CHAPTER EIGHT

TIME

NOW THERE IS NOTHING SO MYSTERIOUS, SO ENIGMATIC, SO WONDERFUL AS TIME. IT IS not only that it is the most difficult of all problems; it is also the most urgent, the one which most frequently confronts us and reminds us of its actual importance, the one which is perpetually experienced not only as a thought, but as the very essence of our being. We are not only living in time; we are living time; we are time.¹

Woolf’s concept of time is essentially Romantic. A sense of transience, of the deficiencies of human life in time, pervades her writing and, with no belief in a supernatural agency, any possibility of transcending the horizon of time must be rooted in actual experience. The most significant feature of the Romantic concept of time is identified by Georges Poulet as a belief in the continued existence of the past. That such a belief was an important part of Woolf’s thinking is vaguely implied even as early as The Voyage Out: “She was haunted by absurd jumbled ideas—how, if one went back far enough, everything perhaps was intelligible; everything was in common; for the mammoths who pastured in the fields of Richmond High Street had turned into paving stones and boxes full of ribbon and her aunts” (TVO, 73). The immanence of the past in the present is felt more definitely later in the novel: “The time of Elizabeth was only distant from the present time by a moment of space compared with the ages which had passed since the water had run between those banks, and the green thickets swarmed there, and the small trees had grown to huge wrinkled trees in solitude” (TVO, 323).

Such intimations of the past’s persistence in the present lead easily to a belief in the continued existence of some “part” of people’s being after death—a belief that Clarissa voices in Mrs. Dalloway. The fact of death temporalizes human being; it is that which manifests the horizon of time by which all actual being is
bounded. Woolf's novels (which she once wrote she would perhaps prefer to call "elegies") testify to a potential in human experience for perceiving a time out of time, for overcoming the limits of actual life through apprehension of a different mode of being altogether.

Her acute sense of life's transience and the search for a way of overcoming it may have arisen from the devastating experiences of her childhood. In an early memoir ("Reminiscences," 1907-8), she wrote, "The effect of death upon those that live is always strange, and often terrible in the havoc it makes with innocent desires" (MOB, 31). The "greatest disaster that could happen" was the death of Julia, her mother. The somber world of death and mourning that may be discovered in Leslie Stephen's *Mausoleum Book* is recalled throughout Woolf's fiction. It is interesting to note in the description of Julia Stephen in "Reminiscences" the similarity between mother and daughter's sense of life's ephemerality: "She kept herself marvellously alive to all the changes that went on round her, as though she heard perpetually the ticking of a vast clock and could never forget that some day it would cease for all of us" (MOB, 35). Her daughter records that Julia saw those around her as a "vast procession on the march towards death." A namesake of Julia's—Julia Eliot—displays just this sense in *Jacob's Room*: "The tumult of the present seems like an elegy for past youth and past summers, and there rose in her mind a curious sadness, as if time and eternity showed through skirts and waistcoats, and she saw people passing tragically to destruction" (168). Like Woolf, she was poised between making the most of things since we know nothing of the future, and thinking that nothing mattered, as perhaps there is no future.

The deaths that occurred in her early life—particularly that of her mother—were constantly in Woolf's mind: "People never get over their early impressions of death I think. I always feel pursued" (D, 5 April 1924). Evidence of this persistence is found, for example, in the striking similarity between a description of Julia's death written in 1924 and another written in 1940:

This is the 29th anniversary of mothers death. I think it happened early on a Sunday morning, & I looked out of the nursery window & saw old Dr Seton walking away with his hands behind his back, as if to say It is finished &
then the doves descending to peck in the road, I suppose, with a fall & descent of infinite peace. (*D, 5 May 1924*)

I leant out of the nursery window the morning she died. It was about six, I suppose. I saw Dr Seton walk away up the street with his head bent and his hands clasped behind his back. I saw the pigeons floating and settling. I got a feeling of calm, sadness, and finality. It was a beautiful blue spring morning, and very still. That brings back the feeling that everything had come to an end. (*MOB, 84*)

The late memoir, "A Sketch of the Past" (from which the latter quotation comes), makes clear that Woolf felt the deaths of her mother and Stella (her half-sister), and later her brother Thoby, in some way revealed to her the true lineaments of life:

But at 15 to have that protection removed, to be tumbled out of the family shelter, to see cracks and gashes in that fabric, to be cut by them, to see beyond them—was that good? . . . I would see (after Thoby’s death) two great grindstones (as I walked round Gordon Sq) and myself between them.2 I would typify a contest between myself and "them"—some invisible giant. I would reason, or fancy, that if life were thus made to rear and kick, it was at any rate, the real thing. Nobody could say I had been fobbed off with an unmeaning slip of the precious matter. So I came to think of life as something of extreme reality. And this, of course, increased my feeling of my own importance. Not in relation to human beings, in relation to the force which had respected me sufficiently to make me feel what was real. (*MOB, 118*).

Allowing for the retrospective modifications of memory, we may say that Woolf’s sense of a distinct ‘reality’ apart from the general reality of everyday life began to develop very early in her life.

In many of the transitional sketches that helped Woolf toward *Jacob’s Room*—e.g., "An Unwritten Novel," "Kew Gardens," “The Mark on the Wall" (see *D, 26 January 1920*)—the ghostly atmosphere of that novel is already prevalent, a sense that what is seen is transient, passed away as soon as looked at. *Jacob’s Room* is elegaic, incorporating the traditional elements of lonely widows, tolling bells, and country churchyards; echoes of the dead reverberate through the novel, mingling inextricably with the voices of the living. It was in *Jacob’s Room* that Woolf felt she had “found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice” (*D, 26 July 1922*). Although death had been a significant
element of her first novel, it does not assume the thematic im­
portance it was to retain in her fiction until Jacob’s Room.

That novel is, so to speak, “bracketed”; for instance, by the
repetition of certain phrases, giving it the appearance of being
“scenes from a life”: “Then here is another scrap of conversa­
tion; the time about eleven in the morning; the scene a studio;
and the day Sunday” (126). More than once it is stressed that
Jacob is a shadow, blown through the pages of the book like a
leaf by the wind. Even in the beginning, on the beach, there is an
undefinable note of absence, of loss; a sense that Jacob is already
gone when the work opens, that what follows is only an attempt
to imagine his life (which is, of course, only imaginary). This
note can be heard in Archer’s calling for his brother:

“Ja-cob! Ja-cob!” shouted Archer, lagging on after a second.

The voice had an extraordinary sadness. Pure from all body, pure
from all passion, going out into the world, solitary, unanswered, breaking
against rocks—so it sounded. (7)

To call and receive no answer is an intimation of death. Jacob’s
death is unseen, unknown; all that is known of death is its effect
on the living, which was Woolf’s habitual focus. At the close of
the book, as Bonamy echoes Archer’s cry (a bracket), it is the
continuing passage of time that dominates.

The sense of the passing of time grows increasingly strong
in Woolf’s diary from 1920 onward, and with it her search for
something apart from time, for moments of timelessness:

Nowadays I’m often overcome by London; even think of the dead who have
walked in the city. Perhaps one might visit <city> the churches. The view
of the grey white spires from Hungerford Bridge brings it to me: & yet I can’t
say what “it” is. (D, 8 June 1920)

Why do I trouble to be so particular with facts? I think it is my sense of the
flight of time: so soon Towers Place will be no more; & twigs, & I that write. I
feel time racing like a film at the Cinema. I try to stop it. I prod it with my
pen. I try to pin it down. (D, 22 January 1922)

I have the sense of the flight of time; & this shores up my emotions. (D, 13
June 1923)

In Mrs. Dalloway Clarissa expresses her belief in surviving
death through the “odd affinities” she has with people and
places:
Somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met: being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.

(11-12)

Later in the novel this (Romantic) autochthonous idea is repeated:

But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or anyone, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. Perhaps—perhaps. (MD, 168)

As if to illustrate the truth of this theory, there is a remarkable "odd affinity" between Clarissa and Septimus ("She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself" [MD, 204]). His death seems to endorse Clarissa's understanding of the nature of life, something she believes to be distorted and covered over by love and religion: "And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn't believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?" (MD, 141). This simple "philosophy of life" is expressive of the divisions between one human being and another. As has been noted many times, there is a profound longing in Woolf's writings that arises largely from the sense of human separateness, and of the failure of relationship to provide anything tangible.

