FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

Looking for Absence

Pandemic Depictions and Calamity Form in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Word count: 10,404

Maurane Pieters
Student number: 01910285

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Marco Caracciolo

A bachelor paper submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Literature and Linguistics: English

Academic year: 2020 - 2021

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Dr. Marco Caracciolo for introducing me to the calamity form, and directing me towards the hidden corner of history that was the Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1918. I am grateful for his support, constructive feedback and guidance throughout the process of writing this paper.

In addition, I would also like to give thanks to my close relatives for being patient when listening to and enduring my endless blabbering about my thesis, and supplying me with a constant stream of refreshments during my self-inflicted lockdown period in my study.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In his work *The Great War and The Language of Modernism* (2003), Vincent Sherry elaborates on how literary modernism constructs a complex impression of war, industry, technology and globalisation, which so utterly transformed the world of the twentieth century (6). As modernists struggled to represent a society turned upside down, they directed their attention to inverting traditional modes of representation, creating an abstract language that communicates notions of cultural apocalypse and global breakdown. Take for instance this stanza from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922):

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images (Eliot ll. 19-22)

This "heap of broken images" is often said to reflect humanity's bewilderment in light of the lingering aftermath of World War I, the event that shaped English modernism fully into existence. As a metatextual reference to the fragmented quality of the poem in general, Eliot's ambiguous "broken images" call into question "the status of the abstract category of understanding" (Sherry 6). In other words, this short stanza represents an ineffability towards a world that has been reduced to a "stony rubbish", formulated as an uncertain experience of remembering such an impactful disaster. While coming up with possible ways to put into words this new disorienting worldview, poets and writers turned to highly experimental forms that could parallel the delirium and confusion of a society struck by violence, death and trauma. Modernist literary

techniques like fragmentation, non-linearity, obscure imagery and overwhelming allusions emerged as aesthetic tools suited to represent a hard-to-depict threat, while simultaneously communicating an incomprehensibility towards it.

In my view, this short reflection on modernist formal qualities hints at and closely resembles a concept that Anahid Nersessian labels the “calamity form” (2013). Rooted in romanticism, Nersessian’s calamity form serves as a meaningful example of an ecocritical theory that engages with poetry to identify rhetorical tropes used by writers to underscore their failure to make sense of industrialization (*Calamity Forms* 13). Since the Industrial Revolution, the Earth’s ecosystems have been immensely affected, giving rise to a growing concern in contemporary literary studies over the unclear future (Nersessian, *Two Gardens* 309). In short, the changes in modern society are too vast to fathom, especially because they are deeply entangled with questions of “nescience”, which refers to “a state of acting across a void of uncertainty” (Nersessian, *Calamity Forms* 18). For Nersessian, nescience is calamity’s “unique structure of feeling” (ibid.: 13), capturing the affective dimension of undergoing a traumatic historical event. Communicating a sense of unknowability towards the past, present and future, nescience arises when we try to square reality with hypothetical events. It is therefore profoundly anxiogenic (*Two Gardens* 324).

Despite Nersessian’s insightful theory, she strictly focuses her argument on romanticism. Arguably, other cultural movements offer equally valuable perspectives that could further support her central claims. Hence, this paper proposes an extension to Nersessian’s calamity form by drawing on her notion of nescience and applying it to a different literary period, namely modernism.

As I mentioned before, many historical developments, like the First World War, impacted the landscape of the twentieth century, spawning literature that both depends upon and generates a similar sense of uncertainty. However, one event in particular stood out to me, not because of its grandiose properties, but for its enigmatic concealment instead. I am referring to the Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1918, which, despite the unusually large number of people that succumbed to its brutal symptoms, faded from historic and cultural memory primarily because it was overshadowed by WWI and the turmoil of the interwar period (Belling 56).

As a result, multiple scholars have pointed out a remarkable scarcity of explicit narrative representations of this pandemic in the modernist literary canon. In her book *Viral Modernism* (2019), Elizabeth Outka notes that the war's dominance is not the only factor that contributed to the concealment of that pandemic literature (ch. 1). She claims that the invisibility of viral threat and the difficulties of representing illness are also key reasons for authors to experiment with alternative formal techniques to evoke this hidden nonhuman presence in their plotlines (ibid.: ch. 3). The influenza-scare instigated widespread paranoia from the trenches to domestic spaces, defamiliarizing the experience of everyday life (ibid.: ch. 1). These elements are, as one would imagine, "hard to grasp in explicative, let alone actionable terms" (Nersessian, *Calamity Forms* 13). Nevertheless, Outka notes that they can be captured formally in "gaps, silences, atmospheres, fragments, and hidden bodies" (ch. 1: 3). From my standpoint, the characteristics that are inherent to the virus' hidden literary depictions communicate a sense of nescience or "traumatic knowledge" (Nersessian, *Two Gardens* 312), while also mirroring aspects of literary modernity. Therefore, instead of *assuming* that certain modernist novels are a symptom of the influenza and war-

stricken society that produced them, I suggest that they can be defined as established objects that *afford* thinking about the formal representation of the influenza pandemic, and how they communicate this unknowability, the lack of understanding of viral threat, through their formal composition.

To investigate this issue, it is worth considering Virginia Woolf's essay "On Being Ill" (1926), which was, according to Sarah Pett (2019), "the first published essay devoted to the representation of illness in English Literature"[1] (26). At the start of the essay, Woolf writes:

> *"It becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, [...] would have been devoted to influenza; [...] But no"* (32).

Besides having battled several tormenting illnesses such as pneumonia and depression (Woolf, *Diary 1* 189-190), Woolf and her family contracted influenza repeatedly (Outka ch. 4), as she dedicated many of her diary entries to describing her feverish symptoms and treatments (Woolf, *Diary 1* 156). Hence, through all her personal experience with influenza and illness, she has shown a distinct reverence and fascination for what disease does to whomever it strikes.

Therefore, I deem Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as an interesting case study for this matter. Having achieved a canonized status, *To the Lighthouse* is widely recognized as "a classic in modernist narrative" (Emery 218). The plot follows two days

[1] Pett (2019) defends this claim in her notes: "Earlier explorations of the relationship between illness, writing, and creativity more generally exist, many of which center on the idea of the *furor poeticus* or poetic madness (see, for example, Whitehead, Madness). These earlier works do not, however, put forward the kind of institutional critique Woolf attempts in "On Being Ill."" (59)

in the life of a Victorian family, the Ramsays, who spend some time in their vacation house on an island in the Hebrides. What makes this novel significant for my research, is Woolf's ambitious formal experimentation in portraying the emotional and epistemic impact of familial loss. The central chapter, *Time Passes,* provides what Louise Westling calls "a representation of the energies of earth's life without human beings" (859), which causes an estranging effect. The chapter foregrounds an aesthetics of ineffability built from images of absence, silence, emptiness and nothingness which resemble the formal characteristics that Outka links to the influenza pandemic (ch. 1).

