A Plot Unraveling into Ethics: Woolf, Levinas,
and “Time Passes”

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TEMPORALIZATION AS TAPIA, THE LOSs OF TIME, IS NEITHER AN INITIATIVE OF AN EGO, NOR A MOVEMENT TOWARD SOME TABLE OF ACtIONS. THE LOSs OF TIME IS NOT THE WORk OF A SUBJECT. . . . TIME PASSses.

—LeVINAS, OTHERWIsE THaN BEING (51-52)

For a long time it was thought that language had mastery over time, that it acted both as the future bond of the promise and as memory and narrative. It was thought to be prophecy and history. . . . In fact, it is only a formless rumbling, a streaming; its power resides in its dissimulation. That is why it is one with the erosion of time; it is depthless forgetting and the transparent emptiness of waiting.

—Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought From the Outside" (35)

In diary entries, Woolf describes “Time Passes,” the short middle chapter of *To the Lighthouse* in which the Ramsays’ uninhabited summer house ages ten years, as “this impersonal thing, which I’m dared to do by my friends, the flight of time” and “the most difficult abstract piece of writing . . . all cyclical and featureless with nothing to cling to” (D3 36, 76). These suggestive phrases for the chapter’s dislocations from normal life help us appreciate its strange narrative qualities, its intrusion of a not-quite-human voice that seems to cling to nothing in order to cling to the passing of time. Yet, as many critics have noticed in recent years, this section is not simply an exercise in abstraction or formalism; the perspective of “Time Passes” is distinct from the rest of the novel—and new to modernism—but not because it moves from particularity to generality, from contingent events to their essential forms.1 The haunting narrative unlocatability of

1 Even within the current diversity of established critical approaches to “Time Passes,” there is a recurring tendency (provided, in part, by Woolf’s diary terms) to read the narrative disduction of the chapter principally as an exercise in abstraction or formalism, even if such characterizations are subordinated to other arguments and critical contexts. Recently, Christine Froala has described the chapter as a turn to “FORMAL ABSTRACTIONS” that gives “symbolic refuge from time and death” in a process that (in terms taken from Wilhelm Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy*) "abstracts the poetics of life..."
its language carries a palpable stillness and silence, an almost reverential care not to wake the sleeping and dead, rather than narrative omniscience or objectivity. In this essay, I discuss the fragile stillness and delicate lyricism around the absences of “Time Passes,” not as abstraction, but as the narrative poetics of alterity, the poetics of the subject’s intuition of its responsibility towards others, and especially of its involvement in the deaths of others. I argue that Woolf anticipates concepts in ethical criticism and philosophy regarding the subject’s response to the death of the other as the origin of time. “Time Passes” is an especially vivid example of an important strain in Woolf’s writing—I also refer briefly to James’s room, Mrs. Dalloway, and A Room of One’s Own—in which the death of the other inaugurates the subject’s temporality, and in which this temporality exceeds the subject’s knowledge by virtue of its impossible ethical demand.

In other words, I argue that the narrator of “Time Passes” speaks with the ethically-inflected voice of seelhood bound to the other more than to its own being, a self for whom the fullness of autonomous identity is not a sufficient meaning of the human. For these few pages, Woolf leaves the familiar horizons of traditional Western subjectivity to narrate in the voice of its unarrangeable, voiceless exteriority, rendering intelligible a void in consciousness that is hard to describe or imagine. This can be thought of something like an eclipse, 2 a shadow saturated with light that evades or pains our seeing. Locating the exteriority of self, like grasping darkness as a substantial thing, confuses familiar notions of identity and difference, giving what is other and alien a value that is not compatible with the internal economy of self. To describe “Time Passes” in terms of alterity and exteriority instead of abstraction is to suggest that its narrative technique animates difference as a meaningful discrepancy in being, rather than subsuming difference in identity or rendering it an object for the subject’s grasp. Alterity, in this sense, differs from Wilhelm Wörringer’s emphasis on modernism as abstraction in that it does not provide solace to a self vulnerable to death and decay by creating a new (aesthetic) order; rather, alterity is the experience of selfhood that achieves an ethical value in its relation to others. 3 Exteriority and alterity, as this essay explores them, do not oppose subjectivity in the same way that objectivity does. “Time Passes” is not non-subjective narrative because it is somehow “objective,” free from idiosyncratic perspectives, but because it dislocates its idiosyncratic perspectives from a discrete mind that might contain them. 4 The voice of the chapter is the voice of a subject that is other than and outside itself; in this difference from itself, it is able to approach the difference of others without subsuming them as the same.

