NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

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In order to discuss the techniques used by Virginia Woolf in her last novel, *Between the Acts*,[1] it is necessary to make a few general comments about the basic modes of narration. These widely recognized modes are described by William Peden as **scene**, in which the author depicts the action in the process of its taking place; **summary**, in which the author compresses action necessary to include but not of specific importance or interest to require more direct scenic method; and **description**, in which the author halts action to describe what the narrator or the characters see.[2] If virtually all novels consist of these three modes, there is clearly considerable variety in the manner in which they are used, from one author to another, from one historical period to another, and even, in the case of an author like Virginia Woolf, from one novel to another. Therefore, a comment like the one made by Phyllis Bentley that "the proper use, the right mingling, of scene, description and summary is the art of fictitious narrative,"[3] although true or even obvious as a general remark, does not suggest the great variety found in works considered artful narratives.

The subject of this essay, then, is Virginia Woolf's specific use of scene, summary and description in *Between the Acts*, to see precisely how she intermingles these three modes in a novel that is both dramatic and lyrical.

Between the Acts begins on a June evening in 1939 in the English countryside and ends approximately twenty-four hours later, in the same setting. During the narration of this relatively short span of time, the reader follows the seemingly disconnected thoughts and actions of

three generations of a family, who receive uninvited guests for lunch and who then make preparations to watch that year's presentation of an annually staged pageant, the acts of which are referred to in the title. Next, the characters, now including other members of the community, watch the pageant, shortly after which the novel ends, with the family alone, about to retire for the night. Thus, William Peden's general comments about scene are especially appropriate, for he says about the most important of the three basic modes that "when the scenic method is employed, the reader sees what the characters are doing at a specific time; he hears what they are saying; he can even share what they are thinking. The reader is like a member of the audience at a play."[4]

In addition to the play within the novel, there is the "play" presented both before and after the pageant, and during and between the acts, when the members of the audience react to the pageant and enact or reveal their own private dramas. In fact, these interior dramas provide much of the conflict within the novel, although it is not the well-defined, well-developed sort often found in the traditional narrative. Instead of a plot with its complications, climax and dénouement, the reader is presented with a series of oppositions which remain strangely static throughout the novel. Some of these oppositions exist strictly within the psyches of the characters, such as the love and hate felt by Isa toward§ her husband, Giles, or the implicit tension in Giles, who feels forced by circumstances to work at a job he does not like, but who, attracted to Mrs. Manresa, an uninvited guest, also flouts convention by going to the greenhouse with her. His feelings and behaviour therefore suggest the opposition between societal obligation and individual desire. Other oppositions result from the juxtaposition of characters, attitudes and actions. For example, in constrast to the religious, mystical, Mrs. Swithin is her skeptical, scientific brother, Giles' father, Mr. Oliver. These two characters, the pageant and the reactions to it, juxtapose stasis, sameness, unity and harmony with change, difference, dispersity and fragmentation. The examples given also indicate a male-female opposition, complicated by the inclusion of a lesbian woman, the author of the play, Miss La Trobe, and a homosexual man, William Dodge. In addition, the setting includes the natural world, which is opposed to the humans' mental world, while actual time is obviously different from mental time. Elements of the setting, such as the wind and various animals, also contribute to the rather complicated opposition of silence, which may or may not be meaningful, and sound, which also may or may not be meaningful. These unresolved, often unconnected oppositions replace the complications of a more traditional plot. In fact, Virginia Woolf

justifies the virtual plotlessness of *Between the Acts* and affirms her focus on emotions when she has Isa, the most poetic of the characters, say: "Did the plot matter? . . . The plot was only there to beget emotion . . . Don't bother about the plot's nothing" (p.69).

In order to see exactly how emotion is "begot", it is necessary to discuss the specific use of the three modes of narration and how they work in the over-all structure of the novel.

