

A SHRINKING ISLAND

MODERNISM AND
NATIONAL CULTURE
IN ENGLAND

Jed Esty

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ments in separate, incompatible packages. Although the pageant-plays work toward a version of the symbolic encounter between males representing different classes, they do so with unignorable aesthetic enervation. Lacking in linguistic complexity and figurative depth, the pageant represents an ideal of village craft rather than professional art. Read as texts, Forster's plays only offer a weak synthesis of the ideological and libidinal elements that were alive in his earlier fiction.⁵⁷ As participatory village rituals, though, they have the appeal of a communal and spontaneous representation of an entire, cherished way of life. The neotraditional strain of late modernist writing that appropriated pageantry in the 1930s had visions of community stripped of aesthetic rarefaction and class privilege. If, in an earlier moment, the pleasures of metropolitan centrality compensated for the lost magic of rural English life, then, in the midcentury, the vanished pleasures of pastoral belonging are revived to compensate for the erosion of metropolitan perception.

Forster's liberal traditionalism inclined him to this particular version of community drama in the 1930s because it seemed to represent the shared memories of a community, not the propagandizing and didactic weight of other forms of political art and theater then circulating in Britain. To Forster, pageantry derived from a popular and spontaneous form of national attachment rather than from statist and xenophobic ideology. However, the pageant-play also had a nostalgic belief in heritage, in the mystified communion between *topos* and *ethnos*, that could very easily be recoded not just as magical and irrational but, even more dangerously, as fascist.⁵⁸ As a community drama, the pageant-play makes a certain kind of sense in the 1930s, the decade of engaged literature and new forms of political theater. But its rural, mystical, and nostalgic depiction of English life were no doubt bland—if not downright offensive—to the tastes of the literary left, including those, like Auden, who were interested in more urban and modernizing and politicizing forms of group theater.⁵⁹ The ritualistic and communal nature of the pageant-play distinguishes it from the more familiar 1930s notions of public or political art (such as the documentary novel, the radio play, or the Spanish Civil War poem). Yet, like those other forms, the pageant play expresses two desires that signal a late modernist transition: (1) the desire to mount a more participatory model of art production (as against the aesthetic virtuosity of high modernism), and (2) the desire to connect more directly with a public of art consumers (as against the cloistered alienation of high modernism).

Forster's pageants express a strong interest in the recuperation of a native heritage but also testify to the problems that arise in the conversion of a metropolitan to an insular aesthetic. Despite his reinvestment of cultural value in local traditions, Forster cannot help but experience and express ambivalence about the narrowing of England's cultural horizons

in the 1930s and '40s. In keeping with his lifelong (and literarily successful) commitment to a cosmopolitan orientation, Forster finds that the resources of a putatively self-sufficient island culture have substantial limitations. On the one hand, England's pastoral core had always been a source of cultural value—a real and imaginary homeland. On the other hand, the homeland's value always depended on the possibility of escape, of travel and of intercultural encounter. To be ensconced within the island brings both the epistemological comfort of a bounded space and the cultural claustrophobia of narrowed horizons. While striving to replace the fruitful cultural dissonances of his modernist-era writing with an Anglo-centric neopastoralism, Forster nonetheless evinces a clear ambivalence about the lost privileges of metropolitan perception. Such an ambivalence also characterizes the writing of Virginia Woolf, who shared Forster's interest in the village pageant-play as a device for negotiating the political and aesthetic predicaments of English modernism during the late 1930s.

Island Stories and Modernist Ends in *Between the Acts*

Like her contemporaries Forster and Eliot, Virginia Woolf faced questions about the nature and status of public art during the 1930s. In *The Years* (1937) she tried to reinvent herself, to extend her form in response to increasing demands for social engagement. But she was discouraged by the results: "[w]hat I meant I think was to give a picture of society as a whole; give characters from every side; turn them towards society, not private life; exhibit the effect of ceremonies; Keep one toe on the ground by means of dates, facts; envelop the whole in a changing temporal atmosphere; Compose into one vast many-sided group at the end; and then shift the stress from present to future. . . . Of course I completely failed."⁶⁰ Woolf seems to reflect on *The Years* as a work that did not transform her method, but simply extended it thematically by covering the life of the large Pargiter clan over several decades and three generations. The new novel Woolf had in mind in the late 1930s would not simply enlarge certain themes, it would renovate novelistic form. And more: it would explore the relation of writer and audience, allowing Woolf to make more direct contact with popular taste and contemporary social referents. But how could the difficult and sometimes private idioms of high modernism be accommodated to the desire (now felt by both Woolf and her engaged critics) for a more public or communal art?

So far, my presentation of Woolf recalls a familiar figure of the thirties literary landscape: the modernist aesthete disciplined away from exquisite treatments of bourgeois consciousness by the imperatives of social crisis. In the final years of the decade, this test of modernist commitments

was intensified and complicated by an urgent political problem: how could Woolf, an intellectual pacifist, respond to the growing menace of fascism? More to the point: what stance could a lifelong Outsider—a woman artist who cherished her idiosyncratic and dissenting freedoms—take in relation to the wagon-circling patriotism of the late 1930s? Woolf had always been suspicious of British nationalism (linked as it was to patriarchy, imperialism, and xenophobia), yet in the end she wanted to find palatable ways to express her affinity for England and to assert the value of English traditions.

The problem of social engagement and the problem of nationalism converge in Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, where Woolf makes the performance of a village pageant the central device in her exploration of community art and English history. Although Woolf missed the 1938 performances of Forster's *England's Pleasant Land* (later published in book form by Woolf's own Hogarth Press), his attempt to forge a meaningfully shaped communal history using the pageant form clearly struck a chord. It was at that time that Woolf's ideas for her new novel began to crystallize; by organizing the narrative around a pageant, she would be able to "exhibit the effect of ceremonies" and to break narrative momentum with poetic and choral structures. Woolf, like Forster, was becoming impatient with the limits of narrative itself. Although *The Years* had represented a shift toward a more encompassing social form, Woolf still felt hampered by certain generic limitations particular to the novel. The problem was the forward momentum of narrative: "thats [*sic*] the horror to me of the novel." But, she wrote to Stephen Spender, "I am very anxious to develop it further; and almost tried a poetry section in this book; wanted to get some chorus; some quite different level."⁶¹ Although *Between the Acts* has sometimes been read as an addendum to Woolf's major novels or as a work bedeviled and finally swamped by Woolf's sense of artistic impotence and political despair, it is also an innovative and daring attempt by Woolf to bring her fiction to that "different level." Where *The Years* aimed for historical extension, *Between the Acts* returns Woolf to the temporal economy of the modernist day book, unspooling itself in the space of a single summer day. At Pointz Hall, in the "heart of the country," villagers and gentry have gathered to perform and watch a pageant-play that rehearses English history from the birth of the nation to the present time. By comparison to the Parkerian model, Woolf's pageant is smaller in scale and less formulaic in dramatic structure. It proceeds from the powerful dissenting vision of its balking director, Miss La Trobe, an outsider marked by whispered implications of queerness and foreignness. Through Miss La Trobe's show, the text registers the political and aesthetic impulses that motivated Forster's turn to pageantry but renders them in highly self-conscious and self-interrogating form. The interpolated genre

of the pageant allows Woolf to combine public ritual and modernist narrative and to investigate the social currency of England's "island history."

