Twilight

'THE DESOLATE RUINS OF MY OLD SQUARES' – WOOLF OUT OF BLOOMSBURY AND INTO THE FUTURE

Luísa Flora – University of Lisbon

> We were in London on Monday. I went to London Bridge. I looked at the river; very misty; some tufts of smoke, perhaps from burning houses. There was another fire on Saturday. Then I saw a cliff of wall, eaten out, at one corner; a great corner all smashed; a Bank; the Monument erect; tried to get a Bus; but such a block I dismounted; & the second bus advised me to walk. A complete jam of traffic; for streets were being blown up. So by tube to the Temple; & there wandered in the desolate ruins of my old squares: gashed; dismantled; the old red bricks all white powder, something like a builder's yard. Grey dirt & broken windows. sightseers; all that completeness ravished and demolished (D-V 353).

While it is indisputable that this January 1941 passage of Virginia Woolf's Diary conveys "the deepest sense of loss" (Dick and Millar, xviii) ,[1] in the present essay I propose to expand its meaning to include not only the elegiac dimension of a goodbye to "all that completeness" but also Woolf's awareness of the new beginning underlying any builder's yard. In fact, the writer was by then concluding her final typescript of Between the Acts, which she had considered as recently as November "an interesting attempt in a new method" (D-V 340).

If the search for significant form had been central to Bloomsbury's aesthetic and ethical quest and to most of Virginia's own novels, we should always bear in mind the advice given in 2000 by Andrew McNeillie, "discriminate and hesitate, at any given point of the group's history, before referring to a 'Bloomsbury' aesthetic" (McNeillie, 17, 19).[2] With the advance of fascism, the indulgence of a Moorean contemplation of "beautiful objects" could no longer be justified and, McNeillie notes, "Woolf's work had already begun, from quite early in the [1930s], to show signs of fracturing" (McNeillie, 19). To be sure those

signs could be read at least as far back as *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with their feminist stance and their playful defiance of biography, history and essay genre conventions. Woolf's awareness of the gendered formation of political power and literary influence had been ingeniously expressed.[3] She had sustained a tolerant attitude towards patriarchy and regularly declined any form of preaching in art. However,

> the impression of Woolf as an apolitical, lyrical, modern novelist so carefully cultivated by generations of New Critics and fuelled by Woolf's own nephew's assessment of her [...] is necessarily exploded by the weight of evidence to the contrary (Pawlowski, 3-4).

Neither the writer's long-lasting public attitude nor the prolonged (and largely male) critical prejudice resist the scrutiny of more recent years. The political significance of her entire work can no longer be underestimated. Novels, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) or *To the Lighthouse* (1927), routinely addressed as standard examples of high modernist pursuit of aesthetic autonomy, have also exposed Woolf's "dissatisfaction with the modernism of her contemporaries and its dangerous potential to blur real political issues" (Whitworth, 156).

But Virginia's unequivocal denunciations of patriarchal power certainly originate in the second half of the 1930s. Even if we are willing to concede that she may have approved early Bloomsbury's rigid formalism, all the way through the writing of *The Years* (1937), *Three Guineas* (1938), and *Between the Acts* (ab 1938), or of essays such as "The Leaning Tower"(1940), Virginia Woolf was intent on exploring a different Path.[4] Nazism and the Spanish Civil War exposed her own and her friends' impotence to avoid yet another carnage and brought Woolf consciously nearer than she had ever been to political fiction. It is not a coincidence that her severe condemnation of power politics during the 30s often shares common ground with her more vehemently expressed feminist positions. And it is surely also not a coincidence that the reaction of some very close friends (Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, Leonard himself) to *Three Guineas* evaded her radical association of gender politics, masculine aggression and the international situation.[5]

As Richard Pearce observes in *The Politics of Narration*:

> Woolf become [sic] more self-consciously political, or aware of her relationship to traditional author-ity, as she became more aware of women's historical repression (Pearce, 19).

Pearce analyses some of Virginia's novels as her own struggle against "author-ity" and, conceding that *Between the Acts* was "breaking new ground" (Pearce 169), he chooses to dismiss it as incomplete. In a former essay I addressed the erosion of the dominant masculine stereotype as depicted in *Between the Acts*.[6] I will now focus on some of her last novel's innovative techniques, suggesting how much Woolf was deliberately contributing to dismantle "all that completeness".

