manner of Britannia is as Patočka would have suggested the father of our civilization. *Polemos*, much like the gramophone hidden in the bush, bespeaking the primal desire for a free life as such, is what binds the apparent disarray—“all life, all art, all waifs and strays”—into “a unified whole” (*Diary*, 26 April 1938). With its intermittent, dispersal mechanical voices, the gramophone gurgles how “there is such a thing—you can’t deny it.

What? You can't descry it? All you can see of yourselves in scraps, orts and fragments? Well then listen to the gramophone affirming . . ." and along with such voices, "the whole population of the mind's immeasurable profundity came flocking" (BA 169-70).

Between the Acts, as Woolf's political criticism substantiated through her historical *narrative* and narrative *history* (in the sense of both her literary and political attempts at history), is an appeal for a re-examination of the existing evaluation criteria of our society. Taking the current focus in Woolf scholarship on feminist criticism, Beth Rosenberg comments, "The writing of history *is* political and is always infused with ideology and intent. . . . [T]here are not only many historical narratives in which to place Woolf, but that Woolf herself wrote different kinds of histories" (1112, original emphasis). Woolf not only debunks the fictitious idea of a single default construction of factual history in terms of imperial power and its discourse; she also introduces an image of history flexible to socio-political discourse, effectuating a reconfiguration of historiography. Woolf's writings are never simply a feminist advocacy; her experimental writing comprises a larger scope. Through a reconfiguration of the conventions of the Enlightenment, *Between the Acts* seeks for an explanation of the cruelty and carnage in a highly developed civilization. It is along this line that what I attempt here is *not* another investigation into the "psychic distress" of war, of fascism, of men's desire for power expressed in Woolf, *nor* a continuing feminist discourse on the negotiation of power between the genders (Schneider 95). Instead, prompted by Patočka's questioning of the impossibility of responsibility and the state of decadence that modernity has failed to leave behind, this research stresses Woolf's inclination to pursue among the helter-skelter of events, the common ground that might connect and unify, and answer to the violence of a modern, civilized society. *Between the Acts* aims at what lies perennially throughout each historical act as Blodgett would have suggested. It is with such concern with the enduring theme of humanity that, in the words of Renée Watkins, "a psychology, a philosophy of history, and an ethic are implicit in it" (356). It is the chorus, singing in variations, "all passes but we, all changes . . . but we remain forever the same . . . (the breeze blew gaps between their words)" that sets up the core subject of the book (BA 125). The chorus threads through *Between the Acts*, suggesting "a unified world view" through "a hypothetical group-consciousness" of a desultory life in a highly dynamic world (Watkins 356-58). The "silent moments full of thought and feeling lie between human gestures and determine their meaning," as inferred by Watkins, which further forms the score that stretches throughout *Between the Acts*, prompting a "psychological and indirectly metaphysical" account of the "We" (357). The "We," or the human col-

lective consciousness, “aware of the crucial thoughts and feelings each member is contributing to the shared experience of the moment,” is present throughout Woolf’s works, though never as prominent as in *Between the Acts* (Watkins 358). For Watkins, it is the potential threats from the continent that unify the community. As for Andrea Adolph, the “We” represents “a group ethic akin to her hopes for the post-war future” (443). Apart from these readings, I will argue “the unified world view” runs deeper towards the primordial human condition and momentum: the *Eros* (20).

