

12. *Nature and History in The Years*

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I

One of Virginia Woolf's most famous remarks is that "in or about December, 1910, human character changed." Scholars have offered several possible reasons for her choice of that date: the postimpressionist exhibition had opened, King Edward was dead, and a general election had taken place; December, 1910, is very close to the time historian Ralph Fox has marked for the "strange death of liberal England"; and in fact, 1910 was the year Woolf herself made a commitment to the Adult Suffrage Movement, doing political chores on behalf of women's rights.¹ Obviously, social and artistic change was everywhere in the winds in those days; nevertheless Woolf's view of "character" is such that one must ask if her remark means exactly what it says. Did she mean that history had somehow transformed consciousness at its deepest levels, or that a crisis in bourgeois culture had led artists to the discovery of new levels of personality?

Her fiction suggests the latter view. In *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*, for example, history manifests itself as a kind of fashion, creating important changes in manners and morals, even in people's sexual identities, but leaving the underlying human nature untouched. Ultimately, the significance of Virginia Woolf's comment appears to be that she, like most of the finest writers of her time, had sensed in the early twentieth century a profound conflict between the inner, instinctive needs of the psyche (which she presented as more or less unchanging, like the cycles

1. Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, I, 161.

of nature or the sea) and the outer lineaments of the society (which do change). In roughly the same historical period, Freud had described this conflict as a battle between what he called the id and the superego; among novelists, Lawrence had spoken of a breakdown in the "old stable ego" of his fictional characters, and Joyce had taken Leopold Bloom through nighttown. By the mid-thirties, E. M. Forster was to remark that there is something "unstable in each of us," which is capable at any moment of "rising to the surface and destroying our normal balance." In other words, social contradictions in the world at large were being mirrored in the prevailing theories of human personality, theories which described consciousness as a battleground between instinctive needs and institutional repressions.

Virginia Woolf was to provide her own distinctive vision of this split between society and individual, and that vision is the source of the celebrated quarrel with Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy. Her chief complaint against the Edwardian novel was that its "materialist" bias rendered an untrue picture of personality, depicting the physical trappings of character while ignoring the deeper essences. Furthermore, when Woolf said that "life" in such novels was like a "series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged," she was indirectly suggesting a link between a society's material possessions (the carriages of the *haute bourgeoisie*, lined up on a fashionable curb) and the "unrealistic" shape of its fictions. It follows that if the traditional novel was incapable of describing character, then the society which gave rise to that novel had set up barriers against the biological and spiritual needs of its people. To perceive life differently was to place oneself in opposition to the social status quo; to change the form of the novel, or to write fictions which in many ways do not seem like novels at all, was to challenge the prevailing European social order and its methods of defining humanity. Hence, contrary to the way most people have described it, Virginia Woolf's program for modern fiction was an aestheticism which was also deeply political.

Political implications such as these are found everywhere in the artistic revolution known as "modernism," and they are at the heart of European romanticism in general. But within the larger movement individuals took different positions — some reactionary; some progressive; some, like Joyce, extremely difficult to assess. Woolf's own politics were quite far to the left, a

fact which I emphasize because she has customarily been described as an experimental novelist who was sheltered by her privileged class. Clearly she was in many ways a product of her birth and station; intellectually, for example, she was attracted to theories of significant form and to a kind of romantic mysticism. Even so, there is another side to her life and work. She was also a cheroot-smoking feminist whose ideas were deeply influenced by the horrors of the first world war, and who remained in sympathy with socialist ideas throughout her career as a novelist. For all the emphasis she placed on the aesthetic quality of life, she recognized a connection between spirit and substance, a link between ideas and economics. And because she was a woman, her response to social change was different from that of her contemporaries; indeed she is virtually alone among the classic moderns in her lack of nostalgia for the old, predemocratic order of things. It was Woolf, after all, who argued that women would need the power of the vote, a good income, and rooms of their own if they expected to write as well as men; and it was Woolf who once optimistically prophesied that a political force would break down the old class and sex distinctions "and melt us together so that life will be richer and books more complex, and society will pool its possessions instead of segregating them."²

This last quotation should remind us that one of the major efforts of Virginia Woolf's novels is to disclose the possibility of a "community of feeling with other people," in which, as Mrs. Ramsay says, life is "all one stream, and chairs, tables, maps, were hers, were theirs, it did not matter whose." In every respect, from her love of watery metaphors to the peculiarly ambiguous, multipersonal quality of her narrative style, Woolf tries to overcome boundaries, insisting upon an ideal unity in life; but she also recognized, especially in her later novels, that her longing for unity was bound to be frustrated. At the most fundamental level, the continuity of life is split up by the necessities of time and space, which cut people off from one another and eventually lead to death; at the level of social intercourse, the unified life is threatened by a patriarchal, capitalistic society, which individualizes people and insists upon the private ownership of things. To defend against these problems, Woolf had two re-

2. "Memories of a Working Woman's Guild," *Collected Essays*, IV, 141-142.

sponses: in the face of the inevitable tragedy of time and death, she offered the consolation of nature seen from a cosmic perspective, as in the interchapters of *The Waves*, where individuals are subordinated to a life spirit. In regard to social disunity, she vaguely suggested that the whole of what she called the "materialist" world should be changed, to be replaced by a classless, nonsexist, purely communal existence, a life where, in its ideal and probably unattainable form, history itself would come to a stop.

