FICTION, REALITY AND PREHISTORY:  
A STUDY OF BETWEEN THE ACTS*

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I. Introduction

Virginia Woolf was a typical twentieth-century writer in the sense that she was keenly aware of the limitations of the conventional plot-making which nineteenth-century writers more or less unquestioningly relied upon. This awareness led her to investigate the meaning of fiction or fiction-making in general. Moreover, she went so far as to question the status of language itself, as in Bernard’s soliloquies in The Waves. This is not surprising because we can say language itself is after all fictitious. Undoubtedly, this feature of Woolf (Woolf as a radical critic of fiction and language) is one of the many factors in her work which still appeal to today’s readers.

Her last novel, Between the Acts, is particularly interesting because it questions fiction or fiction-making more tenaciously than her other novels. It is foremost a fiction about fiction-making. This study aims to examine the novel in this light and finally to analyse its ending, which is extremely subtle and problematic. I shall especially focus on how fiction is interrupted or invaded by reality because that is the most visible way the questioning of fiction is foregrounded. Besides this theme concerning the relation between fiction and reality, another important theme of Woolf’s work is involved in this novel. That is prehistory. It saturates the entire novel and interestingly correlates with the first theme. I shall, therefore, mainly consider how these two different themes, both of which are important in Woolf, are intertwined in this novel. And to do so means, in effect, to consider the relations between three factors: fiction, reality and prehistory.

II. The Opening Parts

Woolf elaborately presents basic motifs in the opening parts of the novel. At the beginning, people are casually talking about a cesspool. But this cesspool can be symbolically linked to the lily pool near the house where a lady had drowned herself (40), and then to something like the collective unconscious in Mrs Swithin’s vision towards the end of the novel (184–86). As long as the lily pool represents something beneath the reality of our ordinary conscious life, it is close to the image of prehistory which Mrs Swithin often evokes. The

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appearance of a cesspool on the first page is, thus, thematically important. Old Oliver is reminded that the cesspool was to be built on the Roman road. He says:

From an aeroplane [...] 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. (3–4)

The structure of this image, in which various past phases are recalled one by one and presented as coexistent, will be later repeated in Miss La Trobe’s pageant on a larger scale.

But what is more noticeable is that the relation between fiction and reality is again and again foregrounded in a relatively short space. Literature, fantasy or dream, which can roughly be classified as fiction, are juxtaposed with or interrupted by fluid reality of life. Seeing some things in a landscape, Old Oliver feels, “Framed, they became a picture. Had he been a painter, he would have fixed his easel here, where the country, barred by trees, looked like a picture” (12). Here he is thinking of “framing” a reality, by presupposing a design in it. This is one form of fictionalising contingent reality. Thus, in this brief passage, the important theme of the whole novel is suggested. And significantly, Old Oliver leaves reality at once and enters the world of fiction, which is in this case a newspaper column: “M. Daladier’, he read finding his place in the column, ‘has been successful in pegging down the franc...’” (12). Though a newspaper column is a report of a fact, it can after all be regarded as a story produced by ordering or forming reality.

Next we find Isa trying to compose a poem:

‘Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care,’ she hummed.
‘Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent...’

The rhyme was ‘air’. She put down her brush. She took up the telephone. (14)

Here, fiction in the form of a poem is discontinued by the very worldly act of ordering fish on the telephone. A similar thing happens a few pages later, when Isa stops quoting Shelley because she suddenly remembers ordering fish:

She in her striped dress continued him, murmuring, in front of the book cases:
‘The moor is dark beneath the moon, rapid clouds have drunk the last pale beams of even ... I have ordered the fish,’ [...]. (17)

Just before this, Old Oliver falls asleep and dreams of his youth and India. But:

The door opened.
‘Am I’, Isa apologized, ‘interrupting?’
Of course she was -- destroying youth and India. (16)

In this way his fiction is interrupted and destroyed by the real event of Isa’s appearance.

