

**THE KING OF FOOLS AND THE BISHOP OF UNREASON:  
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S CARNIVALISQUE VISION IN *BETWEEN  
THE ACTS*\***

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Impelled by the urgency of a society threatened by the imminence of an international conflict, along with the oppressive impositions of growing fascism, Virginia Woolf proposes a radically unconventional insight into this world through the determined subversion of the established values and patterns. Accordingly, it is by setting up a carnivalesque pageant of the world, ruled over by a catalogue of grotesques directly inherited from the carnival tradition, such as the King of Fools or the Abbot of Unreason – its ecclesiastical embodiment - that the narrator is enabled to promote the erosion and debunking of any form of centralized authority. Furthermore, as pertains to a carnival paradigm and its politics of praise and abuse, only through the debasement of the self-enclosing, monadic forms of power operating either in the name of royalty, Empire, religion, or patriarchy, will the process of regeneration of those prevailing structures and conceptions be thus fostered.

**Keywords:** *carnival, grotesque, subversion, Modernism, narrative*

Impulsada por la urgencia de una sociedad ineludiblemente amenazada por la inminencia de un conflicto internacional, así como por las opresivas imposiciones del creciente fascismo, Virginia Woolf propone una visión radicalmente distinta con respecto a dicha sociedad a través de la subversión radical de los valores y modelos establecidos. De este modo, será mediante una carnavalesca representación del mundo,

regido por una serie de grotescas figuras, directamente heredadas de la tradición del carnaval, tales como el Rey Bufón o el Obispo de la Locura – la versión eclesiástica de éste – lo que permita al narrador promover el destronamiento de toda forma centralizada de autoridad. Asimismo, tal y como corresponde al paradigma del carnaval y su política de alabanza-mofa, será precisamente la degradación e inversión de las formas de poder basadas en el monadismo y la imposición dictatorial, las cuales operan en el nombre de la monarquía, el imperio, la religión o el patriarcado, lo que posibilitará el proceso de regeneración de las estructuras y concepciones vigentes.

**Palabras clave:** *carnaval, subversión, Modernismo, narrativa.*

In the midst of a society threatened by the repressive forces of fascism and the imminence of an international conflict, Virginia Woolf advocates for a profound transformation of a system on the verge of collapse, yet paradoxically anchored to outmoded models. As the narrator envisions it, only through the subversiveness and decentralization inherent to the carnival paradigm, with its proposal of a *monde à l'envers*, will a real renovation of the cultural and socio-political bases underlying interwar Britain be enabled. Accordingly, the pivotal structures of power in British society, such as Empire, religion, monarchy, or canonical beliefs are subjected to a dramatic revision and subsequent debasement. At the same time, a whole microcosm of grotesque figures is brought to the fore in order to accomplish the final debunking of that anachronous post-Victorian society. As a result, in keeping with carnivalesque principles, and tallied with the destruction of the old order, the prospect of an invigorated world, released from the manacles of oppression and preceptive tradition, glimmers beneath the narrative in Woolf's last novel.

At the core of those grotesques populating the carnivalistic universe in *Between the Acts*, there lies the Carnival Fool or King of Fools. A constant within the carnival paradigm, this figure has been identified

as a scapegoat or communal expiatory victim. Indeed, invariably receiving the scorn and harassment of the rest, the carnival Fool functions as the vehicle whereby collective evils and pains are expelled from the community and disposed of through symbolical or actual destruction of the carrier. Tracing back the origins of this Fool, Frazer finds its earlier roots in ancient civilizations, where not rarely, it was embodied by flesh-and-bone figures. In his study, the anthropologist notes the dual nature of the Carnival Fool as both the King, representative of the highest social, political, or even religious authority, and as a ridiculous personage, mostly characterized by its utter grotesqueness:

