

The Contingency of History: Gender and Darwinian Temporality in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

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It would be ambitious beyond my daring. . .to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided . . .

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Between the Acts (1941), Virginia Woolf's posthumous work, has been regarded as a highly political novel. Set in June 1939, just before the war broke out, the novel is conscious of the presence of war. In the novel, the playwright Miss La Trobe directs a village pageant representing the history of England. Her pageant consists of four historical periods: the Shakespearean, Restoration comedy, the Victorian, and the modern period. The purpose of the pageant-making which started in 1905, according to Ayako Yoshino, lies in that "it unified communities and was of patriotic importance" (1). It is not difficult to imagine that a village pageant was positively contributing to an upsurge of nationalism in the imminent threat of World War II around the time when Woolf conceived her last novel *Between the Acts*. Despite such a political intention of a pageant-making that Yoshino has pointed out, the pageant in *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe's reproduction of the history of England performed by villagers, meet with accidents due to the collapse of the conventional power dynamics among the author, the actors, and the audience.

Recently, and especially in the last decade, criticism on *Between the Acts* has mainly centres on the pageant within the historical context.

Acknowledging the political intention of pageant-plays in the context of the rise in nationalism in the 1930s, Jed Esty sees Woolf's reproduction of the pageant in *Between the Acts* as her challenge "against the nationalism of shared goals (imperial mission)" (90). Employing Freud's group psychology, Melba Cuddy-Keane's discussion also demonstrates Woolf's reproduction against fascism to be the form of comic subversion. Galia Benziman, on the other hand, who challenges the predominant notion that, in the issue of the public and the private, Woolf pursues for the public in *Between the Acts*, argues that Woolf has been driven "back ... in the direction of the personal and the subjective" (54). In the recent criticism, Jackson Ayres reads *Between the Acts* in the context of invasion literature by highlighting Woolf's fears for invasion while writing the novel (628-50).

Quite a few critics detect the spirit of resistance against the imminent war in *Between the Acts*, some arguing from the perspective of gender and others from that of politics. The issue of women has been discussed by critics such as Jane Marcus, Eileen Barrett, and Catherine Wiley, most of them focussing on Miss La Trobe, the silent author of the pageant. Discussing Woolf's attempt of portraying Miss La Trobe as compared to an ancient Greek poet Sappho, Marcus sees her as "the woman artist's honest portrait of the woman artist" (95). Similarly, Wiley argues that Miss La Trobe's reproduction of the history of England undermines the patriarchal oppression on women. She writes that "these triple subversions—of theater, of history, and of realism—create the base for Woolf's feminist, pacifist polemic in this novel" (3-4). Maroula Joannou focusses on the issue of women through her discussion on Englishness in *Between the Acts*. While noting that "Englishness in *Between the Acts* is constituted as a racialized norm against which 'others' like the uninvited Mrs Manresa ... and the mysterious Miss La Trobe are coded as outsiders and interlopers" (23), Joannou writes that "Woolf's commitment to the ideal of women as global citizens could hardly be represented pictorially in a pageant that consists largely of a jogtrot through four periods of English literary history" (23-24). She

argues that the aim of *Between the Acts* is not to legitimate the position of women in a patriarchal society but to imply the marginality of their position through Miss La Trobe's pageant.

As for the novel's connection with prehistory, Gillian Beer, who has conducted extensive research on Woolf and prehistory, has uncovered Woolf's keen interest in Darwin's writings, whose influence is revealed significantly in her later writing practice. In fact, Woolf was closely related to the Darwins: her father Leslie Stephen is a friend of Charles Darwin (Maitland 300); the Woolfs were invited for dinner by Darwin's daughter Elizabeth in 1902 (*Letters* I 52); Woolf's first cousin Florence Henrietta married to Darwin's son Francis in 1913; Woolf's intimate friend Eily, with whom she had been occasionally corresponding, married to Darwin's grandson in 1906. While writing *The Pargiters*, the working-title of *The Years* (1939), Woolf referred to Nora Barlow Darwin for an enquiry about the relating document (*Diary* IV 142). Nora is Darwin's granddaughter who found his unpublished manuscripts on *The Voyage of Beagle*. In March and June 1940, while writing *Between the Acts*, Woolf conceives the idea of writing a chapter on *The Voyage of Beagle* in *The Common Reader* (*Diary* V 274); Darwin's book was included among Woolf's possessions she salvaged after the Blitz in October this year.