Soon Isa begins to read a newspaper article about a rape. She imagines the situation in which the girl was raped, but then “the door [...] opened and in came Mrs Swithin carrying a hammer” (19). This time Isa’s fantasy is broken by Mrs Swithin’s entrance. But in this case, fiction and reality are not simply contrasted. They are mingled when, beneath the words repeated every year, Isa hears in her mind: “The girl screamed and hit him about the face

1 Mary Ann Caws analyses To the Lighthouse and The Waves extensively in terms of framing (237–61).
with a hammer'" (20). Since her fantasy about the rape was interrupted by Mrs Swithin "carrying a hammer," the phrase "with a hammer" is added to the sentence in the newspaper article she was reading a while ago. Reality has been taken into fiction.

In all these examples, Woolf seems to be drawing attention to the contrast between fiction and reality or the transition from one to the other. But, in fact, the most significant example is placed earlier than all these. As soon as Mrs Swithin is first introduced, she is presented as being absorbed in her vision of prehistory incited by her reading of Outline of History:

Forced to listen [to the birds], 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, surging, 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.

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 steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest. (7-8)

Her fantasy is broken by the real event of a maid's entrance just as in those examples we have seen. But this case is unique because it is possible to say that when Mrs Swithin mistakes Grace for a primeval monster, reality for her is invaded by prehistory. The two basic themes are superimposed here: 1) fiction (fantasy) is broken by reality, 2) reality is invaded by prehistory. The first theme is repeated time and again in the opening parts as we have already seen, and developed in the course of Miss La Trobe's pageant. The second one constantly emerges throughout the novel. Prehistory is not only evoked in Mrs Swithin's vision with or without reference to Outline of History, but it often surfaces to reality in the form of nature. Now it is necessary to examine how these two themes are interrelated in the rest of the novel. But before that, it is perhaps better to consider them in more general terms to provide a more solid footing for the main argument.

III. General Considerations of the Two Basic Themes

In the last chapter I used the word "fiction" for various different things which can be opposed to reality. It is now necessary to circumscribe its meaning a little in order to fully understand the way the relation between fiction and reality is explored in the major parts of the novel. For that purpose, Frank Kermode's classic study, The Sense of an Ending, is useful in still providing many profound insights into the meaning of fiction and fiction-making for the human mind. His central thesis is that in order to make sense of the world, we need fiction, which, by definition, has a beginning, a middle and an end. We need to depend on such a form or pattern to live properly. Kermode particularly emphasises the importance of an end in our necessary and inevitable fiction-making. He says:

Men in the middest make considerable imaginative investments in coherent
patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with origins and with the middle. (17)

He explains the function of fiction with the simplest example, the ticking of a clock (tick-tock). With tick “a humble genesis,” and tock “a feeble apocalypse,” we need to give some sense to the interval between them by making a plot. Then he says, “All such plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning” (46). In other words, an end turns chronos (merely successive time) into kairos (humanly organised, meaningful time). But in modern times it is impossible to live in a world which can be totally determined or controlled by fictitious patterns like apocalypse. Kermode tries to consider the problems concerning the gap between patterns we give to life and ongoing reality which cannot be contained by them. Discussing Shakespeare's tragedies, he says:

They [the endings of Macbeth and King Lear] are researches into death in an age too late for apocalypse, too critical for prophecy; an age more aware that its fictions are themselves models of the human design on the world. But it was still an age which felt the human need for ends consonant with the past, the kind of end Othello tries to achieve by his final speech; complete, concordant. As usual, Shakespeare allows him his tock; but he will not pretend that the clock does not go forward. (88–89)

In short, Shakespeare’s tragedies show that we cannot put an end to the succession of time by fiction-making. Time and life continue, refusing to be enclosed by fiction. Basically the same problem preoccupies the twentieth-century literature as well. Kermode chooses Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea as a prime example since it well represents “a kind of crisis in the relation between fiction and reality, the tension or dissonance between paradigmatic form and contingent reality” (133). Roquentin, the protagonist, is obsessed with the sheer contingency or absurdity of human existence, which is the starting point of Sartre's philosophy. This idea is supposed to reject as a kind of “bad faith” any fictitious pattern by which we might try to make sense of the world. On the other hand, Roquentin aspires to the self-sufficient world of fiction where everything is fixed and given meaning by a presupposed end. He observes that in starting a story, “[i]n reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning.” Then he concludes:

I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered. You might as well try and catch time by the tail. (Nausea 40)

He wishes to escape from the nauseating contingency of existence by putting a provisional end

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1 Peter Brooks, who is much inspired by The Sense of an Ending, also emphasises the importance of an end in narrative. Quoting Walter Benjamin's “The Storyteller,” he says:

It is my simple conviction [...] that narrative has something to do with time-boundedness, and that plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality.

Walter Benjamin has made this point in the simplest and most extreme way, in claiming that what we seek in narrative fictions is that knowledge of death which is denied to us in our lives: the death that writes finis to the life and therefore confers on it its meaning. “Death,” says Benjamin, “is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell.” Benjamin thus advances the ultimate argument for the necessary retrospection of narrative: that only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality. (22)
to his life and turning it into a story, or in other words, by becoming a character in a story. Yet as he knows, this is essentially an unachievable dream since fiction cannot totally enclose life. At best he can have a momentary illusion of success which he calls “adventure.” These ambivalent attitudes Roquentin takes toward fiction clearly illustrate the position of fiction in modern times: it is deeply discredited and yet indispensable to human life.

All these discussions are relevant to our interpretation of *Between the Acts*. Virginia Woolf was as conscious as Sartre of the significant relation between fiction and reality or between telling and living. Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, knows that real life can become a fiction if one knows the end: “She knew what had happened to them, what to her. It was like reading a good book again, for she knew the end of that story [...]” (126). This reminds us of Roquentin’s distinction between life and fiction. The pseudo-biography *Orlando* sometimes makes us feel that Woolf is playing with the border between fiction and reality with Sternian humour. But probably she went furthest when she created Bernard in *The Waves*. Bernard is the most important of the six characters and is presented as a phrase-maker who always questions the meaning of fiction and language. Even when he is a boy, he is always making phrases and stories. He cannot live securely unless everything is expressed by means of words. He says, “When I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness -- I am nothing” (108). He is keenly conscious that the phrases and stories he makes to represent reality are all false and cannot reach any truth. Describing what he sees with words, he questions, “But why impose my arbitrary design?” (156). He also says:

> But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it. (223)

Though he knows that a story gives life a pattern which has a beginning and an end, he is also aware that life eludes that pattern. In the end he says, “I have done with phrases” and seeks instead for silence (246). Woolf, through Bernard, is expressing her own recognition that fiction cannot grasp or contain reality, though it may be indispensable to human life.

*Between the Acts* follows *The Waves* in questioning the act of making fiction. Even in the opening parts, the relation between fiction and reality is recurrently highlighted, as we have seen. In *Nausea*, Sartre juxtaposes a conversation from Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* with a real conversation Roquentin hears in a restaurant (47-48). In this way he emphasises the sharp contrast between the world of fiction where everything is fixed and the world of contingent reality. It is possible to say that Woolf is doing a similar thing when she puts newspaper sentences side by side with a description of a real event early in *Between the Acts*. *Nausea* and *Between the Acts*, which were published at nearly the same time, are similar to each other in their interest in the meaning of fiction as against reality.

However, Woolf has her own motif which Sartre does not have: prehistory. In her novels we often encounter a passage in which a human being is absorbed into or identified with natural process and he or she becomes impersonal. Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* experiences this transformation:

> It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt

1 Following Kermode, Peter Brooks discusses this passage at length (92–95).
they knew one, in a sense were one [...]. (87)

In the second chapter of the same novel ("Time Passes"), the vicissitudes of human life are described as if they were a part of natural process. The young Louis in The Waves often becomes a plant: "I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depth of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre" (7). In this novel the sun and the waves described in the interludes are a metaphor of the lives of the six characters. Natural process is something vast that encompasses human life as its small part. And it continues in eternity regardless of human activities. Thus, Orlando contemplates the world which continues after her death:

There was the garden and some birds. The world was going on as usual. All the time she was writing the world had continued.

