

# READING FOR SPACE

## AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN NARRATOLOGY AND NEW MATERIALISM IN THE WORKS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF AND GEORGES PEREC



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‘Quite like old times,’ the room says. ‘Yes? No?’  
Jean Rhys *Good morning, Midnight* (1939)

L’espace semble être, ou plus apprivoisé, ou plus inoffensive, que le temps : on rencontre partout des gens qui ont des montres, et très rarement des gens qui ont des boussoles.  
Georges Perec *Espèces d’espaces* (1974)

Frontpage illustration: Jesper Christiansen: “Well, We Must Wait for the Future to Show” from the exhibition *Time Passes for Virginia Woolf* (2012).

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1. Space in the Novel

Chez les Maheu, au numéro 16 du dixième corps, rien ne bougeait. Des ténèbres épaisses noyaient l'unique chambre du premier étage, comme écrasent de leur poids le sommeil des êtres que l'on sentait là, en tas, la bouche ouverte, assommés de fatigue. Malgré le froid vif du dehors, l'air alourdi avait une chaleur vivante, cet étouffement chaud des chambrées les mieux tenues, qui sentient le bétail humain (Zola 1978:60).

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, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say 'This is he' or 'This is she' (Woolf 2000:137).

En attendant, la maison est vide. Toutes les fenêtres de la chambre sont ouvertes, ainsi que ses deux portes, sur le couloir et la salle de bains. Entre la salle de bains et le couloir, la porte est aussi ouverte en grand, comme celle donnant accès depuis le couloir sur la partie centrale de la terrasse.

La terrasse est vide également ; aucun des fauteuils de repos n'a été porté dehors ce matin, non plus que la table basse qui sert pour l'apéritif et le café. Mais, sous la fenêtre ouverte du bureau, les dalles gardent la trace des huit pieds de fauteuils : deux fois quatre points luisants, plus lisses qu'alentour, disposés en carrés (Robbe-Grillet 1957:123-124).

Tout serait brun, ocre, fauve, jaune : un univers de couleurs un peu passées, aux tons soigneusement, presque précieusement dosés, au milieu desquelles surprendraient quelques taches plus claires, l'orange presque criard d'un coussin, quelques volumes bariolés perdus dans les reliures. En plein jour, la lumière, entrant à flots, rendrait cette pièce un peu triste, malgré les roses. Ce serait une pièce du soir. Alors, l'hiver, rideaux tirés, avec quelques points de lumière – le coin des bibliothèques, la discothèque, le secrétaire, la table basse entre les deux canapés, les vagues reflets dans le miroir – et les grandes zones d'ombres où brilleraient toutes les choses, le bois poli, la soie lourde et riche, le cristal taillé, le cuir assoupli, elle serait havre de paix, terre de bonheur (Perec 1965:11).

Every novel takes place *somewhere* – yet what happens when space in the novel is not just setting for a narrative, but takes precedence over both characters and plot? This is the question that my dissertation will try to answer. Each of the above quotes describes a space with no active characters; presented instead, from Émile Zola to Georges Perec, are spaces that dynamically encircle and surround. The four descriptions depict what happens when nothing except space takes place. While emptiness and nothingness are emphasized in all four descriptions, they all do describe *something* – and this something is space. In the case of Zola and Virginia Woolf, what happens when nothing happens is darkness engulfing the room when the characters have gone to sleep, and in this immersive movement a material space emerges; a space that relates and gathers humans and things. In Alain Robbe-Grillet and Perec, emptiness lets a space emerge that bears witness to previous and future human activity, but, with the absence of characters, the setting emerges as something on its own, thus allowing that which is transparent when characters are present to become visible. The *materiality* of the *background* appears in all four descriptions; it is the mark left on the tiles, the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers, the sharp orange colour on a pillow, and the heavy air in a stuffed room. The descriptions demonstrate that space in the novel has the capacity to be more than a setting for the characters; it can create its own events and have its own narrative. This understanding of space in the novel paves the way for a repositioning and reimagining of the role of the human, too – reframing the human subject as someone always in relation to and gathered by the object world.

This is even the case in the work of the Naturalist Zola, famous for his descriptions of a milieu that determines its characters, as J.H. Matthews notes in “The Art of description in Zola’s *Germinal*”: “in this novel, as in others of the *Rougun-Macquart* series, Zola devotes considerable attention to description, which he calls, in *Le Roman Expérimental*, ‘un état du monde extérieur qui determine et complete l’homme’” (Matthews 1962:267). In the “Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive” Philippe Hamon describes this as a trait of the nineteenth century novel, where

discussions are often oriented by the will or the refusal to reconcile on the one hand a conception of the work which stays classic in large part (notions of coherence and global organization remain privileged; hierarchically, the character must surpass description – description must remain at the service of the character) and on the other hand, the influence of non-literary theories (sociological, biological, anthropological, etc.) that affirm that the individual is subject to dependence on its environment (Hamon 1981:22).

These two tendencies are important for the role of space in the novel. As Hamon notes, Zola's work reconciles two different notions regarding space: on the one hand, the secondary role of description within the genre of the novel, and thus the novelist's reluctance towards descriptions – when space is described, it must always “remain at the service of the character” – and, on the other hand, an emerging scientific interest in the environment's influence upon the human being emphasizing that the individual is shaped by its environment. The opposition between these views are resolved in Zola's novel insofar as the description of the environment leads to a presentation of the sleeping characters. The description of the house depicts a space that actively surrounds characters and furniture, but the surroundings are not allowed to take precedence as the decorum of the nineteenth century novel states that “it is always the character who stays at the center of the discussion” (Hamon 1981:23).

This consensus undergoes a change in the Modernist novel, especially in the novels of Virginia Woolf. Whereas narration and characters take over Zola's spatial description, space takes up the entire second part of Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927); here, the awakening of the characters happens in small brackets, while space continues to be narrated throughout the chapter. As illustrated by the four quotes at the beginning of this chapter, space is prominently present in the novel from the Naturalist novel to the Nouveau Roman. But while space in the novels of Zola and Robbe-Grillet – even if allowed agency in the abovementioned examples – gets integrated into the narrative of the characters, space is allowed its own narrative in the novels of Woolf and Perec. In *To the*

*Lighthouse*, *The Waves* (1931), and *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978), space is foregrounded to such an extent that characters and plot recede into the background. Two things can be inferred from the quotes. One; they give evidence to the presence of a dynamic space within a larger framework of the novel, and two; they bear witness to the radical nature of the work of Woolf and Perec. It is the latter that I have chosen to focus on in this dissertation, hoping with these two radical cases to pinpoint the importance of taking space into account when analysing the novel – though Zola and Robbe-Grillet will also appear in the periphery of my argument for a new understanding of space.