To be clear, I am not claiming that this novel is necessarily written with the pandemic in mind. I will argue, however, that by establishing calamity forms in the text, I aim to reveal how Woolf's style *enacts* a hidden presence of the pandemic in *To the Lighthouse*. In particular, I will consider strategies of metaphor and personification in *Time Passes,* and how these can be read as if they were shaped by a nescient response to war, illness and loss. Furthermore, I will be reading the other two chapters in light of *Time Passes*, and how they pursue Woolf's interest in "the world without humans" (Nersessian, *Two Gardens* 316), despite the presence of human characters.

Elevating Nersessian's calamity form from its dependence on the romantic era and using it more as a framework will not only help to clarify her hypothesis on nescience in relation to a different literary period, it will also broaden our understanding on how *To the Lighthouse* identifies the challenge of representing "the forgotten pandemic" (Hovanec 161).

Time Passes: Representing a World without Humans

While Nersessian ultimately sees her calamity form as a poetic technique, I defend my choice of *To the Lighthouse* as a case study by pointing out that multiple scholars have described the novel as "highly poetic and densely allusive" (Goldman 58), which again brings attention to its aesthetic formalism. As modernist prose is enormously compressed, it should be read “with the attention normally reserved for poetry or philosophy” (Childs 4). In my view, *To the Lighthouse* is most experimental in its representation of time. There is an enigmatic temporal fluidity that runs through the novel, since the narrative compresses and expands from the events of a single day in *The Window* to the passage of ten years in *Times Passes* and then refocuses back to the events of another day in *The Lighthouse*. In one of her notebooks, Woolf has described the peculiar narrative structure of *To the Lighthouse* as “Two blocks joined by a corridor”, accompanied by a drawing (fig. 1).

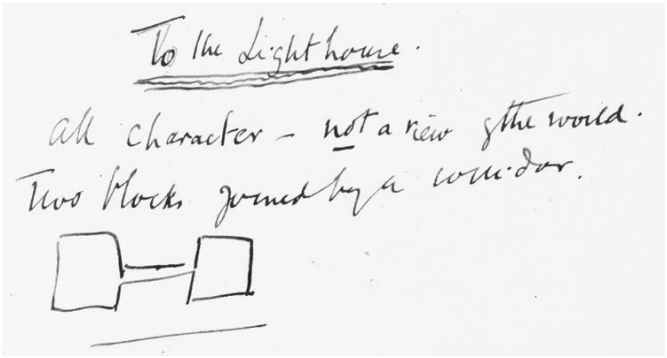

Fig.1: “Two blocks joined by a corridor”, Virginia Woolf’s sketch in a notebook dated March 1925, retrieved from: https://lithub.com/how-virginia-woolf-taught-me-to-mourn/

Ironically, this “corridor” is the shortest section of the novel even though it encapsulates a much wider period of time than the other two chapters. For this reason, the chapter

is paradoxically highlighted, serving as the connecting bridge between the Victorian era of the novel's beginning, and the post-1918 state at its end. Historically, this window of time wholly encompasses the turbulent start of the twentieth century, the setting that I wish to align with Nersessian's concept of nescience, understood as a state of "unknowing" about the world's radical transformation (*Calamity Forms* 12). The perspective that *Time Passes* offers is distinct from the rest of the novel because we get an account of the Ramsays' uninhabited summer house, suggesting a peculiar dislocation from the family's normal life. Woolf herself has characterized the chapter as "this impersonal thing [...] the most difficult abstract piece of writing [...] the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to" (*Diary 3* 76). Due to the lack of human presence in this chapter, there are no events at play within the house to give firm temporal shape. Rather, Woolf creates a setting that allows her to envision the relentless flux of time, and how it is able to transform a space that was once seen as familiar and ordinary. As a result, temporal references are deliberately confusing, lacking any sense of logical or linear order: "for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together" (126). The narrator is continually questioning time: "But what after all is one night?" (119). David Sherman (2007) notes that the chapter approaches the presence of time as an otherness to be perceived or evoked, but never fully understood (172), as can be seen here: "Almost it would appear that it is useless in such confusion to ask the night those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore, which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer" (120). Both Nersessian and Outka point out that such unsettling temporal frames could parallel the delirium and confusion of a violently reorganizing world. This fragility is expressed by casting doubt on something that should be indubitable: the cyclical nature of time. As Sherman

mentions, Woolf “warps time”, because the chapter lacks a “distinctly present moment” (169), creating a sense that time is passing or even surpassing the subject. This is further suggested in this quote: “flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts” (123). The vast scope of cosmic time, along with the lack of a present moment by human standards, generates a tone in which the universe seems completely unconcerned with humankind. Time appears to go by so fast, as in one instance the entire lifespan of “tortoiseshell butterflies” is recorded in the space of one sentence: “burst[ing] from the chrysalis and patter[ing] their life out on the windowpane” (128). The rapid expansion in time is also underlined by the narrator's mixed use of tenses, sometimes rapidly moving from present to past: “At last, in the evening, one after another the sounds die out, and the harmony falters, and silence falls. With the sunset sharpness was lost, and like mist rising, quiet rose, quiet spread, the wind settled” (132). This peculiar representation of time echoes Nersessian’s definition of nescience: “Refusing the vatic license to place past, present, and future in a linear relation, nescience gives itself up to a temporal disorder that is the special effect of calamities and their form” (*Two Gardens* 312). The symbiotic nature of time in *Time Passes* communicates a sense of bewilderment which Belling associates with a representation of the virus' capacity to disorient and defamiliarize one’s grip on reality (61).

Besides the lack of chronology, Woolf further shapes her experimental vision on temporality in terms of the cosmos by employing a dense structural metaphor. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), a structural metaphor is a system in which one complex concept (typically abstract, like time) is presented in terms of some other (usually more concrete) concept, yet, the

link does not need to be explicitly articulated (14). In my view, such a metaphor can be seen as a calamity form in and of itself, while it essentially takes a detour from directly defining a straightforward meaning. Instead, metaphors hinge on a systematic correlation within our experience (ibid.: 61), something that Woolf demonstrates by displaying time through natural imagery and the decay of materialities, something we can perceive more readily. Although metaphors can be powerful tools to *produce* new knowledge and serve an aesthetic purpose, the structural metaphor in *Time Passes* may be seen as a source of nescience, or uncertainty about the storyworld, especially when we view this calamity form through a viral lens. Let us first consider this passage:

> *So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias (...)* (117)

After the characters put out the lights in the house and disappear, invisible forces are seen entering the house. We get a highly sensory description of violent rainfall and an ominous darkness falling, and protruding the house. This darkness and rain evoke a sense of threat, as they are seen “drumming on the roof”, “creeping in” through small spaces, and “swallow[ing] up” the ordinary, comforting objects in the house. Besides darkness, we encounter another entity capable of piercing through small crevices, namely the air:

> *Nothing stirred in the drawing room or in the dining room or on the staircase. Only through rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind […] crept round corners and ventured indoors* (118)

As Banfield (2003) notes, these airs represent “personifications of the physical forces of nature, and indeed, of time itself” (*Time Passes* 502). On a metaphorical level, It has been widely noted that Woolf tends to combine space and time to portray “the lived moment” or “lived time” in her novels (Laurence 6). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that Woolf opts for these formless entities as a vehicle to portray the abstract concept of time, as one could argue that “certain airs” and “darkness” are not necessarily more concrete or tangible. However, they are capable of summoning a felt sensation of time, one that is fuelled by confusion, uncertainty and delusion. As Outka[2] points out, these forces carry viral qualities, and are “structured like a pathogenic threat” (Coda 5) while they each conceptualize a persistent spreading quality. Her claim can be strengthened if we consider the fact that Woolf often used the house/room as a metaphor for the body (Laurence 147). These invisible entities resemble a virus’ ungraspable and unfathomable nature, while also transmitting a sense of unease. On a surface level, this anxiety is evoked by the unnerving imagery, as we get an inkling that something is happening in that house, forces are pervading a domestic space, but what this entails in terms of the plot remains obscure.

