“I Now, I Then”:
The Ecstatic Moment, Real Time and the Narration of Self in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*.

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It is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person;
I do not altogether know who I am.
(Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*)

…Of these visionary flowers
I made a nosegay, bound in such a way / that […]
Kept these imprisoned children of the Hours
Within my hand.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘The Question’)

Let us stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made.
Let it blaze against the yew trees.
One life. There. It is over. Gone out.
(Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*)
For Laura

1991 — 2015

“I cry because everything is so beautiful and so short”

(Marina Keegan, The Opposite of Loneliness)
On the 27th February 1926, Virginia Woolf began her diary entry by asking perhaps the most daunting of metaphysical questions: “Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on and say ‘this is it’?” (Diaries 207). Indeed, she continued, “what is it? And shall I die before I can find it?” (207). Those unfamiliar with Woolf’s writing would expect (and not unreasonably so) such questions to remain elusive and rhetorical. Yet what one learns upon reading not only her novels, but also her autobiographical and critical writings is that Woolf did not dwell, as many of her predecessors did, in the realm of aimless superfluity. Her tireless struggle was to capture the flighty vicissitudes of life within the parameters of a narrative structure that would allow her to express, as fully as language would permit, the reality of time’s passing. And though, by 1931 when The Waves was finally published, Woolf had already written what many of her contemporaries would have considered truly remarkable narratives of life — Mrs Dalloway, To The Lighthouse and Orlando — it was upon reading The Waves, ensconced in the garden-room in the orchard at Monk’s House, that Leonard Woolf remarked to his wife: “It is a masterpiece […] the best of your books” (302).

It is not hard to conceive of what Leonard meant when he said this, nor is it hard to understand his concern when he commented to an excited, but nervous Virginia, that the first hundred pages would prove “extremely difficult” for the “common reader” (Diaries 302). Indeed, The Waves is not a book one can pick up for a day’s reading, put down and feel satisfied. It is a book which warrants much more than the attention of a single-sitting and it is a book which unapologetically demands this of its reader. Within those hauntingly beautiful, lyrical and immeasurably rich first hundred pages, we are immersed not only in the clamor, fear and joy of the lives of Woolf’s central six characters, but also in the rolling iterations of the interluding waves. Multiple concepts of time emerge as Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Jinny, Neville, Louis and the ever-
silent, but no less enigmatic, Percival embark on their voyage from the pastoral spoils of childhood towards the ever impinging realization of their own mortality. Through the singularity of her narrative technique Woolf is able to accentuate the individualized and at points, paradoxically, shared experience of temporality, by allowing each of her characters to narrate a notion of time that is both subtly and markedly different. Whether whirling through the woods at Elvedon, or flowing, as Jinny so often does, through crowds of waist-coated young men in the ballrooms of London, or teetering on the edge of “the cadaverous space of [a] puddle,” fearful to cross from one moment to another, Woolf’s characters offer no one answer to the “it” she so laboriously seeks in her diaries (Woolf, The Waves 47). For Woolf, the task of the writer was not, as her predecessors had successfully done, to capture life “just an inch or two on the wrong side,” but to recognize “[one’s] own strangeness walking on the earth,” and ask “who am I, what am I and so on?” (‘Modern Fiction’ 159). The “it” then was not so much concerned with establishing the answer to the mystery of life (and lives) in time, as it was with the process of living (and writing) in a time that is perpetually passing.

Time for Woolf is ever evolving, built upon and meticulously examined. It is multi layered, touches many registers simultaneously and strains at the limits of what narrative and language have historically deemed it possible to express. It flows, it stops, it starts. Time is at once held still and also in flux, continuous, complex and progressing toward some end point. There is a beginning but perhaps only in the narrative sense that there is a first page, an initial word. Indeed, time is so much more than ‘now’ and ‘then’ in this novel. At one moment obliged to stand sentinel over a moment at risk of being “blown for ever outside the loop of time,” at another the characters feel sure of their primordial identities, ready to “join the innumerable congregations of past time” on that “illumined and everlasting road” (The Waves 110). Time exists in moments, in
objects of the past and present and in the little shocks that remind Woolf and her characters they are still alive.

*The Waves* then requires a more challenging and to some degree divisive theoretical reading that will take into consideration not only the temporal landscape of the narrative as a whole, but the way in which this landscape is reproduced, altered and transposed onto individual narratives living in a collective and largely intersubjective time. Time is a nebulous concept and thus to shape discussion, time here will be examined with reference to the notion of ‘real time’ exploring what it means for time to be ‘real’ and how such time is employed and plays out in this very singular work. Real time does not aim to merely claim that time exists, but that it exists in such a way that all aspects of experienced time become and are viewed as being equally important. Coined from Ann Banfield’s essay on the influence of Cambridge time to Woolf’s work, real time becomes a way in which Woolfian temporality may be examined through the complex philosophical lenses of 20th Century thinkers, Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore. However, this essay will push the notion of real time further in an effort to draw out and draw upon an aesthetic that fundamentally concerns itself with the question of whether time flows or passes.

Real time notes the centrality of space, place, body and embodiment in Woolf’s narrative temporality as well as the restrictions of structure and how such restrictions make pertinent the question of identity and how identities can be tracked and sustained throughout time. It values

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1 I posit ‘real time’ here as the narrative structure of Woolf’s novel, a time that values both sides of the temporal binary and a concept of time that refutes the notion that this text may be viewed as a ‘stream of consciousness’ narrative.

