

Their Fathers' House: Forster, Woolf, and the Aesthetics of Patriotism

Art, if it doesn't start there, at least ends,
Whether aesthetics like the thought or not,
In an attempt to entertain our friends.

W. H. Auden, 'To Joan Ferrante'

Penelope Pether

Forster and Woolf may seem rather curious choices as examples of patriotic writers. Forster is, of course, (in)famous for that one-liner from 'What I Believe' (1939): 'if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country,' and one of the more influential of the recent critics of *A Passage to India* has argued that it 'interrogates the premises, purposes and goals of a civilisation dedicated to world hegemony.'¹ There is an equivalent to the Forster quotation in Woolf's canon, not as well-known, but able to be anticipated in the light of her present representation by literary studies. It comes from *Three Guineas* (1938):²

- 1 Benita Parry, 'The Politics of Representation in *A Passage to India*', in *A Passage to India: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. John Beer, London and Basingstoke, 1985, p.30.
- 2 For example, Gillian Beer, 'The island and the aeroplane: the case of Virginia Woolf', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha, London and New York, 1990, essays a highly selective reading of Woolf which leads her to the conclusion that Woolf's 'one form of patriotism' is a celebration of 'the insouciant resilience of the English language and of literary history' (p.286). Beer presents no evidence in direct support of this claim, although earlier she reads a passage in a 1941 letter to Ethel Smyth ('How odd it is being a countrywoman after all these years of being a Cockney! ... You never shared my passion for that great city. Yet it's what, in some odd corner of my dreaming mind, represents Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dickens. It's my only patriotism: save once in Warwickshire one Spring when we were driving back from Ireland, I saw a stallion being led, under the may and the beeches, along a grass ride; and I thought that is England') as establishing that 'Only in London can she feel herself in kinship with the most "English" writers' (Gillian Beer, p. 281). What this passage in fact suggests is the two types of symbols of 'Englishness' which recur in Woolf's 'personal' and 'published' writings: the literary and the geographical, the latter illuminated in a 'moment of being'. This second model,

When he says, as history proves that he has said, and may say again, 'I am fighting to protect our country' and thus seeks to rouse her patriotic emotion, she will ask herself, 'What does "our country" mean to me an outsider?' ...

"Our Country," she will say, 'throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions. "Our" country still ceases to be mine if I marry a foreigner. "Our" country denies me the means of protecting myself, forces me to pay others a very large sum annually to protect me, and is so little able, even so, to protect me that Air Raid precautions are written on the wall. Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or "our" country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts, or to protect either my self or my country. For', the outsider will

and the way in which, while it originated in Woolf's experience of London, it was transferred in her fiction to other sites (such as Cambridge in *Jacob's Room*) and was employable in her personal writing to record her response to the English countryside, is suggested by a diary entry which Beer doesn't quote (for 2 February, 1940):

... I can't even imagine London in peace—the lit nights, the buses roaring past Tavistock Square, the telephone ringing, and I scraping together with the utmost difficulty one night or afternoon alone ... Only the fire sets me dreaming—of all the things I mean to write: the break in our lives from London to country is a far more complete one than any change of house. Yes, but I haven't got the hang of it altogether. The immense space suddenly becomes vacant; then illuminated. And London, in nips, is cramped and creased. Odd how often I think with what is love I suppose of the City: of the walk to the Tower: that is my England; I mean, if a bomb destroyed one of those little alleys with the brass bound curtains and the river smell and the old women reading I should feel—well, what the patriots feel ...

Beer's insistence on constructing Woolf as 'no patriot' also leads to her curiously imperceptive reading of Colonel Mayhew's reflections on the pageant as evidence of Woolf's mimicry of 'the self-congratulatory forms of village pageants.' This fails to take account of the generic markers and employment of the pageant, pointedly suggested by the fact that Mayhew reflects upon the pageant's representation of 'The Nineteenth Century'. As *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985 edn) notes, Henry Mayhew's 'plain but harrowing descriptions [of the condition of the poor in nineteenth century London were] often told in the words of those he spoke with', and, of course, spoke for. The pageant is both democratic and hegemonic; Woolf's employment of it suggests how it both gives voice to the concerns of the community's 'simples' and speaks for them, exploring the capacity of the woman, the writer, the outsider to fashion a history whose premise is that 'England am I', and counterpointing this possible narrative with the featureless site of contest between the sexes with which *Between the Acts* concludes.

say, 'in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.'