Bearing in mind the notable changes Woolf made in the process of writing *Between the Acts*, this paper discusses the influence of the Darwinian theories on the work. Focussing on Lucy Swithin, who is strongly linked with the Darwinian concept of prehistory, I explore the way in which the Darwinian idea of temporality relates to Woolf's attempt of rewriting a history of England through the pageant full of unforeseen contingencies. *Between the Act* has three surviving drafts: the earlier typescript, the later typescript and the final typescript.¹ The earlier typescript reveals that Woolf made quite a few changes in the process of finishing up *Between the Act*, in which we can find the significant influence of Darwin on the novel. Exploring the way the pageant is gendered in *Between the Acts*, I argue that by nodding to the Darwinian idea of temporality Woolf attempts to write an alternative history.

In *Between the Acts*, characters are forced to confront prehistory in a chronological order from the outset. The site chosen for the cesspool is “on the Roman road” (1). Woolf writes: “From the aeroplane... you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars” (1). The description foregrounds all those historical times such as the time of “the Britons,” of “Romans,” of “the Elizabethan manor house” and of “the Napoleonic wars.” While the published text emphasises the chronology of the events in history in the description of the landscape at the outset of the novel, such a chronological line of history is not depicted in the earlier typescript from which Woolf had made an extensive revision in the process of its publication. In the earlier typescript, Woolf writes:

Oh beautiful and bounteous light on the table; oil lamp; ancient and out-of-date oil lamp; upholding as on a tawny tent the falling grey draperies of the dusk; seen across the valley; not a wandering light like the car’s; but steady; assurance to the next house over there in the darkness that the [fleet] <ships> have reached harbour after the day’s toil: circled by gaitered legs; slippered feet; and dogs couchant . . . (*Pointz Hall* 33, hereafter *PH*)

In contrast to the passages in the published text which foreground prehistory, the above quotes in the earlier typescript foreground human history by elaborating on the interior of Pointz Hall. It should be noted that here Woolf describes in detail an “oil lamp” and the way the “light” gleams, and this reference to a lamp, which could be seen an outcome of a human invention, implies Woolf’s preoccupation with civilisation. But Woolf deletes these descriptions in the published text; instead, she draws readers’ attention to the events in history in a chronological order.

Woolf’s attention to history is more clearly manifested in the description of the library in Pointz Hall in the published text than the one in the earlier typescript. The description of the library in Pointz Hall

in the published text dramatises Woolf's concern in prehistory. In the earlier typescript, the narrator draws attention to a collection of canonical literature in the library: "there was the whole of literature here; from Chaucer opposite the window to the latest bright-jacketed nursling which like the current flower—primrose, tulip, or daffodil as the case might be—had sprung on Smith's Railway bookstall only last Wednesday" (PH 48). From Jeffrey Chaucer's works to books bought on "Smith's Railway bookstall," now WH Smith, the library has a variety of books. As Richard Cavendish suggests, "Smith's Railway bookstall" represents the modern habit of reading on train journeys.² Thus, Woolf's description of the library in an earlier draft does not provide any room to associating itself with prehistory. The above mention of a train journey is followed by a discussion on Chaucer. Calling him "the great originator of this still-continuing conversation or argument or song" (PH 49), the narrator writes: "About Chaucer there was apt to be some [argument] <discussion>, whether or not he was still readable" (PH 49). After discussing further the readability of Chaucer's works (PH 49), the narrator goes on to refer to Christopher Marlowe thus: "And so to poetry again—Marlowe. ... Marlowe, it was said, invented blank verse" (PH 51-52). The narrator not only engages him/herself in literary discussion but also refers to books on science thus: "Or Science. Darwin's *Descent of Man* [*sic*]" (PH 54). It is very significant that here the narrator mentions *The Descent of Man* (1871), for, though written by the same author of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), *The Descent of Man* relates human evolution with the Darwinian theory of sexual selection. Therefore, the earlier typescript reveals that Woolf does not provide a specific focus on prehistory at an early stage of writing *Between the Acts*.

