2 Floating Air—Solid Furniture

Vibrant Spaces in Virginia Woolf's "Time Passes"

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Perhaps counter-intuitively, coming to terms with the fact that we are now living in the geological era of the Anthropocene has prompted scholars from a wide range of fields to turn to literature. Literature is in recent post-anthropocentric theory regarded as a privileged medium for imagining more-than-human realities.¹ In "System and Things" (2012), Jane Bennett for instance notes that "[poetry] can help us feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs" (232). Literature is here seen as having the potential to bracket our human perspective while offering the nonhuman its own voice. An even more radical perspective can be found in object-oriented philosophy, whereby literature shows that all relations are appearances; as Timothy Morton notes in "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry" (2012): "for OOO what is called 'matter' is simply matter for ... *an aesthetic phenomenon*" (217). Overall, literature is highlighted in post-anthropocentric theory as the place where we humans may learn to have "a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body, ... to induce an attentiveness to things and their affects" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* xiv).

While we have now, as the human species, engraved our history into the Earth, this geological turn has yet to be inscribed into narratology, the field of study that most prominently deals not only with literature but with narrative as the form which enables us to construct ourselves as a species as narrative beings. Since the narrative turn it has been acknowledged that narrative is not only a tool for thinking and writing fiction but a tool integral to the ways in which we live and understand ourselves as humans.² With the popularity of "Anthropocene" as a term, it has become obvious that we need to displace the human from the center of reality at the exact moment in history when humans inevitably have dominated the Earth. When confronted with the post-anthropocentric perspective of the Anthropocene, our current understanding of narrative is lacking in explanatory power. In narratology there has been a strong tendency toward temporality and subjectivity, and this tendency contains a latent anthropocentrism as it does not sufficiently acknowledge nonhuman forces. Instead, it reproduces the very tale that has

dominated Western thought, sustaining the binaries of subject/object and life/matter.

In this essay, I combine the post-anthropocentric interest in literature with a new understanding of narrative in order to disrupt our habitual humanization of reality in literature. I want to understand exactly *how* literature presents Bennett's attentiveness to things, which she calls "thing-power." What I propose is that Bennett's philosophical attentiveness toward nonhuman forces requires an equally attentive literary reading of *how* nonhuman forces are represented in literature. An attentive literary reading requires a renewed understanding of the nonhuman and of the surrounding narrative world where the nonhuman is not only read as a setting or an object for characters in novels but could be a narrative "event" in its own right. I propose to do this through a close reading of descriptive details, revising the anthropocentric understanding of narrative by paying attention to punctuation and to the way objects and spaces are represented. This is something that has not yet been fully addressed by post-anthropocentric scholars such as Bennett, because of their main philosophical interests in literature, leading them to leave out formal questions.

To address these questions, I want to reopen the discussion of narration and description in narratology to arrive at a concept of narrative that can include nonhuman forces. My aim is a re-evaluation of narrative in the light of the Anthropocene; I will exemplify this through the modernist novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf, which indeed pushes back the boundaries of narrative in the novel's second part, "Time Passes." Here Woolf presents a narration of space, where characters and plot have been bracketed in favor of a vibrant space. Events take place within the summerhouse emptied of characters, engendered by the encounter between moving air and domestic things such as furniture. Through anthropomorphism, paratactic sentences and the distinctive use of brackets, commas, and semicolons Woolf depicts movement on a spatial level that does not focus on "who" is acting, but on the material, relational action of the encounter.

The following essay will consist of three steps: firstly, a brief theoretical discussion of narrative theory in light of post-anthropocentric thinking and secondly, a close reading of a short passage from "Time Passes," which through formal analysis shows how space can be more than static setting, how it too can be narrated and not simply described. Thirdly, based on a revision of the otherwise subject-centric notion of anthropomorphism, the intertwining of form and content necessitates an analytic focus on what kind of materiality the verbally described space consists of, that is, an encounter between floating air and solid furniture.

