

## BETWEEN THE ACTS AS LITERARY HISTORY

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### Abstract

This work draws on Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" to examine whether his idea of tradition is conveyed in Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts*. Eliot argues that an author should write with an awareness of the whole literary tradition which he calls "historical sense". This concept paradoxically includes the pastness and the presence of the past and the temporal and the timeless simultaneously. Eliot imagines tradition as an order constituted by the past works of art, but also by the new ones that constantly continue and change the order. Thus, the historical awareness of the past and the dialectical process of literary history lie at the core of Eliot's understanding of tradition. This work selects *Between the Acts* as a proper subject to test Eliot's idea due to the novel's preoccupation with history and time. The historical pageant that represents scenes and extracts from English history becomes the main means for conveying the sense of history in the novel. Individual identity blurs into collectivity in the novel's historical pageant. Constantly created, recreated, and continued, history implies change within permanence in the novel. The multi-layered past in *Between the Acts* splits up into scenes of history and prehistory that incessantly impinge on the present and imply the future. Thus, despite its general time confusion, Woolf's novel represents the changing but permanent stream of human history into which all the juxtaposed times are fused together and ultimately reconciled. We conclude that *Between the Acts* embodies Eliot's idea of tradition.

**Key words:** tradition, historical sense, dialectical process, history, prehistory, past, present, future, change, permanence

### Introduction

This work undertakes to analyse Virginia Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts*<sup>1</sup> through the prism of T. S. Eliot's "historical sense" and his idea of tradition. As Eliot puts it in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", the historical sense "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence". Thus, the historical awareness of the past is an essential component of Eliot's concept of tradition. Eliot argues in the same essay: "The historical sense compels a man to write, not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." According to Eliot, the poet should write with an awareness, not only of the literature of his generation, but also of the whole literary history of Europe as well as of his own country. For Eliot, historical sense is "a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together."<sup>2</sup>

*Between the Acts* is a unique literary medley that involves several layers of pastness and therefore it is worth analysing how Eliot's historical sense fits in the novel. The action takes place within twenty-four hours in one house, and especially in its estate, which becomes the stage of a historical pageant. The word "I" representing the individual becomes "We", that is, a part of mankind in general, viewed from the aspect of time. Commenting on the issue of time in the novel, Ferrer argues: "The first thing to note is that Miss La Trobe's spectacle, around which the novel is organised, is not presented exactly as a play properly speaking, but as a 'p<sup>a</sup>g<sup>eant</sup>' in other words a spectacle inscribed in a carnivalesque tradition going back...to ancient and mediaeval ritual processions"<sup>3</sup> (my ellipses). Hence, the novel

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<sup>1</sup> The novel was published in 1941, shortly after Woolf's suicide.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, Thomas Sterns, "Tradition and the Individual Sense", *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, fifth edition, Vol. 2, New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986, 2207.

<sup>3</sup> Ferrer, Daniel, *The Madness of Language*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, 100.

is preoccupied with a historical pageant which involves ancient and ritual elements. The pageant conveys the concept of the past through various scenes from the English history. However, in addition to history, the past in *Between the Acts* is also conveyed from a prehistoric perspective, mainly represented in the novel through Mrs. Swithin. Thus, the concept of past splits up into history and prehistory in the novel. The issue of history is announced at the very beginning:

The old man in the arm-chair - Mr. Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired - said that the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman Road, from an airplane he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars. (8)

Therefore, we are introduced to Mr. Oliver, one of the main characters in the novel, who is also part of the history, for he participated in the Indian Civil War. The narration then shifts to the general history of the English past, from the Britons until the Napoleonic wars, which has left its traces on the site where the action takes place.

The history pervades the play. It is either the history of the site, or of the Olivers, who “had bought the place something over a century ago” (11), or of the other families who had lived in the village even before the Olivers. The historic pageant is of course the main means for conveying the sense of history. It is structured around three plays representing scenes and extracts from the Elizabethan, Augustan, and Victorian history of England.

The concept of prehistory centres mainly around Lucy Swithin’s reading of the *Outline of History*:

She had stretched for her favourite reading - an Outline of History - and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood divided by a channel, was all one, populated, she understood, by elephant bodied, seal-necked, heaving, searching, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend. (13)

Viewed from the prehistoric perspective, one century and the whole of English history appears only as a blink in time. Prehistory thus provides a contrast to history and, just like history, it also interpenetrates the present. Thus, prehistory permeates the whole novel and is also present apart from Mrs. Swithin. Little George, for example, envisions his grandfather, who wants to play with him, as a “terrible peaked eyeless monster” (17). The scene at the end of the novel between Giles and Isa also involves the prehistoric:

From that embrace another life might be born. But first they might fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of the darkness in the fields of night ...

