

The Whimsy and the Woolf: Literary Nonsense in the Works of Virginia Woolf

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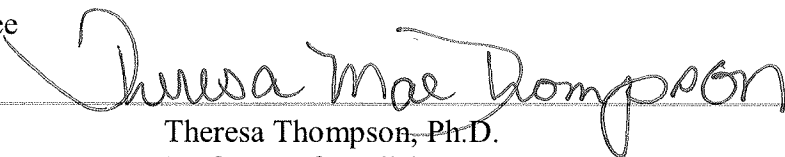
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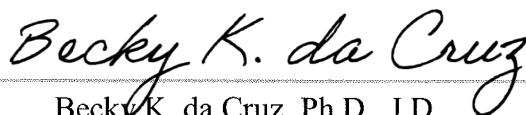
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## ABSTRACT

Much has been said on the sense of Virginia Woolf's works, but little on the nonsense. Literary nonsense is a genre most often associated with Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, but it also has a home in Woolf's use of conversation in *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts*. In the act of reading these works, impressions of nonsense arise and show a tension between sets of order and disorder which is reflected in the behavior of rules governing conversation. Using Stanley Fish's affective stylistics, H.P. Grice's pragmatics, and Elizabeth Sewell's definition of literary nonsense, nonsense appears in these two works as a game played out between order and disorder through conversations between characters and the conversation between reader and text. This order and disorder corresponds to moments in which conversational implicature works as intended on the one hand, and those moments when it breaks down on the other. Using progressive decertainizing from Fish's affective stylistics, a close reading of both texts shows how impressions of nonsense arise in the space between conversational implicature breaking down and being restored. The tension in this space can then be favorably compared to the tension in Elizabeth Sewell's definition of nonsense as a game. Wim Tigges' genre taxonomy of whole and partial nonsense provides context to how these works can be classified after a close reading has been performed, and provides a foundation for what it means to call something a work of literary nonsense. A classification of either whole or partial nonsense is reached for both works according to Tigges' taxonomy, along with a discussion afterward about the implications of what this means in the context of the current scholarship.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

The popular understanding of Virginia Woolf is of a "difficult" writer, one whose work is "overbearing," hard to understand, and that when understanding comes (if it does) in the course of reading, it is a reward granted after a punishing experience ("Is Virginia Woolf Worth Reading?"). I want to offer another way to understand her work, one that prioritizes intrinsic enjoyment of the text not in spite of the style but because of it. I want to challenge the idea that Woolf's works are unapproachable for all except the very few people who are supposedly smart enough to understand them. Within the two books *Between the Acts* and *Freshwater* are two experiences, and it is the experience itself of reading them which I am interested in. This experience must ask only that a reader engages with the text in front of them on its own terms, ascribing nothing to motive or mantra for its author. It should ask that when confronted with something which seems inscrutable that a reader neither toss it aside nor pull out any additional texts to help decipher it. The best way to do this is to change the way we look at the text itself, and to start seeing those inscrutable things as the sum of the impact they create: in a word, as nonsense.

Wim Tigges published the definitive word on literary nonsense as a genre in 1988 with *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*. Although he devotes a great deal of time to defining literary nonsense both as a concept and as a genre, the definition he settles on for himself ignores a more technical approach in favor of one which seeks to accurately

categorize most popular works of nonsense. He settles on the following: "...literary nonsense is characterized by four essential elements: an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning, lack of emotional involvement, playlike presentation, and an emphasis, stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature" (Tigges 55). One of the more technical aspects of nonsense which Tigges abandons out of necessity is a definition posed by Elizabeth Sewell. She classifies nonsense as a "game" involving "order and disorder, a *tension* between the two," and sees this game as an attempt at "reorganizing language, not according to the rules of prose or poetry in the first place but according to the rules of Play" (Tigges 13).

Nonsense is, according to Sewell, "the active manipulation, serving no useful purpose, of a certain object or class of objects, concrete or mental, within a limited field of space and time and according to fixed rules, with the aim of producing a given result despite the opposition of chance and/or opponents" and is "created by 'the mind's force towards order'" (Tigges 12-13). She places much emphasis on nonsense being a "rational game...a collection of words or events which in their arrangement do not fit into some recognized system in a particular mind...a structure held together by valid mental relations...a construction subject to its own laws" (13).

There is precedent for applying the category of literary nonsense to works which are not normally considered nonsensical. Tigges makes note of Sewell's assertion that Flannery O'Connor could be considered a writer of nonsense due to the "emotionless violence" present in her works (Tigges 224). Donna White ascribes to Jane Austen's early writing a quality of the "familiar spirit of English nonsense" (White). Many of these phenomena are things which work together to form a cohesive whole in works which are

traditionally categorized as nonsense, whereas in these works they only show up in isolation.

For example, there is a case of O'Connor-esque 'emotionless violence' in *Between the Acts*, which I will address in more detail in Chapter II:

There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the Barn, with blood on his shoes. (Woolf, *BTA* 99)

As he states in the case of Flannery O'Connor, Tigges would most likely assert that such isolated instances of emotionless violence like this one "primarily serve other aims than presenting nonsense," and that reading them as such would be uncommon (Tigges 224). He admits, however, that one possible way of reading nonsense is as "a no-man's land overlapping all the other categories at the same time as being distinct from them" (Tigges 212). He goes on to quote Sewell's assertion that the tendency of nonsense to "render language a closed and consistent system of its own" is "the aesthetic of modernism" (212). His justification for why certain authors like Gertrude Stein should not be considered nonsense authors is that they "invite connotation" instead of avoiding it. Tigges argues that the "nonsensical impression" present in Kafka's works, for example, is "too associative" to qualify as true nonsense despite the absence of a clear "point" (225). Herein lies perhaps the clearest rebuttal of my proposal: namely, that Woolf's highly-

intentional style seems very much to invite connotation. According to Tigges, this would seem to place her work outside of the realm of nonsense by default.

This is only true, however, if we accept Tigges' presuppositions regarding nonsense as a discrete genre category and not an approach to literature defined by its use of specific techniques. It is in the latter sense that I approach Woolf's work, and to that end I will be using Sewell's definition of nonsense as a concept and mechanism. While I will be forgoing Tigges' strict definition, I will still be using his taxonomy of whole and partial nonsense as a general guide.

Tigges' rejection of works which "invite connotation" does bring up an important point, however, and this is that dealing with what nonsense "means" is both boon and bane of any approach to literary nonsense. In the many attempts to define literary nonsense, the common problem has been with addressing meaning-making in nonsense literature and whether this even happens at all. For instance, Kathleen Pendlebury's approach to analyzing the nonsense of Edward Lear shows that "there is more 'meaning' latent in the rhymes than the non-sense school acknowledges. This, however, occurs on a linguistic or pragmatic, rather than a symbolic level" (Pendlebury 73). In her analysis of Edward Lear's nonsense she quotes Sewell asserting that nonsense is characterized by existence contrasted against non-existence and a general "annihilation of relations" (101). To be annihilated, relations would have to exist prior to their destruction, and this implies a form of meaning which is inherent to the text to begin with. I tend to agree with Pendlebury on the matter of linguistic meaning in nonsense verse, which is why I will be asserting that the tension Sewell talks about, whether between order and disorder or existence and non-existence, can be understood linguistically, and that an affective

stylistic reading can bring this out. This process is how we understand the process of meaning-making which occurs in *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts*, and how we know by this process that these are works of nonsense.

I intend to look at nonsense in Virginia Woolf using a linguistic framework. A quantitative analysis of Virginia Woolf's writing style as it evolved over the years found that Woolf's style tended to change from "informationally concise" in her first novel *The Voyage Out* towards an increasing "information condensation" in her final novel *Between the Acts* (Huang 197). Niklas Cyril Fischer in "Slipping in the Inaudible: Making Sense of Deictic Words in *The Voyage Out*" claims that most scholars pay attention to Woolf's use of saturated language in her later works and not enough to how she uses "useful" words in her earlier works (Fischer 28). He analyzes how *The Voyage Out* is "already engaged with the tension between functional and poetic language as well as their attendant modes of listening" (Fischer 30).

Just as there have been different kinds of approaches to linguistic analysis of Woolf's works, there have also been diverse approaches to analyzing nonsense as it relates to modernism. An in-depth assessment of the connection between nonsense and modernist works comes from Eric John Rettberg, who argues against what he calls a "critical framing of modernist experimentation as monolithically difficult," considering how figures like Chesterton unfavorably compared modernist writers like Stein and Joyce to Carroll, arguing that modernism can be taken seriously "without deflating its ridiculousness" (Rettberg i, 10). While his resistance to the perception of modernist works as 'difficult' is similar to my own, he does not, however, delve into a linguistic analysis of the ridiculousness intrinsic to modernism.

There seems to be an absence of analyses that look at the nonsense in modernist texts through a linguistic lens. There are, however, studies that seem to connect Woolf to the genre of literary nonsense, such as Juliet Dunsinberre in *Alice to the Lighthouse* making the assertion that Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" has passages which seem to directly parallel portions of *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll (Dunsinberre 94). Dunsinberre's argument is that Woolf and her contemporaries modeled their irreverence for the mandated religious sentiments of Victorian culture on the more revolutionary non-religious children's literature of Carroll and Nesbit, among others, who were combating Victorian mores. She draws attention to places in Woolf's works which either display similarities to Carroll's works, such as *The Voyage Out with Alice in Wonderland*, or which seem to be echoes of sentiments in Carroll, such passages in *The Waves* which echo the mockery of revered literary texts present in "The Hunting of the Snark" (2; 108). She also points out that in the 1923 version of *Freshwater* there is an exchange between Watts and Tennyson involving a direct quote from *Alice in Wonderland* which goes as follows, beginning with Watts: "Mammon trampling upon Maternity. The sound is certainly excellent; but what about the sense?" followed by Tennyson's response: "Take care of the sound and the sense will take care of itself" (Dunsinberre 158-159).