Clarissa's "transcendental theory" suggests that divisions can be overcome, perhaps, by what Woolf sometimes called the
soul ("the unseen part of us, which spreads wide"). The word "soul" occurs frequently in the novel, and also in Woolf's diary from about 1922, but in both contexts it is never given any very clear meaning. She uses "soul" to signify the essence of a person, and in this signification might be seen a move toward belief in transcendence, the existence of something apart from all modalities (a self). As already seen, however, this essence cannot be approached directly or described:

But then I should have to speak of the soul, & did I not banish the soul when I began? What happens is, as usual, that I'm going to write about the soul, & life breaks in . . . .

In scribbling this, I am led away from my soul, which interests me nevertheless. My soul peeped out. For it is the soul I fancy that comments on visitors & reports their comments, & sometimes sets up such a to-do in the central departments of my machinery that the whole globe of me dwindles to a button-head. (D, 19 February 1923)

Love and religion destroy the "privacy of the soul" in Clarissa's view (MD, 140) by their attempt to conclude, to state what the essence of life is.

Mrs. Dalloway is explicitly concerned with the experience of time (an early title was The Hours) and the role of memory. Life is characterized as a tension between lived time and clock time. Freud, writing about Maury's famous dream of being guillotined (The Interpretation of Dreams) says, "It seemed to show that a dream is able to compress into a very short space of time an amount of perceptual matter far greater than the amount of ideational matter that can be dealt with by our waking mind" (131). Woolf's novels reverse this, emphasizing the great discrepancy that exists between the time of the waking mind and that ticked off by clocks. The most fundamental aspect of lived time is tension, which arises from the workings of memory. Mrs. Dalloway successfully conveys this form of life, because the act of reading at once involves the reader in the ambiguities of the different characters' experiences of time (as, according to Poulet's "Phenomenology of Reading," a reader's consciousness is invaded by the "consciousness" of a character). J. Hillis Miller has noted that memory often "displaces altogether the real present of the novel and becomes the virtual present of the reader's experience."
The seminal event of Clarissa's refusal of Peter at Bourton reverberates throughout the novel, seeming, to Peter at least, to have defined his life (see above, p. 55). It might be said that in the way shared memories irrupt into the present of the main characters can be seen the possibility of overcoming human separateness. The life of memory is not actual; it is an immaterial substance, an access to a timeless world within the world of time.

Clock time threatens an individual's sense of continuity, because it takes no account of the lived experience of time; this threat is actualized in the novel when Clarissa calls out after Peter, as he leaves her house after their reunion: "'My party! Remember my party tonight!' she cried, having to raise her voice against the roar of the open air, and, overwhelmed by the traffic and the sound of all the clocks striking, her voice crying 'Remember my party to-night!' sounded frail and thin and very far away as Peter Walsh shut the door" (MD, 56). If Big Ben strikes clock time, the bell of St. Margaret's seems to sound lived time: it does not coincide with the authoritative strokes of Big Ben, but seems "like something alive." For Peter, the sound contains past, present, and future; it recalls that moment from the past shared by him and Clarissa, which is separated from their "present" by only a moment of space, but also by many of Big Ben's leaden circles. The moment of intimacy has its being in Peter's memory, at one remove, so to speak, from the actual. Peter himself is uncertain of the moment: "But what room? What moment? And why had he been so profoundly happy when the clock was striking?" (MD, 56).

The sound of the striking clock contains both his prevailing mood of sadness (at the memory of Clarissa's refusal) and his memory of happiness with her. The dislocation of these perspectives unnerves Peter and produces an image of the future that compounds his wretched feelings. To regain his sense of identity, Peter rebels against the inexorable bell that is sounding away the moments of his life: "No! No! he cried. She is not dead! I am not old, he cried, and marched up Whitehall, as if there rolled down to him, vigorous, unending, his future" (MD, 56). "The future lies in the hands of young men like that," says Peter as a squadron marches past. He seems to wish to reorganize his past,
thinking himself back to how he was thirty years previously, to adapt his memories to his present consciousness in a way that will not represent to him what he feels is his failure. As if to deny the possibility of being anywhere but at the front of a rushing train of time, the human emblems of clock time sweep Peter's dreams and memories away: "On they marched, past him, past everyone, in their steady way, as if one will worked legs and arms uniformly, and life, with its varieties, its irreticences, had been laid under a pavement of monuments and wreaths and drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline" (MD, 57).