It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among the rocks. (256, my ellipsis)

However, the prehistoric in this scene is interspersed with something else. The sentence, “From that embrace another life might be born”, implying birth goes back to the origin. Little George, being at the beginning of his life, also suggests origin and not only the scene with his grandfather is related to the prehistoric, but he himself conveys the prehistoric: “The little boy had lagged and was grouting in the grass” (16). Thus, the topic of prehistory becomes related to Darwin’s origin of the species, raising the question of how Darwin’s theory is related to literature. In fact, as Beer explains, Darwin’s evolutionary theory has influenced the fiction of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is permeated with ancient myths and rituals. In *Heart of Darkness* the journey through the prehistoric

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<sup>4</sup> Beer, Gillian, “Virginia Woolf and Prehistory” in *Arguing with the Past*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, 159.

along the river and in the darkness of the forest leads also to the discovery of the primeval self. In Forster's *A Passage to India* the prehistoric is present through the primeval and embodied in the mysteries of India that surpass the expressive capacity of language. The influence of Darwin's evolutionary theory is also evident in Woolf's fiction which is preoccupied with the prehistoric, or, as she puts it in an early draft of *The Waves*: "I am telling the story of the world from the beginning."<sup>5</sup> In the *Voyage Out*, the voyage into the primeval forests in South America of the main heroine Rachel Vinrace, is also a voyage of her development and self-discovery. It seems however that the main heroine is not able to undergo her self-growth and change, for her entry into sexual life is followed by illness and death. Beer in fact argues that, although Darwin has obviously influenced Woolf's fiction, Woolf supports infinity and stands against change and development which is at the core of Darwin's evolutionary theory. Hence, the question of change and permanence from Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is also pertinent to Woolf's novel *Between the Acts*. As Eliot puts it:

The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe...is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*...<sup>6</sup>

According to Eliot, the new works interact with the old works and both future and past works enter a constant dialectic process. Thus, Eliot's "main current", that "the poet must be very conscious of", is constantly changing. This dialectic process of literary history stands at the core of Eliot's concept of tradition. The question which arises is whether Eliot's insistence on change implies that he opposes permanence. Apparently not. In 1921, in a comment on George Bernard Shaw, who was a proponent of "creative evolution", Eliot embraces permanence as more interesting than change:

[Shaw] was interested in the comparatively transient things, in anything that can or should be changed; but he was not interested in, or was rather impatient of, the things which always have been and always will be the same ... His creative evolution proceeds so far that the process ceases to be progress, and progress ceases to have any meaning. Even the author appears to be conscious of the question whether the beginning and the end are not the same, and whether, as Mr. Bradley says, "Whatever you know it is all one" ...Creative evolution is a phrase that has lost both its stimulant and sedative virtues. It is possible that an exasperated generation may find ... permanence more interesting than change.<sup>7</sup>

Criticising Shaw's creative evolution, borrowed from Bergson, Eliot is suggesting the superiority of permanence. Therefore, Eliot's "main current", through embracing change, also implies something stable and permanent. In fact, Eliot wrote in a letter, dated 12 November 1927, that "the idea of change is impossible without the idea of permanence."<sup>8</sup> Thus, incorporating change within permanence, Eliot has managed to reconcile the two opposites in his theory of tradition.

Let us see how Eliot's argument fits in Woolf's novel. It appears that Woolf opposes change in her novel. Thus, Mrs. Swithin comments after the Victorian play: "'The Victorians', Mrs. Swithin mused. 'I don't believe', she said with her odd little smile, 'that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently'" (203). The villagers who act in the pageant, dressed in their historic costumes to create the illusion of the past, seem to confirm Mrs. Swithin's words. Beer, in fact, argues that for Woolf "history is stationary, inhabited by replaceable figures whose individuality is less than their community with other lives."<sup>9</sup> According to Beer, Woolf's concept of history is static in the sense that people do not change, and consequently they do not create history. Woolf herself

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, ed. J. Graham, London: Hogarth Press, 1976, I, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Eliot, Thomas Stearns, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 2208.

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, Thomas Stearns, "London Letter", *Dial*, LXXI, no. 4 (October 1921), 454-5.