2 Michael Lackey argues, “using philosophy to analyze and interpret [Woolf’s] corpus places the critic at odds with [her] political and aesthetic agenda” (76) He goes on to state that characterizations, such as that of Mr Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse*, not only challenge philosophy’s “most treasured axioms,” but deliver the “death blow to philosophy itself” (76). Whilst I see Lackey’s stance as somewhat of an exaggeration, I appreciate his desire to remain respectful to Woolf both as a person and a writer. That being said, it is hard to imagine what other word one could adopt when referring to Woolf’s political ideas and unique aesthetic expression.
highly the relationship held between subjects and objects and the movement between life and death. Real time dwells in the uncertain region between the psychic and the physical, and is most potently felt in the moment of collision between these two spaces. Indeed, time relies on the ability to be retold, restored and relived through a narrative that makes sense to its audience. Memories begin, end and attach themselves to other memories; they are sutured to moments in the physical world and the narratives they create harbor identities. To recount, to tell a story from a fragment, to write lives into books is, as Paul Ricoeur argues, to acknowledge “temporality [as] that structure of existence that [reaches] language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent” (169). In *The Waves* it is not so much narrative in general that Woolf hopes to elude, but the homogenized notion of it as being a linear thread from beginning to end. The characters of such novels are unaware of the pressures of time. They do not experience as Woolf and Bernard do the frustration of being unable to “get down” in words all the “myriad impressions” one unconsciously “nets” everyday (*Diaries* 191). There appears “no time to stop and write” and no time to note the exactitude of time’s passing in narratives that do their best to avoid difficult questions of temporality (191). Whilst Russell and Moore interest themselves primarily in the ontology and teleology of time, Woolf was involved in a highly personal pursuit to capture the affect of time in language, in characterization and in narrative. Her goal in *The Waves* then was to recognize, metafictively and structurally through narrative, the fact that “in the novel there is always a clock” (Banfield, 475).

As much as real time asserts the necessity of both psychic and physical time by upholding “the Russelian division between the ‘fleeting’ world of ‘existence’ and the ‘unchanging’ world of ‘being,’” it leaves little space for the elongation of moments and provides limited explanation as to how the past is able to flow almost seamlessly along with and into the present
Though the notion of separate and distinct moments speaks to Woolf’s belief that life and time must not be read as “a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged,” but as “a luminous halo, […] surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end,” something is lost in not acknowledging the movement and the space that exists between these moments (Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’ 160). Indeed the complexities and nuanced nature of Woolf’s narrative time are most profoundly explored through moments, moments that swell with being and moments which remove it altogether. And it is these complexities, the duality of psychic and physical movement in real time and the rich moments of being that are, for Woolf, and her characters, what continue to make living, writing and existing worthwhile. As she writes in her diary at the close of 1932, “if one does not lie back and sum up and say to the moment, this very moment, stay you are so fair, what will be one’s gain, dying? […] No one ever says that enough. Always hurry” (Lee, 626).

For time as Woolf reads it is not, at its core, about the physical movement between one task to the next, but about the freedom and restrictions of an experience of time that acknowledges the futile and ambivalent nature of task-driven temporality. There are more layers to this time than merely the fulfillment of day to day tasks and the saying that ‘there is time to’, or that ‘time has run out’. What pervades the sense of time in The Waves is the collision between time and space, the disparity between the two and the ultimate reconciliation they must make in order to allow individual worlds to keep turning. Many sections of the novel capture the sensation of a time that urges forward, pushes back, is at once still and free flowing, but it is when the six, now adult, characters join together one last time to wish Percival well in India that this collision and complexity is most pertinently felt.
Carried along “by the general impulse” of the swelling tide of commuters crowding the platform at Euston station, Bernard allows his mind to slip beneath the surface of things, becoming as he does so a “pale-grey stream reflecting what passes” (Woolf, *The Waves* 84). His “past,” his “nose,” the “colour of [his] eyes” become unimportant in a rush of all time — a collation of the time of not only himself and his life, but the time of many: the time of the numerous men and women on this platform in North London (84). Caught in the flood he acknowledges the presence, beneath his feet, of many centuries of time, the “shells,” the “bones,” the “silence” (85). There is a futility in his present which allows him to disappear into the cacophony of an ancient city he knows himself to be part of and yet feels inextricably distinct from in the present moment. Nothing seems real, not least his identity and the knowledge he has of himself at this moment as being “engaged to be married,” traveling to the centre of the city to “dine with friends” and most importantly of being “Bernard, myself” (88). How utterly unnatural, and somehow unreal, it feels for him to “speak about wine […] to the waiter” and how extraordinary to be meeting one’s childhood friends, now grown, now dispersed across many social and physical spheres here at “a particular time” in a “particular pattern” at a “particular spot” (88). Many conflicting and yet congruous timelines circulate through this moment. The present moment in which Bernard sits is also imbued with a past that lies many layered beneath his feet, a wasteland of bones and fragments that have accumulated from the chaos and crush of the city. And as much as space — the visceral and scorching nature of physical time — holds significance here, so too does place and the specificity of this place as being the city Woolf loved, admired and feared: London.

Neville too, who is in love with Percival, is conscious of his positioning in time. He has “come early,” arrived “at the table ten minutes before time in order to taste every moment,” in
order to watch the swing door open in the hope that when it next opens, it will be Percival (88). In the chairs which are not yet filled by his friends it seems “incredible” to him that in mere moments, he will be seated next to an “actual body,” a thing that has the possibility to be fixed forever in the inimitable space of memory (89). A tableau vivant emerges in which this moment of time, inhabited by “this table, these chairs, this metal vase” and Neville himself, quivers on the brink of being and not being (90). Will Percival come and when he does who will he be in that moment, what associations will he make with the past that has brought him to this restaurant in London and what will it mean for the future? Hesitancy, fear and also excitement pervade the idea of an encounter which has not yet happened. Louis, a “strange mixture of assurance and timidity,” stands at the door unsure of whether to enter, followed closely by Susan who “has not dressed, because she hates the futility of London” (89). Rhoda comes too, “cringing” to the sides of her friends who ground her, who “light up her pavements and make it possible for her to replenish her dreams” (90). Without the names and faces of those she has known all of her life, she is in danger of falling into non-being and falling out of time. But Jinny does not fear this. Confident as she is about her place in the world, she “seems to centre everything […] she brings things to a point,” and she brings with her too the sensation of change (90). As she makes her way through the chairs and tables, she ripples and flows; she is no longer a child and yet she will never be fully an adult in the eyes of her friends. The transition has happened, the texture of friendship has changed for Woolf’s characters and yet they are still the same people, still the shadows of the children who metaphorically planted their roots in the earth at Elvedon.

The juxtaposition here grows out of the notion that whilst some characters are able to embody these moments of time, suture themselves to physical anchors and elicit a sense of movement through space, others cannot. Jinny becomes something; she embodies a time that
swells with both the present imagery of the restaurant and the past imagery of the child she was at school perceiving her reflection, and knowing herself, in the looking glass. Although Rhoda is recognizable through the interpellation of other voices and bodies, her struggle to embody time does much to draw attention to, as Michael Weinman puts it, an awareness, inherent in Rhoda’s characterization, that “ostracizes her from the community of meaning-makers” who surround her (50). Her peers succeed, to some extent, “in making their own loops” through, and by having control over, “the narrative of their felt time” (Weinman, 50). Though Rhoda is able to become part of a narrative of her own in which she is at the center, when moments are shared, or when they move towards intersubjectivity, it is Rhoda more than any of Woolf’s characters who perceives her “threatening and ominous exclusion from time” (Weinman, 50).

