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Source: *eSharp*, Issue 17: Crisis (2011), pp. 42-62

URL: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/esharp>

ISSN: 1742-4542

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Identity, Ecology, Eschatology: The Country and the City in D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf

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The real Hardy country [...] is that border country so many of us have been living in: between custom and education, between work and ideas, between love of place and an experience of change (Williams 1973, p.197).

Powerfully drawn to both rural and urban environments, Virginia Woolf is in many ways the quintessential peripatetic English modernist. Her thoughtful analyses of the psychic impacts of places reveal ideas about the country and the city that challenge common assumptions, such as the idea that the urban necessarily represents culture and enclosure, while the rural is the home of a bucolic, idealised 'Nature'. For Woolf, the cosmopolitan, transient dynamics of modernity provoke a crisis of English national identity, problematising notions of authenticity and belonging, exclusion and borders. In this article, I will argue that Woolf's work builds upon the defamiliarised examination of urban experience found in the novels of D.H. Lawrence. In doing so, it suggests that the identity crisis engendered by this artificial urban-rural dualism should be viewed not as a symptom of a perniciously fragmented and alienated modern consciousness, but rather as indicative of an emerging broader understanding of our relationship with the environment and nonhuman animals. In exploring these ideas, both Woolf and Lawrence employ eschatological imagery: the ultimate destruction of human civilisation, they suggest, is a possibility that perpetually haunts modernity. Yet what is ultimately gestured towards is not so

much a post-human world, as one in which the boundaries between human and nonhuman are challenged.

I

Woolf repeatedly voices an insistent craving for a specific sense of wildness in her letters and diaries; she is drawn to the transgressive possibilities of urban life, and associates it with a sense of escaping cultural boundaries more commonly associated with rural wilderness. Woolf's perambulations around the capital provided one means of satisfying this desire, as Hermione Lee notes:

What stimulated her [was] 'illusion – to make the world dance'. 'There must be this fanning and drumming.' She got it from Leonard; but she got it as much, in another way, from walking about London. 'Where people mistake, as I think, is in perpetually narrowing and naming these immensely composite and wide flung passions' (1996, pp.597-8).

The 'narrowing and naming' Woolf refers to is the tendency to reductively characterise erotic or romantic experiences. The criticism is typical, however, of her refusal to accept the limitations of our mode of cultural classification. The 'passions' in question, Woolf suggests, are somehow connected to our experiences of our wider environment, and her comment implicitly challenges the notion that the rural environment provides a sense of freedom which the urban cannot; or, to put the point more broadly, that rural and urban spaces stimulate different clusters of emotions which do not overlap or mingle. We should note, as Lee remarks, that her urban novels are arguably 'the most pastoral city novels ever written' (1996, p.421); and, as Lawrence Buell states, that *Mrs Dalloway* might be classed as a rare example of what he calls 'urban bioregional imagination' (2005, p.86).

Conversely, Woolf's final novel *Between the Acts* (1941), an eccentric and playful account of a rural English pageant set shortly before the Second World War, challenges associations of the countryside with tameness and reclusiveness. Instead, as Helen Southworth notes, the novel locates a 'strange and savage quality' within the English countryside and village life (2007, p.206). The latter, for Woolf, cannot be unproblematically understood as a haven from a supposedly claustrophobic and restraining urban world. Woolf's response to the crisis of national identity provoked by modernism's cosmopolitan character is thus to encourage a focus on *how* cosmopolitanism filters our understandings of the English environment, and to challenge existing conceptualisations that locate 'Englishness' exclusively within the countryside.

What ties Woolf's analyses of place together is her resolute determination to transgress artificial boundaries, be they ontological or literal. Southworth argues that her conception of the rural world in *Between the Acts* derives, in part, from '[t]he presence of a nomadic, 'foreign' figure at the centre of the work', Miss La Trobe (2007, p.206). Moreover, continues Southworth:

[s]everal of the central characters of *Between the Acts* are also associated with a kind of nomadism, most prominently Mrs Swithin, Isa Oliver (who in fact envisions herself at one point in the work as 'the last little donkey in the long caravanserai crossing the desert'), and William Dodge (2007, p.209).