'And if I were dead, it would be just the same!' she exclaimed. (259)

This is what Rhoda in The Waves calls "the sense of a world continuing without us" (100). Mrs Swithin in Between the Acts has a similar feeling, when she thinks of the changelessness of life:

'That's what makes a view so sad,' said Mrs Swithin, lowering herself into the deck-chair which Giles had brought her. 'And so beautiful. It'll be there', she nodded at the strip of gauze laid upon the distant fields, 'when we're not.' (49)

James Naremore points out the tension in Woolf between the world of the self and the world without a self and stresses the importance of the latter world, in which individual personality is dissolved into some unity. He says:

Like the English romantics before her, she feels encompassed by a world of process and death, and her art is an attempt to reach, through the power of imagination, a totally impersonal world, a world out of time. (245)

The inhuman natural process, so often conjured up, is a good example of this "world without a self."

Prehistory is another name for this Woolfian natural process because it is possible to say that nature existed before history began. In Between the Acts, it surfaces in the form of nature or explicitly appears in the characters' vision, suggesting that it coexists with the present. But it also has special significance since it is connected to the theme of fiction and reality. Gillian Beer says, "Virginia Woolf was always distrustful of narrative, finding herself unable to make up plot or accept its resolutions." Prehistory is apt for such a writer because it "implies a pre-narrative domain which will not buckle to plot" and "tells no story" (103). Beer suggests that in evoking prehistory Woolf implicitly criticised the Darwinian evolutionary plot which dominated the thought of her father's generation. Prehistory thus implies annihilation of

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4 In this novel nature always connotes prehistory. So I use the word "prehistory" even when the word "nature" seems more appropriate.
fiction and fiction-making. It is a realm of death for fiction.\footnote{This is of course not to say that no fiction about prehistory can exist. The section of Outline of History Mrs Swithin is reading can be regarded as a fiction describing prehistory. My point here is that prehistory is close to what D. A. Miller calls “nonnarratable.” Typical examples of the nonnarratable are marriage, death and other events in traditional fiction which function to check the narrative dynamics and effect closure. Miller says, “The nonnarratable is not the unspeakable. What defines a nonnarratable element is its incapacity to generate a story” (5). Similarly, we can say prehistory can be talked about, but it cannot “generate a story.” It is possible to conceive a story in which a river gets married to a mountain after many twists and turns, for example. But that would only be a story which uses nature as a disguise for human affairs by personifying it.} If there is any time in it, it is only for inanimate nature or animals and not for human beings. The sphere of reality has at least seeds of fiction, and we constantly try to make sense of it by making fiction, by turning chronos into kairos. But as a virtually timeless world, prehistory annihilates all such possibilities. It totally invalidates the human alternation between fiction and reality by swallowing both up from beneath.

IV. Miss La Trobe’s Pageant

After the major characters and the relations between them are introduced in the first one-third of Between the Acts, the scene of Miss La Trobe’s pageant starts, occupying almost all the rest of the novel. The pageant consists of four sections dealing with four major periods of English history: the Elizabethan, Restoration, Victorian and present periods. (The present in the novel is June, 1939.) They can also be regarded as parodies of English literary history.

First of all, it should be noted that this pageant is an outcome of an attempt to make a fiction out of the whole of English history. It is a fiction made on a far larger scale than ordinary ones people make in their daily lives. In order to make such an attempt, there must be a motive to sum up the history from the beginning. As is well known, Woolf was experiencing the increasing terrors of the war and sensing that English history itself might come to an end, when she was writing this novel. It is probable that this sense of an ending prompted her to recapitulate English history. When we tell a story, we start from the end which gives meaning to it, as Sartre’s Roquentin observes. The end, which the pageant starts from, is the present time of English history that seemed to be literally ending to Woolf. The sense of an ending, which is theoretically a starting point of any fiction-making, was in this case extremely real and imminent.