<sup>8</sup> Bonamy Dobree, "T. S. Eliot: A Personal Reminiscence", in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Allen Tate, Delta Books, New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1966, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Beer, *Arguing with the Past*, 161.

envisions what Beer calls the “community with people” as a stream in which the individual is submerged. Thus in “A Sketch of the Past” she writes: “I see myself as a fish in the stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.”<sup>10</sup>

In *Between the Acts*, however, Mrs. Lynn Jones ultimately accepts change, although she is still romantically attached to the Victorian age:

If they had met with no resistance, she mused, nothing wrong, they’d still be going round and round and round. The Home would have remained; and papa’s beard, she thought, would have grown and grown; and mom’s knitting - what did she do with all her knitting? - change had to come, she said to herself, or there’d have been yards and yards of pap’s beard, of mama’s knitting. Nowadays her son-in-law was clean shaven her daughter had a refrigerator.... Dear, how my mind wanders, she checked herself. What she meant was, change had to come, unless things were perfect; in which case she supposed they resisted Time. Heaven was changeless. (202-203)

Mrs. Lynn Jones is aware that the younger generation brings change, for things are not perfect at any age. To support the opinion in favour of change in the novel, it is necessary to turn back to the relation between history, prehistory, and the present. It has already been established that both history and prehistory interpenetrate the present in the novel. Mrs. Swithin’s musing on prehistory is often interspersed with the present. Her meditation is interrupted by the maid who comes with the morning tea:

It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green streaming undergrowth of the primeval forest. Naturally, she jumped, as Grace put the tray down and said: “Good morning, Ma’am.” “Batty”, Grace called her, as she felt on her face the divided glance that was half meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron. (13-14)

This comic scene is similar with the one already described where George mistakes his grandfather for a monster. The history of the past also merges with the present. The audience recognizes the local people acting in the play so that they are both well-known villagers, and characters from English history. Thus, Queen Elizabeth is played by Eliza Clark, the tobacconist from the village: “Could she be Mrs. Clark of the village shop? She was splendidly made up. Her head, pearl-hung, rose from a vast ruff. Shiny satins draped her ... She looked the age in person” (101, my ellipsis). Not only does history impose itself on the present, but also the present moment interacts with history. Thus Isa muses in the library: “‘The library’s always the nicest room in the house’, she quoted and ran her eyes along the books... ‘what remedy was there for her at her age - the age of the century, thirty-nine - in books’” (26). The aeroplanes with their noise that ironically interrupts Mr. Streatfield’s speech represent both the impending catastrophe of the war and the present moment of history. This view of history in the novel might be related to Carr and Croce’s vision of history. As Carr puts it:

History is what we now are and what we are now doing, it is not a character our actions will assume only when they have receded into past. The basis and the substance of this concept is that our present actions lose their meaning the moment we regard them as new *existence* externally related to another and past existence ... Not only is there no break between the present and the past, but both the form and the matter of present reality, what we now are and are now doing as individuals, or as nations, is in its essence *history*.<sup>11</sup> (my ellipsis)

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<sup>10</sup> Woolf, Virginia, “A Sketch of the Past”, *Moments of Being*, ed. J. Schulkind, Brighton: Sussex University Press, 1976, 80.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 235.

Lewis criticizes Carr's dialectical view of history which blurs the boundaries between the present and the past.<sup>12</sup> However, history in the novel becomes contemporaneous and therefore it coincides with Carr and Croce's view of history as a present reality. Not only the pageant and the characters playing in it recreate history, but it seems that everything is history in the novel. Mr. Oliver fought in the Indian Civil War and he therefore belongs to the history of the past. Mrs. Swithin constantly recreates the ancient, that is, the prehistoric within the present moment. Even little George is part of the most remote prehistory, for he behaves as one of the extinct animals in Mrs. Swithin's book. Consequently, being constantly created and recreated, the concept of history in the novel involves change, and this change exists within the permanence of history. Hence, we have the same paradoxical interplay as in Eliot's essay - change within permanence.

We have seen so far that prehistory contrasts history: on the one hand both history and prehistory interpenetrate the present, but on the other, the present moment interacts with history. Let us turn now to the issue of future in the novel and its relation to the past and the present. In fact, the future is given equal treatment as the past and the present in *Between the Acts*. Isa, besides being an individual character, also conveys the presence of the future in the novel. "Beauty - isn't that enough?" But here Isa fidgeted ... 'No, not for us, who've the future,' she seemed to say" (100). However, Isa's words come only after Mrs. Swithin's statement: "We've the present" (100).

