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Between Parentheses: The Poetics of Irrelevance in Virginia Woolf's Experimental Fiction

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Abstract

The understanding and appreciation of Virginia Woolf's modernist fiction demands careful attention, not only for the obvious complexity of its experimental form but also for the apparent simplicity of certain typographical and stylistic devices. Among these is the use of parenthetical expressions, consisting of explanatory or qualifying remarks inserted into a passage and usually marked off by brackets, dashes, or commas. Generally speaking, the main functions fulfilled by parentheticals have been examined and classified by Woolf scholars. What has received less critical attention, however, is the intrinsic nature of parenthetical constructions and the subtle, multifaceted implications of their actual functioning within the overall economy of every single novel. The purpose of this paper is to address a similar question, beginning with a preliminary delimitation of the scope of the analysis. Firstly, among the different types of the so-called 'parenthetical expressions' only the explicit use of parentheses (in the form of round or square brackets) will be assumed as a distinctive feature in order to identify a specific category of stylistic and narrative devices. Secondly, and quite obviously, the novel under consideration will be, in particular, To the Lighthouse (1927), inasmuch as it provides the most striking examples of the disruptive potential contained in Woolf's parenthetical writing. A good point of departure for such an analysis, however, can be found in Jacob's Room (1922), Woolf's first experimental novel, which shows a long and compound sentence, inserted between brackets, significantly placed in the opening page of the book.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, modernist fiction, Jacob's Room, To the Lighthouse, parenthetical constructions, round and square brackets.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's Parenthetical Writing

Virginia Woolf's modernist fiction aims at representing human existence and everyday life in all its complexity and confusion, in its oddity, mystery and uncertainty. Therefore, it shows a deep need for a new form of narrative art which can overcome the intrinsic linearity of the written text, so as to reveal the multiple layers of experience and the contradictory tensions of consciousness. One of Virginia Woolf's greatest literary concerns might be phrased as follows: how can the 'modern' writer accomplish the task of representing, on the written page, several things that take place simultaneously? Or, in other words, is it possible to mould language in such a way as to give a plastic impression of more things occurring at the same time? Now, the use of parenthetical constructions is a way of making more than one thing happen at once, interrupting the linear succession of events in narrative time, by creating different levels of representation (Lee, 1992).

Generally speaking, the phenomenon of parentheticals has been quite neglected to date, at least in the literary domain. In order to define the scope of this article, it is necessary to clarify the basic notions and criteria. Essentially, a parenthetical statement is a qualifying or amplifying phrase or sentence, inserted into a passage in such a way as to be independent of the surrounding grammatical context. Parentheses are usually marked off by round or square brackets, dashes, or commas. This study will focus exclusively on the use of brackets, inasmuch as it represents the specific and most characteristic form of the parenthetical construction, and the one that allows the most challenging experiments with the written language. Indeed, in Virginia Woolf's acknowledged masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*, a great deal goes on in brackets. As many critics have pointed out, one of the main functions of parenthetical expressions in Woolf's experimental fiction is the identification of the point of view (Blakemore, 2009; Lee, 1992; Sotirova, 2007). The first parenthesis that occurs in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, fulfils exactly this function, attributing to a six-year-old boy, James, a harsh judgement upon his father. It is the intrinsically digressive nature of parenthetical constructions that allows the frequent shifts of viewpoint – a distinctive feature of Woolf's fluent narrative and complex characterisation. Moreover, parenthetical remarks may function like asides in a play, supplying commentary upon the thoughts or actions in which they are embedded. Another important role of brackets is to highlight the significance of digressive reflections, which, in *To the Lighthouse*, may also extend over more than one paragraph.

All these different functions have been considered and classified by Woolf scholars (Blakemore, 2009; Lee, 1992). What has received less critical attention, however, is the intrinsic nature of parenthetical constructions as such and the subtle, multifaceted implications of their actual functioning within the overall economy of every single novel. The purpose of this paper is to address a similar question,

starting from the assumption that the fundamental property of parenthetical expressions consists in their digressive nature, that is, in their capacity to interrupt the linear flow of narrative discourse in order to arouse the impression of simultaneity. In other words, the use of brackets can create a sort of counterpoint between one level of activity and another, allowing thought and action to be shown occurring at the same time, or exploring the multiple layers of consciousness from different perspectives (Blakemore, 2009; Lee, 1992; Jensen, 2007).