I'll return later to these two effusions on the patriotic, but first I want to canvass the question of what aesthetics has to do with patriotism. Anne Sheppard's account of Kant's aesthetics gives us one lead. She writes:

Kant does not think that in judging an object to be beautiful we are doing no more than expressing our subjective reaction, for he points out that judgements of taste claim universal validity. In other words, when we say, 'This is beautiful' we are claiming that others should agree with our judgement, a claim we would not be making if all we said was, 'I like this'. We cannot be claiming that others should apply to the object the same concept as we do, since on Kant's view we are not here applying a concept at all. What we are claiming is that others should have the same reaction to the object as we do.³

Sheppard's reading begs questions about what is to generate that community of reaction, that 'interpretive community'?⁴ Shared experience is a partial answer, rather than the Kantian categories. In *A Passage to India*, which marks the novelistic limit of Forster's hope that 'We [can] ... know what other people are like,'⁵ common experience is grounded in place and time, in what for now I will call nationality, but which might also be labelled 'heritage'.

For Regis Debray the 'explanation in literary terms of the nation's universal appeal,' is found in its two 'anti-death processes'. The first of these is the assigning (implicitly, the inventing) of origins, which in turn 'allows ritual repetition, the ritualization of memory, celebration, commemoration—in short, all those forms of magical behaviour signifying defeat of the irreversibility of time.' The second is delineated in this way:

The second founding gesture of any human society is its delimitation within an enclosed space. Here also there takes place an encounter with the sacred, in the sense of the *Temple*. What is the Temple,

- 3 *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*, Oxford and New York, 1987, p.66.
- 4 I am employing Stanley Fish's term. See 'Interpreting the Variorum' in *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Cambridge, Mass., 1980.
- 5 See my 'E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*: A Passage to the Patria?', *Sydney Studies in English*, 17, (1991-92), for a full account of my reading of this text. The quotation is from Forster's 'What I Believe' in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, London, 1951, p. 77.

etymologically? It was what the ancient priest or diviner traced out, raising his wand heavenwards, the outline of a sacred space within which divination could be undertaken. This fundamental gesture is found at the birth of all societies, in their mythology at least. But the myth presence is an indication of something real.⁶

'Temple', the final structure of *A Passage to India*, is heralded by a movement which is at once the characteristic essay and the characteristic return of pastoral:

Turning his back on it yet again, he took the train northward, and tender romantic fancies that he thought were dead for ever flowered when he saw the buttercups and daisies of June.⁷

'Temple' itself contains the text's negative version of the pastoral *locus amoenus*, India, where desire for renewing connection with the other, Aziz—who is a projection of a masculine antecedent, the India that Whitman's 'Passage to India' imagines—is thwarted by the 'something racial' which separates men from different 'homes'.⁸ They, like their places, share 'nothing ... except the overarching sky.'⁹ In Forster's fictions desire is sustainable in 'the greenwood' of *Maurice* and the Wessex of 'The Machine Stops': in the land of his father, not the Whitmanesque India constructed by his atavistic originary fantasies. The lesson of the final encounter between Fielding and Aziz is that only those who share a heritage can connect. Place is productive of heritage, and *A Passage to India* attests to the soul's incapacity, 'in fear of losing the little she does understand,' to extend sympathy beyond 'the permanent lines that habit or chance have dictated.'¹⁰

A Passage, too, implicitly takes up and explicates Roger Fry's aesthetics of 'significant form' in describing the inaccessibility of the artefacts of the 'enlightened Englishman's tradition'¹¹ to Indians,

6 Cit. in Timothy Brennan, 'The National Longing for Form', in *Nation and Narration*, p.51.

7 E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, pp. 275-63. This and all subsequent references are to the Penguin edition, Harmondsworth, 1961.