Nowhere are these themes more evident than in her ambitious historical novel *The Years* (1937), which was written at a time of political crisis in Europe, and which shows the relationship between Woolf's formal experiments and her politics more clearly than any of her other writings. One obvious subject of *The Years* is the historical change away from an old patriarchal order. But the book also poses a problem; for even though Woolf was predisposed to welcome social change, the late thirties left her uncertain whether the world was moving in the direction of greater unity or greater totalitarianism. Therefore her typical ambivalence over the life process — the passing of time that leads us all closer to death — was doubled and intensified by a more immediate ambivalence about history. This uneasiness gives *The Years* its remarkably complex tone; and the merging of a transcendent, elegiac theme with a social radicalism helps to make the novel one of Woolf's most comprehensive statements.

II

To understand Woolf's attitude toward social change or indeed to understand her politics in general, it is necessary to read *The Years* in conjunction with *Three Guineas* (1938), the long polemical essay which, as she herself suggested, serves as a companion to her novel. Her original intention was to make *The Years* an "essay novel," but *Three Guineas* appears to have absorbed much of the analysis and rhetoric which might have found its way into the fiction. Unfortunately, however, *Three Guineas* has been the most undervalued of Woolf's writings and until recently has been neglected almost as much as the book it illuminates. From the beginning it was not much liked, and became the subject of the most vitriolic of all the attacks by the *Scrutiny* group: Q. D. Leavis' "Caterpillars of the Commonwealth Unite," an influential essay which maintained, among

other things, that Woolf was "quite insulated by class," that she was "silly and ill-informed," and that she had written a tract characterized by a "deliberate avoidance of any argument."³ Woolf's friends and admirers were not much more sympathetic. One of her most scholarly critics has called *Three Guineas* a "neurotic" book; and Quentin Bell has said that it failed because Woolf attempted to discuss two issues which seemed at the time to have only a tenuous connection: women's rights and the war against fascism.⁴

But in fact there is a profound connection between these two issues, a connection Woolf brought out with great lucidity. Unlike most of her critics, Woolf was no conventional liberal, and she did not view the rise of fascist dictatorships in the thirties as a simple aberration or as a case of the "good" British versus the "bad" Germans. Though she confessed a deep, nonrational loyalty toward England like that of a child for a parent, she looked beyond the old European patriotisms, seeking the causes of war at a deeper level—in the very structure of middle-class, liberal democracy. To Woolf the treatment of women under such a democracy was symptomatic of the society's basic contradictions, its inability to live up to the ideals it professed; furthermore, she argued that the Spanish Civil War, and the dictators of the right who were the immediate causes of that war, were the direct outgrowth of the very system the British were trying to preserve. Such a perception naturally left her feeling uneasy. British democracy was preferable to fascism, but it maintained the same sexual and class divisions, the same proprietary modes of thought, the same masculine militarism which had given rise to the fascists in the first place.

Caught in a dilemma, Woolf ultimately gave a guinea to a barrister who had written asking her advice and support in preventing war, and she contributed two more guineas to support

3. *The Importance of Scrutiny*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: George Stewart, 1948), pp. 382–391. "The years change things," Woolf had written in *Three Guineas*, and indeed they have changed things to the point where it is Mrs. Leavis, not Woolf, who seems insulated by class. In regard to Woolf's claim that the society kept women at a disadvantage, Leavis commented, "I feel bound to disagree . . . that running a household necessarily hinders or weakens thinking." "The onus is on women," she wrote, "to prove that they are going to be able to justify (emancipation), and that it will not vitally dislocate . . . the framework of our culture." Elsewhere she hinted darkly that Woolf's proposals for changing the schools and family had something in common with the "Soviet system."

4. See Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art*, p. 174; Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, II, 204.

women's colleges and women's entry into the professions. But at the same time she pointed out that all the committees to prevent war, all the colleges and all the professions, were either beside the point or themselves a part of the problem; the society and its values would have to be radically changed before humane goals could be achieved. Under present circumstances, she wrote, people were forced to choose between bad institutions and an essentially private life as "outsiders." This split between public and private worlds—a split which is embodied throughout modernist literature and in all of Woolf's novels—was ultimately destructive. "For such will be our ruin," Woolf said, "if you in the immensity of public abstractions forget the private figure, or if we in the intensity of our private emotions forget the public world. Both houses will be ruined . . . the material and the spiritual, for they are inseparably connected." What was needed, and what at present could be found only in the voices of the poets, was "that capacity of the human spirit to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity." But such a unity is only a dream, Woolf said, "the recurring dream that has haunted the human mind since the beginning of time."⁵

In writing *The Years*, Woolf tried to give a concrete demonstration of the split between private and public worlds, the conflict between a timeless, transpersonal human nature and a divisive, changing social structure. She also provided intimations of that "dream" of unity which haunts the mind, and envisioned history moving toward a potential resolution of people's inner conflicts. Interestingly, however, she chose to write a book which was superficially similar to the family chronicles of John Galsworthy himself, and that may explain why a few of her critics have wrongly described *The Years* as one of her more conventional works. In fact the novel is strikingly unorthodox, and in every respect serves to undermine the assumptions of traditional "realist" fiction.

