

Woolf, Derrida, and the Politics of a Middle Voice

BEYOND, BESIDE, AND BETWEEN THE ACTS
WOOLF, DERRIDA, AND THE POLITICS
OF A MIDDLE VOICE

By

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the discourses of Virginia Woolf and Jacques Derrida each from the perspective of the other in an attempt to discuss the insights and limitations of each theory. I begin by considering each writer's version of what I will call the middle voice, a notion that serves as the point of departure for my examination of the linguistic processes of graft and disengagement in both Woolf and Derrida. Turning to the philosophical and political problems that arise when these writers put their versions of the middle voice into practice, I discuss their mutual desire (and inevitable failure) to oppose and displace totalization. Despite the similarity of these projects, however, I argue that they arise from distinct relations to subjectivity and, as a result, different imperatives. Next, I consider the (non)principle that permits and enables these notions (that is, the ungraspable because always already divided origin and the decentralizing or (self)effacing self): the logic of supplementarity. This logic allows me to interrogate further the faulty unity that masks a duplicity by showing how *Between the Acts* disrupts and deconstructs limits of representation. Finally, I reconsider the middle voice, this time from Emile Benveniste's position, thus re-turning, once again, to the problem of totalization; I "end" by proposing a pragmatic (but necessarily problematic) praxis, which combines both a Derridean and a Woolfian approach, and that yields a discourse which promises both a critique of totalization and a political vision.

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One

The Middle Voice and "The voice that was no one's voice": Woolf, Derrida, and the Re-turn of Language

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception.

-- Jacques Derrida

'But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red -- even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How describe or say anything in articulate words again? -- save that it fades, save that it undergoes a gradual transformation, becomes, even in the course of one short walk habitual -- this scene also.

-- Virginia Woolf

In this thesis I will (re)present, interrogate, juxtapose, and construct conversations between discourses of Virginia Woolf and Jacques Derrida. However, to discuss the relationship between these discourses is to beg -- or perhaps defer -- the question of definition. It requires that I posit two entities that have no existence as such. Nevertheless, I will posit these two overly simplified provisional entities in order to construct a conversation that I feel will raise important questions.

The conversational form represents my attempt to find a voice, to answer for myself the challenge of finding one way (among many possible ways) to continue writing while abandoning the totalizing modes both Woolf and Derrida so powerfully and appropriately call into question. An important aspect of both approaches is a refusal to avoid conflict and irresolvable differences or to synthesize these differences into a unitary, univocal whole. In this spirit, I will not attempt to resolve conflicts within or between the theories discussed here, nor will the conversations between them result in any new, grand synthesis, because my treatment of these theories is not based on a unified theory of the "whole."

I do think that theorists can provide more or less space for a variety of voices and that they can be criticized for ignoring or repressing certain questions that are important to their own projects. Each theory provides a partial critique and corrective to the other, and by creating a dialogue, I can assess both the insights and limitations of each theory. My arguments are not meant to privilege one theory over the other but to make my thinking clear enough that others can enter into the argument and continue it in their own ways.

In an attempt to find a point of departure for thinking about the trajectories of both writers, I will consider what each has to say about what I would like to call the middle voice. In this chapter, I will begin by invoking

Derrida's formulation of a middle voice, which will then serve as my basis for speaking about a particular approach in and to *Between the Acts*. In the chapters that follow, I will pursue the implications of each writer's theory from the perspective of the other.

In his article "*La Différance*," Derrida uses the analogy of the middle voice in order to describe his coinage of the term *différance*, a neologism he uses because of its implication in both the active, causal properties of the present participle and hence the verb, as well as the passive, already effected or constituted properties of the noun:

We must consider that in the usage of our language the ending --*ance* remains undecided *between* the active and the passive. And we will see why that which lets itself be designated [*se laisse désigner par*] *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived [*ne se laisse penser*] either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these *terms*. For the middle voice, a certain nontransitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself [*se constituant*] by means of this repression. (*Margins of Philosophy* 9)

Partaking of both passive and active voices but belonging to neither, the middle voice locates itself outside and beyond all oppositions. The middle voice serves as an intermediary discourse. However, it is not simply a dialectical middle (a third term that makes resolutions in the form of speculative

dialectics); it is instead a middle in which the differends are suspended and preserved. Like *différance*, the middle voice has the "structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning -- or of force -- to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others" (*Margins of Philosophy* 3).

As Derrida explains in "Signature, Event, Context," writing (which structures all language) perpetuates itself; it does not derive from consciousness: "To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning" (*Limited Inc* 8). At the same time, it gives rise to a mark which does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription: the sign "carries with it a force that breaks with its context. . . . This breaking force [*force de rupture*] is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text" (9). Thus "failure is an essential risk of the operations under consideration" (15).

Derrida relates this process to his (non)concept of spacing, which constitutes the sign and indicates the "always open possibility of its disengagement and graft" (9). To put it in a slightly different way, the logical force of "iter," which "ties repetition to alterity" (7), involves repeating and altering the system, dividing and displacing it. As he explains in "Limited Inc," "iterability blurs a priori the dividing-line that passes between these opposed

terms, 'corrupting' it if you like, contaminating it parasitically, qua limit" (*Limited Inc* 70). By using the analogy of the middle voice to describe *différance*, then, Derrida points to what exceeds, disrupts, and displaces the opposition of active and passive, and as a result, "deconstructs all the philosophical opposites which are based on the opposition of active and passive" (*French Philosophers in Conversation* 99); it is this type of intervention that Derrida attempts to set in motion through deconstruction.

I use the term "middle voice" here because conceptualizing this process as a mode of (non)speech is particularly apt in a discussion of *Between the Acts*, a novel that, from the first page, situates itself in the place of language, a place to which we are ultimately sent back by the last two words of the novel ("They spoke" -- 159), which are at once terminal and interterminal, re-turning us to utterance and thus re-commencing the cycle infinitely.

Similarly, the terminal lines of another book, Woolf's *A Writer's Diary*, describe a circular trajectory:

Suppose I selected one dominant figure in every age and wrote *round and about*. Occupation is essential. And now with some pleasure I find that it's seven; and must cook dinner. Haddock and sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down. (345; my italics)

Once again, the passage is a re-turn that locates itself in language and, like *Between the Acts*, signals a modality of approach that is redundant and approximate. But what exactly are we approaching? "What is the object of this

entertainment" (*Between the Acts* 128)? This question (as I will attempt to demonstrate shortly) implicates a lack¹ (the gaping hole, the middle voice) that both links and attaches and simultaneously divides and separates; it both ties and unties the pre-occupied absent "real" (to use Miss La Trobe's term). The entire text arranges itself as a veil of absence, of that which cannot be made to appear. That it refuses to appear does not, of course, keep the characters from attempting -- repeatedly -- to contain and grasp it. Indeed, as this passage from Woolf's diary shows, despite her desire to invoke a decentred, fragmentary world in which "truth" is continually deferred, Woolf sometimes uses this figure of circularity not to signal perpetual postponement but rather (to attempt) to enclose or contain what at other moments she realizes is ungraspable.

In this context, it might be instructive to take a detour through a passage from *To the Lighthouse*:

. . . and then with a natural instinct to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness -- because the thing was completed partly and partly because distinct views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest. (24)

This feeling of sadness that Lily Briscoe and William Bankes experience describes a re-turn that is ambivalent, that envelops an intuition of completeness and a consciousness of distance, implicating the abyssal gap between the spectator and the contemplated object.

This problematic of approach, of a grasp that is visual or vocal, construes itself from the first sentence of *Between the Acts*: "It was a summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool" (7). This opening comment implicates the space of a silence, the pit into which the unnameable, or perhaps the unmentionable, is thrown. The gaping hole connects itself to a lower order², and in an attempt to speak, uses an Other voice which sends us back, as in other moments of the novel, to animals: "Then there was silence, and a cow coughed" (7).

The object of discussion at the beginning is therefore the point where converging efforts produce language -- a language which often limits itself to a defective, barely audible emission. This object, the hole promised by local authorities, is the first representation of the gaping hole where other objects lose themselves abyssally. It is also the place, or rather the economy, of a circular approach, of an attempted grasp (through memory and words), which carries in it the possibility of its own abortion³:

The old man in the armchair -- Mr Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired -- said that the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road. From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars.

'But you don't remember . . . ' Mrs Haines began. No, not that. Still he did remember -- and he was about to tell them what, when there was a sound outside . . . (7)

Here, a sound interrupts the discourse that was dedicated, from the first pages, to being breached. The orts, scraps, and fragments of the inaugural conversation are continually reassembled⁴ in an inevitably futile effort: "What had they been saying? 'Discussing the cesspool,' said Mrs Oliver" (8). Although the hole is full of words, it guarantees the circularity of the approach, a constant turning, or a combination of unification and displacement. Words continually put themselves in oscillation:

. . . as [the nurses] trundled they were talking -- not shaping pellets of information or handing ideas from one another, but rolling words, like sweets on their tongues; which, as they thinned to transparency, gave off pink, green, and sweetness. This morning that sweetness was: 'How cook had told 'im off about the asparagus; how when she rang I said: how it was a sweet costume with blouse to match;' and that was leading to something about a feller as they walked up and down the terrace rolling sweets, trundling the perambulator. (12)

However, something formless and ungraspable slips always away from the interior of the discourse, something that adds its "unmistakable contribution to talk" (33), bringing to the same level the mooing of a cow and the singing of a shell, and emitting an overflowing voice that rings hollow⁵:

What had *he* said about the cesspool; or indeed about anything? Isa wondered, inclining her head towards the gentleman farmer, Rupert Haines. She had met him at a Bazaar; and at a tennis party. (8)

Isa, from the beginning of the novel, interrupts the exchange of words, introducing into the dramatic structure the motif of interruption, the pause, the interval, a version of what *Between the Acts* takes as its topic. Isa also takes us closer to a verbal grasp (that, of course, ultimately remains a

failure) of the gaping hole. She has a propensity for citation, to distance herself from language (or perhaps from the oneness of the signified and signifier), by turning away⁶, or by taking statements out of context. In her conversation with Bart, Isa becomes discouraged with the very way language is constructed:

'He's a coward, your boy is.'
 She frowned. He was not a coward, *her* boy wasn't. And she loathed the domestic, the possessive; the maternal. And he knew it and did it on purpose to tease her, the old brute, *her* father-in-law. She looked away.
 'The library's always the nicest room in the house,' she quoted and ran her eyes along the books. (18)

It is as if Isa once again is taken in a circular movement (from one possessive pronoun to another), but nevertheless, she manages to reconstruct a new language out of the threshold of an enunciation from which she can only differ or distance herself. This new language is decentred and divergent, and it seems to engender itself in a place where noises and visions mix, a place anchored in fantasy but which for Isa is the only place where she can inscribe "real" events:

as her father-in-law had dropped the *Times*, she took it and read: 'A horse with a green tail . . .' which was fantastic. Next, 'The guard at Whitehall . . . which was romantic and then, *building word upon word* she read: 'The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troops removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face . . .'
That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed; and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (*for in fact it was a door*)

opened and in came Mrs Swithin carrying a hammer. (19; my italics)

Repetition⁷, the negation of the interruption or that which intervenes, compulsively fills up the interval between the echo of the uttered word and the anticipation of that which is to come: "The words were like the first peal of a chime of bells. As the first peals, you hear the second; as the second peals, you hear the third" (20). The empty or silent intermediary is tolerated only at a distance.

The use of words of connection (*then, so, but, and*) underline the functioning but also the precariousness of these connections. Not surprisingly, Woolf's fascination with that which binds is ambivalent. The bond guarantees both the efficacy of the connection and its ability to escape. The picture of the lady reveals this constitutive "property"⁸:

But the lady was a picture. In her yellow robe, leaning with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence. The room was empty. Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent: *the room was a shell singing of what was before time was*; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence. (31; my italics)
[The picture was] looking at nothing. She led them down green glades into the heart of silence. (40)

The silent singing that the picture inspires invokes the pre-occupied "real" that can never be made present.

Isa's approach to the object involves a re-turn to an unbound realm of the imagination, which serves as protection against what Woolf calls "my own despondency"⁹ (*Writer's Diary* 215). This same verbal approach, however, is seen also as a closing. Giles, the most passive character in the novel, sees people as irremediably bonded, prisoners of running things: "So one thing led to another; and the conglomeration of things pressed you flat; held you fast, like a fish in water" (38). The bond, then, is also the knot that strangles and suffocates. Attachment and fixity are the inverses of fluidity and motion, which are the privileged figures of silence:

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-centred 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. (35-6)

Everyone in *Between the Acts* (perhaps with the exception of Mrs Manresa) has a similar obsession with fixity, with that which is content or constraining, or that to which one can anchor oneself¹⁰. Bart explains: "Framed, they became a picture: had he been a painter he would have fixed his easel here" (14). When Lucy abandons herself in reverie, he thinks: "She would have been a very clever woman . . . had she fixed her gaze. But this led to that; that to the other" (22; my ellipsis).

The drama of words that takes place here assures a union and erects a barrier to that union, at once denying and articulating the gaping hole: "She flushed, and the little breath too was audible that she drew in as once more he struck a blow at her faith. But, brother and sister, flesh and blood was not a barrier, but a mist" (23). The air, the silent conspirator, is a recurrent motif in *Between the Acts*, and it is perhaps a privileged model of the space of silence:

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

The rhyme was 'air'. . . . she took up the telephone. . . . 'Mrs Oliver speaking . . . What fish have you this morning? Cod? Halibut? Sole? Plaice?'

'There to lose what binds us here,' she murmured. 'Soles. Filleted. In time for lunch please,' she said aloud. (15; my ellipses)

The soles come conveniently full of an emptiness; and the words that Isa aligns reestablish the bond and recast the recounted story of Isa and Giles ("Her line had got tangled . . . and she had loved him" -- 39), tracing a new line which attaches Isa to Rupert Haines:

'In love,' she must be; since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since *the words he said* . . . 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 . . . (15; my ellipses)

It is from the same fish that a verbal chain (that nothing seems able to interrupt) will construct itself:

'How did we begin this talk?' she counted on her fingers. 'The Pharaohs. Dentists. Fish . . . Oh yes, you were saying, Isa, you'd ordered fish; and you were afraid it wouldn't be fresh. And I said "That's the problem . . ."' (27)

The bond and the logic of the bond, the grammatical conjunction, the instrument of seizure, then, is also an alarming signal of the chain's inability to interrupt itself: "It seems from the terrace as if the land went on for ever and ever" (26). Words, which symbolize, or make a conjunction, suspend themselves. It is only in rare moments, when they are mute like the dead¹¹, that they create a *whiteness or blanc*:

Today they are cremating her, and she had printed a little funeral service -- with the death-day left blank. No words: an adagio from Beethoven and a text about gentleness and faith which I would have included had I known. But what does my writing matter? There is *something fitting and complete* about the memory of her, *thus consummated*. (*Writer's Diary* 272; my italics).

This consumption which is also consummation, in the sense of something being accomplished, is paradoxically also a dispersion or even dissemination (the ashes of the dead, for example) which establishes itself in *Between the Acts* as contrary to fixity and unity. And it is against this dispersion that Miss La Trobe is fighting as the audience at each instant threatens to break into pieces, to "split up into orts, scraps and fragments" (91). This dispersion occurs in all people, especially in the most mobile or undone, Mrs Manresa, who claims not to be able to "put two words together" (48) and who tries vainly to reconstruct her story:

. . . her life history . . . was only scraps and fragments to all of them. . . . her grandfather had been exported for some hanky-panky mid-Victorian scandal; malversation of trusts was it? But the story got no further. . . . And so the story dwindled away. (33; my ellipses)

The dispersion, then, is in part tied in with what the lilies are also without: history ("self-sown from wind-dropped seed"). The disseminating lilies invoke a notion of history that differs from that of logical progression; they float like people's floating attention, which locates itself in silence¹² and remains deaf in bonds that are too logical. At times, the whole pageant seems to be an attempt to deny or thwart this dissemination and to reassemble the spectators into a unified vision: "still for one moment she held them together -- the dispersing company" (74). For Miss La Trobe, interruption is torture, and the elements seem to try to undo the bonds of her created unity: "The wind blew away the connecting words of their chant" (62). Isa, however, greets this confusion with satisfaction: "Did the plot matter?. . . . The plot was only there to beget emotion. . . . There was no need to puzzle out the plot. Perhaps Miss La Trobe meant that when she cut this knot in the centre?" (69; my ellipses).