8 Forster, *A Passage to India*, p. 254. Aziz's home is identified as Islam; Fielding's, as his name suggests, is England's 'green and pleasant land'.

9 Forster, *A Passage to India*, p. 10.

10 Forster, *A Passage to India*, p. 240.

11 In a record of a 1945 journey to India Forster describes the trip (via France, Sicily, Egypt and 'the Holy Land' to India) as including 'practically all the enlightened Englishman's tradition' (E. M. Forster, *The Hill of Devi and other Indian Writings*, ed. Elizabeth Heine, 1953, London, 1983, p. 243).

who are shaped by 'the architecture of question and answer',¹² whose minds India, not England, 'bore, shaped, made aware':¹³

Egypt was charming—a green strip of carpet and walking up and down it four sorts of animals and one sort of man. Fielding's business took him there for a few days. He re-embarked at Alexandria—bright blue sky, constant wind, clean low coast-line, as against the intricacies of Bombay. Crete welcomed him next with the long snowy ridges of its mountains and then came Venice. As he landed on the piazzetta a cup of beauty was lifted to his lips, and he drank with a sense of disloyalty. The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas in poor India everything was placed wrong. He had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? Form stammered here and there in a mosque, became rigid through nervousness even, but oh these Italian churches! San Giorgio standing on the island which could scarcely have risen from the waves without it, the Salute holding the entrance of a canal which, but for it, would not be the Grand Canal! In the old undergraduate days he had wrapped himself up in the many-coloured blanket of St Mark's, but something more precious than mosaics and marbles was offered to him now: the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form, with flesh and blood subsisting. Writing picture post-cards to his Indian friends, he felt that all of them would miss the joys he experienced now, the joys of form, and that this constituted a serious barrier. They would see the sumptuousness of Venice, not its shape, and though Venice was not Europe, it was part of the Mediterranean harmony. The Mediterranean is the human norm. When men leave that exquisite lake, whether through the Bosphorus or the Pillars of Hercules, they approach the monstrous and extraordinary; and the southern exit leads to the strangest experience of all.¹⁴

The association between shared experience of place and of tradition and the aesthetic is the subtext, too, of Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. It is especially marked in his description, in his discussion of Habermas, of the 'forms of human activity which require for their effective operation a ... "communicative rationality" which involves practical and moral agencies, democratic and participating processes, and the resources of cultural tradition'.¹⁵ In his repeated insistence on the grounding of the aesthetic in the

12 Forster, *A Passage to India*, p. 69.

13 Rupert Brooke, 'The Soldier'.

14 Forster, *A Passage to India*, p. 275

15 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford, 1990, p. 400.

'concrete and particular'¹⁶ he provides a useful insight into the 'cultural imaginings'¹⁷ of England by Forster and Woolf.

In the case of Forster, the paradigm of this 'cultural imagining' is the 'geographical eternal moment',¹⁸ place experienced in time as the 'objective correlative' of value. This is typified by the 'poetry ... [which] resides in objects Man *can't* touch—like England's grass network of lanes a hundred years ago'.¹⁹ In Woolf's case it becomes the island that is England, as Gillian Beer has suggested,²⁰ but the island essentialized and illuminated:

They say the sky is the same everywhere. Travellers, the shipwrecked, exiles, and the dying draw comfort from the thought, and no doubt if you are of a mystical tendency, consolation, and even explanation, shower down from the unbroken surface. But above Cambridge—anyhow above the roof of King's College Chapel—there is a difference. Out at sea a great city will cast brightness into the night. Is it fanciful to suppose the sky, washed into the crevices of King's College Chapel, lighter, thinner, more sparkling than the sky elsewhere? Does Cambridge burn not only into the night, but into the day?²¹

So how do Forster and Woolf situate themselves in relation to this England? I'll return, first, to those quotations with which I began, contextualize the first, and gloss and complete the second, and then move to these writers' texts of 'heritage', their English pageants: Forster's *Abinger Pageant* and *England's Pleasant Land*, and Woolf's pageant-within-a-novel in *Between the Acts*.