If this assumption about the nature of parentheticals is correct, an in-depth exploration at the semantic level requires adequate analytical methods: methods that are not only able to promote close reading of what comes before and after the parenthesis, but also capable of interpreting each parenthetical construction in the context of the whole chapter, and (possibly) in the light of the entire book. Consequently, the scope of the present study is essentially circumscribed to Woolf's most famous novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and in particular to some significant examples of parenthetical expressions taken, respectively, from each of the three sections of the novel. A good point of departure for such an analysis, however, is to be found in *Jacob's Room* (1922), Woolf's first experimental novel, in which parentheticals are quite rare and limited to a few words. And yet, surprisingly enough, the opening page of the book shows a long and compound sentence, inserted between brackets, which introduces one of the most important characters of Jacob's childhood – his elder brother, Archer. A close scrutiny of this passage is able to shed light on some relevant aspects of Virginia Woolf's narrative technique, including her flexible use of point of view, her particular treatment of time, her extraordinary art of foreshadowing – right from the opening scene – the underlying theme of the whole narrative.

Modern Fiction, or the Relevance of Irrelevance

Jacob's Room (1922) has often been regarded as a turning point in Virginia Woolf's artistic development. On 26 July 1922, shortly after she completed her third novel, the author wrote in her diary: "There's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice; and that interests me so that I feel I can go ahead without praise" (*Diary 2*: 186). From then on her fiction became a series of brilliant and extraordinarily varied experiments, each one searching for a fresh way of expressing the complexity of human existence and the elusive nature of what we call 'reality'. In her most famous essay, *Modern Fiction*, originally published in April 1919 as *Modern Novels*, Woolf had criticized certain of her contemporaries for producing novels with such a tightly constructed plot that they made human existence appear quite different from what we experience in our daily lives (Goldman, 2006: 103-106). The fragmented fabric of *Jacob's Room* – its relatively loose organization – is essentially due to the need to address the crucial question, posed in *Modern Fiction*, regarding the possible form of the fictional presentation of life, once freed from the constraints and inadequacies of literary conventions (Flint,

1992). In her critical essay, Woolf describes the task of the modern novelist as follows:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, *the accent falls differently from old; the moment of importance came not here but there*; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style. (*Modern Fiction*, 160, my emphasis)

In other words, the writer should try to capture and convey the 'moments of importance', however trivial, fleeting and irrelevant they may appear. In Woolf's view, it is a mistake to search for life in the 'objective reality'. Rather than focusing on external events, modern novels should be concerned with the life of the mind, considered in all its complex thought processes and emotions.

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in *what is commonly thought small.* (*Modern Fiction*, 161, my emphasis)

Indeed, "what is commonly thought small" may reveal its hidden meaning if it is associated with the so-called moments of importance, or 'moments of being', which Virginia Woolf describes in her essay *A Sketch of the Past*. These moments coincide with sudden instances of clarity, through which the individual is able to gain a greater awareness and to reach a deeper understanding about his own situation and the world around him (Jensen, 2007). Such moments of revelation and insight may be provoked by immediate ideas, ephemeral impressions, visual and sensory perceptions – all things that appear insignificant from an objective point of view. The attentive reader, however, knows the importance of paying careful attention to what seems irrelevant and disconnected in such experimental fiction. To put it briefly, we can affirm that Woolf's critical approach configures itself as a true *poetics of irrelevance*, to the extent that fleeting hints and minimal details may assume a crucial role in creating the overall meaning of the novel.

