



## Between the Acts

*Virginia Woolf*

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## **Between the Acts** Virginia Woolf

In Woolf's last novel, the action takes place on one summer's day at a country house in the heart of England, where the villagers are presenting their annual pageant. A lyrical, moving valedictory.

## **Between the Acts Details**

Date : Published October 21st 1970 by Mariner Books (first published 1941)

ISBN : 9780156118705

Author : Virginia Woolf

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Literature

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## From Reader Review Between the Acts for online ebook

### Bookdragon Sean says

Virginia Woolf inserts her gaze into the lives of her characters; there are no introductions, no preambles: we are simply there.

And her gaze is microscopic. She narrates every last detail about her characters; everything is brought to life in all its shades of grey and ordinariness. She does not comment on her descriptions, but simply provides thorough detail. As such, *Between the Acts* does not have a beginning per say or any usual sense of narrative progression. The novel feels more like an interlude, an interruption into the lives of her characters and their preparation for a pageant that would be happening irrespective of the reader's obtrusive presence.

In this sense her fiction feels very real. It feels like it is actually happening. Outside the realms of fiction (hard to believe such a place actually exists I know) we don't have introductions or kindly narrators to give us information. Things simply happen. We are not pre-programmed with a device that allows us to understand this information in its most desirable form. We don't know who everybody we meet is or what they are doing. We are bombarded with information every second. And here, at least in part, the novel captured this feeling of reality.

There are many, many, characters involved in the scenes. For such a short piece of writing, it boasts a large cast. But is that a good thing? I found it extremely difficult to remember who was who. Again, none of them are introduced so none of them have any real substance. This is part of Woolf's aim here, and I do appreciate what she was trying to do, though it meant that the novel was rather hard to read and even harder to actually enjoy with its emphasis on descriptive information dumps.

It's experimental writing, and the experiment is just not to my taste. On the surface, Woolf's prose is artistic, eloquent and perhaps even beautiful. Here though, it is mere description (although wonderfully written) with little to no substance. I will keep reading Woolf's novels because I know there will be one I adore. I just need to find it.

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### Maria says

You know what I love the most about Virginia Woolf? I am completely captivated by her novels. When I am reading her, I find myself completely lost in her words. Her descriptions bring her world together and it surrounds me in such a way that I just become part of it. It's so wonderful...

"Between the Acts" was brilliant, the kind of brilliant that doesn't ask to be adored, but that just is due to its simplicity. Virginia Woolf's observant side is so evident here... it really takes your breath away if you allow yourself to go with the flow. The way she knows people... probably better than they know themselves. I find it absolutely fantastic. When she makes them all stare into their own, broken, reflection... When she makes them realize that under their clothes and their titles they are just the same... When, for a moment, she makes them think about it... it hurts their minds, and you can feel it in their words, their confused words. Then the church's bells start ding-dong-ing and everything is over. No more need to think. No more need to socialize with people that are there just because society says they should. They just go back to their routines. All of them just abandon their thoughts and go. All of them but the ones considered the crazy ones. Are they crazy to think? Isn't their insanity a proof of their sanity?

*Sigh.*

If I had to describe this novel in one word? Oh, I would call it enchanting. It just lulls you.

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## **Madeline says**

Maybe it's because this is technically unfinished (a forward from Leonard Woolf states that although the draft was completed, Virginia Woolf died before she was able to make final corrections and revisions, so it was sent to the printers as is), but this one didn't strike me quite in the way Woolf's other books have. But that's not to suggest that it isn't good - remember, this is Virginia Woolf, so when I say that it didn't strike me as much as her other ones, I only mean that this book felt like a minor blow to the head, rather than feeling like I was being remade from the inside out.

That being said, this book is an almost perfect example of what makes Virginia Woolf such a unique writer. Like her more famous *Mrs. Dalloway*, the action takes place over a short span of time (two days) and is concerned primarily with the actions of one small family, although the narration takes us into other characters' heads occasionally. The main action of the story takes place during the annual village pageant, a history of England. We see the pageant in detail (Woolf even includes stage directions) and, as the title suggests, get to also witness the spectators during the act breaks.

Reading this, I felt like there was something else hiding under the surface of the text - something I wasn't fully able to grasp or understand. There's an undercurrent of longing and sadness and frustration running through all the characters, and I felt like there was a whole other story happening just in the margins and the line breaks. I think I could read this book ten times and still not find everything Woolf wants me to find.

Halfway through writing this review I decided to change my rating from three to four stars, because I started flipping through the book to find passages to quote and kept remembering what is so extraordinary about Virginia Woolf's writing: she had, I believe, an incredible capacity for empathy. Everyone in her stories gets treated, however briefly, like they're the most important character in the story. Every single character in her books, from the educated landowner to the flighty kitchen maid, has a deep inner life and complex thoughts and emotions, and she makes us see this complexity. No one is ordinary in Virginia Woolf's books.

