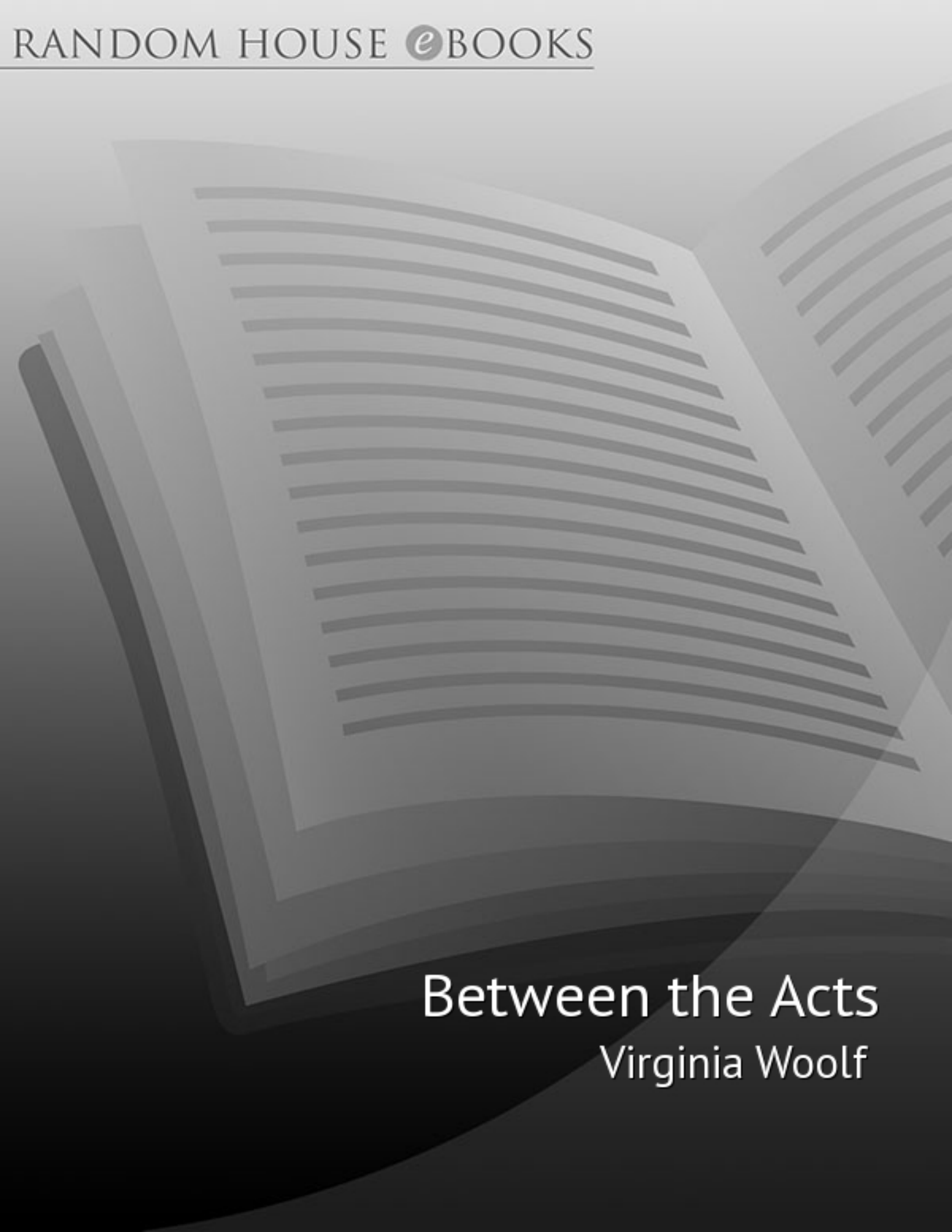


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Between the Acts
Virginia Woolf

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About the Book

Between the Acts, one of Virginia Woolf's most lyrical works, was published shortly after her death in 1941. The story takes place at Pointz Hall, the country home of the Oliver family for 120 years. Its central focus is the performance of a village pageant, written and directed by the energetic Miss La Trobe, encompassing the whole history of England from the Middle Ages to the verge of war in the Summer of 1939. The comic events on stage, the reactions of the villagers in the audience, the blend of past and present are all presented with affection and insight affirming Virginia Woolf's belief in art as the unifying principle of life. This edition contains the original text that Virginia Woolf was working on when she died.

