

Between the Acts of Hybrid Spaces

Abstract: This paper focuses on the complex and proto-postmodern treatment of space relevant to theatrical performance in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*. Woolf's explicit insistence on borderline trespassing and liminal spaces points to a move from modernism into a different ontological domain that borders on postmodern liminality and instability, even if it also tries to hold it back.

After previous forays across boundaries, in this work Woolf largely thematizes and manipulates space in order to convey the increasing hybridization between outsideness and insideness, fiction and reality. The spatial blurring between them, activated by an outdoor theatrical performance placing the audience's experience in a tangible rural space, results in the increasing dominance of reality and coincides with a meta-artistic awareness in the play's audience and the novel's readers. By thematizing and formally representing a complex dynamics of border zones, mixing spaces, and interspaces (ranging from the main theatrical metaphor to minor graphic hiatuses and including issues of identity and literary genres), Woolf's last novel testifies to an already postmodern ontology of dislocation, open-endedness, and changeability.

Key words: *Between the Acts*, postmodernism, spatiality, Woolf

1. A Peculiar In-Betweenness

Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* represents a complex and proto-postmodern treatment of space peculiarly relevant to its thematized theatrical performance. What makes this case worth considering is the productive dichotomy between a modernist form of spatiality and a postmodern one: the former mainly centripetal, the latter ostensibly bursting and centrifugal. Although the formal pattern of the novel provides a highly unifying spatial form¹ that still locates the work within a modernist aesthetic frame and specifically within Woolf's remedial poetics of wholeness, this last novel also crosses modernist borderlines and extends into a postmodern form of space. Woolf's explicit insistence on borderline trespassing and liminal spaces points to a move from modernism into a different ontological domain that borders on postmodern liminality and instability.² Her modernist longing is still recognizable in the search for a wholeness-providing spatial form which opposes the sense of becoming and postmodern nihilism. Although the beginning of a real postmodern period style can be set in the 1960s, postmodern features can be traced back to an earlier time, "to the late thirties or even earlier".³ Woolf cannot be labelled as a postmodern author but, in *BA*, she definitely pioneers a form of postmodern anxiety and a disposition to radical nihilism in that she experiences the "crisis of a new, disintegrative postmodern subjectivity and a new sense of the world as restlessly plural".⁴ With her last novel Woolf touches on the cognitive value of spatiality and borders on a heteropian kind of space.⁵

¹ This is my interpretation of Joseph Frank's original 1945 notion given in his "Spatial Form in Modern Literature". See my *Visuality and Spatiality in Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Oxford and Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012). This paper develops and completes my former approach to *Between the Acts*.

² Scholarly interest in the postmodern aspects of Woolf's production has developed since the 1990s. See Pamela Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); JoAnn Springer, "Woolf Enclosed, Woolf in Space", in Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins, eds., *Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (New York: Pace U. P., 1997), 218-227.

³ Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge U. P., 2015), 26.

⁴ McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 8.

⁵ See McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

⁶ Helen Southworth, "Women and Interruption in *Between the Acts*", in Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth, eds., *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 50.

Proto-postmodern elements coexist with modernist ones, therefore the novel is characterized by an inner contradiction between a modernist epistemological level and a postmodern ontological one, a double pull that explains why, in Southworth's words, while it "marks an ending, it also constitutes a beginning".⁶ The end of the modernist side corresponds to the beginning of the postmodern with its focus on betweenness, liminality, flux, heterogeneity, thresholds, margins, boundaries, and its interest in illuminating what lies in the interstices. This includes drawing attention to crossing borders between fiction and reality, theatre and novel, actors and audience, nature and village, the sky and the earth, water and earth, animals and humans, past and present, we and I, outside and inside.

