Introduction

Time and ethics. What, if anything, links the two terms together in Woolf's *The Waves*, a novel that serves as a powerful example of the modernist literature, with particular pertinence to the time dimensions of the topic? Working on this novel, Woolf wrote, "Can they be read consecutively? I know nothing about that. I think this is the greatest opportunity I have yet been able to give myself; therefore I suppose the most complete failure. Yet I respect myself for writing this book. Yes—even though it exhibits my congenital faults" (*Diary III*, 312). Woolf's ambivalent statement of *The Waves*'s ambitious goal is evinced in its impossibility of being read "consecutively." To comprehend fully Woolf's "most complete failure," one must understand the textual effects of this impossibility of a consecutive reading. If read according to her claim, this text emerges as a novel that eloquently speaks to the broader modernist pattern of temporal interruption, a pattern that informs my own analysis. One of the examples of "congenital faults" that Woolf described elsewhere was her knowledge that "But there must be more unity between each scene than I can find *at present*" (Ibid., 229; emphasis mine). In this sense, this experimental text demands a reading that discerns both the distinction from and relatedness to what is not "at present." Any adequate understanding of time in the modernist period must acknowledge the temporal differences in their complexity, as well as the many active challenges and emerging forces that were pressing and at times transforming the characters in *The Waves.* Woolf's concern about time developed in this novel thus proceeds from the moment of interruption in order to examine how our assumptions about the present produce within each character an implicit ethical practice. Woolf's affirmation of temporal differences, then, constitutes an ideal of diachronic time whose possibility generates radical responsibility to the past. These are the claims that I will make for Woolf's ethical orientation that, I will suggest, is most sustained in *The Waves*—a

text that seeks "after perfection through the sand" (*W*, 128).[1]

The Time of Modernism: "This is here and now"

In her diary, Woolf queried the implications of the "present": "Yet what composed the present moment?… All the same, everybody believes that the present is something, seeks out the different elements in this situation in order to compose the truth of it, the whole of it" (*Diary III* 9). What Woolf's inquiry cogently demonstrates, in effect, is a prevalent modernist assumption about the closure of the subjective immediacy—a closure in the name of the present. To this point, I take up the relevant concern of the Bergsonian time philosophy more fully later. For the moment I want simply to point out that its durational dimension to the present tends to bracket or simplify the problematics of modernist time, ultimately forestalling any real analysis of the ways in which modernist writers like Virginia Woolf actively and even obsessively engaged questions about the absence of the past in the present through memory. As I will suggest, Woolf's *The Waves* overall manifests subtle critique of this subjectivist primacy of the present moment—a refusal to reflect on time—when considering the purpose and consequence of what such a practice might be.

The problematics of time has been a constant concern throughout modernist fiction. As modernist studies concerning British Modernism have acknowledged Henri Bergson's role in its genesis, current understandings of Bergson's philosophy of consciousness and inner time assert an integral relation between the past and the present through the conduit of memory. In 1931, Floris Delattre was the first critic to read Woolf in conjunction with Bergson (Goldman, 29). In the 1930s and 40s, the excavation of symbolism and mythic potential of Woolf's text anticipated the mid-1950s investigation of her stream-of-consciousness technique in the so-called "psychological" novel. Shiv Kumar's study, *Bergson and the Stream of*

[1] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves,* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 128. Subsequent page number references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Consciousness Novel (1962), of the parallels between the Bergsonian concept of flux and Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique is significantly indicative of this strand of criticism. His study accentuates the characterization of the Woolfian "moment." Dissenting from the privileged resemblance between Woolf and Bergson, on the other hand, Tony Inglis suggests that "Woolf's novels are better read as weapons against flux [of consciousness] than as inert surrenders to it" (48). His description of how Woolf grows out of Bergsonian influence has implications for our further analysis and criticism. J. W. Graham's analysis of "certain stylistic features" thereby marks a remarkable departure from the earlier orthodoxies of Bergsonian and stream-of-consciousness approaches. To quote Graham, "the rigid, uniformity of the language throughout and its verbal sophistication, both…make [*The Waves*] unsuitable as vehicle for even one stream of consciousness, much less those of six characters" (195).

