

NAMES AS HISTORY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S
BETWEEN THE ACTS

Shaista Rahman
Brooklyn College
The City University of New York

In April 1938, Virginia Woolf noted her first ideas for Poyntzet Hall, (later to be named Between the Acts) in her diary. She wrote, "Why not Poyntzet Hall; a centre; all literature discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour: and anything that comes into my head; but "I" rejected: "We" substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? "We" ... the composed of many different things ... we all life, all art, all waifs and strays -- a rambling capricious but somehow unified, whole -- the present state of my mind?" At this time Virginia Woolf was working on the biography of the artist and critic, Roger Fry, and soon after she wrote the words quoted above, she began the novel we know as Between the Acts. By November 1940, while the Germans were bombing London and the surrounding countryside, and Virginia and Leonard Woolf were becoming increasingly pessimistic about the survival of Britain in the war, she put the finishing touches to the work. The remarkable fact is that, in the midst of terrible

personal fears of loss and of suffering, she did not deviate from her plan to write about the sense of larger community that she describes as being "the present state of my mind" in the excerpt from the diary.

It is not, therefore, surprising, that Between the Acts should read like a meditation on the nature of existence, and on the meaning of human identity. It is a meditation, however, that is neither sombre nor fatalistic. As a matter of fact, it is lighthearted in its portraiture, and hopeful, even in its candid descriptions of people's pettinesses and eccentricities.

To show her sense of existence as "a rambling, capricious but somehow unified whole," her story of the Oliver family becomes the framework that subsequently contains the presentation of the village pageant that is to raise money for installing electric lights in the church. Thus, while the reader learns of the network of relationships in the family, the sense of the term "family" is itself extended to include all the village people. Later, in the pageant, the idea grows even larger, as everyone gathers on the lawn to witness the

pageant that shows them their history as a nation, from the time of Chaucer to the present. Throughout the pageant too, the present is shown to contain the past, a favourite belief that Virginia Woolf propounds even in her critical essays, and along with that thought, we are led to see also that rank and birth are insignificant, in light of the fact that even the humblest person in the village could be proud of both a personal and a racial history centuries old. Thus, the narrator comments,

Roughly speaking, however, had Figgis been there in person and called a roll call, half the ladies and gentlemen present would have said: 'Adsum; I'm here, in place of my grandfather or great-grandfather,' as the case might be.²

Time, then, becomes the element that bestows the sense of "wholeness" on the human community, and an awareness of history defines personal identity.

Virginia Woolf, however, seems to go still further in her desire to express what life is, and so adds yet another dimension to her plot. She shows that the pageant itself could not have succeeded if another set of actors had not imposed themselves on the script Miss La Trobe had written. These "actors" are the cows, the

swallows, the wind and the rain, who assert their presence to fill up the interludes of awkward silence on stage. In contrast to the human actors, however, these others do not need to simulate a role; they simply remind everyone, that nature coexists with and affects human life, indeed, conditions its history.

What has been said so far, in broad, general terms, is that in the scheme of her novel, Virginia Woolf gives substance to the ideas stated in the diary excerpt with which this discussion began. It becomes necessary, however, to examine the novel to see how she expanded these underlying metaphysical views to substantiate her plot, and to convince her readers of their validity.

One of the most interesting ways in which Virginia Woolf directs the reader to an instant awareness of the place of her characters, and of the environment in which they have that place, is through the kind of names she gives them. She chooses them, it seems clear, for their descriptive significance, and makes extended use of them to create the atmosphere of a present that is filled with resonances of the past.

The names in the novel augment Virginia Woolf's thought in a number of ways. On the most obvious level they give a sense of social position, which, however, the narrator is all the time assiduously involved in inverting, in an attempt to demonstrate that in light of human frailty, the stereotypes associated with rank seem an unreliable measure of the individual's view of life. What is more interesting is that the names all have about them the sort of flavour one might associate with a rural environment. Thus, Bartholomew Oliver, Lucy Swithin, Lady Haslip of Haslip Manor, Mrs. Elmhurst, Cobbet of Cobbs Corner, Colonel Mayhew and even the Reverend Streatfield, remind us of country folk, be they gentry or village tradespeople, because each name has a meaning associated with nature and the countryside.