After previous incursions across boundaries, in *BA* Woolf largely thematizes and manipulates theatrical space in order to convey the increasing hybridization between outsideness and insideness, fiction and reality. The spatial blurring between them, activated by an outdoor performance which places the audience's experience in a concrete, rural space, results in the increasing dominance of reality, and coincides with a meta-artistic awareness on the part of both the audience of the play and the novel's readers. Spatial borrowing and blurring both lay bare the conventions of art and ridicule it, finally abolishing its remedial power over reality which literally invades the theatrical fiction. Crossing the threshold between the performative space of the pageant (second-degree fiction) and that of the surrounding reality of the audience (first-degree fiction) is a main spatial experience, which brings about other forms of crossing: between genres (drama and novel), and between different forms of identity. This causes an increasing (con)fusion which endangers historical, collective, individual, and artistic identity, and which also raises genre issues. Woolf's variety of boundary-crossing events is a form of jolty, fragmented, "heteroglossic, multigeneric assemblage"⁷ and explodes the traditionally delimited and codified space of identity and artistic performance into multiplicity, encompassing both a spatial and "linguistic euphoria".⁸ By thematizing and formally representing a complex dynamics of border zones, mixing spaces, and interspaces (ranging from the main theatrical metaphor to minor graphic hiatuses), Woolf's last novel testifies to an already postmodern ontology of dislocation, open-endedness, and changeability, and to an awareness of essential changes in aesthetics related to the nature and function of art.

⁷ John Whittier-Ferguson, *Mortality and Form in Late Modernist Literature* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 2015), 21. On interpreting the open-endedness of *BA* as a utopian feature, see Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2005).

⁸ Lisbeth Larsson, *Walking Virginia Woolf's London: An Investigation in Literary Geography* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 213.

1.1 A Dislocating Novel

Following the distinction made by Snaith and Whitworth between "space" and "place",⁹ Woolf's spatial bent encompasses references that range from distinctive and locatable places to metaphorical spaces of art, identity, Truth, and Being, which points to her unrelenting cognitive quest and aesthetic inquiry. Though also considering the former typology, my main focus will be on the latter and its manifold meanings.

⁹ Snaith and Whitworth, eds., *Locating Woolf*, 4-5.

When talking about music and poetry, Kramer reflects on liminality and interestingly argues that “[l]iminal experience, the sense of inhabiting or passing across a threshold, is regularly represented in the literature of all periods.... As a rule, the threshold itself is a narrow strip of space, a defile, set in a mediating position between other significant spaces”.¹⁰ It is quite significant that one of Woolf’s main spatial metaphors, both in her fictional and non-fictional writings, is that of the “strip” (a “strip of pavement”/“of board”/“of time”), which represents a safe connection between different spatial and psychological dimensions and, ultimately, between Being and non-Being.

Spatiality is deeply embedded in Woolf’s whole macrotext which is characterized by a strong commitment with space and a keen sense of place. As regards her fictional works, spatiality takes up different values on the level of both content and form including: a traditionally descriptive desire to narrate phenomenal spatiality; the formal construction of a spatial structure defined above as spatial form; an interest in mimetic and symbolic spatial landmarks, crossings and connections. In any case, Woolf’s interest in spatiality testifies to an ambiguous position since space is both a remedial provider of unity/wholeness, and also points to a form of “hostility to totalization and to the notion of the unified self”.¹¹ *BA* attests to a shift from a remedial use of spatial form to thematized and meta-dramatic spatiality on which cognition depends. Moreover, in the light of Jameson’s interpretation of postmodern culture as characterized by a spatial logic and turn, and a loss of temporal depth and connection with history,¹² Woolf’s late attention and disposition to spatiality may also be read in postmodern terms given the novel’s focus: on spatial crossing between the stage/theatre and the village/reality; on the attempt to foster historical awareness and construction of both individual and collective identity.

If any text consists of certain necessary or inherent forms of spatiality which work both on the author’s constructing side and on the reader’s interpretative one,¹³ I would divide *BA*’s into two main categories (excluding the quite obvious textual space represented by the physical medium through which the text is presented such as a page, a screen, etc.) which are: thematized space (including all kinds of narrated spatial references), and symbolic/meta-fictional space (related to identity and meta-dramatic issues).