Again, the compulsive tendency of words to link themselves, to connect, is denounced. Language appears as the ambivalent instrument of cohesion and division. Even music, which at some points seems to be valorized as the "real" harmony, the "true" voice, is a language like any other, with the same contradictory tendencies:

Voices chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music, wafted from the bushes, is expressive of some inner harmony? . . . 'The office' (some were thinking) 'compels disparity. Scattered, shattered, hither thither summoned by the bell' (89).

This denial of a denial in fact undermines the stability of the harmony. At each instant the knot which ties the spectators together comes undone: "Every moment the audience slipped the noose; split up into scraps and fragments" (91). It is the other voices that return to fill the emptiness: that of the gramophone -- "Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine in the bushes, accurately, insistently" (110) and of the animals:

The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. . . . The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion (103-104; my ellipsis).

The human voices appear disembodied and insignificant, but the gossip does guarantee some (at least temporary) connection:

Over the tops of the bushes came stray voices, voices without bodies, symbolical voices they seemed to her, half hearing, seeing nothing, but still, over the bushes, feeling invisible threads connecting the bodiless voices (111).

The scene (in the pageant) of the picnic on the lake is a humorous dramatization of the gash that will never completely mend itself. Mrs H's absurd monologue attempts to make the interruptions into a whole in a comic attempt at verbal seizure, which, as always, is supported by a formula: "Has Mr

Sibthrop a wife?" (123), and ironically, repeated by a choir which draws the message beyond.

Mrs Lynn Jones is caught in this choral echo and surrenders to a reunion with her past, thereby resisting the gash: "If they had met with no resistance, she mused, nothing wrong, they'd still be going *round and round and round*. The Home would have remained; and Papa's beard, she thought, would have grown and grown; and Mama's knitting" (126; my italics). Lucy too attempts to tie disparate elements together when the stage becomes empty: "She was off, they guessed, on a *circular* turn of the imagination -- one-making: (127; my italics). Again, circularity is connected to the absence of interruption, to the approach of completion.

The last entre-acte turns the circularity upon itself, once more highlighting the inevitable fragmentation: "'Another interval,' Dodge read out, looking at the programme. 'And after that, what?' asked Lucy. 'Present time. Ourselves,' he read" (128). From this moment, the spectacle becomes a dramatization of the intermediary spaces. A dizziness seizes the spectators: "What is the object of this entertainment?" (128): "All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no music. . . . They were neither one thing nor the other. . . . They were suspended, without being, in limbo" (129; my ellipses). Suspended, the audience is in a tenuous position, on the verge of losing the thread. It is perhaps a despair of the symbol:

'What's she keeping us waiting for?' Colonel Mayhew asked irritably. 'They don't need to dress up if it's present time.'

Mrs Mayhew agreed. Unless of course she was going to end with a Grand Ensemble. Army; Navy; Union Jack; and behind them perhaps -- Mrs Mayhew sketched what she would have done had it been her pageant -- the Church. In cardboard. One window, looking east, brilliantly illuminated to symbolize -- she could work that out when the time came. (130)

Interestingly, Mrs Mayhew invokes a sign without meaning, a signifier without a signified, and as a result, defers closure indefinitely.

At this point, Miss La Trobe makes herself the advocate of a "devil" she calls the "real," which suddenly overflows:

She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality. But something was going wrong with the experiment. 'Reality too strong,' she muttered. 'Curse 'em!' She felt everything they felt. Audiences were the devil. (130)

The "real," that which at this moment gives itself to Miss La Trobe (cows, birds, empty voices of the people) returns against her until finally Nature takes her part (131) and gives her the illusion -- "This is death. . . . when illusion fails" (131) -- that allows her in her last act to englobe all. But even if the rain is "universal" (131), if, for one moment a completeness appears to be attained ("all liberated; made whole" -- 133), a discordant music enters ("Fox-trot was it? Jazz?" -- 133) which separates and dissolves:

What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult. And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put the finger to the nose? Squint and pry? Peak and spy? O the irreverence of the generation which is only momentarily -- thanks be -- 'the young.' The young, who can't make,

but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole. (133)

In the mirror scene, which transports the audience onto the stage by means of flashing mirrors held by the actors, the bodies find themselves broken into pieces:

Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now Old Bart . . . he was caught. Now Manresa. After a nose . . . There a skirt . . . Then trousers only . . . Now perhaps a face? . . . Ourselves. But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts. (133)

Only fragments remain, "reality" is in pieces, and each attempts through words to establish a semblance of unity: "Each turned ostensibly to say -- O whatever came handy -- to his neighbour" (135). Mrs Manresa attempts to fill in the gap by *making up* her face in the mirror, while the Reverend, "their representative spokesman; their symbol . . . [is] ignored by the cows, condemned by the clouds which continued their majestic rearrangement of the celestial landscape; an irrelevant forked stake in the flow and majesty of the summer silent world" (138). All discourse aimed at restoration of unity, of a verbal bond between the spectators ("we are members of one another. Each is part of the whole" -- 139) is shattered, interrupted by a distant "music." A figure that formerly evoked harmony, music, like all forms of language, both joins and separates. Having lost his "command over words" (141), Mr Streatfield calls to the organizer of the re-union, but "the gifted lady" (141) remains invisible, and language develops another deficiency: "It was an awkward moment. . . . But no

one spoke" (141). However, the illusion continues and tomorrow "the telephone would ring" (146). Words continue to break up ("the end of that sentence was cut short" -- 146), search themselves ("What word expressed the sag at his heart?" --146), and lose themselves.

Miss La Trobe can only imagine the musical completion in a noisy pub: She "listened. Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. . . . Words without meaning -- wonderful words" (153). Isa and Lucy pursue the abyssal gap in the most intense contemplation that the night allows: "You could see more in the evening often *when nothing interrupted*, when there was no fish to order, no telephone to answer" (155; my italics). Fragmentation, however, is their inevitable lot, and at the end Isa dedicates herself to the cleavage: "Love and hate -- how they tore her asunder" (156). Her language, laconic and powerless, becomes exhausted in searching for itself: "'Yes,' Isa answered. 'No,' she added. It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed out embracing. No, no, no, it contracted. . . . 'Orts, scraps, and fragments,' she quoted what she remembered of the vanishing play" (156).

To act from the other side of the curtain is merely to recommence speaking ("The curtain rose. They spoke."). In one of the final passages of her *Writer's Diary*, Woolf describes, once again, the impossible, because infinitely re-turning, attempt to grasp the gaping hole, the middle voice: "A blank. All frost. Still frost. Burning white. Burning blue. The elms red. I did not mean to describe, once more, the downs in snow; but it came" (*Writer's Diary* 342). Perhaps in effect, "The wordless are the happy" (*Writer's Diary* 327).

Endnotes

1. My references to a lack or gaping hole, of course, do not refer to the simple, symmetrical opposite of presence: absence. Rather, I am speaking of the abyssal chasm (a structure that is without bottom and is not itself the bottom of anything either) that Derrida describes in "Chora" as the (non)principle that disrupts and displaces all such oppositions. Exceeding the polarity of *mythos* and of *logos* and belonging in neither the horizon of sense nor the sense of being, this (non)place must remain under cover. Analogous to the trace, chora can only offer itself in withdrawing itself from all determination. In his reading of Plato's *Timaeus*, Derrida describes chora as a *mise en abyme*: "il y a bien un chasme au milieu du livre, une sorte d'abîme «dans» lequel on tente de penser ou de dire ce chasme abyssale que serait *chora*" (276). He continues: "Chaque récit est donc le *réceptacle* d'un autre. Il n'y a que des réceptacles de réceptacles narratifs. N'oublions pas que réceptacle, lieu d'accueil ou d'hébergement, (*hypodochē*), c'est la détermination la plus insistante . . . de *chora*" (285). This inaccessible, amorphous, and virgin (non)structure, then, is an absence of support that cannot be translated as absent support or in absence of support: "*Mise en abyme* du discours sur *chora* . . . serait donc la structure d'une surimpression sans fond" (276). In "Limited Inc," Derrida explains this new conception of absence in regard to iterability: "It is because this iterability is differential, within each individual 'element' as well as between the 'elements,' because it splits each element while constituting it, because it marks it with an articulatory break, that the remainder, although indispensable, is never that of a full or fulfilling presence: it is a differential structure escaping the logic of presence or the (simple or dialectical) opposition of presence and absence upon which opposition the idea of permanence depends" (53). Iterability, like chora, is the impurity of an absence that, from the start, prohibits the full and rigorous attainment of plenitude and subverts self-identity.

2. Suggestively, the O.E.D. defines "ort" as having a lower value.

3. Cf. "'Abortive,' was the word that expressed her" (*Between the Acts* 16).

4. Cf. "to collect, even to bind together, my . . . notes" (*A Writer's Diary* 290).

5. Cf. "a hollow voice" (*Between the Acts* 13).

6. Derrida explains this connection between citation and distance in "Signature, Event, Context." The structural possibility of disengagement, duplicity, duplication, or failure to say "what one means" is another way of speaking of the constitutive role of citation: "Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written . . . can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that a mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any centre or absolute anchoring [*ancrage*]" (*Limited Inc* 12). See also note 10.

7. Another way of describing this continual turning is to speak of repetition. In "The Theatre of Cruelty," an essay on Artaud and the limits of representation, Derrida writes that "Artaud wanted to erase repetition in general" because repetition "separates force, presence, and life from themselves" (*Writing and Difference* 245). He continues: "This separation is the economical and calculating gesture of that which defers itself in order to maintain itself. . . . This power of repetition governed everything that Artaud wished to destroy, and it has several names: God, Being, Dialectics" (245). However, Artaud's project could only fail because repetition constitutes the very possibility of the word: "A sign which does not repeat itself, which is not already divided by repetition in its 'first time,' is not a sign" (246). To put it in a slightly different way: iterability is a duplication which redoubles the first time, through its repetition as an identical and at the same time different entity. It is a reduplication in which the repeated is already separated from itself, double in itself.

8. Cf. "Occupation is essential" (*A Writer's Diary* 345).

9. Interestingly, the word "despondency" derives from the Latin *despondere*, which means at once to tie by promise and to yield or give up (O.E.D).

10. Cf. "And at the moment, with *P.H.* only to fix upon, I am loosely anchored" (*A Writer's Diary* 320).

11. In "La Différance," Derrida reminds us that the "a" in *différance* is "offered by a mute mark" (*Margins of Philosophy* 4), and he explains that this silent mark is like a tomb: "it is a tomb that cannot even be made to resonate" (4). In this context, it is perhaps also important to recall his comment that this mute mark "cannot be exposed" (5). That is, it cannot become present or manifest: "if *différance* is (and I also cross out the "is") what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone . . . in regular fashion it exceeds the order

of truth" (6). Erasing itself in its articulation, "it would risk appearing: disappearing" (6). In sum: "since the trace [*différance*, chora, the middle voice, etc.] is not a presence but a simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site -- erasure belongs to its structure" (24).

12. I do not mean in my references to silence to oppose it to language. Indeed it is the silence-as-spacing that articulates language, but because it effaces itself from logic, we cannot hear it.

Two

Woolf on Derrida: The Problem of Totalization, or Interrogating the Possibilities of Differentiated Identity

Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are perhaps the most discussed animal in the universe?

-- Virginia Woolf

Women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves.

-- Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

Deconstruction, as a strategy to disrupt and displace the hierarchical oppositions that structure Western metaphysics, has worked to expose the presuppositions which construct a text's boundaries. However, deconstruction has its own economy, boundaries, and limitations -- many of which Derrida acknowledges. In this chapter, I will be asking what is at stake in the absences or repressions in Derrida's deconstruction -- in the questions that (for strategic reasons) he chooses not to ask.

Derrida has warned feminists against constructing a specifically female subject, against differentiating the experience of female writers/readers from that of men. This advice stems from the assumption that any attempt to

conceptualize the female subject maintains the metaphysical opposition of male/female; the One, which is male, has been made possible by the negation of the Other, which is female. For Derrida, the attempt to describe a specifically female subject continues (without disrupting) the logocentric tradition ("Women in the Beehive" 190, 193). To return to the discourse of the middle voice (which chapter one invokes), in this chapter, I will pursue the philosophical and political problems that arise when Woolf and Derrida attempt to create a practice based on the inevitable graft and disengagement that, in chapter one, I identified as a textual or linguistic "property" of the middle voice. I will argue that Derrida and Woolf use the notion in similar but distinct ways because of their different relations to subjectivity and the different imperatives that these positions entail.

I will show that a Woolfian perspective, while similar to the Derridean project in terms of its practice of decentralization, raises the question of whether a reading which does not take into account the gender differentiation of writer/reader in the "choreographic text[s] with polysexual signatures," ("Choreographies" 76) leaves Derrida (and his readers) on the ground he is attempting to destabilize: the generic "he" that claims to speak for all¹.

Before examining Derrida's argument from Woolf's perspective, though, it is necessary to take a detour in order to invoke a Woolfian "position" based on a reading of her last novel, *Between the Acts*. In both theme and

structure, *Between the Acts* is a meditation on the proximity of the artist to the dictator, the author to the authoritarian ruler. Woolf suggests that when language is used as if there were no gap between sound and meaning, the speaker/writer verges on totalitarianism. The artist in *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe, at times resembles a dictator; she has a will to unify, to find or make -- by force of imaginative skill -- a principle of continuity. The audience sees her "pacing to and fro" with "the look of a commander pacing his deck" (49). Her nickname is "Bossy" and she refers to the actors as her "little troops." Woolf saw this unifying tendency, at its initial stages, as a life-affirming impulse: art is a means of resisting all that would violate the individual.

Despite the affirmative qualities of unification, however, Woolf saw the temptation (even on her own part) to use narrative to bend the reader/audience to the author's will. The "unification" that arises from communication² (rather than dictation) entails a recognition of distance or difference between the "I" and the "you" of every enunciation, including Woolf and her reader. (Of course, slippage is inevitable, even in dictation, because the totalization that dictation attempts to achieve will necessarily fail.) At times a tyrant, Miss La Trobe treats meaning as hers, finished when written, complete as she conceived it, and she imposes it on the audience whose freedom threatens her play's performance.

In the novel, as in the play within it, every attempt to speak is interrupted; every word becomes a gesture, provisional and in process. Indeed the audience of Miss La Trobe's play is our primary concern, the drama of their lives occurring during the intervals. Shocked and frightened by the effect upon her inner life of the loss of her audience to the general panic and suffering of the war, Woolf wrote a novel that openly explored the artist's need for her audience (and as a result, she reflected on the entire situation of the enunciation): "It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing "I" has vanished. No audience. No echo. Thats [sic] part of one's death" (5:293). One threat to civilization that Woolf discovered, then, was her dependence on the listening, reading "you." This citation also signals the dispersal or erasure of the self as an individual that is totally enclosed, whole, and indivisible³.

Still, Woolf felt that she could best help England by means of her writing. In April 1938, she wrote in her diary:

But to amuse myself, let me note: why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed in connection with real incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; but "I" rejected: "We" substituted: to whom at the end shall there be an invocation? "We" . . . composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs & strays -- a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole -- the present state of my mind? (5:135)

In the beginning, then, apparent discontinuity ("incongruous," "random," "capricious") was to reveal achieved unity (both narrative and social). Narrative unity refers to the product of the artist's imagination: the power to show how all

things radiate to a centre; social unity refers to the process of substitution ("we" for "I"). In *Between the Acts*, as the audience (de)parts, although they have been transformed from disparate "I"s into a unified "we," one of them says: "What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together" (144).

