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"Manacled to a rock he was": Exhausted Patriarchy in *Between the Acts*

> *The Germans were over this house last night and the night before that. Here they are again. (...) Unless we can think peace into existence we – not this one body in this one bed but millions of bodies yet to be born – will lie in the same darkness and hear the same death rattle overhead. (...)*
> *The defenders are men, the attackers are men. Arms are not given to Englishwomen either to fight the enemy or to defend herself. (...) How far can she fight for freedom without firearms? By making arms, or clothes or food. But there is another way of fighting for freedom without arms; we can fight with the mind. We can make ideas that will help the young Englishman who is fighting up in the sky to defeat the enemy. (...)*
> *Mental fight means thinking against the current, not with it.*
>
> (Woolf, "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid": 168-9)

"Thinking peace into existence" had been one of Virginia Woolf's chosen missions during the 1930s and creativity her favoured weapon. After the public success of *The Years* (1937), where a deceptively realist surface encoded a pacifist and feminist quest for a new kind of society, the relatively hostile reception of *Three Guineas* (1938) suggested that she was "thinking against the current".[1] The uncompromising feminist polemics of the book, its association of gender politics and masculine aggression with the international situation, its condemnation of all systems of oppression proved too radical for most readers.[2]

[1] In her introduction to the Shakespeare Head Press edition of *Three Guineas* Naomi Black shows how mixed was the reaction of Woolf's contemporaries to the book. Cf. Black, in Woolf, 2001: xlv-lvi.

[2] Yet Woolf's association during the 1930s of masculinity and militarism was far from unique. Among pacifists, Bertrand Russell's *Which Way to Peace?* (1936) and C.E.M. Joad's *Under the Fifth Rib: A Belligerent Autobiography* (1934) developed similar arguments. Also common at the time, and particularly in feminist circles, was the connection between gender and war. Cf. Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, 2002.

Between the Acts (1941) followed a different path. ***Three Guineas*** had encouraged women to build a Society of Outsiders to prevent war and promote peace; in ***Between the Acts*** men themselves come to be regarded as outsiders.[3] The persistence of hegemonic masculinity was endangering the whole fabric of society.[4] Men may ultimately immolate themselves on an altar of their own making.

As the 2nd World War approached, the absurdity of the patriarchal order so forcefully demonstrated in ***Three Guineas*** had gathered new strength. Chaos and barbarism loomed round the corner. After listening to Hitler's Nuremberg Rally on the 12th of September 1938, Virginia Woolf recorded in her diary:

> No war yet anyhow. Hitler boasted & boomed but shot no solid bolt. Mere violent rant, & then broke off. We listened in to the end. A savage howl like a person excruciated; then howls from the audience; then a more spaced & measured sentence. Then another bark. Cheering ruled by a stick. Frightening to think of the faces. & the voice was frightening. (Woolf, ***Diary***, 13 Sep 1938, 5: 169)

Facing the precariousness of the entire civilization, Woolf "fought with the mind". Her characteristic dedication to the "dissolution of established categories"[5] led her to imagine a new novel where the opportunity of regeneration, however fragile, might emerge. In spite of its dystopic overtones ***Between the Acts*** still contemplates the possibility of rebirth. The erosion of the dominant masculine stereotype may ultimately generate not destruction but a new life.

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While it comes as no surprise that a text set in England on the verge of war, "on a June day in 1939" (***BA*** 130) should present the malaise of a "culture that has exhausted its resources" (Weil, 1997: 248), Virginia Woolf's ***Between the Acts*** culminates her severe judgment of the cultural condition of the late 1930s, by showing the so often silenced links between sexism and militarism, exposing the vulnerability of both women and men in the face of war and confronting the possibility of an end to civilization as she knew it. Written between 1938 and 1941, after the vehement critique of institutional male violence presented in ***Three Guineas,*** the text goes beyond condemnation of the brutality of the male ethos to stage the collapse of the patriarchal order. As Kristina Busse observed in "Reflecting the Subject in History":