Although history is one of the book's manifest subjects, *The Years* subordinates public events to a series of domestic scenes or dinner parties, taking us into people's cell-like homes or rented rooms, where sounds can be heard drifting in through windows, or where characters repeatedly gaze outside, noting symbolic details in the environment. The novel is never tendentious, and

5. *Three Guineas*, p. 143.

it does not offer a comprehensive view of social classes; Woolf's progress from chapter to chapter is determined simply by the passing of time, and while Eleanor Pargiter comes close to being a central personage, she hardly qualifies as the agent of the basic change or *parapataea* which gives shape to most plots. The story arises not out of action or exposition but out of a web of family relationships and the collective memories of various characters. We are given not so much a narrative history as a montage, an irregular succession of meaningful but undramatic moments which reveal the quality of daily life.

In her typical fashion, Woolf organizes the material according to a roughly musical form, repeating certain motifs (such as a pigeon cry heard throughout), and establishing thematic echoes between chapters. And yet despite the rigor with which it is executed, *The Years* has a somewhat diffuse surface. Compared to other novels by Woolf, such as *The Waves*, it is striking in its lack of symmetry, its refusal to present an obvious pattern; even the nature descriptions which preface each chapter are not given a sequential rhythm. Such features of the novel may account for the remarks of Basil de Senancourt, whose early review pleased Woolf a great deal. Senancourt noted especially the writer's "instinct . . . towards disjunction," together with a "poetical" movement of consciousness which seemed to pull unity out of chaos.⁶ This double tendency is indeed the basis of Woolf's later writings, where she is always challenging her view of unity and continuity in human experience by choosing to render the dislocations caused by passing time, by death, or by the mind's conversations with itself. In *The Years*, her problem is posed explicitly by Eleanor, who wonders if there is a "pattern" to life, "a theme, recurring, like music; half remembered, half foreseen? . . . But who makes it? Who thinks it?" (Y, 369). Ironically, the same idea has just been rejected by Eleanor's niece Peggy, who bitterly contemplates the chatter of her relatives and feels that even if there were a pattern it would be meaningless, like a "habit," or a "kitten catching its tail" (Y, 359-360).

Throughout *The Years* Woolf's mood seems to waver precariously between Eleanor's turn-of-the-century optimism and Peggy's "present day" pessimism, so that feelings of unity,

6. The review is reprinted in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Majumdar and McLaurin, p. 373.

communion, and significant form are always threatened. The threat is felt not simply at the level of content — as in those passages where characters meditate inconclusively upon the meaning of life — but in the technique itself; the blank spaces between scenes act as signifiers of some gap, some fissure in experience which the imagination of both author and reader seeks to close up.

The Years therefore shares with *Between the Acts* a fragmented, asymmetrical form, and it also has in common with Woolf's last novel a constantly shifting tone, moving effortlessly between lyricism, satire, and perverse ugliness, rather like Eliot in his *Waste Land* period. Clearly the atmosphere of political engagement in thirties' literature affected *The Years* profoundly, even though the book takes place in a private sphere and does not give much sense of an industrial England. In none of Woolf's previous works is there so powerful a sense of urban poverty and violence, or of economic disparities within and between the social classes. These qualities persist throughout the novel, even at the close, when the Edwardian culture is in ruins and Woolf has a clear sense of what the new world ought to be like; Woolf even predicts, through Eleanor, the possible advent of that world, but she has been so unremittingly honest in confronting the capitalist wasteland of the present that she leaves the novel poised, reflecting the tension of doubt. Because she is writing out of a deep knowledge of injustice, her vision of unity and meaning in life is not easily won.

Woolf's uneasiness about the ultimate meaning of history is reflected not only in individual episodes, but in the whole shape of the book. At first glance even the years themselves seem to have been chosen randomly, with little regard to historical significance or official importance to the characters' lives. Except for the death of Mrs. Pargiter in 1880, the dramatic events take place offstage; the first and last years of the world war are given, but the 1914 section takes place in spring, a little in advance of hostilities, whereas the very brief 1918 section is meant to indicate the meaninglessness of "victory" — the Pargiters' ex-servant Crosby simply pauses to hear the guns booming in the distance, then queues up at the grocer's shop as usual. The novel alludes to historical incidents (including the deaths of Parnell and King Edward, the Irish Civil War, the emancipation movement, the rise of Mussolini, and so on), but people seldom comment on the relation between their lives and these events. Even the nar-

rator of the book, that ghostly persona so common to Virginia Woolf's work, tries to direct attention away from social or political facts. The evocative but generalized descriptions of landscape at the opening of each chapter suggest that nature has transcended both history and the unsatisfactory conditions of individual lives, the weather becoming more significant than social change.

The descriptions of landscape, however, are not so much a negation of history as an attempt to give the novel a firm grounding in what I have already described as the "eternal" natural process. Thus the consciousness of the characters is influenced not only by their social class and their economic needs, but also by their natural instincts and their desire for communion. Nearly all the people in the novel are powerfully affected by the conflict between social institutions and some deeper human nature; and the corollary to such a proposition is that true happiness can be attained only when civilization is brought into harmony with *bios*, or with what Lawrence, in another context, called the "deepest self." In the society as Woolf perceives it, however, this harmony is continually frustrated; especially in the earlier parts of the novel, one senses a battle between the characters' instincts and the social forms which dictate their behavior. Here, for example, is the scene where Delia Pargiter watches her mother's burial:

Earth dropped on the coffin; three pebbles fell on the hard shiny surface; and as they dropped she was possessed by a sense of something everlasting; of life mixing with death, of death becoming life. For as she looked she heard the sparrows chirp quicker and quicker; she heard wheels in the distance sound louder and louder; life came closer and closer . . .

