

“Hear Rather the Shepherd Coughing . . .”: Impressionable Listeners and the Possibility of New Scripts in *Between the Acts*

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Between the Acts begins with a series of sonic intrusions. At Pointz Hall, the Haines couple and Bart Oliver sit with “the windows open to the garden,” which makes their conversation susceptible to all kinds of interrupting sounds (5): Mrs. Haines’s exclamation about their choice of conversation topic, the local cesspool, is followed by “silence” and a cow’s cough, which momentarily directs her to her childhood memories with barn animals. This is more than a digression, since the cow brings to the surface a tension between Mrs. Haines and Bart—as a wife of a gentleman farmer, the former is eager to prove to “the old man” her local family lineage by evoking her childhood (5). A bird “chuckle[s] outside,” however, at which Bart regains hold of the dialogue by rejecting Mrs. Haines’s surmise that it is a nightingale: “No, nightingales didn’t come so far north. It was a daylight bird . . .” (5). The ensuing quibble about the cesspool site is yet again cut short by “a sound outside,” which announces the entrance of Bart’s daughter-in-law, Isa. Isa introduces a new tension in the room with her desire for Mr. Haines, and when Bart recalls his mother giving him “the works of Byron in that very room” (6), the famous first lines of love and desire that he quotes serve as “two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like

two swans down stream” (6). The spoken lines stir a current of emotion, which Mrs. Haines shrewdly likens to “the strain of an organ” as she waits for it to die out (6).

The first pages of Woolf’s last novel thus create a drama of class tension, small rivalries, and jealousies among characters which are mediated by sound: the inhabitants of the room listen collectively to the sounds that enter or reverberate within the small space, with each sensitively attuned to the responses of others. Indeed, the characters of *Between the Acts* may be called “listeners” in a broad sense: not only do they attend to the random noises of their surrounding environment, but their consciousness is also permeated by fragments of verse and popular rhymes that the village pageant reproduces through actors’ lines and the gramophone. The centrality of aural experience in the novel, especially with the entrance of the gramophone, has led several critics to place *Between the Acts* within the culture of radio and technological sound reproduction. Pamela Caughie notes that listening became both an intensely private and public activity with the advent of the radio, since while wireless devices led to the “removal of the listener from other bodies,” broadcast heightened the sense that “dispersed populations and isolated individuals” were tuning in to the same sound (336). The radio was thus “less a technological revolution [...] than a social one,” which produces the figure of “the listener”: radio listeners, as the BBC Magazine *The Listener* suggested, were “highly attentive to technique; sensitive to nuance of voice; selective in tuning in certain kinds of programmes and tuning out distractions” (Caughie 338). Caughie suggests that this listener is therefore a “manifestation of Woolf’s common reader” who is trained in critical capacities of discernment and selectiveness (338). The ideal listener, then, would be able to navigate the uniform messages of broadcast radio in an age of rising fascism in Europe. The opening scene of Woolf’s novel seems to highlight the

"active" capacities of such listeners trained by radio listening, who can take advantage of what they hear to steer the conversation to their own ends.

For Caughie, *Between the Acts* is Woolf's allegory about how a collective listening culture creates a community of active listeners that can resist the coercive patriotism of contemporary broadcasts. Yet the listening subject does not always exercise the "critical" capacity to resist hegemonic interpellations. Other critics have noted that *Between the Acts* explores the dangers of sonic media in fascist organizations of national community, especially in the form of technologically reproduced sound. Bonnie Kime Scott notes that the gramophone's nursery rhymes riskily fuel Isa's wish for death and place La Trobe closer to the fascist agitator, dangers that are averted only when the gramophone disappears at the end of the novel to yield "potential new scripts" for both artist and housewife (111). Listeners are indeed susceptible to what they hear—yet other critics suggest that the permeability of the listener's mind is not always something to guard against. Catriona Livingstone reads *Between the Acts* as staging the formation of collectivity through the gramophone. Livingstone draws from Todd Avery's study of the radio age and modernism, which suggests that radio culture produced "an erotics of listening," involving the experiences of sensory impressions which penetrate "that thick wall of personality" (183). Livingstone argues that this kind of listening causes selves to fragment and mingle, drawing disparate members of the audience into a "politically constructive" way of extending the self and forming communities that do not quite cohere into uniformity (149). Michelle Pridmore-Brown, along with Megan Fairbarin, similarly argues that the glitches of the gramophone in Miss La Trobe's pageant, as well as noises from the surrounding environment, muddle any effort to organize the audience into a homogenous mass. The result is a unity that includes, and does not collapse, multiplicity,

forming somatic links between individual listeners that are immersed in a shared “acoustic field” (Pridmore-Brown 418). Characters are compelled to “acts of listening” rather than any direct action—yet listening itself may become a political act that circumvents imperialist and heteronormative ideologies that form an exclusive “we.”

While the act of listening makes the listener permeable to voices of ideological coercion, I take up Livingstone’s reading of *Between the Acts* to show that this susceptibility is not just a liability. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf engages in the anxieties of the radio era, testing not only the dangers but also the possibilities of the impressionable listener. Characters such as Lucy and Isa, as well as La Trobe are sensitive to the sounds (of animals, of literary language, and of the audience) that are easily sidelined by broadcasts with explicit political messages.¹⁾ Woolf refuses to depict any of these characters as wholly critical, discerning listeners—Lucy, Isa, and La Trobe all risk being overwhelmed by what

1) Most studies of sound and listening in *Between the Acts* focus on the technological medium of the gramophone. Following Pridmore-Brown’s pioneering work on the politics of sound production and listening in the novel, Melba Cuddy-Keane suggests that the gramophone has a life of its own—she notes that the gramophone’s sounds are described with an “astonishing variety of other active verbs” apart from “blared” and “brayed,” working against any reading that would equate it with “the tyranny of hegemonic voice” (75). Pero Allan similarly notes that the gramophone is “virtually granted the status of a subject” (28). Angela Frattarola remains more suspicious of the technological medium’s diffusion of patriotic verse, yet submits that the audience’s disparate responses to its ticks and chuffs “both acknowledge and combat the communal obligations of patriotism” by bringing characters together “into a chorus through their shared act of listening” (“Listening” 148). In this paper, I depart from this exclusive focus on the gramophone to engage how the characters also listen to other mundane noises and everyday dialogue. In an era of technologically transmitted sounds, how do Woolf’s characters listen to other “natural” noises and voices? Does the radio age and the rising anxieties about propagandic messages make listening itself a more paranoid activity? What possibilities remain when one listens for comfort and reparation?