Upon scrutiny, the Bergsonian "duration" reveals the fluidity of time in how past and present merge into one encompassing time. The question which continues to bedevil thinking can be expressed as follows: since duration, or the "durée," as "internal time, the time of actual living, is something inapplicable to the world outside the self" (Gillies, 9), is the Bergsonian duration, involving the prolongation of the past into the present, after all a subjective phenomenon of consciousness? The subjective nature of consciousness in his philosophy is, in effect, most clearly evidenced in its appeal to "immediate consciousness." The immediate conscious experience in the psychological now or present is fundamental, as if it would offer a legitimate and (more or less) autonomous mode of experience and knowledge. It requires that the distance between the past and the present be nullified, as we are reminded: "[Bergson] thoroughly supported the idea of continuity [in the present]" (Stevenson 128). The Bergsonian "duration" in this sense risks eclipsing the otherness of "novelty" in the present. There would be no more the novelty, or, what is novel to the subject.

The Bergsonian consciousness attends thus only to the present, or, at best, attends to the novelty in order to serve the purpose for the present.

This is another dangerous side of "immediate consciousness," from which Bergson attempts to shelter by insisting on the operation of unmediated "intuition." The temptation of spurious continuity in the assertion that "nothing is forgotten" (qtd. in Stevenson 104), I must indicate, is constitutive of the paradigm of modernist impulse to represent what is other than the subject, more saliently in a temporal sense, its impulse to gather other temporalities into the present. Given the assumption that only conscious experience in the present is real, and it is supposed to be known directly or intuitively, consciousness is nothing less than the total of conscious experience in the present. As Stevenson also observes, "When modernist fiction recognized…that 'the mind of man is capable of anything' it also required a method for *structuring 'all the past' into present experience*…" (102; emphasis mine). Through the method of memory or stream of consciousness, the modernist primacy of the present as simultaneity thereby arises because of the possibility of the spurious correlation between the present and the non-present. This is but a little step to forcing what is other than the subject into the same temporal coordinates of the present, into the synchrony of duration, of "time in the mind." Bergson's formulation of durational consciousness is, accordingly, illustrative of this modernist desire to bypass the difference between divergent temporalities for the continuity of the present. Paul Sheehan's research on the condition of the modernist time can be read against the grain of the Bergsonian philosophy which avails to repair the dislocations in time wrought by non-traditional forms of life. According to Sheehan, "Victorian narratives of progress and conformity—whether historical or fictive—made time irrevocable, inexorable and monumental. Through the nineteenth century, and the age of expansion (urban, imperial, industrial), time became steadily more impersonal and less human" (123). To conceive of it in the direction of its temporal determination, modernist time can be defined as the effort to

counteract a temporal cultural phenomenon that is identified as “more impersonal and less human.” To redeem the dislocation of experience, modernist time, informed by the Bergsonian influences, manifests itself in its investment in the subjective consciousness of the present through images rescued from the archive of memory. The present becomes an all-inclusive moment where the durational consciousness encompasses the past and the present. Then, the present, the “here and now,” becomes a temporality that renders any other temporality synchronous with itself.

My Reading of *The Waves*

In my reading, the theoretical route to Bergson’s idea of the duration is not to re-ascertain the relevance of his impact on Woolf’s modernist aesthetics of time, as most critics have set themselves to task in exploring Woolf’s Bergsonian traits. Instead, it is my suggestion that the Bergsonian “duration” shall be read as a cultural sensibility for attempting to suture the temporal discontinuity created in an ambience of fractured subjectivity. Whereas the power of memory seems to overwhelm the primacy of the present moment, it is to this more general apprehension of a closure of the present that Woolf mounts her criticism to produce some of the ethical moments of openness to the non-present in *The Waves*. The crucial point to stress at the outset is that Woolf addresses the question of the ethical on the level of the “moment of being,” the moment of interruption, for its openness to other temporalities. Woolf herein tries to demonstrate that time-consciousness provides ethical sources that can, if properly approached, serve as adequate responses to the modernist solipsism of the present moment. This study argues that Woolf’s conception of time in *The Waves* should be read as *a time for the other,* instead of a temporal closure that sustains the modernist desire for a synchronous present. That is, modernist time in Woolf’s conception shall go beyond conventional expressions of discontinuity or subjective perception of