Even within this short passage, there are several poetic elements that contribute to the strange atmosphere. Woolf goes out of her way to attribute dubious qualities to these invisible entities. Specifically, she does this by employing the poetic technique of catachresis, also known as a mixed metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson 95). Nersessian names this technique as a calamity form, and describes it as “an awkward association of disparate things” or an “abuse of language” (*Calamity Forms* 122). For

[2] Outka briefly discusses *Time Passes* in her book *Viral Modernism* (2019), and how she relates it to the pandemic on a thematic level. I will therefore use some of her claims as anchor points for my own analysis, which is more directed towards the chapter’s formal properties.

instance, Woolf uses water imagery such as “flood” and “downpouring” to describe the darkness, indicating an amalgamation of these entities, while also intensifying the alienating atmosphere that reigns in this chapter. This gives shape to nescience, as the unsettlement of signs creates an obscure image, producing a defective alignment between entities. It challenges our understanding of what is represented, as this image walks a thin line between what we know and what we can imagine. If we try to read this in light of a viral presence, the merging of these substances suggests that boundaries are infinitely expanding, highlighting their spreading quality as they are breaching borders while seemingly restructuring space. These ambiguous borderless qualities are also a feature of a virus, one of the reasons it is so hard to describe. This idea of merging is echoed further in the chapter: “there was scarcely anything left of body and mind by which one could say “This is he” or “This is she”” (117). Catachresis is less prevalent in this initial description of the “airs”, although Woolf stresses their unusual quality, as they are “detached from the body of the wind” (118), implying that they are something unnoticeable and intangible. But as the airs continue wandering through the house, Woolf describes their movement catachrestically, as a “pale footfall upon stair and mat” (118). In these instances, catachresis is not just a “bad metaphor”, but a strategic way of mishandling semantic entities, suggesting that what is being portrayed is something beyond our knowledge, something for which no actual term exists. As Nersessian notes, these forms do not enact a complete “void of understanding”, but rather a concrete complication of it (*Calamity Forms* 202).

In short, it seems as though Woolf is trying to portray “something”, an otherness or entity that exists in the world, but is at the same time undetectable and unnameable. This ties in with the consistent use of negative diction, here most prominent in the

repetition of “nothing”. Roberta Rubenstein (2008) points out that the phrases that include “nothing” may be read “rather than with the customary emphasis, with the stress on that word: what does survive the flood of darkness, what is admitted into the house, is “nothing”” (43). This absent presence is given a sort of agency, which becomes clear here: “Sometimes a hand was raised as if to clutch something or ward off something, or somebody groaned, or somebody laughed aloud as if sharing a joke with nothingness” (117-118). Of course, this opens up questions: How do you shape and narrate a “nothingness”? What language do you use to describe the unwitnessed phenomena that occur in an empty house?

To answer these questions, I turn to Ann Banfield’s theory of the “empty centre” (*Unobserved* 2019). Banfield argues that although the use of deictic words evoke subjectivity, in some texts we cannot identify the subject, or the “self” who perceives (105). As is the case in *Time Passes*, no characters appear and it seems impossible to identify any perceiving consciousness. Nevertheless, the language subtly registers a mind present and at work: the cautious "it seemed" implies a cognitive orientation, and also the spatial deictics referring to someone’s specific position inside the house: "here a jug”, “there a bowl”...

To further define the ambiguous position of the narrative voice, it is interesting to consider the focalization that occurs in this next passage:

> *Almost one might imagine them, as [the airs] entered the drawing room, questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wallpaper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wallpaper whether they would fade and (1)*

> *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 (2) asking, Were they allies, Were they enemies? How long would they endure?* (118)

As mentioned before, there are no human characters to perceive these intruding airs that continue to wander around the premises, so the narrator turns to the inanimate residents of the house to use as focalized objects. At first, these airs seem rather innocent, as they are roaming around “smoothly brushing the walls” and “toying” with the wallpaper. The airs and the objects appear to be questioning each other on their endurance, but the distorted syntax makes it unclear whether it is the airs or the objects that are doing the asking. It appears that the airs are “questioning [...] the torn letters [...]” (1), but as the sentence continues, it seems as though the roles reverse, and the objects are “asking” (2). The utterance is uninterrupted and no colon is used, as if the questions remain unspoken or “in the air”, and unattributable to anything. As Outka notes, “the imagery suggests the language of the war, but describes a particular uncertainty of an airborne death” (Coda 7).

Thematically, Woolf employs these personifications to facilitate the recognition of the metaphorical passing of time and the transience of materialities. Yet, at the same time, it is also important to see that the inanimate and the nonhuman are given a seemingly human awareness, as they are able to question, muse and wonder, while producing a myriad of questions that bring about a general sense of uncertainty. Entrusting the focalizer's role to the inanimate or nonhuman is certainly a deviant act, which, in this case, can be viewed as a calamity form. Usually, at least according to Lakoff and Johnson, personifications “allow us to make sense of phenomena in the world in human terms” (33). Both the airs and the objects in the rooms are thus

personified, which allows the reader to take part in their wanderings, but also their confusion. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that there is an empty deictic centre present, as seen in words like “almost” and “then”. However, through the use of similes, it is the narrator that is imposing these *hypothetical* human thoughts to the inanimate, as there is no real perceiving happening, only “imagining”. This complicates a clear distinction between narrator and focalizer. Nersessian mentions that the words “as” and “as if” act as counterfactual markers that separate the actual from the possible, positioning us in this “in-between” state (*Calamity Forms* 205). This evokes nescience, which arises when we “try to square real with hypothetical events” (*Two Gardens* 324) and gives form to an unsettling sense that there is “no meaningful link between what has taken place and what might take place” (*Two Gardens* 315). In a way, these personifications stage a particular kind of intellectual crisis, as the narrator attempts to identify other characters to combat the confusion. This crisis concerns, above all, the unknowability of the future and the uncertain impacts of our actions on it. The pandemic generally frustrated the search for such agency, or someone/something to attribute the pain, delirium and eventual death to (Outka ch. 4). In a way, this section also reflects a similar attitude towards the virus at the beginning of the pandemic. Initially, Outka notes, the general public seemed indifferent to the influenza, only wondering “how long it would endure” (Pt. III). Because influenza was a rather common disease, at that time, catching the flu seemed like the least of people’s worries. This demeaning sense is also reverberated in this next passage:

> *So some random light directing them from some uncovered star, or wandering ship, [...] the little airs mounted the staircase and nosed round bedroom doors. But here surely, they must cease. Whatever else may perish and disappear, what lies here is*

> *steadfast. 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* (118).