they hear, yet turn that risk into opportunities to crack the repetitious patterns that inculcate a British national identity in the sense of a "we." For Lucy and Isa, who are imbricated within a domestic order that seems to foreclose the possibility of change, sounds are sometimes experienced as violent intrusions upon their senses; what they hear and read (and in the novel, texts are experienced more as recurring aural cues than printed words) influences their consciousness so deeply throughout the day that the two women befit the term, "impressionable" listeners. La Trobe, who is an outsider in terms of her sexuality and rumored foreign birth, seems to stand apart from the two women of Pointz Hall—yet she is also at the mercy of the audience's voices that reach her ear as she hides unseen behind the stage. La Trobe remains connected to the villagers through her very position as a listener, and it is her growing receptivity to the unexpected voices and noises surrounding the pageant, rather than an overarching visual surveyance of the view that inspires her to write a new play. Listening opens the listener to the physical assault of aural sensation and dangerous political arousal. Yet being an impressionable listener, or having such listeners beside them, Lucy, Isa, and La Trobe suggest that listening is more than a mode of compliant servitude or a way of exercising the critical capacities of the autonomous individual. Listening in *Between the Acts* is a reparative practice that produces recognition of the pain of others, and moreover of oneself. From this limited sense of becoming aware of one's own confinement, listening prods the listener to imagine new scripts rather than follow old ones.

I. Lucy and Isa as Impressionable Listeners

While *Between the Acts* rarely shows us Lucy Swithin's immediate reactions to the pageant (Lucy's responses are shown only two times

between the acts, at the middle and end of the play), she is a character who listens raptly to all other miscellaneous sounds that are unassociated with the pageant's artistic intent. Lucy is particularly attuned to the routine sounds of her environment—she enters the novel when she is roused by the “church clock str[iking] eight times” (7). While the same bells, heard later in the evening by Isa, cause despair over the difficulty of change, for Lucy their regularity signals the comforting return of daybreak. The sound provokes no resistance but full acceptance as she “dr[aws] the curtain” and “jerk[s] [...] open” her bedroom window to admit the communal chime.

The act of opening the window serves, in Lucy's case, to highlight her sensitivity to sounds and her openness concerning the sensations that strike her ear. The novel depicts Lucy opening windows and doors more than once, and the very first two paragraphs of Lucy's entrance repeat the phrase, “jerking it [the window] open” (7,8). The former paragraph presents “Mrs. Swithin” in terms of her family relations: “old Oliver's married sister; a widow” (7), and briefly outlines her migratory movements to and from Pointz Hall. This movement is occasioned by the north-facing placement of the country house, and when Lucy questions this strange arrangement of Pointz Hall, Bart Oliver tries to enlighten his sister that the northward house allows an “escape from nature” by minimizing the impact of winter snow upon the house (8). The first paragraph thus shows Lucy triply passive: admitting the church bells into her room, adjusting to the house's location by retiring to Hastings every winter, and silently listening to her brother's explanation that stresses protective human design against nature's encroaching force. Yet the next paragraph, which repeats Lucy's action of “jerking” the window open, colors that passivity differently:

But it was summer now. She had been waked by the birds.

How they sang! attacking the dawn like so many choir boys attacking an iced cake. Forced to listen, she had stretched for her favorite reading—an Outline of History—and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend. (8)

The narration reveals that the birdsong has been audible long before the church bells rang: "waked" by the birds "attacking the dawn," Lucy has been prompted to read her book on prehistory from the "hours between three and five" (8). Yet Lucy's susceptibility to the birdsong does more than disturb her sleep—it fuels her imagination of "rhododendron forests in Piccadilly" (8) and places the center of the British empire in a primeval jungle. If the human will to control and mitigate the influence of nature is implicit in the very positioning of Pointz Hall "in the hollow," Lucy's vision, triggered by the "attack" of birdsong, overturns that sense of control if only imaginatively: juxtaposed with the earlier paragraph, where Bart acts as a spokesperson for the house's prior inhabitants and their desire to "escape from nature," Lucy's flight into a prehistory dominated by nature in effect refutes her brother's voice. More than simply a flight of fancy, the prehistoric imagination provides her with a form of alternative language, though uttered only within her own mind. The syntax further reinforces Lucy's voice: in contrast to the regular syntactic breaks of the earlier paragraph, which create the effect of dull clockwork ("It was early morning. The dew was on

the grass. The church clock struck eight times" [7]), here the focalized narration is punctuated by the activity of Lucy's mind ("she understood," "she supposed," "she thought") breaking longer phrases into shorter segments, which culminate in a list of adjectives that dramatically paint a scene of "monsters" in prehistoric Britain.

Lucy's seemingly passive listening to birdsong triggers an imagination that destabilizes a national narrative of progression, since the British empire itself becomes one short moment within a larger scale of time. Birdsong serves as the occasion for Lucy's immersion in the *Outline of History* to the extent that its contents overflow into life, and she comically mistakes Grace the maid with mastodons, iguanodons, and mammoths that populate the book. Sound mediates this blurring of boundaries between text and reality, as later on she watches the yearly swallows and imagines their migratory routine continuing from "[b]efore there was a channel, when the earth, upon which the Windsor chair was planted, was a riot of rhododendrons, and humming birds quivered at the mouths of scarlet trumpets, as she had read that morning in her *Outline of History*" (66). The reference to "humming birds" echo the early birdsong that woke her inside her room, only now relocated in a wider expanse of geological time. The morning scene of listening allows Lucy to "increase[e] the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future" (8): for instance, the old Barn becomes to her a nesting place for migratory birds from the time it "was a swamp" (63). As an itinerant figure herself who participates in that seasonal movement, Lucy becomes especially attuned to the forms of life that continue within its hollows: the barn not quite so "empty" as it seems, since the grooves and niches in it are caused by "nibbling" mice, "burrow[ing]" insects (61), and a dog that creates a "lying-in ground" (62). Lucy's susceptibility as a listener to sounds of nature allows her the insight that such spaces mark a continuity that stretches across human lifespans. While Lucy's

morning reverie transports her momentarily to her childhood as she recalls her mother's rebuke "in that very room" not to "stand gaping" (8), this very "gaping," in the form of opening, listening, and accepting sensation, is how Lucy finds a voice of her own which remains unrefuted by her brother. Being "forced to listen" to birdsong, Lucy paradoxically cultivates a language that dismantles the ideas of British isolationism and superiority by reverting to a time "when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one" (8).