In the published text, on the other hand, a prehistoric taste is illuminated in the description of the library at Pointz Hall. The library is described through the thought of Isa, one of the characters, instead of the narrator:

Yet as a person with raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop

over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem; a life. The life of Garibaldi. The life of Lord Palmerston. Or perhaps not a person's life; a country's. *The Antiquities of Durham; The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham*. Or not a life at all, but science—Eddington, Darwin, or Jeans. (11)

Through Isa's eyes Woolf introduces various genres of books such as "poem(s)," biographies—"a person's life"—, antiquities—"a country's [life]"—and "science." The shift from the earlier typescript to the published text in terms of the description of the books in the library at Pointz Hall discloses Woolf's increasing concern in history and prehistory; the ongoing deeper discussion on literature in the earlier typescript has disappeared.³ At the same time, the deletion of the title of the book "Darwin's Descent of Man" (*PH* 54) in the published text could be thought of as reflecting Woolf's intention of focussing more on popular science in her contemporary Britain than on specific discussions such as the issue of the sexual difference—a subject for which *The Descent of Man* is notable.

Just as the description of the bookshelf changes from the earlier typescript to the published version, so the title of the book which Lucy Swithin is reading also undergoes a significant change. Mrs. Swithin, who is described as "the indigenous, the prehistoric" (126), plays an important role in Woolf's rewriting of history in *Between the Acts*. In an earliest draft, Mrs. Swithin is reading a book "on the antiquity of man" (*PH* 42); in a later draft, believed to have been written in October 1940, the book is referred to as "on Outline of Science" (*PH* 254). The published text, however, opens and closes with the scene in which she is reading a prehistoric section in "an Outline of History" (4). Woolf's reading notebook discloses that she read various history books: Lord Macaulay's *History of England* (1848), Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89), Edward A. Freeman's *History of the Norman*

Conquest of England (1867–76), George Macaulay Trevelyan's *History of England* (1926), even Jane Austen's *The History of England* (1791), and several others. Woolf must have read her close friend H. G. Wells' *Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind from Primordial Life to Nineteen-Sixty* published in 1919. All of these books except for Trevelyan's and Wells' open with the coronation of kings. The opening line of Lord Macaulay's *History of England*, for instance, reads: "I purpose to write the history of England from the accession of King James the Second down to a time which is within the memory of men still living" (7). The book covers the seventeenth-century England. On the other hand, Trevelyan's *History of England* and Wells' *Outline of History* are the only ones among the above listed books to begin with prehistory.

An *Outline of History*, the finalised title of the book Mrs. Swithin is reading, together with the passage she is reading, foregrounds the sense of prehistory in the novel. Brenda Silver, an editor of Woolf's reading notebook, suggests that the passage Mrs. Swithin is reading could be the one in Trevelyan's *History of England* (18). An opening page of Section One "Early Man. Iberian and Celt" in Part One of the book reads:

It is not my purpose to describe pre-insular Britain and the great geologic changes, volcanoes, the rise and fall of mountains, the tropical swamps in which the coal forests grew, or the industrious building of the chalk downs under the sea. ... It was probably at the great spring-time of northern Europe, after the glacial epoch, that the soil of the future Britain was first trodden by *homo sapiens*, unequivocal man. (5)

The book opens with the references to such geologic changes as "volcanoes, the rise and fall of mountains," and so on; but of course, it is not a book on geology. Trevelyan opens his narrative of history with the period in which "*homo sapiens*" emerges. What the above passage foregrounds is an evolutionary process from prehistory to history.

Likewise, Wells' *Outline of History* opens as follows: "This *Outline of History* is an attempt to tell, truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative, the whole story of life and mankind so far as it is known to-day" (1). In fact, the opening chapter of the book is entitled "The Earth in Space and Time" in which Wells explicates the beginning of the earth. Wells suggests that history and prehistory are seen as "one continuous narrative." Those two opening passages throw light on the link which I assume to exist between Mrs. Swithin and Darwin's theory of evolution. In *Between the Acts* readers encounter prehistory through Mrs. Swithin's reading about this period—a period "when entire continent ... was all in one" (4)—a phrase added in the later draft, in "an Outline of History" (4). Inspired by the opening passages of Trevelyan's and Wells' books, the above phrase in *Between the Acts* emphasises the significance of prehistory as well as history.