"We give thee hearty thanks," said the voice, "for that it has pleased thee to deliver this our sister out of the miseries of this sinful world —"

What a lie! she cried to herself. What a damnable lie! He had robbed her of the one feeling that was genuine; he had spoilt her one moment of understanding. (Y, 87)

Obvious as these social impediments to Delia's "understanding" may be, they are not commented upon until fairly late in the book, when Eleanor and Nicholas Pomjalovsky have a conversation during a blackout in World War I:

"I was saying," he went on, "I was saying we do not know ourselves, ordinary people; and if we do not know ourselves, how then

can we make religions, laws, that —” he used his hands as people do who find language obdurate, “that —”

“That fit — that fit,” she said, supplying him with a word that was shorter, she felt sure, than the dictionary word foreigners always used . . .

“. . . that fit,” she repeated. She had no idea what they were talking about. Then suddenly, as she bent to warm her hands over the fire, words floated together in her mind and made one intelligible sentence. It seemed to her that what he had said was, “We cannot make laws and religions that fit because we do not know ourselves.”

“How odd that you should say that!” she said, smiling at him, “because I’ve so often thought it myself!”

“Why is that odd?” he said. “We all think the same things; only we do not say them.” (Y, 281–282)

Nicholas and Eleanor are able to achieve a tentative, halting perception, a shared insight, because they are both “outsiders.” Eleanor is one of those “daughters of educated men” who do not participate as full members of the society, whereas Nicholas is a foreigner and a homosexual who, as Sara ironically puts it, “ought to be in prison.” We are asked, however, to regard these two as “ordinary people,” because Virginia Woolf is suggesting that at the deepest levels of biological necessity we all share the same needs, feel the same discontent, “think the same things.” Nicholas elaborates on this issue, arguing that under present conditions there is no way to achieve harmony and wholeness, no way for what he calls “the soul” to express itself:

“The soul — the whole being,” he explained. He hollowed his hands as if to enclose a circle. “It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form — new combinations?”

“Yes, yes,” she said, as if to assure him that his words were right.

“Whereas now,” — he drew himself together; put his feet together; he looked like an old lady who is afraid of mice — “this is how we live, screwed up into one hard little, tight little — knot?”

“Knot, knot — yes, that’s right,” she nodded.

“Each is his own little cubicle; each with his own cross or holy book; each with his fire, his wife . . .” (Y, 296)

Significantly, Nicholas’ vision of a selfish, proprietary society is centered not in public institutions, but in the same private realm of family life that Virginia Woolf’s novel has sought to describe. As Woolf had said in *Three Guineas*, “the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected . . . the tyrannies and

servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other." Indeed, the suppression of the "soul" by social forms is nowhere more evident than in Woolf's depiction of people's "own little cubicle" of marriage, which in *Three Guineas* is called "the one great profession open to [women] since the dawn of time."⁷

Every chapter of *The Years* contains some reference to marriages of property or to unrequited loves. The first, most vividly satiric example of the latter theme is in the early episodes involving Abel Pargiter's niece Kitty Malone, a handsome young woman who is the daughter of an Oxford don. Kitty's conservative, snobbish father is a man who, "had a frame been set round him, might have hung over the fireplace" (Y, 77), whereas her mother is contrasted unfavorably with the American visitor Mrs. Fripp, a lady who wears makeup and eats ices instead of making the customary tourist's visit to the Bodleian. Kitty feels frustrated and imprisoned in Oxford, where it always seems to be raining and where she is being forced to read Dr. Andrew's "The Constitutional History of England." (We are told that she once inadvertently spilled ink over one of her father's manuscripts — a history of the college — obliterating "five generations of Oxford men." Dr. Malone's only reply had been, "Nature did not intend you to be a scholar, my dear.") Kitty's mother intends her to marry a suitable man, and cannot understand her daughter's unhappiness; after all, her own convenient marriage has represented an escape of sorts from the tedious country life of Yorkshire. The irony is that Kitty would actually prefer an empty countryside to the college. She contemplates the "barber's block," Edward Pargiter, with distaste, and her only impression of one of the famous scholars who has visited the house is the "damp feel of a heavy hand on her knee" (Y, 66). Her attraction to Jo Robeson becomes the one moment when her life holds out the possibility of romantic liberation, but just when her story seems to be taking a hopeful turn Virginia Woolf concludes the chapter, leaping over several years and casually remarking that Kitty has made a prosperous marriage with Lasswade, a mate approved by her mother.