At one point, the large scales of temporality that Lucy accesses through listening turns her into a "gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head," a godlike figure that Lucy later imagines as listening to all sounds (104). For others, Lucy's propensity to engage in this "one-making" amounts to a totalizing perspective that overlooks "the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being" to produce a larger harmony (104). This may not be an altogether fair outlook: the narration focalizes on Isa and William Dodge rather than Lucy herself, and the two amusedly *surmise* that Lucy believes "*all* is harmony, could we hear it" (104). Yet this characterization of Lucy's mode of listening has a point, since Lucy's way of listening risks mulling over subtle notes of violence that runs as an undercurrent to the continuity of "life." Isa, on the other hand, is less interested in the ontological comfort provided by the prehistoric imagination than in the gender politics of listening. Rejecting the worn books of literature, biography, history, and science in the Pointz Hall library, Isa turns to the newspaper on the morning of the pageant day where she reads of brutal rape. The crime is committed by "troopers" at Whitehall (15) who, endowed with the mission of protecting the nation from without, perpetrate violence from within. The scene is "real; so real" that Isa is transported "through the Arch" and into "the barrack room" of Whitehall itself, hearing the girl "screaming and hitting" her rapist until Lucy enters the room "carrying a hammer"

(15). If Lucy's attunement to birdsong triggers an act of reading, which in turn makes her hear the "humming birds" of prehistoric times, for Isa, it is the act of reading that transforms printed text into desperate screams. This intrusion of text upon life in the form of sound proves far more traumatic than what Lucy experiences. Sonic cues are enough to transport Isa back to the scene of rape later in the day: "The paper crackled . . . The girl had gone skylarking with the troopers. She had screamed. She had hit him . . . What then?" (128). The sound of Bart handling the next day's papers reactivates the girl's scream. If the newspaper is used by Bart as a prop to test his grandson's bravery and discarded, Isa's engagement with the same papers alerts her to screams that remain muted under masculine violence. Listening, as a form of reading, subjects Isa to the shock of violence perpetrated by guards of the nation.

Unlike Lucy's satisfaction from the yearly swallow song, Isa is more acutely aware that listening to the same thing repeatedly entangles her within an imprisoning structure. Conversations on the yearly pageant are tedious to her, and the church bells that signal a communal timetable sadden her as they seem to foreclose the possibility of change. As Isa listens to the annually-repeated exchange between Lucy and Bart about the weather, the narration turns slightly impatient: "Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words [...] Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was—one or the other" (16). The anaphoric touch of "every" almost mocks the predictability of the conversation, since the yearly cycle that delights Lucy registers as tedious repetition for Isa. It is the story of rape from the newspaper that introduces a variation in the banal chime, a story that brings out an undertone of gendered violence between the siblings that might have been there all along: "only this year beneath the chime she heard; 'The girl screamed and hit him about the face

with a hammer" [16]). Isa's recollection of the rape and the "fantasy" of the girl's self-defense suggests that the smooth repetition of family rituals may be propped up by unacknowledged violence, only on a less detectable scale than rape. Isa's susceptibility as a listener is thus not a weakness—it makes her, if painfully, sensitive to the sounds that stay on the margins, an intervening sound in repetitious "chimes" of Pointz Hall's yearly rituals (16).

Lucy's position as a listener is deeply compromised because she is entangled in mundane acts of gendered violence, without quite having the self-awareness of that enmeshment as Isa does. As Greenberg suggests, violence does not always arise as visible crimes but as mundane "domestic banter" (57). Lucy's recollection of the childhood rebuke to "stop gaping," for one, not only cuts short her imagination but highlights how a young girl in Pointz Hall is educated to control facial expressions and bodily poise—by her mother when she was a child, and now by her brother. The recollection of her mother's voice heads the narration's return to a more distanced description of Lucy, who now sits to tea "like any other old lady with a high nose, thin cheeks, a ring on her finger and the usual trappings of rather shabby but gallant old age, which included in her case a cross gleaming gold on her breast" (9).

For the most part, Lucy is seen by other characters exactly as "any other old lady" (9), distinguished only by the silliness of her religious faith, especially from her brother Bart's perspective. To Bart, Lucy must be constantly corrected, and her irrational questions must be met with reasonable answers. Notably, a sound that Lucy constantly listens to throughout the gathering at Pointz Hall is her brother's peculiar way of calling her, a precursor to the corrections that he tries to make in her behavior or judgment: "'Cindy—Cindy,' he growled" (18). The growl is Bart's aural cue for establishing his authority over her sister, beginning from the childhood incident where Lucy was made to take a bloody

fish off a fishing hook. The growl brings to Lucy's mind "[t]he ghost of that morning in the meadow" (15), and as she cleans up the nails with which she has been putting up the pageant placard on the Barn, she inadvertently remembers that Bart "still kept his fishing tackle there" in the cupboard of nails (15). Later in the same conversation, the growl of "Cindy" ends a small "quarrel" over the origin of the phrase, "touch wood," which Bart simply imparts to superstition. If the hammer with which Lucy entered the room was put safely in its place with the first growl, now the hammer is, figuratively, in Bart's hands: "She flushed, and the little breath too was audible that she drew in as once more he *struck a blow* at her faith" (18). Lucy's impressionability exposes her to the controlling presence of her brother, as the repeated growl, "Cindy," ends the debate without allowing her any refutation: "'Cindy,' he growled. And the quarrel was over" (18). Submitting to the growl, Lucy remains enmeshed in a patriarchal order that shapes her behavior, suggesting how listening may educate the listener into compliance by shaping her very subjectivity.²⁾

Isa, on the other hand, is painfully aware that rituals and clichés tie her down to an unhappy marriage and predictable domesticity. For all her wish to break out and "fly," as she repeatedly voices in her attempts at poetry, stock phrases of literature and lines from the pageant lines

2) As a former member of the Civil Service in India, Bart himself has been shaped by the military orders of the British empire. This keeps him in constant rage: when his grandson George is frightened by his appearance, his "veins [become] swollen" in anger as he denigrates George as a cry-baby (10), and the absence of his trusty Afgan hound again makes the "little veins swell[] with rage on this temples" (121). Yet when alone, Bart remains lost in reveries of himself as "a young man helmeted," a vision that comes as if "in a glass, its lustre spotted" (11). The fact that Bart only takes comfort in this shadowy glory reveals how the larger scales of imperial order, which is only hinted at in the English countryside, shape the supposed "patriarchs" in a way that confines them to a life of emotional poverty.

