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Before the Wound: Anticipatory Trauma and Affective Materiality in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

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This study investigates Virginia Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), through the theoretical intersection of affect, materiality, and anticipatory trauma. Drawing on non-representational theory of affect and trauma scholarship, this article argues that the affective materials of the novel such as the gramophone, mirrors, the barn, and the pageant itself function at once as figures of impending catastrophe and as active producers of anticipatory trauma materially: the felt weight of a war not yet fully arrived. Set on a single June day, *Between the Acts* incorporates its objects and landscapes with a pre-traumatic affect that circulates through bodies, surfaces, and sounds before it can be articulated in language. Within this frame, the study reveals how Woolf's materiality of language, manifested through syntactic fragmentation and deliberate silences, performs the collapse of meaning at the limits of representation. By positioning the text at the junction of the material turn, affective turn and trauma studies, this analysis provides a new theoretical perspective for Woolf studies as well as modernist affect scholarship.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, anticipatory trauma, affective materiality .

Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) completed *Between the Acts* (1941), weeks before her death, and the novel bears the undeniable pressure of a world already at war. Set at Pointz Hall in rural England on a warm day in June 1939, it describes the Oliver family as they host the annual village pageant, a theatrical portrayal of English history that has always been interrupted, incomplete, and unstable. The novel has long been evaluated by critics as an elegy, an exploration on fragmentation or a critique with the form of the novel itself. However, less attention has been paid to the way the novel's material world such as its objects, sounds, surfaces, and organic matter serves as a field of feeling, an interconnected network of affect that registers the weight of a catastrophe not yet fully experienced.

This study draws on recent discussions of anticipatory traumatic response and affective materiality and utilises the term anticipatory trauma to define a physical as well as psychological condition in which bodies and material surfaces absorb the perceived weight of catastrophe before its ultimate material arrival. Traditional trauma theory, as pioneered by Sigmund Freud and later developed by Cathy Caruth, has posited trauma as a strictly retrospective phenomenon. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth argues that trauma is not fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence but returns "belatedly" through haunting repetition and deferred experience (92). In *Tense Future*, Paul K. Saint-Amour explains, "the traumatic event" is experienced "belatedly," usually after a "latency" period, through symptoms that may involve the "return of repressed memories" and the "compulsive repetition of behavior," gestures, nightmares, and fantasies connected with the traumatic event. These symptoms and the condition that they represent are "exclusively post-traumatic" (14). However, he challenges this backward trajectory regarding the relationship between anticipation, injury and future, and states that anticipation "has become a new medium for delivering injury" (8). He maintains that living under the constant threat of an imminent total war is to experience a trauma in advance of the event. When applied to the interwar literary landscape, this framework uncovers "a proleptic mass traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to a potentially oncoming rather than an already realized catastrophe" (7-8). Within this frame, this study proposes that Woolf's writing during the interwar years registers a shift from a retrospective trauma framework to a proleptic one. This shift is best understood through Brian Massumi's "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact" concerning political ontology of threat as he suggests, "[f]ear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the affective fact of the matter" (54). In *Between the Acts* this "affective fact" turns the material environment into a space where the weight of an unfulfilled war is felt as an immediate, physical presence before an actual eruption of violence. Thus, this anticipatory or proleptic trauma is not only an intellectual anxiety but also an affective force that pervades the material environment before the real outbreak of global violence.

Following this framework, this article contends that *Between the Acts* transforms the atmosphere of impending war into a materially distributed affective condition, revealing trauma not as a purely retrospective experience but as an anticipatory state circulating across objects, bodies, sounds, and spaces. The novel's gramophone, mirrors, fragmented theatrical performance, and language are the indicators of the dread of the pre-war time, and they are parts of the circulation of a pre-traumatic intensity which is beyond conscious articulation. Woolf develops a textual landscape of catastrophe encountered prior to its historical actualisation through grammatical fragmentation, interrupted speech, and the recurring failure of representation. Ultimately, it reveals how *Between the Acts* reconsiders trauma as an atmospheric and material state of living toward disaster, rather than a retrospective return to the wound, by integrating affect theory, materiality, and anticipatory trauma.