Jacob's Room: A Parenthetical Intimation of Death

Jacob's Room proposes itself as an innovative form of *Bildungsroman*, apparently centred on the life of Jacob Flanders, who is destined to die before his time in the Great War (Little, 1981). The highly impressionistic, self-reflexive narrative draws the protagonist essentially as an absence in the lives of others. As the title tellingly suggests, the novel is focused on the empty room – the intimate and social space

occupied by Jacob, and the emotional vacuum left among those who loved him (Bishop, 2004; Flint, 1992). The theme of absence seems to pervade the novel from the very beginning. The story opens with a beach scene from Jacob's childhood during a summer holiday in Cornwall:

'So of course,' wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, 'there was nothing for it but to leave.' (*Jacob's Room*, 3)

The opening paragraph depicts the figure of Betty Flanders, Jacob's widowed mother, sitting on a beach and writing a tear-stained letter, while her two sons are playing nearby. Beginning *in medias res*, the dramatic incipit focuses on the conclusive statement of the letter: "there was *nothing for it but to leave*". This concise sentence alludes to a difficult and painful situation connected with the death of Mrs. Flanders's husband, as the reader will be able to deduce from the subsequent reconstruction of past events. But here, at the beginning of the story, the unexpected occurrence of the verb *to leave*, used in an absolute sense and placed in a negative sentence, seems to prefigure the protagonist's fate and the dire consequences of the war. It is Jacob who is destined *to leave* behind the empty room towards which the desires and memories of the other characters will be fruitlessly directed, as shown in the last scene of the novel. It is Jacob Flanders who embodies the trauma of a whole generation, as his surname eloquently suggests (Hattaway, 1993). What follows is a descriptive paragraph, where the bay and the lighthouse are viewed through the eyes of Betty Flanders, brimmed with tears:

Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled […]. She winked quickly. Accidents were awful things. She winked again. The mast was straight; the waves were regular; the lighthouse was upright; but the blot had spread.

'…*nothing for it but to leave*,' she read. (*Jacob's Room*, 3, my emphasis)

It is worth noting that the negative clause with the infinitive form *to leave* is foregrounded, at the end of the paragraph, through repetition: "…nothing for it but to leave". By repeating these words, mirrored through the eyes of Betty Flanders, the author intends to convey a vague sense of loss and a feeling of emotional distance. It is not without reason that, immediately after these words, Jacob is mentioned for the first time in the novel:

'Well, if Jacob doesn't want to play' (the shadow of Archer, her eldest son, fell across the notepaper and looked blue on the sand, and she felt chilly – it was the third of September already), 'if Jacob doesn't want to play' – what a horrid blot! It must be getting late. (*Jacob's Room*, 3, my emphasis)

It is interesting to note that the reference to Jacob, in the quoted passage, implicitly signals to the reader that the protagonist is out of the sight of both his mother and

brother. Right from the beginning, from the opening scene on a beach along the Cornish coast (where Jacob will be referred to as a "tiresome little boy"), he is essentially characterized by his absence (Bishop, 1992; Oinam, 2011). This absence will become immediately evident in the next passage, where the older brother begins his search for Jacob, calling him with insistence and making his name resound among the rocks with loud cries. And yet the pervasive sense of anxiety and fear that accompanies this search is already foreshadowed, as the attentive reader will perceive, by the parenthetical quoted above. Let us then focus our attention on this long, compound sentence in round brackets, which occupies almost entirely the third paragraph of the novel:

'Well, if Jacob doesn't want to play' (the shadow of Archer, her eldest son, fell across the notepaper and looked blue on the sand, and she felt chilly – it was the third of September already), 'if Jacob doesn't want to play' – (*Jacob's Room*, 3)

The events in the first part of the novel are narrated from the point of view of Betty Flanders. She is the one who opens the narrative: sitting on the beach in front of the bay, she is writing a letter, while her sons Archer and Jacob are playing round about. Suddenly the shadow of Archer, her eldest son, falls on the sheet of paper on which she is writing: clearly the boy has come up from behind. His mother perceives his shadow together with the words with which he complains about his little brother: "*if* Jacob doesn't want to play". This doubting sentence, which for the first time names the protagonist of the novel, also reveals his independent, strong-willed nature. In actual fact Jacob has gone away, completely disappearing from sight: he is absent from the scene, while the reader learns his name through the voice of his brother (Van Rooyen, 2012). What, then, is the meaning of the parenthetical that follows and introduces, precisely between brackets, a character who plays a primary role in Jacob's childhood, namely his older brother?