> ***Between the Acts*** exhibits Woolf's increasing awareness of history at the same time as it continues to focus on the protagonists' inner lives by addressing the changing role of the individual against a tenuous political and historical background. (…) Like ***Three Guineas***, which connects the war abroad with the patriarchy at home, ***Between the Acts*** links the external vio-

[3] ***Three Guineas*** will be cited parenthetically in the text as ***TG***; ***Between the Acts*** will be cited as ***BA.***

[4] "The terms 'masculinity' and 'patriarchy' are closely linked in a historical sense, since both were taken up by socialist and radical feminists during the late 1960s as part of the process of theorizing male dominance. (…) For historians focusing on masculinity, the notion of patriarchy is important because of the primacy it gives to women's oppression, and because it provides a way of integrating the individual and structural dimensions of male dominance" (Roper/ Tosh, 1991: 8-9).

[5] I use Isobel Armstrong's expression here although she is originally referring only to ***Orlando***. (Armstrong, 1994: 270)

> lent intrusions of war to the internal violent eruptions within subjects, thus showing how the two do not yield contradictory results but are instead closely related. (Busse, 2001: 75, 76)

Virginia Woolf's awareness of history was in fact greater than ever by the late 1930s, but her concern with war is present right through her fiction (see Bazin/ Lauter, 1991: 14-39) and she consistently examines the complex relationships "between private and public violence, between the domestic and the civic effects of patriarchal society, between male supremacy and the absence of peace" (Hussey, 1991: 3). More often than not Woolf abstains from any definite connection between war and male supremacy, favouring a more subtle approach to a patriarchal culture in need of regeneration. Even in ***Three Guineas***, where her indignation against the patriarchal war machine is most outspoken, the final version is more controlled than former drafts (cf. Black, in Woolf, 2001: xviii-xxx; lvi-lxvii; and Lee, 1997: 681-682). Her purpose was not direct propaganda[6] but, in her own words in 1940, "to drag up into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down" (Woolf, "Thoughts on Peace…": 169).

The legend of "an exquisite stylist" oblivious to social and political circumstances has slowly but firmly been erased, particularly since the 1990s when she at long last came to be recognised as "a serious political and ethical thinker, an artist whose aesthetic practice is always informed by a clear sense of political reality" (Hussey, 1991: 2--3),[7] yet the extent to which her work invites a detailed analysis of masculinity has largely been neglected. Loyal to her vindication of women's history and experience, Woolf imagined a society regenerated by the integration of women's values. In her demand for a radical social and moral transformation that would embrace women and men, her treatment of masculinity developed as an enquiry into the heart of a culture that ignored men's inner lives and emotional needs.

Always aware of gender as a "chameleon-like category" (Glover/Kaplan, 2000: 158) and surely never more eager to explore its manifold possibilities than in ***Orlando***, Woolf had nonetheless exposed the resilience of hegemonic masculinity, ingrained as it was in the economic, political and social system. If men had been shown in Woolf's novels largely as beneficiaries of the patriarchal order they inherited, they were also occasionally revealed as its victims (the tortured character of the ex-serviceman Septimus Smith in ***Mrs. Dalloway*** stands as a manifest example). Yet in ***Between the Acts***, even as dominant masculinity retains its ability to subordinate women, historical circumstances have forced it to recognize a new vulnerability. Even though male power seems to exercise as much control as ever over women's bodies it also increasingly comes to be understood as a prison to men themselves. In ***Three Guineas*** Woolf had forcefully argued the absurdity of the patriarchal order. Consider, for instance, her repeated mention of 'the photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses' (cf. ***TG*** 10, 32, 65, 87, 89-90) sent by the Spanish Government in 1936 (see Laurence, 1991: 225-245). She had shown, both in her text and in her inclusion of images of male power that she opposed men's displays of arrogance, vanity and status (cf. ***TG*** 57-59, 96). War was "an affair engineered by men, for men, amongst men, women excluded. Women were there

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[6] Cf. "The Leaning Tower", a paper she read in May 1940 to the Workers' Educational Association.