The narrator seems to provoke the airs, referring to them as “little”. Yet at the same time, it expresses bewilderment that these forces would penetrate the domestic area, let alone a bedroom, which is supposed to be a safe space. The surprise attached to the location is reflected in the triple repetition of “here”. The narrator’s agitation is formulated as a hypothetical apostrophe, as seen in “here *you* can neither touch nor destroy”. As Nersessian also states, apostrophes are essentially a trope of futility, as they bring to mind “something that is there, but hardly” (*Calamity Forms* 154). Like a virus, they invoke shapes of palpable insubstantiality, and are “uncertainly anchored to the world and yet solicited to give some account of their place in it” (ibid.; 154). This is significant in terms of nescience because in *Time Passes*, we get a depiction of a world without people. In our inevitable failure to ground our feelings as readers in the experience of a human character, we are confronted with the limits of our own flawed thinking. So we compensate what we cannot experience imaginatively with what we can experience emotionally, which is this sense of anxiety. At first, it looks like the airs have been stopped: “they would look, once, on the shut eyes [...] and fold their garments wearily and disappear” (118). Nevertheless, in the very next sentence however, they continue their quest, further intensifying their unaccountability. It is also interesting to note that the airs glance at a figure seemingly asleep. Yet, to reinforce that ambiguity, this person is reduced to a mere pair of “shut eyes”. This person is half hidden by a synecdoche, as we can only assume that it is a person, or possibly a corpse. Continuing, the airs don’t leave a room or object untouched, going through boxes in the attics, blanching apples on the table, fumbling the roses, passing the

picture on the easel … It is interesting though that Woolf vividly shows both the organic life that has moved into the Ramsays' home and the inorganic things that have been left behind. It is continually highlighted that the home is "empty" and "deserted," thereby demonstrating that the narrator, and essentially humanity, is incapable of seeing the vitality of materialities.

As we continue reading, the airs become increasingly more vicious:

> "*The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their leaves fly helter-skelter until the lawn is plastered with them and they lie packed in gutters and choke rain pipes and scatter damp paths. [...] So with the house empty and the doors locked [...] those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in bedroom or drawing room that wholly resisted them"* (120).

Here, the wind and airs are depicted using prominent war imagery, adding another metaphorical layer to the chapter. At first, we see how the wind violates the natural landscape, as the "plastered" and "plunged" leaves and trees resemble fallen soldiers on a battlefield. Woolf uses very similar imagery in her essay "On Being Ill" (1926), in which she describes illness or ill bodies in relation to the war. When ill, Woolf writes, "we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream, helter skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn" (37). If we read the "helter skelter" leaves as linked to ill bodies in *Time Passes,* the imagery emerges as an echo of a pandemic landscape. Here, the dead are scattered on the lawn of the Ramsays, not the battlefields. So, it is possible to draw a link between the overlap between

the First World War and the pandemic, while essentially mass death had moved from the battlefields to the domestic spaces of ordinary families that were struck by the influenza. As the airs are seen “bluster[ing] in”, we become aware of their dangerous spreading quality again. It seems to eat away at everything it encounters (“tarnished”, “nibbled”, “cracked”), which could suggest a viral presence infecting and deteriorating the body of the house.

Depicting the violent quality of these airs through war metaphors and allusions hints at a certain calamity form. As I have shown, these war metaphors can be viewed as a certain camouflage for an illness-infused image. Relating to this, in “On Being Ill” (1926), Woolf points to the “poverty of language” (34) when it comes to describing illness, as she argues that when ill, “incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us” (41). Moreover, Catherine Belling mentions that “fiction tends to replicate some of the pandemic’s resistance to being recalled and recounted” (59). This is because it is hard to characterize a familiar disease like influenza as the enemy it turned out to be. Even though the social context can be reconstructed, with its cities in disarray, its overcrowded hospitals, exhausted health-care workers, an escalating death toll etc., the details of experiencing the illness itself, or the symptoms of the infected body and the sick mind, are much harder to detect compared with accounts of trench warfare for instance. The war produced more compelling enemies, ones that could be depicted on posters and placed in stories. Subsequently, pandemic literature approached its adversary differently, by turning the enemy into a “nameless, shadowy menace without character” (Outka ch. 1). Woolf exemplifies many of these points in this passage. How do you portray a sense of danger attached to something that is viral and

invisible in form, such as the wind? In this instance, war tropes are foregrounded, as they are an obvious choice to portray a threat. However, later in the chapter, we encounter a specific case where the war is very much pushed to the background. The description of Andrew Ramsay's death, for example, is placed in rigid brackets along with all other events that occur in the solely human world:

> *"clearly there seemed to drop into this silence, this indifference, this integrity, the thud of something falling. [A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]"* (133).

Within the parenthesis, the focus lies on the battlefield, yet there is a remarkable contrast with the vagueness preceding it ("something falling"), indicating that Andrew's death is not the focal point of this passage. Although that "something" is most likely the falling shell, the ambiguity serves to detach war from a specific human experience. This backgrounding is in line with Woolf's goal for *Time Passes,* as the war's distanced position further removes us from any distinctly human input.

While the war is given a non-anthropocentric form, it is also notable that the deaths of the members of the family are set off parenthetically as well. At once, through a seemingly unimportant side-remark, we become aware that Mrs. Ramsay has passed away "rather suddenly the night before" (120) by an unknown cause. Her loss is in a sense the book's central event, so the brevity of this description is disturbing. The brackets around the deaths of Prue and Andrew, told from a second-hand "they said" or "people said" account, accentuate the traumatic

suddenness and ultimate lack of impact these events possess. Often highlighted in readings of the novel for their exceptional literary power, it is less regularly observed that these parentheses could represent a specific formal response to illness, injury, and death. Peter Fifield (2020) suggests that this iconic moment is “a development in Woolf’s long-running engagement with the challenges of depicting the specific experiences of illness and bereavement” (98). The overall sense with which the reader is left in this passage, is calamity’s “unique structure of feeling” (Nersessian, *Calamity Forms* 13), or in terms of nescience, we quite literally find ourselves in a “void of uncertainty” (ibid.: 18). This drastic side-lining of the human narrative reflects a similar implication of recounting the pandemic. Belling mentions that "a profound cultural and ethical aspect of all major epidemics is the loss of access to personal narrative” (55). There is a conflicting dilemma in reporting on such a vast calamity: one must tell either a small fraction of the story, by consequence diminishing the whole, or one must attempt to take it all on and find that language itself cannot carry the burden (ibid.: 56). It is almost as if the removal of “the individual" from the forefront of the story is a suggestive attempt at portraying a more collective experience, since influenza affected millions of households yet their stories were swept under the rug, or forgotten. These deaths are shocking precisely because Woolf does not fully give them to us, denying us the chance to mourn and highlighting their loss even more.