We might think of this otherness from self—not in abstraction or objectivity, but in difference and alterity—as an undoing of self, a dissolution of the self-same identity of consciousness in currents of language and time. Woolf puts in narrative form the impulses of a long continental philosophical tradition that questions the priority and certainty of the individual, self-possessed ego—a tradition that runs from Hegel through Foucault and Derrida, approximately, against claims by such philosophers as Descartes and Locke that the self is best understood as rationally self-interested, epistemologically and ethically autonomous, and sovereign over its private being and property. “Time Passes” is in the voice of this ideal’s undoing, a narration of what, in the last chapter of A Room of One’s Own, Woolf calls the “shapeliness” as in “the shadow of the ‘I’,” the restless excess in seelhood that comes in moments at which language and time cannot be reduced to one’s consciousness and intentionality (AROO 104). In this chapter of Room, Woolf dramatizes such a moment: she describes how passersby in the street “all seemed separate, self-absorbed, on business of their own” until “a full and suspension” in traffic gives “a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past, invisibly,

3 Wöringer, who has influenced many Woolf critics, writes that “the urge to abstraction finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline or, in general terms, in all abstract law and necessity” (6). Especially since he relates this characterization of modern art primarily to the plastic arts (6), it is important to trace the elements of “Time Passes” that are modern without a “life-denying” inorganicism.

4 While Erich Auerbach’s classic, influential insight in Mimesis that the novel’s “exterior events have actually lost their hegemony” and “serve to replete and interpret inner events” is no doubt true, the point is that there is another sense of exteriority available in Woolf’s language, a sense that surpasses this subject-object dialectic altogether (52).
relations among time, exteriorty, and the ethics of mourning in “Time Passes,” we can better appreciate what ethical criticism of modernism can gain by paying attention to modernist representations of time. In other words, we can reconjoin with Ned Lukacher’s insight that “the first step toward reversing philosophy’s foreclosure of the other is to think the otherness of time” (18). Following Lukacher, I hope to demonstrate that time provides modernism with a crucial poetics of the self’s relation to alterity.

What does it mean to think “authentic,” “primordial” time without reducing it to inner flux or stream of consciousness, to some immediacy of subjectivity or immanence of being? How can we approach time, as we must desire to know it, not as the first alibi for the subject’s private interiority and ontological weight (as Bergson’s durée or Heidegger’s horizon of being), but as the possibility of the subject’s ethical transcendence of self-sameness, as the risk of its dissolution in alterity? We might start by reversing Augustine’s famous complaint—“What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know” (230)—into a different kind of admission. “What then is time? I know only when another asks me, and when I can acknowledge this asking.” Time as the interruption of the other, the event of alterity; for Levinas, time as the subject’s non-synchrony with itself in revelation of the other’s sheer diachrony, this “slippage of the earth beneath my feet” of an “irrevocable lapse” in which we acknowledge “the impossible synthesis of I and the Other” (God, Death, and Time, 111). In other words, time as it is at stake in Levinas’s ethical philosophy is not inscribed in any isolated, individual subject, but emerges at this subject’s—i.e., the traditional Western subject’s—vanishing point, when it is powerless, in the face of the other, to merely inhabit itself: “the situation of the face-to-face” is “the very accomplishment of time” (Time and the Other, 79). This “accomplishment” of time is this inhabited version of subjectivity becoming strange to itself, feeling the residue in its identity of an excessive responsibility, a responsibility for the other that exceeds the subject’s self-knowledge and self-possession. For Levinas, the experience of this strange
excess registers as temporality, as the subject's diachronic sway and flow through the tenses of being.