Material Affect vs. Affective Materiality: Materializing Anticipatory Trauma in Between the Acts

In its most generative configurations, affect theory imposes a distinction between affect and emotion that is theoretically significant. For Massumi (2002), affect is a pre-personal, non-conscious intensity, a bodily capacity to act and be acted upon, which comes before its capture in the identified emotions of cultural discourse. Massumi states, "affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is" (xxxv). This autonomy is not the absence of the social but a residue that exceeds it such as the vibration in the room after the music has stopped, the sense of approaching significance before its content is known.

Based on affect theory and material criticism, this study proposes a distinction between material affect and affective materiality. Material affect denotes the transmission of affect via material entities, wherein objects and surroundings serve primarily as channels for the circulation of human feeling. In contrast, affective materiality highlights autonomous affective agency of matter: the potential of objects, sounds, surfaces, and spaces to produce intensities that surpass human intention or conscious emotional expression. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf progressively moves from depicting affect through materiality to portraying materiality as affectively productive. The architectural spaces, the gramophone, mirrors, and fragmented theatrical forms reflect collective anxiety about the impending war while actively engaging in the creation and circulation of anticipatory trauma as a material and sensory phenomenon. This distinction is critical because the two notions imply different ontologies of matter. Material affect assumes that objects mediate or transmit emotion from human individuals, while affective materiality assumes that affective agency is inherent to matter itself, and that objects and environments are active participants in the production of affect. The analyses that follow use this distinction to show how Woolf repeatedly shifts from representing objects as mediators of affect to presenting them as active participants in the production of affective intensity.

Material affect theory extends this account by claiming that affect is both a quality of human bodies and matter itself. Jane Bennett's notion of "vibrant matter" questions the strong ontological boundary between animate and inanimate; non-human things like food, electricity, metal, trash own a type of "vitality," which means "a capacity," participating in the composition of events (Bennett viii). Objects are not merely passive containers of human-generated meaning but active participants in affective "assemblages" as "an actant" that "is a source of action" (viii). As Derek Ryan argues, "Woolf's writing offers new conceptualisations of the material world where the immanent and intimate entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies are brought to the fore" (4). In *Between the Acts*, the gramophone, mirrors, swallows, and even the material textures of Pointz Hall function as vibrant forms of matter through which anticipatory trauma circulates before it can be consciously articulated, which will be analysed below.

The non-human circulation of pre-traumatic intensity is readily apparent when analysing the architectural and natural landscapes of Pointz Hall, which transforms from a passive architectural space into the most significant macro-level affective assemblage of the novel. For Bennett, an assemblage is not a singular object but an "ad hoc grouping of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" whose agentic capacities emerge through the relational interactions of heterogeneous human and nonhuman actants (23). Following Saint-Amour, anticipatory trauma is generated through the experience of living toward an expected catastrophe rather than through its retrospective aftermath (95). Within Bennett's framework of assemblages, Pointz Hall materialises this temporal suspension by participating in the circulation of affect before war becomes historical reality. Thus, Pointz Hall is a heterogeneous assemblage of historical objects, architectural spaces, surrounding landscapes, human bodies, and the material atmosphere of an impending war. In other words, the house is both a physical structure and an affective environment, representing the burden of war to come, connecting the English historical past to the looming future of aerial bombardment. The house's materiality with its echoing hallways, shifty shadows and silent areas emerges as an environmental catalyst for collective anxiety, establishing a core level of sensory tension which has not been expressed. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf effectively displays such an autonomous materiality in the gap at the heart of Pointz Hall, stating that "the room was empty. Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence" (Woolf 46-47). The narrative entirely separates affect from human presence by presenting the domestic interior as an "essence of emptiness." The space becomes an affective object, a hollow vessel that physically contains and holds the collective dread of a historical moment on the brink of catastrophe. Pointz Hall exceeds the logic of material affect. The house reflects the emotional state of its residents and actively engenders the atmosphere of expectancy by its architecture, silence, and spatial organization. Instead of the transmission proposed by material affect, Woolf moves affective agency away from human subjects and onto the material environment itself, illustrating affective materiality. Pointz Hall is also a geographically exposed building and a landmark of historical significance. Its wide