Post-Anthropocentric Narratology

In *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014), Maurizia Boscagli describes the turn to post-anthropocentric theories as a way to

“present versions of the material as unruly: they refuse to play by the rules that define materiality as passive matter. Their sense of a world in which matter is in flux, offering promising new versions of subject-object entanglements” (3). Broadly speaking, these theories strive to move beyond the dichotomy of an active vital subject and a passive or inert object and try to give voice to more-than-human realities. In her influential *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Bennett introduces the concept of “thing power,” which “gestures towards the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (xvi). The question that these theories all struggle with is, as Bennett notes, “how to describe without thereby erasing the independence of things?” (xiii). Here Bennett, Boscagli, and Morton, to name just a few scholars, all turn to literature. They find in literature the strange ability to “evoke the background *as* background—to drag it into the foreground would dissolve it—it must resort to oblique rhetorical strategies” (*Ecology without Nature* 45), as Morton notes. What both Morton and Bennett are after is the way literature organizes a space beyond our human habitualization of reality, where the more-than-human, vital background, or environment can emerge in ways that are not entirely dominated by an anthropocentric perspective.

More-than-human realities, such as the surrounding environment, have always played only a minor role in narrative theory. The two most distinct ways of encountering the more-than-human reality in literature are through objects and space, even when these are made by humans as in the case of furniture or buildings. Space and objects are, as Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu note in *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (2016), “a relatively neglected dimension of narrative” (16). They argue that one reason why space has been an especially neglected topic is “the wide range of phenomena that can be considered spatial: narrative space extends from the individual object described in a narrative to the cosmic order in which the story takes place” (23). Consequently, they propose five basic levels of narrative space: “a) Spatial frames, b) Setting, c) Story Space, d) Storyworld, e) Narrative universe” (24–25). Though usefully addressing the concept of space in the narrative, this geographical interest only describes spaces in connection with characters and plot. They thus bracket the first part of the list of neglected topics—that of “individual object described”—in favor of an anthropocentric conception of narrative space. I will argue that it is indeed in descriptions of objects and spaces that Bennett’s thing power can be found in novels but only if we revise our understanding of description and narration and allow space and objects to create events. That involves focusing on passages in which space plays an active role, as unruly materiality and not as passive matter or setting.

As Ruth Ronen notes, there is a long tradition in narratology (from Gérard Genette to Ryan) that defines narrative by opposing it to description:

“Narrative is positioned here as direct opposite to description, as everything which description is not” (276). In “Toward a Definition of Narrative” (2007), Ryan defines the two text types as “a changing world for narrative, a static one for description” (27). Narrative is typically understood as a representation of an event or of a sequence of events that are ordered according to chronology, causality, and an experiencing subject. In narrative, the focus is on an acting subject: the events must affect human characters and must be ordered through chronological markers. Space and nonhuman objects are not included as part of this definition of narrative. They belong to the static world of description. There is a latent anthropocentrism in the way that narrative always takes precedence over the description in narrative theory: as the nonhuman mostly figures in what is typically understood as description, it is always subservient to the human characters, as a series of props or a setting. Likewise, in the theory of description, the nonhuman is always only seen in relation to an acting subject and thus never as an active force or event in itself. Even Philippe Hamon, who tried to restore the role of description in narratology in a seminal issue of *Yale French Studies* (1981), assimilates description into narration and continues the anthropocentric bracketing of nonhuman forces. Hamon argues for the importance of description, resisting Barthes’s relegation of descriptive details to a mere *effet de réel*. For Hamon, description either serves to show features of the characters through the setting or helps the reader interpret or predict the plot of the story. It is something to be integrated into the narrative, reflecting a normative assumption that the reader should not be burdened with excessive information. The described nonhuman things and spaces are thus not important in themselves, only in reference to a narrative whole with the character as point of reference. He ensures this by showing how characters set descriptions in motion, either in the way they view the described object, how they talk about it, or how they act with it, as his descriptive formula shows:

$C + F + IT (V + PEq / PEf)$ (“What is a description” 160)

This means that a description consists of a character (C), a form of action (F), the setting with its introductory theme of the description (IT). The form of action can be either: looking at/speaking with/acting with the setting, which can be either a milieu/landscape/collection of objects, which then triggers a series of sub-themes. The latter is described between parentheses through a vocabulary (V), which is in a metonymic relation to the setting. The sub-themes can be expanded by a predicative (PE) that can either be qualitative (q) or functional (f).³ Despite the fact that Hamon with this formula includes the nonhuman—the “IT” element—the nonhuman is only assessed in relation to an action carried out by a character. In effect, the nonhuman (whether it is space, objects, or landscapes) is here always subjected to the human.

The problem with narratology from a post-anthropocentric perspective is that it only allows human subjects to perform actions. The nonhuman is only seen as a static setting, where objects are not allowed to be the active part that affects and transforms the subject. What we need is an understanding of nonhuman spaces and objects that allows us to see these as an active part, so that they, just like characters, can perform and create events without any characters there to initiate them. As Ronan aptly stresses, although only in passing: “a landscape can be described as an active agent” (276).

“Time Passes”—Narrated Space

Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* does indeed depict space as an active agent. The novel is divided into three parts, where the middle section, “Time Passes,” depicts the passing of ten years from the nonhuman perspective of a house with no characters present.⁴ This middle part is contrasted by the first and third parts of the novel which are told through different characters’ inner experiences of small everyday events. By so doing, Woolf is pushing the boundaries between temporal narration and spatial description to the extreme, but she is also placing her novel in a gap between two literary traditions: the descriptive realism of the Edwardians and the fragmented subjective “closer-to-life” narrative of Georgian Modernism.⁵ Whereas the first part, “The Window,” and the third part, “The Lighthouse,” can be characterized as typical modernist narratives, what happens narratively in “Time Passes” is something altogether different. Reacting against the normative claims laid upon the novel by the previous generation of Edwardian writers, such as Arnold Bennett, yet dissatisfied with the way other modernist writers, such as James Joyce, opened new paths for the novel, Woolf developed her own distinct form of the novel that seems to anticipate many of the ideas of post-anthropocentric thinking. Here the Edwardian descriptive realism is combined with the flux of modernity, not, however, the flux of a human consciousness, but a flux intrinsic to space. Combining strategies more typical of poetry and drama, Woolf created a modernist novel that—contrary to Joyce’s—sought to evoke not only the consciousness of subjects, but also “the world seen without a self,” as Bernard, one of the characters from *The Waves*, puts it. In the essay “Modern Fiction” (1925), Woolf even calls this an “attempt to come closer to life” (161).

A well-known reading of this novel can be found in Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946), which laid the foundations for how we understand Woolf as a modernist writer today. What distinguishes Woolf (along with James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Mann) is their departure from and disintegration of realistic representation of reality, their attention fixed instead on the internal experiences of small-scale, everyday events within a fragmented timeline. Auerbach emphasizes the one-day structure of their

novels and their subjective indeterminacy vis-à-vis an objective reality. All this holds true in regard to the first and third parts of *To the Lighthouse*, and to Woolf's other novels such as *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *Between the Acts* (1941). But what happens in "Time Passes" and also in *The Waves* (1931) departs a great deal from this definition. In his analysis of the novel, Auerbach does not give much thought to "Time Passes," and only in passing does he refer to it as a symbol of what happens to Mrs. Ramsay. This view is quite typical in the reception of the novel. Most critics have remarked upon the temporal regime of "Time Passes," ignoring its distinctive depiction of space. If this spatial descriptive quality is noted, especially by early critics, it is as ornamental and superfluous, thus repeating the typical narratological view on the spatial description.⁶

"Time Passes" is indeed an excellent example of the way narration and description are intertwined as space emerges as an event. It is not just time passing but space happening. I argue for a reading of modernist fiction in the opposite direction of Auerbach's subjective reading and agree with Boscagli, who stresses that modernist aesthetics highlights "the very traffic between the subject and her 'outside', between the human and the nonhuman" (13). But unlike Boscagli, I will analyze *how* this traffic is formally realized by Woolf's use of punctuation, brackets, semicolons, and commas, and through the use of anthropomorphic metaphors and similes.