Plus, the writing is, as always, killer. It's not just the people - something as simple as a lily pond suddenly becomes full of deeper meaning and significance when Woolf is describing it:

"There had always been lilies there, self-sown from wind-dropped seed, floating red and white on the green plates of their leaves. Water, for hundreds of years, had silted down into the hollow, and lay there four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud. Under the thick plate of green water, glazed in their self-centered world, fish swam - gold, splashed with white, streaked with black or silver. Silently they manoeuvred in their water world, poised in the blue patch made by the sky, or shot silently to the edge where the grass, trembling, made a fringe of nodding shadow. On the water-pavement spiders printed their delicate feet. A grain fell and spiralled down; a petal fell, filled and sank. At that the fleet of boat-shaped bodies paused; poised; equipped; mailed; then with a waver of undulation off they flashed.

It was in that deep centre, in that black heart, that the lady had drowned herself. Ten years since the pool had been dredged and a thigh bone recovered. Alas, it was a sheep's, not a lady's. And sheep have no ghosts, for sheep have no souls. But the servants insisted, they must have a ghost; the ghost must be a lady's; who had drowned herself for love. So none of them would walk by the lily pool at night, only now when the sun shone and the gentry still sat at table."

## lorinbocol says

il romanzo che virginia woolf lasciò sulla sua scrivania insieme alle lettere per il marito leonard e la sorella nessa, quando uscì di casa per entrare in un fiume, quello di cui disse che era troppo sciocco e frivolo per essere pubblicato, è in realtà la cosa più struggente che io abbia letto di suo finora.

l'impalpabilità della trama, l'esperimento con una scrittura centripeta che cambia continuamente asse e lo spunto lieve - una compagnia di attori dilettanti che imbastisce uno spettacolino teatrale in una casa di campagna - sembrarono a woolf inadatti al momento storico drammatico. e al suo drammatico momento interiore, poi. ma è una frivolezza che increspa solo la superficie, e quello scollamento finale tra l'autrice e l'opera arriva per cause altre, e dopo più di due anni di lavoro entusiasta testimoniato da lettere e diari. tanto che, credo, a fargli da contraltare basta la frase pronunciata da uno dei personaggi a proposito della recita che stanno tirando su, e applicabile pari pari al romanzo e alla sua *mise en abîme* (o abyme che dir si voglia): «la trama c'era solo per suscitare emozioni».

così è qui, in un'opera colta e fitta di ambivalenze e simbolismi. oltre che di riferimenti nei quali, alla luce di quel che sarebbe successo di lì a poco, è difficile non cogliere cupezza di presagio. un'opera in cui, come dice il titolo, la materia da indagare va cercata tra un atto e l'altro, negli interstizi in cui si infila la vita vera. come la luce nella crepa in quella famosa frase di leonard cohen.

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## Lynne King says

I love Virginia Woolf's "Letters" and "Diaries". I often look at them as they show her wit. They are brilliant and compelling reading. I also thoroughly enjoyed her novel "Mrs Dalloway" but this book, well I'm sorry but it's not for me at all. I liked it initially and then I lost interest. It appeared to be full of fripperies.

Such a shame...

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## Lynne King says

I have a real sense of regret here with this final book of Virginia Woolf. I personally feel that it should not have been published. The poor woman was mentally unwell, perhaps due to the strain of writing this final work? Who knows. Her permission had not been given to publish it either. Still many other people love this book and that's the main thing.

This is a fascinating individual who wrote the most superb Diaries and Letters. I love them and they are a great source of joy to me.

In conclusion I would add that I'm surprised that a film has not been made (perhaps it has and I am unaware of it) of the final years of Woolf's life. It would be fascinating. Such remarkable characters as her sister Vanessa, other members of the Bloomsbury Group...

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## Fionnuala says

### The last act.

This is the tenth and last of Virginia Woolf's novels. Of the other nine, I read the two most famous ones some years ago; the rest I've read in the last three months, which makes eight in a row, non-stop.

I feel as if I've attended a series of plays, each with a differently decorated set and its own cast of characters but each sharing themes, locations and character types with the others. There are even characters who appear in more than one of the works: Clarissa Dalloway and her husband Richard have roles in the very first book, *The Voyage Out*, as well as being central to *Mrs. Dalloway*. I mention them because there is a character in *Between the Acts* called Giles who resembles Richard Dalloway and who highlights a theme that occurs in the first book, the middle book, *Orlando*, and the last book. It is a theme that is more or less absent from all of the other books, but in this final book, written just before Woolf gave in to the powerful death drive she'd struggled against all her life, she makes the most direct references to the theme that is death's shadow partner: the sex drive. Sex pervades all the crucial scenes in *Between the Acts*.