[7] "In February 1939, with much protesting about her 'repulsion from societies' [Woolf] gave her manuscript of ***Three Guineas*** to raise money for German refugees" (Lee, 1997: 687).

to weep and tend the wounded" (Poole, 1991: 97). In ***Between the Acts*** she reveals a more compassionate attitude towards men. Ambushed by history, male characters are impotent to deal with the horror of yet another war and they realize their inability to ***act***.

The world depicted in ***Between the Acts*** is suffused with disappointment, frustration and suffering and the male characters show absolute inability to cope with the contemporary situation. Incapable of any effective rebellion against the imminence of disaster, even when they persist in going through the motions of masculine valour, they feel powerless to shield their culture against chaos, defenceless in the face of disaster. They lack conviction and share women's helplessness, thus contradicting the main tenets of hegemonic masculinity.

> He [Giles Oliver] said (without words) 'I'm damnably unhappy.'
>
> 'So am I,' Dodge echoed.
>
> 'And I too,' Isa thought.
>
> They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle. Nothing happened. The tick of the machine was maddening. (***BA*** 128)

Deconstructing masculinity by emphasizing man's disempowerment Woolf uncovers the futility of a patriarchal culture on the brink of destruction. "Mourning for her culture while at the same time she saw its impossibility" (Armstrong, 1994: 264), she exposes humanity facing barbarism, contemplates the possibility of chaos and imagines a new plot where men and women "would embrace" (***BA*** 158).

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The issues of man's vulnerability in the event of war and of a new cooperation between men and women are already present, although usually neglected in critical discourse, throughout ***Three Guineas.*** No matter how much Woolf claimed women's difference, no matter how much she called for a Society of Outsiders, the essay is above all engaged in the prevention of war. Her attack on patriarchy is not an assault on man but a combat for peace.

> the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; (…) the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other. But the human figure [the Tyrant or Dictator] even in a photograph suggests other and more complex emotions. It suggests that we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but ***are ourselves that figure***. It suggests that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but ***by our thoughts and actions can*** ourselves ***change*** that figure. A common interest unites us; it is ***one world, one life***. (…) Both houses will be ruined, the public and the private, the material and the spiritual, for they are inseparably connected. (TG 130, my italics)

While everyone will be familiar with the first sentence in this quotation, the rest has largely been ignored. But, as Sara Rudick shrewdly remembers, the recognition of ourselves in the tyrant gives "women and men a sense of ***agency***" (Ruddick, 1991: 235). Once we acknowledge the violence within ourselves we may be able to confront it. Yet "the dream of peace, the dream of freedom" (***ibidem***) moulds the whole text. Although the responsibility for war lies with those who have benefited from power so far, both women and men are fighting for the same cause. To put an end to violence both men and women need to annihilate "ancient instincts" ("Thoughts on Peace": 170). To eli-

minate war they have to begin to imagine peace – "to discuss (…) the capacity of the human spirit to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity" (***TG*** 130). Exposing the gendered nature of power and associating sexual politics with tyranny, Woolf's priority was not to secure more power for women. As Michèle Barrett points out, "Woolf argues that it is not only in women's interests to resist the patriarchal state, and in men's interests to resist the Fascist state, for the enemies are the same and the reasons for resistance the same, too" (Barrett, 1999: 52). Woolf was trying to imagine that power could be different, more humane. With the patriarchal state displaying its brutal viciousness, she felt entitled to remind men (and women) that it was high time they embarked on a serious enquiry into the nature of power. Taking her argument one step further Woolf wrote in "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid":

> The young airman up in the sky (…) is driven by voices in himself – ancient instincts, instincts fostered and cherished by education and tradition. (…) We must help the young Englishmen to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations. We must create more honourable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instinct, their subconscious Hitlerism. We must compensate the man for the loss of his gun. (…) we must give him access to the creative feelings. (…) We must free him from the machine. We must bring him out of his prison into the open air. ("Thoughts on Peace…": 170-71)

The young airman is a prey to old values endorsed by the old generation – he is both a victim of "the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave" (***idem,*** 170), that breed tyrants such as Hitler, and a collaborator in the perpetuation of those values. But, as Woolf implies in several of her characters and explains in ***Three Guineas***, women are also even if "unconsciously" (***TG*** 37) both victims and complicits in their own enslavement. "Manliness breeds womanliness. Both so hateful" (Woolf, ***Letters***, 6: 464).