The terror of being unknown within physical time pushes a moment of ecstasy into the realms of complete alienation. Whilst Woolf’s characters all form their own idiosyncratic associations with other people, historical events and with objects, Rhoda’s perpetual inability to form associations which create and bolster meaning — her problematic and miserable relationship to the looking glass for example — establishes an impossible situation in which she strives and continually fails to bridge the chasm between psychic and physical time. The motion of stopping and observing one’s reflection, whilst confirming the parameters of one’s body in space, also halts the progression of time and does, for Rhoda, narrate to her a version of herself that, though real, is alarmingly other. In the realm of real time, Rhoda cannot deny the presence of her face in the mirror — “that is my face” — yet she cannot escape from the overwhelming sense, one which shall haunt her throughout the novel, that her corporeal world is somehow irrevocably disconnected from the world inside her head. Indeed, “Susan and Jinny have faces [and] the things they lift are heavy;” the identities that have been created for them fit the physicality they observe
in their reflections, but for Rhoda, no such certainty exists (Woolf, *The Waves* 91). She cannot connect the temporality and internal dialogue of her mind with the expression of herself in physical time. Repeatedly she is forced to “bang [her] hand against some hard door,” to assure herself of her physical boundaries (31). Without doing so she runs the risk of falling “off the edge of the world into nothingness” and it is this fate, tragically, which will befall her at the close of the novel (31).

However, though this sense of exclusion from time most profoundly disrupts Rhoda’s narrative of self, it also unsettles the other characters. It is impossible and at the same time wholly reasonable for these characters to imagine a world that shall inevitably continue without them. The door to the restaurant shall keep swinging open and closed even after they have left for the evening and gone their separate ways. As they sit tentatively awaiting the arrival of Percival, it is not merely Rhoda who “flutter[s] unattached, without anchorage” (91). Without Percival, the consolidation and assurance of a group of lives, a group of shared and individual memories of moments that have made up those lives, cannot take place. Before his arrival, the six characters and the notion they have of themselves as entities within time, represent no more than “silhouettes” and “hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background” (91). There is something chaotic about attempting to ground oneself in a moment that lacks completion — the presence of the person that moment is about. And there is perhaps something even more chaotic and unnerving about becoming aware of the importance of other peoples lives — other people’s time — to the process of selfhood. What is striking in the moments which precede Percival’s arrival is the fragility of a psychic, but also physical time that holds the key to an identity that is more than simply knowing one’s name or being aware of the parameters of one’s body. It is an identity stored in the archival quality of memory, the ability to retrieve a narrative of oneself through the
continuity of past to present. Percival’s role in this moment is one in which he may serve as a node of intersubjectivity and an exterior point of reference for Woolf’s characters. Yet Percival’s absence and the ominous feeling of emptiness and dissolution that can be sensed in the moments preceding his arrival also warn of the dangers of falling into the abyss of solipsism.

There is something terrible about existing only within the confines of individual, psychic time because it denies the possibility of narrative identification within a world of spacial and embodied temporal anchors. Whilst this moment may be viewed as ecstatic\(^3\), it is such only in as much as it creates a distinction between mind and body by alluding to the absence of a meaningful body all together. Though meaning is fractured (perhaps irreparably) for Rhoda by her inability to become physically identifiable, for Louis the meaning of this intersubjective experience and the meaning of his positioning in time is fractured by a moment of thrownness\(^4\). The heightened sense of anticipation that builds in the lead up to Percival’s arrival is scored, and paradoxically so, by the anxious acknowledgement of the way the shift or continuation from moment to moment can alter the trajectory and narrative of one’s life irrevocably. The shift between ‘I then’ to ‘I now’ takes place in the coming together of narratives, once collective and whole, now distinct and numerous. When Percival finally arrives and the enduring quality of the memories of

\(^3\) Ecstatic moments can be read here as points of pure intersubjectivity or loss of individual selfhood. However it is important to note the subtle distinction between an ecstasy that harbors identity and an ecstasy that negates it. For Rhoda, moments of ecstasy become terrifying moments of alienation from both the world and her body. For Woolf’s other characters, ecstasy is a means of becoming aware of the intersubjectivity of narratives in time.

\(^4\) Thrownness or geworfenheit can be understood as an awareness of one’s “coming to be” in the world, but it is also “concerned” about the passage and structure of time. The notion of concern is discussed later in this essay in relation to narrative structure but it is important to gloss here how I am applying the term. For Ricoeur repetition is the vehicle for thrownness in narrative in as much as “repetition is going back into the possibilities of the Dasein that has-been-there”(182). This is certainly seen in the retrospection of memory and especially in the repetitious thrownness of meeting one’s childhood friends as adults. Yet there is something more complex going on here in that Woolf appears to question not only the point at which one comes into being and thus finds oneself to be a figure in time, but the possibility of losing one’s claim to being by being unable to combine the narrative threads of past, present and future/ by being unable to recognize one’s self in these threads.
the “boot-boy,” “the scullery-maid” and the “petals[…] in the depths of the garden” at Elvedon rush through the swing-door with him, there is a sad acknowledgment that the familiarity of the past, its closeness to the present, becomes somehow strange and irretrievable (93). As Louis states, “we changed, we became unrecognizable […] exposed to all these different lights […] we […] came intermittently in violent patches […] to the surface as if some acid had dropped unequally on a plate” (94) It seems there is something corrosive about coming face to face with a reality, in the present space of physical time, that fails to equate to the essence of what we believed that thing to be. The moment for Louis is thrown, and in more than the Heideggerian sense of the term, in that the underlying feeling that pervades his experience of it questions the origin and construction of his being. There is a sense of Louis and the other characters witnessing themselves as coming into or falling out of being and observing through this process the uneven terrain of identities required to push themselves forcefully into and out of a time that is supposed to fit together.