Actually, the theme of frustrated, misplaced, or hypocritical alliances has been introduced even earlier, and Kitty's essential

7. *Three Guineas*, p. 6.

loneliness is echoed in the lives of nearly everyone we meet. Somewhat in the manner of Eliot, Woolf is describing a sexual wasteland, but unlike Eliot she implies that the causes of love's failure are more social than metaphysical. Thus the book opens with Abel Pargiter's clandestine, grotesque visit to his mistress in a street of "dingy little houses" near Westminster. As his amputated fingers fumble at the neck of his lover, Woolf calls attention to sordid details: an eczematous dog; a creaking staircase; the sounds of children outside jumping in and out of "white chalk marks on the pavement" — this last a recurrent motif in the early parts of the novel, and an image used in *Three Guineas* to signify "a monstrous male . . . childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially" (p. 105).

Meanwhile, Abel Pargiter's wife Rose lies dying in their huge house in Abercorn Terrace, where the children of the family, particularly the females, are quite literally "penned, rigidly . . . artificially," becoming virtual prisoners of Edwardian respectability. Here we are introduced to the four Pargiter daughters: Rose, the adventurous little girl who will grow up to become a suffragette, and who will one day have painful memories of "a certain engagement" when "her happiness, it seemed . . . had fallen" (Y, 161); Delia, the romantic, rebellious teenager who daydreams about Parnell, and who will reject the Pargiter household only to end her life married to a conservative Anglo-Irish landlord; Milly, a self-conscious, unremarkable young woman, who will marry a rustic Devonshire gentleman and live contentedly producing his children; and Eleanor, the eldest and most sympathetic, who neither marries nor rebels against her father, but who wishes for one painful moment in her old age that she had been able to find a companion: "I should like to have married," she thinks suddenly, almost surprising herself, resenting "the passage of time and the accidents of life which had swept her away" (Y, 299).

Companionship is obviously a necessity for all these characters, but in the world of *The Years* marriage is rarely presented as a satisfactory alternative to isolation. The daughters of Digby Pargiter, Maggie and Sara, seem to represent the two possible extremes in life: because their side of the family is relatively poor, they grow up to share a shabby apartment in Hyams Place; Maggie

ultimately finds a relatively happy, unconventional marriage with a foreigner, and Sara, who is frequently compared to Antigone, becomes totally isolated and harmlessly insane — indeed, her speeches are examples of what Woolf, in the context of *Mrs. Dalloway*, called the “mad truth.”

The Pargiter sons, on the other hand, have the advantage of “Arthur’s Education Fund,” that money which throughout British history had been set aside for the education of males. Edward Pargiter becomes a classical scholar at Oxford, Morris enters the law, and Martin joins the army — three institutions Woolf had taken special pains to attack in *Three Guineas*. In *The Years* we see just enough of this public world to understand how it is related to the domestic lives of the characters. The deadly Oxford environment, with its prejudice against women and its complacent snobishness, is treated in some detail in the Kitty Malone section of the first chapter; the horrors of militarism and war are suggested at various places, most obviously in the 1917 chapter; and the courts of law are depicted in an early scene when Eleanor goes to see Morris perform. At first she admires the wise looks of the presiding judge, but then remembers having met him socially: “And it was a sham. She wanted to laugh” (Y, 111). But even though Woolf points to the social inequity between men and women, she does not suggest that the men have fuller lives; on the contrary, a profound feeling of frustration and lost possibility is felt equally by both sexes. Morris makes a prosperous marriage to a daughter of the Chinnery family and lives on their estate, but he grows old before his time, and Eleanor at one point feels guilty because she urged him to go to the bar (Y, 202). Martin wishes he had been an architect, “but they sent me into the Army instead, which I loathed” (Y, 230). Even Edward, the vain but successful scholar, becomes supercilious, reserved, and secretly homosexual; his nephew North tries to speak with him at Delia’s party, but ends up thinking “It’s no go . . . He can’t say what he wants to say; he’s afraid” (Y, 414).

“When shall we be free?” Eleanor wonders as she listens to Nicholas, “When shall we live adventurously, wholly, not like cripples in a cave?” (Y, 297). The book never answers this question and none of the years marks a liberating change in either society or character. Even when Woolf records events from 1910, they are less momentous than we might expect. The announcement of King Edward’s death, which Maggie Pargiter hears out

the window of her flat, is clearly a symbolic event and is followed closely by an important moment in the lives of the Abel Pargiter family: in the 1913 chapter, Eleanor sells the house in Abercorn Terrace, and Martin thinks back on his childhood. "It was an abominable system . . . family life," he notes, "there all those different people had lived, boxed up together, telling lies" (Y, 222–223). But the collapse of the old Edwardian order does not seem to have created a healthy new day. The years are still pervaded with an atmosphere of futility and lost opportunity; every level of the Pargiter family, from the poor rooms at Hyams Place to the Lasswade seats at the opera, has been shown suffering in quiet desperation. People are still "boxed up," unable to express their feelings, and the death of the king seems merely in keeping with the theme of mortality which is found everywhere in the novel.

If *The Years* has a most important year, it is not 1910 but a date which is never inscribed in the text. We are shown the lives of the Pargiter family between 1880 and 1918, and then Woolf leaps into the "present day," leaving 1919 as an unstated boundary between old and new. The significance of that year is apparent in *Three Guineas*, where it is repeatedly cited as a watershed in the history of women's emancipation; for in 1919, as Woolf notes, women were admitted legally to the professions. This event, however, tended only to liberalize British life, not to change it fundamentally. Although Woolf believed 1919 was an important date, she regarded the new power of women with some irony, pointing out the dangers of being admitted to equal partnership in an evil system.