The interrogation of gender as power, of the nature of patriarchy and of the question of masculinity undertaken by Virginia Woolf in her fiction and essays should now be credited for having anticipated various issues of late twentieth-century anthropological, social and historical research (See Barrett, 1999: 52). Of these the most recent is the sociology of masculinity, which, influenced by feminist and profeminist research, emerged during the 1980s and is currently engaged in emphasizing the multiplicity of masculinities and in developing "an understanding of femininity and masculinity as multiple in expression, invested with power and (…) historically variable" (Whitehead, 2002: 22). Deconstructing any conceptions of the male gender as an ahistorical and absolute category, twentieth-first-century scholars find in contemporary science evidence for what Woolf had recognized and imaginatively explored in the first four decades of the last century. Stephen M. Whitehead writes:

> At the level of, for example, biology, the brain or genetics, masculinity does not exist; it is mere illusion. Masculinity is not a product or an entity that can be grasped by hand or discovered under the most powerful microscope. No amount of cultural representation can make masculinities biologically real. Any sense of masculinity's embeddedment in men's 'inner selves' comes only from fictional or superficial accounts of what a 'man' is. Yet there is also the fact that masculinity, while in this sense illusory, remains fixed by one important consideration, that is, it exists in relation to femininity. (…) It is a dualism that remains fundamental to Western societies and beyond. (…) masculinities are implicated in the everyday practices of men – and women. (***idem***, 34)

As Woolf knew, there are no masters without slaves.

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The nature of manhood and the nature of womanhood are frequently defined both by Italian and German dictators. Both repeatedly insist that it is the nature of man and indeed the essence of manhood to fight. (***TG*** 168)

The origins of modern Western masculinity have been traced to the rise of bourgeois society – "the ideal of modern masculinity was born and became part of modern history (…) sometime between the second half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth" (Mosse, 1996: 5). Through a long process of social regulation the old aristocratic stereotypes of manliness had evolved to emphasize the individual body and qualities such as self-restraint, toughness, willpower and moral courage. Fashioned during a period of revolution and war, the ideal promoted military virtues such as discipline, heroism, "sacrifice on behalf of a higher purpose" (***idem,*** 50) as set attributes of manliness. Although, during the nineteenth century, these characteristics were somewhat diluted in Britain, and middle class values, such as fair play, had turned team sports and playing fields into privileged training grounds in manliness, by the end of the century the ideal had become strongly militarised. Facing the threats presented by feminism, by the literary and artistic avant-garde, by socialism and by sexual "deviancy", normative manhood was reinforced. As George Mosse emphasizes in ***The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity***:

> in times of insecurity strong lines of demarcation between genders were considered essential; blurring the division between them seemed to conjure up the spectre of anarchy. (***idem***, 66-7)

If during the First World War men had shown "ambivalent attitudes toward aggression (…) coupled with deep fear, disorientation and passivity" (Higonnet/ Jenson, 1987: 3) and Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, among others, had denounced the old men who had sent their sons to be slain and the "Old Lie" of patriotic sacrifice, the war eventually strengthened the masculine stereotype. The heavy toll paid by the young male generation for the privilege of belonging to a patriarchal society was not enough to change the ***status quo***. Insecurity was everywhere. The inter-war years witnessed an unprecedented economic crisis in the Western world and the beginning of the end of the British Empire. In Britain, labour unrest and suffragist demands were placated with the enfranchisement of the entire adult population, but the fear of revolution persisted. Thus the ideal of normative manhood was once more reinforced. Studying the tensions of manliness in boys' story papers between 1918 and 1939, Kelly Boyd shows how the attributes associated with manly behaviour emphasized bravery, leadership and nobility, displays of physical power as brute strength, and the value of submission to one's elders or those in authority (parents, teachers, employers). "There was more fighting, bleeding and brutality in the pages of the inter-war story papers than ever before" (Boyd, 1991: 146). By the end of the 30s the Second World War was more than a mere probability. By then "[b]uttressing and strengthening the existing structures of society may have seemed the best way of slowing down the negative changes which were perceived at the time" (***idem,*** 163). Not only in boys' stories but also in other narratives,

such as war adventure stories and spy stories, there was a widespread appeal for the reassertion of the heroic British masculinity that had presided over the imperialist enterprise (see Dawson, 1991: 113-44).