terrace and exposed position are a sign of the distant vibrations of aircraft approaching. In terms of its vacant halls and clean landscapes, Woolf indicates that Pointz Hall does not passively wait for history; instead, its very stones and essence of silence are actively participating in the affective endeavour of absorbing a crisis before it materialises. Therefore, the displacement of affect from human interiority into material space is not merely an aesthetic strategy but an ontological reconfiguration of agency. Rather than locating affect within individual consciousness, Woolf redistributes it across a network of human and nonhuman actants. The anticipatory atmosphere surrounding Pointz Hall belongs to the assemblage itself. As Melba Cuddy-Keane asserts, Woolf's experimental language functions as a form of cultural and political "intervention" that seeks "to insert the values of literary language into the public issues of the day" (121). In this sense, the "essence of emptiness" permeating Pointz Hall becomes more than atmospheric description; it materialises the collective unease of a society living under the pressure of an imminent catastrophe.

Woolf redirects this pre-traumatic absorption into a micro-level force field with the ancient barn. It serves as an affective assemblage where the past and an ominous future converge through tangible textures. Inside its confines, the communal apprehension of the village is both articulated and experienced through the "vibrant matter" of the surroundings. By detaching affect from human interiority, Woolf enables the physical realm of the novel to bear the materialist burden of upcoming war, revealing that the landscape is anticipatorily traumatised before the historical occurrence:

> Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked from different angles and edges. (Woolf 119-120)

Within this frame, the ancient barn presents a "vibrant materiality" where the human psychological burden of the coming war is distributed across a non-human "assemblage" (Bennett 23). The creatures including mice, swallows, beetles, insects and stray bitch in the barn represent "actant" defined as "a source of action … which has the efficacy … to produce effects" (Bennett viii). It can also be interpreted that Woolf removes affect from human interiority to various animals in accordance with material agency. The barn's "vibrant matter" including the "corn," "sacks," and "rafters" functions as a physical site that sustains the perceived weight of catastrophe prior to actual occurrence. In other words, the barn serves as the micro-level evidence of the affective assemblage. Unlike material affect, where objects primarily mediate pre-existing emotions, the barn generates affective intensity through the interaction of animal, architectural, and organic matter. The heterogeneous assemblage does not simply express human anxiety; it actively produces the sensory conditions through which anticipatory trauma becomes materially perceptible. These non-human elements and the barn's architectural structure function as

affective agents, converting an imminent historical catastrophe from mere human cognitive dread into a material reality profoundly embedded in the "thing-power" of the world (Bennett 3).

From spatial materiality to acoustic materiality, the gramophone serves as the novel's most persistent material actant. Prior to being perceived as a symbol of failure, it operates as an agent for pre-personal affect: an instrument that produces atmospheric intensities that the gathered audience assimilates without understanding how to respond to them. At the beginning of the pageant, the gramophone's output anticipates and surpasses the theatrical content it is intended to complement:

> Chuff, chuff, chuff sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. Some sat down hastily, others stopped talking guiltily. All looked at the bushes. For the stage was empty. Chuff, chuff, chuff the machine buzzed in the bushes. (Woolf 93-4)

Unlike Caruth's model of belated trauma, where the wound returns only after the event, the gramophone embodies Saint-Amour's theory of anticipatory trauma. Its repetitive mechanical sound does not reactivate a past catastrophe but gives sensory form to a future one. The audience experiences the war as an affective certainty before it becomes a historical reality, demonstrating how anticipation itself functions as a mode of injury.