For Woolf, as for Powys, Eliot, and Forster, pageantry was a dramatic genre that could allow for the emergence of a choral voice, giving form to communal values rather than to individual impressions or divisive ideologies. The desirability of a collective or impersonal voice had become an urgent political as well as aesthetic matter in the period. The pageant-in-novel design allowed Woolf to introduce a folkloric choral element (that "quite different level") without relinquishing the familiar techniques of her distinctive narrative style.⁶² Despite the flexible generic structure of *Between the Acts*, however, Woolf's confrontation with national community creates obvious strains in her writing. Several times in the novel, Woolf reverses course between collective and recuperative ideas of Englishness and her fundamental wariness (as both artist and woman) about any kind of national or collective participation. The pageant's retelling of English cultural history is continuously challenged by the intersubjective and intrapsychic dramas that occur "between the acts." And yet, in the course of Woolf's narration, the modernist novel of consciousness begins to look like something new altogether.

Ubi Sunt

Woolf's prickly rapprochement with national heritage is apparent from the outset of *Between the Acts*, when she describes her setting: "Pointz Hall was seen in the light of an early summer morning to be a middle-sized house. It did not rank among the houses that are mentioned in guide books. It was too homely."⁶³ By describing a place untouched by the domestic tourism industry, Woolf suggests that we are approaching authentic, not official, England. But that description of Pointz Hall is soon contradicted by another: "The ground sloped up, so that to quote Figgis's Guide Book (1833), 'it commanded a fine view of the surrounding country. . . . The spire of Bolney Minster, Rough Norton woods, and on an eminence rather to the left, Hogben's Folly, so called because . . . The Guide Book still told the truth. 1830 was true in 1939' (52). This narrative equivocation indicates Woolf's desire to avoid antiquarian nationalism, but it also establishes her surprisingly unironic appreciation of the unchanging English country.⁶⁴ "1830 was true in 1939": this terse formula collapses more than a century of modern history, while the brief list of place names—which recalls Forster's local catalogs—temporarily forestalls narrative momentum. Woolf begins the novel with descriptions that make history visible in spatial form, in the landscape around Pointz Hall: "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" (4). The absorption of historical sequence into a single sentence and a single glimpse anticipates the logic of living history that the pageant-play later performs.

In fact, *Between the Acts* doubles and redoubles its telling of the national story even before the pageant begins. Early on, Lucy Swithin, the aging spirit of domesticity at Pointz Hall, reads an "Outline of History." Like the pageant, the outline organizes itself around the intensely local logic of the *ubi sunt*, seducing Lucy Swithin with stories of what happened *on this very spot of soil* in the dim past.⁶⁵ The outline begins with the geological creation myth of England: the moment when the island calved off from the great Eurasian landmass. Its text inspires Swithin to envision her England as a prehistoric swamp writhing with iguanadons. But the outline also serves as the starting point for a comforting narrative about the birth of culture as an island story.⁶⁶ The outline thus establishes two competing fantasies of historical reversion that structure the novel: in the first, modernity collapses back into destructive barbarism; in the second, modernity is salvaged by the presence of immemorial folkways. Taken as a primer for reading the pageant, the outline draws our attention to a contest between redemptive tradition and barbaric regress.

This same opposition is represented characterologically in the frame narrative, which features two anglicized, domestic women and two metropolitan, aggressive men. The elder siblings at Pointz Hall, Lucy Swithin and Bart Oliver (an old India hand), represent competing versions of Englishness: one pastoral and insular, one barbaric and expansive. Early in the novel, old Oliver dozes in a chair, dreaming of "a bullock maggot-eaten in the sun; and 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" (17). This dream of violent imperial power, like the old man having it, is moribund but not quite dead. The decaying bullock (or castrated bull) seems a fitting emblem for the dying empire, an incarnation of John Bull with his masculine sap running dry. Although the retired empire man is something of a stock figure for Woolf (and indeed in much English fiction of the period), Bart Oliver is certainly more senescent and obsolescent than, for example, Peter Walsh in *Mrs. Dalloway*.⁶⁷ By the end of the novel, the ex-imperial warrior is merely "spectral," a ghostly gasping sign of fading Britannia (218). Lucy Swithin (whose surname echoes "within" and signals interiority) is the presiding figure of insular domesticity. Her native and naive Englishness contrasts sharply with her brother's unregenerate (if creaky) imperialism. A flighty but sympathetic older woman, Lucy, like Mrs. Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse* or Mrs. Wilcox in Forster's *Howards End*, fixes value to the long, slow accumulations of insular culture.

The elder Olivers are caught in an unresolved dialectic: "[w]hat she saw he didn't; what he saw she didn't—and so on, *ad infinitum*" (26). Bart's aggressive imperialism threatens the peace of Lucy's insular humanism, just as Lucy's batty devotion to pastoral and aesthetic values rankles Bart's crusty utilitarianism. In the language of the novel—one that Forster would have understood—she connects, he divides. With these characters in view, Maria DiBattista has suggested that a dialectic of unification and separation (love and hate) structures the novel.⁶⁸ Within that very broad dialectic, the novel also makes particular symbolic assignments that correspond to competing versions of English national destiny.

In a sense, the elder Olivers represent defunct ways both of unifying and separating; the potential symbolic resolution lies in the next generation, where Giles and Isa Oliver repeat the terms of the Bart/Lucy pairing. Giles, a London stockbroker, represents the modern British forces of empire and finance, and he acts as a conduit, bringing the specter of war into the sheltered pastoral scene at Pointz Hall. Woolf uses Giles to suggest links between capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchal aggression. By contrast, Isa (like Lucy) is a figure of beleaguered domesticity. When Bart Oliver lies dreaming of imperial romance, Isa interrupts, "destroying youth and India" (18). At moments like this, the symbolic antagonism between domestic and imperial versions of England comes to the fore.⁶⁹ However, although the transfer of these terms from aged siblings to a younger couple makes for a more direct allegorical encounter, the trajectory of the Giles-Isa marriage plot remains indistinct and unresolved in the novel.