The different times must be synthesized: linear, leaden circles, pealing out with inexorable regularity, and the erratic instants of a sudden plunge into the moment. Peter Walsh and Clarissa cannot bear to live linearly, but strive throughout the novel to complete a circle, joining past and present in the hope of achieving unity. The party at the end, which brings the protagonists of the earlier event together once more, does not solve the problem because the characters are no longer those people that came together at Bourton. This "incomplete circle" (J. Hillis Miller) is the form of the novel; it involves the reader by placing him or her in the memories of the characters (and vice versa). For the reader, then, the circle can be completed in that the whole timescale is not in the actual world of time and death, but in the virtual space between reader and text.

The form of the novel anticipates a historic consciousness that is enshrined in T. S. Eliot's quartet of 1935, Burnt Norton:

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Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
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(44-46)

Such a historic consciousness is most fully expressed in Woolf's last novel Between the Acts. For a formal articulation of what the idea implies, we may turn to Cassirer's Logic of the Humanities: "History, viewed as spiritual, is in no sense a mere succession of events separating and supplanting each other in time. It is, in the midst of this change, an eternal present. . . . Its "meaning" is in no one of its moments; and yet, in each of them, it is complete
and unbroken” (56). The continuous present is created only in the act of reading. For the novel’s characters, however, the moment passes, as do all moments.

If the Clarissa-Peter-Richard side of Mrs. Dalloway exemplifies the common human experience of time, that other strand of the novel, that relates Septimus Smith’s final hours, constructs an image of the actual experience of timelessness. This is a paradox the possibility of which is explained only by the breakdown of the limits “normality” imposes on each individual: Woolf is quite explicit in her diary about the source in her own experience of the contours of Septimus’s madness.⁶

Septimus seems to have fallen out of time; he is caught in a perpetual present, a horrific timelessness in which he is no longer sheltered by past and future.⁷ The striking clocks of the actual world do not penetrate to Septimus because he experiences himself as beyond time, high above the world where time’s “leaden circles” dissolve. It is peculiarly ironic that Septimus should be taken for “help” to the clockwork Bradshaw who gives just three quarters of an hour to his patients in his offices on Harley Street, where the clocks shred and slice the day (MD, 113).

Septimus’s sense of the oneness of the world is a refusal to admit death: if he does not recognize the passage of time, he need not admit death. This, indeed, is the basic tenet of his “new religion”; birds sing to him “from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death” (MD, 28). It is in his belief in transcendence that Septimus is allied to Clarissa, the difference between them being that he has lost all touch with the actual. As Clarissa sometimes tends to, Septimus sees himself as wholly essence, as soul. It is for this reason that he cannot communicate his visions. They come to him “not in actual words” but in a “language” he cannot read (MD, 25). Clarissa, too, feels the pressure of “an inner meaning, almost expressed” (MD, 36), but remains rooted in her embodied, time-bound, actual life.

Septimus’s death reveals to Clarissa a “thing there was that mattered” (MD, 202): as in so many entries in the diary, language halts here. The meaning must be drawn from the similar-
ity of expression in those displacements of language found wherever Woolf writes of 'reality' or the soul. Death reveals the "impossibility of reaching the centre" because it manifests the ultimate horizon of time in human life. However much the moment is expanded, the past recreated, or a sense of being outside time achieved, the actual fact of death circumscribes all effort. In death, however, Septimus both retains his integrity and communicates to Clarissa. This communication argues for an abstract 'reality' in which the soul can find rest and continue to exist, but not in the modes of actual life, and not within the scope of language.