In this pageant we can see the amplification of our first theme, which was anticipated in the opening parts. This grand fiction is often interrupted or invaded by reality. Firstly, we notice that the fictionality of the pageant is thoroughly laid bare in the following manner:

Everyone was clapping and laughing. From behind the bushes issued Queen Elizabeth -- Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco. Could she be Mrs Clark of the village shop? She was splendidly made up. Her head, pearl-hung, rose from a vast ruff. Shiny satin draped her. Sixpenny brooches glared like cats’ eyes and tigers’ eyes; pearls looked down; her cape was made of cloth of silver -- in fact swabs used to scour saucepans. (76)

This kind of unmasking or disenchantment is carried out throughout the pageant as a way of dragging fiction down to ordinary reality.
Secondly, besides the intervals “between the acts,” there are many pauses in the middle of the play, mainly caused by blunders. They allow the audience to return to the world of reality. The constantly inserted descriptions of Miss La Trobe’s behaviour or the audience’s responses enhance the impression of disruption. And prehistory also interferes in the form of natural phenomena or animals, suggesting that it permeates the present. It either breaks in on fiction directly as when the wind blows off the words, or creeps in while the spell of fiction is dispersed and people are in the realm of reality. Let us take one notable example. After the performers leave the stage at the end of a scene, Miss La Trobe urges them to sing, but their voices are not clearly audible:

The words died away. Only a few great names -- Babylon, Nineveh, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Troy -- floated across the open space. Then the wind rose, and in the rustle of the leaves even the words became inaudible; and the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came. (125)

In this way the flow of fiction is broken by reality, which is in fact prehistory in the form of the wind and the leaves. Miss La Trobe thinks it is a failure. But:

Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed. All the great moon-eyed heads laid themselves back. From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. (126)

This time prehistory (a cow’s “primeval” voice) rescues Miss La Trobe’s play.

A similar thing happens again in the last section of the pageant. It is better, however, to see how it happens within the close analysis of this section as a whole since this is the climax of the entire pageant. Here Miss La Trobe makes her experiment by deliberately staging nothing: “She wanted to expose them [the audience], as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality” (161). The intrusion of reality on fiction is here intentionally made use of as a method. In a way, this part of Miss La Trobe’s pageant is what Umberto Eco terms “an open work,” whose completion depends on the interpreter’s active participation. The audience are expected to make their own images of present-time reality. But they are simply exposed to reality in bewilderment. Isa is thinking of the previous play about the Victorian period:

‘Were they like that?’ Isa asked abruptly. She looked at Mrs Swithin as if she had been a dinosaur or a very diminutive mammoth. Extinct she must be, since she had lived in the reign of Queen Victoria.

Tick, tick, tick, went the machine in the bushes. […]

The stage remained empty. The cows moved in the field. The shadows were deeper under the trees.

Mrs Swithin caressed her cross. She gazed vaguely at the view. She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination -- one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves -- all are one. […]

Tick tick tick the machine reiterated. (156–57)

As Mrs Swithin looks prehistoric to Isa’s eye, she herself sees her familiar vision of prehistory.
She suggests that prehistory dissolves individuality and makes all into one. Yet it should also
be noted that the emergence of prehistory is counterpointed against the ticking of the machine
which indicates the succession of time and, by implication, the audience's growing irritation.
The ticking is again highlighted in the following passage where all the audience seem to be
swallowed up by prehistory:

All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no
music. The horns of cars on the high road were heard. And the swish of trees. They
were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were
suspended, without being, in limbo. Tick, tick, tick went the machine. (159)