"run[s] in [her] head" (69), revealing how the listening subject is not quite an "active" agent but made susceptible to repetitious language. The cliché, "The father of my children," repeated four times through the day, momentarily makes her forget her dissatisfaction with Giles and produces an automated feeling: "she felt pride; and affection; then pride again in herself, whom he had chosen" (31). Yet the same "cliché conveniently provided by fiction" (11) not only serves to tame Isa but creates irony, making her conscious of her own imprisonment. The same words become bitter at the end of the pageant when she sees Giles "hurrying to rejoin Mrs. Manresa," a sight that nettles her as a "rusty fester of the poisoned dart" (123). The jealousy and hate provoked by the empty phrase not only fuels her immediate desire to find Mr. Haines, "the man in grey," but heightens her wish for an alternative life. Even in her imagination, however, Isa remains circumscribed since the alternative possibility she pictures stays within the boundaries of married domesticity, essentially an exchange of husbands, Mr. Haines for Giles: "had we [she and Haines] met before the salmon leapt like a bar of silver . . ." (123).

The pageant, which provides a pastiche of Elizabethan and Restoration dramas, is also a "cliché" that Isa listens to, a repetitious structure that creates ironic self-awareness. The first two acts, in fact, play upon familiar plots that involve disruption and dramatic restoration of domestic order: orphans are discovered to be long-lost heirs, and wills are found at the last moment to deliver inheritance to the right hands. The play-within-play in the Elizabethan age especially depicts two women who rediscover or newly enter a familial relationship with a male heir: a crone discovers that the orphan baby she saved is in fact a prince, while a younger woman, Carinthia, waits to wed him. Words are "difficult to make out" in the loud bawling with which the actors say their lines—yet the plot itself is not as important as the

dual poles of emotion, “love; and hate” that the play creates (56). The particulars of the play’s lines are mere “verbiage, repetition” (57), and the point of the act, for Isa, lies in the clichéd words, “*My child! My child!*” (56) and “*My love! My lord!*” (57), which define women’s relation to men. Uttered by mother and bride, the lines tire Isa as too-familiar rehearsals of motherly or marital feeling that now ring empty for her: “It was enough. Enough. Enough,” Isa repeated” (57).

This conscious-raising aspect of the pageant, however, proves painful for Isa as a listener, since the script repeatedly makes her aware of her domestic imprisonment without providing an alternative beyond “verbiage” and “repetition” (57). In the second act, which parodies the Restoration drama, the schemer Lady Harpy Harraden laments her fallen state, dramatizing how she “*that was Cassiopeia am turned to she-ass*” (88). The self-identification with the donkey echoes in Isa’s poeticizations in the interval that follows: “This is the burden that the past laid on me, last little donkey in the long caravanserai crossing the desert” (93). As Bart remarks, the play propagates an “infection of the language” (89) upon the audience: the concluding moral on “God’s truth” sticks with Bart as a laughably empty phrase, while the reference to Gretna Green triggers Giles’s decision to take Mrs. Manresa to the greenhouse, all the while becoming conscious of how “the words rose and pointed a finger of scorn at him” (89). While Bart laughs at the play, and Giles, if briefly, feels *himself* laughed at, Isa reuses the unwanted lady’s reference to the donkey to highlight the burden she feels while watching the play, which is that no one can speak “with a voice free from the old vibrations” (94). The comic parody of the pageant thus figures as another restaging of predictable plots, which pains Isa for reminding her of her confinement.

II. Listening Reciprocally, Listening Together

As impressionable listeners, Lucy and Isa not only become attuned to birdsong and women's cries—they are either further habituated into submission or made excruciatingly aware of their confinement as women. For Lucy's part, Isa's silent comment on her conversation with Bart suggests that Lucy's participation in the routine rhythms of nature might signal her deeper entanglement in her brother's patronization.³⁾ This is perhaps why for Lucy, it is less the act of listening than looking that seems to allow her some reprieve from her brother's influence. After the pageant, Lucy's wish to thank Miss La Trobe beside the lily pool is met with Bart's cynical judgment against her religious sentimentalism: "How imperceptive her religion made her!" (120). This is followed by Bart's dismissal of La Trobe, as he surmises that "[w]hat she wanted, like that carp (something moved in the water) was darkness in the mud; a whisky and soda at the pub; and coarse words descending like maggots through the waters" (120). Yet if Bart associates La Trobe and the lily pool with a primitive, debased form of life, Lucy's silent gaze upon the pool endows it with another meaning. Lucy is aware that the pool she gazes upon is quite a different world, and largely a silent one: sensing the air "rush[ing]" above and the water below, Lucy stands "between two fluidities" (121) that block the transmission of sound from traveling

3) Later in final act of the pageant, the birds are momentarily enlisted in an optimistic narrative of development: "The temple-haunting martins who come, have always come . . . Yes, perched on the wall, they seemed to foretell what after all the Times was saying yesterday. Homes will be built. Each flat with its refrigerator, in the crannied wall. Each of us a free man; plates washed by machinery; not an aeroplane to vex us; all liberated; made whole . . ." (108). As the gramophone plays a nostalgic, "half known" waltz (108), the narration grasps complacently at this vision which deletes the prospect of war and depicts a life of heightened domestic comfort.

between each other. Unlike the birds which force their song upon Lucy's ears, the inhabitants of the pool are themselves noiseless: "*Silently* they manoeuvred in their water world, poised in the blue patch made by the sky, or shot *silently* to the edge where the grass, trembling, made a fringe of nodding shadow" (28, emphases added). Within the novel, fish are silent underwater and silenced above it: the pageant, in fact, depends upon the noiseless butchering of fish, as filleted soles are ordered earlier by Isa, cooked by Mrs. Sands, and eaten by all the village guests. Yet the fish and their watery habitat also signal a vitality that gives Lucy hope. The talk of delivering fish as culinary ingredients incites her wish to hear the sound of the sea, where soles thrive unheard: "But they do say," she continued, 'one can hear the waves on a still night. After a storm, they say, you can hear a wave break . . . I like that story,' she reflected" (20). If silent, the fish in the pool also make "a wave of undulation" (28) that Lucy looks out for.