Woolf depicts the gramophone as surpassing its role as a household object to emerge as a principal actant that dictates the rhythmic power of the village pageant. The machine's repetitive "chuff, chuff, chuff" and the insistent "tick of the gramophone needle" (Woolf 100) exemplify a significant manifestation of thing-power as Bennett defines it as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). If the gramophone merely transmitted the characters' anxiety, it would function as an instance of material affect, serving only as a vehicle for already existing emotions. Instead, Woolf grants the machine its own agentic efficacy. In this sense, the mechanical stuttering of the gramophone not only interrupts the performance but also generates a somatised condition of suspension in the audience. By emphasizing this mechanical noise, Woolf interferes with the collective psychological state of the community; as Michele Pridmore-Brown highlights, she exploits the "noise or static inherent in communications technology" to "short-circuit the herd impulse" of the audience (408). The machine becomes an auditory foreshadowing of the forthcoming historical catastrophe. The constant "chuff, chuff" becomes as an acoustic representation of impending mass traumatisation, with the needle's ticking echoing a countdown to a disaster that the assembled community perceives physically, despite their inability to express it verbally. Thus, this is a matter of ontology and a change from material affect to affective materiality. Material affect suggests that matter is a passive vehicle for human feelings to pass through. However, affective materiality reaffirms the autonomous power of the object itself. In *Between the Acts* the gramophone both carries the concerns of the characters and creates an atmospheric intensity which anticipates and influences human response

with its materiality, particularly its own mechanical stuttering. Considering affective materiality, it becomes noticeable that the coming horror of 1939 is a mental concept for the Oliver family as well as a material force imposed by the thing-power of the mechanical and architectural surroundings they live within. While the gramophone circulates anticipatory trauma through the instability of sound, Woolf's mirrors expand this fragmentation to visual and social surfaces, turning perception into an affective centre of pre-war unease.

Mirrors in *Between the Acts* are unstable devices of reflection and affective surfaces that transmit fragmentation, uncertainty, and emotional turmoil through bodies and objects. Where the gramophone creates anticipatory trauma through the interruption of sound, the mirrors convert this instability to the visual, rendering vision a broken and disturbed experience. Woolf recurrently distorts the idea of unified self-recognition, portraying reflection as multiple, unstable and materially mediated. At the beginning, Isa Oliver is in front of a "three-folded mirror," and she sees "three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome, face" in it, while observing "outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops" (Woolf 19). The mirror does not unify identity into a single image; it multiplies perception and dissolves the border between internal consciousness and the external environment. In the reflections on surfaces, the self is fragmented, implying that subjectivity in the novel is already unstable before the calamity of war fully arises. This instability obtains an affective dimension through Woolf's emphasis on vibration, circulation, and sensory overflow. Isa's feelings cannot be safely placed in the hidden interiority of the self. Rather, feeling emerges as scattered among objects, movements, and material environments. Woolf proposes, words and bodily presence "attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus, lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating" (20). Within this frame, Massumi's conceptualisation of affect as an "autonomous" intensity that escapes rigid "emotive identification" (38, 43) resonates with the language of vibration and circulation in *Between the Acts*. Isa's emotions are not clearly delineated psychological states but unstable intensities moving between bodies and material surfaces. The mirror is both a symbolic item and an affective medium that gives sensory form to anticipatory anxiety. This instability also reconfigures trauma temporality. Rather than reflecting a fractured memory of past violence, the mirror materialises the uncertainty of a catastrophe that remains imminent. The fractured image functions as an affective anticipation of historical rupture, allowing the future to reorganise perception before violence has taken place. The mirrors move beyond material affect. Rather than functioning as passive reflective surfaces onto which characters project their emotions, they actively reorganise perception and distribute affect across fragmented images and material surfaces. Their agency resides not in symbolic representation alone but in their capacity to participate in the production of affective intensity.