The shift in Woolf's title (from *Poyntzet Hall* to *Between the Acts*), like this observation that the community lacks an articulated centre (that Pointz Hall originally was to provide), suggests an important transformation in Woolf's idea of "the centre" from which all things radiate. "Poyntzet Hall: a centre" became *Pointz Hall* by May 5, 1938 and then *The Pageant* sometime in late 1940. Only in its final stages in early 1941 did it become *Between the Acts*: "Finished P.H., the Pageant, the Play -- finally *Between the Acts* this morning" (5:356). The first substitution shifts the focus from play to performance, from domestic to dramatic; the second substitution moves from centre to interstice, from concrete place to a radically indeterminate time -- to a time that is also a figural space.

As the change in titles (and the move from a centre to the lack of a centre) suggests, *Between the Acts* develops into a book that advocates a fragmented community as opposed to the leader-centred group postulated by Freud, whose *Group Psychology* Woolf was reading in December 1939 (*Diary* 5:252). Rather than pointing to the defects of a leaderless society, this text advocates a decentring of authority. Melba Cuddy-Keane remarks that in the

O.E.D., the chorus is defined as appearing "between the 'acts'," and the pauses, which transform all voices into chorus, subvert the dominance of the leader figure and erase the opposition between inside and outside. The leader is subsumed into the choric voice, and a new, more inclusive type of community comes into existence (275). Freud's father-identified group, which is based on authoritarian domination is rewritten here as a group with a contradictory but collective (because fully accepting of difference and discord) voice. This participatory communal form subverts the traditional hierarchical lines of power⁴.

To return to the question asked by a member of the audience ("What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together"), the dissatisfaction which is expressed here strikes a note of resistance to this decentred type of community, and as a result, raises certain questions: is this "real" community if the members are so disparate? and if they have been truly transformed, would they ask this question? The efficacy of this combination of community and difference is by no means certain. Perhaps what we see here (on Miss La Trobe's and Woolf's part), despite their good intentions, is a somewhat desperate, totalizing search for unity, which is imposed forcefully on the passive audience. Between spring 1938 and late winter 1941 (during the bombing of London), then, Woolf's concept of her fiction underwent a decisive change, and this raises a related question: why fix the time of action as mid-day, mid-June

1939 when she began to write the text more than a year earlier and completed it more than six months later? This question engages political events of the time and their implications for art.

Although Woolf did not record the events of the war directly in her novels, as her diary for those years shows, she was constantly responding to them. Indeed I would argue that the extent of the intrusion of public life into her private diary was unprecedented in her career. As a result, it is not surprising that a sense of crisis pervades all her writing at the time, including her fiction. Such attention to the historical moment was uncharacteristic of Woolf, since she tended to relegate politics and current events to what Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* calls the "admirable fabric of masculine intelligence" (98). There was certainly something in Woolf's sensibility that wanted to ignore contemporary history, or at any rate a reluctance to let such events dominate the novel. By 1936, however, in an essay called "The Artist and Politics," Woolf describes the novelist as forced in response to the pressure of contemporary events to turn "from the private lives of his characters to their social surroundings and their political opinions" (*The Moment* 180).

To return to the significance of placing this text in a specific time frame, mid-summer 1939 was in fact the last interval before Britain stopped being a spectator and became an actor in the war; as Woolf remarked in her diary and letters, it was a time of tension between Hitler's occupation of

Czechoslovakia in March and the invasion of Poland in September 1939 when Britain declared war against Germany.

Woolf's fear that Hitler was powerful enough to decisively rupture if not destroy Britain's national boundaries has a counterpart within Britain. As Woolf argues in *Three Guineas*, violence within Britain itself (which is (re)presented as rape in *Between the Acts*) undermines the officially defined difference between "ourselves," the decent English and "them," the barbaric Germans. War against the common enemy is a false form of community which obscures internal differences by suppressing them in the name of a falsely constructed unity.

This distinction between "us" and "them," however, is a rather slippery one. Woolf, in pointing to the false unity that arises from a false distinction, differentiates the "false," logocentric, male "them" from the "true," female "us" (who are not like "them"), and as a result inevitably remains within the very system she is trying to displace. That is, as Woolf attempts to separate her position (community that acknowledges difference) from a position that she sees as falsely unified, she sets up another opposition of "us" against "them"; she defines her notion of community by distinguishing it from what she sees as a masculine type of unity, and as a result, she remains within the logic of metaphysics. By implicating herself in this oppositional structure, she makes

a totalizing and totalitarian gesture that itself could be accused of creating false unity.

In "The Artist and Politics," Woolf contends that England's role as an ally has implications for the meaning of art: even the possibility of continuing to produce it was called into question. Hitler used art in order to achieve unity of the masses by exploiting the desire for art while reifying the state. This rhetoric of community, that suppresses internal differences by transforming an audience into a mob, exploits what Freud observed about the psychology of groups: loss of individual will creates a "collective mind" bent to the will of the leader by exploiting the group's susceptibility to the "truly magical power of words" which can either rouse or calm "the most formidable tempests in the group mind" (68). Woolf worried about Freud's premise that "Just as primitive man survives potentially in every individual, so the primal horde may arise once more out of any random collection" (70), including the audience of a play.

Woolf discusses the problem of forgetting our differences, of women uniting with men, in the name of common identity in *Three Guineas*, where she exposes this "oneness." For Woolf, fascism was not alien to England or to any culture: "We must attack Hitler in England" (*Diary* 5:142). She seriously questioned whether it was possible to constitute an identity except at the expense of another⁵. In *Between the Acts*, she explores the fragile hope that

art can, even (especially?) in a crisis, mediate⁶ moments of authentic community.

The crisis in *Between the Acts*, then, is both literary and political: what can a writer do to abolish the stance of "unresisting obedience" to authority that is so necessary to the triumph of a dictator? Woolf, like Miss La Trobe, decides to "expose" and move the audience to reflection. Since relations at Pointz Hall breed violence, a suppressed war surfaces when a nonconforming artist decides to denaturalize the role of the spectator and expose the suspense and terror of the present. In "Time Present," meaning is suspended and the audience can no longer enjoy anonymity and false safety. Words are cut in two by "distant music" that turns out to be war planes (140). What rouses the audience to rage and ridicule and brings out the buried terror of impending war and the withdrawal of a scapegoat ("And what about the Jews? . . . People like ourselves?" -- 90-91) is a scriptless act, a staged confrontation with "life itself."

Woolf's readers, like the audience of Miss La Trobe's play, are asked to submit to the "mirror bearers," who ask us to consider how "orts, scraps, and fragments" may be transformed not into a herd moved by the instinct to unite against a common enemy, but into a community conscious of internal differences though momentarily at peace. The necessary catalyst is a loss of control; the need for a final, finalizing, affirmative gesture is renounced. In

contrast to Lily's victory over her desire to become "one" with Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* ("I have had my vision" -- 192), in *Between the Acts* words "put on meaning" only when each speaks as part of the community, "as one of the audience" (139). In *Between the Acts*, the artist is subject to her audience and to a perpetual need to renew the play.

Meaning, then, cannot be "one" or the product of one mind. As the first diary entry I cited suggests, the focus here is not on the individual or the artist, not "I" but "we": the group. At issue are communication and community; the focus is on dialogue rather than monologue, shared meaning rather than autonomy. In *Between the Acts*, practices of art, production of literature, and public performance are examined for relations of power -- both the danger of inciting people to violence and the hope of destroying the structure in order to generate peace.

Anonymity of the leader/artist and substitution of communal for individual identity, then, are important ways to counteract fascism and its counterpart in art (which reproduces a relationship of dominance and submission between author and reader/audience and as a result corrupts community). But in order for art to function as both performance and process, metaphor and metamorphosis, it must violate the conventions which have made it possible for people no longer to feel threatened by art's power to estrange them from their lives. Miss La Trobe's pageant moves toward the achievement

of community by inverting the characters' habit of domesticating language. On the day of the pageant, language becomes strange again: "Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you" (47); "Words raised themselves and became symbolical" (56).

The violations of literary genre and social manners in Miss La Trobe's pageant are calculated to realize the middle term: "the third emotion," identified as "peace" (70). Significantly, the third term, which, until the final moment, Isa can only envision as the last of a string of separate feelings -- "Love. Hate. Peace" (70) -- is involved in the mysterious appearance of "Another voice, a third voice, [that] was saying something simple" (86). What I would like to suggest is that this other voice is an alternative to the dictator's voice because it is "the voice that was no one's voice," a ghostly echo of the ancient voice of Anon⁷ -- perhaps the voice that is everyone's voice.

While Miss La Trobe cannot bring her audience back into the bushes with her, she can struggle to transport (trope) her vision across the fragile yet active and necessary threshold dividing them. The authority of illusion unmasks the illusion of authority. To the audience's questions "Whom to thank? . . . Whom could they make responsible?" (141), Miss La Trobe and Woolf respond by remaining invisible. Insofar as there is a work of art anymore in Woolf, it is no longer represented by a bound book, but by a (working) script -- a text that

must be performed and which only then binds its author, actors, and audience together as an authentic community. Like Woolf's characters, we are asked to move from being spectators to becoming actors, to name accurately the violence in the world as originating within and between us.

Le dialogue de théâtre se fait sur la base d'un presupposé qui la gouverne: que l'un des interlocuteurs, par exemple, a qualité pour imposer la loi du dialogue.

-- Anne Ubersfeld

A Woolfian perspective on the Derridean argument problematizes the lack of differentiation in Derrida's key concepts. It might begin by pointing to the fact that Derrida's readings focus for the most part on a Subject who is male, white, and European, and that his critique of subjectivity has been generalized, like a metaphor that substitutes the genus for the species. The Subject, the general term, covers more than the more limited term, the dominant male, but it claims universality, a pattern of experience characteristic of all. Deconstruction of the Subject has been generalized to cover all Subjects, even those never included in that group of Subjects. It involves a move from Subject to subject without gender differentiation or class or race distinctions. Derrida allows a conflation based on the generic "he" and its repression of differentiated subjectivity, its erasure of a female locus of subjectivity. Rather than a deconstruction of subjectivity, "we" are given a

deconstruction of male subjectivity where the "I" is generalized to the universality of "we," thereby extending deconstruction to all in an undifferentiated manner.

A Woolfian "position" questions the possibility of talking about subjectivity as if everyone experienced it in the same way. It forces us to be cautious in supporting Derrida's question in "Choreographies": "What if we were to approach here [in deconstruction] (for one does not arrive at this as one would at a determined location) the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating" (76). This world where neither male nor female identity were limiting, but could be freely chosen, and passed into and out of, this polysexual chorus, is a tempting proposal. But, to invoke Woolf's argument in *Three Guineas*, "we" cannot all start from where "we" would like to end up without losing sight of some very important historical differences. And to what degree do cultural determinations make these undifferentiated positions impossible even as reading strategies, in spite of what would appear to be their theatrical necessity? Are "we" skipping that missing first chapter, the disappearance of women as active subjects, yet again? Is the indeterminacy Derrida advises, the indiscriminate concept of gender, possible within his system precisely because the power of the male as speaker is guaranteed on a larger stage? Has the risk been guaranteed in

such a way as to make this indeterminate subjectivity safe for the speaker which the culture identifies as masculine?

A further question that stems from a reading based on a Woolfian perspective is: does deconstruction do what it claims to do -- that is, is the unity implicit in the generic position of the Derridean "reader" balanced or does it slip into a valorization of the male philosopher's point of view. Derrida advises women to be self-less, not to try to conceptualize an active female subjectivity, as this would risk constructing a system similar to the system which they are fighting: "If you keep the philosophical axiomatics, implying that *women* are subjects, considering women as subjects, then you keep the whole framework on which the traditional university is built" ("Women in the Beehive" 193). The space of the male philosopher, which then forgetfully poses as a generic position, proves to be the best vantage point for deconstructing a metaphysics which has left women no voice; the male speaks his knowledge of the power of weakness; he operates on the powerful space of their powerlessness.

A Woolfian perspective would also remind us that women's allegory of non-identity, unlike men's, is concerned with the fact that they may look into the symbolic mirror of the male text and see nothing of themselves as women. They may see only male fantasies of themselves, spoken by men: "Woman," the social construct that has no basis in "reality" (anymore than men), is a term

that depends on the context in which it is being discussed and not upon social experiences or material existence. Women, defined by their difference from men, remain in the same structure. The teleology for men, as deconstructors, the direction of their action toward self-lessness, is thus already the condition of women.

Ce qu'exprime la représentation théâtrale, son message propre, ce n'est pas tant le discours des personnages que les conditions d'exercice de ce discours.

-- Anne Ubersfeld

Considering the importance of the pageant in *Between the Acts*, it might be instructive to use the metaphor of theatre as a device to investigate a few of the presuppositions that lend coherence to the Derridean argument. The concept of theatre is analogous to that of metaphor, since both claim to imitate and represent a hidden truth that occurs offstage. Like metaphor, theatre can claim to contain within itself the interiorized memory of what has gone before; it tries, like the signifier, to remember the signified in its purity. Thus theatre can claim to perform meaning, to enact the connection between what is represented and itself as representation. But at the same time, it raises the representation to the level of an abstraction, which, in the system of the *logos*, can claim to exist at a higher level than what has been interiorized.

Derrida's writing shows the way that theatre, like metaphor, plays a duplicitous role as a substitute, a stand-in for the truth which tries to present itself as unique. The representation always constitutes both the "truth's" possibility and the risk that meaning will not return to its original site but will be taken away by a substitute, disrupting that system of logic's truth. It is this type of duplicity in Derrida's own texts that a Woolfian "position" can expose by interrogating Derrida's scene of address.

We can read "Chora" and "White Mythology" as scripts for the scene of deconstruction, whose staging, or conditions of enunciation, contain much about its message or utterance. A script is a text that is descriptive, but because of its location on a particular stage as an institution, it also has meaning in relation to that institutional space. As such, it is prescriptive, in that it speaks not just its own words but also the words of the institution of theatre. Perhaps if we look at how the script is presented and by whom, we can reactivate what is missing when we argue strictly in Derrida's terms.

A Woolfian perspective raises a series of questions. Are there significations produced by the difference between what is said and who says it, that is, how it is said? Does one alter the other? What is the nature of the gap between the act of enunciation and the message of the utterance? What about the perlocutionary status of Derrida's writing -- its effects? And what about the addressee? What kind of reading subject is assumed by his deconstructive

text? Can all people afford to overlook the fact that within this drama every word is an act that has an effect?

In "Chora," (which explains the dangers of differentiation) Derrida works to dis-place the (non)concept of chora by demonstrating how chora disrupts binary oppositions: "la pensée de la chora excède la polarité, sans doute analogue, du *mythos* et du *logos*. . . . elle n'appartiendrait plus à l'horizon du sens, ni du sens comme sens de l'être" (267-8); "chora, qui n'est ni «sensible» ni «intelligible», appartient à un «troisième genre»" (265), "d'un raisonnement hybride, bâtard (*logismoinothoi*), voire corrompu. . . . Cet appel au troisième genre n'était que le temps d'un détour pour faire signe vers un genre au-delà du genre? Au-delà des catégories, surtout des oppositions catégoriales" (266).

Derrida compares *mythos* to an orphaned child who does not have the authority of the father to guarantee its position; he then sets *logos*, the law of the father, against *mythos* as its binary opposite. Chora, however, belongs to neither (and both) realm(s) and as a result disrupts the logic of the opposition: "Troisième genre (48e), elle n'appartient pas à un couple d'opposition" (291).