From *Jacob’s Room* (1922) onwards the evolution of Woolf’s writing shows a steady increase in fragmentation on the level of both narrated content and narration itself. Nevertheless, in each novel she always explicitly manages to restore fragments back to unity through an increasingly demanding formal control and organization. On the contrary, with *BA* she yields to the fragment’s power to disrupt and displace reality. What is new is not the focus on a confusing plurality, which she chooses to epitomize in Shakespeare’s words through obsessively repeated formulae containing “orts”, “scraps”, and “fragments”, but the fact that plurality remains so and proliferates.¹⁴ With this last novel, the step Woolf takes is

¹⁰ Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 230-231.

¹¹ Michael Hollister, “Spatial Cognition in Literature: Text-Centred Contextualization”, *Mosaic*, 28.2 (June 1995), 17.

¹² See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

¹³ Vincent Juvé underlines that a novel may do without characters and plot but it necessarily implies space; see Flavio Sorrentino, *Il senso dello spazio* (Roma: Armando Editore, 2010). Sorrentino provides an exhaustive outline of recent spatial theories in literary studies starting from the 1950s to today’s geocriticism.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Penguin Books, 2000). All quotes will be from this edition and pages will be given in parentheses after the quote. The quote is from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*: “orts ... fragments, scraps” (5.2.158-9).

beyond modernism and such ‘beyondness’ relates to both spatial betweenness and spatial dislocation. After representing artists in her previous novels, such as painters and poets, she chooses a playwright and the art of theatre to thematize an already postmodern sense of spatial dislocation as the epitome of an overall dislocation concerning individual and collective identity, reality, art, and Being.

References to the novel in Woolf’s diary entries bear witness both to the idea of a play and to the double nature of the novel which stretches between modernist and postmodern poles. The first mention of it, in April 1938, reads “a complete whole” and, after some days, the second refers again to unity and also to plurality: “Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed ... & anything that comes into my head; but ‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted ... composed of many different things ... a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole ... & a perpetual variety & change

¹⁵ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5 (San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 133, 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 139, 159. Woolf refers to the work in progress as “my Play (Pointz Hall is to become in the end a play)”, to which she returns in August together with the idea of disparateness: “P.H. is to be a series of contrasts.... Its to end with a play”.¹⁶ Her preoccupation with its plurality makes her wonder whether the “book will ever

compose”.¹⁷ It is curious that the writing of it also depends on a form of in-betweenness, since Woolf writes it while also writing Fry’s biography among other things, and admitting “P.H. in between. Oh yes – one cant plan, any more, a long

book”.¹⁸ She writes in gaps, between air raids, and the untamable plurality of the novel makes her use the same words in the novel and in her diary: “Scraps, orts &

fragments”.¹⁹ Nonetheless, in October 1940 she is pleased with it and in November she refers to herself as “writing in spurts” and also to a “new style – to mix” which relates explicitly to the diary’s shorthand style but may also recall previous references to the mixing of poetry and prose, foreshadowing a sort of

postmodern pastiche-like modality.²⁰ In November, a further entry confirms the theatrical aspect of the novel which she defines as “The Pageant”, as she also does when mentioning it for the last time in a 1941 February entry: “Finished Pointz

Hall, the Pageant: the Play – finally Between the Acts”.²¹ Such plurality of genres and titles is paralleled within the novel on many levels.

BA is a novel narrating a theatrical performance put on in an English village and, more precisely on the terrace of a country house named Pointz Hall. As the self-referential title explicitly points out, the focus is on in-betweenness and plurality which equally concern the pageant and the reality of the village.