*Between the Acts* is an enormous pageant: the reader watches a play in which the characters watch a pageant in which the players watch a play about the death of the bawdy Restoration Period. But the characters watching the pageant are themselves engaged in a titillating drama behind the scenes, and are themselves facing the death of an age: the summer day on which the pageant takes place is in 1939 not long before the outbreak of the war.

On that day, an uninvited guest arrives at Pointz Hall where the pageant is about to take place, a guest who might well be Lady Wishfort from William Congreve's Restoration comedy, *The Way of the World* *vulgar as she was, in her gestures, in her whole person, over-sexed, over-dressed for a pageant.*

And so Mrs Manresa ogles her way though the household at Pointz Hall, from Candish, the butler, to Giles, the man of the house, to his elderly father, Bartholomew. And the reader is not passive either in the face of her pageantry:

*She took the little silver cream jug and let the smooth fluid curl luxuriously into her coffee, to which she added a shovelful of brown sugar candy. Sensuously, rhythmically, she stirred the mixture round and round....she looked over her coffee cup at Giles. She looked before she drank. Looking was part of drinking. Why waste sensation, she seemed to ask, why waste a single drop that can be pressed out of this ripe, this melting adorable world? Then she drank. And the air around her became threaded with sensation. Bartholomew felt it; Giles felt it. Had he been a horse, the thin brown skin would have twitched, as if a fly had settled. Isabella twitched too. Jealousy, anger, pierced her skin. "And now", said Mrs Manresa, putting down her cup, "about this entertainment—this pageant, into which we've gone and butted"—she made it, too, seem ripe like the apricot into which the wasps were burrowing—"Tell me, what's it to be?"*

Later, Giles tries to reconnect with his wife Isabel over the dinner table: *With its sheaf sliced in four, exposing a white cone, Giles offered his wife a banana. She refused it. He stubbed his match on the plate. Out it went with a little fizz in the raspberry juice.*

However Isabel is far more than a temporarily jealous wife who wonders what went on in the greenhouse between the acts. She herself is a very sexual being and carries all the oppositions of this contradictory work within her. She hears her father-in-law talk constantly of the weather, will it rain on the day of the pageant or will it not, the refrain she's heard now for years, and she thinks about man and nature, about sex and death, about the cycle of the seasons, the trees and fields, the things of the earth that will endure long after she and her kind are gone. The mainspring of the entire work is buried inside Isabel; she, not Giles, not

Bartholomew, not Mrs Manresa, is at the centre of this very clever book.

.....  
In June 1940 when she was half way through writing this book, Woolf wondered if Europe would ever see June '41. She sent the book to the publisher in March 1941. A few days later, she requested they send it back again as she felt it needed more changes. But she couldn't stay around long enough to make those changes; she was not to see June '41.

*The fire greyed, then glowed, and the tortoiseshell butterfly beat on the lower pane of the window; beat, beat, beat; repeating that if no human being ever came, never, never, never, the books would be mouldy, the fire out and the tortoiseshell butterfly dead on the pane.*

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## Joseph says

*Don't bother with the plot: the plot is nothing.*

*Between the Acts* is Virginia Woolf's last novel. In the introduction, Leonard Woolf explains that Virginia had finished the book, and although some grammar editing was still needed, at the time of her death, she considered it finished. Only obvious errors were corrected.

The story takes place in June 1939 but was written while WWII was being fought. The story opens before the summer pageant and play at Pointz Hall, about a three-hour train ride from London, if the trains are running on time to this remote place. The house is owned by Bartholomew Oliver who is retired from the Indian service. His widowed sister, Lucy, lives with him, and she may be showing signs of dementia. His stockbroker son, Giles, and wife, Isa, also live there; they are having problems with their marriage.

The story revolves around the pageant and splits between the interactions of the Oliver household with visitors at the pageant and the play being performed. One theme that I found prevalent throughout the story is war. The title itself could be a play on the inter-war period with World War I as the first act and WWII as the second with the characters living in the intermission. Everyone seems to be happy living in isolation. This isolation is also shown in Lucy's reading. In England's prehistory, a land bridge formerly joined England to the continent. Just as Pointz Hall is separated from London, England is now separated from Europe. England is safe and secure. The characters seem oblivious to the impending war. There are, however, very few dissenters. Giles sees the whole pageant as a waste when the country should be preparing for war. Another guest watching the historical play comments how the army is not mentioned; its role is vital to British history. Interestingly, the word "war" is only mentioned five times in the entire book, but the symbolism grows throughout the book.

The writing is unmistakably Woolf. Her stream of conscious writing is at its peak. The quote I used as a header was a thought Isa had while watching the play and very much reflects Woolf's writing. What characters are thinking is more important than storylines. The "color" of language also plays a vital role in the writing

*...and as they trundled they were talking --not shaping pellets of information or handing ideas from one to another, but rolling words, like sweets on their tongues; which as they thinned to transparency, gave off*



the entire novel is seeking an articulation for the simultaneous 'unity' and dispersal of all relationships.