All that is left of the characters are the hollowed spaces of their shoes, caps, coats, skirts, and vaguely reflected mirror images and shadows, that take on an ambiguous epistemological status, a visible absence or a ghostly presence. Although this entire section is marked by emptiness and loss, these gaps still

reflect “how once they were filled and animated” (Woolf 120) by a human shape. These remaining forms again show the struggle of representing these losses. As Sherman calls these gaps “empty place holders” (169), and “a guilty response to the dead” (177), it calls for an interesting link to the forgotten pandemic deaths. By visualising emptiness, Woolf highlights that the memory of the characters is hidden among the hollowness of these ordinary objects that are easily overlooked. They are not granted a triumphant memorial like many war heroes received, once more underlining the seeming insignificance of their loss. Moreover, the cycle of the world continues seamlessly, even if humanity is not there: “loveliness reigned and stillness, and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted” (121).

Another sign of these hidden losses can be found in the imagery depicting the vast sea that surrounds the island: “there was a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath*”* (125). It seems as though the sea displays a hidden, internal damage that is eerily reminiscent of flu symptoms, as this “purplish stain” resembles “one of the most commonly remarked features of the pandemic”, as the virus could cause bleeding under skin, granting a “purple-blue” color to the body (Outka pt. III). Even more remarkable is the fact that the sea is called “bland”, pointing towards something that is easily left unnoticed. The “blandness” of the sea is immediately contrasted with “the torment of storms” causing the sea to take on an almost apocalyptic form:

> *“gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the winds and waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulks*

of leviathans [...] it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself" (125-126).

Yet again, the violent language evokes battle imagery, and reflects the ostensibly purposeless destruction that the war caused. The vast and chaotic body of the sea causes a hallucinatory result: "Standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible*"* (126). The narrator is seen reflecting on these acts of nature, wondering: "Did nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began?" (125). As the pandemic overlapped with the ending of WWI, it could be interpreted that nature continues the violence that man started with the war. The narrator mentions the answer lies on the beach, yet nevertheless, the questions remain unanswered, as the "mirror [of the sea] is broken" (125).

As the chapter comes to its close, the maid, Mrs. McNab, is seen preparing the house for the return of the Ramsays. She seems to be aware of the eerie stillness and strange atmosphere of the house. Then, "messages of peace breathed from the sea to the shore" (132). This suggests that the war has ended, and the characters appear to be waking up from a deep sleep, as if resurrected from a hypnotic and tumultuous ride through time and space. When we contrast Lily's ending statement "Awake" with Mr. Bankes opening statement of "we must wait for the future to show", the passing of those ten years seem to have taken place in the form of a dream, or even a nightmare. This evokes the idea that time has gone by rapidly, and that the world has changed its shape in the blink of an eye.

To conclude this section, the overarching metaphor (natural forces representing time) challenges the reader out of familiar patterns of reading, and communicates

different ways of viewing the world. Nersessian argues that “the bond between the figurative object and what it might plausibly pick out is always one of indebtedness or liability” (*Calamity Forms* 24). Nevertheless, the argument that she wants to make leans on her conviction that it is the *effect* of oblique uses of language, such as metaphor, that matters more than any deep ontological correlation between word and thing (*Calamity Forms* 202).

A Viral Reading of *The Window* and *The Lighthouse*

In the previous section, I have discussed how *Time Passes* shapes the uncertain experience of living through a catastrophe, by decentralizing human agency and attempting to portray a space that is unwitnessed. To continue my search for calamity forms that allude to a hidden viral presence, I will be reading the other chapters (before and after tragedy strikes) in light of *Time Passes*. How do they anticipate and remember what happened (or did not happen) in that peculiar central chapter? Is the infectious imagery of *Time Passes* transmitted to the other chapters? To answer these questions, I will look at similar strategies of metaphor and personification to see how they pursue Woolf’s interest in “the world without people” (Nersessian *Two Gardens* 316), *despite* the presence of the human characters.

Nevertheless, there is an important distinction to make first. These framing chapters very much shine light on the internal consciousness of the characters, which is often portrayed in relation to physical space. In his book *Modernism and Physical Illness* (2020) Peter Fifield points out that Woolf has the romantic tendency to conflate consciousness and world, noting that “the interior life of the subject becomes transformed into a wild landscape” (18). Because of this intimate coupling of psyche

and geography, it is often hard to distinguish what is real or imagined in relation to natural descriptions (Parkes 35). Different characters conceptualize nature and space in different ways, making it hard for the reader to keep a firm grip on reality.

From this perspective, the idea of space is often given form through metaphor and simile, and not in the literal or "pure" sense, that is, not as a denotation of visual space in Woolf's texts. However, Nersessian argues that metaphors have a tendency to "pass […] into literalism" when we consider the changing historical context in relation to the figurative contents of literary texts[3] (*Two gardens* 317). It is this literal attention to space that I will use as an anchor for my analysis of *The Window* and *The Lighthouse,* because it allows me to re-imagine the imagery as if it were shaped by the contours of illness or a viral presence. Due to the sheer lack of word-space, I cannot discuss each character in detail and how they take part in the formalization of nescience. Instead, I will consider how they are radically side-lined in relation to their natural surroundings, similar to what happens in *Time Passes.* In this "viral reading", I will attempt to point out more nonhuman, virus-like experiences into the portrayals of space and nature, and how they interact with the characters as potential victims.

Throughout the novel, there is a clear opposition between the vast forces of nature and the seemingly insignificant human presence on the island. The physical make-up of the island invites a sense of alienation and entrapment, as Mrs. Ramsay notes they are "shut up […] upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn" (6). Concern is frequently expressed about how the vast body of the sea is encroaching and slowly "eating away" (42) the land as the waves crush into the cliffs, having already made "a

[3] In her article, Nersessian talks specifically about romantic poetry, but I have generalized her claim in order to use it as a framework that applies to other literary movements as well.

dent in the middle". If we again regard the island and the Ramsays' house as a metaphor for the body or a bounded whole, the imagery of the sea "swallowing up" space is fairly reminiscent to the darkness creeping into the house in *Time Passes,* or in a way, similar to a virus "invading" an unconsenting body. In a more literal sense, this imagery foreshadows the eventual downfall of human structures, as it is only a matter of time when this tiny, insignificant speck in the sea, "shaped something like a leaf stood on its end" (176) is going to be submerged entirely. As I have mentioned in the previous section, the passing of time is expressed through natural imagery, and most significantly through the ongoing rolling of the waves. Comparing the island to a leaf evokes the notion that it, too, is part of the natural cycle, transient and not permanent. In terms of nescience, a vision of an unclear future is created. Marco Caracciolo (2010) notes that "every major character in the novel envisages the island's engulfment; they do so, however, in accordance with their individual sensibility" (255). The characters present a myriad of fantasies about the end of the world, proving that there is no meaningful link between what they know or imagine, and what might take place, as no one will be there "to witness [nature's] final triumph" (ibid.: 255).