About the Author

Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. From 1915, when she published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf maintained an astonishing output of fiction, literary criticism, essays and biography. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, and in 1917 they founded the Hogarth Press. Virginia Woolf suffered a series of mental breakdowns throughout her life, and on 28th March 1941 she committed suicide.

Also by Virginia Woolf

The Voyage Out

Night and Day

Jacob's Room

Mrs Dalloway

To the Lighthouse

Orlando

The Waves

The Years

Virginia Woolf

BETWEEN THE ACTS

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
Jackie Kay and
Lisa Jardine

v
VINTAGE

Foreword

Jeanette Winterson

Virginia Woolf was a great writer. Her voice is distinctive; her style is her own; her work is an active influence on other writers and a subtle influence on what we have come to expect from modern literature.

She was an experimenter who managed to combine the pleasure of narrative with those forceful interruptions that the mind needs to wake itself. Familiar things lull us. We do not notice what we already know. In art newness and boldness is vital, not as a rebuke to the past, but as a way of keeping the past alive. Virginia Woolf was keenly aware of what she had inherited but she knew that her inheritance must be put to work. Every generation needs its own living art that is connected to what has gone before but that is not a copy of it.

Virginia Woolf was not an imitator - she was an innovator who re-defined the novel and pointed the way towards its future possibilities.

The text of this edition of *Between the Acts* is based on that of the original Hogarth Press edition, published on 17th July, 1941. The following note appeared in this and the American edition published by Harcourt, Brace and Company, 2nd October, 1941:

The MS. of this book had been completed, but had not been finally revised for the printer, at the time of Virginia Woolf's death. She would not, I believe, have made any large or material alterations in it, though she would probably have made a good many small corrections or revisions before passing the final proofs.

LEONARD WOOLF

Jackie Kay on *Between the Acts*

Between the Acts is Virginia Woolf's last novel, her final performance, her last act, her final say, her finale, her final curtain, her last words, her last lap, her finishing stroke, her swan song. After writing this last line of her final novel – 'The curtains rose. They spoke.' – she walked off. She killed herself, drowning herself in her local river, the Ouse. 'I feel as if this is my last lap,' she wrote in her diary. Her swan song.

The first page of *Between the Acts* is swimming in water and bird imagery. The cesspool doesn't have enough water. Mrs Haines is 'a goosefaced woman with eyes protruding as if they saw something in the gutter.' Isa – our sort of heroine, big and broad and not in love with her husband, full of poetry – wears a dressing gown with faded peacocks. 'She came in like a swan swimming its way.' A little later: 'Isa raised her head. The words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines like two swans downstream.' 'A daylight bird that can't be a nightingale,' chuckles outside.

Woolf builds a language in the same way that a poet does. Her language is rich, rhythmical, and densely metaphorical. She is a poet's novelist or a novelist's poet. The distinction barely matters with Woolf, particularly in this final book where she is at her most Woolfy. She described *Between the Acts* as being more quintessential than the others. This book breaks down all kinds of

barriers; it thrives on the border country. The land of the in-between.

Between the Acts even breaks down the division between writer and reader. Woolf encourages her readers to write as we read, inside our own heads. She plays with language, freely associating to such a degree that our own minds can't help but participate. *Between the Acts* forces us to become part of it, part of the whole, in the way that the audience at the pageant suddenly becomes part of the play. Virginia Woolf shines the mirror on her readers. Ourselves.