Thus the frozen or unresolved quality of the dialectic established by Bart and Lucy gets more or less replayed in the next generation, where Woolf does not offer a figurative resolution to the struggle between two models of English history. But Woolf does introduce two further characters into this rather static pattern of gendered associations. The unexpected arrival of Mrs. Manresa and William Dodge at Pointz Hall on pageant day gives Woolf a way not only to reinforce the symbolic economy described above but to kick the settled English gentry into unpredictable motion. Manresa, the brash Philistine, captivates the Oliver men, while Dodge, the feminized artist, establishes a quick rapport with both Isa and Lucy. Where Dodge understands culture and heritage, Manresa eats, flirts, and recoils whenever she "scent culture." Where he sublimates, she desublimates, converting verbal exchanges into libidinal ones, turning attention from art to appetite (50). As a trigger for sexual and aggressive impulses, Manresa rekindles "youth and empire" in Bart and inspires awkward violence in Giles (her "sulky hero"). It is no surprise, then, to discover that Manresa comes from outside the Anglocentric sphere of the country house: she is not only a gate-crasher, but a Tasma-

nian-born parvenu (39). Carnal and colonial, Manresa disrupts the peaceable domestic spirit that dwells in Pointz Hall. While the pageant draws attention to the values of insular culture, Manresa threatens it by rechanneling libidinal currents in the direction of sex and violence. Thus Dodge and Manresa repeat the novel's basic symbolic antagonism between genteel insular culture and destructive imperial libido, while reversing the previous association of the former with femininity, the latter with masculinity.

In this way, the frame narrative repeatedly lays down a figurative divide between an England whose values are feminine, pastoral, literary and an England whose values are masculine, industrial, expansive.⁷⁰ Like many other English intellectuals in the 1930s, Woolf seems interested in trying to reclaim English tradition—what DiBattista rightly describes as an “adversary, anterior culture”—from an imperial Britishness that had appropriated the national past.⁷¹ The novel does not paper over the long entanglement of peaceable, humanist tradition and aggressive, expansive modernization. In fact, the novel's political tension is driven precisely by Woolf's awareness that she might not be able to prize apart these two nationalisms, that it might not be possible to celebrate the right kind of English civilization without fueling the wrong kind of British patriotism. Like Eliot and Forster, Woolf experiments with pageantry in an effort to reestablish the nationalism of shared experiences (pastoral memory) as against the nationalism of shared goals (imperial mission). But the inter-pollation of ritual into narrative gives Woolf a new symbolic purchase on this familiar problem. The novel uses the pageant, with its evocations of rural continuity, against the frame narrative, with its inevitable progression through cycles of creation and destruction. History's tragic motion repeats itself through the narrative, but the village ritual interrupts and suspends the narrative motion, freezing history into Englishness.

Deep Play

Woolf introduces the Pointz Hall pageant as a potentially unofficial version of national discourse. Both the food and the decorations are left over from a coronation celebration, as if to suggest that the village, having purged itself of official ceremony, can now engage in a more spontaneous and authentic ritual.⁷² With the townsfolk gathered on the lawn, the pageant begins. Enter a village girl swathed in pink, who announces, “*England am I,*” then cues a teenage actor (“*England's gown a girl now*”), who is quickly replaced on stage by “Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco,” personifying the Elizabethan age (76–83). In quick succession and with a gently spoofing touch, Woolf presents both the pageant's audience and the novel's readers with the conventional figure of the female-

embodied nation. From this point, the pageant unfolds as a history not of politics or society but of literature. Skipping such major events as the Magna Carta and the Revolution, the pageant condenses English history down to four scenes: Elizabethan drama, Restoration comedy, Victorian melodrama, and the present day.

Woolf parodies the various phases of English literature and devotes her wit to laying bare the symbolic ruses of pageantry. In the midst of the Restoration comedy pastiche, a chorus of villagers moves on and off the open-field stage: “*Digging and delving, the villagers sang passing in single file in and out between the trees, for the earth is always the same, summer and winter and spring; and spring and winter again; ploughing and sowing, eating and growing; time passes . . .*” (125). Woolf ends the passage with an ellipsis and an abrupt, ironic echo of the famous middle section of *To The Lighthouse*: time passes. Or does it, if “the earth is always the same”? Here time is measured by cycles of pastoral repetition, not, as in *To The Lighthouse*, by the irreversible and disturbing aftereffects of a modern world war. At this point, Woolf picks up the third-person narrative to draw further attention to the tight relations between the pageant's pastoral conventions and its outdoor setting. The very landscape around Pointz Hall apparently echoes the tune in the pageant. Moreover: “[t]he cows, making a step forward, then standing still, were saying the same thing to perfection” (134). Since Woolf has been gleefully parodying the rural clichés of pageantry, the echoing cows would seem to underscore the pageant's rote quality. This is cultural expression so ancient and so familiar that it barely counts as culture at all: even the local animals know the tune. With culture barely extending beyond natural reflection, we can take Woolf's point as an aesthetic criticism of an enervated rural idiom, but also as the description of an organic village art form.⁷³

In the next scene, Woolf takes obvious delight in exposing the social and literary conventions of Victorian life. Moral earnestness, routine courtship comedies, missionary zeal, superficial materiality, stiff and prudish etiquette, and invidious class consciousness are all satirized briskly in an antic penny-opera. The earnest hero and pious heroine breathlessly vow to spend “*a lifetime in the African desert among the heathens*” (166). The plodding inevitability of Victorian marriage plots is spoofed by a chorus in top hats and side whiskers, who repeatedly ask the musical question: “*O has Mr. Sibthorp a wife? / O has Mr. Sibthorp a wife?*” (169). But the most important figure in the scene is its narrator, a Victorian constable, who stands (we are to imagine) at Hyde Park Corner, “*directing the traffic of 'Er Majesty's Empire. The Shah of Persia; Sultan of Morocco; or it may be 'Er Majesty in person; or Cook's tourists; black men; white men; sailors; soldiers; crossing the ocean; to proclaim her Empire; all of 'em Obey the Rule of my truncheon*” (161–62). Caricaturing

the busy world of Anglo-imperial manhood, Woolf also underscores a darker point about the connections between colonial authority and domestic politics. The policeman declares: "*The ruler of an Empire must keep his eye on the cot; spy too in the kitchen; drawing room; library*" (162-63). By satirizing the masculine types through whom she connects violent overseas power to domestic patriarchal power, Woolf not only exposes one of the key ideological conventions of Edwardian pageantry (the rural heart that justifies British manifest destiny but also initiates the symbolic and political reorganization of that convention with a dissenting version of the island story. The mutually supportive institutions of empire and patriarchy come in for familiarly barbed treatment by Woolf. But their Victorian placement in the pageant has the effect of shunting them backward into the quaint past. A key turn in Woolf's thinking is registered here: empire is no longer seen as a political error of the British establishment but as a dated and outmoded enterprise belonging to an earlier, rather foolish era. Like Eliot's *The Rock*, the text situates itself on the historical threshold of the postimperial age, a gesture that makes it possible for Woolf to delink insular affinities from aggressive politics and therefore to explore the potential virtues of a nationally coded investment in group ritual.