A close examination of the earlier typescript further corroborates the link between Mrs. Swithin and the Darwinian evolutionary theory. The description of Mrs. Swithin as "the indigenous, the prehistoric" appears only in the published text. In one scene, Mrs. Swithin talks about swallows flying every year from Africa while everybody else talks about the pageant: "They come every year ... the same birds" (63); "They come every year. ... From Africa" (64). The passage "As they [swallows] had come, she supposed, when the Barn was swamp" (64) is added in the published text. By reminding readers of the prehistoric era when the area must have been "swamp," Woolf highlights prehistory. Beer points out Mrs. Swithin's association with prehistory in this scene (22-23), but I emphasise Woolf's increasing concern in prehistory which can be discerned by comparing the earlier typescript with the published text. Along with this, it is important to note that, in the published text, there are many conversations about the weather and its forecast (13, 14, 17, 20, 28, 38, 47) which are not found either in the earlier typescript or in the later one. For instance, Mrs. Manresa wonders about the venue of the pageant, as it depends on the weather: "If it was wet, it would be in the Barn; if it was fine on the terrace" (28). The emphasis is on its

unpredictability, and this can be associated with the Darwinian concept of history shaped by chance. As Beer writes in her analysis on a reference to swamps in *Between the Acts*, “the prehistoric is seen not simply as part of a remote past, but as contiguous, continuous, a part of ordinary present-day life” (9) in the work.

In explicating the theory of descent with modification through the idea of natural selection, Charles Darwin regards temporality as “endless openness to the accidental, the random, the unexpected” (7) as Elizabeth Grosz puts it. In *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin defines his theory of natural selection that it “is grounded on the belief that each new variety, and ultimately each new species, is produced and maintained by having some advantage over those with which it comes into competition; and the consequent extinction of less-favoured forms almost inevitably follows” (236). Darwin writes that in the process “in all cases the new and improved forms of life tend to supplant the old and unimproved form” (208). The process in which “the old and unimproved” are replaced by “the new and improved” necessarily involves unexpectedness. In her discussion on the Darwinian evolutionary theory, Tina Young Choi illustrates the contingency which characterises Darwin’s theory: “what the life insurance prospectus and Darwin’s work alike exemplify is a distinctly nineteenth-century attitude in which the reader ... assumes an active role in imagining hypothetical futures and alternative outcomes—in thinking contingently” (291). It could thus be said that Darwin’s natural selection sees temporality as ‘becoming’ which entails a constant change. Darwin further notes that this ‘becoming’ is contingent and not predetermined: “the process of modification is necessarily slow, and depends on many complex contingencies” (252).⁴ Grosz explains that “in his writing, being is transformed into becoming, essence into existence, and the past and the present are rendered provisional in light of the force of the future” (7). She claims Darwin’s perception of temporality is flexible—that is, neither the past nor the present is or has been predetermined.

The Darwinian concept of temporality corresponds to Woolf’s

representation of the pageant in *Between the Acts* as contingent, accidental, and open-ended. Unexpected accidents befalling the actors and the audience, such as the persistent noises of the gramophone—“chuff, chuff, chuff” (47, 48, 49, 51, 93, 97, 107, 121)—and of the machine—“tick, tick” (51, 95, 108, 110)—and the actors’ laughter from a dressing-room (38)—these interfere with the play. In the Elizabethan play, for instance, the stage is in chaos when “[Albert, the village idiot] was picking and plucking at [the Queen]’s skirts. She cuffed him on the ear. He tweaked her back” (54). The audience’s attention was on Albert who is laughed at (54), not on the Queen. The pageant, which supposedly glorifies the authority of Queen Elizabeth played by Eliza Clark “of the village shop” (52), undermines the hierarchy. After an interval, even when the audience are ready to be seated, the actors are not yet ready for resuming the performance: “The stage was empty; the actors were still dressing up among the bushes” (75). It is not the way stage performances are expected. In spite of such an unexpected and chaotic performances on the stage, Miss La Trobe has no part except in just standing by and watching the pageant from behind. Woolf writes: “Over there behind the tree Miss La Trobe gnashed her teeth. She crushed her manuscript. The actors delayed. Every moment the audience slipped the noose; split up into scraps and fragments” (76). Nobody is sure which direction the pageant is heading to. The pageant is out of her control once it starts. Those unexpected accidents and happenings on the stage evidently undermine the patriarchal order that the history of England through the pageant intends to represent.