The title immediately directs the reader’s attention to liminality and crossing (*Between*); dramatic fiction and plurality (*Acts*). The latter area implies a binary opposition between reality and fiction, which Woolf deals with in meta-dramatic and spatial terms: spatial crossings and confusion between the two dimensions of reality/audience/village and drama/actors/stage mean that physical crossings epitomize aesthetic ones and, hence, activate a cognitive process. Recalling an artwork which “leaves no gaps”,²² on the formal level, *BA* turns out to be a very

²² Gabriel Josipovici refers to nineteenth-century artworks, see his *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 128.

tightly-woven pattern, but on the thematic level it widely thematizes many forms of both gaps and spatial in-betweenness concerning the reality of the village and the fiction of the pageant.

2. Varieties of Spaces

Before considering Woolf's use and treatment of space and place, it may be useful to identify some of the novel's postmodern potentialities to which her treatment of space is related:

1. interest in history and relevant (de)construction of both individual and collective identity;

2. intertextuality and heterogeneity (including pastiche-like references to, and quotes of various authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Swinburne, Dryden, Jonson, Racine, Conrad);

3. interart combination of literature and music both within the pageant and in the life of the village (nursery rhymes, jazz, popular songs, waltz, etc.);

4. meta-fiction/-drama²³ which unmasks artistic illusion, laying bare the artificial device through a real interaction between fictional and tangible spaces (the stage and reality around, Miss La Trobe breaking upon the fictional world and also viceversa).

²³ This is not to be intended as Patricia Waugh's radical metafiction; see her *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 136-137.

As a graphic space, the text of *BA* is itself hybrid since it lies between two genres: novel and drama.²⁴ A number of passages recall the layout of a script for two main reasons: 1. between quotes of dramatic lines, there are narrative sentences in parentheses which seem like stage directions but are, instead, the narrator's/audience's comments on what is happening on the stage; 2. a play within the play intrudes into the narrative and contemporarily provides real stage directions. The following are respective examples:

²⁴ See Steven Putzel, "Virginia Woolf and Theatre", in Maggie Humm, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2012), 437-454. The author argues in favour of the postmodern potentialities of Woolf's works by showing how successfully postmodern stage adaptations perform them.

- 1.

And see! There's a mouse ...

(he made as if chasing it through the grass)

Now the clock strikes!

(he stood erect, puffing out his cheeks as if he were blowing a dandelion clock)

One, two, three, four ...

- 2.

Sir S. L. (aside) *She speaks the truth there!* (Aloud) *You would have me understand, Madam... ?*

(She reveals herself)

Valentine... *O Flavinda, O!*

Flavinda... *O Valentine, O!*

(They embrace)

The clock strikes nine.

“All that fuss about nothing!” a voice exclaimed. People laughed. (54, 80, 83-84)

As the last example shows, the mixing includes various fictitious levels: the play-within-the-play script mixes with the novel’s words indicating the time and the audience’s reaction.

With regard to content, the novel’s thematized spatial mixing and crossing depend on the fact that the location of the pageant and the physical space of the village increasingly trespass one into the other, interacting and generating hybrid forms of spatiality.

The novel opens with a focus on spatiality, plurality, and openness: some of the villagers are at the Oliviers’ “talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden”, about the strange “site ... chosen for the cesspool” (5). From the start, outdoor and indoor spaces are made to communicate through open windows and doors which will insistently recur in the whole novel as spatial marks of trespassing. This focus is further enlarged, both spatially and chronologically, when Mr. Olivier suggests an imaginary view of the site from above which might recall the visual effect of a map: “[f]rom an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house” up to the Napoleonic wars (5). In accordance with the historical content of the narrated pageant, spatio-temporal coordinates are often woven together throughout the novel. Such variety of spatial references includes Pointz Hall with its rooms and the outside terrace, the Barn, the lily pond, the greenhouse, and the surrounding bushes. Beside the spatiality of Pointz Hall and its outskirts, the novel also refers to other geographical spaces such as India, Africa, France, Italy and, specifically, to the performative space and places of the pageant which are the stage, the dressing-rooms, and all other fictional spaces such as a painted lake or similar props.