In the Modernist tradition, space enters the scene of the novel, yet it is curiously enough still left out of the theory of the novel – the nineteenth century reluctance towards descriptions of the environment has proved itself to be so tenacious that even in contemporary literary theory, spatial descriptions are still regarded as inferior parts of a novel. Joseph Frank was one of the first critics to introduce space as an important category in the understanding of the modernist novel. In his influential study “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (1945), he argues that the Modernist novel cannot be understood on the basis of narrative temporal structures but must instead be considered in terms of spatial forms and metaphors. Frank launches this new paradigm by revisiting Lessing’s *Laokoon* (1766), applying Lessing’s spatial understanding of the plastic arts to modern literature. Lessing distinguishes between the spatial qualities of the plastic arts and the temporal qualities attributed to literature, or, in Frank’s words:

Form in the plastic arts, according to Lessing, is necessarily spatial, because the visible aspect of objects can best be presented juxtaposed in an instant of time. Literature, on the other hand, makes use of language, composed of a succession of words proceeding through time; and it follows that literary form, to harmonize with the essential quality of its medium, must be based primarily on some form of narrative sequence (Frank 1945:223).

As modern literature (Frank mentions T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust and James Joyce) is no longer composed according

to the principle of succession, but on situation, “this means that the reader is intended to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence” (225). Frank transfers the spatiality of the plastic arts onto literature, and his merit, as Frederik Tygstrup rightly argues, is to have stressed the importance of spatial structure in Modernist literature, but regarding the tangible presence of space in the novel his theory leaves a lot to be desired (cf. Frederik Tygstrup 1999; 2007). This is partly due to the fact that his examples of Modernist novels do not foreground space the way that the novels of Virginia Woolf and Georges Perec do, but also to the fact that spatial descriptions are of no real interest to him, as he mainly seeks to describe formal structures of the novel. Indeed, as space enters into readings of the Modernist novel, Zola’s anxiety towards descriptions – Hamon recalls him noting not to “succumb to the descriptive sin” (Hamon 1981:23) – is a recurring theme. More recently, Tygstrup has repeated this negligence of spatial descriptions in “Det Litterære Rum” (The Literary Space) (1999), where he notes: “[g]enerally space is first and foremost implied in the occurrences of action, perception, thinking and feeling which occur in the text. Space-*description* is one of the least significant ways of presenting space in literature” (Tygstrup 1999:47 [My translation]). What Frank and Tygstrup are looking for is not space *in* literature but space as a principle of textual organization.<sup>1</sup> As a result, they bypass those passages in novels where space does not occur as an implication of an action carried out by a character. To read space as something active and important in itself is something so foreign to the understanding of the novel that indeed most theories of the novel deem this concept nonexistent, or even impossible to carry out. This tendency can be noted in a range of influential theories of the novel: Georg Lukàcs notes in “Erzählen oder Beschreiben” (1936), also in regard to Zola that “eine vom Menschen, von den menschlichen Schicksalen unabhängige »Poesie

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<sup>1</sup> In “Still Life – The Experience of Space in Modern Prose” (2007), Tygstrup takes this interest a step further and reads passages from Proust and Woolf in light of Lessing’s distinctions between poetry and painting. Trying to re-conceptualize the concept of still lives in the modernist novel, he does grant description significance, but those still life descriptions subject to his analyses still focus on the experiencing subject and not on the object being described.

der Dinge« gibt es in der Literatur nicht” (Lukàcs 1971:222), and continues: “die Dinge leben dichterisch nur durch ihre Beziehungen zum Menschenschicksal” (223). To Lukàcs, the novel is a genre that depicts human relations, and in this regard “die beschreibende Methode is unmenschlich” (226). Descriptions of things and space must thus be kept to a minimum. In René Wellek and Austin Warren’s *Theory of Literature* (1949), published just a few years after Frank’s essay, the two authors emphasize that “setting is environment; and environments, especially domestic interiors, may be viewed as metonymic, or metaphoric, expressions of character. A man’s house is an extension of himself. Describe it and you have described him” (Wellek and Warren 1968:221).

This subject-centric perspective is repeated in one of the dominant fields within the theory of the novel, that is, in Narratology. Here, focus on the temporal aspect of narration and its centring on human subjects has led to a comprehensive amnesia of spatial and non-human entities in the novel, and, correspondingly, in descriptions of space. In “Narration in Various Disciplines” (2011), Norbert Meuter defines narrative as “any sequence of actions and happenings which is discernible as a unit and has a temporal organization as well as being perceived as meaningful” (Meuter 2011:7). Narration is a temporal category per se, but implied in this definition is also that the actions and events that constitute a narrative sequence are carried out by human characters. Mieke Bal emphasizes in *Narratology – Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1997) that “this attention paid to subjectivity is indeed, the basic tenet of the theory presented in this book” (Bal 2002:11). I would like to challenge this subject-oriented point of view. As the initial quotes from the novels demonstrate, space is not always secondary to characters and does indeed appear as something important in its own right. Ascribing importance to space also challenges the classic divide in Narratology between narration as a temporal sequence of events initiated by characters and description as a static presentation of space. For most narratologists, a description of space is a pause until the plot continues and for that reason something of minor importance. In the first two quotes from Balzac and Robbe-Grillet, space is not

just a static setting; it takes place – not as events formed by characters, but in the form of activity created by the encounter between darkness and the furniture in the room. The devaluation of description and space in most narratological theories of the novel is rooted in their understanding of the human subject: behind their anthropocentric theory lies an understanding of the human subject as a world- and meaning-making agent, an agent which controls and dominates the inert non-human world of objects. Contesting this concept, I propose a different ontology in which the human subject is no longer the one forming the world, but does indeed constitute itself through its relation to and dependence on the object world.

