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The body under erasure : *To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes", section 3

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In "Time Passes", the second part of *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf deliberately attempted to obliterate human characters, and the main agents are the natural elements. Section 3 for instance is devoted to cosmic disruption and death, but, implicitly, it is the body of the dead mother which is being assaulted throughout. In fact, the lack of apparent emotion in the narrating voice may be a cathartic reenacting of that moment when young Virginia realized in horror that she felt like laughing in front of the dead body of Julia Stephen.

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. Night, however, succeeds to night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers. They leng- then ; they darken. Some of them hold aloft clear plates of brightness. The autumn trees, ravaged as they are, take on the flash of tattered flags kindling in the gloom of cool cathedral caves where gold letters on marble pages describe death in battle and how bones bleach and burn far away in Indian sands. The autumn trees gleam in the yellow moonlight, in the light of harvest moons, the light which mellows the energy of labour, and smooths the stubble, and brings the wave lapping blue to the shore. It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect ; the wave falling ; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always. But alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain ; it does not please him ; he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or what we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth. For our penitence deserves a glimpse only ; our toil respite only.

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. Also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself, and should any sleeper fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul. The hand dwindles in his hand ; the voice bellows in his ear. 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. [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.]

Virginia Woolf. *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Sandra Kemp. London/New York : Routledge, 1996 [1994], pp. 130-131

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“Time Passes,” the second part of *To the Lighthouse*, might be compared to the central piece of a mediaeval triptych, as it describes a world where death and desolation reign supreme. With regard to the particular theme and perspective chosen, Virginia Woolf was quite conscious that she was attempting the impossible, and she wrote in her diary “I have to give an empty house, no people’s characters, all eyeless and featureless, with nothing to cling to.”¹ As a matter of fact, various characters put in an occasional appearance in “Time Passes,” so that ten pages at most can be said to take up the challenge fully. This is the case with the thirty-nine lines of section 3, a splendid poetical text which tells of cosmic disruption and death. Yet, on closer examination, complete erasure of human bodies and consciousness will prove an enterprise difficult to achieve.

At first reading, admittedly, the presence of characters seems to be reduced to very little : adjectival abstractions : “human penitence and all its toil,” (14), the bleached “bones” of dead soldiers (9), a hand that “dwindles” (33) and whose owner is not immediately identifiable, or a conversational remark as by kindly neighbours and bracketed at the end of the text : “Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before” (38). As for “we,” “ours” and “our” (17 to 23), these vague markers of human presence occur in clearly passive contexts, subjected to various conditions (supposition : “did we,” 17, impossibility, 20, or sudden interruption, 22–23). In short, human agency seems to have been superseded by that of natural elements : winter (4), nights (6), wind (24), the sea (27).²

It could be objected that the presence of a “sleeper” (18) contradicts the deshumanizing attempt. However, the sleeper is rendered indeterminate from the start by the qualifier “any,” and then he can only be defined by his interrogative function which is “to ask the night those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore” (34–35). This insubstantial questioner reappears later under the form of nominalized adjectives, such as “the mystic, the visionary” (p. 143), “the wakeful, the hopeful” (p. 144), and probably stands for those thinkers and artists who refuse a total absence of finality. Yearning for a reassuring explicative scheme of the universe where “order” (31) would prevail over “confusion” (34), he wishes to see “the world reflect the compass of the soul” (32). But here, as elsewhere, he is disappointed and bewildered : the hand he had sought in order to alleviate solitude “dwindles in his hand,” the soothing answer he had hoped for harshly “bellows in his ear” (32–33), so that he is made to look like a fool stranded on the beach of despond.