'What I Believe' is, of course, a critique of faith, and the beliefs expounded in it need to be considered in this context. Forster writes:

I have ... to live in an Age of Faith—the sort of epoch I used to hear praised when I was a boy. It is extremely unpleasant really. It is bloody in every sense of the word. And I have to keep my end up in it. Where do I start?

He starts with personal relationships, the possibilities of contracting which across 'the permanent lines that habit or chance have dictated' he had abandoned in *A Passage to India*. In his discussion of personal

16 Especially in Chapter 14.

17 The phrase is Beer's (see *Nation and Narration*).

18 W. Stone, *The Cave and the Mountain: A Study of E. M. Forster*, Stanford, London, 1966, p. 195

19 E. M. Forster, 'The Last of Abinger' in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 369. The image was first recorded in Forster's *Commonplace Book* in 1928.

20 See *Nation and Narration*.

21 Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (1922), London, 1976, p. 29.

relationships in this essay he extends his sense of this limitation:

We don't know what we are like. We can't know what other people are like. How, then, can we put any trust in personal relationships, or cling to them in the gathering political storm? In theory we cannot. But in practice we can and do. Though A is not unchangeably A or B unchangeably B, there can still be love and loyalty between the two. For the purpose of living one has to assume that the personality is solid, and the self is an entity, and to ignore all contrary evidence.

The circumstances in which affection and trust can flourish, he goes on to say, are where there is 'natural warmth'. He does not locate the source of this warmth, but goes on to identify the political situation in 1939 as antipathetical to friendship:

Personal relations are despised to-day. They are regarded as bourgeois luxuries, as products of a time of fair weather which is now past, and we are urged to get rid of them, and to dedicate ourselves to some movement or cause instead.

This passage, though, suggests that at least a commonality in class and age marks those who value and establish 'personal relations'.

What emerges from this essay is that it is the State and its claims which Forster speaks of when he says that he would hope to choose friend over country. This is said both directly —

Love and loyalty to an individual can run counter to the claims of the State. When they do—down with the State, say I, which means that the State would down me.

—and obliquely, in Forster's choice of a literary-historical example to illustrate his stance:

Such a choice may scandalise the modern reader, and he may stretch out his patriotic hand to the telephone at once and ring up the police. It would not have shocked Dante, though. Dante places Brutus and Cassius in the lowest circle of Hell because they had chosen to betray their friend Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome.

Rome was not a country: a city state, a nation, the seat of an empire, but not a country.

Forster's essay and its most notorious sentence do not constitute a rejection of his earlier celebrations of England. They are a response to the perceived effects of State power, as viewed by Forster in 1939. The essay at large presents a quintessentially English version of Democracy as the type of government most likely to allow the continued existence of civilization. It is civilization which both essay and the volume in which it was later collected—*Two Cheers for Democracy*—present as hanging in the balance in the war years. This

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is clear in the broadcast 'Culture and Freedom', dating from 1940, and also included in *Two Cheers*:

... Germany is not against culture. She does believe in literature and art. But she has made a disastrous mistake; she has allowed her culture to become governmental, and from this mistake proceed all kinds of evils. In England our culture is not governmental. It is national: it springs naturally out of our way of looking at things, and out of the way we have looked at things in the past. It has developed slowly, easily, lazily; the English love of freedom, the English countryside, English prudishness and hypocrisy, English freakishness, our mild idealism and good-humoured reasonableness have all combined to make something which is certainly not perfect, but which may claim to be unusual. ...

When a culture is genuinely national, it is capable, when the hour strikes, of becoming super-national, and contributing to the general good of humanity.

Here, as in *A Passage to India*, we find acknowledgment of how local is the grounding of any claims to the transcendent.