In truth, the first mention of Archer in the story is a reference to his shadow, which makes the sand appear blue before his mother's eyes. Between parentheses, therefore, the modernist writer tends to place what is irrelevant from the point of view of traditional literary narratives: an obscure shape on the sand; a sudden feeling of coldness; an immediate awareness of the present moment ("the third of September already"). In contrast with the conventional manner, which aimed at an explicit and full representation of reality and human behaviour, Woolf's modernist writing tends to highlight the subjective consciousness, shunning any pretence at objectivity and completeness (Raitt, 2010; Sotirova, 2007). The author herself addresses the critical question of how to handle character description and development. In two different chapters of *Jacob's Room*, towards the beginning and the end of the novel, the same idea is repeated in exactly the same words: "It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" (*Jacob's Room*, 37, 214). This is the narrative technique that Virginia Woolf inaugurates in her first experimental novel and that will be more fully

developed in her successive works and above all in her masterpiece. She whispers hints; she never shouts proclamations (Raitt, 2010). She puts relevant intuitions within parentheses.

In the light of these considerations we can better appreciate the significance of the parenthesis that appears on the first page of *Jacob's Room*. As already shown above, this parenthesis contains three distinct and apparently disconnected elements, which give an idea of Betty Flanders's subjective consciousness: the shadow of her eldest son; a sudden sensation of cold; the perception of time which has passed (Jensen, 2007: 114). And yet, clearly these three elements are all presented in implicit connection with the figure of Jacob, whose name has just been uttered in the direct speech to which the parenthetical is a commentary.

Indeed, Jacob will appear through the novel as a shadow, as an elusive, indefinable presence (Oinam, 2011). His life's evanescent quality is symbolically enclosed in a simple name, Jacob, evoked in the absence of the character at the beginning of the novel; and again a pure name will be called out at the end, by the voice of a friend, in the excruciating void left by his death. Jacob's life is composed and broken up continually, as impalpable and changeable as a shadow, filtered through the latent impressions, the voices and memories of those who have known him. Jacob's death will cast a dark shadow over the hearts of those who have loved him (Orestano, 1999).

The second element mentioned within brackets at the beginning of the novel is a cold shiver, which suddenly pervades the body of Betty Flanders. The mother shudders for an obscure sense of fear, which is made explicit in the order she gives to her eldest son, when she notices the disappearance of Jacob:

'Where is that tiresome little boy?' she said. 'I don't see him. Run and find him. Tell him to come at once.' (*Jacob's Room*, 3)

Archer then runs to look for his brother, making Jacob's name echo among the rocks, with an articulate cry full of anguish, repeated at regular intervals:

'Ja – cob! Ja – cob! Archer shouted. (*Jacob's Room*, 4)

And for the last time, again:

'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. (*Jacob's Room*, 5)

A pure name which echoes among the rocks, called by his brother, "solitary, unanswered"; similarly, in the concluding scene of the novel, the name of Jacob will echo in his empty room, shouted by his friend and destined to remain forever "solitary, unanswered". As the reader will perceive, this first temporary absence of

the protagonist, somehow distressing for his mother, foreshadows all the subsequent absences, departures, separations, until the final void symbolically represented by the empty room (Jensen, 2007: 115).

Finally, the last element included in the parenthetical, and associated with the cold shiver, is a time expression which might denote, at first glance, a merely declarative kind of temporal awareness: "it was the third of September already". And yet, the presence of the adverb "already" suffices to confer a subjective connotation to this sentence, which sounds like a secret regret for the summer that is ending – like a reminder of the transient nature of life. In the light of the above, the three elements enclosed in brackets appear strictly interconnected. Almost impalpable, and yet with a deep and significant effect, a parenthetical intimation of death foreshadows, right from the opening page of the novel, the underlying theme of the whole narrative.

Parenthetical Remarks in *to the Lighthouse:* The Relationship Between Mr. And Mrs. Ramsay

Virginia Woolf's masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*, is conceived as a triadic structure: the first part, 'The Window' is followed by a much shorter section, 'Time Passes', which functions as a link between the first and the third part of the novel, 'The Lighthouse'. In the first part, which takes place in the course of a single day, we are introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their numerous children and guests, as they take their summer holiday on the Hebridean island of Skye.