Although *Between the Acts* does not have formal divisions such as chapters, it is possible to identify three main parts in the novel: the first extends from the opening scene to the beginning of the pageant (pp. 7-59); the second part consists of the pageant and the intervals (pp.59-146); the last, very short part begins with the end of the pageant and ends with the final, enigmatic "Then the curtain rose. They spoke" (pp.146-159).

In the first part, there is a fairly even mingling of scene, description and summary. Scene and description are related in past tense verbs while the summary, as one would expect, is conveyed in the past perfect. Discussing the use of the past perfect in general, Seymour Chatman writes that it is

> relatively little used in English speech even among sophisticated speakers except when the anteriority of events must be underlined. In highbrow literary language, it is more frequent, and its use or nonuse can have stylistic implications of various sorts, including character -contemporization.[5]

Certainly, one of the reasons for the frequent appearance of the past perfect in the first part of *Between the Acts* is to express the anteriority of events, for history plays an important role in the novel, whether it be the individual histories of the characters, or local, national or even prehistoric history. This historical information is conveyed both by the narrative voice, in scene and in description, and by the characters themselves, in dialogue and in reminiscenses, through direct and indirect speech and through inner monologue. On the other hand, the character-given summary, often adding depth to scenic tensions, also illustrates "character-contemporization." Mr. Chatman comments on the special nature of this kind of summary when he says that

> the usual means of summarizing in contemporary fiction is to let the characters do it, whether in their own minds or externally in dialogue. Such passages are not "summaries" in the classical sense, since the ratio is not between the duration of the events and of the depiction but between the duration

> of the characters' memories of those events and the time it takes to read them, a ratio that is roughly equal, and hence "scenic". The summary aspect is secondary, a by-product of ratiocinative action . . . .[6]

Before illustrating the various uses of summary in *Between the Acts*, one needs to comment that the summaries which clearly represent anteriority occur in distinct layers, even though almost none of them refer to a very specific previous time. An examination of the first few pages of the novel reveals that one layer of summary refers to local events occurring before the June day of the "scene". In the opening paragraph, for instance, the reader is told that "the city council had promised to bring water to the village, but they hadn't" (p.7). Another layer of summary refers to incidents in the lives of the characters, frequently events remembered from childhood, such as the happening mentioned by Mrs. Haines, who says: "how odd it was, as a child, she had never feared cows, only horses. But then, as a small child in a perambulator, a great cart-horse had brushed within an inch of her face" (p.7). She adds that her family "had lived near Liskeard for many centuries," thus providing an example of information about her family's history. In addition to local, individual and family history, other summaries refer to the history of England itself, as when Mr. Oliver says that "the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road. From an airplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars" (p.7). Mrs. Swithin provides an example of pre-historic summary when she recalls her favorite reading, about the times "when the entire continent, not then . . . divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing and, she supposed, barking monsters" (p.11). Some summary refers to an action recently completed within the scene but related in retrospect. When Isa first appears in the opening scene, the reader is told that "she had been sitting with her little boy who wasn't well . . ." (p.8). These examples of different layers of summary, all taken from the first few pages of the novel, indicate the prevalence of "historical" summary, and suggest the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated passages which characterizes the novel.

To illustrate how Virginia Woolf uses summary for "character-contemporization," it is necessary to mention another type of summary: that which refers to past events that are important because they indicate the origin or repetition of a scenic emotion,

often associated with a apparently insignificant, even trivial, act. Thus Isa, attracted to Ruper Haines, remembers that "she had met him at a Bazaar; and at a tennis party. He had handed her a cup and a racket - that was all. But in his ravaged face she always felt mystery, and in his silence, passion. Now a third time, if anything more strongly, she felt it again" (p.8). The following morning, Isa, looking at herself in a mirror "saw what she had felt overnight for the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentleman farmer" (p.14). She decides that she must be "in love",

> since the words he said, handing her a tea-cup, handing her a tennis racket, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating - she groped for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen at dawn at Croydan. (p.15)