And what of Woolf's condemnation of patriotism in *Three Guineas*? Well, as is characteristic of the expression in her polemical writings of the tension between Englishness and feminism which permeates her canon, she shifts the enunciation of condemnation of the *patria* into another voice, thus distancing herself from it. That distance narrows dramatically in the sentence which succeeds the condemnation of patriotism—as an emotion alien and alienating—with which the previous quotation from *Three Guineas* ended:

And if, when reason has said its say, still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational emotion she will make serve her to give to England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world.

It is a commonplace of much presently influential feminist Woolf scholarship that she 'formed an identity in female history [and] found a set of symbols, a matriarchal mythology with which to forge the collective conscience of her sex,' that she thought 'back through her mothers,' and that this was necessitated by the 'radical homelessness' she experienced in 'her father's house'²². These claims suppress the degree to which, in her writing, thinking through literary mothers is locked, tensely, with a desire to insert herself into a masculine canon

²² See Jane Marcus, 'Introduction: Virginia Woolf Aslant', in *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, ed. Jane Marcus, Lincoln and London, 1983.

of English writing, a line descending from William Shakespeare to Leslie Stephen, and with a stubborn insistence on the *patria* as her home. These claims are given voice to in the passage from *Three Guineas*, both in the separation of the 'outsider', the representative 'educated man's daughter', from Woolf's intensely polemical speaking position, and in the bitter resentment there expressed at being excluded from a heritage properly hers. This self-positioning by Woolf is perhaps best exemplified by a famous passage from *A Room of One's Own*. Walking through 'Oxbridge', she thinks about Lamb's essay on 'the manuscript of one of Milton's poems' which Lamb saw at 'Oxbridge', and then:

It was *Lycidas* perhaps, and Lamb wrote how it shocked him to think it possible that any word in *Lycidas* could have been different from what it is. To think of Milton changing the words in that poem seemed to him a sort of sacrilege. This led me to remember what I could of *Lycidas* and to amuse myself with guessing which word it could have been that Milton had altered, and why. It then occurred to me that the very manuscript itself which Lamb had looked at was only a few hundred yards away, so that one could follow Lamb's footsteps across the quadrangle to that famous library where the treasure is kept. Moreover, I recollected, as I put this plan into execution, it is in this famous library that the manuscript of Thackeray's *Esmond* is also preserved. The critics often say that *Esmond* is Thackeray's most perfect novel. But the affectation of the style, with its imitation of the eighteenth century, hampers one, so far as I can remember; unless indeed the eighteenth-century style was natural to Thackeray—a fact that one might prove by looking at the manuscript and seeing whether the alterations were for the benefit of the style or of the sense. But then one would have to decide what is style and what is meaning, a question which—but here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel bearing the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction.

That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library. Venerable and calm, with all its treasures safe locked within its breast, it sleeps complacently and will, so far as I am concerned, so sleep for ever. Never will I wake those echoes, never will I ask for that hospitality again.

Woolf, of course, had with her brothers, sister, and half-sister inherited some Thackeray manuscripts—including those of *Pendennis* and *Vanity Fair*—from Leslie Stephen, whose first wife

was Thackeray's daughter. And Woolf, too, whatever her justified resentment at the circumscription of the educational opportunities given her by her father, was given the run of her father's library. It is her own English literary heritage, the institutions of patriarchal society rather than the *patria*, which she presents as having excluded her.

In Woolf's *Orlando*, the spectacular celebration of the reclamation by a woman artist of the stake in England which she had been denied because of her sex, Orlando's 'The Oak Tree' stands in for Vita Sackville-West's poem 'The Land'. 'The Oak Tree' becomes an anchor, 'something which he could attach his floating heart to; the heart that tugged at his side; the heart that seemed filled with spiced and amorous gales'. It seems significant, in the light of the argument advanced in the balance of this essay, that Orlando at this point in the history is incarnate as a man.