The sense of the countryside is important, in and of itself, as has been mentioned earlier, to the novelist's ideas about the nature of existence and of English history. The birds -- particularly the swallows, which, in mythology, symbolize the feeling of pathos at the passing of time -- the cows, the goldfish in the lilypond, and even the clouds and the rain become partners with their human neighbours in the shared life of the planet. Thus, during the pageant, they enter "between the acts" and save it from disintegration when, as the producer says, "illusion fails."³

Going beyond the association of the names with the open air and the countryside, however, we find another set of associations. These point to qualities of personality and temperament, and they help the reader to understand the positions of the main characters in the more realistic drama that is provided as the outer framework of the novel. Thus, the name Bart, short for Bartholomew, sounds very like "Bar it," and meeting Bart in the first and the last parts of the novel, and discovering his irritable and obstinate attitude to his sister, one might agree that Virginia Woolf has chosen the name aptly. In actuality, the full name, Bartholomew, comes from the Aramaic "Bar Telem" which is, literally, "Son of the furrow," "Telem" meaning "furrow." "Oliver," the surname, derives from "olive," and means, along with its equivalents in French and Italian, either one who owns or lives near an olive grove. The association of the full name, Bartholomew Oliver, with the agrarian countryside thus seems obvious, but the diminutive Bart takes on quite another colouring in the plot of the novel.

The name Lucinda, or Lucy, means "light," and is easily associated with the sky and also the breeze, which the narrator is always describing as rushing in

as Lucy opens windows and doors when she gives her guest a tour of the house. "Swithin" is phonetically very close to "It's within," and when we discover that, along with Isa and William Dodge, she is the character whose stream of consciousness Virginia Woolf takes great pains to reveal, the phrase begins also to become potent with meaning about the main predilection of her nature. "Swithin," in Old English, means "strong," and in its extended sense it has come to mean "Strong friend."

Given the fact that Lucy Swithin is clearly a believing Christian, and her brother is not, their names, in their emblematic aspect, become further enriched in meaning. In fact, when we are privy to Bart Oliver's thoughts about his sister, we learn that he also questions and speculates about what is within his sister's skull:

But it was not in books the answer to his question -- why, in Lucy's skull, shaped so much like his own, there existed a prayable being? She didn't, he supposed, invest it with hair, teeth or toenails. It was, he supposed, more of a force or a radiance, controlling the thrush and the worm; the tulip and the hound; and himself, too, an old man with swollen veins. It got her out of bed on a cold morning and sent her down the muddy path to worship it, whose mouthpiece was Streatfield.⁴

Isa, Giles Oliver's wife, is of course Isabella. Her name combines a reference both to beauty and the name of the fertility goddess, Isis. Her passionate, poetic nature, and her need for love and attachment are proclaimed in all her responses to people and events as they touch upon her consciousness. Hers is the maternal, but agony-smitten, nature that looks everywhere for comfort. Thus, while she strives to protect the weak and the young (William Dodge and her son, George) she shows herself capable of doing fierce battle, almost like a predatory animal. William Dodge notes this fact when he sees her watching her handsome, young husband in the coils of Mrs. Manresa. Thus, we are told, "She swept past her conspirator, her semblable, the seeker after vanished faces 'like Venus' he thought, making a rough translation, 'to her prey ... ' followed after.'" ⁵ Isa, we note, is the one most conscious of the interplay of emotion among the members of the family and the guests on the day of the pageant at Poyntzet Hall, and in order to keep herself whole, and free of her rising hysteria, she thinks, "The plot was only there to beget emotions. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot." ⁶

Like Isa, or Isabella, the name Dodge describes personality, though, in all fairness, one must say, it is perhaps only one aspect of the character's nature. William Dodge, unlike his companion, Mrs. Manresa, does not like to meet many people, nor does he contribute to social conversations. He literally "dodges" people because he is self-conscious about some inadequacy, and it is only Lucy Swithin's generous, open manner, her living up to the meaning of her name, "good friend," that helps him to reach a measure of ease at Poyntzet Hall. Otherwise, he hides his love of art along with his "semblable and fellow-conspirator,"⁷ who hides her poetry in the covers of an account-book.