In other descriptions of the site, there are clear signs of nature's encroachment on the characters and the house. For example, the towels are "gritty with sand from bathing" (10), the children are seen "bring[ing] the beach in with them (26)", the geraniums are exponentially "flowing over" (34) the urns, the furniture is "positively dripped with wet" (10). Besides that, several other natural elements have been placed among other ordinary objects, as seen here: "lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink pots, paint pots, beetles and the skulls of small birds, while it drew from the long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a small of salt and weeds*."* (10) To a certain extent, it

appears that nature is “infecting” the domestic space, considering that the house is described as if it were a living, breathing organism: “The blinds were sucked in and out by the breeze, all was blowing, all was growing” (173). Moreover, borders of the house and the characters’ bodies become more and more porous, as seen in “the mist of his flesh” (84), “the walls of partition had become so thin that practically it was all one stream” (105), and “the sun poured into those attics, which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard”. This invites the idea of contagion, which resonates in Mrs Ramsay’s fear for the “spoiling” of the house. She says: “If every door in a house is left perpetually open, […] things must spoil.” (27) If we link this back to the overarching metaphor of the natural cycle and decomposing objects portraying the flux of time, the house, as is noted, gets “shabbier and shabbier summer after summer” (27), foreshadowing the imagery of the decaying house in *Time Passes*. Extending that metaphor to the idea that illness “spoils” the body is possible, especially when we consider how the natural forces and the nonhuman are depicted. Woolf underlines nature’s ambiguous form by merging several natural entities together, often creating an immensely ethereal atmosphere: “the lights were rippling and running as if they were drops of silver water held firm in a wind” (64). Here, Woolf connects light, water and wind to create a visual yet spectral image. One could call this viral imagery as well, while the wind is seemingly carrying along another substance, again suggesting its pathogenic potential. Although this might be a little bit farfetched, Woolf definitely highlights the “otherness” and unfamiliar quality of nature, as seen in the portrayal of the sand hills: “as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleat, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country,

uninhabited of men." (13) The vastness of the dunes is so impressive that they take on an alien, untouched form. Such imagery invites us to think of a world without people, which ecotheorists like Nersessian encourage us to do (*Two Gardens* 316). This idea is frequently suggested, as in one instance, Woolf describes a mysterious shape appearing from the fog:

> *"Here and there emerged from the mist […] a pinnacle, a dome; prominent things, without names. But when Minta dropped her hand, […] all that, the dome, the pinnacle, whatever it was that had protruded through the mist, sank down into it and disappeared."* (69)

This apparition indicates the presence of some sort of unknown domain hidden in the mist, remaining nameless. The characters try to put a name on this phantom-like vision ("as if it were Constantinople?", "Santa Sofia?" (68)) but they do not come to a conclusion. It might be a metaphorical way of implying the existence of some otherworldly place, where humans are not significant and have no effect on it. This also foreshadows the abandoned house in *Time Passes,* pointing to a future world that is inconceivable, which is further highlighted by the fact that there is speculation whether Minta and Nancy really did see this alternate world, or if they imagined it.

Similarly, when the characters are discussing Mr. Ramsay's philosophical work, we can see Lily struggling to understand the concept of "subject and object and the nature of reality" (23). Andrew tries to clarify this by stating: "think of a kitchen table when you're not there" (23). This is a thought that entails extreme abstraction, and briefly foreshadows the "featurelessness" of *Time Passes,* by having to think of tables, beds, gloves, carpets, books, and the entire structure of the human home when you

are not there. This scene characterizes the mood of absence and loss that lies at the heart of the novel. Moreover, this idea of a “phantom kitchen table” (23) represents an entity that cannot be perceived, but is still present in a sense. In Nersessian’s words, this scene is directed “not toward an encounter with what is real but toward an encounter with the inaccessibility of the real” (*Calamity Forms* 14). In a way, the world that Woolf insinuates has become so incomprehensible, that it evokes a ghostly shape. This, again, suggests the idea of a viral presence.

The opposition between nature and humanity takes on its most curious form in relation to Mrs. Ramsay’s experience of time. In general, Mrs. Ramsay refuses to acknowledge that change is imminent, as she stands for protecting traditional views and values. Nevertheless, it is interesting that Mrs. Ramsay is so connected with nature, as it significantly affects her perception of reality. For example, from her point of view, the rolling of the waves is a measurement of time. Occasionally, nature is seen “murmuring” soothing words and following a “monotonous” (16) rhythm, which makes Mrs. Ramsay feel comforted. Other times though, the waves take on the form of a threatening “ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat[ing] the measure of life” (16). These personifications show a distinct contrast, being able to both murmur and be remorseless at the same time. As Nersessian notes, personification can help transmit a Romantic tradition of nescience (*Two Gardens* 320), which, in this instance helps to dramatize the duality of sublime nature in the face of time. In the blink of an eye, the shape of the landscape can change its shape, aligning her current peaceful life with a threatening vision of an unsettling future, seemingly foreshadowing her own mortality. This happens again in a later scene, when Mrs. Ramsay is seen floating away in thought, giving herself a “little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped” (78),

before regaining her conscious awareness. Yet, she points out her “feeble pulse”, which she further “fosters and shelters” (78) as if carefully guarding her own lifespan. Lily Briscoe observes this moment, and she describes how she saw her “drifting into that strange no-man’s land”, comparing her to a “fading ship until the sails have sunk beneath the horizon” (78). The same image is evoked in *Time Passes,* when something appeared to have sunk “invisibly beneath” (125). The mysterious marked spot on the sea and the threat of drowning often return in the novel, as it can be linked to drowning in grief for someone that is lost, however, the cause of the loss remains unfathomable. Outka mentions that the image of the drowning sailor is a recurring symbol in modernism, but it also foregrounds a link between the pandemic and the war (pt. II ch. 5). The sailor, Outka notes, “seemingly within the most death-targeted age group for both the war and the pandemic, echoes not simply the many soldiers who were lost at sea or who drowned when trenches filled with water or the air with poison gas but also the central cause of death in the pandemic: when fluid flooded the lungs, as one medical researcher summarized, “the body effectively drowned itself”” (pt. II ch. 5).