Furthermore, the comparison of the above scene in the published text to the ones in the two earlier drafts unfolds that Woolf endeavours to stress the elements of the contingent, accidental and open-ended in Miss La Trobe’s pageant. In the published text, Phyllis Jones, a girl representing England in the play, forgets her lines on the stage: “*England am I,*” she piped again; and stopped. / She had forgotten her lines” (47). Such an unexpected happening could be seen as wrecking the glorified history of England that the pageant intends to represent. In the earlier

typescript, the pageant is presented as more organised as it is supposed to be than the one in the published text: Phyllis does not forget her lines (*PH* 94-95). While the description of an organised pageant in the earlier typescript intensifies the patriarchal and imperialistic tendencies of the pageant, the description of an unorganised pageant in the published text rather undermines them. Another unexpectedness that the pageant in the published text generates is an interruption by the audience. When Phyllis forgets her lines, one of the audience reacts thus: “‘Hear! Hear!’ said an old man in a white waistcoat briskly. / ‘Bravo! Bravo!’” (48). The interruption by the audience adds a contingent, accidental and open-ended touch to Miss La Trobe’s representation of the history of England.

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf raises a question of identity, which has a close relationship with her anxiety toward the Victorians. In the novel the Victorians are presented as people who lived in an age of patriarchy and imperialism. Unlike the Elizabethan, the Victorian period in the pageant does not meet with unexpected accidents which overturn the hierarchy. In the act representing the Victorian period, the scene with a young couple, Miss Hardcastle and Edgar Thorold, and Miss Hardcastle’s mother (102-06) follows the Victorian policeman’s speech to celebrate the British Empire (100-01). Toward the end of the scene there is a crucial difference between the two earlier drafts and the published text. Male characters Arthur and Edgar sing ‘Rule Britannia’ (105) in the published text. This is certainly a clearer representation of both patriarchy and imperialism than the scenes in the two earlier drafts. In the earlier typescript Mr. Hardcastle, a patriarch, reads Walter Scott or Tennyson aloud to his family (*PH* 154-55), and in a later draft Mr. Hardcastle says a prayer for God (*PH* 394). In the published text, following ‘Rule Britannia,’ Budge, a policeman, emphasises home, an invaluable concept for patriarchy, with the tune ‘Home, Sweet Home’ from the gramophone (106-07), and indeed ‘home’ is an invaluable concept for patriarchy. By replacing Mr. Hardcastle’s reading and prayer with the songs ‘Rule Britannia’ and ‘Home, Sweet Home,’ Woolf emphasises the imperial characteristic of the Victorian period. Woolf

also represents the Victorian period as an age of Imperialism in *Orlando* (1928). After having time-travelled from the Elizabethan to the Victorian period, Orlando wonders: “Queen Victoria is on the throne, and not Queen Elizabeth, but what difference...” (227).

As we have seen, in the pageant directed by Miss La Trobe, history is presented with full of unpredictable incidents, and this leads the audience to question the stability of identity. Woolf emphasises that identity is not stabilised. When the act representing the Victorian age is over, Mrs. Swithin tells Isa: ““The Victorians ... I don’t believe ... that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently”” (108). William then says, ““You don’t believe in history”” (108). Mrs. Swithin suggests that the term “the Victorians” refer not to individuals but to a category—something that lacks essence—while herself and people around her she sees as individuals—“you and me and William dressed differently.” It is worth noting that Woolf adds a prehistorical narration in the scene. After William’s remark, Woolf describes the stage as such: “The stage remained empty. The cows moved in the field. The shadows were deeper under the trees” (108). She then writes: “Sheep, cow, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one. ...we reach the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it” (108). By reminding readers of prehistory — seeing humans, animals and plants as “one”—Woolf implicitly supports Mrs. Swithin’s perspective on the problem of identity and the Victorians. By doing so, Woolf foregrounds identity as unexpected and accidental as the Darwinian concept of temporality defines.