If we recall that the pool is introduced first with the servants' legend of a lady who drowned herself in it, it is tempting to view this watery alcove as a symbol for "untold stories of women's suffering" which have been silenced in the human world above (Greenberg 58). Yet the silence surrounding the pool and its inhabitants is more than a sign of victimization, since Lucy adopts silence itself as a mode of expression. The pool is an object of demystification for Bart, who counters the legend of the drowned woman by revealing that the bone found in it was nothing but a "sheep's thigh": "Servants, he said, 'must have their ghost.' Kitchenmaids must have their drowned lady" (29). Lucy likewise overlooks the legend, yet her vitalist vision aligns the living fish with "beauty, power, and glory in ourselves" (121):

Fish had faith, she reasoned. They trust us because we've never caught 'em. But her brother would reply: 'That's greed.'

'Their beauty!' she protested. 'Sex,' he would say. 'Who makes sex susceptible to beauty?' she would argue. He shrugged who? Why? Silenced, she returned to her private vision; of beauty which is goodness; the sea on which we float. Mostly impervious, but surely every boat sometimes leaks?

He would carry the torch of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave. For herself, every morning, kneeling, she protected her vision. Every night she opened the window and looked at leaves against the sky. Then slept. Then the random ribbons of birds' voices woke her. (122)

Bart's "reason" finds in the fish an animal expression of human greed and sexuality, a view that Lucy tries to refute but is "silenced" in the process (122). Yet if we recall that the entire scene is created by Lucy's own imagination, silence becomes Lucy's chosen way of protecting her "private vision" without exposing it to Bart's ridicule. In this, Lucy resembles not only the swallows but also the fish that make their own noiseless movements, as with her unvoiced rejoinder to Bart's opinion of the fish. Silence is her stall against the dismissiveness of her brother, and provokes an awareness of the patterns of submission that she has become accustomed to: "It was always 'my brother . . . my brother' who rose from the depths of her lily pool" (122).

No one quite listens to Lucy, a listener of birdsongs and of her brother's growls, because she never openly voices her opposition—her opinions remain silent yet protected as the movements of the giant carp that make noiseless ripples. Yet William is one character in *Between the Acts* who attends to Lucy. A newcomer to Pointz Hall, and ostracized from the insular order of a "we" that Giles polices due to his queer sexuality, William wordlessly applies to Lucy's sensitivity as a listener, which he instinctively recognizes: "[...] I married; but my child's not my

child, Mrs. Swithin. I'm a half-man, Mrs. Swithin; a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass, Mrs. Swithin; as Giles saw; but you've healed me . . ." (46). While Lucy forgets his name, the anonymity does not bother him quite as much since he feels that Lucy's hospitality transcends the particulars of names and identities. And as with the sounds outside her window that move Lucy to jerk open the window, Lucy's voice has a similar influence upon William, who follows her "with a jerk, like a toy suddenly pulled straight by a string" (42). Both listen to unspoken words and form an unspoken alliance: even though Lucy addresses "no one in particular," William "kn[ows] she mean[s] him" when she offers to show the guests around the house (42). Lucy breaks out of her silence when she has William as a listener, and in turn, the rhymes that she sings provide solace for William:

She had spoken her thoughts, ignoring, not caring if he thought her, as he had, inconsequent, sentimental, foolish. She had lent him a hand to help him up a steep place. She had guessed his trouble. Sitting on the bed he heard her sing, swinging her little legs, 'Come and see my sea weeds, come and see my sea shells, come and see my dicky bird hop upon its perch'—an old child's nursery rhyme to help a child. Standing by the cupboard in the corner he saw her reflected in the glass. Cut off from their bodies, their eyes smiled, their bodiless eyes, at their eyes in the glass. (45)

The "old child's nursery rhyme" that William listens to leads to a meeting of gazes in the mirror. With their eyes "cut off from their bodies" (45), the scene enacts Lucy's earlier remark that "we live in things" (44-45) as the frail old woman and the homosexual man acquire a relationship in the mirror. As she has done with the window,

Lucy opens doors, listening "[w]ith her head on one side" to empty rooms before entering (44)—rooms of birth and nurture are opened to William, who enters intimate spaces of the heterosexual family where he previously felt he has no real place in. If Giles feels that words and rhymes have the dangerous potential to "become menacing" and "sh[ake] their fists at you," recalling the violence of fascist propaganda (38), Lucy's words acquire another force that counters the propagandist enlistment of the listener, rather providing momentary comfort.

If Lucy forms a fleeting understanding with William in reciprocal listening, which does not quite become any grand formation of a "we," Isa also finds herself connected with William when they listen to the same sound together. While Lucy is, for William, a savior—and there are moments when he idealizes her as a goddess—with Isa there arises a more mutual recognition of hardship in heteronormative domestic arrangements, especially in a scene where they listen side by side to the gramophone's nursery rhyme:

"And you—married?" she asked. From her tone he knew she guessed, as women always guessed, everything. They knew at once they had nothing to fear, nothing to hope. At first they resented—serving as statues in a greenhouse. Then they liked it. For then they could say—as she did—whatever came into their heads. [...]

"I'm William," he said, taking the furry leaf and pressing it between thumb and finger.

"I'm Isa," she answered. Then they talked as if they had known each other all their lives; which was odd, she said, as they always did, considering she'd known him perhaps one hour. [...]

They had left the greenhouse door open, and now music came

through it. A.B.C., A.B.C., A.B.C.—someone was practising scales. C.A.T., C.A.T., C.A.T. . . . Then the separate letter made on word ‘Cat.’ Other words followed. It was a simple tune, like a nursery rhyme—

The King is in his counting house,
Counting out his money,
The Queen is in her parlour
Eating bread and honey.