Here is a novel that is part novel, part play, part performance, part poetry. How many parts is that and do they make a whole? Woolf moves effortlessly from one form to another, from one image to another, playing words off against each other, like jazz. (Jazz itself gets a couple of mentions. Poetry gets more.) Isa is entangled in a web of language. She is already drowning. Woolf wastes no time at all: 'and she too, in her webbed feet was entangled by her husband, the stockbroker, sitting in her three cornered chair she swayed, with her dark pigtails hanging and her body like a bolster in its faded dressing gown.'

Those pigtails! Those dark pigtails contrast sharply with the faded peacocks on her dressing gown. The pigtails are full of longing and possibility. They are sexual. But the faded peacocks are exactly the opposite: a loss of pride, a once proud woman. This is Isa on page six. Already she is shaping up to be a complex, shifting woman. We can't corner her, although the chair tries its best. She is trapped in a hopeless triad. She is trapped like Woolf was trapped. The closeness of these two events: Woolf writing a letter to her publishers to hold back *Between the Acts* until she revised it and Woolf's final descent into madness and suicide is suffocating. We can't really hide from it. It is still shocking.

Writing was the only thing that kept Woolf whole. *Between the Acts* is an ode to unity and disunity. It all happens in the margins, the borders, between the acts. She creates tension by forcing us to imagine what it is like to be both visible and invisible, inside and outside, real and unreal, actor and audience, beast and woman, silence and noise, drowning and floating, public and private, high culture and jolly human heart. What it is like to be the acted part and the unacted part, to be grown and ungrown, to feel love and hate, to be on the threshold between peace and war. 'But what could she know about ourselves.' To see real swallows. To see unreal swallows. To be conventional and outrageous. To be in and out of society. To be the past and the present.

Between the Acts is not a sad book unless you know what you know. When you do know what you know, you read the whole book with this terrible knowledge, yet it is often witty, entertaining, funny. It is sharp, bracing. It makes you think for ages: think and think and think. The world of it continues in your head like the play continues in Isa's head. 'Two rings, two perfect rings.' They never come together. Virginia Woolf went into the water and didn't float, she drowned.

The language of *Between the Acts* is difficult if you try too hard. It is easier to listen to it like you might listen to jazz; to watch like you might watch a play; to read some of it aloud, like you might read poetry aloud (like Isa's uncle who walked in the garden saying poetry aloud); to let the language be filmed like a camera would film a landscape with scary cows and benevolent horses. A landscape that is constantly moving, shifting, changing. The language of this novel, the private language of the pageant and the more public language of the characters, the inside and the outside of the writer's consciousness, always tells us something if we listen to it. This is the wonderfully strange

and irreverent language of the pageant. Here is the anonymous voice coming over the loud speaker:

‘Before we part, ladies and gentlemen, before we go . . . (Those who had risen sat down) . . . let’s talk in words of one syllable, without larding, stuffing or cant. Let’s break the rhythm and forget the rhyme. And calmly consider ourselves. Ourselves. Some bony. Some fat. (The glasses confirm this.) Liars most of us. Thieves too . . . The poor are as bad as the rich . . . Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how’s this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilisation, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves.’

This voice-aside, the author’s voice, is funny. It is telling us we are all ridiculous. Virginia Woolf has placed a mirror inside *Between the Acts*. It glints and sparkles wickedly, exposing her readers. There is always the looking glass, there for us to see ourselves, our many selves. Isa looks in it right at the beginning of the novel. The love she feels for the man who is not her husband has already split her in two. There is ‘inside the glass’ her feelings for the gentleman farmer; and ‘outside on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes and tooth brushes, was the other love; love for her husband, the stockbroker . . .’

Woolf strides across this divided country of divided selves, obviously enjoying herself, free as a bird. Her characters might be trapped but she is not. She is off. Her writing flies, up and away. Isa is ‘pegged down on a chair arm, like a captive balloon . . .’ But Virginia Woolf floats and disappears.