Spatial sensitivity is continuously triggered in that different indoor and outdoor whereabouts recur and are continually walked into, through, and out of. Regarding Pointz Hall, we are led from the inner heart of the Oliviers’ house which is represented by a central alabaster vase, through its rooms (kitchen, bedrooms, library, dining room), where there are other spatial indicators which include: pictorial frames containing fictional painted space; mirrors dividing the mirrored space into outer/inner spatial slithers; bookcases which foreground the spatial location of words/books; doors generally open, or trembling, flinging, being kicked and standing (half/wide) open in the house, in the Barn, and in the greenhouse too; windows, open and closed, as good opportunities for spatial awareness; and thresholds as liminal markers. Woolf also frequently employs spatial adverbs and words relevant to the semantic dimension of crossing or bordering, and she often foregrounds them by clustering them together or repeating them in single sentences or paragraphs: “A ... lady, pausing *on the threshold* of what she once called ‘the heart of the house,’ the *threshold* of the library, had once said: ‘Next to the

kitchen, the library's always the nicest room in the house.' Then she added, stepping *across the threshold*: 'Books are the mirrors of the soul'" (12, my emphasis); "they all looked out of the window. Then the door opened" (30). Deictics also function as spatial markers: "There the stage; here the audience; and down there among the bushes a perfect dressing-room for the actors" (37).

The crossing between inner and outer spaces hinges on the terrace, a space between men and nature, reality and art. The decision to hold the pageant outside using the terrace as a stage, and the surrounding bushes as dressing-rooms, is intrinsic to the whole network of spatial crossings developing in the novel. Related to this, is a strong sense of spatial mobility which begins as soon as Miss La Trobe visits the venue and decides the bushes and the terrace are "the perfect place" for her play while "[p]inding in and out between the trees" (36-37, my emphasis).

Movement between indoor and outdoor spaces on the one hand, and in the outdoors, between real and theatrical spaces on the other, is fostered by the fact that the novel thematizes the setting up of the pageant, its performance interspersed with intervals (during which the villagers go to the Barn for tea, to the greenhouse, back into the house), and everyone's returning back home which comes full circle at the Oliviers' house. Within a narrative frame that deals with what happens immediately before and after the play, the novel mainly consists of the performance which is divided into four acts and three intervals that are given equal thematic importance, putting fiction and reality on a par and allowing the latter to variously intrude into the former.

Besides being denoted by movement, spatiality is also and often acoustically signaled and underlined (natural and animal sounds, noises, voices, music) since, when doors open, they let sounds pass through and Woolf insists on this feature, such as in the following quote where it is not individuals she presents but their voices moving through space: "Across the hall, a door opened. One voice, another voice, a third voice ... Bart's voice; quivering – Lucy's voice; middle-toned – Isa's voice. Their voices ... came across the hall.... Coming out of the library the voices stop in the hall" (25). Music also relates to movement from one place to another and/or staying in a specific place as when, entering the greenhouse, Isa and William "left the greenhouse door open, and now music came through it.... Another voice ... was saying something simple. And they sat on in the greenhouse, on the plank" (70). The space outside the greenhouse is immediately related, in similar terms, to the inside of the house through the same music since "[f]rom the garden – the window was open – came the sound of someone practising scales ... It was a simple tune, another voice speaking" (71). Another example concerns a second view from above which combines spatial markers, such as a door and a window, with sound: "A rushing sound came in through the open door. He turned. The old woman ... leant against the window. He left the door open for the crew.... Down in the courtyard beneath the window cars were assembling. Their narrow black roofs were laid together like the blocks of a floor" (45). This also provides a

form of crossing between a space above and a space below, because it establishes an equivalence between what should be in a higher position (the roofs of the cars) and what should be in a lower position (the floor). The mixing between these two dimensions recurs in mirroring images, such as when the lily pond reflects a “blue patch made by the sky” (28). Real mirrors also foster spatial awareness since they frame reality, separating it into what lies inside and outside their space. In the three-folded mirror, Isa sees a triptych of herself “and outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops” (11). The spatial dynamics between in and out is often foregrounded by spatial adverbs. The same mirror allows for this: “*Inside* the glass, *in* her eyes, she saw what she had felt ... *outside*, *on* the washstand, *on* the dressing-table, *among* the silver boxes ... was the other love.... *Inner* love was *in* the eyes, *outer* love *on* the dressing-table ... when *above* the looking-glass, *out of doors*, she saw coming *across* the lawn the perambulator” (11, my emphasis).²⁵

