



A passion for books: The early letters of Nancy Nolan to Leonard Woolf (1943-1944)

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I have long been interested in socio-biographical writing and the opportunity it presents for tracing signs of personal or social transformation in women's lives. Aware of my interest in and search for letters and diaries as material sources for women's biographical writings, a colleague directed me to Victoria Glendinning's (2006) magisterial biography, *Leonard Woolf*, and her reference to an Irish woman who wrote to Leonard from 1943 to 1969.

Nancy Nolan was a Dublin housewife. Leonard replied to her fan letter about Virginia's books briefly and kindly. It was his brevity as much as his kindness which made possible the transference. Mrs Nolan used her long letters to him as a journal or meditation, musing on the page about her family's ups and downs, consistently for a quarter of a century[...]. They remained "Mrs Nolan" and "Mr Woolf," and his most personal note Leonard ever struck was in signing off "Yours affectionately" in a condolence letter on the death of her husband. They never met. (Glendinning 397)

I was immediately intrigued and sensed that Mrs Nolan's letters to Mr Woolf might contain more than musings and were a possible source for biographical reflection on women's lives in twentieth-century Ireland. I was interested in what Nancy wrote about to Leonard and what circumstances prevailed so that she took up her pen and wrote that first letter, Irish woman to English man, in the middle of World War II (1939-1945). As soon as the opportunity presented itself, I removed myself to the Woolf archive at the University of Sussex and became immersed in reading Nancy's accounts of her life as a 'housewife,' her reflections on motherhood and family, and her passion for books.¹ My focus here is on that passion as expressed in the first year of their correspondence, in which Nancy writes 17 letters to Leonard, sometimes twice a month. Filed as 'miscellaneous,' amid the 'fan-mail' correspondances to Leonard, copies of Nancy's 150 letters, of considerable length (10 pages and more), are carefully tied with pink ribbon or stretched rubber bands. These are the letters of an 'ordinary' woman, reflecting on her life to a man she does not know, but with whom she develops an epistolary friendship. His initial replies to her may have been out of courtesy to a fan, but soon a dynamic is created so that the correspondence continues until his death in 1969.

What initiated Nancy's correspondence with Leonard Woolf author, publisher, political activist, member of the Bloomsbury group and husband to Virginia Woolf? The question can partly be answered from the letters themselves and from what is generally known about fan-mail to authors, political and spiritual leaders and regents in this period. Glendinning writes that authors such as G. K. Chesterton, for example, received such fan mail as did Woolf. Women expressed their identification with Virginia Woolf and then transferred their affection to Leonard, "and there were other women who became equally fixated, and wrote to him in a similar way, over the years" (Glendinning 434). Nancy Nolan then was not exceptional in this. Nancy's admiration for the life and literature of Virginia Woolf first prompted her unsolicited four-page letter to Leonard on the 9th of February 1943, two years after

¹Thank you to Dr. Eilis Ward (NUI Galway), Dr Margaretta Jolly (University of Sussex), Fiona Courage and Rose Lock, (Special Collections Unit, University of Sussex) for assistance with this work.

the death of Virginia. Nolan writes that she is housebound, "always alone among books" with "only my own instinct to guide me, and this is why I have only within the last year discovered the finest writer and the most rare spirit of our times." Nolan is sustained by her "love" of books. Their authors, such as the Brontë sisters, Dorothy Wordsworth and Charles Lamb, are her "companions," but Virginia Woolf is more than these as "in her work I find everything; my mind responds to hers with such instant comprehension and such perfect sympathy as I have never before experienced." She is familiar with Woolf's writing, quoting from an essay written in 1929 concerning second-hand books but placing Virginia Woolf as the subject of the quotation: "...with the first words of Virginia Woolf I found that here was 'a complete stranger who will, with luck, turn into the best friend' I have in the world."² She describes herself as "one of an amorphous crowd of colourless, ordinary inarticulate people" whom Virginia would not have noticed, and "still I claim her boldly as my friend, and feel that she has written for me." She writes "What is the power that words possess, which makes each reader seem the special one to whom the writer reveals herself?" Nolan inquires whether there is a biography available of Virginia's life, wishing to know more about her. The stated purpose of the letter is to request a copy of *Mrs Dalloway*, not being able to procure the book in Ireland and "hoping it is not banned; one never knows on which author the interdict may next descend." Irish censorship regulations in 1943 were rigorous, and books were either banned or physically marked to remove any references that might compromise Irish neutrality or be deemed offensive to the moral sensibilities of church and state. Nolan's desire is to talk and write about books that she has read or might read. She claims that she is "ignorant" and lives apart from the outside world and wonders if it is possible to form an "epistolary friendship with someone who loves to talk about books? Is there not some way of getting in touch with such people?" She refrains from further imposition, as she assumes that Leonard may never see this fan-mail letter she has written, much less read it and respond to her himself. She concludes her first letter with the thought that "it has been a pleasure to imagine myself in touch with a real bookman and one who lives in that world which of all others I would have wished to inhabit."