They listened. Another voice, a third voice, was saying something simple. And they sat on in the greenhouse, on the plank with the vine over them, listening to Miss La Trobe or whoever it was, practising her scales. (70)

The moment of listening together to this rhyme refutes the narrow sense of “we” that, merely a few moments ago, Giles reinforces in his aversion to being yoked together with William, a man he sees as sexually aberrant (“We?” said Giles. “We?” He looked, once, at William” [68]). William knows from listening to Isa’s tone that she guesses at his queerness—the mutuality implied in the narration’s “they” is based not on a magical ontological knowledge of the other, but a more cautious epistemological awareness, or recognition, of what each “guesses” about the other. The rhyme they listen to after this recognition highlights the gendered division of roles in a domestic order that even confines them both. Interestingly, the first three letters of the alphabet, “A.B.C.,” coincide with the notes of a musical scale, which would typically not be spoken aloud by a singer “practicing scales”—yet here the letters are named, and the combination of “separate letter[s]” form basic words, developing into a nursery rhyme. The effect is as if Isa and William experience the words combine into stock phrases of domestic ideology. Seemingly working as a satire on a royal couple’s greediness, the lyrics

highlight their gendered roles—the King is linked with pecuniary gain in "the counting house" while the Queen remains in the "parlour" with her food. The childish rhyme of "money" and "honey" brings out the absurdity of domestic scripts that keep both in their place.

This jointed listenership of Isa and Williams builds from an earlier moment when William hears Isa quietly responding to the villagers' gossip with her poetry, muted through the "noise of china and chatter" of the Barn: "'And the papers say she met him . . .' 'Alone, under a tree, the withered tree that keeps all day murmuring of the sea, and hears the Rider gallop . . .' Isa filled in the phrase" (64). For one, Isa's reference to the sound of the sea recalls Lucy's earlier wish to hear it, linking the two women in the echo of each other's voices. More importantly, William's alertness to Isa's muted recitation allows them to recognize each other as "conspirators; each murmuring some song my uncle taught me" (64). Reciting the lines of the play, "Hail, sweet Carinthia. My love. My life," and "My lord, liege," the two ironically play out the roles of the heterosexual couple, repeating what they have listened to share a laugh on the script's farcicality. The script and nursery rhymes do not allow the two to "sink down peacefully" into their rhythm, as does the majority of the audience (75). Instead, they create a sense of alienation shared by Isa and William, which stems from their confined positions within a domestic order of marriage that keeps each unhappy.

In the second interval, this alienation triggers Isa's impulse for death when she poeticizes about a "harvestless dim field" without daybreak or nightfall. This changeless, mythic landscape is an underworld that makes "[a]ll equal there," another echo from the pageant in Isa's mind: as Patricia Cramer has suggested, the story of Flavinda tweaks the Persephone myth, since while Lady Harpy is no loving Demeter, she is made to compete with the daughter-figure's "abductor" (Cramer 179). The point is that Flavinda's elopement (which the play refuses to stage)

may in effect entrap her further in a contract where her inheritance is not her own, thus paralleling Hades's abduction of Persephone (Cramer 179). Isa's implicit identification with Flavinda-Persephone recreates the goddess's underworld wanderings among "[u]nblowing, ungrowing" roses" (Woolf, *Between* 93), emphasizing a sense of stasis that also extends to the predictable stable clock, which "point[s] inflexibly at two minutes to the hour" (93). Listening to the pageant, where all scenes seem to restage familiar plots of marital entrapment, and where no one can speak with "a voice free from the old vibrations," Isa falls into despair. Yet this quiet desperation, unheard by anyone but William, creates an oppositional energy that makes her hearken to the muffled sounds of others' pain:

More voices sounded. The audience was streaming back to the terrace. She roused herself. She encouraged herself. "On, little donkey, patiently stumble. Hear not the frantic cries of the leaders who in that they seek to lead desert us. Nor the chatter of china faces glazed and hard. Hear rather the shepherd, coughing by the farmyard wall; the withered tree that sighs when the Rider gallops; the brawl in the barrack room when they stripped her naked; or the cry which in London when I thrust the window open someone cries . . ." (94)

While the voices, fragments of verse, and popular rhymes encroach upon Isa's consciousness and "dissolve boundaries of selfhood" in a violent manner (Livingston 148), Isa does not shut her ears. Instead, she calls for a mode of listening better attuned to the rural worker's cough, the sound of trees, the violent cries of soldier-rapists, and the urban underclass, urging herself and anyone else who would listen to turn away from the "frantic cries" of political agitators and impassive

mass voices of "china faces" (Woolf, *Between* 94). The haphazard manner of listening Isa promotes suggests an alternative mode of collectivity that does not atomize individuals nor creates a homogenous mass, but catches the different currents of sound within what seems to be a lumped "bawling" (56).

A moment of such listening takes place during the following interval, where Giles, Isa, and William become linked in an awareness of their unhappiness: "[Giles] said (without words) 'I'm damnably unhappy.'" "So am I," Dodge echoed. "And I too," Isa thought" (105). Wordlessly, the three share a sense of being "caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle" (105), and the group sits "exposed" to random sounds that remind them of their alienation from ideologies of "home":

All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no music. The horn of cars on the high road were heard. And the swish of trees. They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo. Tick, tick, tick, went the machine. (106)

Isa's earlier call to hear cries of pain and violence is here fulfilled inversely: rather than listening to other sounds, the group listens to their shared thoughts and the mundane noises surrounding them, which makes them aware of their own painful lack of self-definition before they can claim any grand awareness of the pain of others. Unorganized into a collective "we," the loose assemblage of characters ("they") are not inheritors of a Victorian domestic/imperial selfhood and rather sit alienated from the versions of community that the pageant stages. The moment rewrites Isa's supposition that listening closely to unheeded sounds would bring about a dramatic awareness of suffering—instead,

the passage implies that awareness of human pain begins with a recognition of one's own vulnerability in the collective absence of self-certainty.

The sudden fall of a summer shower, before the final act, releases this painful suspension by exploding the pent-up tension of being "neither one thing nor the other" through the violent rainfall, pouring "all the people in the world weeping" (107). The rain triggers Isa's wish that "our human pain could here have ending!" (107), and it changes the import of the absurd nursery rhyme of the King and Queen, repeated at the opening of the final act:

Music began—A.B.C.—A.B.C. The tune was as simple as it could be. But now that the shower had fallen, it was the other voice speaking, the voice that was no one's voice. And the voice that wept for human pain unending said:

The King is in his counting house,

Counting out his money,

The Queen is in her parlour . . .