A similar kind of emotion is felt by Mrs. Manresa, an uninhibited wild child of nature, in regard to Giles, "with whom she felt in conspiracy." Her scenic feeling is that "a thread united them - visible, invisible, like those threads, now seen, now not, that unite trembling grass blades in autumn before the sun rises" (p.45). The reader is then told that "she had met him once only, at a cricket match. And there had been spun between them an early morning thread before the twigs and leaves of real friendship emerge" (p.45). The "scenic" quality of summary is also clear in the several examples of actions that are exactly repeated from one year to the next. In relation to the pageant, the comment is made that "every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was - one or the other" (p.20). Mrs. Swithin sees more extensive repetition in the yearly arrival of the swallows, while a member of the audience viewing the pageant provides an example of the repetition of human behavior when, upon observing Mrs. Manresa, he "saw through her little game. He had known human nature in the East. It was the same in the West" (p.83).

With the exception of the last example, the illustrations of summary have been restricted to the first part of the novel. In the second part, the pageant and the intervals, the summary per se is replaced by the acts of the play, which because they represent the literary history of England, actually produce layers of anteriority like the summaries of the first part. Episodic in nature, the acts also present the same lack of interconnection found in the summaries. At the same time, the pageant suggests the repetition of human behavior

and emotion, best expressed by Mrs. Swithin in a comment to Isa about the Victorians. She says: "I don't believe . . . that there ever were such people. Only you and me and Wiliam dressed differently" (p.127). The local minister generalizes this idea when he says: "We act different parts; but are the same" (p.139). This identification of the audience with the characters in the play becomes actual when Miss La Trobe uses mirrors turned toward the audience to represent the present in the pageant.

In the third part of the novel, summary is again used to suggest scenic feelings, especially the frustration and disappointments of the characters. For example, Mr. Oliver recalls what had happened in the morning when, intead of entertaining his grandson, he had upset the boy. He remembers "that he had destroyed the little boy's world. He had popped out with his newspaper; the child had cried" (p.147). This apparently casual summary brings to mind the grandfather's frustration in the previous scene without actually mentioning the emotion. Isa, full of jealousy because of Giles' behavior with Mrs. Manresa, recalls her own attraction to Mr. Haines and remembers that "she had sought the man in grey. He had given her a cup of tea at the tennis party; handed her once, a racquet. That was all" (p.150). Once again, this summary of trivial events is used to indicate an emotion easily identified by the reader. Also, Miss La Trobe, the author of the play, considers her work as a gift to the world but then decides that

> her gift meant nothing. If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and the funds illimitable - it would have been a better gift. Now it had gone to join the others. "A failure", she groaned . . . . (p.151)

The final use of summary in the novel occurs at the very end, and suggests the repetitive, almost timeless quality of human behaviour. As Isa and Giles are about to go to bed, to enact their private drama of love and hate, the narrative voice says: "The house had lost its shelter. It was the night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks" (p.159).

It should be clear, therefore, that whereas the summary in *Between the Acts* provides the layers of anteriority which are the substance of history, it is also used to explain the scenic emotions of the characters and indicates, ironically, the constancy of private human dramas that are as much a part of history as the chronologically ordered public events usually given this label.

In discussing the organization of *Between the Acts*, Hermione Lee has written:

> In the novel's subtly organized short sections, an alternation is noticeable between scenes of communication and scenes of silence . . . . Once the play takes over, the main part of the book, the alternation is between the acts and the intervals. After the play, the pattern is to some extent continued . . . until the final scene, which impressively welds silence and communication together.[7]