The names of the village people -- the Dyces of Denton, the Wickhams of Owlswick, Cobbett of Cobbs Corner, Mr. Page, Candish, Mrs. Carter, Phyllis Jones, Eliza Clark, Albert the village idiot, Mrs. Otter of the End House, and a host of others -- serve to give the sense of a large canvas in the novel. The device, of course, is necessary to Virginia Woolf's scheme because she has to make concrete her idea of "waifs and strays," or to use the phrase from the novel, "orts,
⁸scraps, and fragments." Only with the creation of large groups made up of people of varied backgrounds of

occupation, character, and perspective can she make a claim for diversity, the diversity that is necessary for there to be any consideration of the necessity for unity, which is synonymous with the idea of the "whole" in which Virginia Woolf places her faith. Nor is Virginia Woolf simply naive in this belief. In the chorus that accompanies the last scene of the pageant she shows that along with the idea of unity, pettiness, thievery, crime, pain, and hypocrisy exist in the world, and every member of the audience is shown, rather unceremoniously, his reflection in the mirrors and scraps of metal that the actors turn towards them. At best, existence can only be "a rambling, capricious and somehow unified whole" (italics mine).

In this connection, we must discuss an important implication of the use of a group of names that is most interesting, which is not recognized at all by most readers of Virginia Woolf's work. There is in the novel an undercurrent of thought which occasionally finds voice in the arguments between Lucy Swithin and her brother on the idea of "a prayable being." It is

significant in a very direct way to the idea of "Unity-Dispersity" that is brought forward in the last scene of the pageant, and the music that is played when the pageant ends. However, it doesn't become obvious until we see the names, Bartholomew, Swithin, Isabel (the name is a variant of Elizabeth) Giles, and Manresa as constituting a group that has a common point of reference. This common point is that each of the first four, the names of the host family, derives from the names of saints, while Manresa is the name of a town near Barcelona where St. Ignatius Loyola sought refuge, and received a vision which was to change his life, and the face of the world too.

On considering the first of the four in the group that forms the family, we know that St. Bartholomew was, of course, one of the twelve Apostles, and his work, spreading Christ's word, took him to distant lands, in fact even as far as the borders of India. He also became one of the first martyrs of the Church, and there is a well-known church, the Church of St. Bartholomew the Great, in his memory in London.

St. Swithin, about whose name Lucy is teased,¹⁰ was an English saint of the ninth century, and there are two special associations with him in the common mind. Virginia Woolf seems aware of them both, along with a third which is not so often mentioned.

The first is the adage, "If it rains on St. Swithin's day (July 15) it will rain for forty days after," and the other belief is that he is associated in the popular mind with drunkenness. The argument between Bart and Lucy about the prospects of rain at the pageant, which is a major motif of their exchanges on that day, and Lucy's remarkable reverie when she is cutting sandwiches and her mind rambles to Italy, ("Why's stale bread, she mused, easier to cut than fresh? And so skipped, sidelong, from yeast to alcohol; so to fermentation; so to inebriation; so to Bacchus; and lay under purple lamps in a vineyard in Italy, as she had done, often"¹¹) are evidence that the novelist was aware of the associations. The third association with the reputation of St. Swithin is that diseases of the eye were cured by him, and thus he is associated with clearing the vision. In a telling passage, speaking to William Dodge, Lucy Swithin says, "Behind

the eyes, behind the eyes."¹² In a more important reference, when Mrs. Swithin takes Dodge on a tour of the house, we learn of his poignant discovery that Mrs. Swithin's eyes are healing eyes:

"I took you," she apologized, "away from your friends William, because I felt wound tight here..." She touched her bony forehead upon which a blue vein wriggled like a blue worm. But her eyes in their caves of bone were still lambent. He saw her eyes only. And he wished to kneel before her, to kiss her hand, and to say: "At school they held me under a bucket of dirty water, Mrs. Swithin; when I looked up, the world was dirty, Mrs. Swithin; so I married; but my child's not my child, Mrs. Swithin. I'm a half-man, Mrs. Swithin; a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass, Mrs. Swithin; as Giles saw; but you've healed me ..."¹³

The association of Giles' name with that of St. Giles, the seventh century saint, is also of interest. The saint was born in Greece but lived his life in France. When he became lame, it is said, he would not allow his wound to be treated because, like St. Francis, he looked for opportunities for the mortification of the flesh. Consequently, he is the patron saint of cripples, and there is a church in London named after him too, at Cripplegate. Giles Oliver, in the novel, shares the condition of being crippled because, we are told, he is incapable, as he admits, of the courage to change the life of

stockbroker which he lives, and hates, for that of the farmer. There is a further association with the saint, in the episode of the blood-stained shoe that Isa notices her husband is wearing. Isa, or Isabel, which is the same as Elizabeth, herself continues the name of at least three saints, the earliest of them being the mother of John the Baptist.