Furthermore, some editorial changes from the earlier typescript to the published text leave the audience’s perception of the Victorians inarticulate, which, therefore, lead readers to question the meaning of identity. For example, in a scene in which one of the audience comments on the Victorians, “There were grand men among them” (101), a following phrase was deleted from the earlier typescript: “Of course ... [Victorians’] ideas were not altogether ours. But they were good according to their lights. They had their faults” (*PH* 150). By deleting

the phrase which the audience talk about the natures of the Victorians, Woolf leaves their perception of the Victorians uncertain and thus gives readers an opportunity to problematise the meaning of identity. Similarly, when Isa asks Mrs. Swithin who has lived in the Victorian era, “Were [the Victorians] like that?” (108), Isa’s following phrase is deleted in the published text: “‘The Victorians had that—a pattern. The old mother; the old father; and all going home in a donkey cart’” (*PH* 159). Instead, the following phrase is added in the published text: “‘D’you get her meaning?’ said Mrs. Swithin alighting suddenly. ‘Miss La Trobe’s?’” (108). Obviously Woolf intentionally deleted the phrase in which the Victorians are defined in details and through the voice of Mrs. Swithin Woolf questions the meaning of identity. In this way, through Miss La Trobe’s unpredictable representation of the history of England, Woolf unsettles the fixed notion of the Victorians which an official history imposes.

Woolf’s representation of the Victorians as a category in *Between the Acts* reflects her own anxiety toward the Victorian patriarchy. In her autobiographical writing, “Reminiscences” (1908), Woolf illustrates the way her patriarchal father affects her family. Her uneasiness toward the Victorian period in *Between the Acts* is in a sense is another expression for her uneasiness toward her father Leslie Stephen, a typical Victorian patriarch in her image. In “Reminiscences,” Woolf writes that after her mother Julia died, her step-sister Stella was forced to take over Julia’s role by her father. Woolf describes such a fragile family as “some creaking old wagon, pitifully rusted, and yet filled with stirring young creatures” (*MOB* 44). Moreover, she calls such a role as Stella’s in the family as a “victim” (*MOB* 56). Woolf’s anxiety toward patriarchal fathers is also illustrated in her feminist pacifist essay *Three Guineas* (1938). Woolf illustrates the patriarchal oppression on women by using the term “infantile fixation.” In the Victorian period, ‘educated men’s daughters,’ daughters of affluent middle-class families, were not supposed to earn their own living; it went against the notion of an ‘Angel in the House’—an ideal female figure for middle classes.⁵ Woolf takes up the

case of Sophia Jex-Blake to demonstrate the despotism of Victorian fathers who prevented their daughters from earning money: “what [the father] objected to was [Miss Jex-Blake] taking money from another man” (TG 348). Woolf goes on to say: “He wished to keep his daughter in his own power” (TG 349). That is, the father loses his control over his daughter if she acquires her autonomy by making her own living. Woolf’s disapproval of the Victorian patriarchy is clearly voiced in these passages, and it was in a course of nature that in her last novel she attempted to cast a doubt on the identity of the Victorians through Miss La Trobe’s representation of them in the pageant.

We have observed that the contingent, accidental, and open-ended natures of Darwinian temporality entails the process of ‘becoming,’ and in a similar way, Miss La Trobe’s pageant presents the ‘becoming’ nature of identity through the scene of “Present Time.” Besides the unexpected accidents happening throughout the pageant performance, Miss La Trobe’s open-ended scenario endorses the idea of temporality as ‘becoming.’ When the pageant moves to the “Present Time. Ourselves” (110), Isa wonders:

But what could [Miss La Trobe] know about ourselves? The Elizabethans Yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939—it was ridiculous. ‘Myself’—it was impossible. Other people, perhaps ... Cobbet of Cobbs Corner; the Major; the old Bartholomew; Mrs. Swithin—they, perhaps. But she won’t get me—no, not me. (110).