Woolf challenges the conventional relationship of mirrors and true self-knowledge. The narrative often depicts reflection as distorted and incomplete. When the narrative speaks of books as "mirrors of the soul", the metaphor is revised: "A tarnished soul, a spotted one in this case" (Woolf 22). Reflection is no longer transparent but fractured and blurry. The spotted mirror stands for a larger crisis of

representation in the pre-war atmosphere of novel, as neither literature nor historical memory can totally stabilise collective identity. Woolf's depiction anticipates the fragmentation that is later realised in the pageant itself, which presents English history as discontinuous and insecure, rather than united. This distribution of affect across reflecting surfaces can also be associated with the circulation of emotions across bodies, signals and objects through recurrent contact and proximity. In this context, material objects serve as an affective archive, where fear and anticipation attach to surfaces like mirrors, so creating what Sara Ahmed calls the "stickiness" as "an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs" (90). The "stickiness" aligns with the broader definition of affect: "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (Seigworth and Gregg 1). In *Between the Acts*, dread sticks to mirrors, books, gestures, surfaces of vision, and the material environment becomes an affective archive of approaching catastrophe. Therefore, the mirror scenes depict anticipatory trauma not as a fully conscious fear of war but as an atmospheric condition that pervades everyday perception before historical violence has fully materialised. Woolf builds a universe where calamity arrives as sensation in fractured reflection. The mirror's capacity to retain and circulate affect also resonates with Bennett's understanding of vibrant matter and thing-power (Bennett 3, 6). Its affective force does not derive solely from symbolic meaning but from its participation as a material actant within a broader assemblage of bodies, surfaces, and sensations (Bennett 23). Woolf thus presents reflection as an event produced collaboratively by human perception and material agency.

The most crucial mirror scene of the novel comes in the final moments of the pageant, when Miss La Trobe turns mirrors toward the audience itself. Rather than presenting the viewers a unified sense of national identity, the mirrors provide fractured, unstable images that undermine the idea of historical continuity that the pageant aims to depict. Here, Woolf changes the mirror from a reflective object into an affective surface that spreads dread through the collective body of the audience: "Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves" (Woolf 219)? Mirrors are a symbol of social dread, and they help to transmit it, forcing the audience to face the chaotic atmosphere of a society that anticipates a catastrophe. In other words, this scene signals the collapse of stable spectatorship. The spectators are no longer distant witnesses to national history, but they are materially involved in the affective uncertainty surrounding the upcoming war. The sonic fragmentation linked to the gramophone evolves into a visual fragmentation in the novel's affective atmosphere, which is articulated through mirrors, extending anticipatory trauma beyond sound to fragmented collective perception.

The fragmentation shown in the mirrors necessarily converges in the composition of the pageant itself. The performance seeks to construct a cohesive narrative of English history, yet it always devolves into interruptions, discontinuities and formal instability. Aylin Atilla states, "the pageant seems to attempt to define the prevailing sense of fragmentation and isolation in the modern world and its