Like Derrida's concept of "Woman," chora does not exist as such; it is indeterminate:

Nous ne prétendrons jamais proposer le *mot juste* pour chora, ni l'appeler enfin, *elle-même*, au-delà de tous les tours et détours de la

rhétorique, ni enfin l'aborder, *elle-même*, pour ce qu'elle aura été, hors de tout point de vue, hors de toute perspective anachronique. . . . [elle] n'est pas quelque chose, et . . . n'est comme rien, pas même comme ce qu'elle serait, elle-même. . . . [Chora] pourtant ne peut s'offrir qu'en se soustrayant à toute détermination, à toutes les marques ou impressions auxquelles nous la disons exposée. . . . Chora n'est pas un sujet . . . [elle est] inaccessible, impassible, «amorphe» (*amorphon*, 51a) et toujours vierge. (268-270)

In short: "Il y a chora mais la chora n'existe pas" (271). In a further attempt to describe this amorphous concept, Derrida argues that Plato uses the word chora to designate the place of the Sophists:

le genre des sophistes se caractérise par l'absence de lieu propre, d'économie, de domicile fixe; ces gens n'ont pas de domesticité, de maison qui leur soit propre (*oikêseis idias*). Ils errent de lieu en lieu, de ville en ville, incapables de comprendre ces hommes qui, philosophes et politiques, *ont lieu*, c'est-à-dire agissent par le geste et par la parole, dans la cité ou à la guerre. (278-9)

Once again, then, this "originary" non-place of the receiver is undifferentiated:

"Dans un troisième genre et dans l'espace neutre d'un lieu sans lieu, un lieu où tout se marque mais qui serait «en lui-même» non marqué" (280).

In arguing for the indeterminacy of chora, Derrida explains that although Plato and others have described it by using the metaphor of a receptacle or receiver, this analogy is problematic because receptacles take on the qualities of that which they receive, whereas chora has no properties as such: "La fémininité de la mère ou de la nourrice ne lui sera jamais attribuée en propre. . . . Elle n'en possède aucune en propre" (271-2). Similarly, the reader (or the receiver of the story), which is also identified with chora, has no

properties, which is to say, this position too is undifferentiated. The story always takes us back to an earlier story in an abyssal chain of substitutes:

"Chaque récit est donc le *réceptacle* d'un autre . . . [la] *réceptacle*, lieu d'accueil ou d'hébergement, (*hypodoché*), c'est la détermination la plus insistante . . . de chora" (285).

In "White Mythology," Derrida's key metaphor is "dehiscence," a term which, like chora, is ultimately undifferentiated, but here it is specifically gender which is undecidable. Dehiscence is a botanical term that suggests an active/passive undecidability, an asymmetrical alternation between male and female. It provides Derrida with a space in which positions can be filled indifferently by subjects whose very identification as male or female have been proved to be theoretically impossible. As Derrida says in "Choreographies," an interview which concerns the connection between metaphors having to do with "Woman" and men,

"Hymen" and "invagination," at least in the context into which these words have been swept, no longer simply designate figures for the feminine body. They no longer do so, that is . . . assuming that anatomy is in this instance the final recourse. . . . One could say quite accurately that the hyman *does not exist*. Anything constituting the value of existence is foreign to the "hymen." And if there were hymen -- I am not saying if the hymen existed -- property value would be no more appropriate to it for reasons that I have stressed. . . . How can one then attribute the *existence* of the hymen *properly* to woman? ("Choreographies" 75)

This undecidability of dehiscence and of terminology having to do with female body parts is not unproblematic. To paraphrase Christie MacDonald, we can

never be sure whether a particular term implies complicity with or a break from existing ideology ("Choreographies" 74).

"White Mythology" discusses texts which deal with attempts to articulate the philosophy of metaphor, which is the metaphor of philosophy. What a Derridean reading discovers is the duplicitous nature of metaphor, which undoes all systems because metaphors constitute the very possibility of the logic that tries to explain them. They reveal themselves to be a fold inherent in language, which shows that the explanation is always contaminated by being part of what it tries to explain or master.

The male of this argument focuses on texts by masters of the tradition he is decentring. "Woman" appears here only as a marginal, ghostly, reported echo. Women readers (or writers) is not a category that has anything to do with the category "Woman." But "Woman" appears in Derrida's text where the risks of metaphor are discussed, where there is a need to represent a gap, to unsettle the main text by representing the unsettling. Derrida quotes a passage from Diderot concerning Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse, followed by an excerpt from Nietzsche on the uselessness of believing in the masculinity or femininity of the sun. He then quotes a long passage from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* in which Freud describes the dream of one of his female patients:

Thus the flower symbolism in this dream included virginal femininity (*jungfräulichweiblicher*), masculinity and an allusion to the defloration

by violence . . . She laid all the more emphasis on the preciousness of the "centre" -- on another occasion she used the words, "*a centre-piece of flowers*" -- that is to say, on her virginity . . . Later on the dreamer produced an addendum (*Nachtrag*) to the dream: . . . "there is a gap, a little space in the flowers." (cited in *Margins of Philosophy* 246)

This shadowy means of evidence for the fold within metaphor, the gap that always unsettles metaphor's claim of fullness, is located on the text's borders as epigraphs to Derrida's "real" text. The marginal space of the text's edge allows him to trace a set of displacements. The female reader, however, has always been displaced to a greater extent than the male reader because it is a tradition of texts by males that is referred to by the male writer. Female readers are "spoken" (by means of metaphor) but not directly addressed. The text is ostensibly addressed to all readers in an undifferentiated manner, so readers are never expected to read as women or men but from a generic space, that of "the reader." Women having disappeared, "Woman" (the ahistorical, undifferentiated construct) becomes a textual necessity to represent what is absent, but as Derrida has said, this image has no connection to real (historical, differentiated) women. The enigma of "Woman" is suggested without any marker to represent the absent women. In that displaced, marginal text of the epigraph, it is men who speak "Woman"; she is filtered through their words or rather she becomes the support for those words. Thus in the main text both women and "Woman" are absent. In the marginal epigraphs, the borderline texts, "Woman" is spoken about and for, so it is women who are absent.

These marginal epigraphs are thus carefully controlled interruptions that propel Derrida's argument forward. They are representations through which Derrida's narrative must pass in order to assure its coherence; and they are the means of his argument. Woman is not located in the main text as metaphor; she is beside the text. Associated in this sideways manner, she is given added valorization as being somehow associated with what is absolutely heterogeneous, with alterity. In "Plato's Pharmacy," for example, an essay that is "all about fathers and sons . . . Nothing is said of the mother" (*Dissemination* 143). In this hundred-page essay, the mother only rates a mention, an aside -- that is, an already decentred remark. Of course, there is a strategic reason for this focus on men: Derrida is critiquing and undercutting the male-dominated, logocentric tradition and must work from within the tradition in order to displace it. Nevertheless, this necessity does not exempt him from the possibility of critique. "Woman" is valorized obliquely by being linked to the undecidability of textuality while women are in certain ways relegated to passivity and silence by male speech. "Woman" as textual enigma covers over the continuing absence of women as speakers and writers.

Un dialogue de théâtre a donc une double couche de contenu, il délivre deux espèces de messages; le même système de signes (linguistique) porte un double contenu: (a) le contenu même des énoncés du discours; (b) les informations concernant les conditions de

production de ces énoncés. Oublier cette seconde couche d'information, parce qu'elle est moins évidente, revient à mutiler le sens des énoncés eux-mêmes . . .

-- Anne Ubersfeld

A reexamination of the theatrical scene may yield a clearer view of the Derridean warning against absolute, totalizing differentiation. As Anne Ubersfeld explains in the above epigraph, theatre speaks less about a word than how one can or cannot speak it; the conditions of the enunciation of discourse partially constitute the message. This statement is suggestive in terms of Derrida's *parole*. Who speaks to whom? Under what conditions can one speak or not speak?

The stage of Derrida's *parole* is an institutional space (that of the university) which is charged with its own reproduction even as Derrida claims to dissect claims of mastery. All discourses are not the same, and part of the message that comes with and enables deconstruction is the university as a paternal institution. Derrida, the Father of deconstruction, occupies a pedagogical position and the female deconstructor, the child to Derrida's father, takes the position of the student to be trained to perform deconstruction. Although Derrida frequently analyzes and attempts to disrupt power relations, he sometimes seems to forget about the existence of institutionally sanctioned power relations that determine the politics of meaning in the first place. What is at stake in this omission is the dismissal of the Other; by not differentiating

between these different positions, the deconstructor does not have to acknowledge the seriousness of the other's claims. As S.P. Mohanty argues, as long as we avoid the challenges of competing claims, "we will surrender complex historical knowledge of Others to sentimental ethical gestures in their direction" (24).

In "Chora," Derrida himself draws attention to the power implicit within any structure of address: "on se demande souvent qui en définitive *tient* le discours, qui *prend* la parole et qui la *reçoit*" (284). By demanding an undifferentiated response on the part of students, the institution presumes (and requires) that they have entered the field undifferentiated. Further, its training and information can most adequately be assimilated by those students who already have, because of their historical position, what the field demands but does not provide.

If the space of the enunciation adds its own force, one of the two subjects will always have the louder voice. The danger of deconstruction's faulty memory about its conditions of possibility is that it does not ask *why* one of its subjects always speaks louder. As Julia Kristeva asks, "What is the meaning, interest, and benefit of the interpretive position itself, a position from which I wish to give meaning to as an enigma?" ("Psychoanalysis and the Polis" 78).

A Woolfian displacement works to dismantle our reliance on interpretive authority and as a result leaves us hesitant to acknowledge Derrida's authority (as he himself is). If deconstruction does not try to work out a theoretical position from which we can analyze how men and women read and write differently, not because of any essence that either gender somehow possesses which would make their readings "truer" but because they enter with a different historical relation to language, in what way can women claim the right to speak in such a system? A Woolfian displacement would point to the fact that the danger of not claiming that gender differentiation is important in strategies of reading and writing is that women who are present and active on the critical scene are forced into the rather mystical and mythical stance of writing as Other, as if they were not present; they are forced to react in terms of an ambiguous textuality, to write from "Woman's" place, and to endlessly analyze the absence of women writers and subjects from men's texts.

Derrida is no doubt right to predict the problems that would arise from women writing as male subjects. But a woman could only do this if she *were* a man or if she were neuter, since historically neuter has been revealed to be masculine. As Derrida explains in "Women in the Beehive,"

when we say that the ego, the "I think," is neither man nor woman, we can in fact verify that it's already a man, and not a woman. It's always the case. So, to the extent which universality implies neutralization, you can be sure that it's only a hidden way of confirming the man in his power. (194)

As this citation shows, Derrida is in agreement with the Woolfian position on this point, however, because differentiation entails a logic of metaphysics, he feels that he must use other strategies to disrupt hierarchical oppositions.

Derrida's undifferentiated point of view requires from female students of deconstruction precisely what women enter without: an indifferent relation to power. Because they enter the pedagogical scene engendered as not-male, in this culture, their words are already marked by their bodies, whose lack, perceived by the male eye, supports the privilege of the male body and masculine speech.

Further, her words, even if she speaks "like a man," are mimicry⁸. Their similarity to the words of men mark them as not the words of men. For a woman to speak like a man, it must first be clear that she is not a man. Within the claim that she can speak "like a man" is the proof that she cannot, the proof that she is different from other subjects. She is proven inappropriate by the very attempt to mimic, to be appropriate. Paul Smith argues that "if women begin to speak and act from the same ground of cerned subjectivity and identity as men have traditionally enjoyed, a resistance is automatically effected in a sense" (137). Since women have never been considered full subjects but were instead marginalized, put in a position to guarantee men's identity, "there is already not only a contestation or a seeking of power, but also a contradiction at work" (137).

In *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe demonstrates that this mimicry has the potential to be quite subversive. Not only does Woolf undermine all definitions of a group as centred, unified identity, but she also rewrites the concept of community as a fragmented, questioning, contradictory, but (and this is where she differs from Derrida) collective voice. To return to my earlier comment, this heterogeneous group is brought together, but the unanswered (and perhaps deliberately avoided) question is: does it work -- that is, is it (in practice) an effective form of community? The new relation between artist and audience subverts the traditional hierarchical lines of power, replacing them with a participatory communal form. By replacing the voice of the leader with the voice of the community, Woolf proposes a direction for revolutionary change. At the same time, the inevitability of the unifying forces shows through.

Nonetheless, the reproduction of logocentrism by those it has disavowed contaminates and displaces the words reserved for the appropriate speaking subject. Logocentrism will begin to waver when inappropriate subjects learn its language because they can repeat it only partially. (Of course all "subjects" will necessarily fail, but women will violate the structure to a greater extent.) As incomplete mirrors, they can only reflect back to the male subject a partial representation of himself, a reflection that is flawed, not specular. The more the inappropriate subjects learn his language, the less dependable his

mirror. Rather than reacting, they re-act to change both the language and the world.

Derrida's fears that women speaking like men (that is, from within the logocentric tradition) will continue the Same does not factor gender as a disruptive and inappropriate threat to the specular dialectic. His concern with the Same presumes the Same. By implicitly presuming, while denying, undifferentiated readers and writers, he presumes a dialectic whose structure is an ahistorical constant. Derrida anchors his theory to a dialectic that appears to be unsusceptible to transformation rather than taking seriously the two subjects of the enunciation, whose relationship is historically changeable.

By insisting on undifferentiation, Derrida denies the difference that gender always introduces into the situation of reader and writer: men and women enter that scene and act within it differently, with different symbolic capacities. But the fact that his words occur in the institutional academic setting of Western culture means that he simultaneously insists on differences. Women may participate in the "selfless" rhetoric of deconstruction, but they are not (for the most part) the ones who write the texts he (re)reads. Denying the importance of gender differentiation on the one hand, he includes it on the other.

This discourse succeeds in obtaining from the oppressed a recognition of legitimate knowledge they command. At the same time, it

confers on the privileged the supreme privilege of not seeing themselves as privileged. A Woolfian perspective points to the fact that the discourse of the Subject should lead us to a reevaluation of the social conditions of cultivated discourse about subjectivity in which our own class and race privileges are also factors. As Kristeva argues in "Women's Time," "we" must take seriously the effects of gender differentiation even as "we" work to undermine them, as they are translated by and translate a difference in the relation to power, language, and meaning.

In such a conceptual system, any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the masculine. As a result, neither the Derridean nor the Woolfian approach is fully satisfactory, as each (in different ways) keeps women within the dominant structure of a masculine economy and (again in different ways) creates totalizing discourses. To invoke once again Woolf and Derrida's differing conceptions of what I am calling the middle voice, both writers feel the necessity of counteracting relationships of dominance, but Woolf foregrounds the importance of revolutionary change and as a result attempts to describe a (necessarily metaphysical) notion of a collective identity whose efficacy is not certain, while Derrida highlights the necessity of disrupting (without reinstalling) metaphysical notions such as the Self and as a result does not attempt to construct even a provisional identity that (despite its counterproductive tendencies) would enable us to live now.

A Woolfian perspective does not advocate rejecting the Derridean manoeuvre altogether, for it would acknowledge that there is much to be gained from deconstruction's project, but it reminds deconstruction of the importance of historicizing or contextualizing women's bodies. As Jane Gallop argues, "identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question" (cited in Smith 149). Gayatri Spivak also articulates a double strategy. She argues for the necessity of a project that is "against sexism, where women unite as a biologically oppressed caste; and for feminism, where human beings train to prepare for a transformation of consciousness" (cited in Smith 149). A Woolfian perspective reminds us that there are (at least) two dramas of subjectivity, and by extension it projects a praxis that involves a dream of undifferentiation, of "incalculable choreographies," ("Choreographies" 76) but it also (again, not unproblematically) tries to find ways to theorize our activity as culturally constructed, gendered subjects -- speaking bodies, real fictions.

Endnotes

1. A critique based on a reading of *Between the Acts* would take into consideration not only issues of gender but also issues of race, class, and sexual orientation. My reading of the Derridean argument will focus on problems that arise from the exclusion of a consideration of gender in Derrida's structure of address, which is not to suggest that the category of women is unified. On the contrary, implicit in my argument is the assumption that this category must itself be deconstructed in order to reveal the plurality of women's voices, and that in Derrida's texts, which use the concept of "Woman," it is not. My references to Derrida's failure to differentiate, then, refer to each silenced voice.