Now that the Civil Service is open to us we may well earn from one thousand to three thousand a year; now that the Bar is open to us we may well earn 5,000 a year as judges, and any sum up to forty or fifty thousand a year as barristers. When the Church is open to us we may draw salaries of fifteen thousand . . . When the Stock Exchange is open to us we may die worth as many millions as Pierpont Morgan, or as Rockefeller himself . . . In short, we may change our position from being the victims of the patriarchal system . . . to being the champions of the capitalist system.⁸

The playfulness of these remarks does not conceal the seriousness of Woolf's convictions. She admits that women seeking to

8. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

enter the universities might think her arguments niggling, but she cautions that her readers should look at the photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses that the Spanish government sends almost weekly.⁹ In her view, as we have seen, there is a direct connection between patriarchy, capitalism, and fascist dictatorship; indeed the historical period covered by *The Years* shows the society moving from the first of these stages into the second, with the third brooding on the horizon as the book closes. Woolf therefore opposed any compromise which would allow women to participate even marginally in the British system while at the same time preserving its unjust features. And it is precisely such a compromised social condition that we find in the "Present Day" section of *The Years*. Peggy, the daughter of Morris Pargiter, has become a doctor, but this important change in the status of women does not lead to personal happiness, nor does it heal the split between old and young, between social classes, between individuals and the community. The last section does suggest the dawning of some new world, as indeed throughout the novel we have been given the sense that the movement of history might ultimately redeem everyday life from its sadness and futility. But the new day is not yet arrived as the novel ends, and the chief representatives of the "Present Day" are just as dissatisfied as their forebears had been.

Clearly certain hopeful changes have taken place in the texture of middle-class relationships: Delia Pargiter's elaborate family reunion, which is the setting for most of the action of the final chapter, takes place not in a home, but in a flower-bedecked estate agent's office, with people sitting on stools or on the floors, dining off every kind of table. Delia thinks that this "had always been her aim . . . to do away with the absurd conventions of English life" (Y, 398). But her attempt to dissolve the old formalities and bring people together has not been completely successful. North remarks sardonically to himself that everyone present makes a good income, and both he and his sister feel a sharp division between their own generation and Delia's. Of the two younger Pargiters, Peggy is especially isolated and embittered; now thirty-seven years old and beginning to turn grey, she lives what she herself calls a "suppressed" life, a frustrated existence different in kind but not in quality from the one we saw earlier in the daughters of

9. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Abel. Bored and distressed by the habitual chatter of her older relatives, she is equally upset by the conversation of an egotistical young man. She does not participate in the dancing, and spends much of the evening brooding alone. She is made especially uncomfortable by the difference between herself and her aunt, and notes sourly that Eleanor can still believe in "freedom" and "justice," "the things that man had destroyed" (Y, 331-332).

Peggy's dissatisfaction is given its most vivid and painful expression early in the chapter, when, en route to the party, she and Eleanor take a cab through London's entertainment district. Peggy is struck by the grotesquerie of the streets:

The light fell on broad pavements; on white, brilliantly lit-up public offices; on a pallid, hoary-looking church. Advertisements popped in and out. Here was a bottle of beer: it poured: then stopped: then poured again . . . Cabs were wheeling and stopping. Their own taxi was held up. It stopped dead under a statue: the lights shown on its cadaverous pallor.

"Always reminds me of an advertisement of sanitary towels," said Peggy, glancing at the figure of a woman in a nurse's uniform holding out her hand. (Y, 336)

The remark shocks Eleanor, who momentarily feels that a knife has sliced her skin. But Peggy's description of the "figure of a woman in a nurse's uniform" is still more unsettling if we recognize the London landmark to which it refers, a monument that Woolf has carefully avoided naming. We are told simply that the figure makes Eleanor think of Peggy's brother, "a nice . . . boy who had been killed."

"The only fine thing that was said in the war," she said aloud, reading the words cut on the pedestal.

"It didn't come to much," said Peggy sharply.

The cab remained fixed in the block. (Y, 336)

The statue which evokes this brief exchange is dedicated to Nurse Cavell and in 1937 was one of the four best-known monuments to women in London. Erected in St. Martin's Place in 1920, the Cavell statue was given an inscription by the Labor government in 1924; the words on the pedestal read "Patriotism is not enough."¹⁰ Typically, Eleanor has read the motto as a kind

10. See *An Encyclopaedia of London*, ed. William Kent (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 524. Kent remarks of the statue: "The figure is an admirable one, but the background is unsightly."

of lesson learned in the war, whereas Peggy regards it cynically. Hence at a later point in the novel Eleanor will comment that things have changed for the better: "We've changed in ourselves," she says, "We're happier — we're freer." But Peggy can only wonder what "freedom" and "happiness" mean (Y, 386).

At Delia's party, Peggy tries to explain to North that she perceives a "state of being" in which there might be real happiness; but then she insults him by predicting that he will marry and "make money" instead of "living differently" (Y, 390). Actually, North is almost as isolated as she, and has begun his drift toward marriage only because he cannot find a satisfactory alternative. Having spent years in the army and then on an African sheep farm, he returns to London feeling oddly out of place, a stranger to his relatives, his thoughts during the day and evening turning around the problem "Society or solitude, which is best?" — a topic he has heard Nicholas Pomjalovsky discussing at Eleanor's apartment.