To think of the subject's temporality as a function of its ethicality, to approach time as the phenomenological representation of responsibility for the other and implication in the death of the other, helps us understand Woolf's narrative technique in "Time Passes." Between two longer chapters taking place on single days ten years apart, "Time Passes" is a kind of connective interlude, a pause in the drama of interiority that define the rest of the novel. With characters' interiorities held in abeyance, de-focalized by the shifting and ever-withdrawing narrator, the events of these ten years take on the strange half-light of a world made illegible without being perceived, as if it were a memory held by someone who had never experienced it, or as if the house itself were remembering from within its own emptiness.\(^9\) This play between presence and absence is the narrative voice of phenomena in exteriority, overheard secondhand by a subject, retaining its echo-like distance and difference from interiority.

And now as if the clearing and the scrubbing and the scything and the mowing had drowned it there rose that half-hushed melody, that intermittent music which the ear half catches but less fall a bale; a blast; irregular, intermittent, yet somehow related; the hum of an insect, the tramp of cut grass, disinterred yet somehow belonging; the jar of a beetles, the squeak of a wheel, loud, low, but mysteriously related; which the ear strains to bring together and is always on the verge of harmonising, but they are never quite heard, never fully harmonised, and at last, in the evening, one after another, the sounds die out, and the harmony falters, and silence falls. (JL 212)

It is a single sentence taken by its rhythms beyond itself, magically overiding its syntax into lyrical fragments. That these fragments are sonically interwoven with as much care as something by Hopkins—notice the metered repetitions of the first 15 or so words; the assurance and consonance of the second, third, and fifth lines; the cadenced shifts among short and long clauses in the sequence after the final semi-colon—complicates the passage's final statement about incoherence,

\(^9\) I consider these somewhat impressionistic descriptions compatible with Ann Banfield's analytical description of the narrative luminality of "Time Passes" and the interlude in The Waves in terms of the epistemology of the unperceived: "The unobserved thus finns in the novel a "neutral nomistic" language. In between Russell's division of the sensible ("I see X") and the physical ("There is X"), Woolf explores the neutral ("Here there was X") representing a sense of the non-existant." (318). See also Banfield's more recent essay on the influence of Cambridge time philosophy and Post-Impressionist aesthetics on the design of To the Lighthouse, and especially "Time Passes," in "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time," Poetics Today 24.3 (2003) 471-516.

silence. There is an unlocateable presence embedded in the almost-related world itself, but the world passes at the threshold of a subject's knowing, suggesting meanings and relations but not assimilating, mediating, or realizing them in the interiority and intentionality of consciousness.

We might better understand this non-territonomized perception and narrative in "Time Passes" by comparing it to Woolf's earlier experiment with such narrative ambiguity in Jacob's Room. In this novel, narrative speech moves in and out of clear subject positions; Woolf makes an especially dramatic display of such narrative detachment by repeating the same episode in a forest, the second undoing the defined focalization of the first:

The upper wings of the moth which Jacob held were unblemished marked with kidney-shaped spots of fulvous hue. But there was no expanse in the underwing. The tree had fallen the night he caught it. There had been a volley of pistol-shots suddenly in the depths of the wooded. . . .

The tree had fallen, though it was a winter night, and the lantern, stood upon the ground, had lit up the still green leaves and the dead beech leaves. It was a dry place. A dead was there. And the red underwing had never come back, though Jacob had waited. (JR 17)

. . . If you stand a lantern under a tree every insect in the forest creeps up to it—a curious assembly, since though they scramble and swoop and knock their heads against the glass, they seem to have no purpose—something senseless inspires them. One gets tired of watching them, as they amble round the lantern and blindly tap as if for admittance, one large toad being the most besotted of any and shouldering his way through the rest. Ah, but what's that? A terrifying volley of pistol-shots rings out—cracks sharply; ripples spread—silence laps smooth over sound. A tree—a tree has fallen, a sort of death in the forest. After that, the wind in the trees sounds melancholy. (JR 25)