In "Time Passes," Woolf reverses the relationship between what a narrative text conventionally consists of and what is normally placed in brackets. The main text does not depict the actions of characters, but the actions of the spatial setting. Here it is the characters and their lives that are depicted literally in brackets; indeed, the result is the very opposite of Hamon's formula, where the description of the setting was placed within brackets. Woolf not only turns this formula upside down, as she front-loads the setting in the equation, she also turns the description of space into narration and thus inscribes a change into the otherwise static space of Hamon's description. But even more surprising in regard to Hamon's formula is the fact that Woolf's narration of plot—something not only outside of the formula, but the very thing that narratologists distinguish description from—is literally placed inside the bracket and so turned into a subtheme, assigning space the main part in the equation. Woolf is here reversing the relationship between narration and description, space and characters.

The second square bracket in "Time Passes" is perhaps the most famous line in the novel. It tells the reader about the death of the main character, Mrs. Ramsay, rather indirectly: "[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.]" (140). Woolf thus kills off her main character, not only in a bracket, but in a subordinate clause in a bracket. The suddenness of Mrs. Ramsay's

death stands in stark contrast to the continuity described in the chapter's opening line: "But what after all is one night? A short space, especially when the darkness dims so soon, and so soon a bird sings, a cock crows, or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf in the hollow of the wave" (139). Continuity is here not simply a temporal aspect of "time passing" as many critics have suggested: the description of time passing has morphed into a spatial narration, with the accumulative commas narrating and not merely listing things that take place.⁷ Active verbs are one of the ways in which Woolf narrates and not simply describes space. This narration of space begins with "darkness dims," moving on to "a bird sings, a cock crows, a faint green quickens;" all things not simply listed but described as events, as things that actively happen; in short, each a small narrative in itself, depicting a vibrant spatial setting. In *Event and Eventfulness* (2011) Peter Hühn distinguishes between two kinds of events: event I and event II, where "event I is present for every change of state explicitly or implicitly represented in a text. A change of state qualifies as a type II event if it is accredited—in an interpretive, context-dependent decision—with certain features such as relevance, unexpectedness, and unusualness" (2). According to this definition, these small events are of the first type and contrasted with the suddenness of the life-changing event of Mrs. Ramsay's death. A bracketing of narration is happening on one level (the bracketing of Mrs. Ramsay's death) but is substituted on another level with a different textual regime that dismantles the relationship between spatial description and temporal narration. By bracketing the conventionally recognizable events while foregrounding nonhuman happenings that we would not normally consider events, Woolf presents a spatial narration.

Without conventional characters in "Time Passes," all that happens happens on a nonhuman level. And here, events take place in a flowing movement from a material perspective. Bennett's attentiveness to things is here shown through discrete shifts in punctuation, which require an equal attentiveness, if they aren't to merely be dismissed as a static description of a setting. One way of noticing what happens with space without any character present, apart from Woolf's use of brackets, is to look at how she uses flowing punctuation, that is, semicolons and commas. Woolf uses a paratactic way of building sentences to spatialize language and present a narration of space with its own distinct rhythm.⁸ Instead of the otherwise chronological linearity of a standard narrative, consisting of a chain of actions initiated by characters in a temporal flow, told with hypotactic sentences that depict the cause and effect of a given action, the paratactic sentence lets many things happen at once in space without any hierarchical levelling. The following passage depicts air moving around the summerhouse after the characters have left:

And so, nosing, rubbing, they [the little airs] went to the window on the staircase, to the servant's bedrooms, to the boxes in the attics; descending, blanched the apples on the dining-room table, fumbled the petals

of roses, tried the picture on the easel, brushed the mat and blew a little sand along the floor. At length, desisting, all ceased together, gathered together, all sighed together; all together gave off an aimless air of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing; and slammed to.