We have seen that in Italy, Spain, and France, that is, in the countries where the influence of Rome has been deepest and most lasting, a conspicuous feature of the Carnival is a burlesque figure personifying the festive season, which after a short career of glory and dissipation is publicly shot, burnt, or otherwise destroyed, to the feigned grief of genuine delight of the populace. If the view here suggested of the Carnival is correct, this grotesque personage is no other than a direct successor of the old King of the Saturnalia. (Frazer, 1913: 312)

In *Between the Acts*, Albert is inescapably appointed as a Carnival Fool. Overtly referred to as “the village idiot” and apparently mentally-impaired, Albert fits into Bakhtin's postulate of the twofold nature of that buffoon/monarch. Along with this duality, a further bi-dimensionality concerns this personage. Thus, while this king, ensuing his crowning, is beaten and ridiculed, Bakhtin also acknowledges him as the one acting as a herald and exponent of the new optics provided by the carnival sense of the world. Chiming in with this, his foolery becomes a means of getting rid of the official, false truth of the world, thereby gazed from a diametrically different perspective (Bakhtin, 1984a: 49).

Accordingly, it is Albert, this acknowledged fool, who dares to enact precisely “the unacted part” of each of us (Woolf, 1992a: 179). Scorned and despaired by the attendants to the village pageant around

which the novel revolves, Albert stands for “something hidden, the unconscious as they call it?” (Woolf, 1992a: 179). This observation by Reverend Streatfield signals Albert as the purest essence of the carnivalesque celebration, whereby man in the Middle Ages was temporarily allowed to live his second and most authentic life, unbounded from the oppressiveness and alienation entailed by the official one (Bakhtin, 1984b: 129-130). In this regard, Albert incarnates that fooled and decrowned expiatory figure through which societies can progress and survive. Thus, the remark by different characters in the novel, such as Mrs. Elmhurst or Mrs. Parker, admitting the existence of an idiot in every village – “‘The village idiot’, whispered [...] Mrs. Elmhurst [...] who came from a village ten miles distant where they, too, had an idiot” (Woolf, 1992a: 79), directly echoes Freud's notion of this figure. Hence, the psychologist agrees with Frazer on noting the prevalence of this collective fool since ancient times. Moreover, Freud highlights its relevance as he observes the pervasive nature of this victimized figure throughout the centuries as a necessary safety valve for the endurance of societies. As he has affirmed, civilizations become more solid insofar as they may have “other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness” (Freud, 1949: 51). As a matter of fact, in the middle of a strictly-ruled society, still imbued by the haunting presence of the Victorian spirit, Woolf revisits the ancient past to poise the nearly rhetorical question - “‘(s)urely [...], we're more civilized?’” (Woolf, 1992a: 100) – as voiced by Mrs. Parker, one of the attendants to the pageant. In the light of the evident answer, in a nation crowded with technological developments – though paradoxically on the verge of an international conflict – the inclusion of Albert, a patently carnivalesque buffoon, brings down the as rigid as inefficient system of values.

Indeed, it is precisely Albert who, in the midst of the conventionalisms surrounding the Elizabethan period which is being performed on stage, overtly laughs at the audience, “leering at each in turn” (Woolf, 1992a: 78). In keeping with the system of carnivalistic obscenities and profanations that constitute, for Bakhtin, a form of “debasement” and “bringing down to earth” whatever is officially worshipped as high and elevated (Bakhtin, 1984a: 123), Albert's openly lewd attitude to Queen Elizabeth contributes to the decrowning of the domineering and monolithic authority she represents: “Now he

was picking and plucking at Great Eliza's skirts. She cuffed him on the ear. He tweaked her back. He was enjoying himself immensely [...] There he was pinching the Queen's skirts" (Woolf, 1992a: 78-79).