At any rate, enough of my 'thoughtful' blabbering. Another fantastic experience of reading this book, with many more readings (hopefully) to come.

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## 2010

When I discovered I'd be re-reading *Between the Acts* for my Modernism course this spring, I groaned internally and began to steel myself against the novel, once again. I read this for the first time about 2 years ago in a Woolf seminar, and found it to be an absolute chore in the way none of her other novels had been. I, like many, questioned why the hell Woolf would write such a superficial & trivial novel with the war looming so heavily before her. And if this Modernism course was invested in particular themes--heroism, experimentalism, acute interest in the seismic historical shifts of the first half of the 20th century--why weren't we reading *Jacob's Room* or *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*?

I was in for quite a great surprise. Since I knew from the start of the semester that I'd probably end up writing on this novel (I couldn't bear the thought of writing on *Ulysses* or *The Waste Land*, and knew \*nothing\* of Beckett or Djuna Barnes), I began plotting ways of coping. When the time came to read the novel, in the midst of the eye-of-the-semester's-storm, I found myself--SHOCKING--positively loving the novel. So much so that I re-read it again only days after finishing it, which is something I \*never\* do with books, even the ones that really pierce me.

I wholly revise my contention that the novel is superficial. In fact, now I find it to be one of Woolf's most politically cognizant novels--the pageant functions as a direct indictment of England's troublesome history, the sound & sight of the aeroplanes overhead is possibly the most disturbing moment of the novel, Giles figures as a sort of blossoming fascist who nonetheless must be incorporated into the novel's community...certainly helps to read the novel alongside *Three Guineas* (where Woolf suggests that the embryonic fascist is not simply a monster--but is within us). The novel's intense interest in precultural histories, "thoughts without words" & the like makes for a wonderfully philosophical read, but you never feel overburdened by abstraction; the strange ideas are presented through the characters' encounters with them, much in the way we, the readers, might likewise encounter them.

The writing left me misty-eyed and out of breath on numerous occasions (the final scene with Miss La Trobe, for example, may contain five of the best pages of prose styling in all of literature). The characters are intensely beautiful--Miss La Trobe, William Dodge, Isa Oliver, Lucy Swithin...each seems tattooed on my innards in some way (that's less grotesque than I'm describing it). Also, the fact that there's an old woman/tranny (ok, gay man) bonding session tickles my naughty bits.

Ok, I just never feel adequate when I try talking about Woolf--god knows how I felt assured enough to write a paper on the novel. It's amazing, it's incredible, it's fucking Virginia Woolf (which should pull you in, in any case). If you've already read it and hated it, give it another go. I was knocked off my feet by the novel this time around, and highly advise anyone remotely interested in Woolf to grant it a little breathing room. I'm almost tempted to read it again this summer, but I've got other Woolf on my list (*The Waves*--finally). Happy reading, and possibly sobbing...

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## Ronald Morton says

(I read over half of this yesterday - so, again, happy birthday Virginia Woolf)

*Between the Acts* was Virginia Woolf's final novel, published posthumously following her suicide by drowning. It was written between 1939 and 1940 – the beginning of World War II into the beginning months of The Blitz on London (which Woolf experienced and wrote about in some of her correspondence). Both events weigh heavy on the text, though it is impossible to say how much of her eventual suicide should be read into the work itself (the war and the Blitz absolutely should be read into the text though, it is clearly intended).

Whether one should see Woolf's eventual suicide in the text or not, it is difficult to separate that event from her last work. In the opening pages of the book a "haunting" is both alluded to and directly referenced by a number of characters – when the events that led to the haunting are eventually disclosed, *It was in that deep centre, in that black heart, that the lady had drowned herself*, it obviously strikes a chord, but then, later, I am confronted with:

*But what wish should I drop into the well?" She looked round. [...] "That the waters should cover me," she added, "of the wishing well."*

[...]

*"That's what I wished," Isa added, "when I dropped my pin. Water. Water..."*

The real difficulty in all this is that water is a recurring theme throughout Woolf's oeuvre – and there is a lot of water imagery here that I'm not touching on – but the wish to be covered by water is especially striking in this last book, and deeply saddened me to read it.