²⁵ However, there is also a different kind of space which is motionless and soundless. It is both the framed space of the pictures in the house, and an essential and innermost form of space which includes both indoor and outdoor areas. In the following quotes, the first relates to the Oliviers’ house, the second to a lily pond: “The room was empty. Empty, empty, empty, silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell ... a vase stood in the heart of the house ... holding the still. Distilled essence of emptiness, silence”; “Water ... lay there ... over a black cushion of mud ... fish swam.... Silently they manoeuvred.... It was in that deep centre, in the black heart, that the lady had drowned herself.” (24, 28-29). Throughout the novel, this simultaneously represents the wordless space of death and also of creation since Miss La Trobe’s words first “sank down into the mud”, then the “mud became fertile. Words rose ... pludding through the mud” (125). Hence, the same places and spaces may have different or opposite values.

Most spatial references are characterized by varied forms of mixing, interference, and equivalence, on the levels of both reality and art. This is fostered by the coincidence of the village’s real spaces with the pageant’s performative ones, and also by the intrusion of the intervals between the acts, namely of reality (first-degree fiction) between fiction (second-degree fiction). Nonetheless, the mixing also concerns each separate level. For example when, during an interval, and hence solely on the level of reality, Cobbet equates the West and the East observing Mrs. Manresa’s behaviour as he “had known the human nature in the East ... the little game of the woman following the man to the table in the West as in the East” (67); or when natural spaces suggest architectural ones, in that the trees recall the columns in a church, and when architectural ones suggest others of the same typology, so that not only is the Barn “built of the same stone” of the church, but it also reminds people of a Greek temple.

3. Identity and Spatiality

The link between (de)construction of identity and spatiality is soon provided in the novel by the simple fact that moving from one room to another transforms the cat’s name as “his drawing-room name Sung-Yen had undergone a kitchen change into Sunny” (22). The centrifugal impulse of identity is also conveyed by the fact that the villagers’ names multiply and a single person may have more than one (such as Lucy Swithin who is also Cindy, Sindy, Flimsy, Batty). Being on the stage further implies taking on a different identity, which happens in a very peculiar way to the actors of the pageant who are in fact the villagers themselves. This makes their real identity interfere with the fictional one they have to assume and play, such as when the character of Queen Elizabeth is simultaneously recognized as Eliza Clark, “licensed to sell tobacco ... of the village shop” (52). Such mixing does not stop with the end of the play since the actors still “mingled”, which produces an apparently absurd result slightly recalling postmodern oddities: “There was Budge

the policeman talking to old Queen Bess. And the Age of Reason hobnobbed with the foreparts of the donkey.... Each still acted the unacted part conferred on them by their clothes” (116).

The actors linger between their fictitious and real identity, but the audience also experiences identity splitting and uncertainty because its images are projected into the theatrical space by being mirrored there when the actors turn reflecting objects and mirrors towards them. Coherently with the duplicity of the whole novel, this both contradicts Bart’s certainty about the villagers’ identity (“We remain seated – ‘we are the audience’”, 38), and also develops his own hint at the mixing of reality with fiction since being the audience is playing a part (“Our part ... is to be the audience”, 37).

