TIME, SPACE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES IN V. WOOLF'S "TO THE LIGHTHOUSE"[1]

Abstract*: V. Woolf's works provide the matter for various approaches focusing on time and space.* "To the Lighthouse" *constitutes an example of complexity in the use of time and space as narrative devices that contribute to the contextualization of the story, to establish an inner rhythm of the text, to render images and moments which reveal the subjectivity of perception and the relativity of time and space. By using the stream of consciousness technique, the author could switch the perspective from one character to another and offer subjective, various and even contradictory opinions about characters and about how they perceive and react within certain spatial and temporal contexts.*

Keywords*: time, space, construction of identity.*

V. Woolf's innovative techniques resulting in inexhaustible works provide the appropriate matter for various approaches focusing on time and space. The relativity of perception, so much theorized at the beginning of the twentieth century, reverberates in theories on people's inability to be in total command of the language they use, which casts a shadow over the interrelation between idea and the form of expression (signified and signifier). Both complexity of content and complexity of expression are exploited in Virginia Woolf's novels. Besides other unquestionable values, *To the Lighthouse* constitutes an example of complexity in the use of time and space as narrative devices that contribute to the contextualization of the story, to establish an inner rhythm of the text, to render images and moments which reveal the subjectivity of perception and the relativity of the two coordinates. The borders generally implied by the two coordinates are constantly transgressed at the spiritual level and at the level of the making of a work of art. By opting for the stream of consciousness technique, the author offers more perspectives upon the same spatial and temporal context, which highlights the difference between characters and upholds the construction of their identity in relation with the perception of the space and time that they inhabit.

Time and space have drawn the attention of physicists, philosophers and critics as the abstractions through which life and identity are moulded and understood, and as the abstractions which leave the most visible and influential traces on the human body, spirit and soul. Aiming at an interdisciplinary approach, the analysis of the way in which time and space are used to construct identities in *To the Lighthouse* will be based on Gerard Genette's study of narrative devices (*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*), on Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel and on modern psychoanalytic theories concerning the subjectivity of the perception of time and space in the Bergsonian sense. Virginia Woolf's work is considered visionary and in the spirit of the time due to the fact that it reflects her contemporary theories in psychology and philosophy. Michael Whitworth states that of the thinkers who ideologically shaped modernism, "Woolf met only Freud. She never met, and may never have read, Einstein, Bergson, Nietzsche or Rutherford. Yet her novels apparently respond to their works and employ their ideas." (Whitworth, 2009: 147)

Departing from the symbol of the lighthouse which implies the life-death alternation and which seems to have imposed the structure of the novel into three

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chapters alternating durative time and condensed time, the construction of the characters can be associated with the technique chosen for each chapter. While in "The Window" and in "The Lighthouse" time is durative and allows a more accurate investigation of the way in which characters feel and think, "Time Passes" is a fugitive presentation of things changing in time and is scattered with short information about changes in the life of the characters.

Thus, in the first chapter V. Woolf introduces the characters and reveals their personalities by using the stream of consciousness technique. Irrespective of whether their random thoughts are focused on themselves or on other characters, the author uses an indirect method to build the characters. Randomness implies a disorganized flow of ideas that might even be contradictory, which requires time to acknowledge and express them. On the other hand, the other characters are presented subjectively and partially, which leads to a net of interrelations and establishes a geometrical structure that reflects sides/features of the characters while also shadowing other sides/features.

To introduce James, the narrator outlines his connection with the family contributing to the identification of certain common features and strengthening a comfortable feeling of belongingness: "Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects (…) cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallize and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator as his mother spoke with heavenly bliss (…)." (Woolf, 1994: 1) James is thus presented as a member of a group and as an independent individual with interests specific to his age and personality. Time seems to have swollen to absorb or encompass the information needed for the outlining of James's identity. Besides, time as perceived or lived by James is more durative due to his monotonous and time-consuming activity, while time seems more active for Mrs Ramsay who is more dynamic at this moment.

