Before moving to the question of temporality in the novels generally, it will be useful to look at what many readers have found to be a gratuitously obscure and eccentric piece of writing: the central “Time Passes” section of To the Lighthouse. Ostensibly, it is intended as a representation of the passage of time, and if this were its only function it might justifiably be said that Woolf has lost control of her pen here. However, “Time Passes” contributes significantly to the “philosophy” implicit in the novels. What are seen as its excesses can be explained as Woolf’s efforts to find some means of communicating what (in several diary passages) she acknowledges is beyond language. Her method in “Time Passes” is to state what ‘reality’ is not.

“As an infinite circumference,” writes Georges Poulet, “eternity . . . is the vastest possible circle of duration; as the center of this circumference it is the fixed point, and unique moment, which is simultaneously in harmony with all the circumferential points of this duration” (Circle, xii-xiii). To the Lighthouse (which Woolf felt had “fetched its circle pretty completely”) partakes of such double infinity, embodying a movement at once toward center and circumference. Intimations of this movement occur early on: “Both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness—because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest” (TTL, 36-37).

In her diary on 5 September 1926, Woolf wrote: “The lyric portions of To the L are collected in the 10 year lapse, & dont interfere with the text so much as usual.” The “lyric portions” do, nevertheless, connect with the “text” as they reiterate Lily Bris-
coe's questions and raise matters already seen to be of paramount importance in the conception of the world of the novels in general. That theme discussed above of the "disproportion of man" returns in "Time Passes," but embedded less accessibly in a symbolic poetry that attempts a pure abstraction. In her diary and working notes, Woolf frequently emphasized the experimental nature of the middle section of the novel and felt at a loss as to how to approach it: "I cannot make it out—here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing—I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to" (D, 18 April 1926). When she dashed off a couple of pages, however, she felt that "This is not made up: it is the literal fact" (D, 30 April 1926). Writing to Vita Sackville-West a week after Lighthouse's publication, she admits that she once thought "Time Passes" "impossible as prose" (L, 1754)—an indication, perhaps, of how it should be approached.

The actual passage of time is fairly directly conveyed by the description of the house's decay, the encroachment of nature, and phrases telling the reader that time is indeed passing, e.g.: "Night, however, succeeds to night"; "Now, day after day"; "Night after night, summer and winter." This section of the novel has an import beyond its functional message of a ten year "lapse," however. In her working notes, Woolf seems to emphasize her deeper concerns. It is worth setting down her plan for the section, as from this it is clear that she intended to encompass and probe themes prevalent in all her fiction, not just interpolate a piece of "poetic prose":

To the Lighthouse
[<<Tie?>>] Ten Chapters
Now the question of the ten years.
[<<Tie?>>]
The Seasons.
The Skull
The gradual dissolution of everything
This is to be contrasted with the permanence
of—what?
Sun, moon, & stars.
Hopeless gulls of misery.
Cruelty.
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The War.
Change. Oblivion. Human vitality. Old woman
Cleaning up. The bobbed up, valorous, as of a
principle
of human life projected
We are handed on by our children?
Shawls & shooting caps. A green handled brush.
The devouringness of nature.
But all the time this passes, accumulates.
Darkness.
The welter of winds & waves
What then is the medium through wh. we regard human beings?
Tears. [di?]  
<Sleep th> Slept through life. (Dick, Appendix B)

I think it is important to focus on “Time Passes” to deflect any inference of mysticism from what is being discussed. My intention is to present a sort of palimpsest: Woolf’s text should be imagined showing through what is in effect my commentary. As “Time Passes” begins, the horizon between sea and sky almost disappears: night falls. This night adumbrates the ten years of abandonment and yet is only an “ordinary” night. A quasi-religious note is sounded almost immediately, an indication of the broader import of this section: “divine goodness” responds to “human penitence” by giving a glimpse of noumena, the “thing beneath the semblance of the thing” (TW, 116): “It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always” (TTL, 198).

Religious terms and ideal forms persist in “Time Passes”: “divine promptitude,” “light bent to its own image in adoration,” “tokens of divine bounty,” “dreamt holily”; “the shape of loveliness itself,” “persistency itself,” “some absolute good.” The “deity” allows only a glimpse of perfection: the “drench of hail” that shrouds the world’s treasures makes it seem impossible “that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth” (199). Here, certainly, Lily’s aspirations are recalled, and the idea of a whole (or the “true nature of our experience,” as it is termed
in the contemporaneous "Impassioned Prose"—see above, p. 74) arising from gathered fragments links "Time Passes" to the wider thought of the novels as I have elucidated it. There can also be seen a close association between religion and art. The momentary visions of a 'reality' apart from actual reality are the typical concerns of Woolf's artists, that which they seek to capture and convey. The tendency to a transcendental beyond in religious faith, it is suggested, shares the form of artistic perception and creation. The difference between the two yearnings lies in the willingness of art—at least Woolf's art—to accept defeat and negation as part of the experience, never to wish to be "blown to nothingness" (MD, 64) in a mystical transcendence of the actual.