## 2. Rethinking Space in Light of the *Material Turn*

In recent years, a “Material Turn” (Coole and Frost 2010:4) has arisen within the humanities, which contests the role of the object “as the eternal sidekick of the subject” (Boscagli 2014:3). This turn opposes the way that the dominant linguistic and cultural turns have bracketed concepts of materiality and things in favour of consciousness, subjectivity, language, and discourse. Coole and Frost note in their influential introduction to *New Materialism, Ontology, Agency and Politics* (2010) that “these have typically been valorized as superior to the baser desires of biological material or the inertia of physical stuff” (2). This new *Material turn* reconsiders the ontological relation between subject and object, stressing that human subjects are not solely responsible for making matter come to life, but that objects as such are alive, and, as Jane Bennett emphasizes, “vibrant” (Bennett 2010:1). In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett proposes to

bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibility and its boundaries [...] the otherwise important topic of subjectivity thus gets short shrift so that I may focus on the task of developing a vocabulary and syntax for, and thus a better discernment of, the active powers issuing from nonsubjects. I want to highlight what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things (Bennett 2010:ix).

What Bennett suggests here is not a disparagement of the subject, but a temporary bracketing of the subject so as to allow a possibility of grasping material agencies other than the human. In other words: through a self-reflexive distancing of a subject-centric position, the material background is made visible and accessible. I would like to propose a similar strategy within the literary study of language in the novel to read for the material background in novels, investigating *how* Woolf and Perec in their novels bracket their human subjects to let another narrative appear – a narrative of space, which challenges the dominant understanding of materiality as static matter.

In order to arrive at a new understanding of materiality beyond the dichotomy of subject and object, New Materialists invoke what Bennett terms “if not a latent, at least not dominant philosophical history in the West” (viii); a history that tells another story than a Cartesian understanding of matter, which according to Coole and Frost, “yields a conceptual and practical domination of nature as well as a specifically modern attitude or ethos of subjectivist potency” (2010:8). While Bennett tells this story through the philosophy of Henri Bergson, Hans Driesch, and Baruch Spinoza before arriving at a new idea of “vitality” (viii), I would like to summon the thing-phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. Whereas New Materialists focus on the broad category of materiality to “dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic” (Bennett 2010:x), which allows them to inquire into all kinds of materiality, from edible matter and the electronic power grid to metal, waste, and genetics, I will narrow my search to consider *space* as the form in which materiality appears in the novels. Space is here understood not as a Cartesian abstract concept of *res extensa*, but as a concrete configuration of place and things. Space is the material gathering of things present. Space is the *gathering concept*, which includes both the domestic house with its interior rooms and furniture but also the airs and the darkness; it is the *material background* that in the opening quotes surrounds the room of the sleeping characters. This understanding of *space as*

*gathering* originates in Martin Heidegger's thought. He offers an understanding of materiality with space as its focal point, as space in his terms is understood as an event; something that occurs as it *gathers* things and humans. Heidegger's attention is directed neither at the human-subject carrying out acts in a space, nor at the human using the thing, but on the very *thingness* of space and things. Thingness is here not a quality attributed to the thing from an outside position; it is the way in which the thing occurs, closely related to Bennett's concept of *vibrant matter*. For Heidegger the thingness of the thing is made visible in the work of art. Inspired by the works of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Edward S. Casey, and Jeff Malpas, I will outline a spatial reading of Heidegger's writings on art, focusing not on his existential hermeneutics but on his ontological thinking on language as the very place where space may emerge as space, things as things, and not as objects or settings for human use or reflection. On this basis, a new material aspect can be introduced to the study of literature. My reading of Heidegger will also take into account attempts made by other New Materialists (Timothy Morton, Bill Brown, and Graham Harman) towards reinterpreting Heidegger's phenomenology.

By turning a material perspective on the novel, that is, on language, the question of representation emerges. This problem presents itself to Bennett as well as to Coole and Frost in regard to their methods. Bennett asks: "What method could possibly be appropriate for the task of speaking a word for vibrant matter? How to describe without thereby erasing the independence of things?" (Bennett 2010:xiii). And, similarly, Coole and Frost note:

For there is an apparent paradox in thinking about matter: as soon as we do so, we seem to distance ourselves from it, and within the space that opens up, a host of immaterial things seems to emerge: language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind, soul; also imagination, emotions, values, meaning, and so on (Coole and Frost 2010:2).

To read matter in literature is to read matter as something already textualised. However, simply because materiality in literature is made up of language, it does not follow – as narratologists would

argue – that it is only presented as subject to the characters within the novel. Drawing on Heidegger’s understanding of language as a field in which the thing is allowed to emerge as thing, it becomes possible to read language in terms of what Gumbrecht and Casey name *presentation*, that is, as “‘bringing forth’ an object in space” (Gumbrecht 2004:xv). In other words, a description of space in literature does not have to be read as a symbol of something else; it does not have to be interpreted, but can be read as a possible opening towards material reality, emerging as something other than interpretive meaning.

Indeed, literature and especially the novel can show a way of describing matter “without erasing the independence of things”, as Bennett sought to do. I intend to demonstrate that it truly is in the narrative form of the novel that matter emerges as vibrant: by introducing matter into the understanding of narrative, matter is presented as an agent, not as inert. The novel’s subject-centric history has typically not left room for this understanding. Focus on things is often solely attributed to poetry, a point that Jean-Paul Sartre is famous for making. In *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1948), he distinguishes poetry from prose, drawing on Heidegger’s understanding of poetry: Poetry as a genre is occupied with presenting a thing as nothing other than a thing, whereas the novelist uses language as a tool for intersubjective communication. Thus, according to Sartre, only novels can be engaging, that is, only novels inspire their readers to act and to engage with the problems of the world. The novelist choses “de dévoiler le monde et singulièrement l’homme aux autres hommes” (Sartre 1948:29). Directly addressing the question of spatial description, the novelist “peut vous guider et s’il vous décrit un taudis, y faire voir le symbole des injustices sociales, provoquer votre indignation” (16), whereas the poet, like the painter, “crée une maison imaginaire sur la toile et non un signe de maison. Et la maison ainsi apparue conserve toute l’ambiguïté des maisons réelles” (16). Describing non-human entities is considered poetry’s field, whereas prose engages human relations – a point that I will return to later, as it is contested by the works of Georges Perec, who redefines engagement to not simply mean engaging with other humans, but

also with the overlooked material reality behind human actions. According to Perec, the engaged novel thus challenges the predominance of the subject, as it presents a new relational ontology. Heidegger too, when addressing the ability of language to present space and things, mainly finds his examples in poetry. I will nevertheless argue that the narrative form itself does not exclude the possibility of showing the thingness of things, and that the novel is also the place where space and things are shown as materially vibrant. Assigning materiality a prominent role in the novel also means that Woolf and Perec invite lyrical aspects into their novels, and it is these both *discreet* and *massive* forms of language that will be central to my reading for space.<sup>2</sup>