What Virginia Woolf succeeds in achieving is a movement from a group to the individual and then from the individual to another individual with a change of focus, which reveals only facets of the characters. When James's feelings for his father are mentioned, features of his personality, such as hatred and aggressiveness, are revealed while his father's features are relative, filtered through James's perspective: "Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence." (Woolf, 1994: 1) The limits of time and space expressed by "here and there" can suggest either that James's feelings for his father are so urgent that he would not delay his gesture or that his feelings are determined by the context and do not express his permanent attitude. Spatial and temporal references contextualize, and thus relativize, a character's behaviour.

In a similar way, Virginia Woolf shows Mrs Ramsay acquiring importance through indirect gathering of features released from the way the other guests gravitate around her. Irrespective of whether the story unfolds from Mrs Ramsay's perspective or from Lily's, Mrs Ramsay holds a central position: as long as she is in the room people laugh and tell stories, when she leaves, the gathering "disintegrates". She seems detached, concerned with the succession of actions and with the choice of the right moment to cut the flow, which demonstrates her awareness of the interrelation between

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actions and environment, that is between time and space: “It was time to go. They were only playing with things on their plates.” (Woolf, 1994: 76) By using the progressive aspect, the author creates the impression of durative time. Mrs Ramsay is however aware of the passing of time measured in stories: “She would wait until they had done laughing at some story her husband was telling. (…) She waited. She tucked her napkin under the edge of the plate. Well, were they done now? No. That story led to another story.” (Woolf, 1994: 76) While the guests’ time is imperceptibly flowing with the stories, Mrs Ramsay’s time hardens, getting the shape of the things she looks at: “She looked at the window in which the candle flames burnt brightly now that the panes were black.” (Woolf, 1994: 76) or getting the form of the words of the poem which “were floating like flowers on water out there” (Woolf, 1994: 77). For Mrs Ramsay, time and space are obviously interchangeable as movement and change mean the passing of time: “With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in the scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta’s arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past.” (Woolf, 1994: 78) Therefore a movement in space is a movement in time.

The fact that she waits until her husband finishes his stories and the poem also reveals her awareness of her position and her politeness, as she did not want to spoil the dinner. Other guests strengthen her position and complete her portrait through their gestures and thinking: Augustus Carmichael “bowed to her as if he did her homage” while Lily thinks that when Mrs Ramsay left “a sort of disintegration set in; [the guests] wavered about, went different ways, Mr Bankes took Charles Tansley by the arm and went off to finish on the terrace the discussion (…), thus giving a turn to the whole poise of the evening, making the weight fall in a different direction (…).” (Woolf, 1994: 78)

In the second chapter time is condensed and the focus is on things, not on people, as the visible change of the former implies unimaginable dynamism. “Time Passes” is an inspired and unique example of verbal expression of the time-space interrelation. Time is generally rendered in space, represented as a line, meaning a succession of events mainly associated with people. The changes of the things that fill in the space appear after long periods of time. V. Woolf skips common events in the characters and insists on the deterioration of things or on the uncontrolled growth of plants engulfing things, which is an obvious proof of the extremely rapid passing of time. The much explored characters in the first and the last chapters are almost absent in this chapter, however the text contributes to the outlining of the characters as unable to control their life, to enjoy life as they live in continuous darkness/night and are subjected to full destruction that occurs more rapidly with people than with things. Mr and Mrs Ramsay are only mentioned in parentheses: “[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.]” (Woolf, 1994: 93) or “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]” (Woolf, 1994: 97).

The second chapter encompasses only major events in the evolution of the characters that appear as reference points to comfort the reader with an illusion of chronology. The two temporal patterns, linear (the Hebrew) and cyclic (the Greek), are almost visible: the former is mainly associated with human beings and man-made things

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(like the house that deteriorates), the latter is associated with nature whose evolution is cyclic, like the waves.