Isa suggests that, although she can define people of the past periods such as “the Elizabethans” and “the Victorians,” it is impossible to categorise people of the modern period in the same manner. As to the Elizabethans, for instance, they can be reduced to “the scene from a play” (55). Likewise, she thinks she can perceive other characters as fixed or something like a category: “Cobbet of Cobbs Corner,” “the Major,” “old Bartholomew,” and even “Mrs. Swithin.” Yet, Isa cannot reduce her own

identity to a category or something fixed: “But she won’t get me—no, not me.” In the scene about the modern period, the actors come out of the bushes with reflective objects, and these mirrors show the faces of the audience. Thus the interpretation of the modern world is left to the audience, the modern period is presented as open-ended and the outcome of the process of ‘becoming.’

As we have seen, Miss La Trobe’s pageant carries multiple significance, but Woolf does not necessarily seem to take the side of Isa and Mrs. Swithin. For one thing, the presentation of history so full of unexpected contingencies is too confusing for the audience since ‘becoming’ is not reconciled with certainty. At the end of the pageant, Rev. Streatfield asks the audience “‘what meaning, or message, this pageant was meant to convey?’” (118). The question which asks the meaning of the pageant is closely related to the problem of identity. “The meaning” Rev. Streatfield expects to get from the pageant is no doubt a message of “a patriotic importance” (Yoshino 1). He elucidates the audience what he believes to be “the meaning” of the pageant thus: “To me at least it was indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole” (119). Rev. Streatfield, it seems, tries to find in the pageant something like totalitarian mentality, and is evidently quite oblivious to its message of contingency. In fact, he sees the unexpected turn the pageant takes rather negatively. He continues to talk to the audience: “Then again, as the play or pageant proceeded, my attention was distracted. Perhaps that too was part of the producer’s intention?” (119). Failing to see the significance of the unexpected happenings in the pageant, Rev. Streatfield speculates that Miss La Trobe—“the producer” in his words—fails to represent the nationalistic and patriotic significance in the pageant, which is what he means by the “meaning” in his speech.

Thus, the audience’s pursuit of the “meaning” in Miss La Trobe’s pageant increases their frustration. The uncertainty caused by unexpected contingencies in the pageant leads one of the audience to say: “... if we’re left asking questions, isn’t it a failure, as a play? I must say I like to feel

sure if I go to the theatre, that I've grasped the meaning" (124). Clearly, "the meaning" is the same as the "meaning" which Rev. Streatfield uses in his speech. The randomness and unpredictability of the pageant frustrates not only the audience but also Miss La Trobe herself: "'A failure,' [Miss La Trobe] groaned, and stooped to put away the records" (130). "A failure" can be equated with the sense of uncertainty with which Miss La Trobe is possessed. After the pageant is over, she is left alone. Woolf writes of Miss La Trobe thus: "She was an outcast. Nature had somehow set her apart from her kind. Yet she had scribbled in the margin of her manuscript: 'I am the slave of my audience'" (131). By using the word "the slave," Miss La Trobe implies the power dynamic between the audience and the playwright: she understands that in the pageant the audience gets the upper hand over the playwright. Ultimately the audience seek for the "meaning"—the nationalistic and patriotic one, as I have noted—in the pageant, and owing to this, Miss La Trobe's reproduction of the history of England is regarded as "a failure" both by the audience and by the playwright.

In *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe attempts to pursue the possibility of presenting an alternative history of England. Being frustrated in this attempt and then defeated by the sense of failure, Miss La Trobe thinks thus: "Words without meaning—wonderful words" (131). Here again, "meaning" can be equated with the nationalistic and patriotic message for which the pageant is intended; but "meaning" also suggests the Symbolic encoding of language. What Woolf means by "words without meaning" is obviously a non-sensual sense of language. Miss La Trobe's sense of failure corresponds to Woolf's sense of failure in "writing to a plot," as she calls it, when she finishes *The Waves*. In her letter to Ethel Smyth Woolf remarks thus about *The Waves*: "I think then that my difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm and not a plot. Does this convey anything?" (LIV 204). Woolf notes "a rhythm"—pre-signification such as metaphor—is more important than "a plot," which is constructed by language. She later writes to John Lehmann: "I had become firmly convinced that *The Waves* was a failure, in the sense that it wouldn't

convey anything to anybody" (LIV 380-81). Woolf admits the failure in conveying both "a rhythm" and "a plot" in *The Waves* since she cannot satisfy herself of "convey[ing] anything" as language should do. In *Between the Acts*, however, Woolf employs the pageant by the playwright, Miss La Trobe, to achieve the goal of conveying something by "words without meaning." After having finished *Between the Acts*, Woolf set off to write a critical history of English literature. "Anon" is the surviving draft for the first chapter of the work which ends with the following passage: "The playwright is replaced by the man who writes a book. The audience is replaced by the reader. Anon is dead" ("Anon" 693). The last passage suggests that for Woolf "the playwright" and "the audience" make it possible to write an alternative history of England, the goal which Miss La Trobe finally achieves. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf succeeds in representing an alternative history of England through the form of play.