Nonetheless, in narrating the pageant's performance of English history, Woolf's tone is undeniably critical and ironic. While mining the resources of the insular literary tradition, she takes obvious delight in parodying its conventions. Given the pious and fraternal rhetoric of pageantry in Woolf's time, it is hard to imagine her responding with anything short of a gag reflex to the typical pageant's promises of triumphant Englishness. In Woolf's text, the accidents and indignities of amateur theater—missed cues, muffed lines, ragtag costumes—undercut the patriotic rhetoric. Woolf parodies not only the pageant and its vulgar archive of civic materials but also the pat, inattentive responses of the pageant's audience. For these reasons, the critical consensus on *Between the Acts* has been that Woolf uses the pageant to deflate nationalism and deflect political commitment. It is true in this pageant-novel that myths and traditions are *put on* in both senses of the phrase: they are donned as historical fancy dress, and they are spoofed. And yet there are moments of communal longing and national sentiment that run against that grain. The travesties of literary convention *in* the pageant do not add up to a parodic reduction of the pageant. To read the text this way is to assign the pageant some symbolic weight and purpose beyond its function as a mere object of Woolfian irony and distrust of patriotism. While she may doubt the value of the pageant's conventionalized content, Woolf has a genuine interest in the power of the pageant's form, or to be more precise, in its ritual occasion.

As I hope is becoming clear, my reading is not meant as the latest round in the game of interpretive ping-pong about Woolf and nationalism in *Between the Acts*; it seems clear that the novel is designed precisely to express both antinationalist and nationalist sentiments, to reflect both authoritarian and antiauthoritarian possibilities in group ritual. The novel's irony reflects Woolf's interest in redefining, not eschewing, national tradition. Its revisionary relationship to "our island history" defines a nativist turn whose aesthetic and cultural effects are not simply (as often assumed) reductive or conservative. Indeed, Woolf's hybrid pageant-novel exemplifies a kind of experimental writing of the thirties that reflects on national ideology with the anthropological self-consciousness proper to a postmetropolitan era.

Narrative and/as Ritual

As I have proposed, a number of wartime intellectual projects began to turn ethnographic devices acquired in the colonies to the task of representing the home culture. With this in mind, we might understand the pageant device in Woolf's novel as a way to shift emphasis from the professional irony of modernist narrative to the inherent liminality of patriotic ritual.⁷⁴ Seeking to express a troubled half-love for England, Woolf presents an *uncertain performance* of—rather than either a thorough ironization of or a complete identification with—nationalism. By sketching the performance, she exerts control over the delicate politics of her communal attachments, dividing the pageant's meaning almost equally between inherited national cliché, La Trobe's dissident sensibility, and the accidental quality of spontaneous outdoor art. The function of Woolf's narrated ritual becomes especially clear in the pageant's final scene, when the director, Miss La Trobe, proposes to represent the present day. Here Woolf and her authorial surrogate confront a representational crisis that is both *in* and *of* the novel: the problem of rendering the community to the community, of performing an anthropology of the here and now. The viewers immediately understand the problem when they read the pageant program: "Ourselves. . ." They returned to the programme. But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans, yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939—it was ridiculous" (178-79). Miss La Trobe's ambition is to "expose them, as it were, to *douche* them, with present-time reality" (178-79). But the audience cannot absorb a representation of itself. At this point, nature intervenes in the form of a rain shower, a universal "*douching*" that immediately unites the audience, which then engages in a collective and primitive shudder at the power of the gods. Such evanescent rites of summer suggest that a ritualized relation to nature can make a collective where art cannot or

should not. Woolf uses the scene to represent a spontaneous and temporary cultural unity, as against the authoritarian (or authorial) imposition of social unity. It is easy to understand that fascism might make an English writer of the 1930s keen to explore the problem of national art or of how to represent the community to itself. But that problematic emerges in the text not only because the war makes national representation newly urgent but also because the anthropological turn makes it newly possible.

This reading of the late modernist moment in England integrates a relatively underexamined story about the discursive effects of imperial retrenchment with the usual narrative about the political and aesthetic crises of the late thirties. If we think of the years around World War II as a period of historical transition, fraught with beginnings as well as endings, we can perhaps better appreciate thirties texts that have sometimes been read as extreme, rigidified, or broken-down versions of twenties masterpieces. *Between the Acts* thematizes the problem of community self-representation more directly than earlier Woolf texts in part because it registers a new opportunity for the revival and redefinition of a broad national tradition. If the rituals invoked here are more nostalgic and Anglocentric than the corresponding myths of cosmopolitan high modernism, they are also more popular and communal. The fading of Pax Britannica opened the way for a redefinition of Englishness—a way, that is, for the pastoral culture of Lucy Swithin to reassert itself against the imperial and patriarchal politics of Bart Oliver.

The project of separating a humane English tradition from the accreted discourse of imperial nationalism took on a new plausibility for intellectuals in Woolf's circle during the late 1930s. Woolf herself clearly knew a good deal about the changing status of the British Empire during the interwar years, in part through her intellectual and domestic partnership with Leonard Woolf, who was one of the most acute observers of colonial resistance and imperial decline.⁷⁵ From his early tour of duty in Ceylon as a colonial officer (1904–11) through his years as a foreign policy advisor to the Labour Party, Leonard Woolf had firsthand knowledge of the colonial system. For him, the end of the British Empire was apparent long before formal decolonization.⁷⁶ In *Imperialism and Civilization* (1928), Leonard Woolf presciently identified the significance of Asian and African independence movements: “the subject peoples everywhere are attempting to throw off the domination of Western States and the tyranny and exploitation of Western civilization. The outcome of this movement of revolt will probably be of supreme importance in the history of the next hundred years.”⁷⁷ Throughout the 1930s, Woolf was urging politicians in London to come to terms with their “contracting civilization.”⁷⁸ In his view, Britain's own untenable institutions, especially the overseas empire, would destroy its civilization, even without Hitler's help.

Virginia Woolf knew Leonard's views about the corrupting effects of empire on English society and about growing political resistance to overseas British rule. It is therefore not surprising that *Between the Acts* registers the incipient end of the British empire, nor that Woolf could write in 1936 that “Things—empires, hierarchies—moralities—will never be the same again.”⁷⁹ At a point when empires—and the hierarchies they both supported and were supported by—were being dramatically transformed, Woolf began to imagine the potential for improvement in the social life of English women. In her late-thirties work of social criticism, *Three Guineas*, Woolf offers a clear exposition of the links between imperial and patriarchal politics, noting that they both contributed to Europe's (and Britain's) headlong descent into war. What is less often noticed about *Three Guineas* is that Woolf's analysis, despite its grim perspicacity about patriarchal aggression, also makes room for a creative vision of an English society redeemed from imperial and warmongering politics.

In Woolf's analysis of English power, patriarchal and imperial institutions are deeply entrenched and mutually reinforcing. Woolf frequently returned to the idea that an unbalanced sexual-aggressive drive, central to the ways and means of patriarchal power, both fueled and was fueled by the imperial enterprise. For Woolf, empire was the mark of tyranny within English domestic life and, on the macropolitical stage, the direct cause of dangerous European rivalries. At the moment of the fascist challenge, *Three Guineas* exposes the everyday roots of both gender and national politics in late imperial Britain. Woolf observes, of a hypothetical woman, that when “consciously she desired ‘our splendid Empire’ . . . unconsciously she desired our splendid war” (TG 39). The book addresses the pitfalls of feminist empowerment: women as well as men can fall prey to a masculine, conquering ethos. Women who gain power in English institutions may be agents of progress and transformation, or they may be recruited into the jingo camp: “if you succeed in the professions, the words ‘For God and the Empire’ will very likely be written, like the address on a dog-collar, round your neck” (TG 70). Woolf urges any woman entering the professions in Britain to “absent herself from military displays, tournaments, tattoos, prize-givings, and all such ceremonies as encourage the desire to impose ‘our’ civilization or ‘our’ dominion upon other people” (TG 109). The quotation marks around “our” underscore Woolf's point that the imperial mission belongs neither to women nor to their version of Englishness.