"O that my life could here have ending," Isa murmured (taking care not to move her lips). Readily would she endow this voice with all her treasure if so be tears could be ended. The little twist of sound could have the whole of her. On the altar of the rain-soaked earth she laid down her sacrifice . . . (108)

In the repetition of the nursery rhyme, the actual semantic purport of the lyrics becomes less important than the impersonality of the voice "that was no one's voice."⁴⁾ Gyllian Phillips singles out this moment

4) Recalling Lucy's remark that "we live in things," the rhyme thus reprises the "ancient song" of love that a nameless old woman sings at Regent's Park station in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and of Mrs. McNab's "old music hall song" (143) in *To the*

as exploiting "the familiarity and nostalgia associated with nursery rhymes," which work to "produce a well-worn pathway from self to group" (43). On the one hand, the repetitious rhyme indeed hints that the universalized voice crying for "human pain" risks becoming a version of the "one-making" project that Isa is suspicious of. Throughout the novel, emotions roused by repetition are often inflammatory and suspect. For instance, the barely audible chorus of the first act provokes Mrs. Manresa's cries of "enthusiasm," while the oldest lady in the audience "clap[s] and laugh[s]" the "sudden laughter of a startled jay" (58): the singers themselves are "intoxicated by the music," which creates enthusiasm and ardor that might be formulated into a mob mentality with the slightest nudge. The "brave music" that is played at the beginning of act two recalls the commands of everyday office life, where the bell "summons" workers uniformly and makes all "answer to the infernal, agelong and eternal order issued on from high. And obey" (73). The passage recalls how sound organizes listeners into uniform objects of exploitation.

Yet immediately following the earlier paragraph on office sounds, "Cobbet of Cobbs Corner" stoops to find a flower underneath the flow of people "pushing from behind" (73). Shoving Cobbet, the collective voice of the crowd claims that music "wakes" the listener and "makes us see the hidden, join the broken," alerting the listener to flowers, the "syllabbling" of tree leaves, and the birds to "bid us [...] come together, crowd together, to chatter and make merry" (73). While the crowd pushes at Cobbet, their collective voice has a point in that listening to a

Lighthouse, which has been "robbed of meaning" from repetition, but becomes condensed into "the voice of witlessness, humour, persistency itself, trodden down but springing up again" (142). As with the pageant's inaudible chorus (and the narrator mentions more than once that the wind blows their words away [48, 49, 50, 76, 84, 98]), the rhyme's lyrics lend less influence upon the emotion they stir in Isa than do the very fact of their repetition.

tune, as does Isa in the rain, is not simply a submission to propaganda but may alert one to the “hidden” and the “broken” in unexpected ways (73). Notably, Woolf highlights the individual (Cobbet) over the collective, suggesting that any reparative properties of sound must operate on a particular level that counters the easy abstraction of the crowd.

What Isa needs is, then to tune down the abstracted, almost mythical moment of understanding universal “human pain” into a specific context, beginning with her own. Giles, in fact, has this acute sense of concrete reality: also a reader of papers, Giles is infuriated that “sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned” across the channel (30), and the complacency of attending a pageant when “any moment guns would rake that land [Europe] into furrows” provokes him to rage (34). The prospect of the pageant itself is tiresome to Giles as it is to his wife, since he feels “manacled to a rock [...] and forced passively to behold indescribable horror” that masks the “real” horror of war (38). With “no command of metaphor” (34), Giles seems lost in a world of hard-boiled facts, an antagonist to Isa the aspiring poet. Yet both share a sense of confinement in their domestic arrangement: Giles becomes violent not due to an intrinsic chauvinist nature but because he is caught in a life of tedious routine, where “the conglomeration of things pressed you flat; held you fast, like a fish in water” (30). Like the actors, Giles must “change” into the clothes of a “cricketer” to greet guests (30) and into the “black coat and white tie of the professional classes” in evening (127). This aversion to changing attire, however, implies a wish for change more generally, implied by the novel’s play with different meanings of “change”—at one point, the anonymous voices of the audience confuse the “change” of actors’ costumes with the more difficult prospect of individual reform: “D’you think people change? Their clothes, of course . . . [...] But I meant ourselves—do we change?” (73-74). Woolf refuses

to end the novel with easy optimism—it remains uncertain if Giles will change for the better or if Isa will be able to find a breakthrough in the confines of domestic life. Yet their shared sense of confinement and alertness to the realities of violence underlying the British countryside suggests that the wordless, mutual "sp[eaking]" that ends the novel might morph into reciprocal listening, which would begin with an awareness of their shared pain from the scripts that hold them to their places.

III. The Artist as Listener

Interestingly, the final moment of *Between the Acts* reads like stage directions ("Then the curtain rose. They spoke" [130]), almost a transcription of the "first words" that La Trobe the playwright "hear[s]" in her moment of inspiration (126). The question is whether this script, like that of pageant, will be mere parodic repetition, or produce something that departs from what has come before. By way of conclusion, I would like to turn to La Trobe, who, as both producer of the play and a listener of her audience, turns the passivity of listening into a generative practice. La Trobe herself seems to be behind the moments of explosive (and potentially dangerous) energy created by the play's songs. At the beginning of the pageant, La Trobe is described as having a gait "proper to an Admiral on his quarter-deck," signaling her ambition to be the invisible speaker behind the microphone, the manipulator of listeners (39). Indeed, the gramophone that she uses to insert popular tunes in the interstices of scenes has the effect of "loosen[ing]" muscles and "crack[ing]" the ice: familiar melodies elicit bodily responses from the listeners, such as the old, indigenous lady who "beats[s] time with her hand on her chair" or Mrs. Manresa who hums "afloat on the stream of the melody" (49). Yet La Trobe's famed "bossiness" is undercut by

the outdoors tradition of the pageant, which places elements of the play beyond her control. The wind-blown words, for one, which are effective in arousing emotion in the first act, prove disastrous in the second, where “the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came” (84). In the erasure of sound altogether, La Trobe feels her own “death” as an artist (84). The gap between scenes is filled in, however, with the lowing of a cow that has lost her calf. The situation of a mother and the lost child not only befits the pageant’s Restoration drama, but the sound, which infects the entire herd, produces a collective animal bellow that acts as a “primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment” (85). The cows help “bridge[] the distance,” “fill[] the emptiness and continue[] the emotion” alerting La Trobe to the gaps between artistic intention and execution that may be filled only beyond her control.