Between the Acts most powerfully contains Woolf’s opposites. There is Woolf’s words and Woolf’s language;

there is also Woolf's silence. '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.' Woolf gets us to speak her opposites. There is society and if there is society, there also must be a lack of society. Society is snobby, stifling, suffocating, shallow, silly. Society shadows and stalks and sharpens the knives. What would we do though if there were no society? There is this moment still now and there is this moment then - 'what was before time was.'

Chillingly, there is even a woman mentioned in *Between the Acts* who drowns herself. Isa wishes to drown herself, wished that the waters should cover her, wishes, wishes. 'O that our human pain could here have ended.' The rain pours down like 'all the people in the world weeping.' The humanity of *Between the Acts*, the whole sweep across society, across ourselves, is breathtaking. At the end of the pageant, when the mirrors are turned on the audience, and the audience becomes the performance, Woolf uses a sweep of verbs to give us an inkling of how varied our reflections are, how split. 'Mopping, mowing, whisking, frisking, the looking glasses darted, flashed, exposed. People in the back rows stood up to see the fun. Down they sat, caught themselves . . . What an awful show - up. Even for the old who, one might suppose, hadn't any longer any care about their faces . . . The very cows joined in . . .'

The play keeps running in Isa's head. 'It's the play,' she says. Although much of the pageant has been mocked and derided - 'What's the point of it?' What's the point of performance? - it comes into its full power at the end when it claps hands with real life. Real life is performance. We all perform. We all tell lies. 'You've stirred in me my unacted part,' says the lesbian Miss La Trobe. 'Try ten minutes of present time.' The present moment is high performance. It is up there, running. This is what makes Woolf

contemporary and what ensures her long lasting importance as a writer. She was always and is always up to the minute, ahead of her time. Illuminating. She will always be ahead of our time. That is why she is so compelling. That is what still fascinates. How did she know so much? How could she understand us as she did? Try ten minutes of present time. *Between the Acts* is pure Woolf.

What did she want in the end, Virginia? Did she want what Miss La Trobe wanted? 'What she wanted, like that carp (something moved in the water) was darkness in the mud: a whisky and soda at the pub; and coarse words descending like maggots through waters.'

Jackie Kay
March, 2000

Lisa Jardine on *Between the Acts*

Between what acts?

Over a period of ten days before she committed suicide on 28 March 1941, Virginia Woolf wrote three carefully composed suicide notes, on 18th, 23rd and 28th March – the first and third to her husband Leonard, the second to her sister Vanessa.¹ During the same ten days Woolf wrote twice to her publisher John Lehmann. On March 20 she warned Lehmann that she was having second thoughts about publishing *Between the Acts* (which Lehmann had recently announced as forthcoming in *The New Statesman*): ‘I’ve just read my so called novel over; and I really don’t think it does. Its much too slight and sketchy. Leonard doesn’t agree.’² Lehmann’s response was a letter enthusiastically praising *Between the Acts*, which he had read in manuscript. Woolf was not convinced. On March 27 she wrote again: ‘I’d decided before your letter came, that I can’t publish that novel as it stands – its too silly and trivial. What I will do is to revise it, and see if I can pull it together and so publish it in the autumn.’³

This second letter reached Lehmann after Woolf’s death. Enclosed with it was a note from Leonard advising the publisher that Virginia was ‘on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown’, and asking him to try to reassure her by telling her that they would put off publication until the autumn.⁴ To the end, however, Woolf herself was determined not to publish. Sideways, along the margin of her final note to Leonard Woolf, left on her writing pad, she

wrote her last thought: 'Will you destroy all my papers.'⁵ There is, then, a certain laconic understatement in Leonard Woolf's printed editorial note, routinely attached to editions of *Between the Acts*, following the posthumous publication of the novel in July 1941: 'The MS. of this book had been completed, but had not been finally revised for the printer, at the time of Virginia Woolf's death. She would not, I believe, have made any large or material alterations in it, though she would probably have made a good many small corrections or revisions before passing the final proofs.'⁶

What was it about *Between the Acts* that disturbed Virginia Woolf so much that she judged a book she had worked on for almost three years, and had substantially redrafted three times, to be irredeemably 'slight' and 'trivial'?