But if *Three Guineas* marks a fine awareness of imperialism's effects on English institutions, it also proceeds from the possibility that the moment was ripe for the reform of those institutions, that the waning power of empire was, even then, beginning to remove crucial sources of inspiration and justification for patriarchy. When Woolf discusses the possibili-

ties of a free women's university stripped of masculine pomp and ceremony, she imagines an institution directed toward the cultivation of knowledge and art rather than toward the production of martial young men for empire (*TG* 30–34). In this way, Woolf wonders whether to seize an historical opportunity to remake English society without the macho underpinnings provided by a now fragile imperialism. Woolf does not blindly celebrate nationalism, nor is she sanguine about the prospects for women in English society, but she recognizes the importance of national attachments at a moment when England's boundaries are stiffening against European aggression and contracting with imperial decline. Under the circumstances, *Three Guineas* suggests that women should neither ignore nor reject nationalism but should redefine it for themselves; the outsider must “analyse the meaning of patriotism in her own case” (*TG* 107). Such an act of analysis and of creative redefinition informs Woolf's fiction in the late 1930s.⁸⁰

For Woolf, then, the political crises of the time compelled intellectuals to think nationally but also shifted the ground of national identity, so that it might now possibly be redeemed by a humane and peaceable Englishness. The pastoral traditions represented in *Between the Acts*—remember that La Trobe has purged English history of its martial dimensions—are a bulwark against the twin barbarisms of continental fascism and British imperialism. But while the image of a rehumanized and innocent England runs below the surface of the novel, so too do the images of a writhing Darwinian swamp. These two versions of the national unconscious—the pastoral and the savage—are both fantasies of historical reversion. The pageant's ritual reenactment of island history is a controlled experiment in devolution and collective memory designed to mitigate the uncontrolled experiment in barbarism and blood politics unfolding in Europe.

It is impossible to ignore the thematic impact of these historical factors on *Between the Acts*. The broad dialectic that leads to violent conflict between genders, races, and nations seems to operate for Woolf, finally, as a kind of frightening master narrative, saturating other stories and histories with its governing tropes of creation and destruction. It saturates narrative itself, in other words. Thus, in *Between the Acts*, the interpolated nonnarratives—visual symbols, lyric moments, snatches of song, outlines of history, and finally the pageant-play—are the textual locations of an alternative and nondialectical version of history associated with peaceful and insular continuities. In formal terms, the pageant's recursiveness and repetitiveness forestall narrative progress. Where *The Years* labored to show history unfolding in narrative terms, *Between the Acts* uses the pageant to recast history as heritage—as the rehearsal of familiar gestures, songs, and scenes.⁸¹ Woolf (like Forster) struggles to

break narrative momentum by posing insular culture against European civilization, the long slow drip of tradition against the rapid transformation of capitalist modernity, enduring pastoral folkways against perpetual Hegelian struggle.

In the end, however, the narrative frame seems to contain and outflank the ritual scene. Still wary about the putative consolations of English identity, Woolf wraps the summer pageant in an ironic and time-haunted narrative that cannot forget modernity; she, unlike Forster, is not fully able to rebaptize the island as innocent.⁸² The contest between traditional and dialectical time, which takes the form here of a genre contest between pageantic ritual and modernist narrative, ends with a return to the cycles of sex, violence, struggle, death, and birth that organize the daily lives of characters like Giles and Isa Oliver. Once the pageant has concluded, Giles and Isa return to their private “heart of darkness” to fight, copulate, and possibly reproduce themselves (219).⁸³ By placing a Conradian echo in the scene, Woolf signals the reemergence of a modernized, barbarized world of civilizational struggle, played out in the smallest domestic arenas as well as in the vast theater of international rivalries.

The novel's conclusion seems to resolve the genre contest between pageant and narrative in favor of the latter: the play is textualized and ironized, its communicative powers subordinated to those of the frame narrative. The insular ritual of the pageant is designed to evoke culture without barbarism, to offer a model of social cohesion without authoritarian control. But Woolf cannot fully endorse it, precisely because even this apparently humane version of group identity—this myth of Englishness—cedes too much ground to conformist, traditionalist, and sexist structures of power.⁸⁴ Perhaps, too, the formal structure of the novel seems ragged or unresolved because Woolf is engaged in a transitional experiment with the limits of textual expression and with the powers of ritual performance. The ritual remains flawed and incomplete: its capacity to create or reflect the collective can only, after all, be temporary. For this reason, the novel reaches its highest pitch of stylistic dissonance and self-consciousness during the denouement, when it must confront the breakup of the pageant audience.

The end of the pageant becomes a moment of truth for Miss La Trobe, who suffers dramaturgical agony as she confronts the disintegration of her compound audience into individual atoms. Woolf lingers over the moment of dispersal, recalling the scene in Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance* when “everyone seemed to become a separate individual again” (Powys 605). As in earlier novels, Woolf concentrates on moments when public and private gears mesh and unmesh, when, for example, the individual guests at Mrs. Dalloway's party or Mrs. Ramsay's dinner of *boeuf en daube* become, in an almost magical, always ephemeral way, a unit—

and then, in jerky spasms of disengagement, decompose back into separate souls. *Between the Acts* expands such moments of unity/dispersal into a more overtly political story about the problem of national identity. Here a gramophone delivers an unpleasant harangue to the audience members, forcing them to recognize the death of the collective. Both the gramophone's message and the scene more generally oscillate jerkily from announcements of dispersal to exhortations of togetherness: "O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company. *Dispersed are we*, the gramophone repeated" (196). As the civic ritual comes to an end, the narration gives way to a long medley of conversational snippets—what Patricia Laurence sees as a kind of "communal voice" or fugue.⁸⁵ Jumping from voice to voice in this Babel of separate souls, Woolf produces the liberal novel's version of a crowd scene: a group caught in that delicate and brief instant of disengagement from collective consciousness, when the community dissolves into the "orts, scraps, and fragments" of a modern society.