Something oddly ecstatic emerges out the chaotic dichotomy between the familiarity and strangeness of Percival’s entrance — he seems to quite literally stop time. Grouped as they are at this one place, at this particular time, Woolf’s characters observe “the roar of London,” “motor-cars, vans, omnibuses,” once distinct are now all “merged in one turning wheel of single sound” (101). As they sit around the table, Neville notes the halt in time and the way the many colors that had at first illuminated each individual body of his friends have “run into each other,” have inextricably “walled” them in to this moment (101). Into this stillness runs Bernard’s visions of India, of Percival’s life there and the image of him wearing a “sun-helmet” and riding a “flea-bitten mare” (102). Time is seemingly endless. It has been stopped in its tracks, forced to elongate and make itself visible. Again the significance of an experience of time that is intersubjec-
tive — that is laced with the affect of not one, but many bodies and temporalities — is accentuated by a collective experience of a singular moment, that disrupts the forward motion of linear time and metaphorically removes the characters from their bodies.

In this moment, all is centered on Percival who plays the role both of spatial anchor — a point of contact for the characters extending from the present into what will soon be the past — and the locus of disembodiment. To Rhoda he is “like a stone fallen into a pond round which minnows swarm,” causing the waves of this moment and perhaps even time itself, to undulate and ripple (102). Indeed, Percival takes Bernard, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, Susan and Jinny thoroughly outside of themselves. Each narration of his arrival brings with it rich and intricate instances of pathetic fallacy, simile and metaphor. For Neville, the table is surrounded by “roaring waters,” for Susan there is a “dizzy” “stream” of “love” and “hate” (103). Louis and Rhoda feel the heat of metaphorical “flames” rising like a “great procession” or dancing like “savages,” and Jinny, of course, observes and takes ownership of the singular quality of “rippling gold” (105). For Bernard, ominously, “death is woven in with the violets […] death and again death” (106). These poles of existence and the elemental forces of fire and water surge into a moment filled with ecstatic, anticipatory and proleptic time. The narratives of all seven have been fractured by a bizarre and inexplicable time which, however fleetingly, refuses linear continuity. “A circle has been cast on the waters; a chain is imposed,” and in this moment, before Percival will rise to leave them forever, it seems entirely possible to Woolf’s characters that they “will never flow freely again” (107).

What transpires in the seconds before Percival departs the restaurant is the consummation of a collective narrative that was until this meeting merely a series of strings and filaments. There is some assurance in the minds of each of the characters that all that came before this de-
parture — their lives as children at school and all that has come after that — bear some relation to a reality (a nucleus of roots planted in the gardens at Elvedon) that finds justification in collective memory. As Louis urges, “do not move,” “hold it for ever,” “hold it for one moment […] this globe whose walls are made of Percival,” for “we shall perhaps never make this moment […] again” (109). And the moment is not significant simply because Percival is traveling to India; it is significant because each of Woolf’s characters struggles terribly with perceiving their individual identities without the validating presence of the people who have been part of their pasts, contributors to their narratives in time.

Throughout this scene in the restaurant, objects, whether quotidian or extraordinary, become important players in the narratives of each of Woolf’s characters, but they also become vital witnesses to the passing and pausing of time. The ordinariness of the chairs and tables, the staccato percussion of the swing door opening and closing and opening again, allow for abstract, psychic time to be sutured to the physical world. Memory is retrieved through the interaction with these tangible objects and the ability they have to allow Woolf’s characters to observe, though a-linear, the trajectory of their lives from then to now. The paper of the telegram that Neville receives shortly after the scene in the restaurant becomes the signifier for all of Percival’s life, his childhood, his departure and his fatal fall from his horse. The agony of the knowledge of Percival’s death lies not in the physical act of his dying, but in the final closing of the swing door, the telegram and in Neville’s acknowledgement (before the fact) as he leaves the restaurant, that “Percival is gone” (110). Something irrevocable has happened.

The necessity of objects to Woolf both as a narrative device and as a means of expressing the actuality of life, is pertinent to the discussion of real time, because it is the importance bestowed upon objects in time that distinguishes Woolf’s philosophy from that of the idealist. In
his ‘Refutation of Idealism,’ Moore criticizes the idealist who attempts to prove existence and non-existence of certain concepts or objects based upon experience alone. For practical reasons it is not possible to rely absolutely on the apparent experience of something when positing existence. However, more troubling is the implication that the physicality of objects (and, by extension, identities) in time is merely a superfluous, minor or illusory detail. Idealism refutes the physicality of the world by attempting to fracture the inherent relationship between spirit and matter. As Moore states, “matter […] is an inseparable aspect of our experience,” and in order to possess “sensation” one must implicitly enter into a relationship between the material and immaterial (Moore 44). Sensation is “knowing or being aware of or experiencing something” tangible in the world external to the body; to live in the world and to experience anything at all, one must acknowledge the reciprocity inherent in an existence that is both tangible and ephemeral (Moore 42).

Indeed, objects in relation to identities in time and here, specifically, objects relating to death or non-existence, harbor a temporal power that has the ability to both store and destroy memory. The roots, Elvedon, the looking glass and the restaurant in London are not simply passive locations and inanimate objects that reside in the background of Woolf’s novel, these anchors are involved in a time of their own, a time that has the power to disrupt conventional progression by taking Woolf’s characters outside of themselves, backward and forward in time. Whilst Percival’s arrival at the restaurant brought his six friends together, his death, in a sense, breaks them apart. The objects and places that stabilized Neville’s knowing of his own identity are shattered upon learning of Percival’s death. Rooms where they had sat together, “barns and summer days in the country” all now “lie in the unreal world which is gone”. As Neville laments, not only has his friend been cruelly taken from him, but his entire past, all that his life until this
The world keeps turning, the lives of Londoners continue in their busy monotony, “women shuffle past the window as if there were no gulf cut in the street; no tree with stiff leaves” which can no longer be passed (114). The streets, the restaurants and even the molehill over which Percival’s horse stumbled occupy a space in memory — in both physical and psychic time — that agonizingly signify Percival, his life and his passing. However the death of Percival inextricably alters Neville’s memory of these places, their meanings and also their futures. The past that is incapsulated in the places they travelled together “stream[s] away like burnt paper” when he opens the telegram from India (114). He cannot walk down the street without noting the lack of Percival and the lack of the self he was before Percival’s death. The street will never be the same again. Neville will never be the same again; Percival is dead, he has gone.