"Making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist" (AROO 6), in *Between the Acts* Virginia Woolf builds a new text which revisits English culture and history by bringing together, both in the pageant and in the framing narrative that encloses it, a medley of diverse literary strategies and discourses. A very superficial consideration of the text would present, on the surface, a short mimetic novel, with a reasonably linear chronological development both in the outer frame and throughout the historical pageant. The whole "thing" takes place within a day and the village pageant is over in a few hours. So what is it that makes Woolf's last novel so strange and unexpected a literary object in 1941?

From the beginning till the end of the text, there is, in Rachel Bowlby's precise words, "no plot and no conclusion, no triumph of love or of hate, no resolution; and the terms of these oppositions themselves fall apart in the break-up of the syntax" (Bowlby, 127).

This fracture is disseminated in many different ways throughout the entire text: broken words and broken sentences, parenthetical phrases, thoughts left suspended, sentences left unfinished, bits and pieces of tunes and songs, poems barely murmured and wordlessly understood or misunderstood, frequent literary allusions and quotations, onomatopoeias, the cries of vendors, returning silences and the sounds of nature (the humming of birds, the bellowing of cows, the splashing of rain), the horns of cars, the noise of the gramophone, the din of the aeroplanes. The fracture is further emphasized by frequent typographic interruptions (blank spaces, ellipses), by the use of italics to distinguish the outer frame from the words of the pageant (though in this case Leonard may have interfered with the typescript).[7] The demolishing of a more conventional modernist narrative building is also underlined by numerous references to current everyday events and reinforced by "quotations from the media - newspapers, magazines, radio, movies, even the local reporter's rough notes – [which] interject into the polyphony of fictional narrator and characters actual voices" (BTA xxvi).

While some of these devices, the use of broken sentences, of parenthetical phrases or of grammatical and typographical gaps, were already familiar to readers of *Mrs. Dalloway*, in *Between the Acts* the peculiar combination of **all of them** constitutes the fundamental **texture** of the novel.

Let us briefly consider a few examples. In the narrative frame, Isa, also known as Mrs. Giles Oliver, combs her hair and watches her children down on the lawn. On the surface, the scene might have been idyllic and the syntax is quite appropriate.

> She tapped on the window with her embossed hairbrush. They were too far off to hear. The drone of the trees was in their ears; the chirp of the birds; other incidents of garden life, inaudible, invisible to her in the bedroom, absorbed them (BTA 9).

There is no possibility of communication. Isolated and lonely, Isa, "the age of the century, thirty-nine", (BTA 11) goes back to her daydreams and murmurs what might have been part of a poem. Her daily routine mimics the difficulty to connect that will demoralize most of the characters.

> 'Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care', she hummed. 'Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent…'
> The rhyme was 'air'. She put down her brush. She took up the telephone.
> 'Three, four, eight, Pyecombe', she said.
> 'Mrs. Oliver speaking… What fish have you this morning? Cod? Halibut? Sole? Plaice?'
> 'There to lose what binds us here', she murmured. 'Soles. Filleted. In time for lunch please', she said aloud. 'With a feather, a blue feather… flying mounting through the air… there to lose what binds us here…' The words weren't worth writing down in the book bound like an account book lest Giles suspected. 'Abortive', was the word that expressed her (BTA 9).

As the reader follows her reverie, the frustration of Isa's life becomes apparent. The narrative effect relies on the combination of poetry and prose within the free indirect discourse with bits of a dialogue only hinted at (neither the narrator nor the reader hear the telephone operator or the fishmonger). Yet the technique here subtly suggested will gain a much larger dimension further on.

Let us now turn to the pageant, the excuse for bringing together as an audience the community of characters in the framing narrative. The pageant's

shaky performance of a sequence of pastiche literary and historical vignettes results in frequent interruptions. These interruptions, often not planned by the playwright Miss La Trobe, in turn produce the audience's (and the reader's) awareness of the fake quality of the whole. This is the beginning of the pageant:

> 'What luck!' Mrs. Carter was saying. 'Last year…' Then the play began. Was it, or was it not, the play? Chuff, chuff, chuff sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. Some sat down hastily; others stopped talking guiltily. All looked at the bushes. For the stage was empty. Chuff, chuff, chuff the machine buzzed in the bushes. While they looked apprehensively and some finished their sentences, a small girl, like a rosebud in pink, advanced; took her stand on a mat, behind a conch hung with leaves, and piped:
>
> *Gentles and simples, I address you all…*
>
> So it was the play then. Or was it the prologue?
>
> *Come hither for our festival (she continued)*
> *This is a pageant, all may see*
> *Drawn from our island history.*
> *England am I.…*
>
> 'She's England', they whispered. 'It's begun'. 'The prologue', they added, looking down at the programme.
>
> *England am I*, she piped again; and stopped.
>
> She had forgotten her lines.
>
> […]
>
> 'Blast'em!' cursed Miss La Trobe, hidden behind the tree. She looked along the front row. They glared as if they were exposed to a frost that nipped and fixed them all at the same level. Only Bond the cowman looked fluid and natural.
>
> 'Music!' she signalled. 'Music!' But the machine continued: Chuff, chuff, chuff (BTA 42).

The suspension of disbelief, even when kindly granted, is momentary. With authorial license, Miss La Trobe juggles with fragments of the island's past. When one of her tricks fails and is exposed, she somehow manages to regain some measure of control. The montage of diverse literary discourses, from different ages and genres, present each and all of them as virtually interchangeable. The actors dress up and just as easily change their identities. One after the other each narrative, dramatic, poetic convention is being denounced as cliché.[8] Virginia Woolf liberally borrows literary genres and styles of language from different epochs, typical period pieces (the medieval song and pilgrimage, the farcical Restoration episode) or stereotyped characters

(the Victorian Miss Hardcastle). Sometimes, as with the Elizabethan medley, the satirical dimension is somewhat softened by the emotion of Shakespearean allusions and the merrymaking the epoch suggests.

> *A maying, a maying,* they bawled.
> *In and out and round about, a maying,*
> *a maying...*
> It didn't matter what the words were; or who sung them. Round and round they whirled, intoxicated by the music. Then, at a sign from Miss La Trobe behind the tree, the dance stopped. A procession formed. Great Eliza descended from her soap box. Taking her skirts in her hand, striding with long strides, surrounded by Dukes and Princes, followed by the lovers arm in arm, with Albert the idiot playing in and out and the corpse on its bier concluding the procession, the Elizabethan age passed from the scene (BTA 51).

The pageant is simultaneously inadequate to honour the richness of English literature in such a short span of time and ample enough to condense it in a few hours as a sort of historical continuum. This continuum is an illusion and it is recognized as an illusion as much as the pageant is known to be a figment of the artist's imagination. To be able to evoke this historical continuity while caught in the very act of parodying it,[9] as Miss La Trobe eventually is, may reasonably lead the audience to suspect its final irrelevance. "The apparent stability of the English village at the centre of *Between the Acts* belies a war-torn history. [...] the civilised surfaces of the fiction" conceal "the disintegration of a collective English tradition" (Eagleton 313, 318-9). The unity and completeness of the long-established masculine traditions of English history and literature are thus denounced by Virginia Woolf as artificially constructed although not valueless. And the artist momentarily rejoices in her magic.

> Glory possessed her [Miss La Trobe]. 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 re-created world. Her moment was on her- her glory (BTA 82).

Of course the illusion does not last. It is **not** meant to last. In 1941 the luxury of "the soothing unity of aesthetic closure" (Reed, 33) belongs to a different era. As Christopher Reed so distinctly reminds us,

> [I]n defiance of the formalist insistence on formal unity as a prerequisite of

> art's separation from other realms of experience - the formal structure of *Between the Acts* is left radically incomplete, an abruptly truncated triptych with a first "act" of one hundred pages set in the family, then a second (even longer) that is the pageant, followed by an abbreviated return to the situation of the first, which ends almost before it begins.[...]
> The formal and authorial disunity is emphasized by Woolf's drastic displacement of the narrative voice in the last paragraphs. [...] Suddenly the pageant [...] has become a play within a larger play, initiating an infinite progression where what seems to be life is always revealed as the art of a larger text. In one move, Woolf [...] violates the assumption of authorial individuality, and shatters all semblance of formal closure (Reed, 31-2).