From the first letter we know that Nolan is a reader of eighteenth and nineteenth century American and English poets, essayists and novelists, but with a special interest in Virginia Woolf. She comments on the structure and characters of the books that she has read, regarding *The Years* as "disappointing" and not "distinctively" the work of Virginia Woolf. Nolan wonders why "did she hide herself so completely in *Roger Fry*?" She writes that she has not yet read *Flush*. Her second letter (2 March 1943), acknowledging the gift of *Mrs Dalloway* from Leonard, which she read at once, is also prompted by her reading of the *The Waves* and her strong desire to communicate her critical response to the book, knowing that Leonard "must have heard the opinions of practically every important author or reader of the last few years. But I don't care." She needed to let an informed other know of its effects on her; "The sunlight glancing through crystal streams, the rise and fall of the sap in the leaves; it is perfection. It is the nearest thing to a Bach fugue I have found and when I do finish it (I'm trying to read it slowly) it will leave the same sense of satisfaction and mathematical perfection that the fugue gives us—at least I am sure it will. Apart from the book itself, how exquisitely the words are woven! She must have loved the writing of it, though that does not express my meaning at all." Nancy Nolan's reflections on Virginia's writing style, her responses to Virginia's books and essays (as well as those of other authors) drive the correspondence and provide her with a reason for writing to Leonard. Few people of her acquaintance are familiar with Virginia Woolf's books. Writing to Woolf

² The full quotation is "Books are everywhere; and always the same sense of adventure fills us. Second-hand books are wild books, homeless books; they have come together in vast flocks of variegated feather, and have a charm which the domesticated volumes of the library lack. Besides, in this random, miscellaneous company we may rub against some complete stranger who will, with luck, turn into the best friend we have in the world" (Woolf 25).

about the books she is reading brings her closer to her desired world and motivates her to continue writing. A sense of urgency to communicate her ideas and criticisms permeates her writing as well as an awareness that she does not want to overwhelm this addressee with her correspondences. She holds back from writing about *A Room of One's Own*: "...it's a delight to read and very stimulating. I love the quick, flashing turns from one point to another, and her way of being puckish when she is being most sedate. [...] I wanted to say more about 'A Room of One's Own'—but I'll keep it for the next time." Nancy apologizes to Leonard for the number and length of her letters to him. Nonetheless, in a postscript she reveals the resolve required to overcome any hesitancy or doubt she might feel about the force of her determination to write and post her letters to him. "P.S. I'm sorry for writing again so soon, but if I delay I would lose courage to send it. I tried to make it shorter, but couldn't." (undated, 1943). Every so often her epistolary connection with Leonard Woolf appears to startle her, as if she cannot quite believe she is writing to him and he is writing to her.

The early correspondence takes place in the years following Irish independence from Britain, after the formation of the Irish Free State (1922-1937) and the establishment of 'Ireland' as an independent democratic state as constituted by the 1937 Constitution of Ireland. Much has been written about these foundational events including the significance of the limiting effects of article 41 for Irish women, positioning married women primarily in the private sphere of the home. While there is debate about the long term discriminatory effects of constitutional constraints such as this, at the time only 5.6% of married women worked outside the home. By working full-time in the home, Nancy Nolan was fulfilling an economic, cultural and state designated role for women. We get some sense of how she felt about this from her letters, but particularly in her letter from 1944. Writing about how the role of housewife is perceived by her mother and husband she confides that they "think I have a very easy, leisurely life, because I don't have to go out and work in the morning; I think they both believe me a lazy, idle creature—but the dishes, and cooking, and washing, and ironing take up so much time that I usually can only give the rooms a quick sweep and dust, and the windows are always getting ahead of me [...] they have no conception at all of my real work, which, as I see it, is to help the children in as many ways as possible to develop on their individual lines and at the same time live peacefully and happily together" (11 January 1944). She offers a counter-point to this perception of her to Leonard, comparing care of children as similar to the creative force required for writing or musical composition. "I used to regret that I hadn't the ability to create books or music, but I think now that it is just as much creative work to bring up a family, even a small one, and see them safely started on their own roads; it requires a virtuoso's touch and a knowledge of the art of living." The separation of domestic labor from love labor speaks of a woman whose ideas may not have chimed with the expectations of how middleclass married womanhood might be performed or understood in Ireland at the time.