Then there is Woolf's friend Lytton Strachey urging her to mimic the novel *Tristram Shandy* because he did not like *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, "Thursday 18 June"). The novel in question is categorized by Wim Tigges as partial literary nonsense, the same categorization which I will be making an argument for in the case of *Between the Acts* (Tigges 131-132). Whether Woolf took Strachey's suggestion seriously or not, Woolf's

response to Strachey hinges on her worrying that she would lose emotion in doing as he suggested (Woolf, "Thursday 18 June"). Towards the end of *Between the Acts* there are crucial moments referencing emotion (Woolf, *BTA* 106, 141). Combined with the fact that Strachey, like Woolf, died before completion of the book, this connection provides relevant context to the creation of the book itself and Woolf's own relationship to nonsense literature (Hussey 28).

Woolf is also connected to nonsense literature by way of its status as a genre for children. Wim Tigges makes the point that literary nonsense has been considered a form of "endearing, imaginative type of children's literature," and has also been included in reviews of "humorous writing" (Tigges 7). It makes sense, then, to take a look at what has been said about Virginia Woolf and her work in the context of humor writing and children's literature. Woolf herself remarked of Lewis Carroll that "only Lewis Carroll has shown us the world upside down as a child sees it, and has made us laugh as children laugh, irresponsibly" (Woolf, "The Moment and Other Essays" 71).

When it comes to what others have said about this connection to children's literature and humor writing, Juliet Dunsinberre, for one, provides a connection between how Queen Elizabeth shows up as a character in both *Between the Acts* and in one of Rudyard Kipling's works for children (Dunsinberre 168). Don L. F. Nilsen gives us a more detailed overview of relevant perspectives. He makes the case that Woolf "had an eye for the ludicrous" from childhood, and that her comedic prowess was most often pointed at aspects of "the male monomyth" (Nilsen 123). He quotes B. H. Fussell's sentiment that many people tend to "mistake the degree of Woolf's satiric and ironic tone," that they tend to consider her more of a "novelist of sensibility" instead of as a

"comic writer" (Nilsen 123). Various other scholars range in their opinions of her humor from being motivated by anger, to being extensive in its use of "parodies, puns, burlesques" and focusing on comedy arising from women "totally confusing the men around them" (124). Her use of humor is at varying times considered sardonic, satiric, or even surrealist (124). Her humor in *Freshwater* is considered to be that of exaggeration "to emphasize the inanity of their 'illustrious' professions" with the effect of "endorsing the liberation of women by attacking the traditions of marriage and chastity" (125).

As for *Between the Acts*, Nilsen notes that some academics claim Woolf intended "Miss La Trobe's pageant to be a burlesque of all such pageants" while giving the same treatment to Greek religious ceremony, and that its themes of family are "interrupted by disunities, bitternesses, and burlesques which add up to a lack of unity, and a 'confused but tumultuous clamor'" (129). He cites Denise Marshall who considers the play within the novel to be "a sort of a joke," while pointing out that Melba Cuddy-Keane on the other hand considers it to operate along "three important comic modes—the satiric, the amiable, and the liminal," and that it contains "subversive comedy," offering "a direct challenge" to powerful groups with implications about "the overturning of the existing order" (130). According to Nilsen, Cuddy-Keane also specifically alters the meaning of the term liminal in her assessment of *Between the Acts* in order to apply it to how the novel dismantles order and pushes for "'permanent instability'" (130). The general consensus is that the comedy in *Between the Acts* is "destabilizing" and that it argues for a society full of "'fragmentation, paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction,'" with Nilsen's final note here being that many are frustrated with how the book seems to be a comedy but "does not end like a comedy should end" (130).

It is not only Woolf's fiction which has garnered this kind of attention. In *Laughing at Ourselves: The Joke in the Structure of Virginia Woolf's New Biographies*, Karen Eisman asserts that Woolf's "new biographies" can be understood through the lens of William F. Fry's concept of joke structure involving play frame, paradox, and reversal (Eisman 9). She argues that Woolf resolves the opposition between truth and fiction much in the way that a reversal in the form of a punch-line resolves the paradox created by a play frame in a joke (24-25). The books Eisman looks at, namely *Orlando* and *Flush*, mark departures from works that showcase Woolf's characteristic stream-of-consciousness technique like *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, differing in both subject matter and style. Similarly, her works for children showcase a unique approach all their own.

In Caroline Marie's "(Re-)Imaging the Imaginary of a Children's Story by Virginia Woolf: Nurse Lugton through the Prism of Three Illustrators," she argues that *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* is a "reflection on colonialism" which shows how "the imaginary" is a collective rather than individual space, refuting older Romantic notions of artistry (Marie 1). Jane Newland argues in *Deleuze in Children's Literature* that in Virginia Woolf's *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* and *The Widow and the Parrot* that the function of the Deleuzian "becomings-animal may...disrupt our preconceived notions of what 'a child' and 'an animal' might be" (Newland 11). Claudia Olk in "Scene Making in *The Charleston Bulletin Supplements*" points out that Woolf envisioned her writing process as a "ribbon of scenes" extending into the past, and that in the picture-book-esque scenes in *The Charleston Bulletin Supplements* "the modernist's, the biographer's and the child's-

eye-view converge" to create "fantastical narrative and iconographical excursions into family history" (Olk 255-257).

The two works I have chosen to focus on deal with drama and theater. Woolf at various times considered that the theater had the power "to change the 'printed word out of all recognition when it is heard by other people,' that when reading a play "the audience is replaced by the reader," and that she found herself "employing the 'distance of the stage' to construct meaning, to find meaning where there is literally nothing—in a pause" (Putzel 110-114). Putzel goes on to describe Woolf's thoughts on theater as Brechtian, having a negative view of the "convoluted plots" of Elizabethan drama, and that the theatrical choruses "provide a collective voice that can help transform a solitary 'reader' into part of a the [sic] collective 'audience'" (111, 116).

Woolf's thoughts on the relationship between a reader and the text of a play focuses on how it mimics the relationship between audience and performers of a play. Her perspective mirrors something which will show up again and again in this thesis, namely, how a reader makes meaning when reading. To explore the process of meeting a text on its own terms like I want to do for *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts*, it is necessary to use a specific type of reader-response close reading called affective stylistics. This approach will show us how we make meaning as we read these texts, and how the nonsense in them jumps out in the process.

Fish uses affective stylistics as a means by which to approach literature in a way which "takes the reader, as an actively mediating presence, fully into account, and which, therefore, has as its focus the 'psychological effects' of the utterance" (Fish 123).

Consider the following passage:

That Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no certainty in Scripture: though in one place it seems to affirm it, and by a doubtful word hath given occasion to translate it; yet in another place, in a more punctual description, it maketh it improbable, and seems to overthrow it. (123-124)

Fish analyzes the passage through a process he calls "progressive decertainizing" to discuss what a reader 'does' in each part of the sentence: "the reader commits himself"... "he knows"... "he must be in control," and so on (124). He discusses how one part of the passage leads to the reader "expecting, and even predicting a single word- 'doubt'; but instead he finds 'certainty'; and at that moment the status of the fact that had served as his point of reference becomes uncertain" (124). This process of looking at what happens as a reader interacts with the text and moves between certainty and uncertainty is the process of "progressive decertainizing." It is this process which I will examine in my close readings of *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts*, paying attention to how the reader is impacted by the "nonsensical impressions" which Tigges decries as insufficient in Kafka, but which I will argue in Woolf's works are strong enough to justify a nonsense reading. I will show that these nonsensical impressions are created when the conversations between characters and between text and reader breaks down and reestablishes itself, and that we can see this process through analyzing the progressions between certainty and uncertainty during the reading process. I will demonstrate that this phenomenon mirrors Sewell's description of a tense game between sets of order and disorder in nonsense literature.

Other critics have applied reader-response approaches to analyze Woolf's works. Ian Gregor's analysis of a passage from *Between the Acts* asserts that it is a "playful" take

on one of her more serious themes involving the relationship between nature and mankind, and that the parodies and reversals within the passage change how we read it (Gregor 588). He concludes that the dramatic shifts in tone create an "apprehension of human feeling" and that this apprehension is conscious of the text and its contradictions, using them to mirror the themes of the work as a whole. (589). He concludes that Woolf's relationship to her readers is through making a promise fulfilled through a "dominant voice" in each work, and that this voice is distinct and separated from both theme and reader interpretation (589). As poignant as these observations are, they still rely on understanding Woolf's life as well as themes from her other works (he includes biographical inspirations during his analysis of *To the Lighthouse*, for example) in order to understand the role of a reader in the context of *Between the Acts*.