In addition, the autumnal time of year is well suited to such a forlorn atmosphere, although at first the natural cycles of days and seasons are seemingly reassuring : “what after all is one night? [...] so soon a bird sings” (1–2). But inexorably, “night [...] succeeds to night” (3–4), winter is mentioned as early as line four and Autumn, for all its beauty, can bring “respite only” (23). A very fragile respite indeed because “the yellow moonlight” or “the light of harvests moons” (10) cannot but refer back to “the yellow harvest moon” (p. 126) that accompanied Mrs. Ramsay’s stately descent down the stairs. Actually that scene already portended death since it was focalized by Prue, the beautiful daughter who was soon going to die as part of the natural cycles of marriage and childbirth (p. 144). Likewise, in section 3, the gorgeous colours of Autumn are fallacious : the reddish leaves evoke “the flash of tattered flags kindling in the gloom of cool cathedral caves” (7–8) and speak of “death in battle”(9), while the yellowish tints are those of the gold letters on mortuary plaques (23). In that

¹ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1979), vol. III, 18/4/1926, p. 76. This question of perspective is clearly stated by Andrew in part one : “Think of a kitchen table then [...] when you’re not there”. *To the Lighthouse*, p. 28. The references to the pages of the novel are given to the text edited by Stella McNichol (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1992) ; references to passages within section 3 are to the lines.

² Similarly in the adjoining sections 2 and 4, the main actors of disintegration are “the little airs.”

context, human life is totally dependent upon the supreme being who presides over the march of the universe. But “divine goodness” or “divine promptitude” — referred to by a masculine pronoun — is clearly exposed as conducting himself like an arbitrary stage director who “draws the curtain” (8) in this cosmic theatre where a tragic play is being enacted. Sadistically, he hides from sight the “treasures” (19) of creation, reducing them to “littered pieces” (22) that cannot be reassembled,³ and is made to act like an irascible deity armed with punitive “hail” (10). What is more, he sanctions a religious system where penitence (14 and 23) is rewarded with a short “glimpse” (23) of truth, and toil with “respite only” before confusion prevails again. In the end, he resembles those male figures of authority Woolf detested so much, and eventually the appellation “divine goodness” becomes an ironical misnomer.

As a consequence of the virtual obliteration of human characters, it appears that authorial metaphysics — or rather anti-metaphysics — tends to creep back centre stage.⁴ But, in accordance with her intention to hold back all tokens of reassurance (“with nothing to cling to”), Woolf chose a restrained, disembodied tone of voice. Such a voice does not preach open rebellion but, in front of the cruel whims of divine providence, adopts a stance of apparent resignation, siding with the unobtrusive human phantoms suggested by “we,” “ours” and “our” — victims incapable of controlling their own fate. And yet, in spite of all Woolf’s strivings after impersonality, what seems to be a deep-lying authorial concern about the human body makes a furtive but insistent reappearance. In the first place, the strangely worded turns of phrase — “the sea tosses itself and breaks itself” — (27) seem to betray a secret recoil in front of the sexual body. They may suggest not only confusion in nature, but more covertly a negative view of sexual excitation, as a prefiguration of section 7 where

chaos [...] could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the wind and waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulks of leviathans [...] and mounted one on top of another, and lunged and plunged, until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself.
(p. 147)

The adjective “amorphous” signals that the coupling creatures are reduced to a gross mass of indistinct form, so that sexual activity becomes associated with disorder and confusion. On a second reading, the lexical echoes (tossing, plunged, battling, confusion) reverberate back negatively on section 3, where the treasures covered up and confused by divine goodness (“the hare erect ; the wave falling,” 16–19), are presented as clearly individualized male and female icons. There is no need to expatiate on the painful and complex relationship of Woolf to sexuality owing to the traumatic experiences of childhood and adolescence.⁵ In this respect, “confusion” may point to (a) vacillation between lesbian and heterosexual sexual practices, a conflict Woolf tried to solve imaginatively in various texts through the myth of the androgyne. The combination of phallic verticality and sheltering, feminine aspects that can be found here is also present in the way Mrs Ramsay envisages the nature of trees, with which she is fond of associating herself :

she [...] used the branches of the elm trees outside to help her to stabilise her position. [...] She must get that right and that right, she thought, insensibly approving of the dignity of the trees’ stillness, and now again of the superb upward rise (like the beak of a ship up a wave) of the elm tree as the wind raised them.
(p. 122)

³ The destruction of the mother’s body is symbolically signalled by the gradual falling to pieces of her shawl (pp. 142 and 145).