2. By communication I do not mean the transference or exchange of intentions and meanings, but rather a general type of writing, of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would be only an effect. As Derrida puts it in "Signature, Event, Context,"

the semantic horizon that habitually governs the notion of communication is exceeded or split by the intervention of writing, that is, by a *dissemination* irreducible to *polysemy*. . . . [A]n opposition of metaphysical concepts (e.g., speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the confrontation of two terms, but a hierarchy and the order of a subordination. Deconstruction cannot be restricted or immediately pass to a neutralization: it must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing -- put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of *intervening* in the field of oppositions it criticizes and that is also a field of nondiscursive forces. Every concept, moreover, belongs to a systematic chain and constitutes itself in a system of predicates. . . . Deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated. For example, writing, as a classical concept, entails predicates that have been subordinated, excluded or held in abeyance by forces and according to necessities to be analyzed. It is those predicates (I have recalled several of them) whose force of generality, generalization, and generativity is liberated, grafted onto a "new"

concept of writing that corresponds as well to what has always *resisted* the prior organization of forces, always constituted the *residue* irreducible to the dominant force of organizing the hierarchy that we may refer to, in brief, as logocentric. To leave to this new concept the old name of writing is tantamount to maintaining the structure of the *graft*, the transition and indispensable adherence to an effective *intervention* in the constituted historical field. It is to give to everything at stake in the operations of deconstruction the chance and the force, the power of *communication*. (*Limited Inc.* 21)

3. The notion of erasure points to the always already divided nature of the self, its self-reflexivity and self-identity. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida explains that the self is folded in upon itself:

Constituting and dislocating it at the same time, writing is other than the subject, in whatever sense the latter is understood. Writing can never be thought under the category of the subject; however it is modified, however it is endowed with consciousness or unconsciousness, it will refer, by the entire thread of its history, to the substantiality of a presence unperturbed by accidents, or to the identity of the selfsame [*le propre*] in the presence of self-relationship. . . .

Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject. By the movement of its drift/derivation [*dérive*] the emancipation of the sign constitutes in return the desire of presence. That becoming -- or that drift/derivation -- does not befall the subject which would choose it or would passively let itself be drawn along by it. As the subject's relationship with its own death, this becoming is the constitution of subjectivity. (68-69)

Spacing-as-writing, then, constitutes the subject, since it is the interval which permits the fold, but at the same time, spacing dislocates the self because it does not allow the parts to collapse onto each other and thus achieve presence and unity. Writing is the absence which articulates the subject, the space inside the fold.

4. This decentralizing process or rethinking of the centre is, of course, an important part of Derrida's project. In "Structure, Sign, and Play," he argues that the centre has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute: "the substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it" (*Writing and Difference* 280). As a result, the centre cannot be thought of as a present being but as a "nonlocus in which an

infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (280). In this sense, totalization is impossible. Instead of conceiving of an inexhaustible field, Derrida argues that we need to think of the field as having something missing from itself: "a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions . . . this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*" (289). (For a more extended discussion of supplementarity, see chapter three pp.2-5.)

Derrida further explains this process of decentralization in his essay on Artaud: "The theatre of cruelty expulses God [the centre] from the stage. . . . [It] inhabits or rather produces a nontheological space" (*Writing and Difference* 235). This nontheological space is also the space of non-dictation: "Speech will cease to govern the stage. . . . The director and the actor will no longer take dictation . . . we shall renounce the theatrical superstition of the text and the dictatorship of the writer" (239). Derrida continues:

The stage is theological for as long as its structure, following the entirety of tradition, comports the following elements: an author-creator who, absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps watch over, assembles, regulates the time or the meaning of representation, letting this latter *represent* him as concerns what is called the content of his thoughts, his intentions, his ideas. He lets representation represent him through representatives, directors or actors, *enslaved* interpreters who represent characters who, primarily through what they say, more or less directly represent the thought of the "creator." Interpretive *slaves* who faithfully execute the providential designs of the "*master*". . . . the theological stage comports a *passive, seated* public, a public of *spectators*, of consumers . . . attending a production . . . offered to their *voyeuristic* scrutiny. (235; my italics)

As the words I have placed in italics demonstrate, (Derrida's interpretation of) Artaud's non-theatre resembles the (dictatorial aspects of) the pageant in *Between the Acts*. The words "absent" and "afar" point both to an attempt to decentre the stage and the unavoidable totalization (or suppression of the Other) that accompanies it. Of course the non-theological (or non-representative) theatre that Artaud and Miss La Trobe (and Woolf) strive to set in motion is bound to fail. The theatre of cruelty, like Miss La Trobe's pageant,

will always remain the inaccessible limit of a representation which is not repetition, of a re-presentation which is full presence, which does not carry its double within itself as its death, of a present which does not repeat itself, that is, of a present outside time, a nonpresent.

The present offers itself as such, appears, presents itself, opens the stage of time or the time of the stage only by harboring its own intestine difference, and only in the interior fold of its original repetition, in representation. (248)

This decentralization also marks the end of representation which is original representation (I will return to this issue in chapter three), an original interpretation that "no master-speech, no project of mastery will have permeated and levelled in advance" (238). As a result, "the director and the participants (who would no longer be actors *or* spectators) would cease to be the instruments and organs of representation" (237).

5. This concern of Woolf's about the possibility of constituting an identity without suppressing the Other is also an issue that interests Derrida. He argues that deconstruction works to identify and combat totalitarianism; indeed he comments that his "principal motivation" is the analysis of "the condition of totalitarianism in all its forms, which cannot always be reduced to names of regimes" (*Responses* 155). Derrida's desire is to free himself of totalitarianism as far as possible or "to uproot what is finally, perhaps, only the terrifying desire for roots and common roots" (155). Both Derrida and Woolf engage in projects that attempt to disrupt totalizing forces, yet they both inevitably fall prey to precisely these tendencies, for as Derrida tells us in "Ellipsis," "To write is to have the passion of the origin" (*Writing and Difference* 295).

We can find an instructive example of how totalizing discourses link up with totalitarianism in the wartime journalism of Paul de Man and the essays written in response to it. This is not to suggest that either Woolf or Derrida produce totalitarian discourses. Instead, what I want to argue is that, as this example demonstrates, totalization (like totalitarianism) is an extremely slippery term. Ernesto Laclau explains that totalitarianism

is to assert that there is a point of the social fabric which is the locus of both knowledge and power . . . [it] drastically eliminates any difference or ambiguity . . . Precisely because totalitarianism presents itself as an entirely rational order, it has to adopt the form of an uncontaminated purity, and that which is excluded has, conversely, to be *essentially* impure. (90)

The upshot of Laclau's argument is that categories like "totalitarian," "fascist," or "collaborator" must themselves be deconstructed as they are far from homogeneous. Indeed he suggests that those who call de Man totalitarian are themselves making a totalitarian claim by suggesting that there is such a thing as a totalitarian essence and by simplifying and thus distorting de Man's

wartime writing's, his later writing's and deconstruction in general by referring to them as fascist and totalitarian. Derrida makes a similar claim:

In many of the discourses I have read or heard in the last few months . . . whether they attack or defend de Man, it was easy to recognize axioms and forms of behavior that confirm the logic one claims to have rid oneself of: purification, purge, totalization, reappropriation, homogenization, rapid objectification, good conscience, stereotyping and nonreading. (*Responses* 154)

Deborah Esch also discusses this reduction of history to a symmetrical, totalizing narrative of origins and ends and proposes instead that we think of history in terms of the material specificity of the event. In Werner Hamacher's words,

"History," this vague abstraction, seems then and now to function as a powerful means of homogenizing and making a taboo out of history -- namely *that* history which exists only concretely, singularly, idiosyncratically, painfully. To judge that history on the basis of its empty generality is to deny the past its particularities, and to run the risk of repeating its worst traits. (*Responses* 463)

It is the idea, then, of one history which tolerates no other, the idea of the continuum of historical development that provides the basis not only for de Man's anti-semitic article but also for the authors who have homogenized de Man's early and late writings.

Esch makes a useful connection between totalization and the symbol as de Man explains it in "The Rhetoric of Temporality." According to de Man, the symbol is predicated on the assumed continuity of the sensory image and the supersensory totality that the image suggests (Esch 40). Comparatively, allegory

disrupts the possibility of the symbolic synthesis by opening up a constitutive temporal dimension, the difference that divides the allegorical sign from the previous sign to which it refers. Allegory confesses the failure of coincidence forgotten or repressed in the model of the symbol. (39-40)

The symbol, then, has values of continuity, homogeneity, symmetry, and totality. Esch's point (in terms of this example and de Man's wartime journalism) is that time must be understood as constitutive rather than contingent in order for us to avoid being caught up in a logic of nationalism,

realism, or blindness and insight: "the introduction of the time factor, then, may be understood to disrupt the rhetoric and the ideology of the symbol that, when mapped onto European culture and politics in 1940-43, yielded the national aestheticism . . . that determines much of the wartime journalism" (44).

Geoffrey Hartman describes the argument of de Man's late work in a similar manner: "Any mode of analysis that sees the text as an organicist unity or uses it for a totalizing purpose is blind and the text itself will 'deconstruct' such disclosures" (cited in Esch 44). The imperative that Esch leaves us with involves the act of reading: "the burden imposed by the correlation of the textual and the political, like that imposed by the attempt to articulate early with late de Man, is that of reading: the relations (whether of continuity and complicity, or discontinuity and distance) cannot be presumed, but must be read, again and again, in each here and now" (47).

By contextualizing de Man's wartime journalism in an attempt to discuss it in a non-totalizing manner, Hamacher explains that the totalizing tendency in these writings is not as uncomplicated as many suggest. He argues that de Man's belief in the nation -- that is, his nationalism -- while anti-assimilatory and anti-integrationist (because he believed in Belgium's cultural specificity and wanted to maintain Belgium as an independent region between France and Germany), was at the same time totalizing because this theory implies the originality, autonomy, and essence of the nation (not unlike myths of origin propagated by fascist Germany). In defending Flanders against the cultural and political imperialism of Germany, de Man borrowed the national-aesthetic ideologeme of the Nazi's and turned it against them by using it as an argument for the political independence of Belgium. The issue of de Man's "collaboration" is no simpler. Because of his theory of "realism," which views force as an authority that produces facts and justice, de Man accepts this force because he hopes that it will lead to an ordered, secure, "harmonious" reality. This "reality," however, is hegemonic; it rules out regard for the difference of other histories and for the realities of other people. Despite the inconsistencies and contradictions (his compromise between complicity and critique) within de Man's wartime journalism, it remains linked to the ideologies of race, value, evolution according to fixed laws, and certainty in judgment.

Hamacher concludes that fascism was (among other things)

the complete collapse of language and reality, of meaning and act, intention and fulfilment, one and all -- the system of the elimination of the other, of the denial of *other* realities, of the denunciation of language's otherness. As long as de Man wrote for the collaborationist press, he contributed to this collapse, if for the most part cautiously, and tried, rarely energetically enough, to turn the

heterogeneity of totalitarian ideology against the hegemonic claims made by its representatives. (456)

Like Derrida and Woolf, de Man (in his later work) addresses the totalizing tendencies in literature, literary criticism, and corresponding ideologies and in so doing contributes to their dissolution or destabilization. Hamacher's imperative, while (as this thesis attempts to demonstrate) not always easy to accomplish, invokes what is perhaps the least totalizing method of writing. In his words, we must attempt to disrupt the one response with the diversity of multiple responses (467).

6. The word mediate, of course, implies a difference, a necessary distance or gap that cannot be bridged. As such, mediation is a problematic form of communication. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement of difference is perhaps the least totalizing type of community.

7. It is with the figure of Anon that Woolf most clearly articulates her concept of anonymity, a concept that is crucial to an appreciation of Miss La Trobe's withdrawal and renunciation of control. "Anon," an essay that Woolf was writing at the same time as *Between the Acts*, traces the evolution of the anonymous element in writer and audience from its beginning to its death. The androgynous singer Anon flourished in the Elizabethan period, and it is the Elizabethan playhouse, a place where writer and audience, peasant and noble, shared a common culture and participated in a communal form of art in spite of social differences, that serves as a model for the open-air playhouse of *Between the Acts*. The Elizabethan playwright, who was a social outcast, continued the tradition of the anonymous singer who spoke in a common voice, and who in the creation of art also created community. Like the Elizabethan audience, the audience of *Between the Acts* sits on chairs on the ground. A live and responsive audience, they come from all segments of society to see themselves given body and voice and to participate in communication. The artist, "Miss Whatshername," is a semi-anonymous voice who embodies the communal self. Miss La Trobe takes up Anon's part by urging her audience to discard not only their names but all words and to join together anonymously.

8. As my explanation of the concept of iterability (its repeatability and alterability that describes it at once as both rule and event, concept and singularity) indicates, this mimicry, or forgery as Derrida calls it in his afterward to *Limited Inc.*, is always already anticipated, as it is a constitutive part of the signature:

No signature is possible without recourse, at least implicitly, to the law. The test of authentication is part of the very structure of the

signature. That amounts to saying that "forgery" is always possible, the *possibility* of transgression is already inscribed in speech acts (oral or written). (133)

Three

Derrida on Woolf: Cracking the Limits of Representation

I was coming to that.

-- Robert Graves

Somewhere, parently, in the grinnandgo gap between antediluvius
an annadominant the copyist must have fled with his scroll. The billy
flood rose or an elk charged him or the sultrup worldwright from the
excelsissimost empyrean (bolt, in sum) earthspake or the Dannamen
gallous banged pan the bliddy duran. A scribicide then and there. . .

-- James Joyce

In "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida argues that there are no neutral terms. When we use one term in order to explain another, as a way of elucidating, controlling, or defining the second term, the first term can never be neutral. Like the term to which it is applied, this term has a history and sediment of prior meanings. It follows, of course, that as someone writing on Derrida, I have no neutral terms, and I cannot presume to discuss Derrida's terms in a neutral way. As well, my citation of these terms necessarily will do violence to Derrida's project, as I must sketch out much too schematically a trajectory which by my mere rehearsal will install the logocentrism that Derrida deconstructs. Nevertheless, I will attempt to graft a few of his key terms to this

chapter because I think that they provide a useful point of departure for (re)reading *Between the Acts*.

In chapter one, I discussed the notion that the origin is ungraspable because it is always already divided in itself and that this tendency is what gives language its dual process of graft and disengagement, and in chapter two, I described the resultant notion of the decentralizing or (self)effacing self. In this chapter, I will discuss the (non)principle that permits (and sets in motion) these processes. I am referring to the logic of supplementarity, which is the logic of *différance* and of the middle voice.

Derrida argues that writing is "dangerous" as soon as it presents itself as the replacement for what should need no replacement. Writing "intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of." It fills the void of what should have no void, showing that something can be filled up of itself only by allowing itself to be filled by sign and proxy (*Of Grammatology* 144-5). Things that need supplementing, then, are not sufficient on their own, as they lack something they require.

Although it has often been assumed that writing is a vehicle that carries meaning, as Derrida points out, meaning cannot occur outside of writing. Meaning, then, is missing something that writing has, but in adding what is missing, writing reveals the incompleteness of the thing that needs a supplement to be itself. This process of supplementation endangers meaning

because writing, rather than merely serving as an empty vehicle which transports meaning whole, adds itself to and then substitutes itself for meaning.

What should remain outside meaning, then, insinuates itself into the inside of meaning: "It breaks in as a dangerous supplement, as a substitute that enfeebles, enslaves, effaces, separates, and falsifies" (*Of Grammatology* 215). The outside, then, is in the inside from the beginning because the inside requires the outside in order to be an inside; similarly, "the presumed interiority of meaning. . . . is always already carried outside itself" (*Positions* 33).

No matter how far back we trace meaning to free it from writing, supplementarity is always already there. "Nothing -- no present and in-different being -- thus precedes *différance*¹ and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*. . . . spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which . . . the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality . . . [is] always deferred" (*Positions* 28-9). The Western writer "would like to separate originarity from supplementarity. . . . [for] it is unthinkable and intolerable that what has the name origin should be no more than a point situated within the system of supplementarity" (*Of Grammatology* 243). However, writing moves ever further from the "zero degree" that could exist if writing itself were not the supplement inside the very inside that should allow no supplement.