Joshua Philips begins his approach to a section of *Between the Acts* by pointing out the inclusion of a real-life event: the rape of a girl by soldiers. He then moves on to a closer reading, comparing the insects among the play's audience as comparable to readers of the text itself, claiming that the act of analyzing the text becomes "insectile" through this comparison (Philips 203). He presents passages from the text in the order in which they would naturally be read and poses questions about them, which he answers with conclusions drawn only from the text. He then engages with an excerpt from Woolf's unfinished treatise "The Reader," which she typed on the back of the original copy of the excerpt he analyzed before this one. He claims that the fragment from "The Reader" draws attention to readers who pay less attention to the "solitary genius" of individual authors, and that they see literature more as a culmination of countless uncredited similar works (205). While Philips manages to compartmentalize context away from analysis, the

analysis he does is not focused on how the text affects the reader. Instead, he uses textual analysis along with context to make statements about how we should approach reading in general and reading Woolf in particular. Using Woolf's own thoughts on reading as a guide to reading her work is both understandable and misguided. It is understandable because understanding how Woolf approached reading texts as a whole would of course help understand how she may have intended her own works to be read. Unfortunately, this assumes that she would have wanted people to connect her own intentions to their readings of her works, and as Philips himself quotes from her "Sketch of the Past," Woolf's own perspective on how valuable an author—or similar artistic creator—should be to the act of reading or otherwise consuming art can be summed up as follows: "There is no Shakespeare; there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God" (Philips 206).

There is unfortunately a dearth of reader-response approaches to Woolf's works that apply an affective stylistics lens. The only exception to this is Stanley Fish's 2011 work *How to Write a Sentence*, which uses Woolf and her contemporaries to make points about how affective stylistics functions. While helpful for understanding affective stylistics more concretely, it is not helpful in understanding how to analyze Woolf in general, much less those works of hers which are less characteristically modernist than the one he draws from. A more recent critical work which does attempt something similar, however, is Andreea Paris-Popa's "Aesthetic Reading in Virginia Woolf's Metafictional Short Stories." She asserts that Woolf's work on the nature of reading anticipated later reader-response theories such as "*transactional theory* developed by Louise Rosenblatt" (Paris-Popa 81). She defines Woolf's own position on reading as

being one of equal sexual reciprocation, a "*pleasurable encounter*" with transactional equality between writer and reader which thus fundamentally excludes the approaches of later reader-response theories by those like David Bleach and Norman Holland (Paris-Popa 82). She asserts that Woolf's attention to "common readers" is "foreshadowing Rosenblatt's 'ordinary reader'" (83-84). For context, she explains Rosenblatt's innovation of "'aesthetic reading'...a mode in which 'the reader's primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event'" (84).

Paris-Popa's summation of Woolf's relationship to reader-response theory shows how the goals of this thesis are in some ways in line with Woolf's own sentiments, as her thoughts on the act of reading seem to reflect Rosenblatt's concern with reading as a transactional event which is continuously happening. Paris-Popa does not, however, engage in a full reader-response analysis of any of Woolf's works in her paper. Instead, she uses the texts of two of Woolf's works of short fiction, "An Unfinished Novel" and "The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection," to analyze the relationship of Woolf's writing to her stance on the relationship between readers and writers. She does this while placing her analysis in the context of Rosenblatt's transactional reader-response criticism. Her practice of reader-response criticism itself, however, is limited to short sections of close-reading which include contextualization of both the reader's response to the text and its relationship to Woolf and reader-response theory. In this sense, her reading is as metatextual as the texts she is analyzing are metafictional. While effective in what it is trying to do, her approach does not help determine the impact of Woolf's style on the reader since we are not concerned with the context of the reader's response in the larger conversation between Woolf's works and Rosenblatt's theory.

What will help us understand how style impacts a reader is to look at what work has been done in applying affective stylistics to literary texts since Fish. Stucky et al examine how performance factors into an affective stylistics approach to plays, both on the page and during live performance. They examine an Edward Albee play both in text and performance, and they note how the performers will "read" each other's performance "with the kind of flexibility Fish proposes in his reading of *Paradise Lost*" by paying attention to the transformation of the simple line "Why don't you kill Agnes?" They note that the simple fact that "Albee wrote the line with a question mark" can lead to the following transformation as the performers "read" one another:

Albee's question and answer become re-textualized in performance. In performance the apparent question "Why don't you—?" can become, for example, what conversation analysts call an "injunction mitigator," such that its imperative would be "you kill Agnes." Although Claire's line looks (syntactically) like a question, and Tobias responds with something that looks like an answer, the performers whose interpretation is evaluated below treat this "simple" moment in a complex way...(Stucky et al 275-276)

While we are not looking at injunction mitigators here, it shows the ways in which conversation function can be brought out by an affective stylistics approach to a text. Another important aspect of any close reading is determining how to do it: what parts to look at and why, and how closely to look at them. Earlier on in their paper, Stucky et al point out that "Fish bases his method on a 'consideration of the temporal flow of the reading experience'...the reader moves through a text in a sequence and responds to the text one word at a time" and that because of this "the reader's response is thus based not

upon the entirety of the text, but on the text as experienced up to that point" where "the meaning of the text is the experience of the text" (Stucky et al 272). This is the kind of approach I will take in my reading.

The following analyses of a passage from one of Edward Albee's plays approaches both the original text and the text-as-performed from an affective stylistics perspective, and will be relevant during my analysis of *Between the Acts*. First we have an analysis of the text as written:

Claire begins by talking about Julia, then confronts Tobias about Agnes.

Claire: I should imagine—from all that I have . . . watched, that it is come-home time.

(Offhand)

Why don't you kill Agnes?

Tobias: (Very offhand)

Oh, no, I couldn't do that.

Claire: Better still, why don't you wait till Julia separates from her husband....

Fish might point out that Claire begins her question with "Why." Beginning a line with this word raises the likelihood of an action to follow. "Why go now?" "Why I declare!" (Stucky et al 275).

Next we have an analysis of the text as performed:

The following transcript records a performance by Scofield and Reid. (Various forms of "h" signify laughter.)

Claire: Why don't you kill Agnes

(1.5 second pause)

Tobias: uh Oh hh ho ho *no*: I couldn't *do* tha(h)t

Claire: hh huh huh

Tobias: uh huh huh huh

[(bracket indicates overlap)

Claire: hhh well better still why don't...

Claire's line "Why don't you kill Agnes?" appears to be treated as a question by Tobias. As such (a first pair part of a question-answer adjacency pair), it elicits an answer, but the answer is "marked," that is, it is what is known as a dispreferred second. (Stucky et al 276)

The approach taken by the authors to the text both as it is written and as it is performed uses affective stylistics to understand how the performers create meaning through the act of performance, and how similar this is to the way the reader creates meaning through the act of reading. Stucky et al shows that conversation analysis can be used in affective stylistics approaches, so my analysis will examine conversational implicature in *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts*.

Conversational Implicature refers to how the things we hear (and read) can imply more than what we immediately notice. These implications are often social and cultural, things which a speaker may assume the listener understands regardless of whether they do or not. According to H.P. Grice, conversational implicature can be defined as an implied meaning "that depends on features of the conversational context and is not determined by the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered" (Davis). Grice said that implicature occurs only when everyone is operating under the same assumptions, which

he calls the Cooperative Principle. The following describes the function of implicature when the Cooperative Principle is working as it should in conversation:

"*S* conversationally implicates *p* iff *S* implicates *p* when: i. *S* is presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle (*Cooperative Presumption*); ii. The supposition that *S* believes *p* is required to make *S*'s utterance consistent with the Cooperative Principle (*Determinacy*); and iii. *S* believes (or knows), and expects *H* to believe that *S* believes, that *H* is able to determine that (ii) is true (*Mutual Knowledge*)." (Davis)

This means that if all parties in a conversation believe one another to be communicating in good faith and as honestly as they can, then all implied information should be understood by everyone involved. The "belief" aspect is what is required for the Cooperative Principle—the assumption everyone is playing by the same rules—to function.

When violations of the rules of conversational implicature occur, the results can range from creating figures of speech, to an end to the conversation because the subject changed or there is not enough information, or an extension of the conversation artificially through inefficient communication (Rahayu 40). In order for conversational implicature to function, everyone involved in the conversation must be able to infer meaning and imply it equally. This cannot occur if one or more of the rules—which Grice called maxims—are violated. When one party to a conversation assumes the rules remain unbroken while another party either breaks them intentionally or simply assumes a different set of rules, then what is implied cannot be inferred, and implicature breaks down. The different maxims which must be followed for the cooperative principle to work are the maxim of quality which says you cannot be lying; the maxim of quantity

which says you have to be as informative as the situation needs; the maxim of relation which says the information you share has to be relevant to the conversation; and the maxim of manner which says you have to be as clear and concise as possible (Davis).

Ni Kadek Dwi Rahayu notes the following about examining literary works for conversational implicature:

...there will be no visible conversation between the speaker and the listener because it is in the form of the text so that what is seen in literary work is only the language user, namely the author and reader. The pragmatic aspect concerns two parties in conversation in a literary work. Although the message in literary work cannot be conveyed directly from the author to the reader because there is no response from the reader, the appropriate term to use is to transfer the message from the implied author to an implied reader. (Rahayu 39)

She argues that Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" contains language which "raises implied conversation," and that "non-linguistic features...namely social and cultural" factor in when "implying an utterance" (Rahayu 38). She goes on to analyze the poem and how it consistently violates the different maxims required for conversational implicature to function. She finds that the maxims most commonly violated are the maxim of quality, maxim of quantity, and maxim of manner.

When it comes to making meaning out of *Between the Acts*, scholars are as polarized as they are diverse in their critiques. Gillian Beer considered the book "Woolf's 'most mischievous and playful work,'" whereas F. R. Leavis considered the novel to be full of "pointlessness and vacancy" (Hussey 28-29). A point of contention when trying to approach *Between the Acts* is what kind of reader the work is intended for. Mark Hussey,

for example, asserts that Miss La Trobe represents a troubled idea of readerless writing, and that the entire concept and phenomenon of readership is what Woolf is concerned with in the novel (Hussey 28).