Few New Materialists have addressed the question of materiality in regard to literature. Often literature is used as a tool “to learn how to induce an attentiveness to things and their affects” (Bennett 2010:xiv), as Bennett notes without further addressing the question of *how* this attentiveness is carried out in literature. In the same vein, materiality and things are read for their importance on a solely thematic level, as for instance by Bill Brown and Maurizia Boscagli. Attempts to seriously link literary studies with New Materialism often end in diffuse reading strategies, as is the case with Graham Harman’s proposal in “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” (2012), where “the critic might try to show how each text resists internal holism by attempting various *modifications* of these texts and seeing what happens” (Harman 2012a:201-202). The same seems to be the true for Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature* (2009), where Morton attempts to introduce “an *ambient poetics*, a way of conjuring up a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world” (Morton 2009:22). Not a New Materialist, but a reader with a materialist agenda, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has addressed the question of textuality and matter with greater success. In *Production of Presence – What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004) and in *Stimmungen lesen – Über eine verdeckte Wirklichkeit der Literatur* (2011) he reacts against Deconstruction and Cultural Studies; two opposing

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<sup>2</sup> In “Reading for the Space – Foregrounding the Sensuous Experience of Space in the French Modern Novel” (2014), I have made a preliminary study of what a reading for space may look like in a reading of the works of Marcel Proust and Georges Perec.

tendencies that according to Gumbrecht have created “Ein Gefühl von Lethargie” (Gumbrecht 2011:9) in the study of literature. From a material point of view, these theories have ignored materiality, either because Deconstruction has made any attempt that literature undertakes to say anything about the world outside of the text impossible, or, reversely, because readings in Cultural Studies only focus on an intersubjective cultural reality outside of the literary text with the human subject at the centre of attention. In analogy to Peter Brook’s *Reading for the Plot* (1984), Gumbrecht foregoes plot-oriented reading for a form of reading that is “stimmungsorientiert” (10), accentuating the reader’s bodily experience in the encounter with the text. To continue this analogy, I propose a *Reading for Space*, but whereas Gumbrecht above all invests renewed interest in the experience of reading as a material aspect of literature, I intend to direct my gaze to material spatiality *in* literature. I also mean to directly engage in a discussion of plot, arguing that from a Heideggerian and New Materialist perspective, things may also be initiators of plot events. To do so, I propose combining Narratology and New Materialism with a twofold purpose: First, through New Materialism’s focus on objects to revise Narratology’s division of narration and description, and second, through a narratological reconceptualization, practiced on works by Virginia Woolf and Georges Perec, to show a way for New Materialism to grasp dynamic and active matter *in* novels. New Materialism and Heidegger allow me to conceptualize space and things as events, while Narratology provides me with the framework to examine how spatial events are formally realized in the novel. Whereas Narratology is a theory of the foreground, examining the foregrounded figure with focus directed at the foregrounded medium of language and not the background setting consisting of space and things, New Materialism is a theory of the background in its search for ways to deal with the “background as background” – as Timothy Morton notes; when you mention the background, “it stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us” (Morton 2009:1), that is, it gets foregrounded. My pursuit will be to find a way to *foreground the background as background*, and I propose to do this by combining formal insights from the theory of the

foreground from Narratology with the philosophical ideas of background from New Materialism and the thing-phenomenology of Martin Heidegger.

### 3. Overview

The aim of my dissertation is to engage equally in a discussion of Narratology and a New Materialist reading of Heidegger's thing-phenomenology. My argument moves from a delineation of how each of the two fields engage the question of space and language to a critical confrontation of this very framework through readings of space in the novels of Virginia Woolf and Georges Perec. To achieve this, my dissertation will consist of four chapters.

In chapter 1, I trace the concept of space in Narratology as a history that separates narration from description and thus eliminates the possibility of understanding space as something other than setting in the novel. First, I investigate the role that space has played in the works of the classic narratologists such as Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal and Seymour Chatman. With their main interest vested in narrated time and form, the descriptive *gap* where space emerges is regarded by these theorists simply as a pause before the plot continues. I thus, secondly, turn to Descriptive Theory, as it is in descriptions that space often appears. Here I focus on the 1981 issue of *Yale French Studies* published with the aim of rehabilitating the role of description in narrative theory. Similar to space, description has suffered a sad fate in Narratology after Roland Barthes' disapproval of it as an "effet de réel". Whereas Barthes interprets description as an unimportant element that only portrays a mimetic reality and leaves no room for meaning and interpretation, Philippe Hamon in this issue of *Yale French Studies* restores the role of description in Narratology by allowing it to carry meaning. Yet by doing so, he turns description into an interpretive key for the narrative, and not into a place where space emerges. In the same issue of *Yale French Studies*, Edward S. Casey offers his way of viewing description as presentation, a view that fosters renewed understanding of description as a place for space. After examining first the role of space in classic Narratology, and

then the role of space in Descriptive Theory, focusing on those narratologists that have taken space into account even in small ways, I turn my attention to new constellations within these fields. In recent years, there have been signs of an awakening interest in space and narrative among narratologists. Here I try to delineate aspects of this understanding of space in Gerhard Hoffmann's *Raum, Situation, erzählte Wirklichkeit* (1978) and Katrin Dennerlein's *Narratologie des Raumes* (2009). Hoffmann's and Dennerlein's concepts will be discussed and further developed in encounters with space in the novels of Woolf and Perec. However, for the purpose of reading for space, both theorists' works carry inherent limitations in that they do not consider space something that occurs and happens without a character present. With its subject-centric worldview, Narratology bypasses the fact that descriptions of space and things may themselves be eventful; that events are not only made by characters, but may also happen in relations between things. Space does not have to be confined to static settings that make the reader want to skip ahead, or, if deemed important, a key to understanding a character; it can have its own narrative rhythm.