⁴ In part one, the denial of divine providence was expressed through more convincing fictional means when agnostic Mrs. Ramsay, trapped into a reflex Christian assertion “We are in the hands of the Lord”, fought it back vigorously “How could any Lord have made this world?” (pp. 70–71).

⁵ See in particular Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf. The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her Life and Work* (London : The Women’s Press, 1989).

But trees in section 3 — and through them the maternal figure — after suffering unrelenting attacks from the enraged natural elements, are totally deprived of their leaves (29–31), so that emptiness prevails. The husband may well stretch his arms out, “they remained empty” (39) in a world which was previously adorned and ordained by the mother’s presence.

Such a line of interpretation, however, is open to an instant objection. If section 3 is primarily a lamentation on the dismembered motherly body, how can the choice of an unemotional voice be accounted for? An obvious answer would be to put forward Woolf’s fear of “sentimentality” mentioned at least three times during the process of writing the novel.⁶ But more fundamentally, a haunting memory may well be at the back of everything, namely the way she reacted at thirteen in front of the lifeless body of her mother. She alluded to the scene much later, first in her 1924 diary : “how I laughed [...] behind the hand which was meant to hide my tears,” and in *A Sketch of the Past*, written in 1939, forty-five years after the event : “a desire to laugh came over me and I said to myself [...] I feel nothing whatever.”⁷ This is an extremely baffling reaction, which needs some tentative explanation. From all accounts, Julia Stephen had been the radiating presence at the heart of the family, a revered figure to be later embalmed in Leslie Stephen’s *Mausoleum Book*. Yet, with the lapse of time, a more complex personality has begun to emerge. Julia had never fully recovered from the death of her first husband whom she adored, so that in addition to her role of perfect Victorian mistress of the house, she absorbed herself in charitable occupations which often kept her away from home. Consequently, she had not much time to devote to each of her eight children, hence Virginia’s well-known remark in “A Sketch of the Past” : she “must have been a general presence rather than a particular person to a child of seven or eight.”⁸ Virginia’s laugh could then perhaps be construed as a laugh of disbelief directed at the ignoble farce destiny had played on her, depriving her of a mother with whom only fragmented instants had been spent. And not to feel was therefore a defence mechanism to prevent pain from completely overwhelming her.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf had created another seventh child, Septimus, who was horrified at the thought that “he could not feel,”⁹ and who eventually took his own life, affording Clarissa Dalloway a substitute death. But in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf decided to face a universe in which the mother suffers dismemberment and death, and the daughter the crippling influence of the maternal image, even long after the mother’s death. So in “Time Passes,” in order to suppress any possibility of laughter and to re-enact the scene in a more bearable way, Woolf wrote pages entrusted to a voice that shows its retrospective mastery of the situation. Then in the third part, she endeavoured to dispose of the lasting influence of the mother image, and delegated to Lily the task of fighting to the death against the two unacceptable contrasted faces of the Mother Goddess, perfect Madonna on the one side, Terrible Mother on the other.¹⁰ After having staged Lily’s painful victory over “this formidable ancient enemy of hers” (pp. 189–190), over the engulfing images of devouring, and taken some distance from a shattered universe, Woolf succeeded in courageously clinging to life for about fourteen more years. But then the terrifying images, intensified by the second world war, overwhelmed her mind again, and she chose to walk into the “waters of annihilation” (p. 196). Thus, *To the Lighthouse* had represented a positive stage in the confrontation with the disturbing body images, in particular because Woolf had deliberately armed herself with all the creative and defensive resources of language.

⁶ See *To the Lighthouse*, Introduction by Hermione Lee, pp. XVII–XVIII.

⁷ *Diary*, vol. II, 5/5/1924, p. 300.

⁸ In *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego / New York : Harcourt Brace, 1985), p. 83.

⁹ Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1966, pp. 97–98.

¹⁰ On these aspects of the novel, see André Viola “Fluidity versus Muscularity : Lily’s Dilemma in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, XXIV, 2 (Winter 2000-1), pp. 271–289.