Nevertheless, this is not the only means through which political power is decried. Alluded to as "old Queen Bess" or "Great Eliza," the eminent and dominant figure of Queen Elizabeth is actually unmasked as merely Eliza Clark, the village tobacco-seller. Furthermore, despite the ironical remark that "(s)he was splendidly dressed up" (Woolf, 1992a: 76), her appearance is no more dignifying – falling yet in the category of the grotesque aesthetics. In this sense, her "pearl-hung" head emerging from a ruff comes to epitomize the carnivalesque dismemberment whereby natural limits become transgressed and over-exceeded as a means of degradation of the conventionally superior (Bakhtin, 1984a: 189).

Similarly, her "splendid" royal vestments amount in fact to ridiculous fakes of their original referents. This is the case of the "sixpenny brooches [glaring] like cats' eyes" –instead of the commonly expected and more majestic tiger's eyes – that adorn the Queen's garments, or the down-looking pearls that complete her attire. At the same time, the delusive depiction of her allegedly silver regal acquires a patently carnivalesque overtone reminiscent of the portrayal of Don Quixote, as concerns the description of kitchen utensils elevated to the rank of royal vestments: "her cape was made of cloth of silver – in fact swabs used to scour the saucepans" (Woolf, 1992a: 76).

Mounted on what turns out to be a soap-box, serving as "perhaps a rock on the ocean," the Queen reaches a grotesquely "gigantic" size, symptomatic of carnivalesque excesses. In tune with the system of carnival inversions, the Queen is literally straight away brought down from her intended summit in the midst of the ocean as the invincible commander of the Armada, to become disparaged to the status of a mere pawn placed, at the own will of the narrator, behind a counter in a shop: "(a)nd when she mounted the soap-box in the centre, representing perhaps a rock in the ocean, her size made her appear gigantic. She could reach a fitch of bacon or haul a tub of oil with one sweep of her arm in the shop" (Woolf, 1992a: 76). Such a form of degradation and reversal of the wheel of social hierarchies

reverberates of a similar episode in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the latter, the very Prime Minister becomes debased to the position of a “poor chap” selling biscuits. Ironically, as in the case of the Queen, the politician attempts to shield his own preposterousness behind the pomp and arrogance of his acts:

One couldn't laugh at him. He looked so ordinary. You might have stood him behind a counter and bought biscuits – poor chap, all rigged up in gold lace. And to be fair, as he went his rounds, first with Clarissa, then with Richard escorting him, he did it very well. He tried to look somebody. It was amusing to watch. Nobody looked at him. They just went on talking, yet it was perfectly plain that they all knew [...] this majesty passing; this symbol of what they all stood for, English society. (Woolf, 1992b: 188-189)

Simultaneously, the association of the Queen with greasy food tallies with the numerous excesses associated with the carnival banquet. Bakhtin notes the enumeration of different sorts of venom and poultry in Rabelais' *Gargantua*, one of the most outstanding examples of carnivalized literature (Bakhtin, 1984a: 268). By all reckonings, the Queen's decrowning becomes evident. Hence, her presentation as “(t)he Queen of this great land” is overwhelmed by a “roar of laughter,” which is implicitly continued when Giles Oliver mutters “(l)laughter, loud laughter” (Woolf, 1992a: 78). As pertains to carnival principles, popular laughter utterly destroys official authority. Hence, even when Eliza has forgotten her lines, it is actually unnoticed – “the audience laughed so loud that it did not matter” (Woolf, 1992a: 78). Likewise, while Shakespeare is supposed to sing for her – as expressed through her lines – it is in fact “a cow moo[ing]” and “a bird twitter[ing]” that can be heard (Woolf, 1992a: 78). The impersonal gramophone also partakes in this demeanour through its sudden emission of cacophonous sounds which overlap the Queen's tentative monologue. Furthermore, along with the disruption of linearity in art, represented by the chaotic reproduction of classical melodies, the discordance of the gramophone's emissions is linked to the drink excess that is typical of carnival celebrations: “The tune on the gramophone reeled from side to side as if drunk with merriment”

(Woolf, 1992a: 77). Indeed, a literal decrowning and ripping-off of the Queen's clothes ultimately confirms the derision of the centrality represented by the monarch when, not accidentally, her ruff is unpinned and her skirts "picked" and "plucked", while "the wind [gives] a tug at her head dress," which becomes undone (Woolf, 1992a: 77).