(138–39)

The passage is divided in two by a period, but before and after Woolf uses a comma and a semicolon to show the movement of “the little airs” (138) that nose and rub around the house. Characteristic of the first part of the passage is the use of verbs, prepositions, and nouns, though the nouns are not subjects in the sentence but are part of a prepositional phrase. Woolf uses paratactic sentences with commas and semicolons to create a sense of movement, accentuating location and action instead of a character’s identity. The first commas between “nosing, rubbing, they went” stress that an action is taking place. But the airs do not merely move around the house; a further sensuous dimension is added by multiplying the verbs that depict movement, and adding them one after another, so that the connotations of one verb metonymically affect the following. Next, Woolf adds two prepositional sentences after depicting where they went: “on the staircase, to the servant’s bedroom, to the boxes in the attics.” In this way, the verbs are grouped together at one end of the passage and the prepositions at the other end, not only lending a sensuous dimension to the movement, but at the same time positioning the movement concretely in the house. A change then occurs, and this next new movement is indicated by a semicolon: “the attics; descending.” The semicolon underlines a short pause; a new movement is taking place. A shift happens on the diegetic level, as the airs change their direction (from nosing around they now descend the stairs), but the shift can also be traced on a formal level, in the sentences after the semicolon, where the prepositional sentences are replaced by verbs and direct objects, though still with no subjects: “blanched the apples on the dining-room table, fumbled the petals of roses, tried the picture on the easel, brushed the mat.”

With this distinctive use of punctuation, it becomes possible for Woolf to depict what happens in a house without a human character in it. This use of punctuation allows Woolf to depict movement on a spatial level that does not focus on “who” is acting, but on the action itself and how it affects a space. This is similar to the textual phenomenon that Ann Banfield discusses in “Describing the Unobserved: Events Grouped Around an Empty Center” (1987). She argues that Woolf’s specific use of language offers a possibility to experience a view of the world without focusing on who is perceiving. Arguing that Woolf draws inspiration from modern science and technology (particularly photography), Banfield shows how certain passages in *The Waves* and in “Time Passes” use a language that strives to grasp “the appearance of things *when* no one was present” (265) through a way of demonstratively referring where the here and now of the text no longer only

“means the place and time which *I* occupy, as *my* spatio-temporal perspective” (271).

Meanwhile, there are also narrative chronological markers which infuse the text with a new rhythm. The two phrases opening the passage and starting the next sentence after the dot—“And so ... At length”—stress that what has happened so far in the passage is not a punctual event but a continual movement which changes the very rhythm of the text. When the pace changes in the second part of the passage, the change is anticipated by the use of a semicolon. Here a grammatical subject is introduced: the airs are now fused with the rooms in which they “nosed around” in the first part of the passage, and from that fusion a plural subject emerges: “all ceased together, gathered together, all sighed together; all together gave off.” What has happened is a relational gathering of space, underlined by the repetition of “together” and “all.” This gathering continues the flowing movement from the first part of the passage. But after the third “together” something happens, anticipating the unexpected type II event that ends this passage: a door slamming to. This very material gesture is transformed into an event II by the way it transforms the surrounding space through unexpectedness.

Woolf employs yet another formal element in narrating a nonhuman space: dialogue. Through her repetitive use of the semicolon in the last part of the passage, she stages a non-verbal dialogue between the gathering of airs and the rooms and the door. They seem to speak to each other, “all gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing; and slammed to.” Here, with the use of the semicolon, Woolf creates a thing-dialogue. What she depicts is a spatial narrative event that changes the situation.