Thus, Mrs. Ramsay’s time seems to be running out, highlighting her reverence towards creating “something permanent” (151). Mrs. Ramsay’s view on reality and the present moment is given shape through what Banfield (2003) calls the “crystallization” metaphor (…): “Woolf adopts the metaphor of crystallization for the process by which something enduring is made out of the moment’s impressions.” (*Time Passes* 493). This metaphor is best exemplified during the dinner scene. While everybody is gathered around the kitchen table, Mrs. Ramsay is staring through the window, letting her mind drift away. She ponders:

> *For the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land, there, outside a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily […] There is a coherence in things, a stability, something, she meant is immune from change, and shines out in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby.* (90)

Here, Mrs. Ramsay is reflecting on this moment of temporary unity in the face of "the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral". The contrast between the "fluidity" of the outside world and the steady, safe room, this hollow of light, brings her a sense of peace, as if, at least briefly, she has overwon the passage of time or nature's attempts to tear down the house and the island. She feels she has created a moment that will last, saying: "this will remain" (97). Although at this stage, the moment can be seen as an epiphany, a moment of clarity, Mrs. Ramsay drifts deeper and deeper into the scenery, to the point that she starts to become slightly delirious:

> *Looking at the outside the voices came to her very strangely, as if they were voices at a service in a cathedral, for she did not listen to the words. […] The words (she was looking at the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, […] the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside her self*. (101-102)

As Mrs. Ramsay stares at the rippling reflection of the candles in the dark window, she starts to hear voices from the people around her as if they were detached from their bodies. She imagines the voices assimilating with her own. There is something strangely disturbing to this scene. She seems to be in a hallucinatory state, where she sees herself, from the interior of the house, merging with the words from "out there".

Earlier, she had had a similar experience, where she “leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers” and felt that “they became one” (60). Although she experienced a moment that she deems “immune to change”, she feels herself becoming one with nature, and this is outside her control. She is surrounded by a blur, as the candles are rippling and the voices are merging. Woolf brings us deep into Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness, a space of psychological self-estrangement it seems. If we try to read the pandemic into this scene, then we could say that “the outside” would represent the danger of nature and wind carrying the influenza. By merging with nature, she is infected, which causes these hallucinatory-delirium visions. Nevertheless, there are no clear indications that point to bodily illness or deterioration, besides her “feeble pulse” which I mentioned before. This scene represents a state of nescience, because in a sense, Mrs. Ramsay’s “crystallized moment” is quickly shattered, staging a particular intellectual crisis, while everything she has done had no impact in the bigger picture.

Although the light inside is a symbol of hope, it undeniably always creates a shadow somewhere. Therefore, darkness inevitably finds its way in the house, as the light in the children’s room shapes a terrifying shadow of the skull hanging on the wall. Mrs. Ramsay attempts to cover it with her shawl to comfort them, while making up a story to soothe the children, she starts to sound “nonsensical” and more “mechanic” (106). An interesting detail is that right as she leaves the room, she opens up the window and gets “a breath of the perfectly indifferent chill night air” (107). The image of the skull is directly followed by her breathing in the “indifferent” breeze, again implying a certain danger attached to this air.

When the characters return after the interlude of *Time Passes,* they are seen struggling to process the losses of Prue and Andrew, but most significantly of Mrs. Ramsay. They repeatedly mention how their world seems to have become “unreal” (138, 139, 155, 156) and how it has changed its shape. The characters struggle to find concreteness in their new lives, as “all shape is distorted” (172), and “the whole horizon seemed swept bare of objects to talk about” (143). The abstract concepts that the characters were discussing in the first chapter reappear, having become their new reality.

Strikingly, loss is often expressed not in human emotions, but through the perspective of inanimate structures: “for she could not sustain the enormous weight of sorrow, support these heavy draperies of grief” (143). Using the “draperies” as a guiding principle to express grief, highlights their struggle to articulate their sorrow. In addition, we see the “empty place holders” (Sherman 169) resurfacing. Whereas Mrs. Ramsay’s goal was to fill the house with life, after her death, the house seems infused with emptiness. Woolf not only spatializes the loss (“ her empty coffee cup” (138), “the empty place” (139), “that emptiness there”, “down in the hollow of one wave” (148)), she also personifies it, as Lily’s blank canvas has an “uncompromising white stare” (147). In Lily’s attempt to capture Mrs. Ramsay, she tries to give shape to a shadow image of a time when Mrs. Ramsay might have gone on living. In terms of nescience, Lily is quite literally trying “to square real with hypothetical events”, as she struggles to imagine an alternative world that does not, and cannot exist.

Although she struggles with painting Mrs. Ramsay, her presence seems to be all around, at least in a ghostly, or spectral shape:

"Mrs Ramsay seemed in consonance with this quiet house; this smoke, this fine early-morning air." (152)

Through a simile, Woolf seemingly extends the mother's presence in the world, as she is reincarnated in the structure of the house. In another instance, Lily notes that the absent presence of Mrs. Ramsay is indicated by "some secret sense":

"Some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking" (184)

Here, this "secret sense" hints at and again resembles the airs seen in *Time Passes,* but now, they seem to function as a memory of Mrs. Ramsay. This could be an example of what Outka calls "viral resurrection" (Pt. II ch. 5), as the miasmic elements of the pandemic could serve as another representational trope that counters the amorphous characteristics of the outbreak. The fascination with the dead returning reflected the extensive anguish surrounding the untimely deaths of so many people, whether in the war or due to the influenza (Pt. II ch. 5). The "viral" quality of these resurrections lies in the enervated, living-death state the virus produced in millions of survivors. These resurrections, we might say, inspire Lily's artistic attempts of capturing Mrs. Ramsay's shape. This idea also returns here:

For in the rough and tumble of daily life, with all those children about, all those visitors, one had constantly a sense of repetition - of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations. (185)

Woolf's language translates some of the representational hurdles that the flu (and illness in general) presented and figures out a method to show them anyway. This "echo" can of course symbolize many things, like the old-fashioned values of the patriarchy, fallen soldiers, the sound of the waves … but again it also constructs an

image that mimics the way a virus might move or is remembered: silently, characterless, vibrating.

The “remorseless gale” (153) still roams around the island, evoking images of resurrection that Lily tries to capture. The narrator frequently comments on Lily’s struggle to find the right vision to finish her painting:

> “She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything.” (180)

This “thing” she wants to portray remains unnamed. She is trying to create a shape that is “unreal” in the world, again thinking in a very abstract manner. She comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to depict Mrs. Ramsay as a hyper-realistic portrait, or to find a fixed shape in the face of the “the fleeting, the floating, the spectral” (90). The only way she is able to give shape to what has happened, is by acknowledging that things do *not* remain, as the shape of the world does not comply with one fixed representation, it demands an impressionistic approach, one that entails ambiguity, or as Lily calls it: “blurry” (194).

Conclusion

From this analysis of *To the Lighthouse*, it is possible to conclude that Virginia Woolf made frequent use of calamity forms to portray the emotional and epistemic impact of familial loss. These forms find their origin in a broader historical context, namely the historic overlap between the First World War and the Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1918-1919. The conspicuous literary silence surrounding this pandemic is a result of a longstanding struggle to represent illness, further complicated by the invisible nature of a virus. Drowned out by the war-inflicted destruction that consumed most of cultural attention, it takes a conscious effort to read for this pandemic's presence in modernist texts.