In "Impassioned Prose" Woolf asked in conclusion, "whether the prose writer, the novelist, might not capture fuller and finer truths than are now his aim if he ventured into those shadowy regions where De Quincey has been before him" (GR, 40). De Quincey's "most perfect passages," she wrote, "are descriptions of states of mind in which, often, time is miraculously prolonged and space miraculously expanded" (GR, 39). This could describe many significant passages of Woolf's own novels, which seek to "make of the moment something permanent" (TTL, 249). The novels are lyrics, in Cassirer's definition that "by losing itself in the moment, seeking nothing else than to exhaust it of its entire mood and atmosphere [the lyric] thereby invests it with duration and eternity." The effort to escape from the ceaseless flow of future to past that is our present is a common human effort, as Poulet notes: "Each poet, each religion, each philosophy, each time has collaborated in man's attempts to escape out of time" ("Timelessness," 22). Faith in the possibility of such an escape must entail—as it did in the Romantics' case—belief in the continued existence of the past. This Poulet holds to be the "essential belief" of "nearly all the Romanticists":

All our life, and especially all our childhood, with all our perceptions, images and feelings, and whatever ideas we have had, persists in our minds; but as we are living in duration, it is not permitted to us to have anything but rare glimpses, disconnected reminiscences, of this immense treasure stored in a remote place in our soul. ("Timelessness," 11)

Life constantly vanishing into the past (see, for example, TTL, 172-73) and the possibility of its recovery is a recurring
center in Woolf's thought," a significant mapping of the deep
tension in all her thinking between faith and despair:

And now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two
contradictions. This has gone on forever: will last forever; goes down to the
bottom of the world—this moment I stand on. And it is transitory, flying,
diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that
though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are
somehow successive, & continuous—we human beings; & show the light
through. But what is the light? (D, 14 January 1929).

The "light" I understand as synonymous with 'reality', that which
is apart from all modalities of being and continuous. It is this
timelessness that Lily Briscoe attempts to capture in her painting,
through the recreation of her own past as a work of art. Memory
and art are explicitly identified with one another by Lily: "That
woman . . . made out of that miserable silliness and spite (she
and Charles squabbling, sparring, had been silly and spiteful)
something . . . which survived, after all these years, complete,
so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and it
stayed in the mind almost like a work of art" (TTL, 248-49). Lily
continues by reframing "the old question which traversed the
sky of the soul perpetually . . . What is the meaning of life?"
The answer she gives to herself illuminates once more the close
association between the modes of being of memory and of art:

The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did
come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck
unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself
and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them
together; Mrs. Ramsay saying "Life stand still here"; Mrs. Ramsay making
of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried
to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a
revelation. (TTL, 249)

Woolf frequently spoke of writers being closer to life, to 'reality',
than other artists. Fiction is defined by the creation of a world of
time out of time. Novels can achieve a fixing of single moments
because they embody a (fictional) present (which may be written as a past) that can be experienced over and over again as a
"present" in the act of reading. In this may be seen a correlation
between Woolf's 'reality' and her concept of art's ability to over-
come time (and hence death).
Identity must have a base; this can be provided by the sense of one's physical being, by a name, by memory, or through relationship with others. Whatever a person's identity, it must exist in and through time; there must be a temporal as well as a spatial aspect to the formation of identity. However, the present is not a unity to be fixed, but the endless flow of future to past. Because past and present can never (as far as actual human identity is concerned) be completely synthesized, an autonomous identity can never form; it proceeds constantly toward death. To locate oneself in time, therefore, requires continuous effort.

The sense that life is a battle against nothingness, that all actions and efforts are merely necessary but futile attempts to disguise life's empty center, is strong in Woolf's thinking. Clock time carries forward a vegetative life controlled by forces that have nothing to do with identity; individual life must be rescued from those forces. This sense is prevalent in *The Waves*, in which the lives of the six characters appear as random moments of organization rescued from unidentified chaos. The import of life being seen as poised over an abyss from which only an accident has momentarily drawn consciousness is that it is not, then, a progression from one moment to the next in order, but has its being in a loop that expands around us all—eternity. The past is always there, ready to irrupt into the present at any moment.