The value conferred upon physical force was reaching a climax. The ideal had not only survived but also received further impetus from fascist ideology, which prized discipline and the need for self-restraint and systematically hounded homosexuals and victimized women.[8]

> [Italian and German] Fascism used manliness both as an ideal and in a practical manner in order to strengthen its political structure. (…) Fascism represented the fullest expression of modern masculinity (…) and it brought to the surface the always-present tension between family life and the ***Männerbund***. This tension could be resolved (…) by subordinating women and children to the dominance of the male: women and children had their predetermined place in family life, and the man as activist was filled with a dynamic that, in the service of a higher cause, could not easily be confined to the home. (…) Fascism regarded the heroic as expressing true manliness, defining masculinity not so much through virtues that could be expressed in ordinary life but by its climax as a fighting force, ready for sacrifice. (***idem***, 155, 166-7)

Fascism confirmed what most women and some men had experienced for a long time – hegemonic masculinity operated by establishing its superiority over the 'other', whether that be women, younger men, homosexuals, minority or subordinated ethnic groups. At its most extreme hegemonic masculinity endangered the whole fabric of society. The achievement of ideal manhood had always, as Virginia Woolf observed in ***Three Guineas***, depended on contempt of the feminine. It was now revealing its brutal disrespect for all those, both individuals and societies, who did not accept tyranny.

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> ***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*** 47-8)

The tensions of manliness observed by Kelly Boyd in boys' stories papers in the inter-war years are central to Woolf's male characters in ***Between the Acts***. Either because they belong to a lost past or because they feel alienated in the bleak present, Bart Oliver, Giles Oliver and William Dodge show total inadequacy to confront life. The breakdown of an ideal of manhood is represented by the manifest helplessness of these three characters and reinforced by repeated allusions to violence and to the brutal newspaper story of the collective rape of a young girl by soldiers.

The pointlessness of patriarchal values and the futile brutality of the old generation are clearly made apparent early in the text when old Bart Oliver startles his small grandson, disturbing the child's perfect epiphanic moment.

> Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete. Then there was a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair rushed between him and the flower. Up he leapt,

[8] For an interpretation of Fascism as an extreme instance of the political polarization of gender and a challenging analysis of the image of women in the collective unconscious of the fascist warrior (through a study of the fantasies of the men centrally involved in the rise of Nazism) see Theweleit, 1997, 1989.

> toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms.
>
> 'Good morning, sir,' a hollow voice boomed at him from a beak of paper.
>
> The old man had sprung upon him from his hiding-place behind a tree. (BA 13)

By showing the episode from the little boy's point of view, the text confers on the relatively harmless nature of the attack a violent effect, further underlined by the old man's irritation.

> Old Oliver raised himself, his vein swollen, his cheeks flushed; he was angry: his little game hadn't worked. The boy was a cry-baby. (***idem***, 14)

Frustrated in his self-indulgent attempt to indoctrinate his heir in the allegedly masculine values of physical bravery, Bart Oliver flattens his newspaper and goes back to reading about the current situation. The episode conveys the powerlessness of a character which personifies the (decline of the) British Empire – a drowsy old man, "Mr Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired" (***idem,*** 7), nostalgic for a male life-style no longer able to enforce its principles either abroad or at home. An old man with swollen veins (***idem,*** 22) and false teeth (***idem,*** 26), lying in a chintz-covered armchair, he lives on reminiscence of the days when he was young and able to exercise command:

> (…) in the shadow of the rock, savages; and in his hand a gun. The dream hand clenched; the real hand lay on the chair arm, the veins swollen but only with a brownish fluid now. (***idem***, 17)