In the fourth act, the pageant is meant to represent the villagers’ present time. Through the mirrors on the stage, the reality which exists facing it is reflected onto it, and the villagers almost appear to take the actors’ place. Despite this mirroring device, self-recognition is annoying and remains uncertain because it reveals “orts, scraps and fragments” (111). No final recognition is really attained because the villagers are “[n]ot quite themselves, they felt” (90). This sense of non-being is related both to movement and spatiality. As concerns the former, during the interval between the second and the third act, the villagers are described in spatially fluid terms as “moving islands” (90). Regarding the latter, in the interval between the third and the fourth act, their sense of non-being is spatially epitomized by “limbo” (106). It is of no surprise that these two occurrences are given in corresponding parts of the plot dealing with dramatic and spatial in-betweenness, i.e. between acts and intervals, and between the terrace and the surroundings where the audience moves during the intervals. Such foregrounded spatial dislocation and its related sense of ambiguous identity finally also reveal a lack of historical sense, continuity, and community.

4. Meta-Artistic Spatiality

A principal postmodern factor is also the novel’s emphasized self-consciousness of artistic production which points to the artificiality of art and to a lack of a “centering force”.²⁶

From the very beginning, the novel links the status of art to reality through spatial correspondences between them. The Oliviers’ terrace, “rising, made a natural stage. The trees barred the stage like pillars” and the lawn is also perfect because it is “as flat as the floor of a theatre” (47), but this is bound to generate confusion. The choice to put the pageant on out of doors, and so within reality itself, fosters spatial mixing since the outdoor reality where the stage is located intrudes into it and into the related dramatic fiction as well so that real animals become part of the fictional backcloth:

²⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 67.

[a] sheet had been spread on the Terrace. It was a lake apparently. Roughly painted ripples represented water. Those green stake were bulrushes. Rather prettily real swallows darted across the sheet. (98)

They were rolling up the lake and uprooting the bulrushes. Real swallows were skimming. (103)

The confusion between the two spatial dimensions also depends on the fact that the stage is often empty. The recurrent emptiness of the dramatic space (also accompanied by the actors' unheard words) makes reality intersect drama by being intrusive on the one hand, and remedial on the other. The latter case arises when the stage is empty and the performance risks total failure because the dramatic illusion has failed but "the cows took up the burden ... filled the emptiness and continued the emotion" (84-85). What is most significant is the meta-artistic value of spatial crossing which epitomizes a sort of aesthetic crossing and leads to a final sense of failure. The end of the last act is a climactic moment of spatial crossing since it represents the present moment and it brings the audience onto the stage thanks to the previously-mentioned mirror device which is directed towards them and where they see themselves instead of the actors. This overcomes the playwright's dramatic intention because it results in a complete confusion between the space of reality and that of drama. Further accentuating the crossing between reality and theatre, the mirroring also includes nature within the theatrical space, and thus confirms the breaking down of barriers. Besides, a real downpour showers the stage and the audience, imposing itself on both fiction and reality, putting them on a par thus destroying artistic illusion, but after the play is taken up again, "Lord! the jangle and the din! The very cows joined in. Walloping, tail lashing, the reticence of nature was undone, and the barriers which should divide Man and the Master from the Brute were dissolved" (109): the confusion between the two spaces risks shifting into identity between them and this spatial mixing also corresponds to crossing the borderline between drama and reality and functions as a meta-dramatic comment on the failure of art.

Besides confirming Miss La Trobe's previous thought that "[t]his is death ... when illusion fails" (107), this interchange between reality and fiction leaves the audience wondering about what it means, but no answer is provided. The mocking tone with which the narrator often glosses such breaches mildly compensates for the substantial failing of art whose illusion is revealed and cognitive function invalidated.

However, there is one occurrence of mixing between reality and stage spatiality which is not atoned and it refers to the impending war. The real reverend is on the stage, mounting the same prop used for Queen Elizabeth (a soap box probably representing a rock in the ocean). He starts talking to the audience when war aeroplanes rudely intrude into the airspace above and into his speech, disheveling the aerial and theatrical space of the novel: "each of us who has enjoyed this

pageant has still the opp...’ The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes ... came overhead.... The planes had passed. ‘...portunity” (114-115). The nth intrusion of reality onto the stage is so strong that it is also emphasized by the graphic division of the word which is split by some in-between lines.