While *Between the Acts* may have garnered the most polarizing critique of any of Woolf's novels, her single play *Freshwater* seems to have been paid less attention over the years since its posthumous publication than *Between the Acts*. Only one recent paper is devoted solely to the work: "Outside Joke: Virginia Woolf's *Freshwater* and Coterie Insularity" by Michelle Alexis Taylor. *Freshwater* was Woolf's attempt to dramatize the life of her great-aunt for the amusement of her family and friends, and when it finally saw print contained two versions which reflect different performances between which Woolf made certain adjustments (Hussey 93; *Freshwater* vii). It is precisely because we know so much about the intentions behind the play that I will argue it falls firmly in the field of whole nonsense: while someone well-versed in the life and heritage of Woolf and her reasons for writing the play might be able to parse out a specific meaning to the plot, the "ideal reader" would not have any of this information. What is left for such a reader is a text where the tone and style inevitably sabotage any attempt at traditional meaning-making, leaving what I will argue is the only natural conclusion for such a reader, namely, that the work is a nonsensical one.

It should now be clear that there is a history of contentious scholarship about *Between the Acts*. This, combined with a dearth of critical scholarship addressing the humor of *Freshwater*, comprise the two primary reasons for analyzing these texts. In the following two chapters, I use affective stylistics as a framework for investigating how impressions of nonsense arise during the process of reading as a byproduct of the ways in

which conversational implicature breaks down and is restored. I will use Stanley Fish's process of decertainizing to draw attention to these moments and how they impact a reader. I analyze conversation using the lens of pragmatics to establish that the tension between moments of conversational implicature breaking down and being restored is functionally the same process which Elizabeth Sewell describes in her definition of literary nonsense as a game between order and disorder.

## Chapter II

### AN AFFECTIVE NONSENSE READING OF *FRESHWATER*

Fish's decertainizing process shows how a reader is affected by the tension between moments in which implicature is broken down versus when it is reinforced. This tension is what creates in a reader the impression of nonsense, and is functionally the same as Sewell's description of the tense game between order and disorder. The ordered systems in Sewell's game correspond to those passages of a text in which implicature is reinforced, whereas the disordered systems correspond to those passages in which it is broken down. For this reading, I apply progressive decertainizing to show the breakdown and restoration of conversational implicature. The impressions of nonsense which arise in the act of close reading will show how this works.

In the 1935 version of Woolf's *Freshwater*, the following lines: "*A studio. MRS. CAMERON washing MR. CAMERON's head*" dictate a specific location, a studio (Woolf, *Freshwater* 7). Readers do not know what kind of studio this is: Is it an art studio, a music studio, or some other kind? The next line does not help answer these questions, as the act of someone's head being washed moves us from a state of curiosity—what kind of studio—to one of confusion: washing someone's head is not a "normal" activity in any kind of studio.

The next line provides a partial answer: "*ELLEN TERRY on the model's throne posing to WATTS for Modesty at the feet of Mammon*" (7). There is a 'model's throne' and someone, namely Ellen Terry, is on this throne posing, making the location most

likely an art studio. While we know that Ellen Terry is posing and therefore is most likely being used as the subject for an art piece, the confrontation with the word "Modesty" flies in the face of the tone of confusion which has been set. While someone's head being washed in an art studio is not an immodest act, the sense which is imparted by the contrast between "washing...head" and "Modesty" is a comical one given how much one thing belongs to the setting and how little the other one does.

Finally, the introduction of the word "Mammon" with its association of someone who is greedy takes this comical juxtaposition and further heightens it: we are no less confused by the washing, rather because the capitalization of both "Modesty" and "Mammon" leads us to believe that they are jointly referring to a work of art, we then begin to anthropomorphize them as we finish the sentence. Because we are taking abstract concepts and are asked to imagine them as human beings, we cannot help but associate those characteristics with the names we have just been given: Mrs. Cameron, Mr. Cameron, Ellen Terry, and Watts. We do not know enough yet to tell which of these four are modest or greedy, but by the end of this line we assume at least some of them must be one or the other.

It is all the more confusing, then, when we read down further and see the following line by Mrs C: "Sit still, Charles! Sit still! Soap in your eyes? Nonsense. Water down your back? Tush! Surely you can put up with a little discomfort in the cause of art!" (7). We infer that Mrs. C. must be Mrs. Cameron, and that Charles, therefore, must be Mr. Cameron. The use of two exclamation points after very short, imperative statements and the use of 'soap,' 'water,' and 'discomfort' lets us know that Mr. Cameron does not want his head to be washed. We also are confronted with the dismissive tone towards Mr.

Cameron having soap in his eyes, and this reintroduces the confusion we had when trying to figure out what kind of studio they are in: soap being in someone's eyes seems reason enough to be uncomfortable and to not like the current activity. We therefore might read Mrs. Cameron as one of the characters endowed with greed per the mention of Mammon earlier.

All of this rational character development is flipped on its head at the mention of "the cause of art." If we recall the previous two lines, it was only at the introduction of the characters Ellen Terry and Watts, one of whom is posing for the other, that our confusion about the nature of the studio was resolved. However, as we process the implication that Mrs. Cameron washing Mr. Cameron's head is also an artistic endeavor, we then go back into that state of confusion.

The end of act one sees the following exchange:

WATTS:

Horror! Horror! I have been most cruelly deceived! Listen: [*He Reads.*]

"The Milky Way among the ancients was the universal token of fertility. It symbolised the spawn of fish, the innumerable progeny of the sea, and the fertility of the marriage bed." Horror! Oh Horror! I who have always lived for the Utmost for the Highest have made Modesty symbolise the fertility of fish!

Mr. C.

My poor old friend. Fish. Fish. Fish. (Woolf, *Freshwater* 18)

Earlier on the same page and on the page prior we would have read Watts talking about the Milky Way, what his painting symbolizes, and that he is looking in a book to discover

the true meaning of the references in his painting, so we would not be surprised at any of those aspects in these lines. What has not been mentioned at all up to this point is fish. We see short exclamatory utterances ("Horror! Oh Horror!") followed by exclamation points, which remind us of the short imperatives at the beginning of the play uttered by Mrs. Cameron. The extended line by Watts is followed up with a very simple one concluding in the short declaratory utterances of 'Fish' repeated three times. This juxtaposition is not a reference to a previous mention of fish, and while there are comical moments in the preceding pages, none have to do with fish, leaving the reader again with a sense of confusion: why does Mr. Cameron repeat 'fish' three times? Why does he repeat it at all? Given Watts' previous disposition to being highly-intentional about his painting<sup>1</sup>, it is no surprise that he is horrified at his mistake when it comes to the symbolism in his painting. What ultimately puts us back into the same state of confusion as we found ourselves at the beginning of the play is Mr. Cameron's repetition of 'fish.' Beyond simply not understanding why Mr. Cameron is saying this in response to Watts' horrified discovery, the fact that there is nothing after it until the opening of the next act means that as a reader we are left in limbo between the sensible horror of Mr. Watts and the nonsensical response by Mr. Cameron.

Act two begins as follows: "*The Needles*. ELLEN TERRY and JOHN CRAIG are sitting in bathing dresses on the Needles" (21). Given that the first line of act one introduced the setting, a reader can naturally assume that "the needles" is a setting of some sort, but have no clue as to what kind of setting this is until we read "bathing dresses," which lets us know that the act of sitting upon "the needles" must be an activity

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<sup>1</sup> The following is an example of this: "even if I have succeeded, humanly speaking, with the great toe, I have not solved the problem of the drapery" (17).

which requires a bathing dress. Here we see some sense reassert itself: Mr. Cameron's nonsensical utterance at the end of act one—"fish. fish. fish"--is followed directly at the beginning of act two by the placement of two characters in a situation adjacent to water, presumably a body of water with formations which could bear the name "the needles," implying an open body of water as opposed to a pool of some sort.

This sense is undercut a few lines down. After exchanging lines about "the middle of the sea," we have the following line by Nell: "Yes, it's a sea. Are you the young man who jumped over the lane on a red horse?" (21). This line has no precedent and is followed not by any confusion, which would be the natural response, but by John saying "I am." This creates a state of confusion: what lane is Nell—the presumptive nickname of Ellen—referring to, why is she asking if John jumped over this lane, and why does it matter that the horse being ridden in the jump was red? We also have to face the absurdity of the idea of a red horse, and have to wonder whether the intent is to communicate that the horse is simply more of a chestnut shade, or has been painted a bright red, or is naturally bestowed with a shade uncharacteristic of normal horse coloring. There is no traditional comic device being used in this moment: for it to read as irony, for example, there would have to be something either very horselike or very unhorselike mentioned in a previous sentence or page; either that, or something of a similar quality regarding jumping or lanes, something which could be contrasted against or compared to Nell's question. As it is, the only comedy here is one of incongruence: horses and lanes are very different from the oceanic setting the two characters are currently in. If incongruence were the simple rule of the comedy in this act of the play, however, then the rest of it would read very differently.

The fact that Nell's question has no precedent within act one or the opening lines of act two moves a reader from comfort to discomfort again. Whereas the opening seemed to naturally follow from the mention of fish at the end of act two, this introduction of red horses, lanes, and the jumping of one over the other is sudden and arresting, causing uncertainty. John then solidifies this uncertainty with his own question: "I am. Are you the young woman who was picking primroses in the lane?" (21). Here we have the initial positive response which frustrates readers' attempt at grounding ourselves in a sense of stability, followed by a statement which creates a synthesis between the need for stability and the introduced element of uncertainty: the lane is referenced, but with the addition of primroses, an element as dissimilar to red horses as the latter is to water and fish.