Woolf identifies the rural landscape of England not as an organised, controlled space which can be understood as a mesh of private property relations and collections of rooted, regional attachments, but rather as a zone open to constant exploration and reassessment. This places her in opposition to the general trend of modernist

evocations of the English landscape in the late 1920s and 1930s. Mary Butts's mystificatory reimagining of Dorset in this period, for example, is ultimately characterised by what Patrick Wright describes as 'an increasingly dominant movement towards *settlement*, with its impulse of return to threatened family, inheritance and predominantly rural nation' (2009, p.94). The region of *Between the Acts* is (significantly) indeterminate – we are told that it is 'land merely, no land in particular' (Woolf 2000, p.189) – but in its dynamism and movement, its refusal to accept borders both literal and metaphorical, it chimes with Raymond Williams's 'Hardy country' in a way that Butts's Dorset fundamentally cannot.¹ Woolf's novel intuitively identifies this 'border country', and suggests it is key to a new understanding of the relationship between English landscape and identity. The socio-cultural crises of modernity, and the impending threat of war, provoke the need for this re-examination.

Joanna Tapp Pierce has noted that Woolf can be aligned with female contemporaries such as Elizabeth Bowen and Sylvia Townsend Warner in her recognition of the radical liminal potential of spaces that cannot be easily understood in terms of an oversimplified city/country binary. As she puts it:

If we examine the largely uncharted space between the bucolic countryside and the cosmopolitan modern city, many other physical places emerge that were essential to the modern writers' landscape: country houses, seaside villages, farmhouses, gardens, regional industrial centres. [...] By refusing to be categorised, these liminal places allow those writers who explore them to move outside

¹ For an analysis of the text's deliberate evasion of the question of location, see Frank Kermode's introduction to the Oxford edition, which notes the playful and misleading mixture of 'absurd vagueness and improbable exactness' in the hints we are given (2000, p.xxi).

of traditional associations and representations of place (2000, p.12).

This kind of liminal potential is evident in the setting of *Between the Acts*, insofar as its inhabitants cannot be reduced to either 'rural' or 'urban' dwellers, and particularly given the emphasis on nomadic transgression of borders. Tapp Pierce's thesis analyses the significance of liminality for Woolf in a discussion of the similarly indeterminate setting of *To the Lighthouse*. Elsewhere, however, Tapp Pierce suggests that the city/country binary *does* have a certain validity, since she argues that:

[i]f woman is to nature as man is to culture, then certainly the country, with its reliance on natural rhythms, its earthly connection to the land, and its celebration of the physical, is a woman's place, whereas the city, with its emphasis on control over the natural world, creativity that is not 'of the body,' and the superiority of the intellectual over the physical, is a man's place (2000, p.7).

Insofar as Tapp Pierce highlights pre-existing cultural associations with the country and the city, this passage is not contentious. However, a stronger emphasis might be placed upon the ways in which Woolf problematises these ideas in her treatment of the rural world. Evidently such associations exist, but as Tapp Pierce recognises elsewhere, Woolf's work suggests that the dominant cultural assumptions which perpetuate them should be challenged. This should entail not just a more complex understanding of the human relationship with what we call the rural world, but also of urban experience. Woolf draws our attention to the affinities and interconnections that exist between the rural and urban spheres. In doing so, she anticipates the work of cultural theorists like Williams, who argues that rural social structures can be traced to the 'same

essential drives' as those associated with cities and modernity: the expansion of capitalist property relations (1973, p.50). Tapp Pierce's strategy is to identify the value of specific zones which have developed associations outside of the simplistic urban/rural dualism, but Woolf's work attempts something more ambitious: to reclaim the urban and rural environments from reductive understandings, and illuminate the complexity of their relation.

Thus, in *Between the Acts*, the unexpected arrival at Pointz Hall of Mrs Manresa and a companion reminds Isa, Lucy and Bartholomew that the rural world is not a separate social universe to that of the city:

Utterly impossible was it, even in the heart of the country, to be alone? That was the shock. [...] If it was painful, it was essential. There must be society. Coming out of the library it was painful, but pleasant to run slap into Mrs Manresa and an unknown young man with tow-coloured hair and a twisted face. No escape was possible; meeting was inevitable. Uninvited, unexpected, droppers-in, lured off the high road by the very same instinct that caused the sheep and the cows to desire propinquity, they had come (2000, p.34).