North's own feelings seem to pull him toward solitude. His favorite poem, for example, is Marvell's *The Garden*, and he enjoys quoting the lines, "Society is all but rude / to this delicious solitude." At the same time, however, his bachelorhood has grown oppressive, and he has come to London partly out of a vague longing for a mate. While in Africa, he wrote a letter to Sara containing the message that "this is Hell. We are the damned." But now that he has returned to London, he shares an almost surreal luncheon with Sara in her apartment at 52 Milton Street, "near the Prison Tower," and he seems not much happier. In one of the more comic passages of the final chapter, he sits at Delia's party and meditates on the marriage between Hugh Boggs and Milly. An overweight, bovine couple, they make sounds like the "munching of animals in a stall," and North wonders if this is what marriage comes to, where the men go out to hunt and the women "break off into babies." For a moment he contemplates revolution and dynamite, wondering if his sister Peggy could invent a potion that would exterminate the Gibbsees of the world. "They're not interested in other people's children," he observes, "Only in their own, their own property . . . How then can we be civilized?" (Y, 375–378). While Eleanor comments on the "miracle" of life, which she calls "a perpetual discovery," North can only say, "I don't know what I want" (Y, 382–383).

Even more clearly than Peggy, North perceives the split between his desires and the objective conditions of the society. Looking about Delia's party, he thinks, "What do they mean by Justice and Liberty? . . . all these nice young men with two or three hundred a year. Something's wrong . . . there's a gap, a dislocation, between the word and the reality." Gazing into his champagne glass, he imagines what life ought to be and unknowingly echoes Nicholas' and Eleanor's thoughts from an earlier chapter:

For them it's all right, he thought; they've had their day; but not for him, not for his generation . . . Why not down barriers and simplify? But a world, he thought, that was all one jelly, one mass, would be a rice pudding world, a white counterpane world. To keep the emblems and tokens of North Pargiter — the man Maggie laughs at; the Frenchman holding his hat; but at the same time spread out, make a new ripple in human consciousness, be the bubble and the stream, the stream and the bubble — myself and the world together — he raised his glass. Anonymously, he said, looking at the clear yellow liquid. But what do I mean, he wondered — I, to whom ceremonies are suspect, and religion's dead; who don't fit, as the man said, don't fit in anywhere? He paused. There was the glass in his hand; in his mind a sentence. And he wanted to make other sentences. But how can I, he thought — he looked at Eleanor, who sat with a silk handkerchief in her hands — unless I know what's solid, what's true; in my life, in other people's lives? (Y, 410)

North's meditation in this passage is crucial not only to an understanding of *The Years*, but in a more general way to appreciation of Virginia Woolf's entire work. For at virtually every level of her writing she is preoccupied with the distinction she feels between the inner self and the outer world, between solitude and society, between "the bubble and the stream." Like North, she wishes to harmonize two kinds of existence: on the one hand are the timeless recesses of being, where one feels a loss of personal identity and a communion with nature; on the other hand is the time-bound social world of day-to-day relationships, where people assert their identity and relish their differences. The difficulty presented in *The Years* — and by implication in all of Woolf's novels — is that the two kinds of existence will not "fit," partly because the society will not allow people to translate their private dreams of unity into public relationships. As a re-

sult the characters feel torn between two worlds, doomed if they choose either one exclusively.

As a novelist, Virginia Woolf seems to have faced a similar difficulty. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," for example, she confronts the problem of reconciling the inward essence of character with the outer shell; as Peggy says when she tries to describe Eleanor, "Where does she begin, and where do I end? . . . two sparks of life enclosed in two separate bodies" (Y, 334). Always Woolf tried to capture some transpersonal human essence, some "spark of life" which unites individuals. In passages like the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse*, she actually attempted to write about a pure life process, a stream without bubbles, where unity has become so complete that there is no distinction between seeing and seen. In most cases, however, she felt torn between a visionary mode of writing and a more public approach, which she identified with the hated orthodoxies of the society. She recognized the ultimate unsatisfactoriness of these alternatives, which forced her to experience life purely at extremes, and she often felt compelled to choose between what she called the novel of "vision" as opposed to the novel of "fact." Hence in *The Waves* she attempted a purely visionary work, but she was no sooner finished than she felt a positive need to write about an opposite kind of experience, to make a solid, "factual" counterpart such as *The Years*.

What makes the later novels like *The Years* and *Between the Acts* so interesting, however, is that they will not settle for one mode of existence over another. Woolf was actually seeking a synthesis of extremes, a dialectic between "female" and "male," between "thou" and "I," between "stream" and "bubble." As North Pargiter recognizes, a world of pure unity and vision would be a "rice pudding world, a white counterpane world," whereas a world of pure individuality must inevitably make people feel that they are "boxed in," cut off from essences. The problem is to develop a human consciousness and a manner of writing which is able to express both kinds of existence simultaneously. In *The Years* Woolf suggests that this problem has social and historical causes and will not be solved by an act of individual will. The split between the two kinds of existence is related to all those artificial boundaries set up between people, all those petty tyrannies of the household, all those economic inequities which

have been shown indirectly throughout the novel; and the reconciliation is not possible until the society itself is fundamentally changed.