It is clear to see that time in these moments is, as Russell rather ambiguously puts it, “not what we mean by time at all, but something else” (Banfield 478). By this he suggests that to take time as being either purely psychic or physical is to limit temporal possibility and assert in the process that one time exists without the other. There is a subtle, but important, difference in the conception of time and the way we experience it which, Russell asserts, is often ignored by the idealist and is further ignored by the conventional novelist. In real time and in the time that Woolf captures and evokes through narrative, “time really passes [both] abstractly and objectively” (479). This duality “permits Woolf to incorporate a literary impressionism” that allows her to push the boundaries of what her contemporaries thought literature able to achieve (479). But it goes further still, establishing a “temporal counterpart to [Roger] Fry’s Post-Impressionist spatial design” (479). Fry’s aesthetic is important when considering the trajectory of Woolf’s work, because the Post-Impressionist focus in which Fry was invested shifted from the “indivisible conti-
nuity” of sensation to the definition and exaction of separate objects and moments (480). In his critique of impressionism, Fry notes that “it is not the elements of sensation but the ‘separate forms’ of objects […] which are lost in the whole continuum of sensation” (478). As has been shown, distinct objects and moments play a vital role in the conception of time in The Waves, but also in Woolf’s personal and critical writings. For Russell and to a great extent for Woolf, it was very clear that “past, present and future arise from time-relations of subject and object” and that without this connection, there would be “no experience […] no past, present and future” (Russell 2).

However, Woolf’s inclination towards the separate forms of Post-Impressionism also reveals an underlying and wholly natural desire to, as Alexandra Harris has suggested, “probe for the formal design underlying a chaotic world” (Harris 102). The world of objects does, to some extent, service this desire by creating (at least) the illusion of order. Yet the risk of disrupting a narrative that relies on the continuity of objects is increased when those objects too — and here let us think of physical bodies — are governed and limited by time. Indeed, Percival’s passing affects the shape of the world, the objects within it and the lives that intertwined with his own. Neville has lost his lover, his friend and a part of himself that was defined by Percival. Death and specifically the death of a person who served so profoundly as a temporal and spatial anchor or object, changes the course of narrative. In his discussion of the importance of plot to the creation of narrative, Peter Brooks cites Walter Benjamin’s notion that “death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell” (22). At the point of death there is no more story to tell, no longer

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5 Brooks begins his discussion of plot with an extended discussion of narrative and the importance of narrative to the living of everyday life. As he writes, “our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in a story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves […] We live immersed in narrative, re-
a narrative to construct and cultivate. But in death there is ultimate meaning. As Brooks suggests, the fascination and, in a sense, desire to know and comprehend death emerges out of the inexplicable fact that “death writes finis to the life;” death ends the narrative and “only the end can finally determine meaning” (22). The issue then for Woolf’s characters is that their narratives are not wholly distinct from each other or the objects within them. Though the end of one narrative does not necessarily signal the end of another, something about the death of one, robs the larger narrative — a group of lives moving through time — of a meaning and layering of events its characters have relied upon to maintain their identities.

Even Bernard who is somewhat sure of his being a poet, a fiancé and soon, a father, experiences a shift in a temporality and a composite identity that no longer harbors Percival. He walks through the Italian room at the National Gallery. He notes in the tones and colors, the presence of a new world, a “world that Percival sees no longer” (Woolf, The Waves 115). There is something heroic in death that is somehow magnified by art that depicts thousands of lives that have ended and yet continue to live in the confines of the gallery, the four edges of the canvases that house them. He observes his own mortality in “the blue madonna streaked with tears” (118). He sees his funeral service. He talks metafictively of the way lives are built upon, the way in which the past adds new layers, “stroke to stroke” (118). Lives can be captured in art, they can be preserved, but art also has the power to eradicate the actuality of what it attempts to represent. As Bernard suggests, it is unlikely that “Titian ever felt this rat gnaw;” it is possible that he never felt the reverberations of death, because the objects he made, the paintings he produced preserved life, evoked it and implicitly denied the finality of death (118). “Lines and colors […] survive,” they withstand the devastation time (119). Bodies cannot and when they die they take counting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed” (3).
with them fragments of ordinary days that memory forgot to store. The picture that remains of
Percival’s life is a blur of color, the infinitesimal details, the seconds and the moments have been
lost and it is this loss, perhaps more than Percival’s literal death, that disturbs and destabilizes
Bernard.

The city and all that exists within it is, like Bernard, “glutted with sensations” (119). Just
like the moment in the restaurant, death establishes itself in an ecstatic temporality. To see death,
Bernard must necessarily step outside of himself and outside of the time that governs his physi-
cal body. Walking through London, a city full of life, Bernard is overwrought by notions of
death and what it means to die. The ecstasy of death then is perhaps not the sensation of death
itself, but, as Teresa Prudente has suggested, “the different apprehension of the past” that it elic-
its (Prudente 25). There is an “instantaneous co-presence of past and present” in death, but there
is also a denial of present-time continuity (25). Memory cannot be “activated without interrup-
tions” as it usually is for Bernard because memory cannot escape from the present fact that its
object of memory is gone (25). Percival cannot establish a past that can “re-emerge” without also
calling up a present that stops this re-emergence in its tracks (25).

This sensation of being outside of one’s individual and habitual notion of time again
brings with it a degree of intersubjectivity that is at once constricting and liberating. Time, iden-
tity and the relationship both have with the world external to individual bodies is complicated in
The Waves by the fact that Woolf’s characters have a tendency to “melt into each other” and are,
as Bernard states, “edged with mist” (Woolf, The Waves 10)⁶. The aesthetic structure of Woolf’s

⁶I am thinking of Jean Luc Nancy here in relation to the presence of a dichotomy between singular and
plural settings of self in Woolf’s novel: “A ‘day’ is not simply a unit for counting; it is the turning of the
world - each time singular. And days, indeed every day, could not be similar if they were not first differ-
ent, difference itself. Likewise ‘people’ or rather ‘peoples,’ given the irreducible strangeness that consti-
tutes them as such, are primarily the exposing of the singularity according to which existence exists, irre-
narrative is such that her characters — the six different thought experiments of the novel — rely upon one another to establish and maintain meaning. This is not antithetical to the way in which relationships of significance function in life and the way in which the narratives of others become powerful in the construction of our own narratives. Indeed, we are touched by the lives of those we have never met, but we are shaped most profoundly by the people we love, the moments of friendship which extend through time from past to present and the way in which those friends perceive us as figures of significance (or not) within the world of time.