One important element in this attempt that we should not overlook is that Woolf tried to reinforce the representation of an alternative history through the tacit allusion to the Darwinian theory of evolution. Woolf closes the novel with the scene where Isa and Giles are sitting against the window and Mrs. Swithin is reading an *Outline of History* in the midst of the newspaper report of the coming war: "'England,' [Mrs. Swithin] was reading, 'was then a swamp. Thick forests covered the land. On the top of their matted branches birds sang'" (135). She then goes on to read a passage on prehistoric man: "'Prehistoric man,' she read, 'half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones'" (135). In the earlier typescript, this passage on prehistoric man from an *Outline of History* (PH 188) does not appear. By adding the scene in the published text, Woolf reminds readers of an evolutionary process in the published text. Although Woolf does not give her a predominant voice, Mrs. Swithin nonetheless plays an important role; her tacit allusion to the Darwinian evolutions helps Woolf to give a deeper significance to an alternative history of England in *Between the Acts*.

As we have seen, Woolf tactfully casts the image of the Darwinian temporality over Miss La Trobe's pageant, and this realisation enables us to read *Between the Acts* as Woolf's attempt to rewrite an alternative history of England. Seen in this light, it is significant that *Between the Acts* is not just a work but the last novel in Woolf's writing career. In this novel, Woolf achieves two triumphs as a novelist who has been tackling the problem of language. The first triumph is that Woolf comes to term with her uneasy feelings toward the Victorians, and it is very significant that she does this through the aid of Darwin. Michael Holroyd, a biographer of Lytton Strachey who wrote *Eminent Victorians* and Woolf's close friend, reveals an interesting story about Darwin. Strachey originally included Darwin among eminent Victorians but left Darwin out presumably because he thought Darwin was among the modern (269). The other triumph in *Between the Acts* is that she demonstrates the possibility of language through the form of play. Woolf closes the novel thus: "Then the curtain rose. They spoke" (136). Unlike the non-determinacy of the future in the Darwinian concept, the future is predetermined in the novel, which is the coming of the war. By leaving the ending open for the upcoming future, Woolf enables us to read her challenging attempt for an alternative history in *Between the Acts* with real appreciation.

Notes

1. According to Mitchell A. Leaska, the editor of earlier drafts of *Between the Acts*, the earlier typescript was produced approximately between April 1938 and 11 October 1940, a later typescript between 17 October and 23 November 1940 (*PH* 28); the final typescript is almost identical to the published text with Leonard Woolf's instruction to the printer (*PH* 17).
2. Cavendish notes that "the Smith's bookstalls epitomised railway travel up to the Second World War and still flourish today." See his article in *History Today* on the internet.
3. The names of those popular scientists appear in the later typescript: "Or science— Eddington; Darwin; and Jeans" (*PH* 267). Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington (1882–1944) and Sir James Hopwood Jeans (1877–1946) are famous astronomers, physicists and mathematicians in Woolf's contemporary

Britain. For further reference to Woolf and popular science, see Michael Whitworth in *Einstein's Wake: Relativity, Metaphor, and Modernist Literature*.

4. Also see Bowler (149) and Gomel (337), for instance, on their discussions on this process theorised by Darwin.
5. 'Educated men's daughters' is a keyword for Woolf's pursuit for women's position under patriarchy. They suffer from patriarchal fathers in middle-class families and fail in pursuing their talents (*Three Guineas* 157). Woolf's accusation for an 'Angel in the House' is notably shown in her essay "Professions for Women."

* This paper is an expanded and revised version originally read at the British Society for Literature and Science 2010 Conference held at Northumbria University, UK, in April 2010.

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Keywords: *Between the Acts* Virginia Woolf pageants Darwin
an alternative history