And yet Woolf presses beyond the familiarly modernist condition of atomization to confront a central paradox of the liberal imagination. Through ingenious attention to the streaky powers of ritual, the novel represents a group's wish to avoid collective identity as a positive feature of its collective identity. In the novel, Woolf frequently returns to this classically liberal (and English) notion of social cohesion based on the promotion of individual freedom. It is expressed as a fond but anxious wish by an anonymous member of the pageant audience: "if we don't jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?" (200). This paradox underlies all the communitarian yearning condensed into Forster's motto "only connect." As the audience members prepare to return to their own private lives, they are united by a common wish for community and vexed by their equal commitment to dispersal. "Dispersed are we" becomes a group chant, its unanimous repetition belying its content. Or, as the gramophone burbles, "*Unity—Dispersity. . . . Un . . . Dis . . .*" (201). This imploding verbal sign of political inconclusion signifies Woolf's unwillingness (or inability) to think beyond the paradox of negative liberty or to endorse rituals of belonging without exposing their authoritarian undercurrents.⁸⁶

Between the Acts is a tragic document of the liberal imagination under pressure, forced to confront the political limitations of the "English way." But it is also a text that looks forward toward a more coherent yet less hierarchical form of national culture and toward new forms of literary expression appropriate to such a culture. The interpolated national pageant exposes the historical limitations of—without fully departing from—a worldview dedicated to liberal individualism expressed in the language of modernist irony. In making a community ritual such a central feature of the plot, Woolf experiments with the aesthetic and social implications

of a potentially organic (but also potentially authoritarian) form of national culture. The novel's interpolation of ritual continually reminds us that novels themselves are "socially symbolic acts," that is, mediated and elaborated forms of what were once storytelling rituals.⁸⁷ La Trobe's wary and self-reflexive show generates a metafictional commentary on the novel's own covert ritual function. This point can be made simply by saying what readers have long sensed, that the pageant plot gives Woolf a chance to meditate openly about her own purposes and effects as a writer and to come to terms with the social limitations of high-modernist literary institutions. Since the ritual breaks down whenever La Trobe tries too hard to assert her artistic vision, the text yields a parallel and autocritical insight about the ineffectiveness of elite experimental literature in a fragmented, liberal-pluralist society. Woolf thus performs an "anthropological turn" on her own literary practice, gaining critical and historical distance on the modernist aesthetic by juxtaposing it to the immediacy and collectivity of group ritual.

As an artistic surrogate for Virginia Woolf, Miss La Trobe looks for devices and techniques that will create harmony between her own eccentric voice and the demands of a sometimes philistine and truculent audience. La Trobe's experiments with music, for example, seem designed to reduce the distinction between two models of the artist's vocation, one in which the artist imposes unity on a fragmented audience and one in which the artist ritualistically evokes or channels unity from an audience that already possesses it in the form of group identity. That oscillation structures an ambiguous moment at the end of *Between the Acts*. As the pageant draws to a close, there is confusion at the gramophone—and at this moment the experiment is no longer really La Trobe's but Woolf's: "The records had been mixed. Fox-trot, Sweet Lavender, Home Sweet Home, Rule Britannia—sweating profusely, Jimmy, who had charge of the music, threw them aside and fitted the right one—was it Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mozart or nobody famous, but merely a traditional tune?" This question goes unanswered, but the music begins:

Like quicksilver sliding, flings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted. The whole population of the mind's immeasurable profundity came flocking (188–89)

The passage describes the one-making effect of music on the distracted spectators, though of course the grammar of Woolf's writing creates a pitch-perfect equivocation between a unity of the "whole population" and a unity of the single mind's "immense profundity." Moreover, Woolf

stages the mix-up at the gramophone in order to advance this question: is the unity effect achieved because of *formal* perfection created by an Artist, or is it achieved because of a preexisting *cultural* cohesion preserved by the people's anonymous creativity? The confusion—never resolved—between individual composer and traditional tune allows the text to make clear its own ambivalent division between a modernist ideal of the artist's individual sensibility and an emergent investment in the creative consciousness of the folk.

Woolf's representation of a collective artistic agency is emergent in two senses: first, it marks a relative but nonetheless identifiable shift in emphasis for Woolf's own writing; second, it marks Woolf's place in a wider late modernist shift away from the prevailing assumption of social fragmentation (palliated by an individual vision of aesthetic or mythical order) and toward an exploration of the sources of collective, often national, identity. As I will suggest in chapter 3, for example, Woolf's use of music to split the difference between aesthetic wholeness and social unity resonates in a number of ways with Eliot's contemporaneous work in *Four Quartets*. And of course the recirculation of pageantry among other English writers of Woolf's generation suggests that her experiment can be understood as part of the anthropological turn in which domesticated rituals seem to infect perspectival narration and textual irony.

In narrativizing ritual, Woolf struggled not only to represent the present to itself but to invent a ritual that could register an uneasy and partial investment in national community. In the pageant's final scene, La Trobe makes a gesture that, against all odds, seems to answer both to modernist political irony and to Woolf's growing investment in the possibilities (and limitations) of collective self-representation. La Trobe instructs the actors to turn a series of cracked and homemade mirrors on the audience. Her last use—the trick of mirrors—shifts attention away from symbolic content and lays bare the aesthetic transaction itself. It converts the neotraditional pageant into an avant-garde gesture embedded within a modernist novel. In a bravura revision of the "mirror of fiction" trope, Woolf defamiliarizes modernist narrative style. At that point, the gramophone proposes: "let's talk in words of one syllable, without larding, stuffing or cant. Let's break the rhythm and forget the rhyme. And calmly consider ourselves" (187). The machine's dream is the substitution of elaborated literary style with a spare aesthetic of self-contemplation on the collective level.

Songs My Uncle Taught Me

Woolf uses the figure of Miss La Trobe to examine the effects of artistic "one-making," but the problems that Woolf wishes to explore only repeat themselves at the level of the surrogate who, like Woolf, is profoundly

attuned to both the value and the danger of communal art. Thus, in a Chinese box of displaced artistic agency, Miss La Trobe herself employs a surrogate: the hidden gramophone that issues disembodied voice-overs during the pageant. These distancing mechanisms complicate the transaction between actors and spectators in the pageant (and between text and readers in the novel). At a certain point, Woolf turns the experiment in displaced expression into an exploration of collective reception. At the moment of dispersal, Woolf initiates a stylistic experiment, representing the voice of the audience as a collective in free indirect discourse. In earlier Woolfian ventures into fugue-style renderings of group voice, each snippet of conversation could, theoretically, be assigned to an individual speaker. In certain passages in *Between the Acts*, though, Woolf gives one voice to a group consciousness:

Feet crunched the gravel. Voices chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music, wafted from the bushes, is expressive of some inner harmony? "When we wake" (some were thinking) "the day breaks us with its hard mallet blows." (119)

The combination of gramophone speeches and collective discourse modifies Woolf's narration of consciousness and represents the two great challenges to the liberal/modernist subject in 1930s culture: the machine and the masses. By registering the growing and global importance of collectivist national culture, Woolf objectifies her own celebrated techniques for narrating consciousness, providing a lucid case study in the precise interplay between political and aesthetic change in late modernism.