What Patočka argues through the discourse of phenomenology in *Heretical Essays*, Woolf brings forth in a modernist contemplation through aesthetic dramatization which is very congenial to Patočka. Greatly influenced by his father’s modernist aesthetic critiques, Patočka would definitely prefer “the concrete character of aesthetic form” for an illustration of his philosophical ideas which is primarily a question of being (Vojtech 3). And such is exactly what Woolf has achieved in *Between the Acts*. *Between the Acts* sets the scene of a summer village pageant that takes place at the Oliver family’s residential ground of Pointz Hall. The object of the pageant is “the illumination of our dear old church,” not with enhanced faith but with electric lights (*BA* 173). The pageant play with a rather religious object is employed to challenge the conviction of the modern techno-scientific civilization to liberate life. Ironically, “a free life as such” is carried forth not through peace but rather through war. Pointz Hall, isolated from the European warfare, is fashioned as a modern Arcadia, which promotes modern life as it suppresses fear for the imminent invasion of the German aeroplane. This seemingly earthly Elysium which is still intact from the perversion of modernity that has developed into a pan-European confrontation provides neither the security for the private self nor a free life as such. And yet, apprehension though silenced pervades individual consciousness and threads throughout the Oliver family and the rural community. For Frank Kermode, *Between the Acts* purposely dramatizes, at this historical junction, the Hegelian dialectic process of antitheses, aiming at a final agreement. Jean Wyatt, who traces the intertextuality of *Between the Acts* and E. M. Forster’s *Abinger Harvest*, suggests that *Between the Acts* portrays “the eternal round of the seasons endures forever beneath the changing surface of civilization” through the congenial theme of “the continuity of country life” (93). In spite of which, both fail to discern the significance of an immeasurable monstrosity seated within the apparent peace of modern civilization and only through Patočka one begins to realize the intrinsic frenzy of modernity. The pageant play that stages separate “Scenes from the English History” on the open-air terrace ground of Pointz Hall expressively conveys the strain of human effort to make history and meaning in

defiance of a natural ground that ousts the particularity and significance of human achievement. From the Oliver family members (Bart and his widowed sister, Lucy Swithin, Giles and his wife, Isa), the country genteel and villagers, to the nation at large, the conflict between nations, ethnic groups, classes and family members on the surface conjoins to point towards the utmost discordance issued from a submerged human nature, the *Eros*. And with the discharge of *Eros*, *Polemos* arises. The fragmentation and disputation on the social level is the outward expression of this paradoxical internal discordance. Through conceptual conductance, this “ancient batter[y]” of *Eros* is channelled into a drive for spiritual attainment of self rather than corporeal reproduction of self (*BA* 44). Therefore, Bart clings to “reason” and “solitude,” Lucy Swithin relies on superstition and religion, and Isa and Miss La Trobe, the director of the pageant play, devote themselves to the poetic flow and artistic vision (*BA* 183). Each of which is a delivery of *Eros*.

The opening prelude successfully introduces the fundamental controversy of civilization with a discussion of a cesspool and the lack of water supply. Both the cesspool and sexual implications are the most prominent signs of defilement of the living body, which the rational mind and civilization as a whole seek to screen off from acknowledgement. The abject, the wasted, the deceased, the process of procreation, etc., perhaps remind the civilized rational mind of human fatality itself. The once familiar and homogenous become estranged, as theorized by Freud’s uncanny and Julia Kristeva’s abject. To wash oneself clean of any remaining connection to animality (faeces, menstrual blood, the corpse, etc.) becomes the crucial criterion of a civilization. According to Michelle N. Mimplitsch, the various controversial issues in *Between the Acts*—homosexuality, madness, idiocy, rape, and sexual violence—are an illustration of such a crisis, when “one’s conception of oneself as an intelligent, ‘clean and proper,’ person” is challenged (37). It is in this sense that the lack of water supply for the cesspool forms a perfect opening for *Between the Acts*, a work that anchors on this denial of nature. The shortage of water leads towards an unbearable exposure to a nature that human civilization has endeavoured to deny through the Hegelian sense of *Aufheben*, a complex notion of at once “cancelling” and “transcending,” as well as “preserving.” In abjection, that which is most human is rejected. And in sublation, humans invest in an image of an absolute Other, God, the self-blinded belief of himself as a responsible individual. In denial of the bodily abject, the egotistic *Eros* is also obscured and idealized into a sacrificial love for the other due to the reverence as well as fear for that absolute Other which transfigures into a permanently present internal voice. And just as Mrs. Swithin rightly questioned, “who makes sex susceptible to beauty” (*BA* 185)? In the light of the