However one must question the extent to which narrative is able to establish and sustain singularity when that narrative pulses so intensely with the time and vigor of many other bodies, many different minds. What moments are important and whose temporality and narrative should take precedent? As Bernard states, “whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle [...] and slip through my fingers” (197). Being in a world full of the time of other people and attempting to write a narrative that acknowledges this fact, not only fractures, however strong, one’s sense of individual identity, but it makes this question of significance difficult too. To be known to narrative is to become important in the eyes of the person who narrates, but it is also about the ability one has to bleed one’s life into another’s. The six little fish Bernard speaks of are all that is visible to us as readers exposed to the bias of the author’s individual sight and interest. They have “lived many thousands of years,” and are a compilation of “more selves” than they appear (66). Bernard alone is at once “Hamlet,” “Shelley,” “Napoleon,” and “Byron,” and the struggle he faces, just as Rhoda does with the looking glass, is finding an idea of himself in the guises that narrative offers him (66).
It is evident that to Woolf, the novel and the narrative it held within it required some acknowledgement of the duality of experienced time in order to produce something compellingly representative of life. In her search for the “it” she was able, in the writing of *The Waves*, to establish a narrative and structure that allowed her to not only represent the importance of both psychic and physical experiences of time, but also make explicit the struggle of the writer who sought to give both equal space. For modernists like Forster “the novel [told] a story,” but for Woolf who so often noted her contempt for the narrative constructions of her predecessors and contemporaries, this loose notion of story was what made the novel as a genre unsuccessful (Banfield 475). The modernist ‘story’ lacked the ability to represent life and the complex, often paradoxical, movement between life and death. In Heidegerrian terms one may look at the relationship between character, temporality and poles of existence as being suggestive of a concern regarding one’s place in the world\(^7\). To be ‘within-time’ and to acknowledge the interplay between psychic and physical temporality is to be acutely aware of and concerned with ‘having time to,’ ‘taking time to,’ and wasting the time one has left. Although undoubtedly this concern played an unconscious part in the writing of most modern fiction, Woolf’s reservations appear to have stemmed more from the fact that this concern, as it was expressed in the novel, seemed insincere or, alternatively, was ignored all together. Without this concern and the implications it brings with it, narrative struggles to be propelled, in realistic terms, towards an end point and without some form of ending, narrative fails altogether.

\(^7\) Ricoeur argues the importance of concern to narrative by expanding upon what Heidegger defines as within-time-ness: “this level is defined by one of the basic characteristics of care — our throwness among things — which makes the description of our temporality dependent on the description of the things of our concern […] Heidegger calls this trait of concern, preoccupation or circumspection” (172).
For what this concern also does is suggest a certain degree of continuity to temporal experience, a continuity that Russell’s declaration of time fundamentally undermines. In response to Russell, Banfield makes the claim that “the sensible world presents a broken surface” and that in order to establish the sense of temporal continuity I have suggested is present in our concern regarding the passing of time, this continuity “must [ultimately] be sought elsewhere” (Banfield 480). Problematic in this statement is the overarching acknowledgement of Russell’s assertion that “duration is the illusion” and that “experience is discontinuous” (480). Whilst I agree with his inclination towards subject-object relationships, the word illusion connotes an unimportance and irrelevance that harshly juxtaposes Woolf’s temporal aesthetic in The Waves. Underpinning this aesthetic and indeed Woolf’s narrative structure, is the concept of moments of being and though Russell would perhaps read these moments as individual units of time, as I have suggested above, the ecstatic tendency of moments of being necessarily evokes a continuity in the moment that cannot be reduced to illusion.

Moments of time can be shared, but they are not necessarily experientially the same. Whilst it is possible to ‘be in the moment’ — to bear witness to a “moment of being” — it is just as possible to succumb to “non-being” and to be thrown outside of time into the “sunless territory of non-identity” (Woolf, The Waves 87). For Woolf, moments are significant to her construction of time because they throw the paradoxical and chaotic relationship between space, time and the conventional, homogenous notion of temporality into greater relief. These moments shall inevitably pass “like a cloud on the waves,” but for the briefest of seconds they “adhere,” have weight, are elongated (Diaries 257). Past, future and present are mapped seamlessly onto one another in such a way that the sensation and affect of these moments can appear intensely othering, terrifying and at the same time ecstatic.
For Rhoda, who is perhaps the definition of alterity in this novel, even stepping over a puddle in her path leaves her feeling thrown and wholly beside herself. Looking out of the train window on her way back home for the summer holidays, she recalls the terror and “humiliation” of a midsummer garden party, the “wind and storm coloured July”:

There was a star riding through clouds one night, and I said to the star, ‘Consume me’. […] I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body. (47-48)

It is quite literally an out of body experience for Rhoda to approach and finally step over this puddle. But it is not merely the action of crossing over this physical boundary that is strange, it is also the shock she receives of becoming aware of her place in time. There is movement into the future in the process of stepping over, but there is movement into the past and indeed into a bizarre quasi-temporality in the sensation of this crossing. She somehow becomes aware of falling out of a time that harbors the physical world, including her own body. Standing on the other side of the puddle, Rhoda is aware of the infinitesimal passing of time, but she is aware too, in the retelling of this moment, of a duality inherent in a self that is both now and then — the person before the puddle and the person who has now crossed it.

Interestingly it seems that Woolf took inspiration for this moment of being from an acutely similar experience she had as a child and recounted in A Sketch From the Past. Walking through Kensington Gardens with her sister Vanessa, Woolf recalls “the moment of the puddle in the path, when for no reason […] everything became unreal” (Sketch 78). Try as she might, she could not step over the puddle and, like Rhoda, found herself desperately trying to “touch some-
thing” in an effort to bring herself back to her body (78). Woolf feared these moments, just as Rhoda fears them, because exiting one’s body in such a violent manner tacitly implies that reentry may not only be difficult but may, at one point, become impossible. From the opening pages of the novel Rhoda is “outside of the loop” of time, rocking her basin of petals which metaphorically become ships on a sea upon which she sails alone (Woolf, *The Waves* 12). She must touch other bodies in order to make sense of her own and she must continue to attempt, as she does throughout, to ‘join’ the time of her friends. The tragedy of Rhoda’s character is that only in the manner of her death — a moment glimpsed by Bernard as he crosses the Strand between speeding omnibuses — does she become knowable in physical time. Only in death may Rhoda be identified, bodily, as a being possessed of physical boundaries. Identity does not fail at the point of death. It is solid and final and is, perhaps, the sum of what can be said of her. As Bernard notes, “she had gone; she had killed herself” (216).