Spatial trespassing between drama and reality are recurrent and people also trespass the spatial border between reality (the audience’s place) and drama (the place where both the stage and the dressing-rooms are located): “ignoring the conventions, a head popped up between the trembling sprays: Mrs. Swithin” (91). This also hints at postmodern theories on the addressee’s decisive role in the meaning-providing process of any artwork. It confirms Miss La Trobe’s experimental and postmodern desire to foster the audience’s active participation in the performance and in the attribution of a meaning to it (in the fourth act, with the intention to expose the audience to real present time making them realize they are the real actors of the present, she notes on the script “try ten mins. of present time. Swallows, cows, etc.”, 107).

So, at the beginning of the performance, in the audience, someone wonders “Was it, or was it not the play?” (47). Similarly, Miss La Trobe finally wonders: “if we’re left asking questions, isn’t it a failure as a play?” (118). The playwright’s and the novel’s meta-dramatic reflexivity can be read in Waugh’s postmodern terms as producing “fragments ... [that] are not at all explicable by any ... *a priori* transcendental system”.²⁷ For the same reason Woolf believed that this novel was a failure. Although *BA* still manages to achieve the formal and remedial unity she was incessantly searching for,²⁸ it also points to the impossibility of communication, of answering questions, and to the collapse of metaphysics.²⁹ *BA* partially falls within postmodern boundaries because it also alludes to the ontological dominant which, according to McHale, characterizes postmodernism’s questioning the existence of reality itself and its representing an unprecedented and pluralistic ontological landscape.³⁰

5. Inhabiting Liminality

In conclusion, Woolf’s spatial issue is multifaceted in *BA* as it includes: a. the thematized experience of the audience/villagers/readers through the theatrical performance they respectively enact, attend, and read about; b. the formal aspect of the novel which is a fragmentary and jolted *ensemble* of “scraps, orts and fragments” where different spaces are made to intersect and cross each other’s boundaries even graphically; c. the cognitive quest based on spatial crossings that reveal the impossibility of fixing any boundaries relevant to both identity and aesthetics. If, with McHale, we believe that postmodern literature’s ontological crossing(s) finally also represent(s) the ultimate and necessary crossing which is death,³¹ *BA*’s various forms of crossing already point to a cognitive spatiality of death. Woolf’s last quest epitomizes a postmodern discovery of the collapse of metaphysics with the novel

²⁷ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 24.

²⁸ In a 1939 January entry of her diary, Woolf writes about P.H.: “I think I have got at a more direct method of summarising relations” (*The Diary*, 200).

²⁹ I do not agree with Michael Bell on the fact that “the change from Modernism to postmodernism is not a difference in metaphysics so much as a different stage in the digestion of the same metaphysics”. See his “The Metaphysics of Modernism”, in Michael Levenson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1999), 9-32: 9.

³⁰ See McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*.

³¹ Ibid.

itself situated between modernism and postmodernism, still longing for the former's remedial devices rescuing Being and totality from an increasingly nihilistic panorama, but clearly also testifying to the latter. As announced by the very in-betweenness of the title, the spatial experience will lead audience and readers to, and leave them in an ambiguous space between fiction and reality, inhabiting liminality, where spatial "shelter" (130) is lost and a curtain rises on someone speaking, whether it be on stage or in reality we are not to know. Despite the pageant's failure and Woolf's final distrust in art, the novel seems to approve postmodern possibilities. Miss La Trobe's lack of artistic words ("The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escape her", 124) is definitely turned upside down by the narrator's final words that take up the playwright's but with a different and auspicious turn: "Then the curtain rose. They spoke" (130).

At the end of her modernist experience, Woolf represented the vacancy of art through a peculiar focus on spatiality and liminal confusion as she probably realized that "it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out of the bushes" (128). This is where Miss La Trobe hides, directing the play "script in hand, behind the tree" (73), but the new author Woolf may be referring to is bound to come out of his/her hiding to make him/herself see in meta-narrative terms, just as the postmodernists do.