Poignantly satiric and iconoclastic as this political mockery becomes, this is not yet the only form of institutional defilement in *Between the Acts*. Along with politics, religion, the other Victorian colossus, undergoes a similar debunking from its hegemonic position. Steadfastly committed to destroying the oppressive manacles of an outmoded Victorian system, Woolf never ignored the inestimable potential of ancient rituals and imagery for debasing pre-fixed conventions. Actually, as a direct inheritor of those ancient traditions, carnival imagery displayed a huge range of weapons for the derision and final annihilation of those anachronous values.

In the novel, the most bluntly irreverent act occurs during the performance of the village pageant commemorating British history – significantly, while the Victorian period is being enacted. Hence, in one of its acts, the celebration of a mass is taking place when, in the middle of the parson's prayers, a fake donkey embodied by Albert suddenly irrupts on the stage at the same time as it shows how its "hindquarters [...] became active" (Woolf, 1992a: 153). Blasphemy is taken to the utmost when, coinciding with this episode, the priest's homily paradoxically announces "a happy homecoming<sup>1</sup> with bodies refreshed by thy bounty, and minds inspired by thy wisdom" (Woolf, 1992a: 153-154).

This bizarre inclusion of the ass into the pageant directly remits to the Festivals of the Ass described by Frazer. As a variation of the Festival of Fools, the anthropologist observes the celebration in France of mock masses which, even though recalling the biblical episode of Mary's Flight to Egypt, were yet centred upon the figure of an ass. In these rituals, once the animal had been introduced into the church and positioned by the altar, the priest initiated the ceremony, which consisted of mixed "scraps" from different services. In keeping with the desacralized character of these celebrations, the intervals between

the acts of the mass were spent on drinking, while the ceremony ended with the merry mingling of the attendants, who joined the ass in a festive dance. The rite often continued with the participants marching in a procession towards a great theatre opposite the church, where dowdy parodies were performed:

Amongst the buffooneries of the Festival of Fools one of the most remarkable was the introduction of an ass into the church, where various pranks were played with the animal [...] and on [its] entering the sacred edifice [...] a parody of the mass was performed [...] A young girl with a child in her arms rode on the back of the ass in imitation of the flight into Egypt. Escorted by the clergy and the people she was led in triumph from the cathedral to the parish church of St. Stephen. There she and her ass were introduced into the chancel and stationed on the left side of the altar; and a long mass was performed which consisted of scraps borrowed indiscriminately from the services of many church festivals throughout the year. In the intervals the singers quenched their thirst: the congregation imitated their example; and the ass was fed and watered. The services over, the animal was brought from the chancel into the nave, where the whole congregation, clergy and laity mixed up together, danced round the animal and brayed like asses. Finally, after vespers and compline, the merry procession, led by the precentor and preceded by a huge lantern, defiled through the streets to wind up the day with indecent farces in a great theatre erected opposite the church. (Frazer, 1913: 335-336)

In the light of this, the pageant in Pointz Hall is not exempt from its own “festival of the ass.” Indeed, during the course of those fictional religious services, a donkey – even a commonly less noble version of the ass – also breaks into the mock church. Though not riding the animal, the presence of a young woman carrying a child is suggested by Isa Oliver, who significantly makes frequent references to her son. Moreover, in the name of parody, the divine child of the tradition becomes dubbed by Manresa, the whimsically childish lady

who, recurrently throughout the story, is alluded to as a “wild child of nature”. Nevertheless, if this pageant, which Reverend Streatfield describes by means of the same miscellaneous quality as the ass festival – a composite of “(s)craps, orts, and fragments” (Woolf, 1992a: 173) – is paramount within the narrative, no less emphasis is made on the intervals, which in fact provide the title for the novel. It is precisely during these periods between the acts, as in the ancient version observed by Frazer, that the audience gather together in the Barn to have tea. Not accidentally, the place is portrayed at the beginning of the narrative as a Greek temple, right of the same age and stone as the church:

Those who had been to Greece always said it reminded them of a temple [...] The roof was weathered red-orange; and inside it was a hollow hall, sun-shafted, brown, [...] dark when the doors were shut, but splendidly illuminated when the doors at the end stood open [...] (Woolf, 1992a: 24)

This exaltation of the Barn as a sacred place inexorably dooms it, according to the carnivalistic maxims governing this microcosm, to its own decrowning. As Bakhtin notes in his taxonomy of carnivalesque principles, any act of enhancement or crowning is invariably linked in carnival to the idea of degradation – or decrowning – of the previously elevated:

Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the start. And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester; this act, as it were, opens and sanctifies the inside-out world of carnival. In the ritual of crowning all aspects of the actual ceremony – the symbols of authority that are handed over to the newly crowned king and the clothing in which he is dressed – all become ambivalent and acquire a veneer of joyful relativity; they become almost stage props [...]; their symbolic meaning becomes two-leveled. From the very beginning, a decrowning glimmers through the crowning. (Bakhtin, 1984b: 124-125)

Thus, formerly revered as a sanctuary of tradition and a religious symbol, the Barn is afterwards implicitly profaned and degraded as merely a tea-place, whereby it is relocated onto that lower stratum suggested by Bakhtin. Mr. Hardcastle's speech is later continued by Reverend Streatfield, a confessed "fool" who cannot conceal his own grotesqueness (Woolf, 1992a: 170-171). Yet, his attempted discourse is continually interrupted, as in its French equivalent, by the spontaneous irruption of animal sounds, which overlap his words to the extent of becoming "painfully audible" (Woolf, 1992a: 175).

Significantly, once the mock mass is over in Pointz Hall, "a procession" is formed under the implicit guidance of the lamplight in the Victorian play – a reminiscence of the lantern in the ass parade. This is followed by boldly lewd acts which, initiated by the donkey's "becoming active," covertly find their continuance through the character of Budge, whose part as a policeman evidences a preposterous image of contemporary authority. Furthermore, his performance is clearly presided by a grotesquely obscene overtone, as is suggested by his immutable position "truncheon in hand" while ironically guarding the respectability, prosperity, and purity of Victoria's land (Woolf, 1992a: 146). In fact, his ludicrous semblance constitutes a patent mockery of the purity he paradoxically tries to preserve in a land which has though corrupted itself with anachronous precepts incapable of avoiding national disaster. Additionally, the figure of Budge, "truncheon in hand," epitomizes the masculine struggle for preserving women within the hard carcass that maintains them under male dominance. Through him, Woolf denounces the prevalence of an ideological apparatus aimed at buttressing male control, thereby allowing scarce opportunities for the Victorian middle-class woman. Indeed, poisoned with the same ideals, women themselves had come to accept a system of values which strictly circumscribed their role within marriage. Hence, in her manual for married women – *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* – Sarah Stickney Ellis reminds women of "[...] the superiority of your husband simply as a man" (Ellis, 1843: 53).

In this regard, the incongruous figure of Budge, the policeman – actually identified by his neighbours as a drunkard – enacts the decrowning of the Victorian attempt for imposing the patriarchal rule,

conceived as "God's law as laid down by man" (Marcus, 1987: 152). This, along with the "truncheon" that symbolizes the power of the absolute supremacy of patriarchal institutions, becomes determinedly subverted and belittled as merely the deplorable spectacle of a drunkard.

