

THE PLURISIGNIFICANCE OF THE NAMES OF FEMALE
CHARACTERS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S BETWEEN THE ACTS

Ned Williams

The critical insights brought to bear on the structure in Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts are indeed impressive; yet the problem of unity continues to plague readers of the novel. Recent critics have generally rejected F. R. Leavis's and Louis Kronenberger's early disenchantment with Woolf's novel and have amassed curious and persuasive support for the work's inner unity and conceptual harmony.¹ Painfully reduced, the basic disagreement about the novel's unity can be illustrated with two extreme opinions, one from Milton Friedman and the other from Dorothy Brewster. Friedman concludes that in Between the Acts, "a unifying principle is nowhere to be found."² On the other hand, Dorothy Brewster believes that "Mrs. Woolf never did a more beautiful job in integrating the parts of her design than in this brief book."³ James Wilson's evaluation may be the most diplomatic of those critics who have attempted to arbitrate the ongoing disagreement. Wilson calls Woolf's book, "A completed novel but perhaps an unfinished work of art."⁴

In a fresh approach to the question of unity, Jean Love has introduced an intriguing resolution to the critical conundrum surrounding the novel's unity by pointing out that instead of offering readers discord or harmony, Woolf's purpose in her work is "only the reiteration of the dialectics."⁵ There can be little doubt, however, even to the uninitiated reader that Woolf's thematic thrust is toward fragmentation in its various manifestations; thus,

we do not have a perfectly balanced system of opposites as Professor Love would desire. Love's reading should be valued, nevertheless, for it provides us with a conceptual system previously overlooked, a psychoanalytical approach that leads us to the novel's deeper structures.

It is from Love's book, Worlds in Consciousness, that I have taken the term "plurisignificance" for my title and its definition as a guideline for analyzing various female names in Between the Acts. Love defines plurisignificance as "the ability of a symbol or symbolic form to refer to more than one lexical meaning and therefore to signify more than one thing."⁶ Neither Love nor I am concerned about the kinds of qualities of meaning in symbols; rather our focus is upon their suggestions. In order to probe the deeper structure of the novel, I have chosen to examine the plurisignificance of the principal female names in Woolf's book and to show how Woolf's names become codes whose essential content is represented in larger dialectic tensions at other levels in the book. In other words, I believe that each feminine name reiterates revealing paradoxes of sound and sense, underscoring Woolf's central themes concerning the nature of existence, history, society, and art.

Presenting us with laughable names of restoration characters-- Sir Spaniel Lilyliver, Sir Smirking Peace-Be-With-You-All, and Harpy Harraden--Woolf clearly has in mind not only a parody on the names of the inner play's performers, but also a concern with the

very process of naming. Interest in the names of Woolf's characters in this book has largely been ignored; only Love and Hermione Lee have touched on them and both with glancing comment.⁷ What fascinated me from the first reading of Between the Acts were Woolf's unusual non-British British names, Oliver, Swithin, Isa, La Trobe and Manresa, foreign names of characters who are thoroughly familiar with British life.

Oliver, for example, the name of the residents at Pointz Hall, best illustrates how Woolf combines antithetical suggestions in a single surname. Not only do we hear and read the words "O Live" in the ancestral name, but we also detect the opposite meaning, "All over." On the one hand, the vocative, "O live" resonates with audibles of positivistic promise, a celebration of the future; whereas "All over" harrows up prophecies of the extinction of the race, one of Woolf's pressing fears at the time of the composition of Between the Acts. "All over" also implies a complete dispersion, a thorough fragmentation of society, order, tradition threatened by the oncoming world war, one of the central themes of the novel. Moreover, Oliver carries in it the sound "all of her," which gives the family name a deeper complexity. "All of her" suggests a whole woman existing among the fragments of a weak patriarchal society embodied in the characters of Bart, Giles, Haines, Mr. Budge and William Dodge.

Lucy Swithin and Isa Oliver are both Olivers. Lucy, though, has

dropped her surname, while Isa has assumed it. Isa has several names in the novel: Isabelle, Mrs. Giles Oliver, Sir Richard's daughter-- all of which give her separate identities connecting her with the presiding patriarchy. Isa's major dilemma, to be sure, is the question of who she is. Somehow her various labels fail to describe her nearly or fully. Woolf highlights Isa's confusion by associating her in several places with being "entangled"(p. 8), "prisoned"(p. 66), and "ambiguous"(p. 38). Isa's name can be read in at least two ways: "Is a . . ." or "I saw." Much of Isa's quandary about her identity stems from the uncertainty about who she is in relationship to what she sees. She is introduced as a mother in pigtails, indicating that she is not quite sure if she's an adult or an adolescent. She loves her husband but romanticizes excessively about Haines, whom she rarely encounters. She claims to love her children, but wants to free herself from them. She is very much in the prison her name suggests. Either she must follow her private vision or accept her **stifling** existence, her "isness," if you will. When we are told that Isa "looked what she was " (p. 16), Woolf succinctly fuses the antithetical aspects of her character, for throughout the novel, she comes across as an entangled mass of contradictions.