In order to create a vocabulary that can grasp the agency of space, I turn in chapter 2 to reading Martin Heidegger with a New Materialist approach. Using a short story by Virginia Woolf to set the scene, I here introduce the concept of background as a transition between the material focus of New Materialism and the thing-philosophy of Martin Heidegger. I seek to explore how the space that already surrounds us as background may emerge in the novel in the way it surrounds us, that is, *as background* – and not as an analytical object for us to examine that thus turns into something else. For Heidegger, background becomes visible through the work of art. Before arriving at Heidegger's concept of space, it is necessary first to explain his *thing*-concept, as thing and space are intrinsically connected in Heidegger's thought. I want to extract Heidegger's vocabulary of *thing* from his analysis of tools in *Sein und Zeit* (1926) and combine it with his description of a pair of shoes in a painting by van Gogh from *Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36) to arrive at a concept of thing as something actively stemming from the thing itself. Whereas Narratology can be said to

be a theory of the foreground, with the human subject at the centre of attention and the background fading into mere setting for human action, New Materialism and the thing-philosophy of Heidegger offer a way to focus on the background *as* background. Heidegger goes one step further, offering a mode of reading space in novels through an understanding of language in the work of art as an event that lets the background emerge as background in an attitude of *Gelassenheit*. In his readings of poems by Hölderlin, George, and Trakl, Heidegger identifies a mode where space and things do not have to be interpreted as symbols for something else but where discreet aspects of language, such as the use of punctuation, present the space *as space*, the thing *as thing*, and not as something else.

Combining these insights from Narratology and a New Materialist reading of Heidegger makes my reading for space possible. In a reciprocal movement, these insights will inform my reading of the novels of Woolf and Perec, while the novels in turn will question and expand the concepts from both Narratology and Heidegger. The readings are thus a way to further challenge my theoretical framework, allowing a reading for space to be developed from within the existing space of the novels in close readings of the spatial parts of the novels. In order not to force an existing framework upon the novels, but to instead allow the authors and their texts to speak for themselves, my chapters on Woolf and Perec seek to carefully establish how each novelist directly and indirectly expressed their thinking on space in their essays, and how their thoughts differ from the general attitude towards description and space in the respective literary milieus of their times. To further ground their spatial thinking in the way they structured their novels, I have also included their manuscripts in my analysis of their works.

Chapter 3 is thus an investigation into the role of space in the works of Virginia Woolf. First, my overview of her novels indicates a significant change in her approach to space in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. By stressing the spatial aspect of her works, I also try to counter the forgetting of space in the reception of her novels – a tendency that mirrors the subject-centric literary theory of the novel. And second, by placing this change in the context of contemporary debate between Edwardians and Georgians, I will

show how Woolf's spatial argument is rooted in her description of what she terms "Phases of Fiction", where she distances herself from both the Edwardian generation of writers such as Arnold Bennett, as well as the Modernist generation exemplified by James Joyce. I will trace how Woolf indirectly arrives at a spatial conception of the novel, which allows a new dynamic concept of space to emerge in her two spatial novels, which in turn challenge to an even greater extent than the essays the division between narration and description from Narratology. My analysis of her novels will thus be a testing ground for the narratological concepts developed in chapter 1, but combined with Heidegger's understanding of language as *Gelassenheit* from chapter 2, new modes of analysing space in the novels begin to take shape. In Woolf's works, a bracketing of narration is the formal mode through which a new descriptive narration of space appears, including her use of discreet signs, such as semicolon and comma, a distant narrator, and a re-evaluation of the concept of anthropomorphism. Furthermore, the space that appears in her works is one that challenges dominant conceptions of space in Modernism; that is, the urban setting. Instead, a discreet space emerges which fuses the element of air with the domestic interiors of a house, opening the field for a greening and domestic thread within Modernism. Mine are modes of reading that unlike New Materialist readings of literature take the medium of language into account. Formal as well as thematic aspects are analysed, in order not to stop at identifying in her novels a confirmation of space as something vibrant and alive, but also to analyse precisely *how* this is accomplished in the novel's form.

I further develop and challenge this question in my reading of works by Georges Perec. In chapter 4, I read against the dominant understanding of Perec's work as hypertexts showing a world of signs, as I approach his work from a material and spatial angle. Contrary to what might be termed a Poststructuralist approach to Perec, I want to accentuate a strain in his work evolving around what he terms the *infra-ordinary*, a concept that I posit belongs alongside the New Materialist concept of background. Unlike Woolf, Perec deals directly with space and to such an extent that

even his words can be considered material things. In the opening of this chapter, I trace a sustained idea in his essays, running from his first essays about the role of the novel in post-war France where he participated in a debate with Sartre and Robbe-Grillet, to his investigations into the everyday; both highly influential, I argue, on his method for creating his masterpiece *La Vie mode d'emploi*. His manuscripts for the novel support my argument that even though he belonged to the group of Oulipo, famous for its language games, *La Vie mode d'emploi* also presents a material space. Contrary to Woolf, Perec does not only use discreet signs to let the *background as background* appear. In Perec's novel, space appears through an excessive use of description, which challenges narratological understanding of narrative as something built upon plot, character, and time. Here, space is foregrounded to such an extent that it becomes possible to make a manual of description based on the many different ways that Perec lets space appear. This presentation of space departs from the dominant material trend of his time: Directly opposed to the cool white spaces of Functionalism, Perec offers a novel full of things and spaces with no visible function or use. Perec in this way gives centre stage to that which in other novels only supplies the background for narrative. Perec not only challenges narratological framework but also supersedes Heideggerian understanding of language as *Gelassenheit* with a literal and concrete manifestation of words as things.

In the closing remarks of this dissertation I will sum up what a reading for space might look like, based on a combination of the theoretical insights from the first two chapters and my spatial reading of the novels of Woolf and Perec. I will then sketch how these spatial readings may permit a broader investigation of space in the novel as a genre.