In chapter 7 of the first part the tension between husband and wife reaches a particular intensity, enhanced by the fact that the relationship is presented from the point of view of James, who is the youngest among the Ramsays' children (Lilienfeld, 1981). As always in modernist fiction, it is the reader who is called upon to reconstruct the scene through suggestions and details which are given in the course of the narrative. Besides, among these details, some of the most significant indications are contained in parentheses (Blakemore, 2009). In particular, the opening paragraph of chapter 7 takes the reader back to the beginning of the novel, where a first essential parenthetical occurs – "(James thought)" – in order to attribute to the six-year-old boy a harsh judgment upon his father (*To the Lighthouse*, 8). The scene depicted in chapter 7, too, recalls the physical postures and attitudes of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay as they appear in the initial pages of the narrative. Mrs. Ramsay is sitting by the window with her son in her arms, reading Grimm's fairy tales to him. The chapter begins by showing James's feelings towards his father, who has come up and stopped in front of them, disturbing the perfect harmony between mother and child:

But his son hated him. He hated him for coming up to them, for stopping and looking down on them; he hated him for interrupting them; he hated him for the exaltation and sublimity of his gestures; for the magnificence of his head; for his exactingness and egotism (for *there he stood*, commanding them to attend to him); but most of all

he hated the twang and twitter of his father's emotion which, vibrating round them, disturbed the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother. By looking fixedly at the page, he hoped to make him move on; by pointing his finger at a word, he hoped to recall his mother's attention, which, he knew angrily, wavered instantly his father stopped. But no. Nothing would make Mr. Ramsay move on. *There he stood*, demanding sympathy. (*To the Lighthouse*, 51-52, my emphasis)

As happens often in the novel, the parenthetical here has the function of describing the physical position of Mr. Ramsay and the firm and irremovable attitude with which he remains in front of his wife and his son, demanding their attention. Interestingly enough, the parenthesis contains the only expression that describes 'objectively' the father's position: "there he stood". On the other hand, what is important to reveal for the modernist writer, that is the inner attitude and the emotional life of the characters, pervades the whole passage. It is also worth noting that the feelings of little James towards his father are expressed through the almost obsessive repetition of the verb *to hate*, occurring with incessant insistence five times in the first paragraph. All the material acts carried out by Mr. Ramsay ("coming up", "stopping", "looking down", "interrupting them"), his gestures, his characteristic features are revealed uniquely through the perception of James, as if they were fraught with the strong feelings of aversion that the little boy shows towards his father.

In this context, the parenthetical content appears detached, like an off-stage voice. In truth, it is always the narrative voice that holds up the speech of the whole chapter; but here it assumes a semblance of objectivity, in such a way as to enable a deeper truth to emerge, transcending the particularistic points of view of the single characters.

At this point, it is important to notice that the parenthetical is not limited to a mere external indication ("there he stood"), but also includes a moral attitude, expressing with incisive effectiveness Mr. Ramsay's nature, which is both fragile and imperious, pleading and commanding ("commanding them to attend to him"). Moreover, the parenthetical content is repeated, with a slight but significant variation, right at the end of the paragraph: "There he stood, demanding sympathy". Undoubtedly, this is the physical and moral image of Mr. Ramsay that will remain impressed on the reader's mind.

In contrast with the presentation of the male figure, there follows a description of the female character: she, too, is revealed through a parenthetical note which takes us back to an initial image of the narrative:

Mrs. Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating

(quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. He wanted sympathy. (*To the Lighthouse*, 52)

At first sight, the parenthetical seems merely to describe the physical attitude of Mrs. Ramsay, with the addition of a relevant gesture which refers back to the opening scene of the novel: the woman is knitting a brown sock for the son of the lighthouse keeper (Lee, 1992). In the first section of the book, 'The Window', the act of knitting assumes a symbolic significance, alluding to Mrs. Ramsay's capacity to weave connections between people, to create relationships, to promote cohesion and harmony.