If Isa is a gainsayer, then Lucy Swithin "belonged to the unifiers" (p. 118). Lucy is a diminutive of Lucinda, whose root (Luc) means "light." Swithin, I believe, should be read as a deliberate play on the word "within." Hence, her name signifies "light is

within." The paradox of her name suggests the tension between boundless emanating light and its containment within. Her religious, unifying vision, on the one hand, allows Lucy to sympathize with William Dodge (p. 67) and to appreciate the intention of Miss La Trobe's play (p. 152); but on the other hand, those close to her-- Bart, who thinks her religion made her "imperceptive," and the servants, who call her "battie"--believe that Lucy's inner light is a form of blindness. Smug in her assurance that "all is harmony" (p. 175), Lucy is blind to her blind side. Woolf provides ample evidence that Lucy's vision is not to be trusted.

Woolf establishes Lucy's double-vision from the beginning of the novel. We discover that "in mind time it took her so much longer than in actual time" to separate "Grace by herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest" (p. 9). Once, when Grace, the house servant, startled her, Lucy "felt on her face the divided glance" (p. 9), anticipating the fact that "she couldn't fix her gaze" (p. 24) which, according to Bart, would have made her a clever woman had she been able to. Furthermore, we sense the division of her vision when she groups the books in the library into two categories: those she has read and those she has not (p. 59). This classification suggests Lucy's fragmentary knowledge of the past, also hinted at by her endless reading project, the Outline of History.

Our knowledge of her divided vision, her stance "between two fluidities" (p. 204), balances against the supposed oneness of Mrs. Swithin's private, unifying vision. Therefore, the tension "is-within" and the issue is inner and outer "light." Does she maintain insight or blindness or both or neither? The dialectic holds; no synthesis emerges within the character of Lucy Swithin.

Unlike Lucy Swithin, Mrs. Manresa is defined from the point of view of other people who eddy around her. Childless, primitive, vulgar in dress and manner, this disrupting woman is described from one extreme as "a wild child of nature" (p. 56) and from the other as "the Queen of the pageant" (p. 93), demonstrating that her very nature encompasses the extremes of society. With William Dodge, Mrs. Manresa crashes the Oliver Party, energizes the members of the family, and to Isa's dismay, displaces her from the center of attention. She emerges as a foreign invader, rich, with an unknown past who "believes in superstition" (p. 50) and has the modern freedom and power to "do what she likes" (p. 55).

Her name invites play. We never learn her first name in the novel; she is known to us only as Mrs. Manresa. Her name gives its bearer a foreign quality, an aspect that underscores a major significance to her role as an alien invader. Also, we hear the word "Man Ray," that associates her with an eel-like bite and nature. Her sting, especially against other women in the novel, is frequently felt. Another possible significance of her name can be linked to the

American artist, Man Ray, who photographed Virginia Woolf numerous times. The most revealing aspect concerning Mrs. Manresa's name points to the dialectic tensions preoccupying Woolf's mind during the composition of the novel: the future of "man" and "race."

We can hardly miss Woolf's intentional association of Mrs. Manresa with the invading forces on the continent at the time. It is no accident that Mrs. Manresa's absent husband is a Jew (p. 40), that she was the "first to bite" (p. 102) when teas were served, that she manages to displace Bart from his chair in the very center of the audience during the performance of the pageant (p. 78). Men, young and old, follow her "like leaping dolphins in the wake of an ice-breaking vessel" (p. 41). Her force, vulgarity, and appetite are as overwhelming as her sexuality, though she has "given up on her figure" (p. 42) in favor of following the primitive nature she calls "just human" (p. 102).

Perhaps it is Mrs. Manresa's near animalistic, abnormal humanness that makes her suspicious as a character. Her influence is enormous, unreflectively destructive. Instead of teaching the women of the village to can fruit or keep house, she has them all weaving hats (p. 43). Uninvited, she is quick to seize control and attention with her very presence, despite the fact that "she can't put two words together" (p. 62). Furthermore, she has no concern for social class; she "is on the servants' level," herself immature, culturally, yet physically overdeveloped. The future of man and

race is questioned in her telling recitation of the famous line from Hamlet: "to be or not to be, that is the question" (p. 54). Indeed, that is the question that man and race must answer; yet Mrs. Manresa, in this passage, merely asserts the question and then nudges Giles to complete Hamlet's lines. Why, we may wonder, do members of the audience in the last scene of the play turn away from their reflections like a primitive horde, while Mrs. Manresa touches up her make-up in a fragment of a shattered ancestral mirror? Either the others wish to avoid seeing themselves as they really are, or are perhaps giving Mrs. Manresa the mirror to inspect her face. Woolf implies that Mrs. Manresa, too, has no vision beyond her own surfaces. Gazing at a reflection of herself, she fails to perceive the chaos she has caused.