## CHAPTER 1

### NARRATOLOGY AND SPACE

## 1. The Role of Space in Classic Narratology

### 1.1. Field of Inquiry

In classic Narratology, space has played a minor – if not inferior, or even nonexistent – role because of the field’s interest in narrated time and form. As Marie-Laure Ryan states in her article on “Space” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2012): “Narrative is widely recognized as the discourse of human experience, yet most definitions, by characterizing stories as the representation of a sequence of events, foreground time at the expense of space” (Ryan 2012:2). From this point of view, space is nothing more than a way to place the story in a reliable environment, or, as Gerard Genette points out in *Discours du récit* (1972): “De là vient peut-être que les déterminations temporelles de l’instance narrative sont manifestement plus important que ses déterminations spatiales” (Genette 1972:228). As Genette is primarily interested in the level of discourse, whose surface constitutes the only access to the text – “C’est donc le récit, et lui seul, qui nous informe ici, d’une part sur les événements qu’il relate, et d’autre part sur l’activité qui est censée le mettre au jour” (Genette 1972:73)<sup>3</sup> – it is important for him to make a temporal distinction between events in the story and the event of narrating. It follows that the space in which narration takes place is less important. In addition, space is often where action and events come to a halt, and where the characters recede into the background, allowing the surroundings to emerge through description. To a theory interested in the discrepancy between narrative time and story time, this descriptive gap is regarded as nothing but a pause until the plot continues – as the reference “Description” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2007) bluntly states: “Classical narratology defines description as a narrative pause interrupting the presentation of the chain of events” (Herman, Jahn, Ryan 2007:101). The peripheral role of space in

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<sup>3</sup> Genette divides the narrative text into three levels: the first one being the *story* (*histoire*), that is, the narrative content, the signified; the second one being the *narrative* (*récit*), the signifier, the discourse; and the third one being *narrating* (*narration*), that is, the producing narrative action (Genette 1972:72).

Narratology is thus mainly caused by the clear distinction between description and narration. On the discourse level, the temporal gap between different narrative events and the modes of narrating are of interest to narratologists – not descriptive pauses. This attitude becomes abundantly clear when one consults the reference to “Space in narrative” in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, which asserts that “a story cannot have too much of temporal sequentiality, but it does grind to a halt when overloaded with spatial description (cf. Georges Perec’s short story *Still Life/Style leaf*)” (Herman, Jahn, Ryan 2007:551). Narration takes precedence over description because it is that which drives a text forward. Implied in this view is the fact that “events” are mostly understood as actions carried out by characters, and, as a result, passages where characters are not the main focus are inherently less interesting to narratologists. This, however, expresses an anthropocentric view of narration, which leaves out the possibility that the non-human world could also be narrated as eventful; as something that takes place, if with another temporality and rhythm. Also left out in this definition is the potential of approaching things and spaces as events in their own right instead of something solely attributed to characters or overlooked as background setting. In Ryan’s article on “Space” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, she maintains this division, describing narrative space thus:

[t]his is the physically existing environment in which characters live and move. We may call it “setting,” but this intuitive notion of setting needs to be further refined: just as, in the theater, we can distinguish the stage on which events are shown from the broader world alluded to by the characters, in written narrative we can distinguish the individual locations in which narratively significant events take place from the total space implied by these events (Ryan 2012:8).

Despite the fact that Ryan does modify the idea of setting as a background, as she includes space as implicit in events, she does not acknowledge that space can be an event in itself. And precisely because Narratology does not consider space important in itself, the discipline ends up without a clear definition of what space is –

often the term is used either metaphorically or symbolically, and ultimately does not refer to actual spaces in novels.

The forgetting of space is also apparent in James Phelan's inventory over the development in narrative studies over the past forty years in "Narrative Theory, 1966-2006: A Narrative" (2006). From a spatial point of view, it is striking how human-centred his narrative is. He emphasizes "three prominent general conceptions of narrative during this period: narrative as formal system, narrative as ideological instrument, and narrative as rhetoric" (Phelan 2006:1). All three conceptions share a focus on the formal structure of a narrative of life-stories. This is either investigated in literature, as classical Narratology does, or broadened to also include non-literary experiences in order to understand "how narrative contributes to human beings efforts to structure and make sense of their experiences (5), as the cognitive narratologist does. The latter is characteristic for the so-called Narrative Turn that has developed in recent years. Here, narratological optics is used to look at life-as-narrative. As Phelan tells the story of this development, anthropocentrism is present on many levels: When narratologists look beyond the text, they do so with the human subject at the centre of attention, not trying to grasp the non-human world outside of language but the intersubjective world between humans. Language is considered a communicative tool, effectively condensed in Phelan's famous phrase that narrative is "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (9). Phelan's anthropocentrism is present even in his structure of the development in "A Narrative": In a self-reflective way, Phelan's argument is built around four protagonists, who each focuses on a different issue in narrative development. When compared to New Materialists' style, this is a striking formal gesture. Whereas Phelan structures his text around human protagonists telling a story progressing in time, New Materialist theorists almost always evoke the thing itself as protagonist in their opening argument (cf. Bennett 2010, Morton 2009). Space is left out of the narrative Phelan presents – only towards the end does he open up the possibility of including space in Narratology in the future, as he mentions space as one of four

unexplored fields within Narratology (cf. Phelan 32). I would like to take him at his word and accept this invitation to explore further.

In this chapter, I will first briefly sketch the role space has played in classic Narratology – even if it is only a peripheral one – and then secondly move from the role of space in Narratology to an examination of Descriptive Theory, as it is most often in the descriptive parts of a novel that space figures. In other words: my focus will shift from examining space in narratives to surveying the role of space in description. The last part of this chapter will consist of examples of new modes of including space into Narratology: In Descriptive Theory, and especially within German Narratology, there have been several individual attempts to integrate space more fully into a theory of narration. I do not intend to give a broad outline of the developments within Narratology similar to the ones already provided by Phelan and by Katrin Dennerlein in *Narratologie des Raumes* (2009); instead I will single out those narratologists who offer a constructive take on space in regard to my investigation into a new understanding of space in the novel.