Under the threat of complete destruction caused by the Second World War, Woolf uses literature to re-present the past and to anticipate the future. In 1996, surveying the period between 1950 and 1995 in The *English Novel in History*, Steven Connor wrote:

> The conditions of extreme cultural interfusion [...] have combined with the growth of an ever-more interdependent global economy to create a splintering of history in the postwar world, a loss of the vision of history as one and continuous. [...] when the authority of history is exploded, the result is an explosion of histories and authorities (Connor, 135-6).

In 1941, while still emotionally connected to old Bloomsbury, Virginia Woolf wanders through the fragments of a liberal humanist paradigm she once subscribed to. Her gradual estrangement from a consideration of politics as outside the realm of aesthetic experiment is part of her fight against any totalitarian narrative.

The ruins are desolate and the old squares echo with the debris of a civilisation Woolf considered doomed by its aggressive repetition of gender, class and national divisiveness. Wandering in the rumble the artist strives to imagine the work, the world to come. One last time, she follows her own advice to the younger generation of poets:

> Whenever you see a board up with 'Trespassers will be prosecuted', trespass at once (WE 178). [10]

NOTES

This essay is dedicated to the memory of my dear colleague and friend Hélio Osvaldo Alves.

[1] I am much indebted to Susan Dick and Mary S. Millar's Introduction to *Between the Acts*. The novel will henceforth be referred to as BTA; all quotations will be parenthetically indicated. Ellipses within square brackets are my own.

[2] See also, among others, S. P. Rosenbaum, "Virginia Woolf and the Intellectual Origins of Bloomsbury".

[3] Cf. among others my "'So Men Said': Virginia Woolf and a history of women's creativity".

[4] For one outstanding interpretation of Woolf and Bloomsbury's formalism see Christopher Reed, "Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury's Aesthetic".

[5] See Naomi Black, Introduction to *Three Guineas*, particularly xxix-xxx and xlv-l.

[6] "'Manacled to a rock he was': Exhausted Patriarchy in *Between the Acts*".

[7] For Leonard Woolf's intervention cf. Dick and Millar, Introduction to BTA, xlviii.

[8] "[H]istorically, the cliché began in the nineteenth century as an image reproduced in a magazine; it then migrated from the visual to the verbal register to take on its modern meaning of a fixed formula of words" (Bowlby 190).

[9] For parody cf. Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern.*

[10] Virginia Woolf, "The Leaning Tower". Woolf was echoing her father.

WORKS CITED

Black, Naomi. Introduction to *Three Guineas*. Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press and Blackwell Publishers, 2001, xiii - lxxv.

Bowlby, Rachel. *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

Connor, Steven. *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*. Routledge: London, 1996.

Dick, Susan and Mary S. Millar. ***Introduction to*** *Between the Acts*. Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press and Blackwell Publishers, 2002, xi-liii.

Eagleton, Terry. *The English Novel*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Flora, Luísa. "'So Men Said': Virginia Woolf and a history of women's creativity" in Luísa Maria Flora, Teresa F. A. Alves and Teresa Cid, eds. *Feminine Identities*. Cadernos de Anglística, 5. Lisboa: University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, Edições Colibri, 2002, 43-66.

_____, "'Manacled to a rock he was': Exhausted Patriarchy in Between the Acts" in Ana Luísa Amaral e Gualter Cunha, orgs., *Estudos em Homenagem a Margarida Losa*. Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2006, 169-82.

McNeillie, Andrew. "Bloomsbury" in Sue Roe and Susan Sellers eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 1-28.

Pawlowski, Merry M. *Virginia Woolf and Fascism: Resisting the Dictator's Seduction*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Pearce, Richard. *The Politics of Narration: James Joyce, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Reed, Christopher. "Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury's Aesthetics" in Diane F. Gillespie, ed. *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993, 11-35.

Rose, Margaret A. *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Rosenbaum, S. P.. "Virginia Woolf and the Intellectual Origins of Bloomsbury", in Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb eds. *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*. New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983, 11-25.

Whitworth, Michael. "Virginia Woolf and Modernism", in Sue Roe and Susan Sellers eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 146-163.

Woolf, Virginia (1929). *A Room of One's Own*. St.Albans: Triad, 1977.

_____. "The Leaning Tower" (1940) in Rachel Bowlby ed. and int. *A Woman's Essays. Selected Essays: Vol One*. London: Penguin Books, 1992, 159-178.

_____ (1941). *Between the Acts*. Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press and Blackwell Publishers, 2002.