In each of these three moments in the play readers face a lack of stability. There is no way to find a foundation from which to engage in meaning-making. Joshi Vishal makes note of an examination by Fish regarding the disparity between Milton's intentions with *Paradise Lost* versus what a reader necessarily concludes during the process of reading: "The process of experiencing the text, therefore, coincides with meaning-making. The textual meanings are thus actualized in the process of reading" (Vishal 256). He quotes Fish's assertion that "'the disparity between intention and execution become[s] a disparity between reader expectation and reading experience'" (257). In the case of Milton the initial disparity is between what Milton intended to communicate in Satan's speeches versus how those speeches are executed, leading to the further disparity between the reader's expectations of theological faithfulness versus the reading experience which is an altogether different picture of Satan as a character (257-258). In

the case of *Freshwater*, the initial disparity is the biographical inspiration for the creation of the play on the one hand versus the execution of the play—which does not communicate this inspiration—on the other. The second disparity that this leads to is the expectations of a reader that the play will allow for meaning-making versus the reading experience which shows that this is not possible.

Next, implicature creates misunderstandings between the characters, and that these misunderstandings also create impressions of nonsense.

Act two ends in the following way:

NELL

Now you're married to Mr. Watts, porpoise! The utmost for the highest, porpoise. Look upwards, porpoise! And keep perfectly still! I suppose it was a female porpoise, John?

JOHN

That don't matter a damn to Mr. Watts, Nell. [*He kisses her.*]

(Woolf, *Freshwater* 29-30)

The reason Nell says that Mr. Watts is married to a porpoise is because earlier on the same page she threw her ring into the ocean. The reason she gives for doing this is that she thinks the porpoise is hungry. So we have three moments in quick succession, indicated by the following lines given by Nell (here presented one after the other although in the text they are spaced out across the page): "Oh, poor porpoise, how sad you sound! I'm sure he's hungry," "There, porpoise—take that! [*She throws him her wedding ring.*]" and "Now you're married to Mr. Watts, porpoise!" (29). As we progress from one statement to the next, we encounter two things which do not logically follow:

throwing a ring to a porpoise to feed him, and declaring a porpoise married to a man because the porpoise ate the ring. These are presented with only minor pushback by John, who exclaims: "Lord Nell! Now you've gone and done it! The porpoise has swallowed your wedding ring! What'll Lady Mount Temple say to that?" (29). John does not show any concern for the feelings of Nell's husband, Mr. Watts. In fact, shortly thereafter he implies that Mr. Watts would not mind being married to a porpoise whether it was male or female.

Here we see a classic case of implicature breaking down as the text unfolds: Nell assumes that a ring will satisfy a porpoise's hunger, and that if it eats her ring that this is tantamount to the porpoise being married to her husband instead of herself. John does not operate under these assumptions when conversing with Ellen.

This is a violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle, which means it is now no longer safe to assume that everyone in the conversation is operating under the same assumption. John assumes that the information Nell gives him is given in good faith, playing the Alice to Nell's caterpillar and going on to express befuddlement. It is also worth noting that just like Carroll's Alice focusing on an irrelevant concern over height in the face of a nonsensical conversation with a caterpillar, John here expresses concern over someone other than Nell's husband when expressing his confusion at her actions, a similarly irrelevant concern in the face of Nell's nonsensical actions.

Implicature remains broken until the final statement of the act. John implies that Mr. Watts might be homosexual, the only logical inference to make from his statement regarding Mr. Watts' assumed lack of care regarding the sex of the porpoise he might hypothetically find himself married to. Because the breakdown in implicature is followed

so swiftly by its reestablishment, we move quickly through the following states as we read: confusion at Nell's actions, relief at the intrusion of a logical response to her actions, followed by confusion again at the swift acceptance of Nell's actions despite their inherent nonsensical nature. Throughout these three states, implicature breaks down and reestablishes itself, but paradoxically it is when John expresses confusion at this breakdown that we are at our most comfortable, and it is when implicature is reestablished at his final statement that we are at our most confused. This is because it is the nature of what is implied to stay hidden, and if we are not 'in on the joke' implicature breaks down and reforms. Then we feel a violation of norms. When we are in conversation with a text, just as in any conversation, we are supposed to understand what is implied by the interactions taking place; because of how the end of this act is structured, however, that is impossible.

The opening of act three establishes that the nonsense at the end of act two is in fact a matter of life and death in a literal sense, and in doing so positions the end of act two as a joke which has its punchline in the following opening:

The studio as before, TENNYSON reading Maud aloud. TENNYSON reads aloud for some time. Then the door opens and WATTS comes in, hiding his head in his hands. He staggers across the room distractedly.

TENN.

"The fault was mine, the fault was mine"--

Why am I sitting here so stunn'd and still,

Plucking the harmless wild-flower on the hill?--

It is this guilty hand!--

And there rises ever a passionate cry—

WATTS

Ellen! Ellen! My wife—my wife—dead, dead, dead! (Woolf, *Freshwater* 33)

The following passage from Tigges' *Anatomy* regarding Sewell's approach helps explain the stakes present at the opening of Act Three:

...we are meant to reach "the world of religion, magic, alchemy, astrology, poetry and the strange riddles, oracular or monstrous, proposed to human beings as a matter of life and death" (187), a country where "words and play together fringe out into liturgy and magic" (184). (Tigges 13)

There is a conversation happening here between reader and text. Readers know of course that Ellen is not dead<sup>2</sup>, but Mr. Watts thinks she is, so the characters take this very seriously and treat it as a "matter of life and death." The irony of this false death juxtaposed against the symbolic death of Ellen's marriage when she throws away her ring at the end of the previous act on the other (which is not taken seriously at all), is what gives meaning to the nonsense of Ellen and John's exchange. Their words and actions become no less nonsensical, but we are finally "in" on a joke involving this nonsense. This is a restoration of implicature, and as such we are now able to infer what is implied by context, despite each individual element of the conversation being fundamentally nonsensical. This demonstrates that, just like the shifts in implicature between characters, we can also clearly see Sewell's game play out when we look at the shifts in implicature between reader and text. Between implicature breaking down during Ellen and John's

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<sup>2</sup> If this is not already apparent given the context, it is made clear three pages into act three with the following line of stage direction: "[*Enter ELLEN. Everybody turns round in astonishment.*]" (Woolf, *Freshwater* 35)

exchange, and the reestablishing of implicature through irony at the opening of Act Three, there is a tension which mimics that of Sewell's tense game by giving readers the impression of nonsense. This tension drives nonsense literature. It is what a reader experiences on a miniscule level every time they progress from certainty to uncertainty and back. It is a conversation not only between Ellen and John, but between me and the text as I am reading.

The last page of the act includes a line by Watts full of the exclamatory utterances present at the beginning of the play, which establishes a sense of completion: "Don't tell me, Alfred! Don't tell me they're coming back! I couldn't face another—fact!" (44). This is followed immediately by the entrance of the Queen of England suddenly with no prior warning:

MARY

Her Majesty the Queen.

THE QUEEN

We have arrived. We are extremely pleased to see you both. We prefer to stand. It is the anniversary of our wedding day. Ah, Albert! And in token of that never to be forgotten, always to be remembered, ever to be lamented day—

TENN.

'Tis better to have loved and lost.

THE QUEEN

Ah but you are both so happily married. (Woolf, *Freshwater* 44)

The Queen continues on, bestowing various gifts upon those of the cast still remaining, but the sudden intrusion of the royal "we" with declarative utterances following the exclamations of WATTS moves us from the sense of completion to a final moment of confusion which is what we are left with. This is because the only other references to a queen are first to a "Queen Rose of the rosebud garden of girls" which the character of Tennyson makes on page 40, and his penultimate triplet at the end of act three: "She is coming, my dove, my dear; She is coming, my life, my fate. The red rose cries, 'She is near, she is near'" (44). While this does initially seem to indicate that he is expecting the Queen to arrive, his previous reference to a "queen rose" is pointed at Ellen, not the real queen of England. So when the latter appears to pronounce Tennyson and Watts "happily married" despite Ellen's disposal of her ring, it reads consequently as both ironic and nonsensical.

The irony is that the queen does not know what Tennyson, Watts, and the reader know, which is that Watts is not happily married whatsoever and that it is implied that Tennyson has affections for Ellen given his poems about her and his characterizing of her as the "queen rose" which he calls "my dear." The implicature between reader and text is violated when the queen that arrived is not the one we believe Tennyson to be referring to, but then it is immediately reestablished by the irony which positions the reader as having the same information as Tennyson and Watts, with the queen being the one lacking the necessary information to properly infer the meaning of the phrase spoken during this passage, "'Tis better to have loved and lost" (44).

We once again move from the shock of the Queen of England's nonsensical entrance to being in on a joke which two out of three characters share. In Fish's terms

which I have been using liberally, we move from uncertainty to certainty once more. The irony present in the text during this section functions as a set of logic and order which defines by exclusion the disorder of the queen's nonsensical appearance. This tension between the two takes the nonsensical impression created by implicature breaking down and being built back up again, and transforms it into Sewell's game. Because there is no true resolution to this tension even at the end of the play, it is safe to conclude that this 'game' remains in that tense state throughout, and that the text can be considered nonsensical according to Sewell's definition. The reason this 'game' creates nonsense is because it is a play with tension that mimics the play between order and disorder which Sewell talks about. This tension can be observed non-linguistically by just paying attention to the events as they take place.