However there is a possible cyclicity with people. Unlike the cyclicity of nature, man's cyclicity extends beyond death and is associated with a spiritual revival in the living characters' minds. While climbing the stairs in the first chapter, Mrs Ramsay has a vision of her revival in the memory of the guests and of her children. Everything around her becomes a stream that the survivors carry with them, her presence leaves traces on her children's minds and also on the objects around, just like her parents' memory that remained engraved on "the sofa on the landing (her mother's)" and on "the rocking chair (her father's)" (Woolf, 1994: 79). By achieving a time-space interchangeability, V. Woolf renders actions and feelings more concrete, almost palpable, as if she attached them to things while the latter softens and are endowed with a memory that palimpsestically stores moments of the past and of herself:

"All that would be revived again in the lives of Paul and Minta; 'the Rayleys' – she tried the new name over, and she felt, with her hand on the nursery door, that community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that practically (the feeling was one of relief and happiness) it was all one stream, and chairs, tables, maps, were hers, were theirs, it did not matter whose, and Paul and Minta would carry it on when she was dead." (Woolf, 1994: 79)

What Mrs Ramsay anticipates in the first chapter happens in the last chapter which shows how Mrs Ramsay continues to live in the memory of the others, but this also means that she contributed to the formation of their personalities. While the first chapter is more anchored in the present, the last one merges past and present illustrating that man's identity is palimpsestically built in time and that past and present cannot be dissociated. Trying to stimulate her memory to finish the painting, Lily Briscoe finds concrete elements, like the cask bobbing up and down, to bridge past and present and to bring Mrs Ramsay back on the beach. The gradual presentation of the way in which the dead woman is getting shape also implies the transfer of the "reality" the painter perceives to the painting. Thus the painting provides a permanent proof of people's revival in the living persons' mind.

The two chapters suggesting light are punctual, as they cover a short period of time, and can be associated with temporal and spatial simultaneity, while the second, covering a longer period of time, clusters more external events that have a greater impact on the characters and can be related to successiveness. This means that the characters are contextualized differently: in the first case the characters seem interdependent as they are presented in relation with one another and through one another leading to a social and punctual contextualization; in the second situation the characters are dependent on the larger historical context, their evolution is related to external events and the fact that they do not think but act is a result of the impact of the war upon people.

Virginia Woolf's characters evolve, although she does not make the effort to follow their becoming. Technically speaking, her novel is the opposite of the adventure novel criticized by Bakhtin in *The Forms of Time and of the Chronotope* where time passes and the characters go through various experiences that do not change them either physically or spiritually. James, Mr Ramsay, Lily Briscoe are minutely analysed in two moments and the emphasis eventually falls on the way in which they changed in between. In the end of the novel James sees the traces of the passing of time when he analyses his father: "He sat there bareheaded with the wind blowing his hair about, extraordinarily exposed to everything. He looked very old. He looked, James thought,

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getting his head now against the Lighthouse, now against the waste of waters running into the open, like some old stone lying on the sand; he looked as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both of their minds – that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things." (Woolf, 1994: 147) Physical reference is used to suggest both the passing of time and the reflection of the soul in the appearance, an idea that reminds of the picture of Dorian Gray. The simplicity and directness of the word "old" are counterbalanced by the image of the soul reflected on the body which suggests physical erosion to the point of interchangeability between body and soul. Since the fragment presents James's perception of his father, it reflects James's change too: his hatred is replaced by a sense of father-son identity in the way in which they think and is obviously marked by a change of attitude as a result of the tone that he uses in the end.

In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* the two coordinates of time and space are not used to organize the plot, as it happens in most of the novels, but to show how things change or become in time and space, how things and bodies are concrete proofs of the passing of time and of spiritual changes. The lighthouse stands for the alternation between light and darkness, which makes it the perfect symbol for the last chapter where past and present, as light and darkness or life and death, palimpsestically coexist.

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