In Forster's *Abinger Pageant*, too, a tree becomes a metaphor for an English literary lineage, the basis of an argument for the continuity of a certain type of English life. John Evelyn, author of *Sylva*, and imagined here as the planter of a great tulip-tree, is placed at the heart of the pageant and of the Abinger parish whose history it chronicles. That parish was, of course, the location of Forster's 'father's house', 'West Hackhurst', which Forster inherited from his Aunt, Laura Forster. Laura Forster died about a month before the publication of *A Passage to India*. Forster's biographer records her fetishizing of tradition in place: rooms at 'West Hackhurst' were named for loved places with family connections. And she planted a tulip-tree at 'West Hackhurst' because there had been one at 'Battersea Rise', the Thornton family house.²³ Forster was later to write a biography of his great-aunt, Marianne Thornton, which focussed on her love of the house, and celebrated his own Thornton inheritance.

In the *Abinger Pageant*, the tulip-tree, planted in celebration of a wedding, is the insigne of the continuity of an English tradition, that of 'country life', and a marker of the implication of the writer in that tradition. The tulip-tree, 'the great Tree' that is the kingdom of England, and the Church are presented in the text as those things which are resistant to change, while the arboriculture of England varies as its landscape is made by humanity, and oak and ash are succeeded by the larch and the silver fir and the scots pine. The pageant ends with a celebration of the parish church as 'the Father's house'. It seems worthwhile to note here—given that the celebration

23 P. N. Furbank, *E. M. Forster: A Life*, Oxford, 1979, I, pp. 46-47.

of religion is quite uncharacteristic of Forster's canon—that Forster's paternal grandfather, Charles Forster, was an Anglican clergyman. The pageant is succeeded by the 'Epilogue':

Houses, houses, houses! You came from them and you must go back to them. Houses and bungalows, hotels, restaurants and flats, arterial roads, by-passes, petrol pumps and pylons—are these going to be England? Are these man's final triumph? Or is there another England, green and eternal, which will outlast them? I cannot tell you, I am only the Woodman, but this land is yours, and you can make it what you will. If you want to maim our Surrey fields and woodlands it is easy to do, very easy, and if you want to save them they can be saved. Look into your hearts and look into the past, and remember that all this beauty is a gift which you can never replace, which no money can buy, which no cleverness can refashion. You can make a town, you can make a desert, you can even make a garden; but you can never, never make the country because it was made by Time.

The parish of Abinger: England local, particular, green and eternal, connected with Forster's father's family, stands in opposition to an England of 'Houses and bungalows, hotels, restaurants and flats, arterial roads, by-passes, petrol pumps and pylons.' Is the *patria*, then, a 'darling dodo', a symptom of what Perry Meisel has called the 'recurrent desire to find origins or ground despite the impossibility of ever doing so for sure'²⁴; nostalgic, sterile?

Forster's 1938 pageant, *England's Pleasant Land*, takes up the image of England denuded of trees, filled with pylons and bungalows, motor vehicles, paper and empty tins, and 'masses of adverts'. This pageant is avowedly a tragedy of the 'English countryside, its growth and its destruction'. It uses the most famous of literary imaginings of England:

This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise:
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war;
This happy breed of men, this little world;
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office and a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
(*Richard II*, II.i.44-50).

24 In *The Myth of the Modern*, New Haven and London, 1987, p. 4.

as a metaphor for the lost heritage of 'the house of my fathers'.²⁵ The pageant's 'cultural imagining' of an England worth saving, though, is imbued with the aesthetic of community:

Man made the country as he made the town. He took many years to make it, but he can if he chooses destroy it in a few days. He can do this because in the course of centuries he has become strong. How will he use this strength? To spoil the beauty of his native land or to preserve it?

I am a Recorder—not a poet—and my last word to you is a word of prose—of practical advice. If you desire to save the countryside there is only one way: through good laws rightly applied, through the Parliament, through the nation as a whole. That is your only hope. A little has already been done; much more can be done in the future. It needs men of goodwill who can contrive and work together lest that destruction spread and cover the fields and the hills with its senseless squalor. Now is the moment. Soon it will be too late. England's Green and Pleasant land can be preserved for centuries to come if you will make the effort now.