In resemblance to the merry dance after the mock mass, where, as Frazer recounts, the priest and his parishioners mixed together to dance and bray round the ass, once the pageant is over, the whole congregation in Pointz Hall gather together on the stage. In the midst of the great "jangle" and "din" that preside over the joyous festival, animals and men alike join the celebration. Moreover, as in the case of the braying men in its French equivalent, the audience in Pointz Hall experience a dramatic transgression of natural borders to the extent that "the barriers which should divide Man the Master from the Brute were dissolved" (Woolf, 1992a: 165).

At the heart of this clerical parody, an extended variant of the Carnival King is represented by what Frazer baptized as "The Bishop of Fools" or "Abbot of Unreason" (Frazer, 1913: 312). In the carnival market-place of Pointz Hall, this figure is accurately embodied by the character of Reverend Streatfield. Mounting on the soap-box, the clergyman – as his precursor, "Queen Bess" – initiates his own dethroning. Thus, "the most grotesque and entire [...] of all incongruous sights" (Woolf, 1992a: 170-171), no sooner as Streatfield emerges, the Reverend is mocked and "laughed at by looking-glasses," as the idiot he acknowledges himself to be (Woolf, 1992a: 172). Insofar as the priest is a patent fool and the donkey becomes the centre of the religious celebration, it cannot be other quality than the Folly that is to be worshipped. It is precisely Hogben's Folly, the field where Pointz Hall stands, that is praised by Miss La Trobe as "the very place [...] for a pageant" (Woolf, 1992a: 52-53).

Determined to scapegoat the former character as an epitome of restrictive authority and censorship, the narrator endowed the derided priest with a multidimensional quality. On the other hand, by virtue of his identity as a carnival fool, Streatfield is constantly derided throughout the narrative and decrowned from his attempted authority. Hence, while he intends to gain the admiration of the villagers, his

only sight merely provokes the laughter of his neighbours. Furthermore, even though he thrives to become a leader for a community traditionally aimed as the passive targets of his speeches, his attempts are reiteratively sabotaged by background noises that either mutilate his discourse – “(t)he word was cut in two. A zoom severed it” (Woolf, 1992a: 174) – or annihilate his utterances:

He looked at the audience; then up at the sky. The whole lot of them, gentles and simples, felt embarrassed, for him, for themselves. There he stood their representative spokesman; their symbol; themselves; a butt, a clod, laughed at by looking-glasses; ignored by the cows, condemned by the clouds which continued their majestic rearrangement of the celestial landscape; an irrelevant forked stake in the flow and majesty of the summer silent world.

His first words (the breeze had risen; the leaves were rustling) were lost. Then he was heard saying: ‘What.’ To that word he added another ‘Message;’ and at last a whole sentence emerged; not comprehensible [...] ‘I have been asking myself’ —the words were repeated — what meaning, or message, this pageant was meant to convey?’ [...] ‘I will offer, very humbly [...] my interpretation.’ (Woolf, 1992a: 171)

Aside from this, the Reverend's role within the pageant entails further complexity. Thus, in her accounts of the celebrations of the primitive carnival, Jane Harrison had noted the presence of a ritual wooden pole which, placed in the middle of the acts performed on occasion of the festivity, was perceived as a symbol of the rite. Accordingly, this branch, which necessarily included a blossoming spring, was intended as an omen of the regenerated life that was to come after the removal of whatever old and waste (Harrison, 1913: 57-59). Significantly, Reverend Streatfield, a “symbol” of the celebration in Pointz Hall (Woolf, 1992a: 171), comes to embody the maypole described in one of the Spring songs Harrison retrieves that were intoned, precisely, at ancient religious celebrations:

A branch of May we have brought you,  
And at your door it stands;  
It is a sprout that is well budded out,  
The work of our Lord's hands. (Harrison, 1913: 59)

In the novel's desacralized version of the Lord-modelled branch, Streatfield is identified as "a piece of traditional church furniture, [...] a corner cupboard, or the top beam of a gate fashioned by generations of village carpenters after some lost-in-the-mists-of-antiquity model" (Woolf, 1992a: 171). In keeping with that wooden/vegetable quality, the priest literally emerges from the ground. Concomitantly, he is considered as a "representative spokesman" for the community (Woolf, 1992a: 171). Self-appointed as the centripetal nucleus where the core meaning of the celebration is encapsulated, the Reverend turns into the actual maypole of the events in Pointz Hall.