Although it is possible to view the structure of the novel as Ms. Lee has described it, several objections immediately come to mind. First, the very opposition of "communication" and "silence" does not take into account those scenes in which sounds do not communicate and others in which silence is meaningful. For example, when Isa tapped on the window to catch the attention of her son and the two maids outside, they did not hear her tapping because of the sounds of the garden, inaudible to her (p.15). On the other hand, the dining room is described in the following terms: "The room was empty. Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was" (p.31), thus describing a kind of silence which has poetic, if elusive meaning. Therefore, it would be more accurate to make the opposition "communication" and "lack of communication". In addition, the opposition "communication-silence" or, better, "communication-lack of communication" continues as an important theme in the second part of the novel, and is more significant distinction than that of "acts" and "intervals". In fact, one of the recurrent motifs throughout the presentation of the pageant is the difficulty of communication. One the one hand, there is the interference of natural phenomena, such as the wind. Thus the villagers in the pageant "were singing, but not a word reached the audience" (p.60). Later, "the wind blew their words away" (p.92), and in a different scene, "the wind rose, and in the rustle of the leaves even the great words became inaudible" (p.103). Other barriers to communication are caused by human failures, such as when one of the performers forgot her lines (p.66) or when another "spoke too low at first" (p.92). Of equal importance is the fragmented nature of much speech, both in the intervals and in the pageant itself. At the end of one interval, "the audience turned to one another and began to talk. Scraps and fragments reached Miss La Trobe . . ." (p.90). In the final scene of the pageant, all the participants appeared, with each declaiming some phrase or fragment from their parts . . . (p.134). By changing her categories in what I have callled the second part of the

novel, Ms. Lee has missed an underlying unity in the novel. This unity can be perceived in the "communication-lack of communication" opposition or in the intermingling of the scenic present and the past, in which the layers of summary and the acts of the play, used to indicate anteriority, ironically and lyrically suggest the repetition of human emotions throughout history.

If summary is important in establishing the lyrical nature of the novel, the description plays its part, too. Unlike other novels by Virginia Woolf, in which there is very little description of the appearance of the characters, *Between the Acts* is filled with short passages of physical description, with seemingly casual details that are often highly suggestive of the characters' behavior and personalities. The greater attention to physical detail in this novel is in keeping with its dramatic nature, and parallels the descriptions of the characters in the pageant. For example, in the second paragraph of the novel, Mrs. Haines is described as "a goose-faced woman with eyes protruding as if she saw something to gobble in the gutter" (p.7). Isa first appears "with her hair in pigtails; she was wearing a dressing-gown with faded peacocks on it" (p.8). Later, Isa's face is described as "rather heavy, yet handsome" (p.14). Her husband, Giles, is described from the point of view of Mrs. Manresa, for whom her was the type that she adored:

> His hair curled; far from running away, as many chins did, his was firm; the nose straight, if short; the eyes of course with that hair, blue; and finally to make the type complete, there was something fierce, untamed, in the expression which excited her, even at forty-five, to furbish up her ancient batteries. (pp.38-9)

Giles' aunt, Mrs. Swithin, is seen as "any other old lady with a high nose, thin cheeks, a ring on her finger and the usual trappings of rather shabby but gallant old age, which included in her case a cross gleaming gold on her breast" (p.11). Miss La Trobe is described as outwardly swarthy, sturdy and thick set; she "strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth, often with a whip in her hand; and used rather strong language - perhaps then she wasn't altogether a lady?" (p.46).

In addition to the vividness of these descriptions, Virginia Woolf's skillful use of detail creates impressions of personality that are maintained and developed throughout the novel: Mrs. Haines figuratively gobbles at Isa two pages after the initial description; the adjective faded in referring to the peacocks on Isa's dress foreshadows Isa's feelings about her own life, ending in a desire to "fade out" completely; Mrs. Swithin's cross is an apt symbol of her religious faith,

which gives her a sense of unity and harmony; and Miss La Trobe's whip is an indication of her aggressive forcefulness. Thus, the fragments of description scattered throughout the novel have the suggestive, symbolic overtones which indicate the proximity of Virginia Woolf's prose to poetry.