Vibrant Things—How to Anthropomorphize

It is not just through her use of punctuation, active verbs, and temporal markers that Woolf creates a narration of space in “Time Passes,” it is also through her use of anthropomorphic metaphors and similes that the chapter takes on narrative qualities. Once the characters have gone to sleep in the first chapter of this part, different material things and natural phenomena take over the role of agents. For instance, the little airs that move around the house are anthropomorphized in such a way that they become the concrete deictic center for the reader to follow throughout the part.⁹

Recent post-anthropocentric thinking has advanced a revised understanding of anthropomorphism; this position has been best expressed by Bennett, who claims that “we need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (*Vibrant Matter* xvi). This idea is backed up by Serenella Iovino, who argues “in favor of a ‘strategic anthropomorphism,’” which liberates “things from their silence” (82). Anthropomorphism, then, can be a device used to set things free. To

anthropomorphize is not purely a mirroring of human forms in things. Timothy Morton takes this argument one step further in “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry” (2012), saying that

It is impossible for me to peel myself away from the totality of my phenomenological being. Just as I fail to avoid anthropomorphizing everything, so all entities whatsoever constantly translate other objects into their own terms. My back maps out small backmorphic slice of this tree that I am leaning on. The strings of the wind harp stringmorphize the wind. ... Moreover if everything is itselfpomorphizing everything else, anthropomorphism is not as big a deal as some ecological criticism thinks. (207)

For Morton, everything in the world translates itself onto everything else. In the relation it is not just humans who shape things, but every object is influencing and translating every other object it comes into contact with. Every relation is a translation whether or not humans are part of it.¹⁰ To acknowledge anthropomorphism as a post-anthropocentric device is to show our connection with the nonhuman reality and to emphasize the agentic powers in it.

“Time Passes” is an excellent example of how the narrative form of the novel can be used to narrate the connections between the human and nonhuman through anthropomorphism. It is indeed by staging an encounter between the natural nonhuman phenomenon of air and the humanly crafted rooms and furniture that a narrative emerges out of what at first hand seems like a static description of an empty summerhouse. Here Woolf uses different kinds of anthropomorphic metaphors and similes to create a living space without any characters there to initiate the action—what happens happens on a material level as everything “itselfpomorphizes” everything else. The materiality of one thing rubs itself onto the materiality of another, but human traits are also attributed to things. Woolf uses anthropomorphic metaphors in order to narrate the material movements of things and to ascribe a sensuous aspect to space without any character sensing it:

When darkness fell, the stroke of the Lighthouse, which had laid itself with such authority upon the carpet in the darkness, tracing its pattern, came now in the softer light of spring mixed with the moonlight gliding gently as if it laid its caress and lingered stealthily and looked and came lovingly again. But in the very lull of this loving caress, as the long stroke leant upon the bed, the rock was rent asunder; another fold of the shawl loosened; there it hung, and swayed.

(144–45)

The light from the lighthouse mixed with the moonlight is here anthropomorphized, “as if it laid its caress and lingered stealthily and looked,” but

this anthropomorphic metaphor is just one part of the different relations that affect each other. What Woolf depicts here seems to equally include Morton's idea of itselfpomorphism. The anthropomorphic caress thus gets its material texture from the carpet as the carpet carpetmorphizes the light from the lighthouse, which the light has laid itself upon in the previous sentence. The textual effect of the carpet, its solidity, is transferred onto the way the light moves as it "[glides] gently." This is not "the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought" (*Vibrant Matter* xvi), as Jane Bennett notes, but a way of letting space and things appear through poetic language as relations that are being created and affect each other.

The poetic quality of this passage is underlined by alliterations, which again emphasize a translation of relationality on a formal level as well as on the level of content. In this passage, the alliterations are dominated by the letter "l," which on a content level originates from the thing, that is, the lighthouse. The "l" is repeated in the following verbs and adjectives describing the light from the lighthouse thus: "laid, lingered and looked and came lovingly, in the very lull of this loving caress, long stroke leant and the shawl loosened." The "l-thing," the lighthouse, is not dead matter to which life is ascribed through human attributes; its very thingness rubs off, word for word. The lighthouse is not a symbol—Woolf herself stressed in a letter to Roger Fry: "I mean *nothing* by the lighthouse" (13 September 1926) ("Introduction *To the Lighthouse*" xxi)—it is what it does, and what it does is material in both content and form. The formal alliterations also add an auditory aspect to the visuality of light on the level of content. By making use of anthropomorphism, Woolf employs a human vocabulary to depict that which itself is not human.