The passage quoted, which should be read in its entirety, highlights the protagonist's effort to turn her attention towards her husband; besides, this same effort is transformed into an illuminating and fertile burst of energy which emanates from her whole being. In this context, the parenthesis introduces an adverb – "quietly" – which is able to attribute a definitive connotation to the physical and moral portrait of the female character. In the first chapters of the novel, as the reader knows, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay continually face each other through the dialectics of *Yes* and *No* (Lilienfeld, 1981). The mother's full agreement with her son's desire to go to the lighthouse is conveyed by her attitude of heartily acceptance and support. On the contrary the objective, rational reasons of Mr. Ramsay, motivated by the weather forecast for the next day, sound like an unappealable refusal. However, beyond these contrasting attitudes, which find a strong echo in little James's soul, it is the different personality of husband and wife that is gradually outlined throughout the first part of the narrative. One might say that this representation reaches its acme precisely in the seventh chapter, where the confrontation between husband and wife is direct, no longer mediated by the child's request.

Indeed, in the passage quoted above, the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay appears as one of opposition and complementation. The narrative voice presents the husband's evident dependency as an indication of "the fatal sterility of the male", contrasted adversely with the "delicious fecundity" of the female, described as a "fountain and spray of life". At this point the function of the two parentheticals becomes clear: strategically placed – as they are – in the middle of the first and second paragraph of the seventh chapter, they are intended to focus on the visual and symbolic representation of the two characters. While opposing each other on the semantic level, these parenthetical expressions succeed in capturing and fixing the essential features of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, providing two icons that will remain etched in the reader's mind.

Square Brackets, or the Terrible Impersonality of 'Time Passes'

The middle section of Woolf's masterpiece constitutes a highly experimental piece of writing, which covers an interval of ten years, focusing on the objective world of the

house and its surroundings, in decline and under repair, as a metaphor for the losses and changes during the period of the Great War (Goldman, 2006: 59). The real subject of this section, as the title suggests, is time, whose action is revealed above all through the inexorable forces of nature. The first part of the novel, 'The Window', ended with the affirmation of the most profound human values, showing the mutual love between the Ramsays, despite all the potential for disagreement, misunderstanding, and resentment. In this second part, much shorter, human existence seems to lose all its value and relevance, while the narrative voice describes the passing of time and the supremacy of a world which is not human.

Thus, characters we have come to know in the first part of the novel are consigned to terse, matter-of-fact parenthetical statements, contained in square brackets. The detached, impersonal tone of these assertions is aimed at shifting the reader's attention from the experiences of individual lives to the material processes concerning the life of the world (Stevenson, 1992: 175). At the end of chapter 3, the reader may be shocked by the traumatic representation of Mrs. Ramsay's death:

[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.] (*To the Lighthouse*, 175)

The use of square brackets gives the shape of a mathematical, irrefutable certainty to the contents transmitted, in such a way as to confer upon them a character of lucid objectivity. The terrible news of Mrs. Ramsay's death refers to "the night before" – a night which mingles with that "immense darkness" pervading the middle section of the narrative from the beginning to the end (*To the Lighthouse*, 171).

The sixth chapter again surprises the reader with the impact provoked by the square brackets. These, differently from round brackets, which were inserted naturally in the fabric of the narrative discourse, appear isolated from the rest of the linguistic context, arousing a strong, visual impression of heterogeneity and detachment. On the syntactic level, in effect, it is evident that the square brackets circumscribe a very short paragraph, so that the parenthetical statement looks like a sort of subtext – almost an unnecessary insertion, which provokes a sudden interruption in the stylish, overflowing, highly lyrical prose of 'Time Passes' (Goldman, 2006: 62). The first parenthetical which appears in the sixth chapter contains concise information about the marriage of Prue, the Ramsays' eldest daughter, for whom the mother had cherished visions of future happiness, and in whom she saw herself on account of her beauty:

[Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father's arm, was given in marriage that May. What, people said, could have been more fitting? And, they added, how beautiful she looked!] (*To the Lighthouse*, 179)

The reader cannot help being struck by the cold, detached tone of this communication, which inevitably calls to mind the references to Prue in the first part

of the novel and, above all, Mrs. Ramsay's expectations and dreams regarding her daughter's marriage. One should also note that the impersonal tone is referred to obvious and superficial judgements, which are attributed to an external world ("people said / they added"), insensitive and extraneous to the inner lives of the characters. And here, after the flow of a long paragraph describing a sequence of natural processes, the impersonal impact of the square brackets intervenes again, interrupting the lyrical prose of this narrative, just as the continuity of life may be suddenly interrupted:

[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more.] (*To the Lighthouse*, 180)

The reference to the natural desire for happiness, so alive and personalized in the first part of the novel, returns here as a useless, stupid comment made by "people". Yet again, another announcement of death follows, written between square brackets in a brief and lapidary style, characterized by the chill impersonality of a war bulletin:

[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.] (*To the Lighthouse*, 181)

The short, stabbing account accentuates the brutality of the event depicted. Andrew, the Ramsays' eldest son, is one of the many young men who tragically lost their lives in an explosion: the reference to a whole generation slaughtered in the First World War is evident. The cold, impersonal tone that distinguishes all these parenthetical expressions, also suggested by the indication of the name and surname of the character, reaches its climax here. Differently from what happened in the parentheticals quoted above, here the very first occurrence, inserted between square brackets, is a nuclear sentence whose subject may disclose different potential meanings: "A *shell* exploded". The disruptive power of this statement becomes immediately explicit in the light of what follows. However, the latent polysemy of the word "shell" cannot but evoke in the reader's mind, precisely in relation to Andrew Ramsay, a completely different context: a summer home in the Hebrides, which was the setting for the first part of the novel, where the Ramsays' children loved to run up and down the beach collecting crabs and shells.

Towards an Ending: The (Passionate) Impersonality of the Artist

It has been said that "*To the Lighthouse* is about something ending, and it contains a number of endings" (Lee, 1992: xxxix). Among these, two projects are brought to a conclusion simultaneously in the final part of the novel: the trip to the lighthouse, which was so longed-for by James, the Ramsays' youngest child; and the picture – a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay – that Lily Briscoe had begun ten years earlier. Lily is the protagonist of the concluding part of the narrative, inasmuch as she embodies the

figure of the artist, whose main task consists in shaping into a coherent form the chaotic multiplicity of life (Humm, 2010). It is precisely through the eyes of Lily Briscoe that the reader perceives the accomplishment of the two actions planned from the beginning. It is worth noting that both actions would have required the presence of Mrs. Ramsay; on the contrary, they are fulfilled in the absence of the person who had supported and inspired them.

Significantly, the third section of the novel is entitled 'The Lighthouse', indicating that the longed-for destination is eventually reached. However, the lighthouse also represents a sort of objective correlative of Mrs. Ramsay, because of the light it emanates. Consequently, the title also suggests the idea that the artist has finally succeeded in grasping the inner beauty of such a cherished woman, though she is no longer a visible presence (Fusini, 1992). This last achievement, the most arduous, literally puts an end to Virginia Woolf's masterpiece: Lily draws a final line on her painting and realizes that it is truly finished, feeling a weary sense of relief:

It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, *I have had my vision*. (*To the Lighthouse*, 281, my emphasis)

The attainment of this interior vision is the result of a long and painful process which passes through a deeply felt sense of loss. Thus, in the fifth chapter, looking at the picture, Lily suddenly realizes that her eyes are brimming with tears:

[…] when, looking at the picture, she was surprised to find that she could not see it. Her eyes were full of a hot liquid (she did not think of tears at first) which, without disturbing the firmness of her lips, made the air thick, rolled down her cheeks. She had perfect control of herself – Oh yes! – in every other way. Was she crying then for Mrs. Ramsay, without being aware of any unhappiness? (*To the Lighthouse*, 242)

The passage shows with penetrating acuteness the contrast between the sensitive nature of Lily Briscoe, who perceives the absence of Mrs. Ramsay as an unfillable void, and the tension towards the impersonality of the artist, which she somehow embodies and expresses with full awareness ("She had perfect control of herself – Oh yes!"). In this context the parenthetical sentence appears extremely significant, confirming from the outside, through an objective narrative voice, how the deep emotion arrives unexpectedly, to the point of not even being recognized. A little further on, at the end of the same chapter, Lily is depicted in the act of giving voice to her suffering, almost as if she wanted to call back the presence of Mrs. Ramsay by invoking her name:

'Mrs. Ramsay!' she said aloud, 'Mrs. Ramsay!' The tears ran down her face. (*To the Lighthouse*, 243)