The war hangs heavy over this work – threats from above; the weather, birds, even literal planes; all darken the pages with their threat. When the planes themselves make their eventual appearance (not the actual Blitz, but a group of planes flying over) not only does it disrupt (and eventually scatter) the pageant – but "opportunity" itself is "cut in two". Furthering the inherent (and sometimes surprising) threats from above: I love the description of the storm breaking, unexpected: *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.*

All those observations aside, this book was beautifully written – big surprise there, I know – and really only underscores the loss that was Woolf's death. In reading *A Room of One's Own* I came across this reference to World War I:

*But what was lacking, what was different, I asked myself, listening to the talk? And to answer that question I had to think myself out of the room, back into the past, before the war indeed, and to set before my eyes the model of another luncheon party held in rooms not very far distant from these; but different. Everything was different. Meanwhile the talk went on among the guests, who were many and young, some of this sex, some of that; it went on swimmingly, it went on agreeably, freely, amusingly. And as it went on I set it against the background of that other talk, and as I matched the two together I had no doubt that one was the descendant, the legitimate heir of the other. Nothing was changed; nothing was different save only here I listened with all my ears not entirely to what was being said, but to the murmur or current behind it. Yes, that was it—the change was there. Before the war at a luncheon party like this people would have said precisely the same things but they would have sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves.*

Which struck me as a staggeringly great summation and observation – and I wondered (as most of Woolf's

work was written and published between the two wars) what Woolf would have had to say about World War II, as I'm sure it would have been as striking as what she contributed to the post-war literature following World War I. *Between the Acts* hints at what more could have come, intimates how great it could have been, but leaves only a void, and a loss.

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## Claire says

3.5 stars.

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## Asclepiade says

Opera postrema della Woolf, questo libro ha goduto di minor fama rispetto ai suoi più noti capolavori: è in effetti un'opera un po' strana, di cui la scrittrice non ebbe modo di curare una revisione; parlandone, le premeva metterne in luce un'asserita frivolezza: io parlerei piuttosto di leggerezza, che in realtà è anche apparente, perché il romanzo, sebbene rorido d'ironia sommessata e tipicamente inglese, suona tutt'altro che leggero e frivolo. Tutto si svolge in poche ore: nei pressi d'una vecchia dimora di campagna si mette in iscena, come ogni anno, uno spettacolo teatrale organizzato dalla gente del posto: l'argomento è la storia britannica; e sembra quasi che Virginia Woolf, dipingendo i suoi personaggi e riferendo quello che portano sul palcoscenico, intenda raffigurare e salutare un intero mondo di certezze, modi e idee che avvertiva giunti ormai al tramonto. Io ho trovato affascinante il bellissimo giuoco metaletterario che costruisce su queste vicende minute e scarnate: senza dubbio il lettore anglofono, educato per molti anni di scuola ai suoi classici, avrà trovato decine di richiami ad autori notissimi e meno celebri; a me, che della poesia inglese ho una conoscenza molto frammentaria e superficiale, a un certo punto ad esempio sono venuti in mente un verso dall'*Ode to a Nightingale* di Keats e un *incipit* di Byron, che descrive un abito a lutto cosparso di brillanti come un cielo notturno stellato. Molto presente anche Shakespeare, e non solo a livello di citazioni: l'intera struttura dell'opera ricorda parecchio il *Sogno d'una notte di mezza estate*, col contrappunto fra la vita dei signori della villa e la recita un po' scalcinata e ingenua dei villici locali; ma la Woolf si diverte a giocare anche qui, perché, se la costruzione ricorda Shakespeare, al contrario che nel suo teatro qui sono rispettate rigorosamente le unità di tempo e di luogo: ma sono rispettate, per ironia, nel romanzo, e non nella sequenza di quadri storici e allegorici che vengono materialmente portati sul palcoscenico; e a proposito di unità aristoteliche, a un certo punto la scrittrice non manca di menzionare Racine, che peraltro uno dei personaggi ritiene alquanto noioso. Insomma, mentre trasfonde nella pagina gli echi della sua sensibilità esacerbata, l'autrice amava ancora giocare e scherzare: ed è proprio ciò a rendere affascinante quest'opera pur forse non del tutto riuscita, e certamente non rifinita come la Woolf avrebbe voluto.

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## Diana says

I took a class on Woolf in the last semester of my third year. This was the last book we read. We had the option of taking an in-class final or writing a paper. As I had not finished much of the assigned reading, I opted for the paper. That quarter, all of my finals were done Monday, and this paper wasn't due until Friday at 5pm. I figured I'd gun this out and turn it in Wednesday at the latest. Ha. No.

Woolf never finished editing this book. It was the middle of WWII and she lost hope. She killed herself before it was complete. You can feel that hope draining as you read it, can feel movement towards the inevitable conclusion. Humankind is doomed to re-enact its mistakes, and the only thing that changes is the

number of stones in the churchyard.

On Wednesday, after I'd written most of a paper about some one being a foil to some one else, I realized her actual conclusion. I sat and cried and cried, both for her sadness and my own faltering faith. I stayed there for, seriously, a day and a half, until I finally found the other half of the conclusion: this is the way it's been, but things could be different. Woolf wove together a damning account of (man's) history with a resolute belief that things can change. If not now then someday. She lost faith, it's true, but we're still here and so can be different. And then I ended up rewriting the whole thing Friday afternoon and ran to submit it without reading it or editing. And, embarrassingly, I haven't read it since because I want to idealize the moment and not screw it up with my run-on sentences and footnotes.