This explicit de-focalization\(^10\) can be read as a subtle prefiguration of Jacob's death in the war—the tree "a sort of death," pistol sounds, mourning wind—associating death with narrative effacement. Woolf renders this effacement, this narrative non-personhood that witnesses an unwatched scene, as a kind of game: if nobody is in a forest, what language does nobody use to describe the sound of a falling tree? Or, in another turn of the screw: if nobody—a narrator

\(^10\) While the second passage might be interpreted as a reenactment of Jacob's private thoughts from his own first-person perspective, immediately by the narrator that organizes the rest of the novel, this interpretation stands against the impersonality of the framing pronouns ("you," "one"—no "I") and the extreme atypicality of such direct access to his interiority. It seems much more likely to me that this passage remains in the speech of the styly ironic, floating narrator that precedes and follows, and that this narrator has simply done away with Jacob's presence for the moment.
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Untangling, in his large body of work, the plot of being as it has unfolded through Western philosophy, Levinas seeks an alternative to "ontological categories" to think "the proximity of the one to the other," an alternative to thinking of the other as either an adjunct or limitation to the self's being, essence, and identity (Otherwise Than Being, 15). Levinas suggests that this "one" need not approach its "other" as such that it must either totally exclude from or subsume within itself; for Levinas, the subject has a capacity beyond treating the other as either a limit or complement to the accomplishment of the adventure of essence" (Ibid., 16). There is more a significant adventure that gives selfhood its value and meaning; the ethical encounter with the other, in which assuming one's responsibility for the other is the defining mystery of the self. Levinas uses the trope of "the one-for-the-other" to re-idealize ethics beyond normative rules and invoke an originary, primordial obligation to alter, an "allegiance of the same to the other," at the heart of being and identity (Ibid., 100, 25).

This ethical alternative to ontological terms for approaching alterity is, more generally, an alternative to "the dialectic of being and nothingness in the flow of time," a way of understanding the relation between life and death without making them simple, mutual negations (God, Death, and Time, 14). "Time Passes" is so exemplary an instance of modern fiction because it occupies the same irreducible liminality in this dialectic, becoming a third term in the traditional opposition between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration, somewhere in the realm of free indirect discourse but without recognizable minds to anchor and focalize speech. In this chapter, narrative speech arrives anonymously and remains exterior, the passive voice of what Levinas calls an "atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void... the impersonal 'field of forces' of existing" (Time and the Other, 46). It is neither being nor nothingness, a notation at the outskirts of ontology that correlates to an "existing without existence," to the "fact that there is [il y a]," to a disembodied passivity of presence that precedes or survives actual beings (Ibid., 45-6). Returning to a strain of thought about the impersonality of Being that is especially important in Heidegger (whose "es gibt" anticipates Levinas's "il y a"), he explores this "irreminiscibility of pure existing" when "there is neither anyone nor anything that takes this existence upon itself" (Ibid., 47).

This idea of an "ambience of being" that is "behind every negation" helps us read the presence that Woolf ascribes to nothingness (Ibid., 48):

So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could sur-

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12 Ronald Scherer describes Woolf's disembodied narration in a similar fashion, as one of the "disembodiments" common "at the turn of the twentieth century" that rather than being a "transcendental disembodiment of a view from nowhere" "are as vague as the subtle rhythms of experience, haunting not quite 'positively' the edges of things" (126). In other words, Woolf's narrators are "anonymous, but whose anonymity, like Clarissa Dalloway herself, exists in the position of disengagement rather than a transcendental future" (Ibid.).

12 Levinas occasionally describes this ethical interruption of ontology in narrative terms, e.g., "This responsibility appears as a plot without a beginning, anarchic" (Otherwise than Being, 135), "One is tempted to call this plot religious..." (Ibid., 147).
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embrace after an absence. Subjectivity uninterrupted by sleep is an Odysseus who never leaves home, an eventless epic; or it is a visual perspective into distance without a horizon, extended to the point of emptiness. We can think of narrative insomnia, the voice of wakefulness that stirs while characters sleep in "Time Passes," as storytelling without the limiting horizons of past, present, or future. In other words, insomnia narrative is bound by a familiar sense of time. It warps time, creating a subjectivity that voices itself not-in-the-present-tense, non-synchronously, as time passing or even surpassing the subject. 