Moments of ecstatic othering take place throughout *The Waves* and affect all six of Woolf’s narrating characters, but it is the way they function and indeed drive her conception of time which is most pertinent to this discussion. Moments of being temporally halt a collective world that is always moving forward. There is a change in the sensation of temporality and there is a shift in the affective feel. In the center of the moment lies “a knot of consciousness; a nucleus divided [into] separate bodies”. It is “shot with an extraordinary arrow” which brings with it “terror, […] exultation,” “the power […] to be swept away,” but also “to be consumed” (Woolf, *The Moment* 4, 5). These shocks to the standardized notion of time have the power to dissolve temporal and bodily boundaries, allowing Woolf’s characters to quite literally slip out of time and self. To be ecstatically outside of self is to be “part of the eyeless dark, to be rippling and streaming, to feel the glory run molten up the spine […] and penetrate the buffeting waves of the
wind” (8). It is to be conscious that time exists, but to momentarily possess all time and no time at all.

There is something about the sense of elongation within the parameters of distinct moments in this novel that speaks to Bergson’s notion of La Duree. Pure duration is “a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another,” and which become, in short, the expression of “pure heterogeneity” (Bergson 104). This perhaps is too strict a concept to apply rigidly to The Waves, but one ought not overlook the fact that permeation — the misty boundaries Bernard speaks of — is a significant feature of moments of being. Within these moments there is paradoxically, “change […] without ceasing,” but there is also the feeling that the past, that which swells “unceasingly with the present,” “follows […] at every instant” (104). We may look too at the scene in the restaurant before Percival’s departure as an example in which distinct moments of experience become blurred into the continuum; there is no clear origin to these moments, no clear end. As much as the concept of duration presents a strict understanding of the interpenetration of events and of sequence, Russell’s equally strict assertion that the experience of time consists only in a “succession of distinct, noninterpenetrating units, directly apprehended only one at a time,” negates the elongation of moments and the interpellation of shared experience (Banfield, 480).

The building movement of duration also accounts for the layering and refining of character that takes place over the course of Woolf’s novel. The present moment is composed of everything that has come before it and flashes of what is yet to come; it is composed of “visual and sense impressions,” but it is composed too of a public time that establishes and dismantles identities. In his discussion of language, time and identity in The Waves, Michael Weinman uses Judith Butler’s performativity thesis to express the way in which time, the subject-object relationship of
such time and the notion of shared experience carve out a temporality that allows the time of other people to contribute to and detract from the creation and preservation of individual identities. To be interpellated is to “be recognized [externally] into existence” and this important social and temporal process —this “shattering” of one’s internal view of self — can only take place through the building of external, vocalized, moments of being (Weinman 4). Impressions and the identities which reside within them are built out of the layering of moments of “recognition”. This recognition is made possible by the “sustained discourse of the body” in time, the continuity, as it were, from the past to the present (4). Without this process and without some form of progression from one’s past self to one’s present — through one’s own and others memories and moments of being — the creation of identity as we conventionally think of it would not be possible.

Although Woolf’s realization of real time values some notion of continuity, The Waves cannot be described as a ‘stream of consciousness narrative’. Though critics are quick to cite The Waves as a more complex example of the narrative structure Woolf adopted in the construction of Mrs Dalloway, the highly self conscious and metafictive narration that shapes this novel — what I term as real time — appears to highlight Woolf’s increasing awareness of the shortcomings of a narrative temporality that professed to capture conclusively the infinite intricacies of a life in time. There is, perhaps, something dishonest in this and, further still, something entirely more real in the portrayal of the failures of human memory and experience. The remarkable sense one receives in The Waves is Woolf’s willingness (through Bernard’s narration) to reveal to the reader the vulnerabilities, inconsistencies and deficiencies of the writer and narrator who is first and foremost only human. In her admonition against modern fiction, she expressed the view that the fault of the writers of fiction stemmed from the fact that “they [were] concerned not with
the spirit, but with the body” (Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’ 158). They were content with exploring only the physicality of their characters and not their inner lives. The conventional writing Woolf so disliked robbed the novel of any deeper meaning to such an extent that costume, setting and class mattered far more to the novelist than individual lives and the temporalities within which they were set. As Woolf writes in her essay ‘Modern Fiction’, “if the writer were a free man and not a slave […] there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy […] and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond street tailors would have it” (160). To Woolf, everything was “the proper stuff of fiction,” and it was the extraordinary nature of the quotidian within which true character potential could be found (160).

Indeed, to create a real character, as Woolf argues so tenaciously in her polemic “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown8,” one must create a whole life. It does not follow from beginning to end but is “eternal,” imperfect and is moreover an exploration of “human nature” itself (Woolf 28). Mrs Brown sits not in the shadow of a train compartment in which the view from the window, her inheritance or the careers of her forefathers are the driving forces of her character; she sits on that immutable train, as it speeds between Richmond and Waterloo, an “apparition,” inexhaustibly fascinating, “the spirit we live by” — “life itself” (33). She lives in no specified place or time, she is not even necessarily a woman, but what she is is an example of character as Woolf writes and feels her. Mrs Brown has been Clarissa Dalloway in post Great War London, she has been Septimus Warren; she has been Mrs Ramsay looking out to the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe painting landscapes in the Hebrides and Bernard going off to school for the first time. She, like

8 In “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” Woolf states that “on or about December 1910, human character changed” (22). In her essay she explores the importance of character reading and the changes that took place in the literature being produced in the early part of the 20th Century. Whilst many of Woolf’s contemporaries were happy to build merely a physical, social impression of the enigmatic, fictional character of Mrs Brown, Woolf was concerned with understanding her as a human and portraying her narrative, however trivial it may have seemed, as the definition of life itself.
the characters in *The Waves*, has lived “many thousands of years,” has had multiple identities and has lived many variations of time (Woolf, *The Waves* 127).