Of course, a familiar narration of consciousness operates at various points in *Between the Acts*, but Woolf organizes the story to emphasize the collective sources of thought rather than its eccentric individual play. Where the earlier Woolf tended to make mental records of fleeting visual and emotional impressions, here she makes mental transcriptions out of the words, songs, phrases, and tropes of a preexisting and durable cultural archive.⁸⁸ This marks only a relative shift in Woolf's style; her high modernist representations of mental life were always iterative and citational and therefore, in an important sense, always social. However, in this novel, the pageant's stock of English literary conventions (drawn from Shakespeare, Shelley, Tennyson) begins truly to saturate the inner language of the novel's protagonists, turning stream of consciousness into a game of unfree association. "The play keeps running in my head," says Isa. She and William Dodge acknowledge that their verbal repertoires are made up of overlapping cultural stuff: "They were conspirators; each murmuring some song my uncle taught me" (105). The position of the pageant in the text places rhetorical emphasis on the power of inherited culture to both inform and restrict the mind's verbal and mnemonic pathways. In-

stead of being used to individuate characters, this version of Woolfian consciousness tends to underscore their shared debt to national tradition.

The inflection of Woolf's most distinctive technique, the narration of consciousness, by the gravitational force of national tradition makes sense when we recall that she was at work on a synoptic history of English literature during the composition of *Between the Acts*. The two extant essays from that unfinished critical project, "Anon" and "The Reader," suggest that Woolf intended to emphasize the continuities of English literature from its very beginnings to the present day.⁸⁹ Like Mrs. Swinburn's *Outline of History*, "Anon" begins with England's geographical separation from the continent, so that insularity once again frames the birth of culture. From there, Woolf's fantasy of origins reaches all the way back to the prehistoric moment when nature begat culture in the form of human imitations of birdsong.⁹⁰ As in *Between the Acts*, Woolf seems taken by a vision of English literature's primitive bases, describing forms of culture so rooted in the local ecology that they ring in echoes with the singing birds and the lowing cows. Both the novel and the late essays generate images of a kind of cultural unconscious figured as a pool or "reservoir of common belief": "Behind the English lay ages of toil and love. That is the world beneath our consciousness; the anonymous world to which we can still return."⁹¹ If Woolf seems to indulge in what we are now quick to expose as a bad-faith quest for national essence, she also (characteristically) refrains from fixing a prelapsarian point of origin. In the passage just cited, she also warns against the ideal of a golden, unself-conscious culture: "[t]here never was a time when men and women were without memory" ("Anon" 385). Every history, she suggests, has a prehistory; every story of origins gives way to another. Woolf's point is not to establish a fixed and Edenic cradle of the English genius but to gather into one sustaining narrative the expressive capacities that she associates with her island home.

The anthropological quality of Woolf's project leads her to emphasize dramatic and ritual forms (including pageantry) as the primal art of England. In "Anon," Woolf does not idealize the premodern artist, but rather an entire kind of symbolic transaction shared by artist and audience. The object of Woolf's historical imagination is a cultural situation where the separation into expressive subject and receptive audience does not even make sense: "the audience was itself the singer" ("Anon" 382). Anon, which stands for a pre-aesthetic ideal of authorship submerged into pastoral community, is, for Woolf, "the common voice singing out of doors."

Like most stories that begin with a pastoral ideal, Woolf's "Anon" tells of a fall from grace. From the aesthetic Eden of common culture to early

modern patronage to late modern privatization of artistic production and consumption, Woolf recounts the social and institutional separations that gradually but unmistakably produce the alienated modern(ist) writer. Moving indoors and into specialized spaces, Anon "acted more and more his own art," gaining creative freedom but growing more divided from the values of the community. With the rise of the book, literature becomes a storable cultural treasure, but it loses its direct and live connection with the audience: "It was the printing press that finally was to kill Anon." At this point, "the individual emerges"; the modern artist develops a signature and a name; the anonymity of premodern cultural expression gives way to personal style ("Anon" 383–85).

When we read "Anon" alongside *Between the Acts*, the effect of splicing a group ritual into the modernist narration of consciousness comes into sharper focus. In "Anon," Woolf describes the slow transformation of a bardic culture whose themes were "great names, great deeds, simple outlines" to a modern society whose writers learned to focus on the "single subtlety of one soul" (394). The proper theater of an older common culture was slowly and inevitably replaced by the "theater of the brain," a centuries-long process that reaches its peak in the modernist novel of consciousness (398). Woolf's late essays thus describe the modernization and autonomization of Art—the very problem that preoccupied not only the continental avant-garde of the 1930s but also the Auden circle of politically committed poets in Britain. If "Anon" provides a history of art's segregation from broad social power and meaning, *Between the Acts* imaginatively reverses that history. The pageant-novel redirects attention from the "theater of the brain" to a more public and communal theater, thematizing at every turn the political and aesthetic tension between the two arenas. In presenting the encounter and tension between the souls and the drama of group identity, Woolf draws on pageantry as a traditional form that is still viable in modern England. Her wary nativism bears interesting points of contact with that of T. S. Eliot. During the thirties, Eliot, like Woolf, not only took explicit account of the problem of modernist alienation in its full historical and institutional form but also turned to Anglocentric traditionalism when contemplating remedies for art's autonomy from culture. Despite his growing investment in an elitist, masculinist, and Christian notion of the public sphere, Eliot would certainly have seconded Woolf's call to revive modernist art with "something drawn from the crowd in the penny seats and not yet dead in ourselves" ("Anon" 398). For Woolf and Eliot were not just demystifying island stories but also reinventing them, turning fears of historical regression into a vision of restored contact between artist and audience in a postmetropolitan English culture.⁹²

Theatres of the Brain

Although Woolf's interest in national ritual was both partial and belated, the pageant-novel's version of anonymous and participatory expression nevertheless seems to fulfill an old modernist ideal. Its hybrid form frees Woolf to some extent from the critical irony that so many modernist experiments in fiction and poetry, though designed to achieve impersonal voice, have been received and canonized as examples of virtuosos personal style. Under the political pressures of the late thirties, modernists found new approaches to the problem of literary objectivity or anonymity. Woolf's turn to the anthropological scene of ritual, for example, broadens the sociohistorical basis of perspectival narration beyond the historical fantasy of *Orlando*, beyond the serialized viewpoints of family saga in *The Years*, and beyond even the dazzling experiments in fugue consciousness in *The Waves*. In an early musing about the novel, Woolf wrote:

why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre. all lit. discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; but "I" rejected: "We" substituted . . . "We" . . . composed of many different things . . . all life, all art, all waifs & strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole.⁹³

It is no accident that in her attempt to compose a "We," Woolf turns to the kinds of culturally sanctioned meaning associated with country rituals. This particular method for reaching a first-person-plural perspective moves Woolf beyond the simulation of idiosyncratic (yet putatively universal) mind-effects so central to her success as novelist of the psyche. No longer content to oscillate between the personal/impersonal poles of high modernism, she composes a form designed to evoke and express the collective values of a knowable community and to be, in that sense, *transpersonal*.