Finding the time to read and write letters while managing home and family is a source of some anxiety for Nancy. Hers is the problem of the lack of solitude. She writes that illness allows a total immersion in the world of books bestowing "a great opportunity for reading with a clear conscience" (27 May 1943). Reading is a time for entering particular storyworlds, engaging with characters, reflecting and commenting on their behavior and values. But the anxiety leaks through as she confides to Leonard that "It's very inconvenient my being sick, although the children are very good; but no one but myself knows when everyone wants their dinner or tea, to suit their various activities, and it interferes with their school work and music" (27 May 1943). But it is clear that reading time is also recovery time; she writes that reading *Flush* "has restored me to a much more cheerful self" (20 April 1943). It is very difficult to gauge how exceptional a reader Nolan was in her choice of literature without a thorough knowledge of the availability of books in circulation through lending libraries, specialist booksellers and local

bookshops in Ireland during the 1940s. By all accounts, access to books was not only mediated by church-influenced state censorship laws and the availability of personal money to buy books but was also an era in which the public library system was only beginning to expand. Nolan writes to British booksellers in her search for specific texts and was a regular visitor to second-hand bookshops in Dublin. By 1943 most of Virginia Woolf's publications, novels, short stories, essays and non-fiction would have been available, and there is no indication that Woolf's work was subject to Irish censorship laws. Nolan writes of the difficulty in procuring books for her daughter to read. "Unfortunately a good many of the books I want her to read are frowned on by the church; if not banned altogether" (third letter in series, undated, 1943). Nolan writes that she hides her books from her family, and we learn how others respond to her reading choices, such as *To the Lighthouse*. "My friend Pearl, also read it, when I had been careless enough to leave it in the sitting room (I have to hide them you know) and she could find no sense in it all—it was crazy she said" (29 June 1943). Nolan reacts with some amusement on learning that her daughter ordered *To the Lighthouse* for her friend's birthday. "I'm envious to know how her family will react...they don't approve of any books but Irish and Catholic one's [...] hearing so much about Virginia Woolf, she's determined to get them. She got *Mrs Dalloway* from the library and her family were horrified."

Nancy Nolan identifies with the values and ideas grounded in Woolf's writings and for her Virginia Woolf is a writer of personal significance. "I've never known any writer who so charmed and invigorated me; every sentence of hers delights me, and with all her ideas I find myself in complete harmony. The world must be more beautiful because she lived" (20 April 1943). From her letters it is clear that Leonard did respond, though not at length. The archive contains only a few samples of his replies; the whereabouts of the bulk of his correspondences to her at this point is unknown. At the outset, his replies are short, responding to her immediate queries while encouraging her to continue to write to him. Later on in their correspondences, and gleaned from Nancy's replies, he reveals a little more about himself, with descriptions of where he lives, room furnishings, his music preferences and comments on travel abroad, holidays and the state of his health. He also writes to her about American academic visitors who have come to Monk's House to talk with him about Virginia's work and life; he tells her of a film that is being made about his life and from the mid 1960s onward, letters are more frequently signed off by both of them, with "yours affectionately." One of the ways of reading the meaningfulness of the correspondence for Leonard is considered by Glendinning. Woolf shared Mrs Nolan's letters with Trekkie Parsons, his companion and partner from the 1940s onwards, referring to one of her very long letters as "terrifying." Glendinning observes that:

When his own letters to Trekkie were over-long, he said he was as bad as Mrs Nolan. But the correspondence touched a nerve: his intrigued fondness for women who were not geniuses, and who admitted him into their confidence and into a way of thinking which he believed peculiar to the "feminine mind." (Glendinning 397)

There is no doubt that Nancy Nolan admitted Leonard Woolf into her thoughts about her familial, domestic and personal life, inviting him in as an act of epistolary friendship. Corresponding with somebody "who lived among and loved books," affirmed the time she spent reading books and writing letters, time otherwise occupied by the needs of family and the demands of domestic work. From these extracts from the first year of the correspondence, it is clear that the act of writing, the letters sent and received, and the connection with Woolf are deeply significant for Nancy Nolan at this point in her life story. She conveys her appreciation to Leonard to whom she is indebted for his responsiveness to her. "Once more, thank you for being so kind; it was a great pleasure to me, and I shall always enjoy the thought of it. It was like a window opening on a blank wall" (16 May 43). The correspondence is not only a conduit for her literary expression but provides her with affirmation

and recognition from an informed addressee confirming the aesthetic value of intellectual inquiry, the pleasure to be gained from it, and the opportunity to forge another vision for herself and her family. For this 'Dublin housewife,' her search for an alternative self and a context in which her creativity could be expanded is expressed in the epistolary space of the letter and composed in the epistolary friendship with Leonard Woolf.