Western patriarchal God, the inexorable human venality is sublated, “the love . . . that they should give to flesh and blood they give to the church” (BA 23). *Eros*, in accordance with the Platonic division, is split between pure sacrificial love and carnal possessive appetite, between the light of God which one must elevate oneself towards and the darkness of the human body that one must abject. Whilst any direct gaze at the light of the absolute Other is petrifying, the wild, orgiastic nature within “I” is *Aufgehoben* (transposed) into a cultural fancy and apprehension over the nightly feminine beauty, fatal and alluring. When “the ancient batteries”—the *eros*—are “furbish[ed],” both destruction and regeneration await (BA 44). The prelude, the drawing room scene, trumpets the theme of *Between the Acts*, entwined on “a joint history of the subject, responsibility, and Europe,” where the orgiastic mystery is surpassed but retained by the divine Other in Christian tradition (Derrida 4). “In the proper sense of the word, religion exists once the secret of the sacred, orgiastic, or demonic mystery has been, if not destroyed, at least integrated, and finally subjected to the sphere of responsibility” (Derrida 4).

When self image is in conflict with one’s natural desire that cannot be thoroughly removed, a scapegoat is always welcome, for the transportation of a personal sin onto a social abject helps to relieve the guilt of unachievable responsibility and preserves an intact image of the self. The various exhibitions of nonconformity, deformity, wildness, material nature, the “ungovernable”—as characterized by women (Lucy Swithin, Isa Oliver, Mrs. Manresa, the self-invited guest, and Miss La Trobe, the bossy director of the pageant) or by the village idiot and William Dodge, the unmanly man—bear the social blame for revealing a human nature, though alienated, still weighing down on human rational society. Take Mrs. Manresa for instance: her gesture, tone, and character seem to affect everything, making the world ripe, sensuous in free flow. She, “the wild child,” “whose nature [is] somehow ‘just human nature,’” is the very embodiment of human *Eros* (BA 92). “She looked . . . goddess-like, buoyant, abundant, her cornucopia running over” (BA 107). In terms of her, the narrative is suffused with erotic infatuation. Around her, men orient themselves: “Giles would keep his orbit so long as she weighted him to the earth” (BA 107). She is indeed “the wild child” of nature, who disregards social decorum (BA 51). And a further breach of the social creed is effected by her implicit sensual relationship with Giles, with whom she is seen by Isa to come out of the greenhouse together: “The door was kicked open. Out came Mrs. Manresa and Giles” (BA 140). People, who cannot even be honest about the taste of tea and praise the tea while “it [is] like rust boiled in water”, enjoy following in the wake of Mrs. Manresa, as she will take the blame (BA 93). She relieves the desire with straightforward expres-

sion and decision, but she also shoulders the responsibility for “the breach of decorum”: “Vulgar she was in her gestures, in her whole person, over-sexed, over-dressed for a picnic. But what a desirable, at least valuable, quality it was—for everybody felt, directly she spoke, ‘she’s said it, she’s done it, not I’” (BA 37). Although temporary relief from order is welcome, any suggestion of negligence of propriety or exposure of human nature provokes anxiety. The very presence of the village idiot, with his full disregard of social delicacy, makes the genteel society feel “creepy.” In the idiot, one perceives the most deep-seated nature, dissembled by culture. Therefore, people squint at the sight of the idiot who has no respect for the code of manners, deceiving themselves that they are withal different, but, in truth, “there’s a sense in which we all, I admit, are savages still” (BA 179).