This dissociation between public and private worlds helps explain why characters in *The Years* have so much difficulty expressing their feelings to one another, or even to themselves. Repeatedly, especially in the last chapter, people experience North's difficulty of trying to "make other sentences," an anxiety Woolf the novelist must have felt as strongly as her imagined characters. The problem is most obvious when the characters try to ask large questions. When Peggy asks if there is any "standard" for human behavior, the issue is dropped while Eleanor tries to recall something she wanted to say; when North asks whether society or solitude is best, Sara's reply is washed away by the chaotic sounds outside her window; when Nicholas tries to make a significant speech at Delia's party, his comments become slightly drunken and incoherent. "Directly something got together, it broke," Peggy thinks (Y, 392), and her observation is reinforced when Nicholas accidentally shatters a champagne glass while he is trying to make his most important statement.

And yet, underneath these elliptical, unfinished attempts to give life meaning, underneath the apparently random fragments of the text, Virginia Woolf suggests a kind of unity, a potential for harmony. This unity is expressed partly by the fact that, despite their surface differences, the characters in the novel at least feel the same discontent across generations — indeed, the elder Pargiters do not conform to the easy stereotypes given them by Peggy and North in the final section. Given this possibility of human community, Woolf is able to provide the novel with a conclusion which strikes a balance between hope and irony. In the last scene, Eleanor looks out the doorway of the estate agent's office, echoing all those times before when characters have looked out unhappily on the streets, and sees a young couple entering the house across the way, a symbol for the sexual accord and fulfillment which has been denied nearly everyone else: " 'There,' Eleanor murmured . . . 'There,' she repeated, as the door shut with a little thud behind them" (Y, 434).

Like the couple Woolf notices out the window in *A Room of One's Own*, the man and woman in this scene represent "a force in things which one had overlooked," a potential for unity in life. At the same time, however, they are going inside a house,

where the door shuts with a little thud. Are they not "boxed in," like so many of the characters we have seen elsewhere in the novel? Clearly the image is not a satisfactory representation of happiness, because it returns us to the same kind of domesticity which has been a center of trouble throughout. As if in compensation for this final scene, Woolf closes the novel with an explicitly optimistic statement: We are told that "the sky above the houses wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity, and peace." Understandably, some critics have felt that the exaltation in these lines is not congruent with the tone of the novel as a whole.¹¹ But it seems to me that we are not intended to read Woolf's last words as a sort of "Happy ever after"; she is not saying that the problems of the novel have been solved, only that a certain natural harmony is potentially within the grasp of humanity.

Actually, Woolf does not know what the future will bring, and in the moment when she tries to predict tomorrow, her essential optimism is tinged with fear. Only a few pages before the conclusion of the novel, Delia's party is interrupted by the entry of a group of children of the building's "caretaker," who are not members of the class who make up the party. "Speak!" Martin Pargiter commands, taking up the role of his father before him, and when they do not reply Peggy remarks sardonically that the younger generation "don't mean to speak" (Y, 429). Instead, the children nudge one another and break into song:

Etho passo tanno hai,
Fai donk to tu do,
Mai to, kai to, lai to see
Toh dom to tuh do —
(Y, 429)

It is a new and strange language, understood by none of the adults. One of the more conservative members of the party suggests it is a "Cockney accent," but no one is quite sure. We are told that the "distorted sounds rose and sank as if they followed a tune" (Y, 429), and that there was "something horrible in the noise they made. It was so shrill, so discordant, and so

11. See, for example, Josephine O'Brien Schaefer, *The Three-Fold Nature of Reality in Virginia Woolf* (London: Mouton, 1965), pp. 167-185.

meaningless" (Y, 430). Typically, only Eleanor can find something good to say about the performance:

"But it was . . ." Eleanor began. She stopped. What was it? As they stood there they had looked so dignified; yet they had made this hideous noise. The contrast between their faces and voices was astonishing; it was impossible to find one word for the whole. "Beautiful?" she said, with a note of interrogation, turning to Maggie.

"Extraordinarily," said Maggie.

But Eleanor was not sure that they were thinking of the same thing. (Y, 430-431)

The curious mixture of admiration and sinister terror in this episode is rather like the final scene in *Between the Acts*, where a husband and wife approach one another across the darkness, about to commit an "act" which will determine the future. We may safely assume that Virginia Woolf herself felt such emotions when, in the late thirties, she tried to think about the movement of history. Unlike T. S. Eliot, she did not cling to a tradition, but at the same time she was appalled at what liberal democracy (identified with the masculine ego) had done to the human spirit. She was therefore fearful: Would the inevitable changes to come lead humanity toward some higher plane, or were the years moving in a downward spiral, each stage as frustrating as the one before? Her novel leaves us waiting for the answer, poised for an apocalypse. And yet what is so remarkable about *The Years* is the tenacity with which it keeps faith in "beauty, simplicity, and peace," despite so much social and sexual frustration. Although Woolf is not in league with Blake or Lawrence, she does suggest that a radical change in human consciousness is due; by offering the vision of a peaceful landscape, even if tentatively, she partly overcomes the feelings of despair and solitude which are characteristic of so much modernist literature, helping us believe that human nature might eventually triumph over history.