## 1.2. Classic Narratology: Genette, Bal and Chatman

The exclusion of space lies at the very root of Narratology: the most cited and ground-breaking text in this field, Genette's *Figures I-III*, pays no great attention to space. Over the course of three volumes, only one minor chapter is dedicated to “La littérature et l'espace”, and Genette's space is not space *in* literature as much as a metaphorical use of the term. Even if he does acknowledge that space is a theme in literature, this is of no substantial interest to him as it does not affect the discourse level. Instead he turns his attention to the spatiality of language, and presents the following four features: First, language is a system that represents a space, in which each element has its own space. Secondly, he regards the book as a space, where words on the page create a space. Thirdly, he takes space to mean rhetorical figures, that is, space is the gap between what a rhetorical figure means and what it says. Finally, he finds space in the way all literature creates spaces, with the library as the emblematic example. Space is thus not only metaphorical, but

also an abstract category in which all kinds of things can be placed, yet Genette never contemplates space within a text's own world or spaces in the novel. Even as this brief chapter in *Figures I-III* only addresses space on a metaphorical level, space has no part at all in *Discours du Récit*, whose emphasis lies solely on narration, directly and indirectly devaluating the descriptive passages where space emerges. Genette makes a virtue of the fact that

Proust passé ordinairement pour un romancier prodigue en descriptions, et il doit sans doute cette réputation à une connaissance volontiers anthologique de son oeuvre [...] en fait, les passages descriptifs caractérisés ne sont, relativement à l'ampleur de l'oeuvre, ni très nombreux (guère plus d'une trentaine) ni très longs (la plupart ne dépassent pas quatre pages (Genettes 1972:133).

To Genette, Proust's text is neither defined by description on a quantitative level, that is, the descriptive passages does not take up much space in the whole of the seven volumes, nor qualitatively, so to speak, as he redefines the passages that could be described as descriptive as narrative. Genette asserts that the narrative does not stop or pause in these passages because it corresponds to a contemplative pause composed by the protagonist himself "et donc jamais le morceau descriptif ne s'évade de la temporalité de l'histoire" (134). Because Genette understands Proust's descriptions as part of the narrative, "c'est que la description, chez Proust, se résorbe en narration" (138), i.e. as something within the category of time and duration, it is only natural that space should not come to his attention. I agree with his notion that description in Proust is not a pause in narration but instead of concluding, as Genette does, that space and description are subservient to the narrative plot and the thoughts of character, I think it valuable to regard these passages in for instance Proust's work from a spatial vantage point. If we endeavour to analyse the kind of space that is being presented, we also need to redefine what we understand by narration and description. It could be argued that it is Genette who, even without mentioning space, is the first to take a step in the direction of a new approach to space through his variation on the

dichotomy between narration and description. Dennerlein, too, moves towards this conceptual shift, yet does not realize its full potential.

In continuation of Genette's narratology, Mieke Bal in her introductory work *Narratology* (1985) distinguishes between three levels of a narrative text: the text, the story, and the fabula, defining them as follows: "if one regards the text primarily as the product of the use of the medium, and the fabula primarily as the product of imagination, the story could be regarded as the result of an ordering" (Bal 2002:78). *The text* refers to the medium, to how the story is told, whereas *fabula* is understood as its elements, and *the story* is the ordering of these elements. With this distinction Bal's interests extend beyond the discursive level; although she does agree with Genette that the only thing the reader has access to is the written text, she for the sake of analysis wants to distinguish between three levels, and therefore also asks *what* the text consists of. Consequently, she opens up the possibility for including space on all three levels. On the textual level she distinguishes *description* from narration; on the level of fabula she includes *location* among the elements events, actors, time; and on the level of the story, the category of *space* is regarded as one of the aspects that constitute the ordering of the elements.

Genette integrated description into narration on the textual, discursive level in relation to Proust, but Bal treats description as a separate part of the text, even if she does so reluctantly: "Although descriptive passages would appear to be of marginal importance in narrative texts, they are, in fact, both practically and logically necessary" (36). She continues to provide the following definition of a description: "I will therefore define a description as a textual fragment in which features are attributed to objects" (36). To Bal, descriptions form an important element in the creation of a believable environment; they are necessary links between narrative elements, but do not hold value aside from this function. What Bal is interested in is thus not descriptive space, but descriptions as attributes to characters or aids in the development of the narrative plot. In this view, descriptions are only significant in relation to characters; Bal asks *who* sets the description in motion, seeking to

identify motivation behind the descriptive passages. She writes: “In the nineteenth-century realistic novel, descriptions were at least narratively motivated if they were not made narrative. And despite its efforts to avoid representation, the *nouveau roman* has continued to follow this tradition” (37). What could have been a step towards a definition of description as something that happens – as she also finds a narrative moment in the descriptive Nouveau Roman – fails to follow through, as Bal focuses, like Genette, on the character’s motivation for “speaking, looking, or seeing” (37) the objects, and does not dwell on the thing being described. Descriptions are not a question of space for Bal, but of time and character; as she observes, “the character must have both time to look and a reason to look at an object. Hence the curious characters, the men of leisure, the unemployed, and the Sunday wanderers” (37-38).

Consistent with Genette’s definition of space in the small chapter “La littérature et l’espace”, Bal continues to define “the rhetoric of description”, but whereas Genette’s interest begins and ends with the spatiality of language, Bal goes further and begins to scrutinize the elements of description, and defines the term as follows:

Descriptions consists of a theme (e.g., “house”), which is the object described, and a series of sub-themes (e.g., “door”, “roof”, “room”), which are the components of the object.[...] This may or may not be accompanied by predicates (e.g., “pretty”, “green”, “large”). These predicates are qualifying when they indicate a characteristic of the object (“pretty”); they are functional when they indicate a function, action, or possible use (41-42).

Between the theme and the sub-theme, Bal identifies a possibility for a metaphorical and metonymical relation, which can be combined in six different ways<sup>4</sup> that may vary in different historical periods and styles. With this definition Bal echoes one of the theorists of description, Philippe Hamon, whose concepts will be described in the next chapter. Even if solely on a rhetorical level,

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<sup>4</sup> The six different ways the rhetorical relations may be expressed are: 1) the referential, encyclopedic description, 2) the referential-rhetorical description, 3) metaphoric metonymy, 4) the systematized metaphor, 5) the metonymic metaphor, 6) the series of metaphors (Bal 2002:42-43).

Bal does provide preliminary work for analysing descriptions of space, but as her only interest lies in the way descriptions convey information to the reader and create a reliable environment, she reduces descriptions to something static, which means that description always conveys stable qualities of the environment surrounding the characters.