Strained with *Eros*, there is anger, hatred and horror as well as love and possessiveness. Unable to act freely, each character is seemingly forced into passivity, a mere audience, helplessly watching history being enacted: “This afternoon he wasn’t Giles Oliver come to see the villagers act their annual pageant; manacled to a rock he was, and forced passively to behold indescribable horror” (BA 55). As mere spectators, “they were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo” (BA 159). The bristling of war and the rape of the Whitehall guard are both real but distant just as the scenes from British History staged by the villagers. However, such passivity of the audience is in fact what *Between the Acts* has reversed. The very title itself indicates the intervals, both the intervals of real history as well as the ones of the performance and with thus, *Between the Acts* actually features and accentuates the participation of the audience as well as their responsibility in the historical present. The audience who take themselves as passive receivers are rather active meaning engenderers. By staging it on the open-air terrace, Miss La Trobe not only submits her performance to the mercy of the weather, but also to that of the audience. Constantly cursing her audience for destroying the vision she wants to transfer to them, Miss La Trobe nonetheless enlists her audience’s engagement. Even though they are passive perceivers, they must “see” her vision. Otherwise, the performance would be a complete failure. But, each audience in believing their own passivity shuns responsibility from history just as the community shies from the warfare on the European continent. They do not see their part in history as well as in the play, until right at the end, when Miss La Trobe “exposes” them to and “douches” them “with present-time reality” (BA 161). The audience being caught by the array of mirrors and anything that reflects, forcing them to look upon their own broken image, and each is more or less left baffled and offended rather than assured

by the final presentation of “Ourselves”: “But that’s cruel. To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts . . . That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair” (BA 165). They are forced to see their own contribution to the making of the historical present time, their part in the historical narrative and therefore to be responsible for the act of both the play as well as the European warfare: “we all act all parts” (BA 177). There’s no shunning from history nor from responsibility. The meaning of the history play, is eventually left afloat among the audience’s unfocused and disjointed chatter as if taunting the very effort of human history, which is always a partial presentation, to make definite meaning. It is by the very attempt, through the effacement of the author as Miss La Trobe hides herself among the bushes from the interrogation of the audience, not to limit meaning that the play becomes most alive and prolific.

The gaps of human history are left for nature to build up, although the deliberate oblivion of war scenes is conspicuous as well as suspicious: “why leave out the Army . . . if it’s history? And if one spirit animates the whole, what about the aeroplanes” (BA 178). In order to effectuate such a vision of history, Miss La Trobe takes her chance against the unpredictable English weather. With thus, a unity is achieved through the natural resonance between the external natural world and the internal nature of humans, bringing what the polite society wishes to obscure from the surface of their consciousness, the natural frenzy of life that is now manifesting itself through the war in Europe, back into view. When the narrative of human history fails, it is nature, as if goaded by *Eros*, revealing the raw yearning for life, that “annihilate[s] the gap”; “bridge[s] the distance”; “fill[s] the emptiness”; and “continue[s] the emotion” (BA 126). Under cultural inhibition, “desires petered out, suppressed by the leaden duty [one owes] to others” (BA 62). Dry, strained, and stifling, this summer day in 1939, echoing across the decade with *The Waste Land*, “mixing/Memory and desire, stirring/Dull roots with spring rain,” is enswathed with a sense of desolation as well as with the throes of rebirth (Eliot 2-4). *Polemos*, just as *Eros*, reminding humans of their primitive nature that they still must abide, horrifies modern society. The narrative towards the end of *Between the Acts* gradually builds towards a final outburst of the curbed emotions, when one is relieved of society: “Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace” (BA 197). Such ebullition is not just an echo of the European warfront, but also an analogy of the immense liberation of self in war as well as in sex, as Patočka has argued. Although real human history alternates between war and peace, the pageant completely leaves out any military scenes from its history of England, chopping history further into orts

and fragments. The choice of scenes is rather unsound to Colonel Mayhew: "Why leave out the British Army? What's history without the Army" (BA 141). The deliberate oblivion of war and dissension is but an analogy of the general attitude of the human belief in the good and peace brought by progress and science.