As Levinas describes Blanchot's writing: "Thus is diachrony restored to time. A nocturnal time... A diachrony without protection or retention... the opposite of subjectivity." ("The Servant and Her Master" 155). 

Woolf restores diachrony to the subject's synchrony by making a complicated perspectival move: she gives voice to this insomnia consciousness without domesticating it; she narrates from inside its exteriority. The wandering air and random lights, the narrator's empty placeholders for localized subjects, are refused entry to the recognizable interiorities before them: 

So some random light directing them with its pale footfall upon stair and mat, from some uncovered stir, or wandering ship, or the Lighthouse even, the little airs mounted the staircase and nosed round bedroom doors. But here surely, they must cease. Whatever else may perish and disappear, what lies here is steadfast. Here one might say to those sliding lights, those trembling airs that breathe and bend over the bed itself, here you can neither touch nor destroy. Upon which, wearily, ghostly, as if they had finger-light fingers and the light persistance of feathers, they would look, once, on the shut eyes, and the loosely clasping fingers, and fold their garments waerily and disappear. (TJ 191)

Woolf grammatically frames the air and light as speculative and conditional personifications, as estranged representations of consciousness, reinforcing their rejection from the inhabited bedrooms that they approach. This estrangement from interiority—showing interiority from outside, and this outside from inside—is one way to understand insomnia. Levinas characterizes the impersonal there as "a vigilance without possible recourse to sleep" or "refuge in unconsciousness," a consciousness "without the possibility of withdrawing into sleep as into a private domain" (Time and the Other, 48-9). This idea that the self gets tired of being itself, and that it cannot remain itself without periods of anti-

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13 In his essay "The Narrative Voice (the 'he,' the neuter)," Blanchot describes a similar quality of narration (with reference to Kafka and Duras, in particular) in which, in his terms, "the speech of the tale always lets us feel that what is being told is not being told by anyone: it speaks in the neuter," in which "the other speaks." (The Voice of Orpheus, 140, 141). The neuter speaks "from nowhere, suspended in the tale as a whole" and "comes from exteriorly itself, the outside that is the special enigma of language in writing." (142). And so on.

14 Emile Benveniste helps us understand the fundamental violation that this speech not-in-the-present-tense represents: "there is no other criterion and no other expression by which to indicate the time at which one so except to take it as 'the time at which one is speaking.' This is the eternally 'present' moment" (227). My point is simply that Woolf's narrator is somehow speaking outside of this eternally present moment.
hilation, suggests that interiority and exteriority are not separate positions, but part of the same one, and that we inhabit our subjectivity only to the extent that we can also be excluded from it. "Time Passes" is an attempt to represent this exclusion.

Woolf's narrative position within exteriority, looking at interiority from its beyond, may be approached with Levinas's elusive, often fragmented concept of diachrony (a concept in relation to which we, as his readers, necessarily feel positioned outside). We need to elaborate this idea of time emerging from the subject's relation to the other, even to risk a few spatial metaphors, before continuing. We might call diachrony the exteriority of time as we know it, the outside of the new and all of the past and future that we encompass within the now of memory and anticipation. Diachrony is unordered and unmeaning passage itself, nocturnal to the subject's daytime schema, "refractory to all synchronization" (Otherwise Than Being). Yet it is not simply the impersonal time of physics, moving in a uni-directional line without human perspective. It is the non-synchronous dimension of time—"the instant falling out of phase with itself"—that is just as alien to physics as to metaphysics (ibid.). Levinas insists that "there must be signaled a lapse of time that does not return...a transcending diachrony," a moment that cannot be accounted for in any relation among past, present and future (or, in terms of physics: before, simultaneous with, after) (ibid.). The idea of diachrony is the idea of a moment "foreign to every present, every representation," a moment that "signifies a past more ancient than every representable origin, a pre-original and anachronical passed" (ibid.). Levinas "emphasizes the powerlessness of memory over the diachrony of time" as a way to imagine a moment that never passes because it has always already passed (God, Death, and Time 111). This is the ethical moment prior to the moment of self-identified being, the moment of "ethical antecedence" by which the self is founded, "without reference to my identity guaranteed its right," by being given responsibility for the welfare of the other (Entretien 150). This dimension of