In these examples, the sense of the succession of time, which only human beings can be so
keenly conscious of, is stressed by being contrasted to the timelessness of prehistory where
there is no individuality. The awareness that one moment succeeds another ("tick, tick, tick")
is connected to the empty sense of simple chronicity, the sense that time and life continue on
and on futilely in the realm of reality. Miss La Trobe's experiment forces the audience to this
sense and only irritates them. In order to escape from this we can make fiction and put a
provisional end to chronos, turning it into kairos. But Isa tries to turn to another way of escape
when a timely shower fills the emptiness of reality and Miss La Trobe's failure is again
prevented:

And then the shower fell, sudden, profuse.
No one had seen the cloud coming. There it was, black, swollen, on top of them.
Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears, Tears, Tears.
'O that our human pain could here have ending!' Isa murmured. Looking up she
received two great blots of rain full in her face. They trickled down her cheeks as
if they were her own tears. But they were all people's tears, weeping for all people.
[...] The rain was sudden and universal. (162)

Isa also murmurs, 'O that my life could here have ending" (162). This remark suggests that Isa
wants to escape from the endless succession of moments by being absorbed into the timeless
world of prehistory which is "universal" and impersonal. The passage in its entirety marks a
dramatic moment in which the two basic themes (fiction broken by reality and reality invaded
by prehistory) quite visibly overlap.

Rescued by the rain, Miss La Trobe's experiment goes on. Suddenly many glasses are
brought in and show the audience the fragmented images of themselves. In this confusion it
momentarily seems that prehistory explicitly swallows up all the audience:

And Lord! the jangle and the din! The very cows joined in. Walloping, tail lashing,
the reticence of nature was undone, and the barriers which should divide Man the
Master from the Brute were dissolved. Then the dogs joined in. (165)

Mrs Swithin thinks of unity through prehistory. By contrast, Miss La Trobe is trying, though mostly
unsuccessfully, to create unity by means of her fiction. After one play is over, "she held them together -- the
dispersing company" (88). It seems that Woolf herself was concerned with unity in these two ways.
Alex Zwerdling says that Mrs Swithin and the Rev. Streadfield, who speak of unity, do not "speak for the
author" because they are treated disparagingly by other characters and the author (313-14). But even if they are
negatively depicted, it does not necessarily follow that they do not represent the author's own tendency.
Next follows another confusion in which all the performers who played various roles in different periods of English history appear and declaim fragments of their lines, inserting some bits of literary quotations. The implication here is that not only prehistory but also different eras of history coexist with the present, just as the traces of different eras can be observed on the ground in Old Oliver’s view, expressed at the beginning of the novel. Finally, everything stops abruptly: “The hands of the clock had stopped at the present moment. It was now. Ourselves” (167). This is the typically Woolfian moment in which one is exposed to the bare present moment. It embarrasses and vexes the audience more than ever, for “what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the present moment?” (Orlando 285).

After an anonymous voice’s speech and music, the Rev. G. W. Streatfield begins his speech. He is often interrupted by the wind or the sound of airplanes, and sharply contrasted to the prehistoric nature:

There he stood their representative spokesman; their symbol; themselves; a butt, a clod, laughed at by looking-glasses; ignored by the cows, condemned by the clouds which continued their majestic rearrangement of the celestial landscape; an irrelevant forked stake in the flow and majesty of the summer silent world. (171)

But this “silent world” in fact latently encompasses us. Mr Streatfield says something thematically important in this sense, even though he is mockingly presented:

‘[...] We act different parts; but are the same. [...] I thought I perceived that nature takes her part. Dare we, I asked myself, limit life to ourselves? May we not hold that there is a spirit that inspires, pervades...’ (the swallows were sweeping round him. They seemed cognizant of his meaning. Then they swept out of sight.) (173)

This can be taken as a restatement of the recognition that our reality is pervaded by prehistory which can unify our seeming dispersity, by dissolving our individuality. While the gramophone takes over and emphasises this motif of unity and dispersity, people go home, musing on it.