We can see this in *Freshwater* in the following ways: The play begins with Mrs. Cameron washing Mr. Cameron's head. We learn that this is "the sixth time in eight months!" that this head-washing has occurred, because it is the sixth time that they have begun to "start for India. And yet we never do start for India. I sometimes think we never shall start for India" (Woolf, *Freshwater* 7). Two pages later, Mrs. Cameron states "we can't start for India without our coffins," and yet this is "the eighth time the coffins have not come" (9). Right away we are introduced to the following two rules: every time Mr. and Mrs. Cameron attempt to go to India Mr. Cameron's head must be washed and coffins must be acquired.

These rules are presented without explanation as to why Mr. Cameron's head is washed specifically and consistently each time they try to leave for India, and why their coffins are only ever requested when they go to India and not before or at any other time.

These rules are not explained, and yet they are assumed to be true. These rules are also in conflict with the fact that they are never able to actually leave for India, and so all of these preparations the characters do to satisfy these rules they do not explain are then subverted by circumstances which are, likewise, never elaborated upon: the coffins have been requested eight times, but Mr. Cameron's head has only been washed six times, leaving the question of how many times they have actually attempted to go to India in limbo. The oscillations of implicature break the most fundamental assumption between reader and text: trust. Once we understand that even the rules of conversation cannot be taken for granted we begin to notice other instances of trust being broken, such as the rules of washing heads and acquiring coffins never matching the expectation of being able to go to India.

Another more extensive example of rules and expectations in conflict is a conversation between Ellen Terry and Watts in act three. There is a conversation on pages 36-37 surrounding Ellen's disposal of her wedding ring by throwing it in the sea. This conversation demonstrates how the breakdown in implicature is easy to notice on a larger scale once trust has been broken between a reader and the text. Consider the following passage:

WATTS

This is the end, Ellen. Our marriage is dissolved—in the sea.

TENN.

The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea. Matthew Arnold

NELL

I'm very sorry, Signor. Indeed I am. But he looked so very hungry, Signor;  
I couldn't help it. She looked so very hungry, I should say; I'm almost sure  
it was a female.

WATTS

A female! Don't attempt to lie to me, Ellen. (Woolf, *Freshwater* 36)

Following this passage, Ellen mistakes the object of Watts' outrage to be her act of throwing the ring to a male porpoise instead of a female porpoise. She responds to his outrage—which to readers is clearly over her "sitting on the Needles...with a man...with your arms round a man"--by saying "I was only trying to cheer you up" (36). Watts' attempts to explain why he is upset with her do not line up with her assumed rules of marriage: that if she throws away her ring to a porpoise it means that the porpoise is now married to her former husband, and that the only upsetting part of this would be if the porpoise is male. Her rules for marriage are not the same as the rules Watts follows.

Because there is no agreement between both parties of the conversation that disposing of a wedding ring is a taboo, the expectation that Watts has for Ellen not breaking this taboo is impossible for her to pick up on. The nonsense in this passage is not from wordplay, onomatopoeia, meaningless linguistic cognates, or onomastics: it is simply the existence of rules which are impossible to follow. Watts is as equally confused in this moment as readers are during the opening moments of the play when confronted with the rules about coffins and voyages to India. We could analyze both parts of the play from a pragmatics perspective to see how the rules of conversation break down, but on a surface level it is easy to recognize that there are rules here which are unknowable, and also a demand for these rules to be followed anyway.

We can now see that *Freshwater* has sets of rules where the expectations of those giving the rules and the expectations of those being told the rules are irreconcilable. This is how the linguistic oscillations of implicature manifest throughout the text. The continuous changes in the conversations—both the one happening between the characters and the one happening between text and reader—establish a boundary to the 'game,' without which we would not be able to see the nonsense in the tension between the rules and expectations at large.

As we read, we start to piece these moments together as parts of a greater whole. We begin to see that there is a mechanism at play, and whether or not we understand what that mechanism is we know it is funny; because even if we don't understand what is happening, we realize that we are not really meant to.

It is even more clear that we are not meant to understand what is happening in passages like the conversation between Ellen and Watts when we look at differences between the 1935 version and the earlier 1923 version. On pages 70-72 in the 1976 first edition of *Freshwater*, we see that in the 1923 version there is a long discussion of Ellen Terry's decision to dress in trousers and present herself, as the text says, "as a young man" (70). In the 1935 version, this conversation is removed entirely, and in its place we get the exchange about the wedding ring being thrown to the porpoise. Steven D. Putzel asserts that because Ellen in the 1923 version is "imprisoned" by Watts' values but ends up moving "to a life of freedom in Gordon Square" in the end while donning trousers, that this is a symbol of "androgyny and freedom of movement rather than the woman taking on male identity or male values" (Putzel 69). In this earlier version there is more support for Putzel's assertion that Ellen Terry is seeking freedom from confinement

through wearing trousers. Taken in this way, the act could be seen as a deliberate feminist statement. It is interesting, then, that this is removed entirely from the later version of the play.

If Ellen were seeking a deliberate release from confinement then we would see a great deal more emphasis on Watts and Ellen and their separation in the final version of the play despite the removal of the trousers and their accompanying discussion. What we have instead is that when Ellen is leaving she is leaving with many other members of the cast, and she is leaving not just Watts but Tennyson as well, who arguably shows up in the play as much as Watts does. While Watts' reactions to Ellen abandoning him would be sufficient in a cursory reading to justify an inference of intentional feminist themes, the reality of what occurs when reading is that this escape from a type of imprisonment to freedom is not readily communicated. One could argue that any such themes would be subverted by their juxtaposition with the nonsensical aspects around them, and if this is just as easy to argue as the opposite, then it seems unlikely that these themes are readily apparent without imposing outside context. If that is the case and such a reading would require a more in-depth knowledge of the rest of Woolf's canon to accept, then in light of her statements from "Sketch of the Past" (covered by Philips in the previous chapter) such a reading would not easily adhere to Woolf's own ideas of the relationship between reader and text. It is also certainly not a reading which can be arrived at simply from reading the play itself without treating the rest of her work as a sort-of peritext. I assert that instead, the themes of imprisonment and freedom are the result of the nonsense in the text heightening the features of the characters. This is similar to how some critics find

allegorical and psychoanalytic meaning in various aspects of Carroll's work, as Martin Gardner points out in his introduction to *The Annotated Alice* (Gardner 8-9 ).

Michelle Alexis Taylor takes a similar approach. She asserts that "flatter" readings of *Freshwater* focus too much on pitting the women against the men, or the young against the old. She unfortunately makes this same mistake herself; by requiring the historio-biographical context to validate her reading of *Freshwater* as a form of play with coterie conventions, she presumes that Woolf could not have been aware of a reader beyond that of her own circle when writing it. The nonsense arises when the rules of conversation create an insular humor unique to the text itself. Taylor's reading, like many other readings of *Freshwater*, end up making the claim that this text can only be understood in the context of its creation. This necessarily alienates any reader who is not initiated into such context prior to reading. Understanding the text as nonsense explains why it might be entertaining on its own terms. While yes, the historio-biographical context allows us to recognize the initial genesis of *Freshwater* as a project, a nonsense reading can allow us to understand that Woolf is also showing how conversations and relationships between men and women are fundamentally nonsensical.

### Chapter III

#### AN AFFECTIVE NONSENSE READING OF *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

In *Freshwater*, the process of decertainizing helped us understand how a reader moves through a text from each impression of nonsense to the next. In *Between the Acts*, it can help us to understand the relationships between characters, how that relationship translates during the act of reading, and how impressions of nonsense arise as a result. The tension of Sewell's game can occur within the confines of the text itself as it does in *Freshwater*, but it can also occur between the text and the reader. In this last sense, the tension manifests as a conversation between the implied author and the implied reader where the functional relationship is between text and reader. This 'tense game' can be seen at a larger scale in moments when rules and expectations conflict.

The implied rules of agreement between speaker and listener in conversation are maintained in *Between the Acts* for about the first 70 or so pages, but are violated almost as soon as Miss La Trobe's play begins:

*Gentles and simples, I address you all...*

So it was the play then. Or was it the prologue?

*Come hither for our festival (she continued)*

*This is a pageant, all may see*

*Drawn from our island history.*

*England am I. ...*

"She's England," they whispered. "It's begun."

"The prologue," they added, looking down at the programme.

*"England am I,"* she piped again; and stopped.

She had forgotten her lines. (Woolf, *Freshwater* 76-77)

We begin with an italicized declarative address from performer to audience telling the reader that a conversation has begun. This is neither certain nor uncertain in how it reads. We move into a statement which immediately subverts its own assertion: "So it was the play then. Or was it the prologue?" This is the non-italicized reaction of the audience. Because this establishes that a line by a performer is italicized and an audience reaction is non-italicized, we assume that all italicized lines will be delivered by performers and all non-italicized lines will be audience reactions. The statement itself indicates an initial acceptance of the play starting, followed immediately by uncertainty over whether the theatrical conversation they have been anticipating has actually started or not. The uncertainty here is clearly over whether the performer is in fact addressing the audience, which would indicate the start of the play. This movement to uncertainty violates the maxim of relation: who is speaking and who is being spoken to are vital components to any conversation, or else the exchange must end right there.

A rhyme scheme is introduced by the performer, confirming that the play has in fact started, and moving us into certainty. The maxim of manner helps to solidify this move because the rhyme is not obscure and is in a meter which is easy to discern. As the maxim can be best described as "be perspicuous; so avoid obscurity and ambiguity, and strive for brevity and order," it is clear to see that the introduction of the rhyme scheme follows this rule (Davis).