Far from the countryside offering a refuge from the constraints of society and culture, Woolf emphasises their inescapable presence there. Indeed, she suggests, social interactions seem to derive from the same kind of 'natural' logic, the 'very same instinct' that underlies animal behaviour. The inclination to socialise emerges as one of the various ways in which behavioural and experiential similarities between human and nonhuman animals undermine notions of their supposed absolute ontological separateness in the novel. If human social activity stems, in some ways, from the same kinds of instincts or inclinations as animal behaviour, then any clear separation between 'culture' and 'nature' is undermined. As Jed Esty

notes, Woolf describes ‘forms of culture so rooted in the local ecology that they ring in echoes with the singing birds and the lowing cows’ (2004, p.102). The complex character of rural life is also brought out by Woolf’s use of the ambiguous phrase ‘the heart of the country’, which could either refer to Pointz Hall’s literal distance from the city, or suggest that the region of the novel symbolises a kind of idealised Englishness, the heart of England itself. Esty argues that in *Between the Acts* Woolf ‘seems interested in trying to reclaim English tradition [...] from an imperial Britishness that had appropriated the national past’ (2004, p.90). The novel therefore represents an attempt to draw attention to the pre-war crisis of English national identity, challenging existing patriotic tropes, and gestures towards possible new ways of understanding that identity.

II

It is in Woolf’s urban writings that her critique of a reductive, dualistic understanding of the relation between countryside and city, and her challenge to the drive to impose boundaries upon either realm, is most thorough and penetrating. Williams, again, notes that in this respect Woolf can be aligned with more general modernist trends, evident in Lawrence and Joyce (among others), which associate the urban experience with a kind of wildness and vitality (1973, pp.234-5). This constitutes the appropriation of tropes previously associated with the rural. Hence, as Miroslav Beker argues, in *Mrs Dalloway*:

London has a somewhat similar effect on Clarissa Dalloway that nature had on Wordsworth; even amidst all the commotion of the metropolis she feels ‘a particular hush, a solemnity, an indescribable pause; a suspense [...] before Big Ben strikes.’ The experience is not unlike the ecstatic stasis in Wordsworth’s poem

when ‘...the breath of this corporeal frame / And even the motion of our human blood’ are ‘almost suspended’ and an extraordinary vision follows (1972, p.377).

For Clarissa, Beker suggests, London ‘has a profound meaning, a fascination that is not fully explicable in rational terms, amounting to a mystical communion with the *locale*’ (1972, p.376). This kind of experience of the city as a wild or liminal zone is perhaps most effectively explored in Woolf’s 1930 essay ‘Street Haunting’. Here sensations and language typically associated with organicism and the ‘natural’ emerge in a nomadic *dérive* around nighttime London:

How beautiful a London street is then, with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness [...] high among the bare trees are hung oblong frames of reddish yellow light – windows; there are points of brilliance burning steadily like low stars – lamps; this empty ground, which holds the country in it and its peace, is only a London square (1947, p.20).

As Rebecca Solnit points out, the tone of this essay indicates ‘a subtle state most dedicated urban walkers know, a sort of basking in solitude [...] an observer’s state, cool, withdrawn, with senses sharpened’ (2006, p.186). It also explores, in different senses, the experience of transgression, since cities ‘make walking into true travel: danger, exile, discovery, transformation, wrap all around one’s home and come right up to the doorstep’ (2006, p.188). Woolf’s nighttime wanderings consciously challenge the accepted behavioural boundaries of her society, which viewed women acting in such a way as eccentric, if not deviant and potentially criminal. Her social transgression stimulates and mirrors the experience of wildness, the discovery within the urban of sensations and phenomena normally associated with the rural. Through a close attentiveness to the phenomenological experience of urban walking, and a conscious

interrogation of the ways in which culture tends towards the enclosure and regulation of urban experience, Woolf reveals the permeability of the supposed urban-rural boundary.

Such insights are of ecological significance insofar as they challenge potentially restrictive or pernicious dualisms. As Timothy Morton puts it, common thinking regarding our relationship with the environment tends to see 'Nature' as 'a thing of some kind, "over yonder" [...] a reified thing in the distance [...] preferably in the mountains, in the wild' (2010, p.3). To the extent that we separate the 'natural' world from the urban in this way, we tend to ignore their material interrelation and shared economic underpinnings. One way of challenging this, Woolf suggests, is to emphasise that there is no necessary qualitative difference between the kinds of experience that 'natural' rather than 'artificial' environments might stimulate in us. If modernity and conflict provoke a crisis phase in traditional relations between the culture and landscape of England, such possibilities should be considered in any realignment of those relations.