15 The preceding phrases from Levinas are especially resonant with (and influential on) writing by Derrida and, to a lesser extent, de Man. For Derrida’s thought about time relevant to Levinas’s diachrony, see, for example, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974) 65-73; Writing and Difference 79-152; Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (NY: Routledge, 1994) xviii-xx, 18, 39-40; and Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992). For de Man’s, see “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism. 2nd ed. rev. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), and his quintessentially deconstructive statement that “As a writer, Proust is the one who knows that the hour of truth, like the hour of death, never arrives on time, since what we call time is precisely truth’s inability to coincide with itself” (Allegories of Reading, 78.

selfhood, "the diachrony of subjectivity, is my entry into the proximity of the neighbor" (Otherwise Than Being 27).

It is the immemorial moment in which the self’s sovereignty over the being it experiences is in question: a self whose very right to be is under interrogation by the other. To the Lighthouse is inaugurated with an unheard question; its first words refer to the question that precedes them: "Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow... " Levinas thinks of the self-in-time as a response, as in-response, to the other who is always asking: "a putting in question of the one who questions. That would be temporality" (God, Death, and Time 110). As I will discuss more in section two of this essay, it is especially "the death of the other" that "puts me in question, as if...I, through my eventual indifference, became the accomplice; and as if, even before being doomed to it myself, I had to answer for this death of the other, and not leave the other alone in his death-bound solitude" (Entretien 145-46).

To the Lighthouse reverberates with an unsettled interrogative current, culminating with the unanswerable deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew. Woolf’s proliferating questions are not merely preludes to answers, but what Mrs. Ramsay thinks of as "unsoluble questions," escalating interruptions in narrative order and subjective coherence (TTL 18). While "Time Passes" is the strongest expression of this interrogative impulse, it pervades the novel; Mrs. Ramsay experiences it near the end of "The Window": "Slowly it came into her head, why is it that one wants people to marry? What was the value, the meaning of things? (Every word they said now would be true)” (TTL 183). The logistical and informational questions of the preceding dozens of pages deepen here into less answerable abstractions, questions veering towards the existential, towards the meaning of questioning itself.

From early on, "Time Passes" renders existence in its anonymous and unsubjected state, existence as there-is, as interrogation:

Nothing stirred in the drawing room or in the dining-room or on the staircase. Only through the rusty hinges and swollen see-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and vented indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing-room questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if making the red and yellow nudes on the wall-paper whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for there was time at their disposal) the torn letters in the wastepaper basket, the flowers, the books, all of which were now open to them and asking. Were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure? (TTL 190-1)
These questions are of ambiguous source, attributed to the roaming airs but also a function of an unidentified mediating and narrating consciousness: “Almost one might imagine them...” “they passed on menacingly as if asking...” (emphasis added). In this ambiguity, the narrative voice seems to be both asking and receiving questions at the same time. The narrative voice, an unlocated quasi-presence, is realized increasingly as a self-questioning. In fact, we might think of the voice in “Time Passes” as a presence that has been undone by the strength of its own interrogative impulse. “But what, after all, is one night?”, “How long, she [Mrs. McNab] asked, creaking and groaning on her knees under the bed, how long shall it endure?” (TTL, 192, 197) If subjectivity that owns its own being is a constative state, its obverse as anonymous and insomniac existence is its interrogation.