As far as the meaning of life, humanity, and history is concerned, the irreconcilable correlative energy between reason and emotion are bound up in a word—*Eros*. Reason, a personified character in the pageant play who takes the reign of the seventeenth century, ends with an almost enigmatic epigram: "The God of love is full of tricks / Into the foot his dart he sticks / But the way of the will is plain to see / . . . / Where there's a will there's a way" (BA 133). The wordplay mocks the fatal conceit of humans in taking the literal meaning as well as the illusion in their rational ability to rise above the will of life and "the will to life," which "manifests itself as sexual desire in general" (Murdoch 67). It promptly accentuates a cosmic irony through the ideology of the age of reason. The almost profane faith in the good of human rationality undercuts a more truthful understanding of nature and the way of life. Despite all sensible plotting and insistence on the precision of the meaning of words, still emotion prevails and natural contingency gets the upper hand; still unforeseeable events intercede, goaded by *Eros* or by "God's will" (that needs not answer for itself). It is taken that humans blessed with self-reflexive intelligence are capable of responsibility. God only stands for unconditional love and the ultimate responsibility that humans as intelligent beings have internalized. The problem with this belief and its possible disillusionment, as the whole of Europe suffers from "a demonic rapture," to make use of Jacques Derrida's reading of Patočka, is what *Between the Acts* expressly portrays. When the illusion of humanity's immense intellectual capacity to transcend the material nature has failed, one is instantly confronted with death, with human mortality. As Miss La Trobe demonstrated through the pageant play, *Eros*—the primal appetite as well as the spring of the spirit—is the thread that unites. With the effusion of *Eros* and the relaxing of form, the illusion of reason to discipline the body and the material world is unveiled, enabling a more genuine emotional flow of self. Both Bart and Giles, father and son, are constrained by the socio-cultural norm to be rational and appropriate, yet under the influence of champagne and Mrs. Manresa, their insistence on logic and adequacy relaxes. Bart, with Mrs. Manresa by his side, would rather take up the youthful dream of life and death induced by *Eros*, while Giles, released from a sense of guilt, could finally take real action. As Giles has intuited, "she [Mrs. Manresa] was a thorough good sort, making him feel less of an audience, more of an actor" (BA 97). Such a free flow of feeling that creates

unison is often taken as illusion that blinds one from proper judgement and incites unreasoned action. Responsibility is thus made questionable. But, illusion serves a paradoxical role in *Between the Acts*. It connotes both the modern belief in the rational superman and the natural mystery intuited by the imagination of the poet. And which is the true illusion? Miss La Trobe appeals to the illusion of art as the only means to free oneself from the separatist perspective, and arrives at a vision of unification. As the shattered glasses reflect the separatist vision back onto her audience and force them to recognize how the separatist vision has screened off various aspects of self and of life, diversity and unity is simultaneously achieved.

The intervals offset the continuity of the pageant play, but in destroying the wholeness of the dramatized illusion, a further unity, which transcends the barrier of art and nature, is achieved. Just as the voice of the epilogue that invites us to break through the common “rhythm” and “forget the rhyme” and honestly sees ourselves as “liars,” “thieves,” who are none but the same as “the gun slayer, bomb droppers here or there” (BA 168). Perhaps the only difference is that “they do openly what we do slyly” (BA 168). It is rather through the shattered image of “Ourselves” that a truer vision of unison is conceived. The scraps, orts, and fragments are most effectuated through the whimsical, unfocused Mrs. Swithin, the constantly improvising Isa Oliver, the outcast Miss La Trobe, the disrespectful Mrs. Manresa and the innocent village idiot. Each in her/his own way defies social order and institutional dogma. As it is chanted by the impersonal voice of the gramophone, “Ding dong. Ding . . . if we don’t jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same” reversing the original appeal of a rational, idealistic society for regulative conformity towards a communal experience in the echoes of feeling and emotion (BA 180). In the words of Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Between the Acts* exemplifies an amiable comedy that, in debunking the ethics and enforcing unity of the time, pre-sages a more inclusive wholeness of community among its fragments, while the verbal meaning of the chorus as it is disrupted by the wind “leads to a further decentering: not only is the individual voice repositioned as a part of the collective voice, but anthropocentric vision is replaced by an integrated vision of humanity and nature” (282). As for Sally A. Jacobsen, “Woolf values the comic effect of joviality and magnanimity” and in the very “comic spirit,” she contrives a way to break through “the pretentiousness and solemnity” of “dogmatism” (216). Through women and children, “the comic spirit” is ministered, “because their eyes are not clouded with learning nor are their brains chocked with the theories of books’ and they are able to see things as they are” (qtd. in Jacobsen 216). In the comic effect of Mrs. Swithin’s