The 'one nation'²⁶ of England imaginatively formed at the pageant's beginning becomes a nation for all. Or at least for those who are sexed male.

And what of Woolf's pageant, then, her history of England? Certainly, webs of coincidence and connection relate it to Forster's *England's Pleasant Land*. As literally occurred during the performance of Forster's pageant, and as he recorded in the 'Introductory Note' to the published pageant script, so the presentation of the genealogy of England's community in Miss La Trobe's pageant at Pointz Hall is threatened and interrupted by the passage of aeroplanes overhead. Forster's pageant was published by the Hogarth Press in 1940. It seems unlikely that Woolf was not aware of the 'Introductory Note'. She was certainly aware of the pageant and apparently contemplated attending it.²⁷ And perhaps there is a more profound connection. Woolf started work on what was to become *Between the Acts* on 11 April 1938.²⁸ On 9 May her diary entry records both 'Morgan asking some literary help about

²⁵ E. M. Forster, *England's Pleasant Land*, London, 1940, p. 65.

²⁶ Forster, *England's Pleasant Land*, p. 18.

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5, 1936-41, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, 1984, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 156; Virginia Woolf, *Collected Letters, 1936-41*, eds Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, London, 1980, pp. 255, 258.

²⁸ Woolf, *Diary*, V, p. 133.

a quotation in a pageant,' and 'can't settle either to my Play (Pointz Hall is to become in the end a play) or to Roger's Cambridge letters'.²⁹

Forster certainly saw other congruences between his celebration of an imagined nation which had become something more than his father's house, and Woolf's fictional pageant. He wrote of her achievement in *Between the Acts* thus:

She loved her country—the country that is the countryside, and emerges from the unfathomable past. She takes us back in this exquisite final tribute, and she points us on, and she shows us through her poetic vagueness something more solid than patriotic history, and something better worth dying for.³⁰

Forster, here, though, is not taking account of the kind of distancing which occurs in the casting of a pageant inside a novel. Framed, placed, Miss La Trobe's imagining of England denies precisely the engagement of patriotic sentiment which is given expression to in Forster's pageants. Here community is 'Scraps, orts and fragments'³¹ divided. Even if the telling of the story of the past is a response to felt communalities of concern, as Gillian Beer has suggested,³² here the shaper of the narrative is the outsider: woman, lesbian. She weaves a fantasy history precisely out of her own sense of exclusion from community, out of 'the horror and the terror of being alone.'³³ And disturbing images of 'continuity', of 'inheritance' and of 'community', disrupt the text:

There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion.

There are the repeated returns to the newspaper account of a barracks-room rape, and there is Mrs Lynn Jones' perception of the symbolic home of the Victorians, Woolf's father's generation, the monstrous

²⁹ Woolf, *Diary*, V, p. 139.

³⁰ E. M. Forster, 'Virginia Woolf', *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 257.

³¹ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, p. 137. This and all subsequent references are to the Granada edition, London, 1978.

³² Gillian Beer, 'Forging the Missing Link: A Victorian Dilemma', Heritage and Memory Conference, H.R.C., Canberra, 10 July, 1991.

³³ Woolf, *Between the Acts*, p. 153.

'missing link'³⁴ with the idealised past which atavism desires:

Was there ... something—not impure, that wasn't the word—but perhaps 'unhygienic' about the home? Like a bit of meat gone sour, with whiskers, as the servants called it? Or why had it perished?