Williams's point that Woolf's re-imagining of urban experience aligns her with a wider modernist movement is supported if we consider a passage from Lawrence's 1922 novel *Aaron's Rod*, in which the titular protagonist contemplates the Thames at night:

He walked quickly down Villiers Street to the river, to see it flowing blackly towards the sea. It had an endless fascination for him: never failed to soothe him and give him a sense of liberty. He liked the night, the dark rain, the river, and even the traffic. He enjoyed the sense of friction he got from the streaming of people who meant nothing to him. It was like a fox slipping alert among unsuspecting cattle (1988, p.111).

This passage is interesting for its emphasis on the intermingling, via the Thames, of the urban world and the environment beyond; but also for the suggestion that the city is conducive to a sense of animality. Like Woolf, Lawrence understands that urban experience can function to undermine our culturally-constructed sense of self. Insofar as it works to defamiliarise us, forces us to attend anew to our engagements with the physical world, it may in fact do so more effectively than rural life. Hence the often-quoted passage towards the end of *Orlando* which highlights the ways in which the quintessentially modern experience of driving through a city challenges the unity of the self:

After twenty minutes the body and mind were like scraps of torn paper tumbling from a sack and, indeed, the process of motoring fast out of London so much resembles the chopping up small of identity which precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment (1993, p.212).

Williams draws upon this passage to illustrate a continuing tendency within literature to separate urban from rural experience, since it closes with Orlando entering the countryside, at which 'her mind regained the illusion of holding things within itself' (Woolf 1993, p.212). As Williams reads the passage, the discontinuity and atomism of the city are experienced as a form of perception, one which raises problems of identity that are 'characteristically resolved on arrival in the country' (1973, p.241). Woolf's point, however, is not so much that the problems are *resolved* – since they reflect an inescapable truth about the nature of human personality – but merely that rural experience makes it easier to ignore them. Her returning sensation of her mind 'holding things within itself' is an 'illusion'. What the passage therefore suggests is that what Williams calls 'metropolitan

perception' facilitates a more sophisticated understanding of the fragmentary, interdependent character of self. We might see projects like *Between the Acts*, works of cosmopolitan modernists engaging in what Jed Esty calls 'the nativist turn' in the interwar period, as a series of attempts to apply such insights to the English landscape (Esty 2004, p.93).

As Solnit notes, 'Street Haunting', like *Orlando*, is also concerned with the problem of 'the confining oppression of one's own identity', and identifies urban walking as a means of escaping this (2006, p.187). Woolf explores the psychic effects of being surrounded by so many different consciousnesses:

Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. [...] And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men? (1947, p.28).

As in the passage from *Aaron's Rod*, we find here the striking and unexpected usage of 'natural' imagery to describe a quintessentially urban experience, and the suggestion that that experience promotes a sense of animality, of our 'fellow men' as 'wild beasts'. Both examples imply that urban experience cannot be easily disentangled from rural. Moreover, they suggest that modernity, by stimulating new ways of understanding our relation to the world and others, and by challenging the notion of the bounded and narrowly human self, is conducive to a renewed attentiveness to those experiences and landscapes commonly considered 'natural'.

This can be most clearly brought out with recourse to Jane Bennett's concept of vital materiality. This posits that 'the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalised matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption' (2010, p.ix); what is needed is a recognition of the ways in which all things 'act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own' (2010, p.viii). The acceleration of modernity brings with it an increasingly striking awareness of the interrelation of the human and nonhuman realms:

Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore (2010, p.31).

This echoes Williams's point that advanced capitalism leads to relations between humans and the world that are 'extremely active, diverse, self-conscious, and in effect continuous' (2005, p.83). What both thinkers suggest is that the emergence of the kinds of urban experience that are evident in both Lawrence and Woolf's work reflects a specific potential of modernity, to reveal the actual interrelation of human and nonhuman matter. Woolf's emphasis on the nomadic transgression of walking, with its refusal to acknowledge artificially imposed boundaries, is central to this. As Solnit notes, this insistence upon engaging with the physical world in its particularity is 'one way of maintaining a bulwark' against the 'erosion of the mind, the body, the landscape, and the city'; 'every walker is a guard on patrol to protect the ineffable' (2006, p.11). For Bennett, this entails a challenge to the concept of the coherent, bounded or exclusively 'human' self. Not only do we thus become inescapably

aware of the ways in which the inanimate world influences our activity; but we also come to see previously occluded affinities with nonhuman animals, since the notion of a distinctively human autonomy that is somehow separate from the physical influence of the external world is undermined.² The modernist cosmopolitan experience therefore stimulates a more sophisticated understanding of the character of materiality, as well as its interrelation with human activity. Such an understanding is of value whether applied to urban or rural landscapes. Woolf hints at this kind of intuition in her explorations of animality and fragmentation within the urban context, and recognises that such experiences imply a challenge to the assertion of borders both within and between the urban and rural worlds.