As chapter one demonstrates, beyond the written text, "there is not a blank, virgin, empty margin, but another text, a weave of differences, of forces without any present center of reference" (*Margins of Philosophy* xxiii). "The supplement is always the supplement of a supplement. One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognize that there is a supplement at the source" (*Of Grammatology* 304). As a result, "the point of origin becomes ungraspable. . . . split in itself" (36). Supplementation, then, takes the form of a *mise en abyme*, a (non)structure that Derrida refers to (aptly, in the context of this chapter) as "[un] théâtre de l'ironie où les scènes s'emboîtent dans une série de réceptacles sans fin et sans fond" ("Chora" 287).

To put it in a slightly different way, no element in the signifying system "can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present" (*Positions* 26). Each "element" is constituted by the trace within it of elements from which it differs. "Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere either present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces" (26); and "the trace itself does not exist" (*Of Grammatology* 167). The trace, like chora, is something "qui n'est pas quelque chose, et qui n'est comme rien, pas même comme ce qu'elle serait, elle-même" ("Chora" 269).

As words appear on the page, they erase the pure meaning that would obliterate them if such pure meaning could appear in its own right.

Indeed, words on a page depend on the erasure of such pure meaning, because written words can never be pure meaning. They can only represent it once it has gone. The trace "can only trace itself out in the erasure of its own 'presence,' so that tracing is not simply the mere other or outside of erasing" (*Dissemination* 364). The trace, then, "erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the *a* writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in *différance*" (*Dissemination* 23). This explains the forever recursive process of writing. Writing never fixes meaning, for something always remains incomplete or unclear. Writing itself erases the possibility of the end of writing.

Only the absence of writing could fill the absence created by the process of writing, which forever traces the absent figures that must remain absent for writing to operate. Though writing constantly points to what it replaces, the "thing itself" that writing points to can never appear in writing. Writing actually creates both speaking and meaning by differing from them and thus calling attention to them by that difference, and by deferring them and thus generating the desire for what now can be recognized as absent.

Consistent with this logic of supplementarity, this chapter critiques the traditional notion of mimesis, questioning the representational view of art which is implicit in my reading of *Between the Acts* in chapter two. It relies instead on the notion (invoked in chapter one) that plenitude and unity are fictions masking the duplicity (that is, the always open possibility of graft and

disengagement) inherent in language. As a result, no reading (not Mr Streatfield's, Miss La Trobe's, Woolf's, or mine) can be a unified whole, complete in itself; the excess will always carry meaning away, and will forever graft itself into new contexts.

As its title indicates, *Between the Acts* engages with discourses of theatre, and what I want to argue is that it is the theatre (theatrical representation and, through that, representation in general) which is being interrogated and deconstructed. There is a lot more at stake here than a playful evocation of the tranquil images of daily life: "English country; and a scenic old house -- and a terrace where nursemaids walk -- and people passing" (*A Writer's Diary* 276). Derrida argues in "The Theater of Cruelty," that "theatrical art should be the primordial and privileged site of this destruction of imitation: more than any other art, it has been marked by the labor of total representation in which the affirmation of life lets itself be doubled and emptied by negation" (*Writing and Difference* 234). Following this imperative, Derrida attempts to redefine representation in order to free it from its classical baggage. This new conception of representation is an apt model for what the pageant in *Between the Acts* sets in motion:

The stage, certainly, will no longer represent, since it will not operate as an addition, as the sensory illustration of a text already written, thought, or lived outside the stage, which the stage would then only repeat but whose fabric it would not constitute. The stage will no

longer operate as the repetition of a present, will no longer represent a present that would exist elsewhere and prior to it, a present whose plenitude would be older than it, absent from it, and rightfully capable of doing without it: the being-present-to-itself of the absolute Logos, the living present of God. Nor will the stage be a representation, if representation means the surface of a spectacle displayed for spectators. It will not even offer the presentation of a present, if present signifies that which is maintained in front of me. Cruel representation must permeate me. And nonrepresentation is, thus, original representation, if representation signifies, also, the unfolding of a volume, a multidimensional milieu, an experience which produces its own space. (*Writing and Difference* 237)

To invoke (once again) Derrida's (non)concept of the middle voice, a key aspect of the 'theater of cruelty' is that "the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds him" (cited in *Writing and Difference* 244); that is, "the spectators become an entertainment to themselves . . . actors themselves" (245). Emile Benveniste (whom Derrida credits with the notion of the middle voice) explains that what is important about the middle voice is that "the subject is the center as well as the agent of the process; he achieves something which is being achieved in him" (*Problems in General Linguistics* 149). I will show that the spectators in *Between the Acts* are put into a position similar to that of the subject in the early form of the middle voice.

What I want to argue, then, is that a deconstructive reading of *Between the Acts* could take as its point of departure the (non)concept of the middle voice, (which, as I mentioned in chapter one, points to what exceeds, disrupts, and displaces the opposition of active and passive and as a result deconstructs the boundaries of all the philosophical opposites which are based

on the opposition of active and passive), because it is this deconstruction or displacement of limits which we are confronted with in *Between the Acts* in the irreducible plurality of theatres which constantly interpenetrate each other in a never-ending string of supplements. This text pushes the unnameable to its outside limits but at the same time puts in question the closure of the novel and its very relation to its limits. *Between the Acts* engages a radical type of theatre that powerfully challenges the Western conception of representation.

Miss La Trobe's spectacle is presented not as a play but as a pageant, a spectacle inscribed in a *carnavalesque*² tradition. The crucial feature of this tradition is the removal (or rather nonexistence) of the separation or boundary between the audience and the stage. In *Between the Acts*, there is no separation between actors and spectators: everybody is drawn into the carnival. The inhabitants of Pointz Hall feel that they play a part in the show -- "and a very important part too" (47); Miss La Trobe underlines this participation in the mirror scene which forcibly includes the spectators in the play. In fact, she realizes her dream -- "O to write a play without an audience" (130) -- by incorporating the audience in the play.

The text not only effaces the stage boundaries, but also dissolves other limits of representation. The whole spectacle, which ends with the "present moment" and includes objects of everyday life (cows, swallows, and rain), abolishes the distance separating the theatre and the external world. The

pageant associates props, "real" objects, and natural objects with each other; Lady Harpy Harraden's boudoir coexists with "the view," the hundred-year-old trees covered with greenery. Birds flutter on the artificial lake and the mooing of the cows mingles with the music from the gramophone. The actors themselves play their role (or rather their roles) without losing their everyday identity in the eyes of the spectators. Albert, the "village idiot," circulates from one level to another, playing "in and out" (71) -- everywhere acting his own part.

Representational limits of space, then, are constantly displaced and effaced in the spectacle. There is another limit, however, the one between stage and backstage, which is also skirted. This boundary, materialized by a thin curtain of greenery, allows enough images and sounds to filter through to attract attention backstage, to transform the staging itself into spectacle. All the failings of the show (which are constantly emphasized) help to unveil what ought to remain hidden, to make a spectacle of what by definition should remain offstage.

And yet it is inevitable that all these limits disrupted within *Between the Acts* return on the outside in an other scene³ that is displaced to the edge of the book, separated from the external world, with its stage (the narrative) and its staging (the narration). The final edge of the book, its end ("The curtain rose. They spoke." -- 159), refers to the passing of a limit, but not to the closing but rather the opening of the theatre. With the rising of the curtain, it is

the intermission which comes to an end: the play is about to begin -- the play that was announced at the other edge by the first words, the title.

We do not get to know this play, as it is external to the novel, and begins only after its end. And yet it is present in a ghostly way, announced in the form of a future-in-the-past: "Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born" (158)⁴. At the same time as an end, the last words are a beginning (of a new scene) and also just one phase in a story which is still unfolding.

The setting is already there for this theatre external to the novel: it is night; two silhouettes are outlined in the dark; the house loses its features, transformed into a timeless rock; the curtain rises; words will be spoken:

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (158-59)

But we do not hear these words; we are allowed to go no further but are instead sent back. Once again, then, a limit is displaced; the end becomes the beginning.

We get a different sense of the novel's title if we consider that these words come before a sexual act, which is implicitly inscribed in a series already begun ("from that embrace another life might be born"). *Between the Acts* would no longer be the interval of reality between two times of theatrical illusion,

but rather the world of pretence and inauthenticity which separates the "true human acts" of Isa and Giles. Outside the book becomes "reality" and inside deceptive appearances.

It is the unreality which is underlined by the boxing in of spaces, the *mise en abyme* (the play within a play within a play, Elizabethan play inside the pageant itself inside the novel), and by the fact that we never -- even between the acts of Miss La Trobe's play -- leave representation. The landscape is never considered as such, but as "the view," through the description of it by the authors of a guidebook (42), or through the way it could be painted by artists (14).

Beyond the end of the novel, all that will change, we are told. Isa and Giles are going to behave like a "real" man and a "real" woman ("as the dog fights with the vixen" -- 158). We have returned to the Romance genre. The environment loses its inessential attributes to become itself again, as it is, as it always has been. The world of appearances is coming to an end; reality is going to begin. This is another way of explaining what I discussed as a decentralization process in chapter two. To use Melba Cuddy-Keane's words, all voices become part of the chorus, or in this case, the entire novel becomes an interval. Indeed the title itself suggests that the novel occupies the position of interlude. The "between" (inter, the limit) is everywhere here.

The game or play is also everywhere, in the very place where we think we are getting hold of the "real." So this post-final scene placed outside the novel -- but which figures there all the same in the form of a trace, an announcement ("they would . . .") -- does correspond to the "real" to the extent that it cannot be grasped, that it remains forever unknowable, determining from outside the words of the book without ever being able to be expressed by them. But to the extent that it is represented in spite of everything, while pretending not to be, it is only a further screen, concealing the "real."

Between the Acts, then, initiates a proliferation of screens of all kinds, which are pierced, but beyond which we find only other screens; spaces dissolve into other spaces with no more correspondence to reality. All that is left is the flight itself, the passage from one place to another, the disruption of limits. If we can locate *Between the Acts* anywhere it is there, in the middle voice, in the spacing which sets up a communication between terms which cannot themselves be placed,⁵ and it is in the gaze of the fascinated spectator that we can see this passage.

The gaze persists across all levels of representation; everywhere it makes its presence felt: "She felt Dodge's eye upon her as her lips moved. Always some cold eye crawled over the surface like a winter blue-bottle!" (128). And looking is just as painful as being looked at, for both are passive: "They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle" (128).

These two tortures are linked in the mirror scene, which provides an intolerable sight ("People in the back rows stood up to see the fun. Down they sat, caught themselves" -- 133), because they themselves look ("Each tried to shift an inch or two beyond the inquisitive insulting eye" -- 135). The mirrors suddenly materialize the invisible limit, spectacularly showing up the re-turn of the gaze. But they simultaneously abolish this limit in making the auditorium and the stage overlap: they install the spectator's look on the stage.

To confront the spectators, Miss La Trobe brings the mirror onto the stage, transgressing the limit between it and the audience, transporting the audience onto the stage, and mixing the spaces of fiction and "reality." She fragments the specular image, making it lose its unifying function, revealing in it the "body in pieces" that had been forgotten in the image's stabilization. And this is exaggerated because the mirrors are moving, "flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. . . . distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair" (133; my italics).

With these barriers broken, people are no longer separated from animals: "The very cows joined in. . . . and the barriers which should divide Man the Master from the Brute were dissolved" (134; my italics). Epochs become mixed up, Queen Anne stands with Queen Bess, the Victorian policeman with the medieval pilgrims, and the earlier scenes of the play mix with Present Time. The past is returning in the present; the imaginary is irrupting inside reality (the present reality of the audience is drawn up onto the

stage among the fictive characters, into the space of de-realization; and the tangible "reality" of the actors' bodies is brought down to the same level as the specular images).

To return to the last limit, the last page functions as a mirror placed at the edge of the book: it is a type of future anterior, reflecting what happens (or what should happen) beyond the limit. But beyond the limit, nothing happens; the last words are truly the last words. "They spoke" initiates only silence. The space which ought to open is missing from the place. "The curtain rose," but it rises on nothing; it rises on the unnameable.

Besides an ungraspable space of representation⁶, *Between the Acts* implicates an undiscoverable time of representation⁷. The articulation between space and time is most readily seen in the wings. Miss La Trobe, we are told, is "pacing to and fro between the leaning birch trees" (49). Backstage is not an open space; like the other regions of representational space, it is confined by a strict set of boundaries, and this restriction allows only one kind of movement: to and fro. People must either retrace their steps or stay put (at times Miss La Trobe is even "paralysed" -- 103, "unable to lift her hand" -- 131). There is no space for progression, only for repetition⁸. The only possible outlet is towards the stage, but the stage is the space of (re)presentation, another form of retracing one's steps. Hence an attempt to extend the stage, to make it coincide with the wings, an impossible attempt to reach a direct presentation.

But since the new extended stage engenders a new backstage, another extension is called for, in a potentially infinite movement. This pulsation of an expanding space marks the time of representation.

But when Miss La Trobe stops her movement to and fro, changing the space around her into a scene, and looking for a play behind the play which is being played out, something prevents the creative expansion and sends her back to pacing:

Miss La Trobe stopped her pacing and surveyed the scene. 'It has the makings . . .' she murmured. For another play always lay behind the play she had just written. Shading her eyes, she looked. The butterflies circling; the light changing; the children leaping; the mothers laughing -- 'No I don't get it,' she muttered and resumed her pacing. (50)

The blockage is no accident. It is impossible to take account of the temporal dimension of representation without being confronted with the problem of the origin and being taken back to the originary object which in the last instance conditions the (im)possibility of representation. In *Between the Acts*, it is the figure of the Mother which comes to represent the ungraspable (because always already divided) origin⁹.

Although here the mother is not omnipresent as she was in *To the Lighthouse*, motherhood does come up from time to time, for example: "It took my mother half the morning to order dinner" (117). But the maternal image is barely separable from images of death -- "That's young Mrs Giles. . . . I remember her mother. She died in India" (116-17) -- or of separation (for

example, the scene where Isa taps to no effect on the window of her bedroom, unable to communicate with her children who are outside -- 15).

Every time a more affirmative version tries to establish itself, there is some kind of blockage. In the pageant, the coming of the Augustan age is the occasion for prosopopoeia of Reason Triumphant (92), in the form of an explicitly maternal, protective, and nourishing allegorical figure. But this supposed reign of the forces of Reason will be revealed as an imposture, a pleasant fiction masking the terrible "reality." And the lie wavers at a precise point. When Reason is supposed to evoke the peaceful image of happy maternity, the actor stops and stumbles over her words: "at peace the mother sees her children play . . . she repeated" (92).

Among the inhibitions linked to the figure of the Mother is time. It is the memory of her mother which prevents Lucy Swithin from allowing the possibility of a simple past or future:

Mrs Swithin paused; she was given to increasing the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future; or sidelong down corridors and alleys; but she remembered her mother -- her mother in that very room rebuking her. 'Don't stand gaping, Lucy, or the wind'll change . . .' How often her mother had rebuked her in that very room -- 'but in a very different world,' as her brother would remind her. (11)

Although the maternal rebuke is supposed to belong to a time now gone, it has lost none of its validity and remains terribly "present." As a result, Lucy is doomed to refuse the (teleological) temporal dimension: "'Marking time,' said

old Oliver beneath his breath. 'Which don't exist for us,' Lucy murmured. 'We've only the present'" (64).

What is true of Lucy Swithin can be extended to the novel. Paradoxically, since history is one of its themes, temporality is confused in *Between the Acts*. Access to the past (and thus to the possibility of a progressive historical vision) is forbidden: it is repressed by an unavoidable event. It is possible, however, through certain details, to glimpse the nature of this event: "it was old-fashioned, dowdy, savoured of . . . black-edged notepaper, to go ferreting into people's pasts" (33; my italics). This black-edged paper refers to the mourning of the Mother (or to the always split origin), to the fundamental loss, constantly reiterated, which always threatens to make any life and any writing (im)possible. The past is untenable, crossed with blackness and death; the future (as I will show shortly) is only a projection of that past. The only time that remains is the present, which is, of course, never simply present.