The text links the pageant's image of the Victorian 'home'—its masculine authority-figure 'eminent, dominant', celebrating women whose whole lives are 'spent in the service of others'—with conflicts between the sexes in the Oliver family. Mrs Swithin's fantasy of harmony is dependent on a recognition of the identity between the text's present and the Victorian period.³⁵

And the future posited by *Between the Acts* does not, like that envisaged by Forster, make a plea for the preservation of an ideal England, grounded in the concrete and particular, in the lineaments of place, achieved in a transforming community imaginary. It perceives only a continuity of violence and contest, of the primitive, of the swamps, the matted vegetation of the England of prehistoric man, of 'violence' and 'insecurity'³⁶ marking the space between self and other, woman and man. Its image first emerges in Bart's dream of Empire:

... the master was not dead; only dreaming, drowsily, seeing as in a glass, its lustre spotted, himself, a young man helmeted; and a cascade falling. But no water; and the hills, like grey stuff pleated; and in the sand a heap of ribs; a bullock maggot-eaten in the sun, and in the shadow of a rock, savages; and in his hand a gun.

The woman's, the outsider's, imagining is finally not of a community where 'one spirit animates the whole,' where 'we act different parts but are the same.' Woolf's novel leaves this hope behind with Matthew Arnold on Dover Beach. England, imagined, is 'land merely, no land in particular'.³⁷ And the drama which plays itself out there, the narrative of the woman, the outsider, self-consciously taking its lead from *The Heart of Darkness* and *Women in Love*, reads like this:

34 Beer, 'Forging the Missing Link: A Victorian Dilemma.' Beer's thesis is that, for the Victorians, the figuration of the 'missing link' was evidence of separation from, as well as connectedness with the past; anxiety about it was produced by the dreadful sameness of the other from which one descends, rather than its otherness.

35 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, pp. 119, 121, 118, 127.

36 Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 411.

37 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, pp. 145, 139, 153, 156, 152.

The old people had gone up to bed. Giles crumpled the newspaper and turned out the light. Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.

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 the night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in the caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke.

This is the antithesis of the community aesthetic, the aesthetic of which Eagleton has been dreaming, marked by love, given rise to by the needs and desires which render individuals non-identical with themselves, the medium through which they are opened out to a world of others and objects.³⁸ Notions of community founder on alienation between men and women; fictions of the nation are succeeded by the representation of a prehistoric opposition of men and women which is so pervasive as to banish the geographical particularity which would fix it to place, to England. It is a construction of Nature whose brutality fails to differentiate, not England's green and pleasant land.

Isa's vision of its future suggests that Woolf in *Between the Acts* is unable to envisage a 'desirable future society ... in some way already immanent within the present system, extrapolable from a certain imaginative construction of current practices':³⁹

'Where do I wander.' she mused. 'Down what draughty tunnels? Where the eyeless wind blows? And there grows nothing for the eye. No rose. To issue where? In some harvestless dim field where no evening lets fall her mantle; nor sun rises. All's equal there. Unblowing, ungrowing are the roses there. Change is not; nor the mutable and lovable; nor greetings nor partings; nor furtive findings and feelings, where hand seeks hand and eye seeks shelter from the eye.'

It is Woolf's very sense of her identity with 'the missing link', of her inhabitation of an England which is contiguous with, rather than different from 'her father's house' which is productive of an aesthetic of the *patria*—one cannot say a patriotic aesthetic—which is marked

38 Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.413.

39 Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.407.

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by 'ratifying domination',⁴⁰ which can conceive of no new home; unlike Forster, who finds in his father's house a way back to the future.

As I began with an epigraph identifying aesthetics with 'connection', so I will end with an epilogue which suggests that Woolf's final envisioning of England abandoned that possibility.

On 27 June 1940 Woolf wrote about *Between the Acts*—then still called 'Pointz Hall'—in terms which echo and invert the image of Orlando's sustaining connection with 'The Oak Tree', that was at once a patriotic poem and England itself:

How difficult to draw in from all those wide ripples and be at home, central ... Threw another stone into the pond. And at the moment, with PH only to fix upon, I'm loosely ordered. Further, the war—our waiting while the knives sharpen for the operation—has taken away the outer wall of security. No echo comes back. I have no surroundings.⁴¹

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40 Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.411.

41 Woolf, *Diary*, V, p.299.