Frail and decaying, the old patriarch takes pride in his valiant ancestors ("under a glass case there was a watch that had stopped a bullet on the field of Waterloo", ***idem,*** 10), considers himself a degenerate descendant and reflects that his generation belongs to "a very different world" (***idem,*** 11) from the one he inherited. While the Empire had justified "the imagining of a secure, powerful and indeed virtually omnipotent" (Dawson, 1991: 120) British masculinity, its decline reveals its weakness. Bart Oliver's frailty conflicts with his obstinacy in protecting those values which, in Woolf's opinion, have brought civilisation to its present impasse. Although disturbed by his son's despondency, he never questions the principles which have ruled his life – "He would carry the torch of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave" (***idem,*** 149). As Patricia Maika observes: "Bart epitomizes law and reason [and] can only be comfortable if he confines his vision in a frame" (Maika, 1987: 23) In his Afghan dog's name – Sohrab – one recognizes an allusion to Matthew Arnold's famous poem "Sohrab and Rustum". While this may suggest to the reader Virginia Woolf's denunciation of the guilt of the father who realizes his responsibility in the destruction of the son,[9] Old Oliver is hardly conscious of any fault. In Maika's words the allusion

> is Woolf's answer to Matthew Arnold's glorification of the silly heroics of Sohrab the Tartar warrior who wanted a fight to the death so that his fame would reach the ears of his father Rustum; who only made his father ***see***, that is know him as his son, after Rustum had mortally wounded him. In Arnold's poem, Sohrab and Rustum both ignore their intuition, their

[9] See Bazin/ Lauter, 1991: 37. The poem sympathetically centres in the tragic fate of the brave and gentle Sohrab, slain by the father who does not know him.

> emotion, in favor of the reason and logic that lead to filicide and an anagnorisis which cannot be followed by epiphany, for in the waterless desert there is nothing from which new life can arise. (***ibidem***)

But Old Oliver does not see that the values he clings to are responsible for his son's frustration. Though aware of contemporary politics, he still expects some future for the next generations and is grateful for his daughter-in-law for "stretching his thread of life so fine, so far", "for continuing" (***idem,*** 17). Yet the only future he is capable of imagining rests with a small grandson who does not conform to the grandfather's idea of masculinity (" 'He's a coward, your boy is'" [***idem,*** 18]). And, as a representative of the old ***status quo***, Old Oliver has become something of an outsider – disabled by age and by history ("for us the game's over" [***idem,*** 74]) he knows that the principles he still embodies are under threat. For if the family's patriarch feels disappointed in his small grandson, he also gathers no hope from his son's behaviour, whom he silently exhorts "to give over [his] womanish vapours and be a man" (***idem,*** 99). Though the old patriarch still holds on to outdated values, he no longer has the strength to remain in control of events.

But if his lethargy is a token of the old generation's blunders, his son's generation seems trapped in paralysis. Both Giles Oliver and William Dodge, on the surface two very different types of men, have been ambushed by history and are thoroughly incapable of effective action. In the character of Giles Oliver Woolf creates an anti-hero, a "surly knight" (***idem,*** 82), utterly at odds with the male legacy he should have expanded. From his very first appearance in the novel, Giles shows his complete inadequacy to the role that would have been assigned to a "hirsute, handsome, virile" (***idem,*** 80) man. Endowed with a firm chin, a straight nose, blue eyes, he tries to play by the rules and follow "the ghost of convention" (***idem,*** 38) but his anger, although never targeted at his father with whom he feels some complicity, clearly indicts the social and political system and the older generation.