The collective past is entirely collapsed onto the individual past, of which it is only the projection. In Miss La Trobe's play, the destiny of a country is represented by the growing up of a little girl: "'A child new born. . . . England am I (60; my italics). . . . Now weak and small/A child, as all may see . . .'" (60); "'O, England's grown a girl now'" (62). Any historical event will be interpreted through the past of the individual -- that is, in terms of family histories. In the

beginning, there are pre-historic monsters, identified with terrifying ancestral figures: "elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend" (10). There will be no moving beyond (or outside of) this origin. It is always to pre-history that the characters return.

However hard the story tries to pretend that time is passing, as we watch the succession of ages and reigns file past on the stage, we are always at the same point. On the last page of the novel, Lucy has still not advanced beyond pre-history in the reading of her *Outline of History*. The final scene between Isa and Giles, as I have already suggested, is "originary." And it is from precisely this point that Miss La Trobe plans her next play to start. The changes that history appears to bring are only superficial modifications which can be effaced in a moment. We remain the same in different costumes:

'The Victorians,' Mrs Swithin mused. 'I don't believe,' she said with her odd little smile, 'that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently.'

'You don't believe in history,' said William. (127)

The past is denied as such, but only because it is "omnipresent." Historical development cannot take place, because the only time that is current is the time of repetition. The past never stops coming back, identical with itself:

"'They come every year,' said Mrs Swithin . . . 'From Africa.' As they had come, she supposed, when the barn was a swamp" (78; my ellipsis). The future can

thus only be a return to the (pre-historic) origin: "He would carry the torch of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave" (149). The provisional triumph of Augustan Reason or Victorian peace will be shattered by the noise of the planes which interrupts Mr Streatfield's speech.

The future throws its shadow onto the present: "The future disturbing our present" (64), but this shadow is that of death:

'The doom of sudden death hanging over us,' he said. 'There's no retreating and advancing.' . . .

The future shadowed their present, like the sun coming through the many-veined transparent vine leaf; a criss-cross of lines making no pattern. (86)

Before us is only the void ("This year, last year, next year, never," repeats Isa -- 155, 157), because the future is only a projection of the past. The names of the surrounding villages and those of their inhabitants figure in the Domesday book (27), which is to say that they go back to the beginning, have always been there -- which is to say that in the beginning was written doom, the end was already here.

The book ends with death by drowning -- an outcome fantasized by Isa (78-79) and accomplished by Woolf -- but this death has its prototype in a mythical past: "a lady" drowned herself in the past in the lily pond. Death itself replays an earlier event and is inscribed in a series which is organized around the loss of the Mother -- which is to say, the always already lost oneness.

The text's only enduring source of water, the lily pond, is an elusive object of female memory, where "[w]ater, for hundreds of years, had silted down into the hollow, and lay there four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud" (43). All the women in the Oliver household come here for repose. Dark and deep, the pond inscribes the boundlessness counterposed by Pointz Hall's precise articulation of spatial relations. The "deep centre" and "black heart" oppose the patriarchal home that rises over England's dry interior¹⁰.

Yet this dark maternal heart, seemingly beneath and outside the patriarchy, is an ambiguous feminine locus, for "It was in that deep centre, in that black heart, that the lady had drowned herself" (36). The lily pond is a treacherous mother since into it the generic "lady" vanishes in a parody of the erasure of female history. Returning no sign of her existence, the pool collaborates with Pointz Hall's suppression of female history: "Ten years since the pool had been dredged and a thigh bone recovered. Alas, it was a sheep's, not a lady's" (36). The lady's historicity is in doubt, and the lily pond strengthens Bart's case for her fictiveness¹¹. The lily pond is thus entangled with its apparent opposite: Pointz Hall.

The place of the novel in this series (origin, absence, Mother, death) is ambivalent: it is the place of repetition of the past, announcing the future (or the absence of a future), but it is also part of a desire to suspend that past, to delay its return in the form of the future. It serves to fill in a lack, to restore a

false symmetry. But the illusion only half succeeds; the void manages to show through in spite of everything. Even the luxurious lengths of yellow satin cannot veil the fact that the canvas is cracked.

The portrait of the male ancestor was productive of talk; the painting of the non-ancestor makes language (that will) fail, and leads back to silence (which constitutes and articulates language), to the past, to the void of those who would like to write themselves into its story:

He was a talk producer, that ancestor. But the lady was a picture. . . . she led the eyes up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun, and rose into silence. The room was empty. Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence. (31; my italics)

The place of the ancestress is empty, held by an image with no historical or logical referent: "The lady was a picture, bought by Oliver because he liked the picture; the man was an ancestor. He had a name" (30). The lady has an imaginary status; rather than being represented as a picture, she is a picture. Existing only as an image, she has no name. The imaginary space created by her portrait empties out life from the dining room, puncturing a hole in the heart of Pointz Hall. Instead of representing a historical picture, the portrait of the lady makes space sing about prehistory, the locus of the absent Mother. Within the history of the ancestor's portrait, the dog replaces his wife: "he's saying: "Paint my dog"" (39). The wife's absence from her husband's portrait, his

discourse, and the adjacent picture eludes the novel's commentary. Like the lily pond that consumes rather than preserves life, the portrait of the unnamed lady displaces the ancestress in the maternal heart within the home, substituting the seductive space of the imagination for a record of "real" events. The silence at the heart of the patriarchal home is repeated in the structure of social relations. No one mentions Bart's wife, whose absence is disguised by a series of substitutions. Through the substitution of sister for wife, a silence is inscribed, "add[ing] its unmistakable contribution to talk" (33) by gesturing, beyond absence, toward unrepresentability. Once again, then, Woman becomes a figure for spacing, articulating an Other language and defining the patriarchy while remaining (necessarily) hidden, a silent support.

The work of art tries desperately to build a structure where there is only chaos ("A criss-cross of lines making no pattern" -- 86), to cover over the lack, to impose a unity. But the "real" soon pierces through what remains a futile effort: the green bottles with gilt scrolls contain only wind. Indeed, the illusion only underlines the lack.

Miss La Trobe would like sometimes to be able to avoid these cuts and to preserve as far as possible the continuity of the illusion. She would like to suppress the intervals (72), but her technique also deliberately multiplies these cuts and slippages; she uses illusion only to make way for the (absent) "real." It is a question of saying the unsayable across language and in spite of

it. Of course this goal can only be achieved in an indirect way, using strategies that exceed representation¹².

Through Woolf's suicide and its implication into the interior of the novel, a gaping hole replaces the Subject as guarantor of the text. It is inevitable that attempts will be made to fill this gap; perhaps the novel is impossible to read otherwise. But this reconstituted subject will remain precarious, mobile, unstable, ghostly, letting the gap show through every time the ruptures of the text provide the opportunity.

In fact, these ruptures are numerous and occur at every level. The narrative technique is perhaps the best place to begin. In the opening passage of the novel, the voice of Isa and the narrator are superimposed on each other and it is difficult to know what is attributable to whom. But in the following paragraph, we seem to get Bart's voice:

'I remember,' the old man interrupted, 'my mother . . .' Of his mother he remembered that she was very stout; kept her tea caddy locked; yet had given him in that very room a copy of Byron. It was over sixty years ago, he told them, that his mother had given him the works of Byron in that very room. He paused. (8)

Then we return again to the narrator's/Isa's voice. But do we completely depart from Isa's point of view in the section about Bart? If so, why does Woolf cut him off, interrupting the quotation to turn to an indirect interior monologue? Is the speech rather presented from the point of view of Isa, as the trace left by the spoken words on her consciousness? The narrative style blurs several

limits: the one that separates characters from each other, and also the one separating inside from outside (words thought as opposed to words spoken out loud).

These limits are not put into question in the following passage:

'They're not ready . . . I hear 'em laughing' (they were saying.)' . . . Dressing up. That's the great thing, dressing up. And it's pleasant now, the sun's not so hot . . . That's one good thing the war brought us -- longer days . . . Where did we leave off? D'you remember? The Elizabethans . . . Perhaps she'll reach the present, if she skips . . . D'you think people change? Their clothes, of course . . . But I meant ourselves. (90)

These lines are spoken by one or several characters, but who are they? Is there a collective subject? Individual spectators are transformed into an audience, but the fragments come from individuals. However disembodied they appear ("voices without bodies, symbolical voices they seemed to her" -- 111), the voices which intermix do refer to particular subjects, and although they may appear symbolic, they point to yet another incomplete or deferred reference, as we never get symbolic meaning. Further, we do not know exactly when we leave certain characters or if we return to them. What floats above these fragments is a collection of clichés, which by definition do not belong to individuals. Here, fragments of discourse float, indeterminate, and not assignable to a particular subject.

Further, every word uttered by the characters of the play, by Lady Harpy Harraden for example, is a direct expression of the character, a word of

the supposed author of the play, and a word parodied by Miss La Trobe and again by Woolf. As Derrida reminds us, texts cannot be univocal because they are always constituted of and by written signs that already exist, have always already existed, within a system of relations. There is a plurality of voices, then, behind every word. The disappearance of the subject is closely linked to the deconstruction of representation. Because of the superimposition of stages within stages, the representative function of narrative signs is continually subverted by the invasion of an underlying "reality." The signs no longer refer to something beyond themselves; they take on an autonomous existence.

Another rupturing technique, the device of *mise en abyme*, of representation within representation, produces demystification: it destroys the illusion by doubling it. Having witnessed the fictional Lady Harpy Harraden, it is difficult to believe in Bart or Miss La Trobe, who exist in the same way and who are also made of words. However, an opposite process also occurs. Representing someone implies that the person is not present. By embodying the absent person, the representative is thus disembodied, is only a stand-in for "reality," the mark of an absence. But here, we can see an obvious infiltration of "reality" into the de-realized world: nature invades the play, mingles inextricably with it; the bodily materiality of the actors submerge their roles. The 'Victorian Lake' is also a piece of canvas on which, in 1939, swallows flutter; Queen Elizabeth is also Eliza Clark, the tobacconist.

This process also occurs on the level of the novel's narration which appears to enclose all the other levels:

Then suddenly the starlings attacked the tree behind which she had hidden. In one flock they pelted it like so many winged stones. The whole tree hummed with the whizz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabing discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up! Then off! (152)

Beyond the meaning of the words, it is the sound that takes on added importance. Obviously we do not leave representation here: the rustling of the words pretends to imitate the sound of birds, but the reader's attention is drawn to the materiality of the words. The strange compound words are expressive but redundant; the narrative becomes onomatopoeia -- gestural language. Something is inscribed here that does not pass through the ordinary paths of signification¹³.

The tree in question is the one behind which Miss La Trobe was hiding (badly); it marked the separation between the stage and the wings, constituting a limit. It is this limit which is attacked, dissolved, devoured by life without limit ("life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree"). The outburst of energy makes the frames of representation crack open. It seems that the text is overrun by forces that make it go beyond its narrative function.

But this only lasts for a moment: the starlings fly off, the tree gets back its identity; the narration returns to its normal course:

What interrupted? It was old Mrs Chambers, creeping through the grass with a bunch of flowers -- pinks apparently -- to fill the vase that stood on her husband's grave. In winter it was holly, or ivy. In summer, a flower. It was she who had scared the starlings. (152)

"Life" cannot triumph over the limits, for there is death, but representation helps to mask the intolerable gap.

On the stage which forces itself upon Miss La Trobe, it is the "original" scene which returns, fatally incomplete, insofar as it is outside the reach of ordinary language: "'I should group them,' she murmured, 'here.' It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her" (152). It is only later that she conceives a transmutation of language into meaning-less words: "words without meaning -- wonderful words" (153).

Then the stage can come up again, the limit will be erased by the assault of life, and the ungraspable words will finally be embodied: "Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words" (154). Of course we cannot hear these words; they are pushed out to the limit of the book: they are the words announced by the last line of the novel. A language such as this, which would not stand in for something else, but stand on its own, escapes us. We cannot even conceive of what this non-representative writing would be. And yet it exists as the vanishing point toward

which *Between the Acts* tends without ever reaching. The interaction of the various levels of representation and the sliding of reference points, then, disrupts the form of the novel.

In a way, our position as readers includes the spectators, just as *Between the Acts* includes Miss La Trobe's play. We are invited to see through the audience's eyes. At the same time, we see it seeing. So there is one more level here which rests on all the others, a new complication which can disrupt everything. This final disconnection seems to work as a distancing technique, for the narrative form is capable of including the most heterogeneous elements and integrating them into its own logic.

However, this final narrative is problematic, since it too transgresses all the limits which ground representation in space and time. In this sense, far from being the enclosure containing the inner excesses, the narration adds to their energy. The interpenetration of different levels does not stop. The game continues in a perpetual flight which nowhere comes to an end -- except in emptiness and death. The absence in the place of the ultimate subject guaranteeing the enunciation, this logic of supplementarity, which enables and delimits the middle voice, reactivates all the gashes which the text opened up but immediately pretended to close in order to carry on. All the consolidations are in turn taken aback by this lack in the place of the enunciation, and rendered infinitely precarious.

Endnotes

1. See chapter one of this thesis pp. 3-5.

2. Bakhtin's notion of the *carnavalesque* is complex, and I will not attempt to fully explicate it here. What is important in this context is the carnival's emphasis on participation, which, as Ann Jefferson points out, is an alternative to representation: "what carnival reveals is that relations of representation can be reconstituted as relations of participation" (164). And it is the disruption of boundaries (of representation, for example), which this participation entails that is at stake in Miss La Trobe's spectacle. The carnival, as Bakhtin explains, "does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (*Rabelais and His World* 7). Indeed, the carnival marked "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. . . . This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other" (10). The carnival body, then, loses its individual definition; the boundaries within and between bodies as well as between bodies and the world are confused: "the material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are constantly growing and renewed" (19).

3. This Other scene that takes place outside of the novel points to a movement that exceeds representative language. As Derrida explains in "Plato's Pharmacy," "the theatrical cannot here be summed up in speech: it involves forces, space, law, kinship, the human, the divine, death, play, festivity. Hence the new depth that reveals itself to us will necessarily be another scene, on another stage, or rather another tableau in the unfolding of the play of writing" (*Dissemination* 142).

4. The force of this future-in-the-past is not unlike what Derrida describes as the ineluctable: something that seems "to have already happened, to have happened before happening, to be always in a past, in advance of the event" (*Typography* 2). This unavoidable supplemental determination, this double constraint of negation (that is not negative), is connected to a deconstitution or constitutive desistance of the self. As I have explained in other contexts, this deconstitution of the self has the form of an abyssal redoubling that withdraws, masks itself, and never resembles itself. In this way, it resembles the new (old) type of mimesis. In Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's words:

mimesis has no "proper" to it, ever (so that mimesis does not consist in the improper, either, or in who knows what "negative" essence, but *ek-sists*, or better yet, "de-sists" in this appropriation of everything supposedly proper that necessarily jeopardizes property "itself"). Which would betray its essence, in other words, if the "essence" of mimesis were not precisely absolute vicariousness, carried to the limit (but inexhaustible), endless and groundless -- something like an infinity of substitution and *circulation*. (26)

Like pre-originary mimesis, this trace or announcement ("they would") precedes and destabilizes truth in advance. As this chapter will demonstrate, in *Between the Acts*, pre-history keeps coming back as an unavoidable force that determines and has always already determined the "present." It is the logic of supplementarity that sets in motion this (de)constitutive function of the ineluctable. As Derrida explains, "The (de)constitutive disappropriation of the subject, that destabilization to which Mimesis *submits* it from the "beginning" -- this is what gives desistance the phenomenal form of "delay" (29).

5. Cf. "[Chora] ne se laisse pas facilement situer, assigner à résidence: elle est plus situante que située" ("Chora" 267).

6. Cf. "Cette place introuvable" ("Chora" 281).

6. Derrida explains this connection between space and time in an interview with Raoul Mortley: "I often talk about spacing, but this is not simply space as opposed to time, but a mode of producing space by temporalizing it. Temporization, to temporize, means waiting or expecting, postponing or delaying. Temporizing is spacing, a way of making an interval, and here again with the idea of *différance* the ideas of spacing and temporization are inextricably linked" (*Conversations With French Philosophers* 100). Deferral, then, is both a spatial and a temporal process.