Woolf and Lawrence's sense of the city as a wild, liminal space, one that promotes a sense of animality and diminishes awareness of regulated cultural boundaries, is linked to their explorations of prehistory and barbarism. In the modern city, the purported apex of Western culture, both writers find themselves drawn towards imaginative engagement with worlds in which Western culture does not exist. Hence, in *Aaron's Rod*, Aaron and Josephine appear to lose contact with their ostensible time and place upon arriving at a square in Bloomsbury during a nighttime walk:

It seemed dark and deserted, dark like a savage wilderness in the heart of London. The wind was roaring in the great blue trees of the centre, as if it were some wild dark grove deep in a forgotten land [...] They sat in silence, looking at the darkness [...] The houses of the

² As Bennett argues, anthropomorphism may not necessarily be a pernicious attitude to take towards nonhuman animals, as much ecocriticism assumes: for it can function as a mode of recognising our ontological affinities, to 'catalyse a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations' (2010, p.99).

Square rose like a cliff on this inner dark sea, dimly lighted at occasional windows. Boughs swayed and sang. A taxi-cab swirled round a corner like a cat, and purred to a standstill. [...] it all seemed so sinister, this dark, bristling heart of London. Wind boomed and tore like waves ripping a shingle beach. The two white lights of the taxi stared round and departed, leaving the coast at the foot of the cliffs deserted, faintly spilled with light from the high lamp (1988, pp.69-70).

The urban environment, rather than being regimented, regulated and controlled, is a 'savage wilderness', 'dark' and 'bristling'; the taxi-cab, symbol of modernity, has been animalised. The sense of the precariousness of 'civilisation' is echoed in *Orlando*, in a passage in which the protagonist shares a carriage with Alexander Pope:

Here they reached the big lamp-post at the corner of what is now Piccadilly Circus. The light blazed in her eyes, and she saw, besides some degraded creatures of her own sex, two wretched pigmies on a stark desert land. Both were naked, solitary, and defenceless. The one was powerless to help the other. Each had enough to do to look after itself (1993, p.144).

Both writers imply a paradox: that it is precisely when civilisation and progress most confidently assert themselves that their fragility and contingency become most apparent. At these moments, which commonly occur at night, the façade of human separateness from the world falls away. The dangers and sensory stimulation of the urban induce an awareness of our interdependency with the physical world, of the absurd hubris of the idea that by constructing cities we build eternally impregnable citadels. Rather, it is suggested, Western civilisation is merely a temporary staving-off of the ever-present possibility of descent into chaos and barbarism. The persistence of such tropes underlines the sense of a crisis of English identity in the interwar period.

One possible reaction to such realisations is to indulge in eschatological fantasies of a post-human world, or a world in which none of the trappings of ‘human civilisation’ are evident. Lawrence is given to such imaginings, as this passage from *The Rainbow* suggests, in which Will Brangwen imagines the historical development of London:

he marveled [...] thinking of naked, lurking savages on an island, how these had built up and created the great mass of Oxford Street or Piccadilly. How had helpless savages, running with their spears on the riverside, after fish, how had they come to rear up this great London, the ponderous, massive, ugly superstructure of a world of man upon a world of nature! It frightened and awed him. Man was terrible, awful in his works. [...] Sweep away the whole monstrous superstructure of the world of today, cities and industries and civilisation, leave only the bare earth with plants growing and waters running, and he would not mind, so long as he were whole, had Anna and the child and the new, strange certainty in his soul (1949, p.193).

Such fantasies have their contemporary counterpart in some ‘deep ecological’ ideas. The deep ecology movement, as originally conceived by Bill Devall and George Sessions in their 1985 work *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, grounds ethics in the capability for acts or entities to contribute to the flourishing of ecosystems. However, as Michael Bennett argues, Devall and Sessions’s text makes problematic claims for wilderness areas, asserting their unique capacity to cultivate characteristics such as humility towards our environment and sense of place. For Bennett, these qualities ‘can just as easily be found in urban environments’ (2003, p.297). Moreover, ‘ecocriticism grounded in deep ecological theory’, he argues, ‘tends to engage in a form of wilderness fetishism [...] that disables it from offering a useful analysis of urban