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"the drop fell"—Time-space Compression in *The Waves*

Technological innovation in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries transformed popular conceptions of space and time. Radio technology allowed information to be propagated instantaneously. Trains, planes, and personal motor-cars made it possible to traverse great distances many times more quickly than in the past. According to Leena Kore Schröder, Virginia and Leonard Woolf were quick to embrace the technologies that became available during their lifetimes, buying three cars between 1927 and 1933 (133), and taking "an annual motoring holiday, roughly alternating between Britain and the Continent" (137). They were also aware of the cultural significance of the technological revolution the West was experiencing. Indeed, Virginia writes in her diary, "we opened one little window when we bought the gramophone... now another opens with the motor" (qtd. in Schröder 132). Leonard is more dramatic, declaring in his autobiography, *Downhill All the Way*, "nothing ever changed so profoundly my material existence, the mechanism and range of my every-day life, as the possession of a motor-car" (qtd. in Schröder 133).

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey argues that these new modes of travel and communication, made marketable in the early twentieth century, produced an era of "time-space compression." Technology permitting high-speed travel had the effect of "annihilat[ing] space through time" (Harvey 205), whence the practice of measuring distance in temporal rather than spatial units (e.g., "Vancouver is five hours distant by plane"). The ability to communicate instantaneously caused time-horizons for decision-making to shrink drastically. Distant spaces became effectively adjacent, intervals between cause and effect

contracted; more could be accomplished, for better or for worse, in an hour or in a day, than ever before. The result was a highly accelerated pace of life that, according to Harvey, inspired and informed the work of contemporary artists, whose task it was to represent the high-tech, high-speed environment in which they found themselves. Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) is no exception. In *The Waves*, the mainly continuous literary time-spaces characteristic of more conventional novels are dissolved into atoms. The new time-space that emerges does not form a continuum, but rather a myriad of discrete microstates—disconnected moments in disconnected spaces. Its atoms, however, contain condensed within them large expanses of space and time. This article will show that *The Waves* can therefore be read as a representation of time-space compression.

Let us begin by introducing a certain conceptual tool for analyzing depictions of space and time in literature, which will help elucidate the above claims: Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "chronotope." Thus far, I have tacitly assumed the interconnectedness of novelistic space and time—that neither can be properly characterized without recourse to the other. It was Bakhtin, however, who, in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," first expressed this view:

We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.[...] In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.¹ (84, emphasis in original.)

Characterizing the chronotope(s) of a work, then, means outlining the way(s) in which space and time function within it, considered both separately and together. Bakhtin insists that this is the best way to trace the generic evolution of the novel, because every genre exercises its own distinctive spatiotemporal logic. His most famous chronotopic analysis, for instance, is of the Greek romance "novel," whose chronotope he dubs "an alien world in adventure-time."² Though Bakhtin's interests lie in the study of genres, the chronotope concept can be applied across a wide range of literary scales, from individual works, to individual passages, and, still smaller, even to the spatial and temporal relations between individual words and phrases (Ladin, 215). Here, however, we will avoid the extremes of generic and micro-linguistic analysis, restricting our attention instead to the "local chronotopes" (216) of certain passages, and the way they come together to form the larger, let us say "primary," chronotope of *The Waves*.

I have claimed that this primary chronotope is atomized. What I want to suggest by this is not merely that it is composed of many nested local chronotopes (which, arguably, is true of every novel), or that each of its fragments occupies a small textual space. Indeed, there is another concept I wish to capture with the image of atoms, one which distinguishes the chronotope of *The Waves* from others, and which Woolf herself uses in "Modern Fiction" when she compares impressions upon

¹ Though Bakhtin was a contemporary of Woolf, writing this passage sometime in the years 1937-38, it is important to note that because his work was only translated into English in the 1970s, Woolf is unlikely to have read it. This does not, of course, detract from the value of the chronotope concept in criticism of Woolf's work.

² Bakhtin describes adventure-time as an extra-temporal "hiatus" (89) between two directly adjacent moments in regular (biographical) time (e.g., the meeting of the lovers, and their consequent marriage), during which characters and their relationships remain absolutely unchanged. Once the adventure ends, everything goes back to normal; it is as if nothing had happened. The spatial component of this chronotope is abstract, related to the temporal only mechanically: it must be large and alien; there must be obstacles; distance and proximity must govern events; etc.