If the author of *Between the Acts* is sensitive to the subtleties of human personality, she also has an eye for the physical qualities of the setting, both in terms of the buildings and in terms of the natural scenery. Like the summary and the descriptions of the characters, this description is rarely extensive or neatly separated from the other modes, but is intermingled or juxtaposed with them. It is also tinged with attitudes toward what is being described which reinforce the general lyrical tone of the novel. For instance, in the middle of the opening scene, the narrative unexpectedly jumps to a description of the family house:

> 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. But this whitish house with the grey roof, and the wing thrown out at right angles, lying unfortunately low on the meadow with a fringe of trees on the bank above it so that the nests of the rooks, was a desireable house to live in. (p.9)

A description of the barn serves to illustrate the importance of animals and insects throughout the novel, for non-human representatives of the natural world are mentioned so frequently that they become like a cast of minor characters, providing color, sound and light, in this case in the absence of human participants:

> The Barn was empty. Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked from different angles and edges. Minute nibblings and rustling broke the silence. Whiffs of richness and sweetness veined the air. A blue-bottle had settled on the cake and stabbed its yellow rock with its short drill. A butterfly sunned itself sensuously on a sunlit yellow plate. (p.76)

Besides providing a parallel to human society, with its various members busily engaged in such activities as eating, nestbuilding and

procreation, this description also contains an image which recurs throughout the novel, and is one more example of Virginia Woolf's poetic method of suggesting the tensions that substitute plot. The bluebottle stabbing the cake with its drill is one of the many cases of the marring of surfaces, the piercing or wounding that is so evident in the human relationships in the novel. Such images appropriately symbolize both the love and the hate that Isa says are the only emotions. The most clear indication of this meaning occurs in a humorous reference to Cupid, with his arrows of passion. In one of the acts of the pageant, a character recites: "The God of love is full of tricks; Into the foot his dart he sticks" (p.109). On another occasion, Isa, feeling prisoned, is bruised by blunt arrows; of love, then of hate (p.52). Other examples abound. For instance, the lady in the picture in the dining room, not a family ancestor, has "a silver arrow in her hand" (p.31). Toward the end of the novel, "darts of red and green light flashed from the rings on Mrs. Manresa's fingers" (p.128). After the play is over, Isa's ambivalent feelings toward Giles, and her attraction to Mr. Haines, are clear as she watches her husband and Mrs. Manresa walking ahead of her: "By way of healing the rusty fester of the poisoned dart, she sought the face that all day she had been seeking" (p.150). As she looks at Giles talking to Mrs. Manresa, who is about to leave, Isa wonders whether they perceive "the arrows about to strike them" (p.151). The use of these effective images appropriately suggests the contradictions that are an essential element in the novel.

Furthermore, although the bright colors of the scenic summer day are usually described as sensorially appealing, a specific human mood can cause a different view. In a moment of boredom and heat preceding the beginning of the pageant, "the flat fields glared green yellow, blue yellow, red yellow, then blue again. The repetition was senseless, hideous, stupefying" (p.53).

Such passages of lyrical description correspond to Virginia Woolf's theory, published in 1927, that a new form of a novel would be "'written in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry,'"[8] expressing "the feelings and ideas of its characters closely and vividly."[9] In *Between the Acts*, the author's skillful rendering of the narrative modes results in a vividly drawn panorama of the contradictory feelings of her various personages, who inhabit the kind of fragmentary world that characterizes many of the more experimental works in this century. Finally, this relatively unknown modernist text is a memorable novel that surely deserves to be more widely read.

NOTES

1 *Between the Acts* (New York: Granada Publishing, a Triad Panther Book, 1978). All references to the novel are to this edition. Page numbers are given parenthetically within the text. Originally published by The Hogarth Press in 1941.

2 "Introduction", in *Short Fiction: Shape and Substance*, ed. William Paden (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 32.

3 "Art of Narrative", in *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 54.

4 Peden, p. 33.

5 *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 82.

6 Ibid., p. 76.

7 *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 222-3.

8 Quoted in Ann Y. Wilkinson's "A Principle of Unity in *Between the Acts*", in *Virginia Woolf: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Claire Sprague (Elglewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 146.

9 Ibid., pp. 146-7.

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