environments' (2003, p.298). Both Lawrence and the more militant deep ecological thinkers tend to simplistically dismiss urban culture as being of no epistemological value, while retaining an overly simplistic, undertheorised notion of the rural environment (2003, p.302). Hence, the passage from *The Rainbow* calls for the sweeping-away of everything that Will identifies as 'civilisation', as though humanity can be unproblematically separated from its creations, and longs for a return to a state of prelapsarian bliss, a harmonious re-engagement with a 'pure' nature. Lawrence suggests it is possible to neatly separate nature and culture, and imagines a world without the latter. Yet fantasies of a 'Nature' somehow outside the human are themselves the creation of culture. What any world in which humans continue to exist entails is a world of complex entanglement between the human and nonhuman. Lawrence is prophetic in recognising the ecologically unsustainable elements of mass urbanisation, but what is called for is an investigation of how aspects of Western cultural thought have led to this state of crisis, and how these ways of thinking about the world have promoted equally simplistic and pernicious assumptions about the 'natural' world.

Woolf demonstrates a similar interest in reimagining the urban landscape as a site of the prehistoric and primitive from her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, published in the same year as *The Rainbow* (1915). As Louise Hutchings Westling notes, the protagonist of *The Voyage Out*, Rachel Vinrace, has 'a sense of the vast life beyond present human apprehension or control – of "mammoths pastured in the fields of Richmond High Street" many thousands of years before London existed' (1999, p.859). It is in *Between the Acts*, however, that Woolf engages in her most thorough and sustained exploration of these themes. Early in the text, we learn that Lucy Swithin is reading H.G. Wells's *An Outline of History*, and:

had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanadon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend.

It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest (2000, p.8).

Although the content has echoes of the passage from *The Rainbow* quoted above, the tone is markedly distinct from Lawrence's eschatological rhetoric: gentle, contemplative, even playful. This is characteristic of Woolf's novel, which tentatively examines the contingency and precariousness of Western civilisation without offering unambiguous judgements on its value. The setting of *Between the Acts* is overshadowed by the imminent onset of the Second World War; as Hilary Newman argues, this partly explains Woolf's suggestion that 'all people retain something of their primitive ancestors, which could at any time erupt to submerge civilisation and reduce humanity to a state of chaos' and 'a resurgence of barbarism' (2000, p.23). The novel's position on this possibility is ambiguous, but such passages can be said to perform a similar function to the explorations of animality found throughout the novel: that is, they do not call for an *abandonment* of human culture, as Lawrence sometimes does, but rather for a renewed and broader understanding of it, one that acknowledges our animality and evolutionary history. The reexamination of English cultural

identity which *Between the Acts* explores suggests anxiety; yet, by the same token, it also provides an opportunity to incorporate potentially valuable ideas into that identity.

As the novel closes, Woolf evokes the notion that Western civilisation masks a latent barbarism once again. At the day's end, the married couple Giles and Isa find themselves alone together:

[T]hey were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. [...] The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke (2000, p.197).

The reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* evokes the threat of a descent into nihilistic chaos that hangs over much of the novel, as does the recurrent imagery of prehistoric humanity. These themes are linked to animality, the 'dog fox' and the vixen. However, as Southworth notes, we should not read this as a simple metaphor for a clash between 'civilisation' on the one hand, and the apocalyptic threat of the coming war on the other. For Southworth, the imagery of the 'savage landscape' suggests:

the centrality of the trope of nomadism to Woolf's portrait of England and a commitment to it as a means to conceive England anew. The Conrad reference highlights the unknown of the domestic landscape (2007, p.211).

Woolf identifies a latent violence underlying domestic life, but suggests that this needs to be acknowledged rather than attacked. As war threatens, it becomes more important than ever to develop a fuller conception of humanity and its relationship with the world: to recognise our ontological connections to nonhuman animals, and the interdependence of culture and the nonhuman world. Crucial to the development of such recognition, Woolf suggests, is language. With the last words of the novel, '[t]hey spoke', we sense that verbal communication is key to the negotiation of the 'savage landscape' that Giles and Isa confront, both domestically and nationally. These insights underpin Woolf's exploration of the possibility of communication, verbal and otherwise, between the human and nonhuman. If Lawrence's eschatological fantasies are indicative of a crisis in English identity provoked by cosmopolitan modernity and the imminence of war, in Woolf's fiction we find a playful reappropriation of such imagery. This, she suggests, can contribute to the development of a broader understanding of the human. Ultimately, these crises of modernity might represent opportunities to develop a more sustainable mode of being in the world, one which challenges an overly simplistic and dualistic view of the relationship between English culture and environment.

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