But equally important, when this part is read in a post-anthropocentric framework, is Woolf's choice of materials, which sets her apart from other Modernists, such as T.S. Eliot, T. E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound. What characterizes "Time Passes" on a material level is air. Choosing this material as her main "agent" in the part of the novel makes it possible for Woolf to narrate space through discrete relations between the floating air and solid furniture. It is exactly opposite to the materiality by Hulme, whose favorite texture was the "dry hardness" of steel, which, according to Bonnie Kime Scott in *In the Hollow of the Wave* (2012), "suggests that for him the best organism is a dead, or at least a desiccated, one" (15). Where steel is a refined and industrial product and thus an example of human mastery, air is the atmospheric element surrounding the Earth as well as the bodily breathable condition for human life, as Steven Connor suggests in his study *The Matter of Air* (2010). The two materials articulate two different attitudes to nature in Modernism: one seeks to control and refine nature, the other accentuates the interconnectedness of human and nature.

The element of air is an element of discreteness and invisibility, which is underlined in "Time Passes" by the abundant use of negations, such as stillness, silence, and the repetitive use of "nothing." Woolf makes it appear

as if “nothing” happens, while a number of things are happening on a different level of events. Contrary to the brackets containing extra-ordinary events in the life and death of the characters, Woolf adds a miniature level of events taking place within the house emptied of characters, engendered by the encounter between nature and the domestic things. That the role of air in “Time Passes” is significant is something that many critics agree on, but rather along the lines of Hamon’s understanding of description: as a way to show features of the characters through the setting or as a way for the reader to interpret or predict the plot of the story. These critics all end up repeating the narratological omission of nonhuman reality with no regard to the materiality of the things being described. Air has been read by Paul Sheehan as a symbol of the nothingness felt by the human characters during the war, or by Eric Auerbach as “namenlosen Geister” (494) depicting the ghost of Mrs. Ramsay, or “The Greek chorus” (xxxvi) as Hermione Lee suggests. These different interpretations propose a reading of air as either nothingness (Sheehan) or as spirituality (Auerbach, Lee). In each case, air is dematerialized and considered as a symbol for a human character. This is a typical reading of air according to Steven Connor. He notes that “air is unique among the elements in having this affinity with nothingness, in signifying the being of non-being, the matter of the immaterial. ... Air is the thing that is nothing, the unbeing that is” (31).

In “Time Passes” the airs are not nothing, even if they appear just after Woolf notes that nothing seems to happen:

Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round the window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and a basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers.

(137)

Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or in the dining-room or on the staircase. Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing-room, questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall?

(138)

The “certain airs” and the “darkness” moving around the house are material airs. They signify the “being of nonbeing.” The two passages follow the point of view of the airs, and their movements are depicted with spatial directional verbs: “creeping, stole round, swallowed up, crept round, entered.” It is through space that the airs gain materiality, as with the

anthropomorphic translation of light and carpet. In the encounter between the solidity of the furniture and the floating of the airs—as the airs touch the solid furniture “the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers”—things are made dynamic, and air is made visible. In this gathering of nature and domesticity, a dynamic space emerges, where “nothing” is turned into something and where a materiality takes shape, whose agentic power lies in the relationality of things material and immaterial.