Woolf began writing the novel, whose working title was *Pointz Hall*, in April 1938.⁷ She was working on her biography of the art-critic and painter Roger Fry, a task which she felt to be a huge responsibility, and from which the beginning of her new work of fiction offered a welcome respite. 'Here I am sketching out a new book', she confided in her diary on 26 April 1938, 'only don't please impose that huge burden on me again, I implore. Let it be random and tentative; something I can blow off a morning, to relieve myself of Roger: don't, I implore, lay down a scheme, call in all the cosmic immensities; & force my tired & diffident brain to embrace another whole - all parts contributing - not yet awhile.' The same diary entry goes on to give a remarkably evocative sketch of the novel as it later emerged:

'Why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all literature] discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; but "I" rejected. "We" substituted: to whom at the

end there shall be an invocation? “We” . . . 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? And English country; & a scenic old house – & a terrace where nursemaids walk? & people passing – & a perpetual variety & change from intensity to prose. & facts – & notes; & – but eno’. I must read Roger.’⁸

But at the same time, as she started writing *Pointz Hall*, Woolf was correcting the proofs of her polemical essay *Three Guineas*.⁹ Even in the first draft of what she tried to image as a light, inconsequential piece of writing, ‘random and tentative’, a newspaper cutting of the kind she had collected in her *Three Guineas* scrapbook, introduces a serious edge of violence: the kind of violence which Woolf describes so compellingly in *Three Guineas* as being a peculiar and inevitable consequence of men’s upbringing and education.¹⁰ In June 1938, *The Times* newspaper reported the trial of a group of guardsmen for the rape of a fourteen year old girl. She had been lured back to their barracks on the promise of being shown a horse with a green tail. Woolf transcribes the report of the incident into *Between the Acts*, as the item Isa idly reads when she picks up a newspaper in the library: ‘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 troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him in the face . . .’ ‘That’, observes Isa (who has been considering English literature’s capacity to soothe a troubled mind), ‘was real’.¹¹ Even before the outbreak of war, even as Woolf was telling herself that she wanted her novel to lighten her otherwise sombre mood, her preoccupation with men’s authoritarianism and women’s

social and educational disadvantage entered her text, giving it an angry edge readily detected by today's reader.

The action of *Between the Acts* in the form in which it was published is set very precisely on a mid-June afternoon in 1939, six weeks before the start of the Second World War. By the time Woolf completed her final (third) draft the country was in the grip of war; she had experienced aerial bombing at first hand as German bombers flew over Lewes on their way to London; she had seen the devastation of the Blitz in London; the Battle of Britain had taken place and England had witnessed the fragile heroism of Dunkirk, when the plucky little boats ferrying home the English troops from the French beaches had run the gauntlet of German planes strafing them overhead; nor was there, of course, any end to the hostilities in sight.

It was at this stage, at the end of February 1941, just weeks before her death, that Woolf gave her novel the title by which we know it: *Between the Acts*.¹² It had become, by this time, a novel profoundly marked by its own moment in time – a moment of which its protagonists are necessarily unaware. Unbeknownst to the cast of characters, the residents of Pointz Hall and of the neighbouring village, it is they who are 'between the acts' in June 1939 – between the First and Second World Wars, in a lull before a storm which, so far as Virginia Woolf was concerned, would be never-ending.

Mentioning the war.

How was the enormity of the ongoing war and its total impact on English life to be conveyed in a novel? This was a question which Woolf had been provoked into asking herself once before. In November 1919, the New Zealand-born writer Katherine Mansfield, wrote a negative review of Woolf's *Night and Day* in the *Athenaeum*, in which she specifically attacked the way Woolf focused on the minutiae of English daily life, as if World War One had never