I realize this probably isn't the best recommendation of a book, but I am telling the story because it's why I love it. Between The Acts broke open my whole perception of the world. Twice.

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## Cxr says

### Il Palcoscenico della Vita

Alla vigilia dello scoppio della seconda guerra mondiale gli abitanti di Pointz Hall, l'anziano Oliver e sua sorella Lucy (Old Flimsy), il figlio Gilles e la nuora Isabelle, ospitano la rappresentazione teatrale amatoriale che si svolge ogni anno nel piccolo paese dove abitano. E tra gli atti della commedia, insieme agli altri abitanti e spettatori, recitano la commedia della vita, ciascuno con il proprio ruolo e la propria maschera. Sul palcoscenico si recita la storia dell'Inghilterra, che rappresenta "la civiltà" con i suoi valori legati alla famiglia, alla patria, alla religione. Ma i personaggi che in questi valori hanno trovato rifugio si ritrovano ingenui e disarmati davanti alle difficoltà della psiche e all'incombere della barbarie. Ed anche quando la Signora La Trobe, autrice e regista della rappresentazione, probabile alter ego di Virginia, mette ognuno esplicitamente sul palcoscenico davanti alla propria immagine usando specchi e vetri in mano agli attori, la consapevolezza dura un battito d'ali. La scena si chiude e ciascuno ritorna, inalterato, alla recita di sempre. E alla Signora la Trobe non resta che ammettere la propria sconfitta artistica annegandola in un boccale di birra.

Per me che sono una pirandelliana di lunga data, impossibile non ritrovare tra queste pagine gli echi del suo teatro. Del resto il Nobel di Pirandello è del '34, pochi anni prima che la Woolf scrivesse questo libro. E Pirandelliano è anche l'umorismo che pur nella tragicità degli eventi è presente in tutto il racconto. Un umorismo fatto di piccole notazioni, osservazioni, dettagli. Un umorismo empatico, molto femminile, che rende questo romanzo unico tra quelli che ho letto della Woolf.

@Asclepiade mi ha fatto notare che più che Pirandello la Woolf è legata a Shakespeare e che tutto Between Acts è un omaggio a quest'ultimo. Senz'altro vero. Del resto forse tutto il teatro discende da Shakespeare, anche Pirandello. Come non ricordare che in "As you like it" Shakespeare scrive proprio ciò che è il senso di questo libro e del teatro di Pirandello:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts...

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## Maddy says

I always forget about Virginia Woolf despite everything of hers that I have read hits me in the gut and stays with me for years. Maybe I carry her around in my bones.

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## Teresa Proença says

**Entre os Actos** - o último romance de Virginia Woolf, que concluiu mas já não reviu, - foi publicado, pelo seu marido, meses depois do seu suicídio.

É uma obra com uma estrutura original constituída por dois planos narrativos: o romance tradicional no qual, a dado momento, as personagens assistem a uma peça de teatro representada por eles próprios.

As personagens principais são um casal, Isa e Giles, que não sabem se se amam ou se odeiam e cuja sombra da infidelidade, potencial não real, paira sobre eles.

*"A sós pela primeira vez em todo o dia, mantiveram-se os dois em silêncio. Sós, a hostilidade ficava a descoberto; e o amor também. Antes de adormecerem, teriam de lutar; depois de lutar, abraçar-se-iam."*

Sobre a prosa não digo nada além de: é Virginia Woolf...

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## Ilse says

Fragments of life's rich pageant

Sharp, witty, vital, brilliant. With *Between the acts*, Woolf sings an eudaimonic valediction to her readers, and finally, to life, as Woolf was still working on the final revisions when she walked into the Ouse and the novel was published by Leonard Woolf 4 months after her death. Although sometimes perceived as unfinished and jokingly referred to as her 'Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman', she gave birth to a full-term child. A full-blown, proficient novel, meant to pay homage to literature and to England's charm. While writing the novel, she says in her diary on the 24th of December 1940 she feels in the Sussex countryside 'how England consoles & warms one'.

At the core there is a dramatic piece, the annual pageant played by the villagers upon the grounds of a fictitious English country house, Pointz Hall, attended by the local villagers and the Oliver family members living in the house, representing scenes touching on the literature and history of England, set in the Interbellum period, 'between the acts'.