To the Lighthouse captures the atmosphere of the time, taking on the characterless and plotless qualities of the virus to shape an aesthetics of ineffability that defies ready comprehension. By decentring the characters from their privileged focus, in *Time Passes*, Woolf challenges the reader to see the world in a new light, albeit through the metaphorical eyes of a confused kitchen table. Offering moments of infection, contagion and viral resurrection, the presented narrator explores multiple positions and subjectivities of previously unacknowledged and traditionally conceived others, like the nonhuman. Woolf juxtaposes presence with absence, moving the reader from the known to the unknown, and from the intelligible to the obscure, creating an affective dimension steeped in anxiety and uncertainty, or what Nersessian (2013) calls "nescience". The Ramsays embody the post-war state of an entire continent as they return to their vacation house shaken, drained and apprehensive.

Employing Nersessian's theory of the calamity form as a framework to dissect other cultural movements offers an excellent opportunity to re-imagine a world that is drastically changing its shape. With the 1918-1919 Spanish Influenza outbreak as an important benchmark for our own struggle to suppress coronavirus, the emergence of COVID-19 has reawakened interest in the forgotten pandemic. Of course, this leaves me wondering: How will we detain this calamity in our cultural memory? What remnants of it will persist a century from now, in our own literary record?

Bibliography

Banfield, Ann. *Describing the Unobserved and Other Essays : Unspeakable Sentences after Unspeakable Sentences*. Edited by Sylvie Patron, Newcastle Upon Tyne Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.

---. “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time.” *Poetics Today*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2003, pp. 471–516, 10.1215/03335372-24-3-471. Accessed 15 Mar. 2020.

Belling, Catherine. “Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918.” *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2009, pp. 55–81, 10.1353/lm.0.0046. Accessed 19 Feb. 2021.

Caracciolo, Marco. “Leaping into Space: The Two Aesthetics of to the Lighthouse.” *Poetics Today*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1 June 2010, pp. 251–284, read.dukeupress.edu/poetics-today/article/31/2/251/21022/Leaping-into-Space-The-Two-Aesthetics-of-To-the?casa_token=ZeB0rx24EvQAAAAA:lD8_g4H5RgugPkXako4wrZx4cTfDhgNECKqbw5S3LAtkPjsmAdnlvvqx7uPIP85M61Buvl0C, 10.1215/03335372-2009-020. Accessed 20 May 2021.

Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. London ; New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Coates, Kimberly Engdahl. “Phantoms, Fancy (And) Symptoms: Virginia Woolf and the Art of Being Ill.” *Woolf Studies Annual*, vol. 18, 2012, pp. 1–28, www.jstor.org/stable/24906895?seq=1. Accessed 18 Feb. 2021.

Doyle, Laura. "'These Emotions of the Body': Intercorporeal Narrative in to the Lighthouse." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1994, p. 42, 10.2307/441550. Accessed 31 Aug. 2020.

Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land and Other Writings*. 1922. New York, The Modern Library, 2002.

Emery, Mary Lou. "'ROBBED of MEANING': THE WORK at the CENTER of 'to the LIGHTHOUSE.'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1992, pp. 217–234, www.jstor.org/stable/26284324?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents. Accessed 17 May 2021.

Goldman, Jane, and Virginia Woolf. *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008.

Hovanec, Caroline. "Of Bodies, Families, and Communities: Refiguring the 1918 Influenza Pandemic." *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2011, pp. 161–181, 10.1353/lm.2011.0314. Accessed 3 Nov. 2020.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, Ill. University Of Chicago Press [C, 1980.

Laurence, Ondek Patricia. *The Reading of Silence : Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001.

Nersessian, Anahid. *The Calamity Form : On Poetry and Social Life*. Chicago, University Of Chicago Press, 2020.

---. "Two Gardens: An Experiment in Calamity Form." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 3, 1 Jan. 2013, pp. 307–329, www.deepdyve.com/lp/duke-university-press/two-gardens-an-experiment-in-calamity-form-aJYyn4aFUI, 10.1215/00267929-2153482. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.

Outka, Elizabeth. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. *Columbia University Press*, Kobo ed., Columbia University Press, 1 Oct. 2019, cup.columbia.edu/book/viral-modernism/9780231185752. Accessed 25 Feb. 2021.

Parkes, Graham. "Imagining Reality in *to the Lighthouse.*" *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1982, pp. 33–44, 10.1353/phl.1982.0028. Accessed 13 Feb. 2020.

Pett, Sarah. "Rash Reading: Rethinking Virginia Woolf's on Being Ill." *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2019, pp. 26–66, 10.1353/lm.2019.0001. Accessed 21 Feb. 2021.

Rubenstein, Roberta. "'I Meant Nothing by the Lighthouse': Virginia Woolf's Poetics of Negation." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2008, pp. 36–53, www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25167568.pdf?casa_token=YxKdvacELMMAAAAA:YLyoOsI8aeq48DR5PwPn7LlMquK6T3bsPBepWj9niuxPGVasJKG_YkoBRBHrkVxXU_8b1o4IB7zET55NKpRPrd6kgMUJZPb-KXLqsfWkSGdqnsq1DiM. Accessed 20 May 2021.

Sherman, David. "A Plot Unraveling into Ethics: Woolf, Levinas, and 'Time Passes.'" *Woolf Studies Annual*, vol. 13, no. , 2007, pp. 159–179, www.jstor.org/stable/24907094?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents. Accessed 17 May 2021.

Sherry, Vincent B. *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*. Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Toth, Naomi. "Disturbing Epiphany: Rereading Virginia Woolf's 'Moments of Being.'" *Études Britanniques Contemporaines. Revue de La Société D'études*

Anglaises Contemporaines, no. 46, 3 June 2014, journals.openedition.org/ebc/1182, 10.4000/ebc.1182. Accessed 17 May 2021.

Westling, Louise. “Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World.” *New Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1999, pp. 855–875, www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20057575.pdf?casa_token=6XOhQnCy3YYAAAAA:6j4eyUEaWhH-LvKvOBpe1yao9XT1tdbWSz9X9IkVWS2lUIjHLrbRVSC1e3Tq2Tr11te-9ZdfeuCCRQZjZs8nMRjojBYux3hq_ifKUCgd-S-IISDAock. Accessed 17 May 2021.

Woolf, Virginia, 1982 To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft, transcribed and edited by Susan Dick (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).

---. *Moments of Being*. Edited by Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd ed., New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

---. “On Being Ill,” *New Criterion,* January 1926; reprinted in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf,* vol. 4: 1925-1928, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York:Harvest/Harcourt, 1994).

---. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, Vol. 2, New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.

---. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 1920-1924*. *Google Books*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, books.google.be/books/about/The_Diary_of_Virginia_Woolf_1920_1924.html?id=ZCjuAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y. Accessed 25 Feb. 2021.

---. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 1925-1930.* Edited by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie. Vol. 3. 5 vols. New York: Harcourt, 1980.1977-1984.

---. *To the Lighthouse*. 1927. Alma Books Ltd, Oct. 2017.

---. *Two Blocks Joined by a Corridor*, lithub.com/how-virginia-woolf-taught-me-to-mourn/. Accessed 10 Apr. 2021.