

Time Passes

Though “Time Passes”, the second part of Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*, spans 10 years of the story, it is only 20 pages long, while “The Window”, the first part, spanning only one evening is 120 pages long and “The Lighthouse”, the third part, spanning only one morning, is 60 pages long. In the first and third parts, we are taken in the perspective of the Ramsays and their guests – we see the events at the scale of people’s minds. In the second part, with the exception of Mrs. McNab and the house-cleaning crew, we see the passage of time through the elements of Nature. At the scale of Nature, the events at the human scale seem tiny and almost irrelevant, and this is why most references to the Ramsays and their guests are bracketed in “Time Passes”.

We notice that the bracketed references only occur in those chapters, which are void of direct human presence. The first chapter of the second part provides a link to the first part and, similarly, the last chapter of the second part provides a link to the third part. Both feature the Ramsays and their guests directly. We follow Mrs. McNab in Chapters v, viii, ix. In the other chapters, where all the bracketed references appear, we follow the perspective of Nature. At the end of Chapter ix, in which Mrs. McNab, Mrs. Bast and his son restore the house, we have a final bracketed reference: “(Lily Briscoe had her bag carried up to the house late one evening in September)” (II, ix, 141). Subtly, this reference is in soft brackets “()” as opposed to hard

brackets “[]”, because we have already moved to the human perspective, away from that of Nature.

Woolf renders Nature’s perspective, curiously, in a similar way to how she renders a person’s stream of consciousness. We, the reader, feel at points that we are following the consciousness of the wind. “Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (...) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing-room questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking would it hang much longer, when would it fall?” (II, ii, 126). These “airs detached from the body of the wind” seem to have a playful mind of their own. They are almost like children, who have to be said what is permissible: “Here one might say to those sliding lights, those fumbling airs that breathe and bend over the bed itself, here you can neither touch nor destroy. Upon which, wearily, ghostily ... they would look, once, on the shut eyes, and the loosely clasping fingers, and fold their garments wearily and disappear” (II, ii, 126-127). We assist at the procession of the wind as if it is a mysterious ritual: “At length, desisting, all ceased together, gathered together, all sighed together; all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied: swung wide, admitted nothing, and slammed to” (II, ii 127). Interestingly, the warnings “almost one might imagine” and “one might say”, indicating that the wind is described just metaphorically, are gone at the end of the passage.

Even in the first passage about the wind, where it seems rather harmless and causes no destruction yet (since it needs time), the imagery of war is present. The wind is “asking would it

[the flap of hanging wall-paper] hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed no musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for there was time at their disposal) the torn letters in the waste-paper basket, the flowers, the books, all of which were now open to them and asking, Were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure?" (II, ii, 126). The wind knows that it will win with time – it asks “when would it fall?” not “would it fall?” and “how long would they endure?” not “would they endure?” – it is not a question of “whether” but a question of “when”. The wind destroys the house, like the war destroys civilization – as long as it is free to act, complete destruction is just a question of time. Later, the “stray airs” of the wind are likened to “advance guards of great armies” – “So with the house empty and the doors locked and the mattresses rolled round, those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in bedroom or drawing room that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked. What people had shed and left – a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobe – those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once ...” (II, iv, 128-129). The wind creeps into the house as an army would creep into some deserted enemy territory, noticing that it was once alive.

Like with the other references to humanity (and ironically, the war is a human endeavor), we are informed of the war explicitly in a bracketed reference, though implicitly the war imagery appears before. “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among

them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous”] (II, vi, 133). In the chapter where the war is first mentioned, we have four bracketed references, more than in any other chapter. The war accelerates the pace of events on the human scale, specially bringing premature deaths like those of Prue and Andrew Ramsay.

The effect of bracketing the references is paradoxical: on the one hand, the brackets seem to indicate that what is bracketed is a side node – of secondary importance – yet, on the other hand, the brackets make the bracketed passage stand out. This is especially true of the bracketed passage that informs us of Mrs. Ramsay’s death. “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]” (II, iii, 128). On the first reading, I could not believe it. I thought: Is that it? Is that all? Even in the bracketed passage itself, Mrs. Ramsay’s death is given secondary importance, mentioned only *en passant* in a relative clause. How could so little be said, and so suddenly?

At the same time, the ten years seem like just one night. Indeed, the first part was about one evening, and the last part about one morning. The second part, then, is about the night that links the evening to the morning. At the beginning of the second part, the Ramsays and their guests are going to sleep. At the end of the second part, the guests start to awake: “Here she [Lily Briscoe] was again, she thought, sitting bolt upright in bed. Awake” (II, x, 143). Here, again. She is finally going to finish her painting; James is finally going to the lighthouse. It could have been the morning after. Yet, it is 10 years later. In between, nothing and everything has changed.

Like a time microscope, the brackets, in “Time Passes”, reveal a human world that changes too quickly to be noticed at the scale of Nature. At the scale of Nature, ten years, during which family members die, a war occurs, and the human world changes, becomes, indifferently, one night.