Certainly, an actual Spring Festival arises from the celebration of the pageant, which additionally includes, as in Harrison's outline of the ritual, its respective King and Queen of the May Day. Accordingly, Mrs. Manresa, portrayed from the very beginning as "the Queen of the Festival," is explicitly bound to Giles, whom she has pointed as "[her] sulky hero" (Woolf, 1992a: 96). As pertains to carnival fools, Giles, who at a certain moment reveals his expiatory role through his "pose of one who bears the burden of the world's woe" (Woolf, 1992a: 100), suffers the harassment he cryptically inflicts on himself. Hence, previous to his lamentation, Giles had been exerted his cruelty upon a snake he had come across:

There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow, the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the Barn, with blood on his shoes. (Woolf 1992a: 89)

In fact, a covert form of self-victimization is suggested through this episode, whereby the snake “crouched in the grass” comes to reverberate a former image of Mr. Oliver, who had identified himself as “a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass” (Woolf, 1992a: 67).

Like that ancient pole, which should retain “a bunch of dark green foliage [...] as a memento that in it we have to do, not with a dead pole, but with a living tree from the greenwood” (Harrison, 1913: 60), Streatfield escapes his inertness to reveal some signs of his humanized side, evidenced by the tobacco stains in his forefinger. This fact “mitigated the horror” of his existential woodenness (Woolf, 1992a: 171). In her account of ancient rites, Harrison also quotes the description of the Cambridge May Day by Stubbs. According to the Puritan writer, the ritual maypole, after having been ceremonially carried by a yoke of oxen, was followed by men, women, and children alike, who worshipped it “with great d(e)votion” (cf. Harrison, 1913: 60). Stubbs continues to define the maypole as the “perfect patterne” of a heathen idol, “or rather the thyng itself” (cf. Harrison, 1913: 60).

Nevertheless, in keeping with the carnival sense of the world pervading *Between the Acts*, the sole attempt for leadership is doomed to appear as “an intolerable constriction, contraction, and reduction to simplified absurdity” (Woolf 1992a: 171). Hereby, Streatfield becomes “an irrelevant forked stake,” merely “a prominent bald branch” which, in opposition to the Cambridge maypole – transported by oxen – is condemned to remain “ignored by the cows” (Woolf, 1992a: 171).

As had been pointed out above, regarding his role as a carnival fool, Streatfield acts as a carrier of hope and life into the community of Pointz Hall, whose members eventually converge in a patently carnivalesque *mésalliance* encompassing Budge the policeman and Queen Bess, along with the Age of Reason, the foreparts of the donkey, the corrupt Mrs. Hardcastle, or the personified little England. Furthermore, it is after the speech of Streatfield, the “representative spokesman” (Woolf, 1992a: 171), that the narrator exposes her purpose of setting up a carnivalistic universe which, upon the removal of the barriers among individuals, should bring to a same level “(t)he

peasants; the kings; the fool and' (she swallowed) 'ourselves?'" (Woolf, 1992a: 192).

In conclusion, as the narrator envisions it, only by offering a deconventionalized portrayal of late Victorian society, in which the hierarchical poles of centralized power and extreme foolery become blurred, is it possible to demolish the authoritarian order enveloping the entire political and socio-cultural scaffolding. In particular, this transformation becomes imperative once the deformed lenses of that Victorian heritage have proven their pernicious inefficiency to focus the reality of a world in constant change and evolution.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Note the obscene overtone of this word, whose second lexeme may denote the moment of sexual climax.

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