It is obvious from some of the evidence in the novel that Virginia Woolf is aware of the associations with the names of saints that she gives to her characters. Consequently, we can feel reasonably safe that we are not distorting the importance of their place in the novel when we extend the argument to find out why she might wish to create yet another set of resonances. The resonances, this time, are with an awareness of another element of consciousness, spirituality, and they take their place beside the ideas of time and history that she brings to the reader's attention from the beginning of the book.

That only one of these four characters who bear names derived from saints' names is a believing Christian is clear enough; in fact none of the other three can be said to even give much thought to

religion, Bart even actively counterposing Reason to Faith. Nevertheless, Virginia Woolf does seem to give a nod of approval to Lucy Swithin in saying that she was one of the "Unifiers," while Bart was a "Separatist."¹⁴ Further, she portrays Reverend Streatfield as a well-meaning, if sometimes bumble-headed, leader of the community, and his modesty in his attempt to interpret the play is also presented by the narrator in a sympathetic tone.

All these observations seem to lead one to think that Virginia Woolf wants, indeed, directs one to include the thought of spiritual lineage with the other ideas (the insignificance of spiritual identity, historical consciousness, and the close relationship with nature) in considering the issues of the meaning of existence. What adds to the plausibility of this view is that the pageant is produced in order to raise money for the installation of electric lights in the church, that is for the actual, and symbolic, modernization of the church. The questioning way in which a member of the audience comments on this idea also supports this belief. The voice says:

Oracles? You're referring to the Greeks? Were the oracles, if I'm not being irreverent, a foretaste of our own religion? What is what? ... But I was saying: can the Christian faith adapt itself? In times like these ... At Larting no one goes to church ... It's odd that science, so they tell me, is making things (so to speak) more spiritual ... The very latest notion, so I'm told is, nothing's solid ... There, you can get a glimpse of the church through the trees.¹⁵

Finally, one must consider the place that Virginia Woolf gives to Miss La Trobe, the writer of the script of the pageant. Miss La Trobe is rather an exotic character in the village, and has led, so popular rumour says, many kinds of lives. What we see of her in the novel is that she is passionate about her art, and is almost obsessively concerned that the audience should grasp her meaning. From the phonetic structure of her name we get two meanings; one is "let robe" or "dress up," which would fit her role as the creator or producer of the play. Another possible meaning is derived from considering "the trobe" as an abbreviation of the term "troubador," that is, a singer or balladeer. In either case, the associations are with art. What is most significant for us, however, is that after the excitement of the presentation of the pageant, after the terrible depression at the thought that the

audience had not received her meaning, Miss La Trobe, having got drunk at the local pub to forget her depression, is inspired to words again, words of one syllable that she pictures as rising from the mud. The image evokes man's early history when language was discovered, and expression and art rose out of the primeval mud for man to express his sense of his existence, and his needs. In the case of Miss La Trobe we learn that words as unifiers and interpreters of vision cannot be repressed, because art is a process of perpetual renewal, and this is the large thought with which the novel concludes -- renewal.

In much the same spirit, having finished Poyntzet Hall, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, "Having this moment finished the Pageant -- or Poyntzet Hall? (begun perhaps April 1938) -- my thoughts turn well up, to write the first chapter of the next book (nameless).¹⁶ Anon it will be called." It is no simple irony that such a book, a book that would use no name, was never written.

Shaista Rahman
 Brooklyn College
 City University of New York

NOTES

- 1 Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Diary. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p.268.
- 2 Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969, p. 92.
- 3 Ibid., p.210.
- 4 Ibid., p.32.
- 5 Ibid., p.243.
- 6 Ibid., p.109.
- 7 Ibid., p.136. (" 'I'm William' he said ... 'I'm Isa,' she answered ... Weren't they, though conspirators, seekers after hidden faces?")
- 8 Ibid., pp.219 and 251.
- 9 Ibid., p.32.

10

Between the Acts, p.40. ("Bart would crack
another joke about Saints")

11

Ibid., p.43-44.

12

Ibid., p.68.

13

Ibid., p.90.

14

Ibid., p.140.

15

Ibid., p.232.

16

A Writer's Diary, p.331. Entry for Nov.23rd, 1940.