flimsy mind, a unity is achieved, upsetting Bart's rational separatist's conception of the world: "For she belonged to the unifiers; he to the separatists" (*BA* 106).

In an undertone, *Between the Acts*, with its "hybrid and contrapuntal" comedy and tragedy, prose and poetry, reflects in form the internal dialectic process between reason and emotion that prompted the philosophical achievements of the Greeks in both personal meaning and political governing (McWhirter 790). Patočka takes historical progress "as a rising above decadence, as the realization that life hitherto had been a life in decadence and that there is or that there are possibilities of living differently than by toiling for a full stomach in misery and need" (102-03). Patočka claims "that history is foremost a history of the soul": how it estranges itself from its primitive status and primal needs, and then in such estrangement, through an inner dialogue, struggles continually to reunite a sense of self-responsibility with that which is authentic and inevitable (103). He takes the Platonic philosophers as those who triumph over death, not through escape, but in the care of death: "Life (eternal) is born of this direct look at death, of an overcoming of death (perhaps it is nothing but this 'overcoming')" (105). Such, as Patočka argues, is the immortality of the soul under Platonic doctrine: "the result of the confrontation of the orgiastic with responsibility" (105). The Greek philosophical delineation of *Eros* is an attempt to solve the primal paradox of human life more than two thousand years before Freud; though demonic, *Eros* can be diverted and transformed into an energy that goads humanity towards spiritual attainment. The problematic but nonetheless necessary relation between the rational mind and the emotional body occupied much of Greek philosophy, while the capacity to surpass the subjective lens and reach a pure objective "Good" still remains critical to modernity. It is in this sense that one must conclude that orgiastic (or, demonic) nature, rather than being "removed," "is disciplined and made subservient," and remains essential to the modern civilization that rests on a dual conceptual system: a Platonic philosophy incorporating Christian theology (106). In the stirring of the once subordinated *Eros* and its unaccountable orgiastic potency which reawakens a persistent fear of that which is as irrational and unpredictable as the weather, the uncertainty of which haunts the *Olivers* and puts humanity and civilized society at stake. Ironically, the demonic destruction that dishevels the entire Europe is brought about by a fascistic enthusiasm to restore order.

As Woolf's last critical insight into the latent discordance that erupts into pan-European genocide, the repeated concern over the weather in *Between the Acts* serves as a recurrent chime—not simply to stand for English obsessions over weather, but a more general human issue concerning the eternal conflict, resting in the kernel of humanity's own nature, from which grows both the good and