In "Time Passes" the beach—which can certainly be taken in one sense as that beach upon which the Ramsay children walk and play—is the scene of many questionings of life's purpose. This, of course, anticipates Lily's longing to find "the meaning of life" in the third section of the novel ("The Lighthouse"). Before an answer can be approached, however, the questioners must learn the honesty Woolf's art propounds.

The first seeker after an answer is a solitary sleeper who seeks on the beach "what, and why, and wherefore" (199), a typical Romantic looking to nature—and particularly the sea—for an explanation of life and himself. His desire to make the world "reflect the compass of the soul" (199) is disappointed; Poulet is instructive here: "Here there is the place, the moment, there an indistinct immensity. How to link them, how to place them in rapport with one another? How to establish a proportion?" (Circle, 33). Once again, the text is following the path of Pascal's "unaided knowledge." Standing on the ambiguous beach (so because it is at once part of the land and part of the sea), the sleeper is mocked by the bellowing wind for his vain attempt. Mrs. Ramsay's death appears as an impassive fact, contrasted with the ethereal quest of the solitary sleeper: it is a fact of life the meaning of which is not to be found in nature.

The empty house is "seen" by the "nameless spirit" around which Woolf's thoughts were to revolve so incessantly as she wrote Between the Acts. As distance between perceiver and perceived is annihilated, in the vacancy arises pure form: "the shape
of loveliness itself" (TTL, 201). Such form is not in the actual world, and so not in time; lifeless and solitary, the form "is" in eternity. Without the distancing, distorting, shaping, and naming of human being, there is nothing: "pure form" is one of the myriad (false) names of nothingness (N.B.: "a form from which life had parted" [TTL, 201]). Such form may, it is suggested, be glimpsed ("seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly"). It shares this characteristic with 'reality' and the notion of self or soul. Stillness is the key to the ideal; movement is essential to life; stasis is death. This shape of loveliness is, then, a form of death (the jugs and chairs are suitably shrouded). Qualities (like the beauty of the Acropolis in *Jacob's Room*, 147-48) do not share the modes of being of actual human life; only by human perception are they brought into the actual world. The sounds of the world are folded into silence; only with the return of human life do those sounds again become the fragments of a sought-after pattern (TTL, 218). As Woolf noted in her diary, her intentions in "Time Passes" were impossible to realize if come at directly. The meaning can only emerge as part of its overall context; by shaping round what is unsayable, it is "said" in the act of reading.

Mrs. McNab—the "principle," "human vitality"—has moments of light in her darkness. Despite the quotidian rhythms of her existence, there is something in her that makes her smile and sing; a fundamental humanity, inarticulate, but sufficient to motivate life. The answer that is "vouchsafed" the beach-walking mystic and visionary (implying a resting in transcendence) is not to be shared. The sense here is that the inward-looking visionaries have little to offer human life. It is to the world of being with others, to the shared experience of actual human being that Woolf would direct our thoughts, illuminating the "incorrigible hope" that twines about even the most apparently desolate aspects of life.

The third walkers on the beach are "the wakeful, the hopeful" (TTL, 204): they see a commensurability between nature and man, a comforting assurance that "good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules" (TTL, 205). The wakeful and hopeful assemble elements of nature in the belief that they thus bring together the fragments of an inner vision. Nature "declares" the
truth of this vision, but if questioned, the vision at once evaporates. What seems to be implied here is that it is only the apparent order and unity of nature that impels man to seek a commensurate unity within himself. The passage is dotted with indications that such a project is to be rejected: the minds of men are mirrors in which clouds and shadows form; the season of the wakeful and hopeful is "acquiescent" spring, the significance of which is soon revealed.

The wakeful and hopeful seek universal knowledge that as Pascal knew, is hopeless: "If, as Descartes believes, the first question is to know oneself, the very act of the knowledge of self, contrary to what Descartes held, leads us at once, either to despair through the comprehension of our misery, or else to catastrophe by making obligatory the impossible, that is to say, universal knowledge" (Circle, 35-36). Death again starkly controverts all hope of security; the "diamond in the sand which would render the possessor secure" (TTL, 205) is unattainable.

"Time Passes" is implicitly concerned with the urge to fix an absolute self, for it is time that proves always to be the downfall of the attempt to compose self. In this section of the novel, Woolf is not so much attempting to render the experience of time, as time "itself," the time of nature and eternity in which all human being appears as but a spark. This concern will loom larger in her last novel, but the notion is really impossible to grasp unless put in terms of human being. Poulet, writing about one of Woolf's favorite authors—Montaigne—draws attention to the inextricable relation of time and self, using an image familiar in Woolf's writing:

The instant is the kingdom of the imperceptible. It is the home of what Leibnitz was later to call the infinitely small entities. It is an instant which is an instant of passage, and which therefore is less an instant than the passage from instant to instant; there is, so to speak, an infinity of the microscopic changes in all the shades of being. It is a wager to attempt to "choose and lay hold of so many nimble little motions" [Montaigne], to hope to disentangle "a thing so mixed, so slender, and so fortuitous." It is all the more so because the incommensurable volubility of tenuous elements, which makes up the mind, is volubility of the thinking act as well as of its thoughts. Thus the self is dissolved, not only from instant to instant but even in the middle of the instant-passage, in a prismatic play like that of a spray of water.
War ultimately demonstrates the illusion that a commensurability between man and nature is. "Those" who go down to the beach to seek answers in sea and sky are finally shaken out of complacency by the evidence of war. How does the image of an ashen-colored ship reflect their benevolent deity? The tone is deeply mocking of that "scene calculated to stir the most sublime reflections and lead to the most comfortable conclusions" (TTL, 207), setting itself firmly against the visions of divine harmony the Romantics (in particular) found in the contemplation of nature. This intrusion of an image of man-made death forces the beach-walker to a new honesty: nature is entirely indifferent to man. "That dream, then, of sharing, completing, finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath?" (TTL, 208). The question-mark is surprising, but expressive of the movement toward the conclusion that "the mirror was broken" (TTL, 208). By only looking outward to nature, away from their own being, by making no effort, people simply reflect the nature they are thrown into, denying their actual being by losing it in the universal.

In support of this idea we can turn to a most significant entry in Woolf’s diary, made on 11 October 1929, in which the word “acquiescence” forms a direct link with the novel; the concerns of Between the Acts, it might also be noted, are once more adumbrated:

& for all this, there is vacancy & silence somewhere in the machine. On the whole, I do not much mind; because, what I like is to flash & dash from side to side, goaded on by what I call reality. If I never felt these extraordinarily pervasive strains—of unrest, or rest, or happiness, or discomfort—I should float down into acquiescence. Here is something to fight; & when I wake early I say to myself, Fight, fight. If I could catch the feeling, I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness & silence from the habitable world; the sense that comes to me of being bound on an adventure. . . But anything is possible. And this curious steed, life; is genuine—Does any of this convey what I want to say?—But I have not really laid hands on the emptiness after all. (D, 11 October 1929)

The import of this passage evidently spreads far beyond the immediate concerns, which is a good example of why Woolf’s writ-
ing resists linear, discursive exposition. Words are pools of meaning, with many levels of import and significance that can obtain simultaneous recognition only in the preverbal unconscious of the reading mind. The approach to understanding Woolf's thought must, I feel, lie in such concatenation of passages, a gathering of fragments. With the mirror of complacency broken, nature and humankind are divorced; art, in the form of Mr. Carmichael's poetry, is the fact of life that is set against mystic visions now (77L, 208).

Released from the illusion of reflected beauty and unity, nature is seen as a reasonless and indifferent force; time also, "(for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together)" (77L, 209). Nature in the novel is like Pascal's desert island: it is what we are thrown into. Attempts to find unity between that emptiness (for nature is empty at heart) and our being are hopeless, resulting only in illusions. Memory, by which, as we have seen, the sense of identity must be formed and sustained, is helpless in stemming the rising "pool of Time":

What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature? Mrs. McNab's dream of a lady, of a child, of a plate of milk soup? It had wavered over the walls like a spot of sunlight and vanished. (77L, 213)

Here [on the desert island], memory proves itself miserably ineffectual. It could only, by the vain miracle of affective reviviscence, transport us from island to island, from moment to moment, and from place to place. Never, for any moment nor for any place, could it tell us who put us there, nor what we are doing there. (Circle, 34)

The language of "Time Passes" reveals an acute struggle in Woolf's thinking: while suffused with the religious sense, it rejects the idea of any external agency, of the supernatural. Despite this, it does suggest an informing "spirit"—or, at least, a pattern—that might be described as the non-being from which being arises, and against which being stands out. This otherness is usually misrepresented by mystics and visionaries who seek an escape from the actuality of human being. Without the creative power of human being, nature (or eternity—they seem synonymous here) will prevail. Human being, then, is seen as "rescued" from the dark nothingness of amorphous nature / eternity.
The “singing of the real world,” the “voice of the beauty of the world” (TTL, 219) (Mrs. Ramsay was described as “the beauty of the world,” [61]), goes on unheeded by the sleepers, who might be taken as representing the majority of human beings. Again and again, Woolf emphasizes that apprehension of ‘reality’ is available only through effort. The voice of beauty is indifferent to those who sleep heedless of it: if they prefer to sleep, “gently then without complaint, or argument, the voice would sing its song” (TTL, 220). It is significant that the passage closes with the awakening of the artist, Lily, to whom the song has penetrated.

Once again, thought folds back in on itself when face to face with this metalinguistic ‘reality’; it cannot be thought about; the circle cannot be escaped. It is perhaps Woolf’s inability to put in actual terms what she means by ‘reality’, beauty, and soul that gives the “philosophy” implicit in the novels its essentially religious character.