> Giles nicked his chair into position with a jerk. Thus only could he show his irritation, his rage with the old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe – over there – was bristling (…) bristling with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes would splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. He, too, loved the view (…) His father, whom he loved, he exempted from censure; as for himself, one thing followed another; and so he sat, with old fogies, looking at views. (***idem***, 43)

Oppressed by his inability to avoid the war and enraged by the irrationality of a community who tries to pretend that everything's normal, Giles does not know how or where to direct his anger. His complicity with Old Bart indicates how much he has internalised the allegedly characteristic qualities of masculine behaviour; while he does not challenge his father's values he is unable to act accordingly. As Bruce Woodcock explained in the context of his analysis of John Fowles's male characters,

> the [patriarchal] legacy of (…) power is both a privileging and a restriction, a prescription which by definition proscribes whole areas of human experience as part of the process of social regulation. (…) the father affirms masculine power in a double-edged way: the son suffers from that power, the power of denial, restriction, castration, the patriarchal 'no'; and at

> the same time, the son foresees in the father a future when he himself might act that role. Masculinity, then, is both threatening and mysteriously attractive. (Woodcock, 1984: 9-10)

In different historical circumstances, Giles might have been able to re-enact his ancestors' role or at least to feel useful as a farmer. But his public role is at odds with his inner feelings; and his supposed power barely disguises his felt helplessness. Giles's lack of self-restraint is a measure of his distance from the male ideal; his nervousness gives away his fragile self-esteem.

> The ghost of convention rose to the surface, as a blush or a tear rises to the surface at the pressure of emotion; (…) [H]e had no special gift, no capital, and had been furiously in love with his wife (…) Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice. So one thing led to another; and the conglomeration of things pressed you flat; held you fast, like a fish in water. (***BA*** 38)

As a City stockbroker in 1939 (and the recent Depression had revealed just how out of control the whole system might get), Giles senses the pointlessness of his job and the fairness of his aunt's disparaging comments, "expressing her amazement, her amusement, at men who spent their lives, buying and selling – ploughs? glass beads was it? or stocks and shares? – to savages who wished most oddly (…) to dress and live like the English?" (***ibidem***). Demeaned to the status of upper-class commuter, he changes into his cricket costume to observe the social norms his upbringing imposes. Woolf signals the character's inner contradiction even in this choice of costume – the definition of an English gentleman had associated team sports, and particularly cricket, to a "imaginary, chilvarous field of battle" (Mosse, 1996: 47) but Giles does not think of himself as a soldier. The most enduring imaginings of idealized masculinity had "crystallized around the figure of the soldier as hero" (Roper/ Tosh, 1991: 119), yet Giles does not dream of heroic exploits. Convention, however resilient, is now only a "ghost" – hegemonic masculinity presumably follows the same path.

> Masculine identities are lived out in the flesh, but fashioned in the imagination. This 'imagining' of masculinities is not simply a matter of defining those roles, traits or behaviours considered normal or appropriate for 'men' in any particular cultural context. Rather, it indicates the process by which such norms are subjectively entered into and lived in, or 'inhabited', so as to enable a (relatively) coherent sense of one's self as 'a man' to be secured and recognized by others. An ***imagined identity*** is something that has been 'made up' in the positive sense of active creation, but has real effects in the world of everyday relationships (…). It organizes a form that a masculine self can assume in the world (its bodily appearance and dress, its conduct and mode of relating), as well as its values and aspirations, its tastes and desires. (Dawson, 1991: 118)

Behind the tenuous camouflage of his gentility, Giles broods and sulks all day long. Split between an imagined masculine identity, which should involve the power to act and his lived subjective identity, trapped in emotional paralysis, the character feels estranged from his community and continually misdirects his energy.

The episode of the snake "choked with a toad in his mouth" (***idem,*** 75) is often read both as a symbol of Giles's violent need to ease his tension ("But it was action. Action relieved him" [***ibidem***]) and of his inability to endure the eruption of savagery in everyday life. Yet by "raising his foot" (***ibidem***) and gratuitously crushing the ani-

mals the character unknowingly reveals his helplessness – this is the only 'heroic' act he is able to perform. As his wife, Isa, silently observes, "[s]illy little boy, with blood on his shoes" (***idem,*** 84), Giles's nausea does not drive him to significant action but to futile brutality.