Does this sound like tedious, obsolete bluestockingish stuff to you? Well, it isn't. The deceptively idyllic, overly traditional setting and the play are a pretext to some exquisite, vivid and playful distillation and exploration of ambivalent human moods and experiences, bristling with Woolf's sly, derisive and subtle humor and social criticism. The eye is barely directed to the spectacle as such, but focuses on what happens before, between and after the acts, on what commonly passes by unnoticed, the thoughts, observations and emotions that come to us when we are alone and where we do not speak about. The substance of the novel is not to be found on the pageant's stage, satirizing England's heroic past, but in the polyphony of the fragmented inner voices dispersed in the audience attending the play.

Juxtaposing and confronting apparently trivial, everyday concerns like talks about the weather and the food with most significant moments, present and past, rationality and spirituality, art and nature, author and audience, Woolf evokes life's rich pageant through refined psychological and suggestive depictions of her

characters, handling them with great empathy and care.

The musicality of her mercurial prose and the ingenious composition reminded me of *Toccata*, a choreography on the music of Bach danced by Rosas, the dance company of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, a Belgian choreographer which I admire: dancers moving like counterpoint melody lines, sometimes interfering, touching each other, then drifting apart, like the scraps of conversation between Woolf's characters and their transient trains of thought. I imagine Woolf as the omnipresent simultaneous resonating voices of Bach, the pianist and the choreographer, conducting and directing the ephemeral movements, minds and bodies of the dancing characters:

"For I hear music, they were saying. Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken. Look and listen. See the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue. And the trees with their many-tongued much syllabbling, their green and yellow leaves hustle us and shuffle us, and bid us, like the starlings, and the rooks, come together, crowd together, to chatter and make merry while the red cow moves forward and the black cow stands still."

Evidently, academic research thoroughly scrutinized the abundant themes, motives and techniques Woolf packed in this concise novel, inviting to a second and third reading. Aware it is impossible to grasp it fully at this first reading, here is what stays with me now: the wonderful evocation of the archetypical rural English landscape; the people living on the brink of war again, metaphorized by the loveliness of birds, shifting into grim bombers; the people living on the verge of transition, their world crumbling and collapsing by modernity, a world that will wither like the profuse flowers adorning the park of Pointz Hall, recalling Vita's dazzling Sissinghurst gardens. The magnificent, radiant language:

"Beyond the lily pool the ground sank again, and in that dip of the ground, bushes and brambles had mobbed themselves together. It was always shady; sun-flecked in the summer, dark and damp in winter. In the summer there were always butterflies; fritillaries darting through; Red Admirals feasting and floating; cabbage whites, unambitiously fluttering round a bush, like muslin milkmaids, content to spend a life there."

And the characters of course, of which the women are the most appealing and intriguing, (according to a feminist study, the men in the novel belong to 'exhausted patriarchy') showing resembling traits to real women we ostensibly all know: the blatant, in-your-face voluptuousness of the buoyant Mrs. Manresa, turning on the old and the young men with her frivolous airs and graces; beautifully contrasted with the lyrical, melancholic sensuality of Isa Oliver, the daughter-in-law, jealous, "a captive balloon, pegged down on a chair arm by a myriad of hair-thin ties into domesticity"; Isa's cynical, restless, frustrated, grumpy husband, Giles Oliver, the only person aware of the impending war; his rationalist father Bartholomew Oliver and his widowed sibling Lucy Swithin, a moving ageing woman, intensely spiritual, sensitive to natural mystic; William Dodge, the nervous companion of Mrs. Manresa, with "artistic leanings"; Miss la Trobe, the outcast artist and director of the play.

I was enthralled by the recurrent image of a thread connecting the characters, a masterful leitmotiv, visualizing the *pas de deux* between the characters that will take place in the greenhouse during the interludes to the play:

"The wild child, afloat once more on the tide of the old man's benignity, looked over her coffee cup at Giles, with whom she felt in conspiracy. A thread united them--visible, invisible, like those threads, now seen, now not, that unite trembling grass blades in autumn before the sun rises. She had met him once only, at a cricket match. And then had been spun between them an

early morning thread before the twigs and leaves of real friendship emerge.”

Was she referring to her pending death, when she entered the legend of the drowned lady into the book? Her untimely death could easily rouse the usual *hineininterpretierung*. However, the joyous and playful tone seems to gainsay that morbid interpretation. Adumbrating definitely the gloom of imminent war and suffering, the novel is a hymn of praise to life, being full of pleasure, passion and imagination.

Just read this, let her take you eight miles high with her in the flight to the higher realms of celestial beauty and imagination. Listen to her symphony. A swan song and farewell performance indicating that not only Bowie could leave the stage as a genius.

Warning: you might end up a Woolfie.

[image error]

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## Joseph says

Don't bother with the plot: the plot is nothing.

Between the Acts is Virginia Woolf's last novel. In the introduction, Leonard Woolf explains that Virginia had finished the book, and although some grammar editing was still needed, at the time of her death, she considered it finished. Only obvious errors were corrected.