duration**.** That is to say, the representation of subjective experience of here and now which underwrites the modernist impulse to synchronize divergent temporalities will be overturned in this novel. The dimension of Woolf's time as a time for the other is one which I could not recall having been adequately examined. Whereas other modernist writers, intent on the technique of stream-of-consciousness, take great care to preserve the sense of representational time flow, and links the past to the present directly, Woolf would deliberately disrupt it, with an awareness of the difference between these temporalities. Unlike Joyce, the "epiphanies" that have tended to disclose the meaning of experience or the nature of reality in his novels require some difficult compatibilities in Woolf's *The Wave*s. Perhaps Ann Marie Hebert's distinction of Woolf from other modernist writers shall be read in terms of their treatment of time. To quote Hebert, Woolf's "equivocation" or "stance against certainty…most distinguishes [her] from Eliot and Joyce" (11). As Joyce's treatment of the moments of epiphany is meant for personal integrity, or as Eliot's Prufrock is enmeshed in the repetition of time, and lamenting the triviality of the ways in which we experience it, Woolf seeks rather to foreground the impossibility of holding onto the stable present. She sees in each present moment the potential to open up an interval that takes the place of this simultaneous present. This temporal opening that withdraws from representation or knowledge draws Woolf's attention.

As we shall see, in *The Wave*s Woolf not merely elaborates on the impossibility of holding onto a present moment, but shows how the artificial simultaneity of the present is debunked through a slippery representation of the stable present. In large measure, subjective time, or our experience of temporality, is constituted paradoxically as a synchronous experience of discontinuity in which the temporal distinctions between past and present disappear. While Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* proclaims itself as "a novel of Time lost and found again" and to which Genette adds, "a novel of Time ruled, captured…or better:

perverted" (qtd. in Stevenson 91), it is the interstice between "Time lost and found" that cannot reside solidly within the present that arrests Woolf's attention. What is at stake here, which Woolf has significantly hinted in her diary writing quoted above, is a concealed temporal imperative. Ultimately, time must have been lost and found with an enormous difference; even if time is to be found again, there is a *diachronic* relation between these temporalities. It is the very lapse in time, not the seamlessness of "Time lost and found again," that provides the diachronic center around which the present moment revolves. The present is, in this sense, always a deferred articulation of itself once interrupted by the time of the other. This line of argument functions in large measure to discredit the sufficiency or synchrony of the modernist present which bypasses the recognition of temporal otherness in order to subsume it.

In her reflection on the proper way to approach the present moment, Woolf participates in a more pervasive cultural concern with the lived experience of interruption and discontinuity. Woolf's depiction of the moment of being as one of interruptions prepares a ground for my diachronic reading of *The Waves.* It shall be noted that Woolf embeds her depiction of the otherness with a temporal dimension. The theoretical framework is to be exercised through the Levinasian ethics of diachrony to engage the Woofian "moments of being" which positions the subject as exposed to the alterity of other temporalities, as I will argue, the time of the other. That is, for both Levinas and Woolf, it is the reflection upon time that makes possible the advent of a thought of alterity. Unlike the Bergsonian time that encircles alterity in consciousness, Levinas opens up the time of the self to the time of the other for absolute discontinuity. The opening up of my time to the other is the fundamental gesture of what he terms as "the deformalization of time" (RB, 208). Levinas thus ventures a bold and decisive reappraisal of time and its possibilities. Through the Levinasian diachrony, the hegemony of linear and monumental time is to be overturned throughout modernist

priority of the “here and now.”

My intention in this introduction has been in the first place to formulate a context of modernist primacy of the synchronous present for understanding Woolf’s ethics through an explicit review of Bergson’s time philosophy. However, in the chapters that follow, that context will recede into the background in order to highlight the nature of Woolf’s ethical practice in *The Waves*.