More important, Woolf renders exteriority-as-interrogation specifically as questions about time; narrative insomnia and questioning correspond in questions about the meaning and possibility of endurance. Time is at issue (“would it hang much longer, when would it fall?... How long would they endure?”) in the anonymous narrative voice and negative rhetorical form of exteriority, a function of the beyond-being that cannot be known in the terms of the subject. “Time Passes” is the novel’s approach to the presence of time as an otherness to be intuited, evoked, but never fully deciphered or defined: “Almost it would appear that it is useless in such confusion to ask the right those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore, which tempts the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer” (TTL 193). Like Woolf, Levinas takes the interrogative as a stance toward being and identity from which to thematic time and death:

Would not the disquietude of emotion be the question that, in the nearness of death, is precisely at the point of being born? An emotion in the sense of a difference toward death; in other words, an emotion as a question that does not contain, in the posing of the question, the elements of its own response. A question that attaches to that deeper relation [rapport] to the infinite, which is time (time understood as a relation to the infinite). (God, Death, and Time 17)

Levinas describes the subject’s intertwining of death as a profound experience of interrogation, a confrontation with a “pure question mark” that indicates the “original question, one without the posing of a question; a question without a thesis; a pure question that raises itself; a question that is the pure raising of a question” (God, Death, and Time 21, 106). For Levinas, death is not an annihilation but an absolute, unanswerable question, “the question that is necessary for this relationship with infinity, or time, to be produced” (God, Death, and Time 19). This description of death and time as part of the same interrogation of a subject’s claim over its own being is, more precisely, the question asked us by another, a question that is alterity interrupting the sethhood of the self. The other asks us a contentless question by dying. In her narrative poetics, Woolf shows how this passing of the other carries the ethical enigma of passing time.

II

By taking part in the infinite solitude of the Other’s dying... the self is granted an exposure to mortality. Holding the hand of the one who dies in the present, one affirms that there is no “now” in which I could die. The self can never mourn its own death precisely because “my death” could never occur in or as the present.

—Joseph Suglia (53)

“Time Passes” is not simply “abstract”—omniscient, impersonal—but de-centered, transcending localized subjectivity, not into objectivity, but by a paradoxical inhabitation of the subject’s exteriority. Woolf’s lyricism emanates from and contains within it a silence that articulates itself against positive speech, and brings to obscure life something like a darkness that occupies the territory outside light. The chapter briefly interrupts the free indirect discourse of various characters in the long first and third chapters with, we might say, the free indirect discourse of nothing, of absence itself. It is a narration of exteriority, I argue, that abides by diachronic time as Levinas later conceives it, time that, in its alterity, is irreducible to the subject’s endless present. Diachrony—a nocturnal temporality that Woolf and Levinas associate with insomnia and radical questioning—emerges in the subject’s critical relation to others, and especially to the other at or in death. In “Time Passes,” Woolf narrates the oblique, irrational involvement that the self has in the other’s death, the responsibility that the self bears in mourning. It is a difficult relation to represent because, strictly speaking, it is not a relation at all: the death of the other is not a term in a relation, it is not something one can make an object of knowledge or part of an intersubjective dialectic. The death of the other is an absence in being that puts the subject’s own being in question, that ruptures its immanence and totality, and that thereby gives subjectivity a relation to alterity that inaugurates its ethical dimension.

As Suglia suggests above, we can imagine a subtle compensation for our non-presence at our own death with the other’s exposure to our death, and with our exposure to the deaths of others; it is a kind of ontological and temporal sub-

163. Hillis Miller suggests this idea that Woolf’s narrator is shaped by its involvement in character deaths when he writes that the “narrator is without life, personality, opinions, feelings of its own, and yet is doomed to see all the lives, personalities, opinions, and feelings which it relives from the perspective of that prospective death toward which they all move, and where the narrating mind already is” (174).
stition. It leads to a post-Heideggerian conception of the self's absolute relation to its own death, a response to Heidegger's insistence in *Being and Time* that one's relation to death is not only individual but the very source of individual identity. "Da-sein," Heidegger's term for an individual human being (and loosely translated as "being-there"), finds its most defining and affirming possibility in dying; death is Da-sein's "ownmost potentiality of being" (232). This potential is necessarily our own, it is "a matter of the being of my own Da-sein," because "in dying, it becomes evident that death is ontologically constituted by mineness" (Heidegger 223). Heidegger's idea of death's individual mineness—a mineness that creates the individual's very capacity for self-possession—is also an idea of death's "nontotalizing" nature, one in which "all relations to other Da-sein are dissolved" (ibid., 232). Da-sein's nontotalizing nature in mortality guarantees its authenticity:

Death does not just "belong," in an undifferentiated way to one's own Da-sein, but it *lives* claim on it as something individual. The nontotalizing character of death understood in anticipation individualizes Da-sein down to itself... It reveals that the fact that any being-together-with what is taken care of and any being-with the others falls when one's ownmost potentiality-of-being is at stake. Da-sein can authentically be itself only when it makes that possible of its own accord. (Heidegger 243)

Heidegger describes the irreconcilability of authentic being-toward-death and being-in the publicly shared world (the inevitable, originary social situation he calls "being-with" [Mitsein]). It is an idea of authenticity that excludes the presence of the other from the self's death and the self's self from the death of the other.

Levinas attempts to re-think Heidegger's model of mortal self-possession, or as Jonathan Strauss calls it, "the co-creative ideology of mortal self-identity" ("After Death" 100), in ethical terms that can help us understand Woolf's narrative approach to the deaths of three members of the Ramsay family in "Time Passes." Levinas presents the "obligation not to leave the other alone in the face of death" as that which "summons me, demands me, claims me: as if the invisible death faced by the other... were "my business."" (Entre-nous 131, 145). Where for Heidegger death "lays claim" on the individual as its ownmost potentiality, Levinas considers "a more radical substitution for an other" involving "a respons-

17 While Suglia does have Heidegger specifically in mind here, Heidegger comes at the end of a long tradition of thought about the individualizing effect of mortality: see Jonathan Strauss's discussion of this tradition in "After Death" in *Dis/en* 30.3 (Fall 2000): 90-104. For an earlier discussion, see the entire issue of *Diacritics* of which it is a part, which takes as its theme "Post-Mortem: The State of Death as a Modern Construct."
Woof represents an elusive way of knowing in which subjects do not perceive objects but perceive the hollowed or reflected or shadowed residues of objects, the empty spaces (shoes, cap, skirts, coats) or mirror images (in the looking-glass and water) or fleeting shadows (of trees, birds) that take an ambiguous epistemological status, an epistemology of felt absence. It is not simply memory that happens in this passage—there is no subject remembering here, qua subject—but a kind of perceptual haunting that registers in the delicate prose-rhythms, word repetitions, and fragmented imagery that give this passage what we might call the poetics of ethical intuition. The narrative voice summons what is gone from the remaining traces, complicating and elaborating epistemology with mourning, with a guilty response to the dead. We might call it a way of knowing the dead that no subject can perform, because there is no object for it to know, and no specific guilt to claim or alone for.

There is no object, but there is not nothing. Woof represents the process in which the self, by achieving a proximity to the other that is not an epistemological relation, is reconfigured around the deaths it participates in besides its own. It is the self as it sacrifices itself in the death of the other. Levinas writes that

the sacrifice for another [attaché] would create an other relation with the death of the other: a responsibility that would perhaps answer the question of why we can die. In the guiltiness of the survivor, the death of the other [attaché] is my affair. My death is my part in the death of the other, and in my death I die the death that is my fault. (Grid, Death, and Time 39)

Levinas has us imagine our own death as the manifestation of guilt—of nonindifference, of an obsolete implication—we bear in the other’s dying, our related answer to the question posed by the death of the other. For Levinas, the word “time” names the warping of the subject’s contours by its irremediable exteriority, its ethical excess. The subject in diachrony cannot simply be when it is: it has always already passed, along with the other, for whom it mourns.

The narration of “Time Passes” is in the voice of this passing. It is a nocturnal passage that shadows the day that comes to eclipse it.

In spring the garden uma, casually filled with wind-blown plants, were gay as ever. Violets came and daffodils. But the stillness and the brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and tumult of the night, with the trees standing there, and the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet holding nothing, eyes, and so terrible. (772 265)

Woof’s images of what it is to lose the logic of interiority, to have a blindness in which one actually beholds nothing, are strange and beautiful because they represent the subject’s exposure to an exteriority in which one substitutes one’s
mortality for another's. We cannot know we do this; it is not a knowledge. It happens as time happens, terrible and inevitable, a night-wind overheard in sleep.

Works Cited