If Woolf's invocation of national ritual tempers her rendering of consciousness, it does not reflect a sudden turn from "individualist" to "collectivist," but it does reflect the emergence of new forms developed in response to the crisis/opportunity of national retrenchment. Woolf's semi-ironic shift toward English tradition encourages a relatively more socially inflected understanding of consciousness and reduces (again, in relative terms) the centrality of the autonomous psyche as an object of modernist representation. To date, the general critical consensus on *Between the Acts* has, I think, overemphasized Woolf's (liberal-feminist) fear of the collective and underemphasized the appeal of a ritualized nativism that reintegrates artist and audience into a common culture.⁹⁴ But I do not want to argue, from some stringently Lukacsian perspective, that Woolf had, at long last, learned to transcend "modernist subjectivism." Instead,

it might be more profitable to ask what can be learned from this case about the relation between the modernist language of consciousness and "metropolitan perception." What, in other words, does it mean to claim that Woolf's attempt to substitute a "We" for the modernist "I" depends on the recrudescence of national feeling? What does that substitution—or shift in emphasis—reveal about the larger process of demetropolitanization in England and its effect on modernist style?

In recent years, critics have begun to understand metropolitan conditions as a crucial factor in the formation of modernism's theater of the mind. In one recent version of the argument, Franco Moretti has offered, via Georg Simmel, a theoretical account of the stream of consciousness technique as a device for managing the overstimulation of the modern urban subject.⁹⁵ Raymond Williams takes the co-presence of diverse languages and cultures in the metropole as crucial for the development of modernist subjectivity.⁹⁶ Similarly, for Kumkum Sangari, the multicultural welter of imperial capital cities is inseparable from the "freewheeling appropriations" of an "assimilative bourgeois consciousness."⁹⁷ To put the argument schematically, we might say that a high modernist aesthetic dedicated to idiosyncratic mental processes tends to assume that human consciousness is a universal currency or that its language is at least trans-cultural.⁹⁸ In other words, the canonical works of high modernism represent subjectivity by shuttling between individualizing and universalizing discursive modes, between *psyche* and *myth*—a cosmopolitan short circuit that often bypasses determinate social configurations such as classes, genders, and nations.⁹⁹

The case of *Between the Acts* as a document of late modernism extends and retrospectively (as it were) clarifies these claims about the relation between metropolitan settings and the classic high modernist project of writing "consciousness." In *Between the Acts*, Woolf demystifies that literary project just as her thematic focus shifts in the direction of national culture. With a sometimes burdensome degree of self-consciousness, the novel explores the growing historical tension between the universal subject of modernism (*psyche/myth*) and the demands of a *particularized* collective, defined, in this case, by nationhood. In moving from languages of the psyche that are archetypal and mobile toward those that are more culture-bound, Woolf manages to register the broader transition in English literature from metropolitan modernism to minor culture. Woolf's cultural turn proceeds under the sign of the nation because it seemed both possible and necessary to resignify England as a meaningful (but geopolitically minor) social collective. As I noted earlier, Jameson's thesis on modernism and imperialism holds that modernist style was predicated on the unknown-ability or lost totality of daily life in the European metropolis, a condition of "meaning loss" perpetuated and exacerbated by the fracturing of the

nation into core and colonies. By implication, then, the reconsolidation of culture through a genre that composes the nation's fragments into unified local time and space would both signal the end of imperialism and destabilize modernist style. And this, I think, is precisely the relation between national history and literary form in *Between the Acts*.¹⁰⁰

In moving from the 1920s artist Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* to the 1930s dramatist La Trobe of *Between the Acts*, Woolf has shifted emphasis from private production ("I have had my vision") to collective reception ("I have made them see"). And Woolf's last meditation as a common reader, *Reading at Random*, makes plain her stake in the total circuit of expressive culture, as opposed to the elite institutions and segregated spheres of modern art. In the story of "Anon," what gets lost to modernity is the "impersonality" and "generality" of song, the self-consciousness of an art that borrows, repeats, and "can say what every one feels" (397). "Anon" imagines (but cannot execute) the forfeit of artistic privilege in the interest of a more communal form of expression.¹⁰¹ It defines the long historical emergence of autonomous art and its eclipse of a recognizably insular ideal of expressive culture—an ideal associated with the broad human Englishness of Shakespeare's time, when the folk and the genius were one. To the extent that modernism had assimilated the concept of the individual genius as the seat of aesthetic value, Woolf's cultural history tries to think beyond modernism. Thus, when La Trobe's actors urge us to "break the rhythm and forget the rhyme" and "calmly consider ourselves," when they turn the shattered mirror of the national pageant onto the audience, they are laying bare the logic of Woolf's cultural turn. Their gesture evokes her vision of a spontaneous community which is *in itself* meaning and which therefore renders obsolete the modernist artist's gift of form.

This domestication of ritual (whose cracked looking glasses echo Joyce's definition of postcolonial Irish art) represents an uncannily apt choice in a culture that is just beginning to accede to its own logic of cultural nationalism, that is, in a culture beginning to recognize itself as one nation among many, eccentric and postimperial. But it would be reductive to read late Woolf for some ultimate statement about the aesthetic or political value of either a common culture based on national belonging or of a high modernist Art based on rational cosmopolitanism. What her late writing offers is a sharp but balanced historical reflection on the advantages and disadvantages attached both to modernist practices and to their potential obsolescence. In "Anon," for example, Woolf frames the emergence of the modern artist not only as a fall from grace but as a successful aesthetic adaptation to modernity. Modern(ist) writing came to achieve an astonishing degree of skill and beauty, but it was often, for Woolf, "a suspended derelict irrelevant beauty" ("Anon" 398). Woolf

balances her account of art's irrelevance in "Anon" by reckoning with both the dangers and the comforts of a more communal aesthetic in *Between the Acts*. As the novel vividly suggests, national tradition could easily sponsor stultifying ideologies and mob aesthetics—effects that threaten to curb liberal freedom and bring to ground the "suspended beauty" of modernist art. On the other hand, the ritual invocation of national tradition seems to pose a meaningful shared history against the social fragmentation of the metropolis and against the social marginalization of modernism.

Thus two models of the "location of culture"—the fading world of elite cosmopolitanism and a revived core of insular nativism—are relativized in late Woolf: each is shown to have its own liberating perspectives, aesthetic potentialities, and social blind spots. But the two models are not simply held together through irony as the opposing poles of a stable and structural dichotomy. Indeed, my reading of Woolf in the context of national retrenchment is designed to show that her texts register a historical process. Such a reading kicks the cosmopolitan/nativist dichotomy into dialectical motion and reveals to us some of the ways in which modernists conceived the transition from metropolitan literature to national culture in England. Like Eliot's *Four Quartets*, to which we will shortly turn, *Between the Acts* situates itself at the switchpoint between two cultural epochs—a fact that accounts for its jerky, balky, and elliptical qualities. Rather than read those qualities as aesthetic flaws or content ourselves with repeating truisms about Woolf's ambivalence in the face of nationalism, we can perhaps understand those formal properties of the novel as signs of a necessarily incomplete historical project. *Between the Acts* thematizes but does not fully realize the end of an era.¹⁰² It remains poised between a residual model of the cosmopolitan genius ironically distanced from social collectives and an emergent model of the anonymous artist absorbed back into shared national traditions. This is what English modernism looks like as it transforms itself into something new.