V. The Ending

After the pageant is over, the two themes slowly but steadily prepare themselves for the final twist at the end of the novel. Watching the fish in the lily pool, Mrs Swithin feels they are “ourselves” and sees in that vision “beauty, power, and glory in ourselves.” And then:

Silenced, she returned to her private vision; of beauty which is goodness; the sea on which we float. Mostly impervious, but surely every boat sometimes leaks? (185)

Here the lily pool is associated with prehistory which can invade us from beneath. The natural impression that it may be a zone of human death is enhanced when we remember that a lady had drowned herself in it ten years before. The pool is also a metaphor of the unconscious,

Needless to say, this sense of the present charged with all the past is one of the key elements in the aesthetics of T. S. Eliot and other modernists.

As for the prehistory coexisting with the present, Gillian Beer draws a parallel with Freud’s idea in Civilization and Its Discontents that in the mind the past phases can be preserved without being erased.
which is nothing but prehistory in the human mind, as is shown in the following passage: ‘It was always ‘my brother ... my brother’ who rose from the depths of her lily pool’ (186).

On the other hand, Miss La Trobe, now liberated from her task and going home, conceives a new plot:

She put down her case and stood looking at the land. Then something rose to the surface.

‘I should group them’, she murmured, ‘here.’ It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her. (189)

The phrase “something rose to the surface” clearly takes over the image of the lily pool and suggests that the new idea came from the unconscious depths of her mind or, for that matter, from prehistory itself which can dissolve her individual mind. The same image continues when she drinks in a bar and the new plot is about to take shape:

Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning -- wonderful words.

The cheap clock ticked; smoke obscured the picture. Smoke became tart on the roof of her mouth. Smoke obscured the earth-coloured jackets. She no longer saw them, yet they upheld her. There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words. (191)

She is beginning to work on a new fiction against the ticking of the clock which indicates the succession of time. She is moving from the world of reality to that of fiction, or from chronos to kairos. And the fact that she does so right after her pageant is over may suggest that she, as a fiction-maker like Bernard in The Waves, cannot endure bare empty reality for long, or in other words, cannot be long in the state of “between the acts.” It may be possible to say that she represents the human need for fiction here.

As if to echo her, Isa thinks:

Love and hate -- how they tore her asunder! Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes... (194)

Isa is tired of the everlasting conflict in her life between love and hate toward her husband Giles. She wants to live in a new plot or to have “the author” of her life reveal it is all a play, thereby ending it. When Isa said in the rain, “O that my life could here have ending,” she wanted prehistory to end her life. Here instead she is ready to live in a new plot, putting an end to the old one.

When Mrs Swithin starts to read the descriptions of prehistory in Outline of History again before going to bed, everything is ready and there only remains an extremely striking ending, in which the two themes dramatically converge. The novel ends in this way:

The old people had gone up to bed. Giles crumpled the newspaper and turned out the light. Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had
fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (197)

Two striking things are happening here at the same time. 1) Reality is completely swallowed up by prehistory. So far the sense of reality has always been maintained even when prehistory breaks in. But here Giles and Isa have literally become two primitive figures. 2) And that reality turned prehistory appears to be altogether encompassed by a fiction. We can easily recognise this scene as a realisation of Miss La Trobe’s new plot. Isa, as she wanted, now lives in a new plot. So far fiction has always been broken by reality. But we can say here is a reversal in which a fiction embraces reality (and prehistory). It is also a reversal in the sense that one element within the novel (Miss La Trobe’s fiction) has come to dominate the entire world of the novel.

But what kind of fiction is this? It has only a beginning. It lacks an end, which is, according to Kermode, decisively important in a fiction. It is exposed to infinite contingency the moment it begins. In this sense it may be possible to say that this final fiction repeats the theme of the limitation of fiction: fiction cannot contain reality after all and has to be open to ongoing reality outside it. Then is this a suggestion of the deplorable endlessness of human life? That is unlikely because Isa and Giles are not human here. They have become prehistoric "dwellers in caves" and assimilated into natural process. That means the human time and the human pain caused by the endlessness of time and life have come to an end. The ending which Isa wanted in the rainfall scene has actually come. Here is a world where there is no possibility of fiction. This final fiction, therefore, contains in it that which annihilates the very possibility of fiction. It may be argued that this ending has something affirmative in it and implies that Woolf believed in the possibility of man’s renewal or rebirth in the face of the impending possible end of history. But as long as we focus on the working of fiction, we must say that fiction here is sentenced to death the moment it seems to embrace everything and gain the ultimate triumph. Fiction triumphs in its own death.