8. As I explained in reference to iterability (in chapter one), *différance*, which marks the disappearance of any originary presence, is at once the condition of the possibility and the impossibility of truth, and "at once" means "that the being-present (on) in its truth, in the presence of its identity and in the identity of its presence, is doubled as soon as it appears It appears, in its essence, as the possibility of its own most proper non-truth, of its pseudo-truth reflected in the icon, the phantasm, or the simulacrum. What is is not what it is, identical and identical to itself, unique, unless it adds to itself the possibility of being repeated as such. And its identity is hollowed out by that addition, withdraws itself in the supplement that presents it" (168). He continues: "the opposition between the true and the untrue is entirely comprehended, inscribed, within this structure or this generalized writing. The true and the untrue are

both species of repetition. And there is no repetition possible without the graphics of supplementarity" (168).

9. In reference to Plato's *Timaeus*, Derrida writes of the connection between chora, the (non)origin, and the Mother. The word chora itself implicates the notions of "«lieu», «place», «emplacement», «région», «contrée»" ("Chora" 268) as well as the metaphorical images ("«mère», «nourrice», «réceptacle», «porte-empreinte» -- 268) that Timaeus, among others, has mentioned. However, Derrida warns that despite their apparent usefulness these connections are also dangerous, because if we talk about chora's place, then we risk thinking that it exists (270). Although Timaeus names the receptacle or space (chora), "ces noms ne désignent pas une essence, l'être stable d'un *eidos*, puisque chora n'est ni de l'ordre de l'*eidos*, ni de l'ordre des mimèmes, des images de l'*eidos* qui viennent s'imprimer en elle -- qui ainsi n'est pas, n'appartient pas aux deux genres d'être connus ou reconnus. Elle n'est pas" (269-70). As a result, Derrida writes that "nous ne parlerons pas de métaphore, mais non pas pour entendre, par exemple que la chora est proprement une mère, une nourrice, un réceptacle, un porte-empreinte ou de l'or" (267). He prefers to speak of "[un] troisième genre et dans l'espace neutre d'un lieu sans lieu, un lieu où tout se marque mais qui serait «en lui-même» non marqué" (280). I am suggesting, then, that we read Woolf's (and Miss La Trobe's) Mother in the manner that Derrida reads Plato's: as a (non)origin, an amorphous structure that creates both the possibility and the impossibility of meaning.

10. The black heart, the absence at the centre, which is here identified with the women of the Oliver household, is the necessary support that maintains the supposedly mutually exclusive binary opposite: Pointz Hall, the centre, which is passed down through the Oliver men from generation to generation. The lily pond is a figure for the suppressed otherness of Woman. As Derrida writes in "Plato's Pharmacy," "It is all about fathers and sons . . . nothing is said of the mother . . . [but] if one looks hard enough as in those pictures in which a second picture faintly can be made out, one might be able to discern her unstable form, drawn upside down [and, like Miss La Trobe, hiding] in the foliage" (*Dissemination* 143).

11. This story locates a woman without a past, who, in other words, has a confused or missing origin, in the place of *mythos*: hierarchically subordinated to (and entangled with) the Other it supports. Derrida explains the connection between the father, the son, and the guaranteed logic of the *logos* in "Plato's Pharmacy": "the origin and power of speech, precisely of *logos*, [is assigned] to the paternal position" (*Dissemination* 76). It is not *logos* but the origin of *logos* that is the father. *Logos* is the son, who would be destroyed "in his very presence without the present attendance of his father" (77). As Derrida explains with reference to the *Philebus*, Thoth takes Ra's place, "as a substitute capable of doubling for the king, the father, the sun, and

the word, distinguished from these only by dint of representing, repeating, and masquerading[.] Thoth was naturally also capable of totally supplanting them and appropriating all their attributes. He is added as the essential attribute to what he is added to, and from which almost nothing distinguishes him" (90). As always, the relationship of father and son, *mythos* and *logos*, is hierarchical, like the opposition between subject and king, death and life, writing and speech, night and day, moon and sun (92). "He is thus the father's other, the father, and the subversive moment of replacement" (93). In "Chora," Derrida argues that *mythos* is the subordinated Other to *logos* (275). Unlike *logos*, "le dit mythique ressemble alors à un discours sans père légitime. Orphelin ou bâtard, il se distingue ainsi du *logos* philosophique qui, comme il est dit dans le *Phèdre*, doit avoir un père qui répond -- pour lui et de lui" (291).

12. As I have mentioned in other contexts, communication involves nonsemantic as well as semantic movements: "in such cases we are dealing neither with a semantic or conceptual content, nor with a semiotic operation, and even less with a linguistic exchange" (*Limited Inc* 1). As Derrida writes in "The Theatre of Cruelty," "the theatre of cruelty is not a representation. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable. Life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation" (*Writing and Difference* 234). He continues: "the theatre of cruelty would be the art of difference and of expenditure without economy, without reserve, without history" (247).

13. In "The Theater of Cruelty," Derrida describes Artaud's notion of speech and writing in a way that is suggestive in this context: it "takes us back to the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, when articulation is no longer a shout but not yet discourse, when repetition is almost impossible, and along with it, language in general This is the eve of the origin of languages, and of the dialogue between theology and humanism whose inextinguishable reoccurrence has never not been maintained by the metaphysics of Western theater Thus, it is less a question of constructing a mute stage than of constructing a stage whose clamor has not yet been pacified into words" (*Writing and Difference* 240). As Artaud himself puts it, speech before words must be found again: "I am adding another language to the spoken language, and I am trying to restore to the language of speech its old magic . . . for its mysterious possibilities have been forgotten The spectacles I produce there will be a preponderant physical share which could not be captured and written down in the customary language of words, and that even the spoken and written portions will be spoken and written in a new sense" (cited in *Writing and Difference* 240). What I want to argue is that it is a similar type of language that Miss La Trobe sets in motion at certain (admittedly rare) moments, and it is these moments which crack open the limits of representation.

Afterword

The Middle Voice Reconsidered: "I can't go on, I'll go on"

In any differential system, it is the assertion of the space between the entities that matters.

-- Paul de Man

[It is] in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice . . . [that] the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women.

-- Teresa de Lauretis

I call this short chapter "Afterword" because to formulate any type of conclusion would be to beg several of the questions that I have raised in this thesis. Indeed to conclude is to take the totalizing position that my entire thesis attempts to undercut. I find persuasive the arguments which suggest that such yearning for meaning is an outmoded way of thinking and that it is better only to analyze such a desire and to learn to live as much as possible without grounds. Further, any useful response to these issues would demand an entire other thesis and perhaps an entirely different approach than I have taken here.

Nevertheless, I believe that there are many important purposes and functions within the processes of claiming meaning, and I think that it is useful to consider how

such claims function within different approaches and which of these functions we might want to preserve, if in altered forms. I contend that some parts of the discourses that I have discussed are more useful (in the here and now) than others, and as I suggested at the beginning of this thesis, my decision to articulate my choices is not meant to privilege one over the other, to place its truth, appropriateness, or author beyond question. The point of making such choices clear is so that the reader can respond and conversation continue.

I believe, then, that we can seek meanings without assuming that they are context-free or fixed. Because our thinking always occurs within theoretical, linguistic, and cultural frameworks, it is not possible to think, argue, or write without presuppositions. But the bondedness of our thought need not always lead to domination. I think the point of such conversations has more to do with accountability than with foundational motivations.

I want to re-turn one more time to the concept of the middle voice. As this thesis has demonstrated, Woolf creates a notion that resembles Derrida's formulation of a middle voice, but she sees it more in terms of a collectiveness and refuses to entirely give up totalizing notions of unity that Derrida's concept must call into question. But it might be instructive to consider the middle voice in terms of one more position -- the position that serves as Derrida's point of departure: Benveniste's theory of Proto-Indo-European languages.

If we re-examine Derrida's explanation of the middle voice in "La Différance," we see that although the middle voice begins as a metaphor, it comes to describe a history of repression: "For the middle voice, a certain nontransitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself [*se constituant*] by means of this repression" (*Margins of Philosophy* 9). What Derrida postulates, then, is the "existence" of an earlier grammar, the grammar of the Other -- that is, of the middle voice, which has been repressed.

Benveniste's claim, however, is not that the opposition between active and passive voice in the Proto-Indo-European verb has been generated from a single middle voice. Rather, he contends that the modern active/passive distinction is a contradictory development to earlier oppositions. That is, Benveniste argues that the Greek doctrine which posited a triple division (active/middle/passive) was itself imposed on an earlier stage where the passive was only a modality of the middle: "The Indo-European stage of the verb is thus characterized by an opposition of only two diatheses, active and middle" (*Problems in General Linguistics* 148). What is at stake for Benveniste in this issue of grammatical voice is the relationship between subject and process: "in the active, the verbs denote a process that is accomplished outside the subject. In the middle, which is the diathesis to be defined by the opposition, the verb indicates a process cantering in the subject, the subject being inside the process" (148).

Vincent Pecora suggests that it is in Benveniste's conversion of middle voice verbs into active forms (that are called transitives) that Derrida finds repression. However, as Benveniste argues, transitivity is only a "necessary product" of the conversion. Instead it is the subject's exterior relationship to the process that marks the active form. The crucial grammatical issue, then, is where agency is located with reference to process. As I mentioned in chapter two, in Benveniste's middle voice, "the subject is the center as well as the agent of the process; he achieves something which is being achieved in him" (*Problems in General Linguistics* 149). This formulation is clearly different from Derrida's claim that a primitive language like the middle voice was repressed and distributed into active and passive terms. As Vincent Pecora argues, Benveniste's middle voice, then, actually expands the notion of agency.

In the context of this thesis, what is important about these different interpretations of the middle voice is that Derrida's middle voice, like his other key concepts, is undifferentiated. As both Benveniste and Derrida maintain, "it is in the nature of linguistic phenomena, since they are signs, to realize themselves in oppositions and only thereby to convey meaning" (*Problems in General Linguistics* 151). Derrida's version of the middle voice, though, seems to beg the question how could there be a middle voice without difference from its other(s). The undifferentiated form of this term signals a totalizing gesture that works against Derrida's attempt to

disrupt and displace unifying forces: it signals a dialectical return of an original value that somehow has been forced into active and passive forms.

In this thesis, I use Derrida's term "the middle voice" because I feel that despite its shortcomings, it is a useful and instructive way of engaging Woolfian and Derridean discourses. And, despite the weaknesses and omissions in the conversations that I have constructed, I feel that several important issues have emerged, concerning both the discourses themselves and the questions they raise. Derridean deconstruction is overtly and subtly gender bound and biased. Derrida does not fully deal with the gendered nature of his own recounting of the story of Western metaphysics and the strategies he opposes to its master narratives. Man retains his privileged place as the author and principal character in his stories while Woman remains the Other or mirror of Man.

Deconstruction offers implicit assumptions about the liberating potential of freeing differences and refusing totalities. Beyond this, however, it is not clear that deconstruction has or could offer a vision of change. As this thesis has attempted to argue, deconstruction does not provide ways of analyzing specificity, and if we cannot describe why a particular group comes to occupy the position of Other, we have no basis from which to posit political action. To the extent that all political practices have been affected by or reflect the "existence" of male domination, a Woolfian perspective argues for the necessity of offering something new: concepts that do not presuppose

or require asymmetric gender relations for their realization. Feeling oppressed now, women cannot be indifferent to questions of how transformations are to occur.

The problem with the Woolfian approach is that, as much as it criticizes deconstruction for its totalizing tendencies, the Woolfian approach cannot avoid making similar gestures, albeit for different reasons. As Iris Marion Young argues, "the ideal of community privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one's understanding of others from their point of view. The dream is understandable but politically problematic because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from their political groups persons with whom they do not identify" (*Feminism/Postmodernism* 300). Deconstruction shows that despite "intentions" to the contrary, a desire for unity or wholeness in discourse generates borders, oppositions, and exclusions.

As well, although a Woolfian discourse does seem to want to undermine the metaphysical properties of notions like the Self, it is unable fully to abandon them. In certain ways women never had a Self, and the coherence of logocentric discourse depends partially on their exclusion. If we must regard reality as fictive, if there is no objective basis for distinguishing between true and false beliefs, then it seems that power alone may determine the outcome of competing truth claims; this is a frightening prospect to those who lack or are oppressed by the power of others. Given the risks involved, it is understandable that women are sceptical about

abandoning these practices before they have enjoyed their limited and ambiguous benefits. Although Derridean deconstruction's argument about the limitations of using metaphysical concepts is forceful, at present not many alternatives exist. But perhaps one alternative is to consider the self as social and in some important ways gendered. This formulation sees the self as differentiated, local, and historical. The self is located in concrete social relations as well as in fictive or textual conventions.

Before pursuing this possibility, I want to explain that I fully realize that to take such a position of compromise is to construct a totalizing discourse, but I think that such a gesture is not only worthwhile but also crucial at this point in time. Because of its ability to dismantle binary logic and deconstruct identity, deconstruction provides an extremely useful tool for a Woolfian analysis, but I would suggest that it needs to be historicized. I would like to believe that it is possible to pursue two projects simultaneously -- to recognize that Woman/woman is a position within a binary opposition and that this position is arbitrarily (and falsely) unified while at the same time remembering that there are concrete historical women whose differences reveal the inadequacy of this unified category in the past and present. The multiple positions real women occupy, positions specified by race, class, or sexual orientation point to the inadequacy of binary logic and unitary selves, but at the same time this emphasis leads us to question the ahistorical nature of the concept of Woman.

If the position of Woman is falsely unified and if identity is not given (solely or necessarily) by anatomy, then Woman or even women cannot be a legitimate point of

departure for political action. Real historical women have been (and are) oppressed, and that oppression must be analyzed and fought, but as deconstruction rightly shows us, we also need to abandon the binary thinking that has stabilized women as a group that could be collectively (although not uniformly) oppressed. I am suggesting, then, that if deconstruction takes the Woolfian critique seriously and if a Woolfian approach takes deconstruction at its word, we could begin to dismantle the system that assigns to all women a single identity and a marginal position.

Such a discourse that I am proposing is not unproblematic and my defence of it can only be pragmatic. It may be, though, that justification of new theories can only be made on grounds such as usefulness, politics, or self-reflexive provisionality. I believe that we cannot properly understand texts apart from their institutional and social origins and that conversely institutional analyses are inadequate unless they are also able to address questions of textuality. I am suggesting, then, that we need a careful critical analysis of textual representation in the context of a social-historical grasp of the processes and institutions in which literature is produced and consumed. Perhaps the alternative is a politics of difference that combines the Derridean critique of totalizing discourses and the concrete political vision of inexhaustible heterogeneity of a Woolfian perspective.

This politics that I am proposing reaffirms the importance of difference as part of a broader political struggle for reconstruction. It rejects essentialism but points to the importance of certain formative narratives in the recognition that women's positioning within existing social, familial, and ideological structures differs

fundamentally from that of men in distinct although often varied ways, and that the emancipation of women requires an examination of the nature and implications of such differences. It provides a language of power that engages the issue of inequality and struggle. In recognizing the importance of institutional structures and language in the construction of subjectivities and political life, it promotes social criticism that acknowledges the interrelationship between human agents and social structures. And finally, it provides a radical social theory imbued with a language of critique and possibility.

As I come to the end of this thesis certain questions remain unanswered. Is discussion of discourses of knowledge still motivated by the metaphysical belief that knowledge can set us free? Can we treat these beliefs as a series of questions that still have value apart from their hopelessly contaminated answers? What are the relations of knowledge and power? Does all knowledge necessarily inflict violence on things, ourselves, and others -- that is, is it possible to construct an identity without imposing on others? Is a decentred community a practical alternative? I leave these questions for others to take up in their own ways, and I close with Isa's words of hope and encouragement: "Rise up, donkey. Go your way till your heels blister and your hoofs crack". . . . On little donkey, patiently stumble" (*Between the Acts* 114).

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