The imagery of violence evoked by this episode and present throughout the novel is nowhere more apparent than in Isa's obsession with the rape case she read about in the ***Times***. The rape scene actually echoes the case of a fourteen-year-old girl assaulted by soldiers reported in the London ***Times*** (28, 29, 30 June 1938).[10] For a moment Isa contemplates the possibility of revenge (cf. ***idem,*** 19) and even if no vengeance is possible or advisable several points are being made. Women are not immune to hate. Public institutions meant to defend patriarchy's values breed violence. "We cannot dissociate ourselves from" the tyrant. As Patricia Joplin notes,

> The culture's internal violence (…) is represented in sexual terms in a newspaper story about an English girl raped by soldiers of the prestigious House of Guards at Whitehall. Rape undermines the officially defined difference between "ourselves", the decent English and "them", the brutal Germans. (Joplin, 1989: 92)

Male aggression and sexual violence are predictably associated and nowhere more clearly than in this real episode – were soldiers not expected to defend women and children?

While Giles's inner tension is strikingly exposed in the episode with the snake and the toad, emphasizing through its futile display of masculinity the character's helplessness, his barely disguised loathing of William Dodge further reveals his vulnerability.

> A toady; a lickspittle; not a downright plain man of his senses; but a teaser and twitcher; a fingerer of sensations; picking and choosing; dillying and dallying; not a man to have straightforward love for a woman (…) but simply a – At this word, which he could not speak in public, he pursed his lips; (***idem***, 48)

William Dodge is attracted to Giles who feels threatened. Weakened by his inability to act, Giles Oliver needs to cling to the old masculine stereotypes to feel less unsure of himself. His homophobia somehow confirms his endangered masculinity. His sexual charm may entice William, but the reader is not deceived – Giles is no hero.

> William (…) watched [Giles] approach. Armed and valiant, bold and blatant, firm elatant – the popular march tune rang in his head. And the fingers of William's left hand closed firmly, surreptitiously, as the hero approached. (***idem***, 83)

William feels (and is) marginalized as a homosexual of artistic sensibility who does not accept his sexual condition. "I'm a half-man, (…) a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass, (…) as Giles saw;" (***idem,*** 57) On the surface he could not be more different from Giles, "brainy – tie spotted, waistcoat undone; urban, professional, that is putty coloured, unwholesome" (***idem,*** 32), he has "tow-coloured hair and a twisted face" (***idem,*** 31) and white, fine, shapely hands (cf. ***idem,*** 42). Yet as a would-be artist working as a clerk, William Dodge is as miscast as Giles as a stockbroker. And like Giles

[10] For details of the case (which eventually reached public notice and Old Bailey because the girl's gynaecologist performed an abortion and was prosecuted) see Beer, 1996: 138-139. Cf. also Laurence, 1991: 240-241. The scene would sound familiar to contemporary readers.

he was not given his choice. Both men continually silence their nervousness and are continually exposed by their gestures. Dodge's repressed homosexuality matches Giles Oliver's blatant heterosexuality. Trapped in a masculinity myth they are helpless to challenge, trapped in a historical situation they did nothing to bring about, both Giles Oliver and William Dodge embody their generation's impotence to deal with the present, to imagine peace and to dream the future into existence.

> 'The doom of sudden death hanging over us,' [William] said. 'There's no retreating and advancing' (…). The future shadowed their present, like the sun coming through the many-veined transparent vine leaf; a criss-cross of lines ***making no pattern***. (***idem***, 86, my italics)

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If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny.
(Woolf, "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid": 170)

Facing the precariousness of the entire civilization, Virginia Woolf denounced in ***Between the Acts*** the devastating effects of a patriarchal culture on the edge of collapse. Exposing the disintegration of the dominant masculine stereotype in the male characters here analysed, Woolf showed the suffering inflicted upon men (and women) by received notions of masculinity, and its self-destructive possibilities.

But her compassionate approach is also a political act. Another prospect lies behind the scenes. If male supremacy stimulates war perhaps male weakness might encourage peace. If sexual anxiety and masculine enervation signal the collapse of the patriarchal order they may also point towards redemption. Men and women may still meet halfway to bridge the gulf "between the dying world, and the world that is struggling to be born" (Woolf, "The Leaning Tower": 176). The disappointment and frustration of hegemonic male power may at the end of the day favour the beginning of regeneration.

> Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. (***BA*** 158)

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