The precariousness of the hold that identity needs to retain on its "present" is illustrated by a moment in Bernard's life:

And, what is this moment of time, this particular day in which I have found myself caught? The growl of traffic might be any uproar—forest trees or the roar of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel; our short progress has been cancelled. I think also that our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence. (*TW*, 81)

This is not an isolated mood of a single moment but a characteristic expression of an attitude to human being that is found in other of Woolf's novels too. At the reunion dinner, Bernard recalls, "We felt enlarge itself round us the huge blackness of what is outside us, of what we are not" (*TW*, 196-97). It is this radical awareness of being in the face of the possibility of not being that charges Virginia Woolf's fiction with its need for faith and its tendency to despair. "I reflect now that the earth is only a pebble
flicked off accidentally from the face of the sun and that there is no life anywhere in the abysses of space" (TW, 159). In the face of such perception human history becomes meaningless: "It roars; the lighted strip of history is past and our Kings and Queens; we are gone; our civilization; the Nile; and all life. Our separate drops are dissolved; we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness" (TW, 160). Thus Louis voices the brooding perception of the ultimate emptiness of human being that pervades all Woolf's fiction. For meaning, for a center, she looked to a 'reality' that escaped the decadence of human being's spatiotemporal horizons, a 'reality' the experience of which she could express, but not the nature. Her faith is in a consciousness of eternity, dissolving the human-made divisions of past, present, and future, a "being" in the mode of nothingness, offered in her art.

The hope for order, for meaning, is not abandoned after *The Waves*. At the party that closes *The Years*, bringing together the different generations, several characters are troubled by that now familiar sense of human separateness. In the face of the chaos to which memory can reduce life (e.g., *TY*, 358), there is still a yearning for conclusiveness: "Millions of things came back to her. Atoms danced apart and massed themselves. But how did they compose what people called a life? ... Perhaps there's "I" at the middle of it, she thought; a knot; a centre; and again she saw herself sitting at her table drawing on the blotting-paper, digging little holes from which spokes radiated" (*TY*, 395). That image of "I" at the center recurs throughout Woolf's work; in fact, Eleanor's little spiked drawing appears several times, from as early as *Night and Day* when Ralph Denham is embarrassed at Katharine's seeing it. The philosophical implication of the image may be elucidated by reference to Poulet's *Metamorphoses of the Circle* in which he explains that the center's relationship with all the points of the circumference is that of eternity to time. The self-reflexive nature of the circle image fits in well with Woolf's thinking as discussed here. It is the fact of the past's persistence into the present, in memory, that gives Eleanor Pargiter the vague hope of an order to life:
And suddenly it seemed to Eleanor that it had all happened before. So a girl had come in that night in the restaurant: had stood, vibrating, in the door. She knew exactly what he was going to say. . . . As she thought it, he said it. Does everything then come over again a little differently? she thought. If so, is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half remembered, half foreseen? . . . [in original] a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible? . . . But who makes it? Who thinks it? Her mind slipped. She could not finish her thought.\(^\text{13}\) (TY, 398)

Peggy, too, feels intimations of the possibility of "a state of being, in which there was real laughter, real happiness, and this fractured world was whole; whole, and free" (TY, 420).

The Years offers no new ground; a predominant theme is the failure of communication and relationship to establish anything whole or lasting. In many ways the novel merely rehearses what Woolf had already learned. It is clear that the forlorn hope of Eleanor for "another life" (TY, 461) is a repetition of the desire to "make of the moment something permanent" in actual life. Such permanence is not in the power of life, the "here and now," but art. Eleanor wishes to "enclose the present moment; to make it stay" by filling it with past, present, and future (TY, 462). The effort is doomed to failure, to what Poulet has described as the "shattering return to the misery of the human condition and to the tragedy of the experience of time: in the very instant man catches his prey, experience dupes him, and he knows he is duped. His prey is a shadow. In the instant he catches the instant, the instant passes, for it is instant."\(^\text{14}\)

Any hope of rest in the actual world now seems entirely mistaken. In the development of her idea of 'reality' and experiences of the soul, Woolf emphasizes the rootedness in actual life of her perceptions. Nevertheless, actual life has seemed hopelessly far removed from 'reality' in the novels. However, in the last few years of her life, Woolf moved to a more direct expression of her beliefs, achieving in Between the Acts a brilliant union of design and substance that holds within it the clearest exposition of her faith in 'reality'.

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\(^{13}\) (TY, 398)

\(^{14}\) (TY, 462)