The story takes place in June 1939 but was written while WWII was being fought. The story opens before the summer pageant and play at Pointz Hall, about a three-hour train ride from London, if the trains are running on time to this remote place. The house is owned by Bartholomew Oliver who is retired from the Indian service. His widowed sister, Lucy, lives with him, and she may be showing signs of dementia. His stockbroker son, Giles, and wife, Isa, also live there; they are having problems with their marriage.

The story revolves around the pageant and splits between the interactions of the Oliver household with visitors at the pageant and the play being performed. One theme that I found prevalent throughout the story is war. The title itself could be a play on the inter-war period with World War I as the first act and WWII as the second with the characters living in the intermission. Everyone seems to be happy living in isolation. This isolation is also shown in Lucy's reading. In England's prehistory, a land bridge formerly joined England to the continent. Just as Pointz Hall is separated from London, England is now separated from Europe. England is safe and secure. The characters seem oblivious to the impending war. There are, however, very few dissenters. Giles sees the whole pageant as a waste when the country should be preparing for war. Another guest watching the historical play comments how the army is not mentioned; its role is vital to British history. Interestingly, the word "war" is only mentioned five times in the entire book, but the symbolism grows throughout the book.

The writing is unmistakably Woolf. Her stream of conscious writing is at its peak. The quote I used as a header was a thought Isa had while watching the play and very much reflects Woolf's writing. What characters are thinking is more important than story lines. The "color" of language also plays a vital role in the writing

...and as they trundled they were talking –not shaping pellets of information or handing ideas from one to another, but rolling words, like sweets on their tongues; which as they thinned to transparency, gave off pink,

green, and sweetness.

...

He thought very little of anybody, simple or gentry. Leaning, silent, sardonic, against the door he was like a withered willow, bent over a stream, all leaves shed, and his eyes the whimsical flow of the waters.

Woolf lets her poetic talent flow through her prose. Several times I stopped and re-read passages because they were just so well written and contained flow and imagery that is simply sublime. Woolf would have given my grammar teachers fits of rage. She uses punctuation for her own purposes. Periods, semicolons, and commas do represent full stop, partial stop, and pauses, but do not always play by the rules of sentence formation. Like most of Virginia Woolf's novels, *Between the Acts* is a difficult read for the reasons I mentioned above, but like most of her work, it is very well worth reading

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## Dolors says

The last book that Woolf wrote before she entered the Ouse, never to return. There is a sense of premonition in this hybrid work; a play within a play like in "*The Tempest*" and a novel of manners with the most British of pedigrees; a presage that the world is never going to be the same, even if people keep acting as if nothing were the matter. The feeling is mostly portrayed in a global scale because the characters are not ready to acknowledge it and make it personal, but it can be perceived in the changing dynamics between members of the same family, neighbors and acquaintances.

The year is 1939, and the setting is rural Southern-England on a summer day when the Olivers organize the yearly pageant in their cottage, where all the villagers are invited to attend or to participate. The performance this year takes the form of a journey through the history of England by means of fragmented scenes with symbolical meaning, not short of sharp-tongued satire, which transport the audience back to the time of kings and knights, to Chaucer, the Elizabethan era, the Restoration period, the age of reason, the decorum of the Victorian time, and finally, to the present time.

An act between two momentous historical events, WWI and WWII, that symbolizes the continuous farce, the imposed roles that we perform daily for the sake of others. But what is it that really moves and motivates us? Similarly, it is during the intermissions of the play, that we get access into the inner worlds of the Olivers, where they survive in constant contradiction, while they pretend that everything is as pleasant as it should be. Isa and Giles Oliver's marital struggles, the old Mr. Oliver's rational understanding of the escalating tension that unfolds in front of his alert eyes, his sister's romantic soul that responds to music and poetry, the unbridgeable gap between the safety of individual consciousness and the tortuous paths of love, desire, temptation and jealousy. The complexities of human beings, with their insecurities and weaknesses, and their inability to communicate with each other, fluctuate in still movements towards a flowing stream of scenes that compose the physical and psychical landscape the characters inhabit.

By defining the familiar movements of the Olivers, blended with their sensations and expectations and their brief snapshots of life and voices barely delineated, while the fertility of the natural world at the backstage stares impassively, facts are brought about without continuity, shaping a vibrant *tableau vivant* that is painted with the impressionistic strokes of a language that pulsates with the color of emotions present and past. Woolf exposes her characters to their naked reflections, bared of pretense, and by doing so, she forces the reader to participate actively in their struggles, to feel the pull of desire against their moral standards, to acknowledge a broken reality that is sterile and shattered, whose pieces sparkle under the sunbeams of an indifferent sun, which continues to rise regardless of the countless trauma that the human soul deals with every new day. But still, they keep looking up, hoping to find their lonesome star, which might shine down upon them.

Let's keep looking up, then.

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