Conclusion

In “Time Passes,” more-than-human reality emerges as vibrant in the narrative form of the novel. Through the reading of “Time Passes” a new aspect of the novel has emerged—countering the conventional understanding of the novel as the form which engages human relations, as also apparent in narrative theory. My reading shows that the novel is also capable of presenting relations and interactions between nonhuman entities. Here the narrative, temporal structure of the novel is used to represent an environment that is unfolding and evolving. Turning the stillness of an empty house into a narration of space proves that narrative can not only be used to enforce an anthropocentric worldview but indeed has the potential to present a vibrant nonhuman environment. Understood in this way, narrative may still be the best device to understand the human species in its current predicament: in the era of the Anthropocene, narrative can help us imagine our species in a non-hierarchical connection with the nonhuman reality. This prompts a revision of preconceived subject-centric notions of narrative; it also requires that we exchange extra-ordinary human events and characters with events happening on a smaller, nonhuman scale. In the same line of thought, but on a formal level, this also means that we should include punctuation in the analysis of narration. The non-verbal signs allow for a depiction of movement on a spatial level without focusing on “who” is acting. Woolf’s use of paratactic sentences spatializes language in a way that lets many things happen at once with no hierarchical leveling, enabling things to relate to one another without a character perceiving or using them: instead, each thing itself pomorphizes, that is, translates itself and connects itself to every other thing. Narrative, understood in a post-anthropocentric framework, gives voice to a vibrant materiality and foregrounds what is normally placed in the background in our human-scale reality.

A post-anthropocentric approach to narrative thus opens for a reengagement with novels whose spatial setting is more than just a backdrop for the story. Examples of such narratives can, apart from Woolf’s other works such as *The Waves* (1931) and her own contemporaries such as Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) for instance be found in French modern and postmodern narratives. This would mean to focus a reading of for instance Nathalie Sarraute’s *Tropismes* (1939) not on the Parisian inhabitants and their intersubjective struggles, but on a narrative of the novel’s

objects and rooms. In a postmodern French context, *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978) by Georges Perec, with its excessive descriptions of an apartment building and its rooms, could be read as placing the materiality of things at the very center of the narrative. Through such readings a reality appears which goes beyond the human subjects that inhabit the room and use the objects therein contained; indeed, spaces and objects are shown as active forces affecting and shaping the lives of the human characters.

Notes

- 1 I use the term post-anthropocentric theory as an umbrella term for the diverse range of theories (such as Object-Oriented Ontology, New Materialism etc.) criticizing anthropocentrism and engaged in a rethinking of the relationship between subject-object, matter-life, human-nonhuman.
- 2 For a discussion of the narrative turn see Martin Kreiswirth's "Narrative Turn in the Humanities" (2005).
- 3 To elaborate on the predicative subtheme Hamon gives the example of a fan which can be described *functional*, that is, "(it circulates air, should be silent etc.) and *qualitative* (it should be stable, attractive, compact etc.)" (175).
- 4 The motive of an empty house can also be found in Woolf's short story "A Haunted House" (1921), a ghost story about a couple haunting a house at night. Unlike the house in "Time Passes," which invokes the spatial characteristics of the surroundings, the house in "A Haunted House" invokes a human-centered temporal plot. The house serves as a transit point for the past and present owners, thus repeating a more typical usage of space as setting for a human-centered plot.
- 5 For a discussion of the novels critical heritage see Jean Mills: "*To the Lighthouse: The Critical Heritage*" (2015)
- 6 See for instance Majumdar and McLaurin's *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (1975).
- 7 See for instance Paul Sheehan (2015) or Michael Levenson (2015).
- 8 In *Modernism: Keywords* (Cuddy Keane et al. 2014), rhythm is described as a style in modernism which brings together human and nonhuman realities: "in its most general and wide-ranging modernist usage, rhythm stood for harmony not only between sounds in a line of verse, or formal elements in a poem, or individuals in a group but between the human body and the natural world" (206).
- 9 Deictic center refers to the physical reference point of the text, the "embodied space-time position" ("Narrator" 17).
- 10 For OOO this relationality of translation means more radically that "OOO is saying that behind every flow, behind every stasis, there is an object that cannot be reduced to anything whatsoever" (Morton 208). Behind the relation there is always a withdrawn object that can never be accessed.

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