It is during the cows’ intervention that La Trobe also becomes a listener like any other member of the audience. Before the pageant begins, La Trobe is truly like an admiral in that she surveys the landscape and maps out positions for the stage, the dressing-room, and the gramophone that would allow her maximum control. Her imagination is first put in visual terms: “There the stage; here the audience; and down there among the buses a perfect dressing-room for the actors” (37); later La Trobe wonders, had she “made them see?” (60). Yet La Trobe gradually turns from her visual surveyance of the audience to aural receptiveness. From behind the bushes, she becomes a receiver of the “[s]craps and fragments” of conversation, which moves haphazardly from banter, gossip, and politics (73). Listening allows La Trobe a moment of unexpected communication, as when she hears a voice that catches her artistic intent: a voice laughing at the second act as a “fuss about nothing!” makes her “glow with glory,” since the laugh rightly jabs at the play’s parody (84). Yet immediately after this moment

of glory, the wind makes chorus lyrics inaudible—fluctuating between triumph and despair, La Trobe becomes a listener whose play is at the mercy of the audience and of nature.

La Trobe gradually becomes sensitive to "stray voices, voices without bodies, symbolical voices" of the audience (91). She "see[s] nothing," "half hear[s]," and most of all "feel[s] invisible threads connecting the bodiless voices" (91). Listening to the fragmentary yet connected voices makes "every cell in her body [...] absorbent," creating a physical interconnectedness with the audience that was not available to her when she surveyed them from her hideout. When Lucy intrudes into the bushes, breaching convention yet overflowing with congratulations for La Trobe, the playwright encounters a member of the audience that suddenly endows the audience's "bodiless voice" with a close-up presence. The face-to-face encounter does not magically connect the two women: in a somewhat comical effort to express thanks, Lucy blurts that "you've made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra," and the botched "common effort to bring a common meaning to birth" ends up with La Trobe interpreting this, "You've stirred in me my unacted part" (92). La Trobe here interprets Lucy's incoherent praise to her liking and exults in momentary glory, inflating herself as "one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a re-created world" (92). The fantasy of giving shape to an "amorphous mass" verges dangerously on fascist thought, which seeks to channel undirected energies of the masses to specific political ends. Yet La Trobe's emphasis on "re-creat[ion]" rather than mere agitation bears more scrutiny, and suggests that her willful interpretation actually catches the gist of Lucy's meaning—Lucy's reference to Cleopatra, the iconic woman ruler, inversely highlights that the play has made her aware of her own confinement, relegated to a "small part" that she has "had to play" as a daughter, wife, and widowed

sister (92). Lucy's implicit wish for change, then, aligns with La Trobe's wish to become an artist who uses existing conventions to make new forms. The moment of misunderstood listening brings out a common ground between the two women that they themselves do not quite realize. As a listener who wishes more than anything to be listened to, La Trobe flourishes in this brief encounter with her audience.

When the play is over and the audience leaves, La Trobe's moment of glory "fade[s]" (124). Yet the predicament of having no audience turns La Trobe herself fully into a receiver of sounds when a flock of starlings rush at the tree that she had hidden behind: "The whole tree hummed with the whizz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabbling discordantly life, life, life [...]" (124). As Frattola points out, the passage uses the words "life" and "bird" as if they were onomatopoeic, making the reader "read[] for sound" over "prosaic signification" (*Modernist Soundscapes* 90). Frozen in the description of the collaboration between bird and tree, the paragraph itself arrests narrative progression and blurs the boundaries between narrative prose and music, placing the reader in a listener's position, until "old Mrs. Chalmers" interrupts the moment. Holding new flowers to place between her husband's grave, the widow deflates the "vibrant rapture" and re-situates the novel in time, where people pass away and flowers fade. Yet while La Trobe, snubbed by Mrs. Chalmers, feels that she "had suffered [...] for nothing," soon "something r[i]se[s] to the surface" from listening to the unexpected music (124). To capture the wordless sensation, La Trobe relocates to the village pub, where she continues "listen[ing]" until "[w]ords of one syllable sank down into the mud" (125). The figurative language links the artist's incipient creation with the lily pool Lucy gazes into, and counters Bart's supposition that

La Trobe can work only with "coarse words descending like maggots through the waters" (120), since the image is linked to a newfound fertility that arises from decomposition: "Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning—wonderful words" (125). The crucial moment when La Trobe "hear[s] the first words" of her new play overlaps with the recollection of the tree being "pelted with starlings" (126). A listener of the birds' discordant music to "life" and the pub crowd's talk, La Trobe begins to "re-create" amorphous sensations that she hears into a new form. That script will inevitably be created from what already exists, and it too will lose its novelty, as with all works of art after they are performed, published, or exhibited. Yet nevertheless, La Trobe's receptivity to what she listens to fuels a productivity that she could not quite muster earlier when she remained a surveyor of the landscape ("It has the making . . .' she murmured. [...] 'No, I don't get it" [40]). Populating her novel with impressionable listeners, Woolf shows that the artist herself remains open to (rather than stands above) the environment that surrounds her, and this vulnerability of the artist as a listener allows the possibility to create a new script when existing ones prove defunct and ineffective.

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ABSTRACT

"Hear Rather the Shepherd Coughing . . .":
Impressionable Listeners and the Possibility of New
Scripts in *Between the Acts*

Sunbinn Lee

This paper reads Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* in the context of a growing culture of listening and sound transmission. The centrality of aural experience in the novel, especially with the entrance of the gramophone, has led several critics to place *Between the Acts* within the culture of radio and technological sound reproduction. Yet instead of highlighting the active agency of listeners trained by radio listening, Woolf's listeners do not always exercise the "critical" capacity to resist hegemonic interpellations. Woolf engages in the anxieties of the radio era, testing not only the dangers but also the possibilities of the impressionable listener. While the act of listening makes the listener permeable to voices of ideological coercion, I argue that this susceptibility is not just a liability. Characters such as Lucy and Isa, as well as La Trobe are sensitive to the sound (of animals, of literary language, and of the audience) that are easily sidelined by broadcasts with explicit political messages. Woolf refuses to depict any of these characters as wholly critical, discerning listeners—Lucy, Isa, and La Trobe all risk being overwhelmed by what they hear, yet turn that risk into opportunities to crack the repetitious patterns that inculcate a British national identity in the sense of a "we." Being an impressionable listener, or having such listeners beside them, Lucy, Isa, and La Trobe

suggest that listening is more than a mode of compliant servitude or a way of exercising the critical capacities of the autonomous individual. From this limited sense of becoming aware of one's own confinement, listening prods the listener to imagine new scripts rather than follow old ones.

Key Words Virginia Woolf, Listening, Radio, Sound, Britishness, Domesticity