historical basis" (80). The formal instability of the pageant is not merely a theatrical failure but a direct consequence of the affective materiality of its physical environment. The pageant transcends material affect. Its interruptions convey societal dread and deliberately produce anticipatory trauma through the dynamic interaction of theatrical performance, sound, material objects, weather, animals, and audience. Affective intensity originates from the assemblage itself, rather than from individual psychological reactions. The collapse of theatrical coherence also reflects Saint-Amour's reconfiguration of trauma temporality, in which the anticipated future becomes a source of present injury rather than merely a deferred historical event (Saint-Amour 7–8). Rather than representing the aftermath of catastrophe, the interruptions stage the instability generated by an anticipated future. The pageant therefore performs anticipatory trauma formally, allowing the future war to reshape the present before its historical arrival. While Miss La Trobe endeavours to sustain a coherent narrative of English history, non-human actants disrupt the performance, exerting their own "thing-power" over the human script. As Jane Goldman remarks, Woolf's technique "extends beyond the individual lyric impulse to include other voices and incidental objects" (85). In this context, Woolf portrays that "cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness" (165-66), implying that the landscape is an active participant in the composition of the pageant. These environmental disruptions serve as anticipatory indicators of the impending disaster; they embody the "the interminable geopolitical suspense" that Saint-Amour associates with the pre-war state, particularly Woolf skilfully uses in her fiction (Saint-Amour 96), wherein the stability of historical representation is physically undermined by the vibrant, uncontrollable forces of the material world. Moreover, the inherent frailty of the pageant's costumes including "cardboard crowns, swords made of silver paper, turbans that were sixpenny dish cloths" (Woolf 77) embodies the fragile nature of European civilisation. By highlighting the improvised quality of these historical garments, Woolf demonstrates that the shelter of national heritage is as unstable as the physical textures of the stage, shaking under the material burden of a world on the edge of catastrophe.

Beyond the materiality of objects and spaces, Woolf ultimately inscribes anticipatory trauma into the texture of language itself. Repetition, interruption, ellipsis, and linguistic fragmentation turn language from a transparent medium of representation into an affective structure that enacts unease and suspension. With the repetitions of the phrases like "empty, empty, empty" and "silent, silent, silent" (Woolf 47), the rhythmic intensities of the expressions exceed semantic meaning to circulate affectively throughout the text. Hence, war emerges not only as a thematic catastrophe but also through the instability of linguistic form itself. Woolf's disjointed sentence structures and broken speech patterns show a world where language is no longer capable of stabilising perception, history, and collective experience within an affective atmosphere of an approaching catastrophe.

Conclusion

Between the Acts represents catastrophe not as a fully realised historical event, but as an affective condition already circulating through material environments, bodily experience, and fragmented acts of perception. This article reveals that Woolf turns the atmosphere of imminent warfare into a pervasive sensory experience distributed across objects, sounds, architectural spaces, and visual surfaces, through a combination of affect theory, material studies, and anticipatory trauma. The mechanical stutter of the gramophone, the shattered reflections of mirrors, the unstable textures of Pointz Hall, and the interruptions of the pageant both serve as symbolic representations of crisis and as affective agents that materialise the felt pressure of a forthcoming disaster. In this way, the novel opens up the possibility of understanding trauma not solely as a retrospective experience but also as an affective condition shaped by anticipation and impending catastrophe.

Woolf locates trauma in memory and psychic aftermath as well as in a pre-traumatic universe in which matter itself absorbs and distributes collective anxiety. The instability of language, the collapse of coherent spectatorship and the fragmentation of historical narrative all create an affective atmosphere where representation collapses repeatedly in terms of the looming threat of war. This interwar cultural moment is defined by a "proleptic" preoccupation with ruins and fragments, which establishes Woolf's modernist aesthetic as an "active form" of response to political crisis (Snaith 2). Therefore, her modernist experimentation is a formal innovation as well as a response to the sensory and historical conditions of late-1930s England. As Ryan suggests, this form of modernist ethics is "embedded in material relations between human and nonhuman, culture and nature, and that gains its force through experiments in both content and form" (300). Through this experimentation, *Between the Acts* marks how ordinary existence is transformed into a state of suspended anticipation through its affective materiality, where disaster exists not yet as an actual occurrence but as vibration, interruption, and atmospheric intensity. In doing so, the novel shifts from material affect, in which objects merely mediate human emotion, to affective materiality, in which matter itself participates in producing affective intensity. Consequently, trauma emerges not as an exclusively human psychological condition but as an ontological event distributed across material environments and nonhuman actants. This study explores the novel via the integration of materiality, affect and anticipatory trauma, arguing that Woolf reconceptualises trauma as a state of living toward disaster, showing how the future may already be in the textures, objects, and silences of the present.

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