The “extreme precision, [the] orderly and military progress” of the illusory linear time that governs the days of Mr Galsworthy and Mr Bennett’s characters fails to acknowledge that “deep below” rushes a “stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half finished sentences and sights […] that rise and sink;” “a thousand faces [that] mop and mow” (196). There is “nothing one can fish up in a spoon” that does not bring with it a thousand other narratives and interconnected identities (196). Over and over again Woolf’s reader is, first implicitly and then explicitly, reminded that at every turn, narrative and the lives within it are haunted by “shadows of people one might have been,” whispers of stories that have not been told and effigies of “un-born selves” (222). Writing in her diary on 18th June 1927, Woolf “rhapsodized and told over the story of *The Moths*” (Dairies, 230). This idea would of course later evolve into *The Waves*, but in the early phases of the writing process Woolf was keen to evoke “the idea of some continuous stream” composed “not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night, all flowing together” (230). Though not a stream of consciousness, the stream of time that drives her narrative to a close, is imbued with a desire to find wholeness among the fragments, whilst nevertheless not denying that many fragments remain. The interluding sections of *The Waves* not only remind the reader, as Big Ben reminds Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway*, of the passing of time in space, they also allude to the diurnal and ultimately cyclical motion of hours, days and lives. “Light [does] return to the world after the eclipse of the sun,” the days begin afresh and once death has abolished the people of the present, new people will enter the world; new bodies will mingle with the shadows of those from the past (Woolf, *The Waves* 220).
Wholeness and the desire for wholeness is an effect of real time, but it is also a product of the narrative impulse. If for Russell, “a truer image of the world […] is obtained by picturing things as entering into the stream of time from an eternal world outside,” it is the sense of concern implicit in both the stream and the world outside of it that drives the desire for meaning, for finality and, ultimately, for death (Banfield 495). Identities cannot exist as we understand them without some anchorage in a time that can be quantified, concretely observed and looked back upon. For Ricoeur wholeness is the result of narrative repetition and, citing Heidegger, he asserts that repetition is “more than the reversal of the basic orientation of care towards the future” but “the retrieval of our most basic potentialities inherited from our past” (Ricoeur 180). Wholeness in narrative, just as in time, is about asking what one has made of life, what one has achieved and perhaps, what ‘it’ means to have lived. As The Waves draws to a close, it is Bernard who, in his ever lengthening soliloquies, seems enamored by this search for a whole life, a beginning and an end in time.

‘Now to sum up,’ said Bernard. ‘Now to explain to you the meaning of my life […] The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed. This, for the moment, seems to be my life. If it were possible, I would hand it to you entire. I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes. I would say, “Take it. This is my life”. (The Waves 183)

He imagines walking forward and presenting his life entire — a narration of events from his birth to the present — but he acknowledges too that the substance of this presentation would only “adhere for a moment” (183). It seems that continuity breaks upon him during moments of reflection and pauses in the course of real time. The moment in which he sits, an “elderly man, grey at the temples,” becomes (fleetingly) the definition of his life, his identity, the sum of his
accomplishments and failures. (183) And whilst this moment speaks deeply to the characterization of Bernard as the reflective poet, aware of the plasticity of his identify, it speaks too to the perception of moments of definition (and being) in Woolf’s own life. In her diaries, but also in her work preceding The Waves, the notion of definition, a “this is it” if you will — a pause in the passage of time — was a commanding thematic force.

Yet to speak of wholeness is to implicitly speak of death. The irony of a life or lives so filled with the possibility of a tomorrow is that at some point tomorrow will not come. Tuesday will follow Monday, the sun will rise and the waves will break, but in the narrative of the life that has passed, there will be no tomorrow. At the close of the novel, as Bernard recalls “things gone far, gone deep, sunk into this life or that” he sees his life spread out before him, but he also sees his death (222). It is death who rides towards him, yet is it death, in the conventional sense of the word, only in as much it ends the current narrative: this Bernard, this life. As Bernard prepares to fling himself “unvanquished and unyielding” towards the denouement of his narrative, he does so with the knowledge that death does not end absolutely (228). The “illumined and everlasting road” of time will fold him into a larger narrative that will continue ad infinitum (110). Perhaps he will become part of the iterative procession of “generations,” of “women carrying red pitches to the Nile, of the Nightingale who sings among conquests and migrations” (218). Perhaps he will fall “to rot among the ferns” like the “primeval fir-cone” (11) at Elvedon, subsumed into the earth of the “eternal world outside” of the stream (Banfield 495).

Time continues without end. It holds, creates and gives meaning to the narratives that make up and structure identity. It throws individual worlds into the destabilizing realization of the existence of other lives, other possible worlds and endless psychic possibilities. It haunts, it controls; it is feared and it is savored in equal measure. Time is the “eternal renewal, the inces-
sant rise and fall and fall and rise again” (*The Waves* 228). Narrative tracks the trajectory through a time that passes in the physical world — the movement between “I now, I then” — but it tracks too a time that flows and pulses in the individual moment.

Shortly after the publication of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf wrote of her joy at having received a note of admiration from a reader. The note was short and exclaimed simply, “this time you have done it - you have caught life and put it in a book” (*Diaries* 195). Those who read Woolf would, to some extent, agree with this sentiment, but I would argue that *Mrs Dalloway*, though an extraordinary achievement, was a precursive experiment of what Woolf hoped and, indeed, succeeded to do in *The Waves*. The “it,” the mystery and the strangeness of life Woolf sought to capture, the very “it” that is alluded to in the opening of this essay, is found, to the extent that it can be, in Woolf’s willingness to demonstrate the vulnerability of the writer who attempts to speak in the uncertain discourse of time. Life is so intricately woven with lofty dreams, with possibility, with failure, with fear and ultimately with death. The writer who does not take ownership of these facts, who is not prepared to write into their prose the ecstasy and terror of a time that is unquestionably real — a time that exists in the world external to the book within which it is being expressed — fails to make a mark on a world infatuated with a misguided search for meaning. For meaning is not made in one dimensional narratives that fear the possibility of extinction, but in the narratives that fling themselves towards it. Whilst the publication of *The Waves* was, to Leonard Woolf, an example of his wife’s literary prowess, to Virginia it was the epitome of a cathartic process concerned with securing meaning — a project she could believe in and be proud of. The “atoms” of life had been recorded “however disconnected and incoherent in appearance;” the moment had been caught (‘Modern Fiction’ 160), “the moment was enough” (*The Waves* 166). She had “netted the fin in the waste of waters which [had] appeared to [her]
over the marshes out of [her] window at Rodmell;” (Diaries 297) she had written the words “O Death” (The Waves 228).