It is precisely by passing through this suffering of the soul that Lily acquires the capacity for spiritual cognition and perception, which allows her to recuperate the truest image of Mrs. Ramsay. As Nadia Fusini (1992: 20) emphasizes in her

Introduction to the novel, it is not the presence of Mrs. Ramsay that permits the completion of the portrait, but her absence. Because it is not the organ of sight that achieves the profound perception of persons and things; only memory, purified by suffering, is capable of attaining interior vision. This crucial passage, this inner transformation is masterfully described in the seventh chapter:

And now slowly the pain of the want, and the bitter anger (to be called back, just as she thought she would never feel sorrow for Mrs. Ramsay again. Had she missed her among the coffee cups at breakfast? not in the least) lessened; and of their anguish left, as antidote, a relief that was balm in itself, and also, but more mysteriously, a sense of someone there, of Mrs. Ramsay relieved for a moment of the weight that the world had put on her, staying lightly by her side […]. (*To the Lighthouse*, 244)

Here, too, the parenthetical has an important role, inasmuch as it contains an interrogative reflection which demonstrates how thought and feeling do not proceed at the same pace; and how one can be surprised at what she feels, finding herself emotionally at a point that she thought she had overcome. The aspiration of the artist towards the detachment of impersonality, theorized by T. S. Eliot, is thematized in Virginia Woolf's masterpiece through a subtle and penetrating psychological analysis.

The process outlined in the concluding section of the novel is characterized, at least in a first phase, by its contradictory impulses and wavering progression, as shown in the passage quoted above. Moreover, a decisive moment in this evolution is marked by the need – often perceived almost unconsciously – to stand at a distance, to stand apart. Thus, in the seventh chapter, the narrative voice focuses on Lily's attitude with these words: "Now again, moved as she was by some instinctive *need of distance* and blue, she looked at the bay beneath her". (*To the Lighthouse*, 245, my emphasis). And further on, towards the end of the same chapter: "For sometimes quite close to the shore, the Lighthouse looked this morning in the haze *an enormous distance away*." (*To the Lighthouse*, 246, my emphasis). In this way, gradually, with rapid strokes, the descriptive/interpretative process moves towards the desired result:

[The sea without a stain on it, thought Lily Briscoe, still standing and looking out over the bay. The sea is stretched like silk across the bay. *Distance had an extraordinary power*; they had been swallowed up in it, she felt, they were gone for ever, they had become part of the nature of things. It was so calm; it was so quiet. The steamer itself had vanished, but the great scroll of smoke still hung in the air and drooped like a flag mournfully in valediction.] (*To the Lighthouse*, 253-254, my emphasis)

Once again the reader is confronted, at this point of the novel, with the interpretative challenge represented by the square brackets. What we have here, however, is a totally exceptional case, since the parenthetical construction perfectly coincides with a whole chapter – the ninth in the final section of the book. This brief chapter, placed

within parentheses, is proposed therefore to the reader as a true digression, interrupting the narrative continuity between the previous chapter and the one following. These present us alternately with the thoughts and feelings of Cam and James while they are on the boat, together with their father, approaching the lighthouse.

Placed between the eighth and tenth chapters, therefore, this reflection of Lily Briscoe stands out as she sees the group of people on the boat in the distance: and it seems to her that they have become "part of the nature of things". On the one hand, then, the use of parentheses could induce the reader to put aside Lily's reflection, almost as if it were an undue interruption, and totally superfluous to what is being narrated. On the other hand, one cannot help noting the visual impact caused by the square brackets, as if they were intended to frame a pictorial image, symbolically expressed by one sentence: "Distance had an extraordinary power".

Clearly this is a key sentence, whose meaning sheds light, for example, on the interpretation of the preceding chapter: where James had observed how the lighthouse, seen near at hand, no longer held the fascination that had enthralled him as a child, when its remoteness made it an object of desire. More radically, considering the general structure of the novel, one could affirm that this parenthetical chapter is a prelude to the ending: and here the visual symbolism of the square brackets really does play a part, giving definite form to the vision of Lily Briscoe and framing it as an objective 'work of art' (Stevenson, 1992: 161; Humm, 2010).

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