In chapter one, “A Time for the Other: Diachronic Interruptions in *The Waves*,” I demonstrate that in order to foreground this transformation in modernist time-consciousness, Woolf shows in detail how the experience of diachrony can be explained on the basis of different temporalities which render the impossible now. Given an exposition of Levinas’s ethical thought, Woolf’s approach might be compared fruitfully to that of Levinas in their shared emphasis on the concept of interruption for their project of an ethical time, or as Levinas terms it, “deformalization of time.” In inserting the principle of diachrony into the practice of representation, Woolf reveals her commitments to the other in a fidelity to the ethical interruption upon the characters. Through this re-examination of the time of representation, Woolf reaches the limit of our conception of time, to the point at which even the characters get quite lost. In its most appealing and promising moment of interruption, diachrony registers Woolf’s reconceptulizaton of time through the Levinasian ethical relation.

Based on the premise that diachrony is the complex temporal articulation in this novel, chapter two, “Towards an Diachronic Articulation of Subjectivity as Exposure and Responsibility,” raises the question: how is it possible for the modernist subject to attest to a diachrony that has always already interrupted the synchronous order of the present? As many critics have indicated that one of the central tenets of modernism is the concept of the fractured subject, Woolf’s reformulation of modernist attitudes toward fragmentation consequently allows her to rework the modernist subjectivity in a diachronic, non-tragic

manner. The problem of subjectivity herein is refigured as *exposure* and *responsibility* to the immemorial other in a manner specific to diachronic interruptions. In so doing, Woolf presents the birth of an ethical subjectivity through a shift in the modernist conception of time.

Chapter three, "'By what name are we to call death?'": Death as Community," begins by foregrounding the import of mourning in modernist discourse. With its theoretical route through Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of "a community of finitude," a central question raised in this chapter is whether Woolf's attempt to integrate an ethical dimension into the practice of friendship successfully and credibly achieves an alterative ideal of death as community. To illuminate Woolf's concern over the deaths of the other, I turn to a double reading of Louis's words, "All deaths are one death." On the one hand, "All deaths *are* one death" is read for its dynamic immediacy, since death for Woolf must be understood in terms of events and movements rather than in terms of structures and meanings. On the other, the emphasis on "one death" marks Woolf's own deep belief that our "mind's eye" underscores an ethical logic of distance and proximity in the mortal truth shared both by the self and the other. This attention to death of the others can therefore be read as instantiating a Levinasian ethics of responsibility which offers a passage to the political. As Woolf never fails to underline the restrictive aspects of communal identity and institutions, her critical gesture is meant to imagine a community *not* based on relationships of power and domination. Rather, through the "mind's eye," the ethical promise of the community can only be enacted as "a purely physical statement" (186).

The conclusion chapter, "For a Time to Be Ethical," draws on one scene in this text when Neville tries to explain how to read a poem with "myriad eyes," however encrypted or explicitly disavowed. This textual instance displays alert awareness of any political condition that perpetuates violence and suffering as well as active ethical engagement with differences.

Against the eagerness that wants to skip over the exposure to get to factual changes, or to know how to relate this diachronic vision to immediate questions, Woolf advises that ethics takes "patience and infinite care." Writing thus, she would nonetheless have in mind the knowledge that the persistent covert modernist impulse toward a unifying structure of time will be intolerant of such indeterminacy. For the ethical experience is forever in excess of any given formulation, the subject is always to be left with a fresh surprise or shock.

The diachronic temporality in *The Waves* emerges as the very mechanism of Woolf's ingenuity. Perhaps what Woolf seeks to account for is, as Raymond Williams suggests, the modernist period's "internal diversity of methods and emphases: a restless and often directly competitive sequence of innovations and experiments, always more immediately recognized by what they are breaking from than by *what*, in any simple way, *they are breaking towards*" (43; emphasis mine). As we shall see, Woolf rethinks modernist time not by "[abolishing] the ticking of time's clock with one blow," but by keeping the present moment at bay, directing us toward the time of the other that interrupts and calls for responsibility. The point of invoking the immemorial other may be, in this sense, to maintain an asymmetrical relation to the temporal imperative between the forever bounded categories of past and present, public and private, or life and death—that are central to the concern of ethics. And it is to the fuller understanding of Woolf's endeavor to *break* through the clock time *toward* an ethical time to which the following chapters are committed.