In addition to conveying the prehistoric in the novel, Mrs. Swithin's thoughts often include future: "she was given to increasing the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future" (14). The future is present at the very end of the novel. Concerning the last scene of the novel, Ferrer argues that "we do not get to know this play, as it is external to the novel, and begins only after its end. And yet it is present in a ghostly way, announced in the form of a future-in-the-past."<sup>13</sup> No matter how uncertain it might be, the important thing is that the future marks the end of the novel. The planes that interrupt Mr. Streatfield's speech indicate not only the present moment of history, but also the imminent war. Therefore, it appears that all times are juxtaposed in the novel: prehistory to history; history and prehistory to the present and vice versa; the future both to the present and past, as well as the present and past to the future.

To show that the concept of the future is not neglected in the novel, although it does not stand alone, it is necessary to go back to Woolf's vision of herself as "a fish in the stream". Viewed from the aspect of time, it is in fact the stream of human history into which the individual fuses. Thus, in *Between the Acts* the past, the present and the future fuse in the infinity of the stream of human history. Not only does the future receive an equal treatment, but also all the juxtaposed times in the novel are fused together and ultimately reconciled into the stream of human history.

However, if history is considered as a present reality in the novel, then, according to Carr and Lewis, it should be identified with Bergson's time and therefore with his concept of duration.<sup>14</sup> For Bergson, duration is the time inside us, whereas clock time is the so-called mathematical time.<sup>15</sup> Let us see how Bergson's time concepts stand in the context of the novel. The clock time appears in pieces in *Between the Acts*. It seems that the sound of the machine which permeates Miss La Trobe's play measures the simultaneities of Bergson's clock time: "Tick, tick, tick' the machine continued. 'Marking time,' said old Oliver beneath his breath" (100). The clock is not ticking only in the present. The Victorian policeman, stating his everyday routine, also seems to be counting the simultaneities of the clock time: "Go to Church on Sunday; on Monday, nine sharp, catch the City Bus. On Tuesday it may be, attend a meeting at the Mansion House for the redemption of the sinner; at dinner on Wednesday attend another - turtle soup" (190). Thus, the monotony of everyday life becomes present in all ages. However, the ticking of the machine stops after Mrs. Swithin and Isa's musing on the present and the future. The policeman representing authority in the Victorian age is in fact Budge, the publican, that is, a person belonging to the present who only creates an illusion of Victorian authority. Hence the clock time in the novel constantly transforms itself and fuses into something else.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 236 & 238.

<sup>13</sup> Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, 102.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 235-236.

<sup>15</sup> Bergson, Henri, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson, Muirhead Library of Philosophy, London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1910, 56.

Bergson's duration might be occasionally present in the novel. However, it is not a prevailing concept. Immediately before the scene with the mirrors, the ideal harmony conveyed by Miss La Trobe's music is destroyed: "The tune changed; snapped, jagged ...What is her game? To disrupt?... (To) break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole. What a cackle, what a rattle, what a yaffle" (213-214; my ellipses). Therefore, the notes of Miss La Trobe's music shift from Bergson's ideal harmony into a complete chaos:

Then once more, in the uproar which by this time has passed quite beyond control, behold Miss Whatsername behind the tree summoned from the bushes - or was it *they* who broke away - Queen Bees; Queen Anne; and the girl in the Mall; and the Age of reason; and Budge the policeman; here they come. And the Pilgrims. And the lovers. And the grandfather's clock.... (215)

The "uproar" of music not only blots out the memory of the past, but it conveys a complete confusion of people and time. Hence, Bergson's concept of the time inside us is not reliable in the novel, for it is present only in fragments and it constantly transforms itself into something else. Although some moments in the course of the illusion created by Miss La Trobe resemble Kristeva's monumental temporality<sup>16</sup>, they are also not predominant in this novel, as they are, for example, in *To the Lighthouse*. These moments together with all the different concepts of time in *Between the Acts* fuse into an infinite stream. Therefore, all the times in the novel are reconciled and fused together in the infinite stream of human history.

Time in *Between the Acts* is a stream which constantly glides away from history and prehistory into the present and the future. This stream is not related to any specific time, but it only flows towards eternity. However, the whole novel, despite its general time confusion, represents the changing stream of human history and thus it embodies Eliot's historical sense and his idea of tradition.

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<sup>16</sup> Kristeva, Julia, "Women's Time" in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 191. As Kristeva puts it: "there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word 'temporality' hardly fits: all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space, this temporality reminds one of Kronos in Hesiod's mythology, the incestuous son whose massive presence covered all of Gea in order to separate her from Ouranos, the father". According to Kristeva, linear time is the time of history, involving departure, progression, and arrival. Contrary to it, monumental temporality, being without "cleavage or escape", implies eternity. The comparison to Kronos reinforces the idea that the concept of monumental temporality stands beyond the boundaries of time and space.

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