evil of civilized progress. Out of the survival instinct, humans develop a higher sense of consciousness that is capable of placing itself not just in the immediate physical context but also in a context of personal history, as well as gaining a deeper sense of human life history. An apprehension of the perils of nature is the primary momentum that drives humans to devise various self-protecting strategies and mechanisms. Nevertheless, the greatest irony of the twentieth century is that it is these defence mechanisms that will later evolve into a major threat against all humanity. Desire for “Good,” for progress, convenience, and for ultimate dominance over one’s destiny leads humans frantically towards the absolute embrace of reason. The rational, intelligent mind, capable of reaching beyond itself to form a contextual survey, is also what blinds humans from their ultimate nature: the nature of self-preservation is always selfish and almost demonic; it is a nature subservient to reason but never tamed by it. Claiming the capability to override the nonsensical, hardwired, bodily appetite (*Eros*), the rational mind mistakes its own independence from the body that forms and sustains it. The pageant play ends with “Ourselves” (BA 160). The audience asks, “But what could she know about ourselves?” (BA 160). The reflection in pieces nevertheless captures the most genuine aspect of “Ourselves,” long masked by manners and propriety that take only a single fragment of life as a whole. And with such a disruption of the superficial perfection and tranquillity, “the reticence of nature was undone, and the barriers which should divide Man the Master from the Brute were dissolved” (BA 165). It is a most adequate portrait of what the two consecutive wars have achieved: breaking up the composed outward form of a modern civilized society and laying bare the inner nature that one shies from. On the verge of the possible destruction of humanity by the very hands of humans, *Between the Acts* evokes, in resurrecting Greek tragedy, the thematic warning over human hubris (born out of an ignorance of one’s humanly state) in challenging the laws of nature. In a Shakespearean comedy that successfully creates an ironic distance in hearty empathy, Woolf’s play-novel brings forth a human interaction of modern society in silence, in miscommunication, in treachery. Probing deep into the dishonesty of polite society, one touches upon a profound deceit, as the intelligent mind hides its elemental nature from itself. To reverse the dishonesty of modern society and correct its disharmony, *Between the Acts* seeks to actualize a return to a pastoral organic unity in both personal and social terms, to rebalance intelligence and its natural ground through recognition and acceptance rather than denial and suppression.

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《幕幕之間》： 情慾、歷史與亞恩·帕托什卡的 《歷史哲學異論》

摘要

本論文試圖以亞恩·帕托什卡的《歷史哲學異論》(Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*)探討英國作家吳爾芙(Virginia Woolf)的作品《幕幕之間》(*Between the Acts*)中對於二十世紀初兩大世界大戰與人類歷史循環的反思。吳爾芙在《幕幕之間》藉由一場英國小鄉鎮為教會募款的露天歷史劇帶出人類歷史上諸多衝突的原點乃是智能與情慾間的矛盾，這種矛盾致使得人類戰爭衝突不可避免，卻也是推動歷史的原動力。情慾是人類生存驅動力的表徵，人類高度的智能則是本於人類肉體生存驅動力而生，然而其生成卻也是為了控制這有勇無謀的生存驅動力。此矛盾深植於人類的科技文明裡，無法被化解。畢竟所謂的文明只是藉由科技所帶來的便利生活鞏固人類與動物，人類與自然間的區隔，強化人類近乎神性的理智與自信，進而以書寫文字的留存與生命意義的傳遞來超越人類有限的生命。但這一切，觀念性的轉化多於本質上的改變，人類的智能與科技並非真能改變人自然的本性，遑論人類文明的成就正是倚仗著人類基本生存的驅動力。因此，人類的歷史也可以說是一部生於自然、受制於自然的人類，卻自負地奢望能夠征服自然的徒勞奮鬥史。帕托什卡在《歷史哲學異論》中，強調在看似光明與理性的科技文明裡其實包裹著人類那最初深具破壞力的情慾生存動力，此動力是人類共有確也是致使人類分化的開始。而吳爾芙的《幕幕之間》，從個人的情慾表達挫折、文明社會裡禮儀對於個人情慾表現的規範、乃至於國際間因利益衝突而激發的全面性戰爭，層層呼應，評判國際軍事對抗、社會分化、與個人對生命的焦慮與失望，皆可回溯到人類智能與情慾間的基本矛盾。

關鍵字：歷史，戰爭，情慾，自然，智能，亞恩·帕托什卡，吳爾芙