We then move back into uncertainty because the rhyming is broken. We are then told about England, but what we know about England is less than what the performer knows because she has forgotten her lines. This creates an information asymmetry, and violates the maxim of quantity. This is because both the relationship between audience and performer as well as the relationship between reader and text have become confused, and the maxim of quantity states that participants in conversation must "be as informative as required" (Davis). As we move into the uncertainty caused by the breakdown in implicature we recognize that what the performer knows about England is not something she can tell us. Both audience and reader must now wait and hope that this information will be revealed.

In addition to the movement between certainty and uncertainty, we also see a shift in language use. We have left behind the semicolons and complex-compound structures of sentences like the following: "While they looked apprehensively and some finished their sentences, a small girl, like a rose-bud in pink, advanced; took her stand on a mat, behind a conch hung with leaves, and piped" (Woolf, *BTA* 76). Instead, we now find ourselves among lines of verse alternating with short exclamations like Miss La Trobe's "'Blast 'em!'" (77). The language has changed from precise and careful to colloquial and carefree, and we will not see a semicolon again for a page and a half. A reader, moving from one style to another with no established precedent, cannot help but be confused. The clues we have about what is happening are located in the vocabulary shifts to exclamations like "bravo" and "'blast 'em" along with a sudden plethora of exclamation points. These provide us with tone indicators, showing that while we may not know if

this is the start of the play or what the significance of England is, we do know that what is happening is dramatic and important.

This tone carries us into energetic immediacy despite the confusion. We are confused by the implicature breakdown and contrasting styles while also being excited by the energetic exclamations and vocabulary shifts. So, we interpret our own confusion as comical instead of frustrating. The tension between the moments in which conversation breaks down and reestablishes itself has not been released, but since the trust which was broken by this breakdown in implicature has been replaced with curiosity, we find that we do not need a resolution to the tension yet.

What will carry a reader forward through the next few sections of alternating verse and prose is an interaction between the audience and the character Giles. His reactions to various moments in the play are consistently that of someone who is utterly confused: "what were they laughing at?" and "I fear I am not in my perfect mind" tell us that if the performers are trying to create meaning, he is not understanding it (Woolf, *BTA* 85-86). At one point he tries to quietly complete a song abandoned by the character of Great Eliza after she forgets her lines. As he attempts to complete the song, we see the structure of the lines laid out one after another in the form of a paragraph of dialogue. This is in contrast to how the lines appear when Great Eliza initially recites them, namely as italicized lines of poetry broken by descriptive parentheticals. He ultimately forgets the lines too and ends up stuttering, a moment which brings us to the line "what were they laughing at?" Since the section where he attempts to recite the song begins with "I fear I am not in my present mind," the line questioning the laughter of his fellow audience

members provides the reader with a sense of certainty: if we are confused, at least so is Giles.

The parts of *Between the Acts* which alternate between verse and prose with varying degrees of length mimic the conversational characteristics of improvisational performance. If we accept that the implied author of a text and the implied reader of that text are participants in a conversation, it is logical to apply this as well to the relationship between the performers and audience members in *Between the Acts*.

As Stucky et al show in their analysis of Albee, whether the conversation is between reader and text, between performers, or between performer and audience, that conversation evolves over time to create a unique version of the text through the act of reading. In the case of *Between the Acts*, the text imitates this process by setting two casts of characters in conversation with one another: the audience and the performers. The various moments in which characters seem to improvise, or when they forget their lines, all happen in conversation with the characters in the audience. The text of the play which this conversation creates is a nonsensical one because there is ultimately no resolution of the tension. Giles acts as a window for the reader to view this conversation in moments where implicature has broken down between him and the performers. In giving this view, the conversation between the text and the reader is strengthened and I can infer as a reader that Giles is reacting to elements of the play which he finds nonsensical.

On the other hand, the passages following Miss La Trobe's interactions with the performers show a collusion between her and the performers of her play which the reader cannot follow:

Miss La Trobe stood there with her eye on her script. "After Vic.," she had written, "try ten mins. of present time. Swallows, cows, etc." She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality. But something was going wrong with the experiment. "Reality too strong," she muttered. (179)

She goes on to ruminate about how she wishes she could "write a play without an audience—the play" (Woolf, *BTA* 180). This moment is followed by panic at the imminent failure of her play which manifests in the following line: "Blood seemed to pour from her shoes" (180). At no point throughout the entirety of the text is the reader ever provided with the information that Miss La Trobe has about the play.

In the passages which cover Miss La Trobe's moment of panic there is only one moment in which the rules of conversation between reader and text are not violated, and that is the line about a play without an audience. She is acknowledging that the audience—and the reader—lack information about the play, and we infer that Miss La Trobe might be intentionally manufacturing this disparity of knowledge. The confusion of both Giles and the reader could be solved by Miss La Trobe intervening to tell us what she knows, but this never occurs. Because of this, the only thing we can logically conclude from this line given the context is that there will be no resolution to the broken rules of the conversation. Miss La Trobe resents having to give any information to the audience at all, so she would never want to give more than she already has.

In this moment we realize that no one is playing by the same rules as anyone else. This is what Elizabeth Sewell means when she talks about nonsense as a game: there are moments of understanding, and there are moments of confusion, but there is never a moment of catharsis or a release from the tension of the game. The characters in *Between*

*the Acts* understand that Miss La Trobe's play has created a fundamental breakdown in social rules, but what no one seems to know is how far this goes. Giles tests the boundaries of this instability when he crushes the snake choking on the toad on page 99. The fact that his wife sees the blood on his shoes but does not comment on it indicates that she is also aware that rules have been broken, namely those which govern polite conversation and social convention. Giles' violent act comes across as nonsensical because it is a reaction to Miss La Trobe's play, one which is equally random and unpredictable as the content of that play.

This is another example of the tension between rules and expectations breaking down: audience members are expected to behave politely between acts, but audiences themselves expect the play they are watching to make sense. During the parts of the book involving the performance of the play, the breakdown in implicature occurs both between audience and performers and between reader and text; because of this, as the reader I find myself anticipating similar violations of trust to occur elsewhere in the text even before they happen. Giles' act of violence, despite happening in the interlude between the acts, is no more or less a surprise to me than anything else happening during the play. This supports Sewell's assertion that moments of "emotionless violence" can be considered a type of nonsense device (Tigges 224). In the end, the characters leave the play and the narrative without a resolution or catharsis of any kind. We see Miss La Trobe, for instance, going to seek solace at a local bar and refusing to explain what her play meant to anyone who asked, concluding that her play was a failure (Woolf, *BTA* 213, 209).

In "Hearing Beyond Extinction: The Inhuman Comedy of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*," Rasheed Tazudeen argues for a more existential description of the

comedy in the text. He claims that Woolf's comedy is defined by the relationship of humanity to the inhuman, and that the use of the theatrical chorus as a comedic device in *Between the Acts* includes not only the human actors but also the many animals in the book such as starlings and cows (Tazudeen 146-147). He points to a moment in La Trobe's play during the Valentine and Flavinda segment in which the "Earth song" meant to draw attention to the courtship of these two characters goes unheard by the audience due to a breeze, being replaced by the sounds of a herd of cows instead. He claims that this moment points to other instances of silence throughout the book which are used to transform human sounds into inhuman ones, and that this is where the comedy lies (149-150). He points to La Trobe's statement insisting that the absence of a chorus means death, and uses it as an expectation which is subverted by the inhuman voices of nature and animals intruding into the silence during the breeze. This effectively spares the observing humans from Miss La Trobe's chorus-less death. He concludes that the novel's comedy therefore lies in pulling the inhuman element out of the extinction of the human one, or the threat of it. At one point he claims that this "cow song 'annihilates the gap' between life and death, human and nonhuman being, a gap that is and has only ever been a humanistic construction" (150).

I would say in response that yes, the comedy does arise from a kind of annihilation, what Elizabeth Sewell calls an "annihilation of relations"; but I would argue that this is due to a breakdown in the conversation between the performers and the audience. The intrusion of the non-human elements in these moments is to emphasize the nonsense which lies in the gap between what is spoken and unspoken. To support this, I would point to Tigges' description of a form of nonsense called "sound poems" marked

by using "anapest" meters with two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (Tigges 190; "Anapest"). In the section of Miss La Trobe's play before the anticipatory pre-cow silence, Woolf uses words and phrases such as "Babylon, Nineveh...and delving we break with the share of the plough the clod," which follows the anapest meter very closely throughout and precisely in some sections (Woolf, *BTA* 139). This indicates a high emphasis on how the words sound as opposed to what they mean. To conclude that the silence in this passage removes one meaning in favor of another, the words and their arrangement would have to be meaningful enough on their own terms to invite that kind of interpretation. Furthermore, the meaning would need to be clear enough to rule out the possibility that the passage functions primarily as "play with words and their sounds" as is common in the nonsense of authors like Gorey, for instance, who also happened to illustrate *Freshwater* (Tigges 195).