It may be theoretically possible to assert that even in this final fiction, a certain end is presupposed as long as it is a fiction. But it is practically senseless to say that end gives meaning to it because it is far too short and simple.

It may be argued that even if prehistory cannot itself generate a story, Miss La Trobe’s last fiction can go on normally by personifying the prehistoric couple and making a story of them. But her conception of the plot contradicts that possibility. The words the couple are supposed to speak seem to be “meaningless words” originating in “[words of one syllable”, according to her conception (191). Bernard in The Waves says at the end of the novel, “I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak [...]. I need a howl; a cry.” He then declares, “How much better is silence” (246). It is probable, then, that the meaningless words Isa and Giles speak would approach silence, and accordingly, their life, which would resemble inhuman natural process, would resist being fictionalised by personification. There may be fighting, embracing and childbirth but they would be as good as natural phenomena and essentially nonnarratable.
Shortly after finishing this novel, Woolf put an end to her own life and literally entered that inhuman world she was so strongly drawn to. It is perhaps worth while, in conclusion, to comment a little on the relation between her life and this novel in terms of an ending. She wrote in her diary on 22 June 1940:

I feel oughtn’t I to finish off P. H. [Pointz Hall, the first title of the novel]: oughtn’t I to finish something by way of an end? The end gives its vividness, even its gaiety & recklessness to the random daily life. This, I thought yesterday, may be my last walk. (298)

This passage is notable. The phrase, “The end gives its vividness […] to the random daily life,” is reminiscent of Sartre’s or Kermode’s idea that the end confers significance on “random” life by organising it into a fiction. Probably, for Woolf, writing fictions was a means of getting away from the randomness and contingency of daily life and in that sense had an ontological meaning as in the case of Roquentin or Sartre himself. And just like Miss La Trobe, she could not be long in the state of “between the acts,” and had to keep conceiving and writing fictions without long intervals, or in other words, keep putting a provisional end to her life. Yet the last sentence of the above-quoted passage suggests that in the increasing terror of the war she was somehow feeling her life itself might be really ending soon. Actually, she wrote in her diary five days later, “I cant conceive that there will be a 27th June 1941” (299). Her foreboding turned out to be true because she drowned herself on 28 March 1941. We cannot truly explain why and how she turned away from her habitual practice of putting an end to life by fiction-making to the decisive act of putting a real end to it and going into that inhuman realm. But at this point it may be interesting to remember the ending of Between the Acts and speculate that it ominously allegorises the ending of her own life. In the novel, the ultimate winner is prehistory despite fiction’s seeming triumph. When she finished the novel, she wrote delightedly in her diary (23 November 1940):

I am a little triumphant about the book. I think its an interesting attempt in a new method. I think its more quintessential than the others. […] I’ve enjoyed writing almost every page. (340)

With all this triumph of fiction-making, however, she drowned herself eventually. The pull from the underworld was stronger than the power to continue fiction-making. Certainly all this is nothing more than a speculation. But it may be possible to say at least that Between the Acts clearly reflects Woolf’s struggle in her last years with the problem concerning an ending which involves the relations between fiction-making, real life and the lure of prehistory. In this sense it seems to be most suitable as a work with which she ended her career.

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9 Sartre himself was similar to Roquentin in that he also wanted to live as if he were in a fiction and free himself from the contingency of existence (cf. Kermode 135, Brooks, 94–95).

10 In a sense, Woolf followed Isa’s path. As we have seen, the world of fiction and that of prehistory are two havens where we can be free from the emptiness of reality. Isa longs for both and in the end she reaches both in such a way that the latter world gets the better of the former: she is assimilated into prehistory as soon as she seems to begin living in a new world of fiction.
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