It is Miss La Trobe, however, who directed her cast to hold up the mirrors to the faces in the audience as the finale of the pageant. Through her, Woolf affirms the artist's creation. Unlike the chaos caused by Mrs. Manresa, Miss La Trobe's gift to the residents, guests, and intruders at Pointz Hall is one of unity, harmony, and radiance. Her name, La Trobe, reminds us of Atropos, the daughter of Themis, the inflexible fate who severs the thread of life. Woolf's character, Trobe (Trope) is one who "turns," as her name suggests, life into art.

Miss La Trobe is single, contemplative and cultured; she is in the center of the backstage production, whereas Mrs. Manresa is in

the center of the forestage performance. One is commissioned, the other uninvited, and this contrast, among others, illustrates the complex paradoxes between and within these two female characters in the novel. It is curious to note the various identities which accrue to Mrs. Manresa as opposed to the virtual namelessness of Miss La Trobe. In fact, the reporter, appropriately named Mr. Page, calls Miss La Trobe Miss Whatshername on three occasions (p. 150, p. 184, p. 197), indicating either his unprofessional journalism or Miss La Trobe's unnameable identity. We learn about her initially from the unnamed narrator:

She was always all agog to get things up. But where did she spring from? With that name she wasn't presumably pure English. From the Channel Islands perhaps? Rumour said that she had kept a tea shop at Winchester; that had failed. She had been an actress. That had failed. She had bought a four-roomed cottage and shared it with an actress. They had quarrelled. Very little was actually known about her. Outwardly she was swarthy, sturdy and thick set; strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand; and used rather strong language--perhaps, then, she wasn't altogether a lady? At any rate, she had a passion for getting things up (p. 58).

The wonderful energy of Miss La Trobe and the destructive energy of Mrs. Manresa show the extreme difference between artistic sensitivity and barbaric intrusion. A bossy, irritable director, who is afraid that her work is a failure, Miss La Trobe is Virginia Woolf's last portrait of the woman as artist. The task she undertakes is more visionary than practical, for she attempts to apprehend the past, present and future in the moment of the day, to include her audience, the natural setting and the wildlife in a pageant, hoping someone will understand to some degree, the wholeness of her vision. Behind the tree gnashing her teeth, she scorns the cultural blindness of her audience, although for an instant she felt that she "made them see" (p. 98). Not only does Miss La Trobe embody powerful artistic forces, but she is also one who works "like a nigger, scattering and foraging" (p. 150) backstage to advance the performance. Her rage at the audience's dispersion between the acts of her cyclic pageant parallels Giles' anger and frustration in view of eschatological ruin. The expanse of her encompassing outer vision compares in profundity to Lucy Swithin's inner religious delusions.

Appropriately, it is Lucy Swithin who has understood Miss La Trobe's purpose, for both in their extreme ways share an enthusiasm for mystical ecstasy. Invisible, passionate, despondent, aggressive, Miss La Trobe and her foreign-sounding name seem to vanish from Pointz Hall at the end of the performance. In a local pub:

The cheap clock ticked; smoke obscured the pictures. Smoke became tart on the roof of her mouth. Smoke obscured the earth-colored jackets. She no longer saw them, yet they upheld her, sitting arms akimbo with her glass before her. There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words (p. 212).

The first words she heard were possibly the first words of the "other play behind the play" (p. 63) that had been on her mind from the beginning of the village production. Perhaps her powerful illusion failed, and it may be that her enduring inner voice is the only gift she is given for her efforts. If we take Miss La Trobe as a type of the artist, art, though failing often, has an affirmative purpose; it bridges gaps, holds fragments together, unifies the people.

Ned Williams
Brigham Young University
Hawaii

NOTES

¹ See F. R. Leavis's "After To the Lighthouse," Scrutiny, No. 10 (1942), pp. 295-297, and Louis Kronenberger's "Virginia Woolf's Last Novel," Nation, October 11, 1941, pp. 344-345.

² Melvin Friedman, "Between the Acts," Scrutiny, No. 9 (1941), p. 145. Among other studies agreeing with Friedman see Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf: A Commentary (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), p. 236; Jean Wyatt, "Art and Allusion in Between the Acts," Mosaic, No. 11 (1975), p. 91; and Leavis, p. 344.

³ Dorothy Brewster, Virginia Woolf (New York: New York University Press, 1962), p. 153. See also, Jill Morris, Time and Timelessness in Virginia Woolf (Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1977), p. 97; Hermione Lee, The Novels of Virginia Woolf (London: Methuen and Co., 1977), p. 203; and Avrom Fleishman, Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading (Baltimore: Johns-Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 195.

⁴ James S. Wilson, "Time and Virginia Woolf," Virginia Quarterly Review, Spring (1942), p. 273.

⁵ Jean O. Love, Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 224.

⁶ Love, p. 255.

⁷ Love, p. 222 and Lee, p. 212.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1941), p. 8, 13, and 48. All subsequent page references to this edition will appear in the text.