The latter use is the most consistent throughout the book, and it fits into the way La Trobe talks about her play having failed to communicate what she wanted to say (it is also something Woolf has intentionally alluded to elsewhere, as Dunsinberre points out when highlighting the 'sense and sound' reference to Carroll in the earlier manuscript of *Freshwater*). She laments that there is even a need for an audience at all, and this matches up very well with how much play with sound there is in the performance sections. La Trobe—and perhaps Woolf herself—is less concerned with communicating what the audience wants to hear than she is with realizing her creation as she understands it, even if neither the audience nor we as readers are ever meant to infer what that is supposed to be. The play with words and how they sound is meant to mimic how such theatrical performances "should" sound without actually being similar to it at all. It mimics the

conversation between audience and performers while simultaneously undermining it, leading to impressions of nonsense oscillating between moments of implicature breaking down and being reestablished. In the end, there is no way that the audience could have understood the play even if the breeze had not blown away the sound and the cows had not lent their voices. The rules governing conversations fluctuate both in the book as well as during the act of reading it, and this creates nonsense. In my concluding chapter, I will contextualize the nature of the nonsense in both *Between the Acts* and *Freshwater* within the bounds of traditional approaches to literary nonsense analysis.

## Chapter IV

### CONCLUSION

So what does this tell us about *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts*? We can consider that on the subject of the former there is no way for a reader to ground themselves in the moments where conversational implicature reasserts itself. In the case of the latter, there is a play which is equally confusing for audience, characters, and readers, and a frame narrative where the tension between the performers and audience members of Miss La Trobe's play dies down, only for a new nonsense to emerge. When it comes to categorizing each, if we were to follow Tigges' taxonomy of nonsense as a literary genre, then the complete lack of emotional catharsis in *Freshwater* indicates that it should be considered "whole" nonsense, while *Between the Acts*, with its moments of stability that allow the reader to commiserate with audience over their shared confusion, should be considered "partial" nonsense.

But before you accept this as the final word, consider other possibilities. If we accept Tigges' taxonomy of whole and partial nonsense, *Freshwater* qualifies as the former and *Between the Acts* qualifies as the latter. But what exactly does this mean, and how does it help us understand why we enjoy reading either of these works? I have shown that impressions of nonsense arise during reading, and that there is a linguistic explanation for why this happens. I have demonstrated that this allows us to understand non-linguistic aspects of these works—such as the presence of conflicting rules and

expectations—as nonsensical as well. We never get any answers to the questions raised in reading either of these books, not from Ellen or John, nor from Miss La Trobe or Giles.

This is, incidentally, what a lot of people find frustrating about *Between the Acts* and liberating about *Freshwater*, according to Mark Hussey. Upon its publication, critics could not decide whether *Between the Acts* was a protest against the war or against Leonard Woolf's attitudes towards Woolf's mental state; neither could they pinpoint whether its tone is playful or sad, dystopian or hopeful, or whether it might even be a rewriting of Genesis (Hussey 28-29). On the other hand, *Freshwater* has been seen as transparently utilizing exaggeration for the purpose of anti-marriage sentiment (Nilsen 125). Despite the difference in reception, both works deal with questions which are never answered and both include examples of conversation breaking down. The difference in how people respond to each is that it is easier to 'buy-in' to the idea that *Freshwater* is silly because it is never anything else. *Between the Acts* is harder to pin down as wholly silly or entirely serious, and this prevents people from seeing the nonsense. It can be hard to reconcile the more serious moments in the book about war and rape with the antics of Miss La Trobe and her cast of ridiculous characters. But it is because of the play that we can understand how nonsensical the rest of the book is too. Rather than seeing the play as attempting to make any serious historical points, the historical aspects of the play are simply a vehicle for the nonsense. The reactions of the audience to the play show us how nonsensical it is, but how they interact with each other in the intermission and after the play is over show us how human relationships can also be nonsensical. It is more interesting to imagine that there is no better way to understand the ridiculous nonsense of

human relationships than through conversation, and that Woolf must have known this, than to impose external insight onto the text.

Tigges and Sewell have great insights. However, they focus too much on categories and mechanics of nonsense and forget why readers like it. To say we like nonsense for the same reasons we like all forms of humor is to ignore how much of ourselves we see in works like *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts*. Like the end of the third act of Miss La Trobe's play, we are shown a mirror when we read nonsense, one which reflects the inherent ridiculousness of conversation and society back at us. I think to say that *Freshwater* is whole nonsense and *Between the Acts* is partial nonsense might make sense in the context of a rigid framework which seeks to define and constrict certain works in order to better understand the phenomenon, but in doing so we ignore what that phenomenon does to us. Perhaps it is better to simply say that these books show us the nonsense of conversation and society in both Virginia Woolf's time and our own.

Ultimately, understanding these two works as nonsense is important in a way that neither Tigges nor Sewell really care about. The critics who talk about existentialism in *Between the Acts* or feminism and burlesque in *Freshwater* are teetering on the brink of something very important without understanding what it is they are seeing. They are all seeing parts of the truth: history and family are made up of conversations between men and women which are fundamentally nonsensical. Even in the context of why it was created, *Freshwater* shows the nonsense of family history. *Between the Acts* came about during a period of great uncertainty, and within this context it shows the nonsense of history as it plays out over great periods of time as well as on a smaller scale between people through conversation. This is why Dunsinberre draws connections between Eliza

the Great and Kipling's Queen in *Rewards and Fairies*; she is seeing the historical connection within the context of children's literature without understanding the point of a character like Eliza the Great. She is an exaggeration neutered of all political connotation, unlike Kipling's Queen who is specifically in conflict with the King of Spain and who Dunsinberre sees as "a creature of fitful but electric power in a world governed by male authority" (Dunsinberre 168). In *Between the Acts*, the performer playing the Great Eliza can barely remember her lines, much less communicate a coherent political, historical, or feminist message to Giles or the other audience members. Likewise, in *Freshwater* there is no "attacking the traditions of marriage and chastity" as has been suggested, at least not in the 1935 version (Nilsen 125). Ellen Terry truly believes in rules of marriage that apply to porpoises; it just so happens that these are not the rules of marriage her husband believes in. There lies the comedy: all of life is nonsense, especially the made up parts called society and marriage. Jane Newland's assertion about Woolf challenging what we consider to be a child or an animal is closer to the point of the comedy in these two novels. She defines this, however, as the result of a specific Deleuzian process. The truth of these novels is that being a child, animal, queen, performer, poet, or audience member are all nonsensical, and it is through the conversations in these books and the conversation we have *with* these books that we see this.

Before the play ever starts, there is a moment in *Between the Acts* when we learn that some soldiers have raped a girl just that day. Isa, the one who reads about the assault in the newspaper and the victim's attack on her assailants, looks up to see Mrs. Swithin enter holding a hammer. The paragraph referring to the victim ends with "and hit him about the face" and the very next sentence describes Isa imagining the assault until Mrs.

Swithin enters "carrying a hammer" (Woolf, *BTA* 20). This proximity creates an association between Mrs. Swithin and the assault, and she is the one who goes on to have a strong emotional reaction to the play once it is over, one which contextualizes her own place in history with that of her loved ones:

And thus—she was smiling benignly—the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being is necessary; and so—she was beaming seraphically at the gilt vane in the distance—we reach the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall. Her eyes now rested on the white summit of a cloud. Well, if the thought gave her comfort, William and Isa smiled across her, let her think it. (Woolf, *BTA* 175)

To Mrs. Swithin who carried the hammer, the themes of harmony resonate with her own idea of home, which resides in paintings like the one she shows to William of a woman who is "Not an ancestress" but who belongs in the house because "we claim her because we've known her—O, ever so many years" (68). She even asks out loud "Who was she...who painted her?" but she does not answer the questions. In the conversation she holds with William she discusses something he cannot understand because it represents an idea of home which only she understands, an idea of home which is disturbed by the nonsensical violence of soldiers raping a girl just as it is comforted by Miss La Trobe's nonsensical depiction of "'The Victorians'" of whom she is one. In the following passage, Mrs. Manresa, another audience member, asks Mrs. Swithin what she thinks of the play: "'Was it an old play? Was it a new play?' No one answered. 'Look! Lucy exclaimed. 'The birds?' said Mrs. Manresa, looking up. There was a bird with a straw in its beak; and the straw dropped. Lucy clapped her hands. Giles turned away. She was mocking him as

usual, laughing" (Woolf, *BTA* 109). In this passage, Mrs. Swithin is given a chance to say what she thinks of the play, but she has no answer. Instead, we have yet another example of expecting answers only to be presented with nonsense: why Giles assumes that Lucy is mocking him is unclear, and we never get the answer to that question either. After the play has finished, Mrs. Swithin finally offers an opinion, specifically regarding the depiction of Victorians like herself: "I don't believe...that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently" (174-175). She has embraced the nonsense of her own place in history and among the people around her. Even though she knows that the Victorians, like herself, were entirely different than how Miss La Trobe depicts them, she accepts the paradox of this and allows herself to exist in the tension between what she has seen and what she knows (just as Isa and William allow her the nonsensical fantasy of everything being in harmony). If there are rules to how history should be remembered, she does not care about them.

When the audience characters in *Between the Acts* step away from the play, they enter into conversations with both the world around them and the people in it. Both *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts* show that while there are rules to be followed in conversation and in nonsense, breaking these rules removes neither the nonsense or the conversation; it just makes them the same thing. Some, like Giles, choose to end those conversations violently by destroying life, imitating the random, nonsensical violence of people like the rapacious soldiers. Some, like Mrs. Swithin, choose to anchor themselves to a nonsensical feeling which only they know and only they can understand. And some, like Isa and Bartholomew in the closing pages of the book, choose to look off into the sunset while ruminating on a history of the past, present, and future made nonsensical

both by Miss La Trobe's representation of it and by how it passes them by in life.

Between the moments of understanding and confusion is where we find ourselves as a reader and a person, and seeing the nonsense can help us realize when we are truly 'between the acts'.

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