Within the same framework, Bal describes the *fabula* level where a location is defined as the place where events happen, which means that it is always linked to characters as “transitions from one state to another state, caused or experienced by actors” (182). Locations are background settings that support a thematic structure in a novel. This becomes apparent as she links spatial pairs of opposites – inside-outside, centre-periphery, far-near, safe-unsafe – to psychological, ideological, and moral oppositions. As a result, Bal turns her attention away from the materiality of the location, away from what these locations actually consist of, and towards psychological categories. This makes evident the problem with an anthropocentric perspective on space: when space is reduced to background to the foregrounded theme or character, it loses its distinctiveness *as space*. Additionally, at the end of her chapter on location, Bal finds herself distracted from writing about location by pursuing instead a deconstructionist need to distance herself from the oppositional way of thinking – of which the dichotomies centre-periphery and near-far are examples. Her work indirectly supports the point that Gumbrecht makes in *Stimmungen lesen* (2011) about the need for a third position in the study of literature. It is necessary to turn away from both Deconstruction and Cultural Studies if we are to have a reading that is “stimmungsorientiert” (Gumbrecht 2011:10), and if we are to regard literature as something that relates to and describes spaces and things in the world; where not only the subject frames and determines the world, but where the world is influenced by something non-human.

In the opening paragraphs of her chapter on space on the level of *the story*, Bal seems to be in line with my inquiry about space, as she states that: “[t]ogether with character, few concepts deriving from the theory of narrative texts are as self-evident and have yet remained so vague as the concept of space” (132). She continues to

define space as “these places [the locations from fabula] seen in relation to their perception” (133). Place is thus related to “the physical, mathematical measurable shape of spatial dimensions” (133) and space to perception and “the way characters bring their senses to bear on space” (133). This definition is unlike the one posed by Heidegger, as space here is dependent on humans. Much as she did on the fabula level, Bal defines space in relation to characters, but moves closer to an inquiry into space for its own sake by distinguishing between two types of spaces: On the one hand, space is seen as a “frame”, that is, “connected to the characters who ‘live’ it” (133), which means that space is “only a frame, a place of action” (136). Character’s sense perceptions – their sight, hearing, and touch – determine to what degree they are in contact with the rooms they perceive. On the other hand, Bal also recognizes space as “an acting place”, that is, as thematized space, which means that “[i]t becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake” (136). Yet Bal is not interested in the “non-human-ingredient” in the creation of space, and does not elaborate on the implications of thematized space, or how it could be represented in a text. This is, however, a question crucial to my inquiry and something I will return to in depth later in connection with Katrin Dennerlein’s similar pursuit. Instead, Bal focuses on space in relation to other elements of the story – on the way characters move in space, on the relationship between event and space – that is, not how space happens, but space as *topos*<sup>5</sup>: how specific actions are related to specific spaces. She also hints at the relationship between space and time, which creates a certain rhythm in the narrative. Bal thus touches on important aspects of space, but as her interests lie elsewhere, her analysis remains superficial, with no examples or elaboration.

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<sup>5</sup> Space as *topos* is developed in Ernst Robert Curtius’ *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948). The connection between actions and space is further something Michail M. Bakhtin concentrates on in his concept of chronotope. For a discussion of this concept’s relation to narratology and space see Dennerlein 2009: 168-169.

One narratologist often mentioned in the field of space in narrative is Seymour Chatman.<sup>6</sup> In *Story and Discourse – Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978), he not only employs the typical distinction between *story-time* (*erzählte Zeit*) and *discourse-time* (*Erzählzeit*), but through the categories of *story-space* and *discourse-space*, he also adds space to the vocabulary. On the story level, Chatman distinguishes between events (happenings, actions) and existents (characters and setting), pointing out that “[a]s the dimension of story-events is time that of story-existence is space” (Chatman 1980:96). Accordingly, if characters and settings are to exist in a narrative, they need a space to exist, in the same way that events unfold in time. Space is thus established on the story level, but as he still differentiates between the temporal event and the spatial existent, space remains a static category. For Chatman “[e]vents are not spatial, though they occur in space; it is the entities that perform or are affected by them that are spatial” (96). As a consequence, he leaves out the possibility of regarding space as something that takes place – that *happens* as something dynamic. Furthermore, his concept of space is always linked to characters, as he categorizes both space and character in the category of “existents”. In a footnote, he adds to his concept of event that

Physicists [...] would be right to smile at the naïveté of this distinction. Everything in the universe, of course, is an event in some sense; not only the sun but each stone consists ultimately of a series of electric charges. This event-existent distinction is a purely folk (“commonsense”) attitude taught us by the codes of our culture. [...] Narrative analysis is based on folk, not scientific, physics (96).

By merely focusing on the culturally inherited and anthropocentric understanding of events, Chatman remains within the realm of thinking criticized by Gumbrecht in which the study of literature does not have a vocabulary for the material world. As Gumbrechts states in “Reading for the *Stimmung*” (2008), “we still do not know [...] how to reach the material world through the

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<sup>6</sup> See *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2007), where the entry on “Space in narrative” mentions Chatman as one of few theorists to define narrative space (Herman, Jahn, Ryan 2007:552).

layers of our consciousness and our “social constructions of reality”, as they are mainly constituted in language” (Gumbrecht 2008:221). One might balk at this statement; after all, did not some of the great writers of the twentieth century approach this issue, fashioning events out of the way the sun rises, or imagining the perspective of a thing such as a stone? I would argue that the Modernist novel lets these non-human things emerge and become visible through the language of the narrative form. This is the case in the interludes of Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves* (1931), where the sun sets the narrative in motion and as a result appears as an event itself, as will be analysed in chapter 3. The same is true in the last scene of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27), where a paving-stone in a moment of perception becomes the main actor in the scene. Here, chronometric time comes to a halt and the perceiving subject enters into the world of emerging things that are described as events in themselves. In these examples, upholding a distinction between *temporal-events* and *space-existents* would seem pointless, since what *happens* is space. By maintaining the “commonsense” understanding of events, Chatman stays within an anthropocentric framework, where everything that *happens* is caused by a human subject.

One new aspect that Chatman does add to Narratology is on the discourse level. As discourse-time refers to the arrangement of events in the discourse, *discourse-space* “can be defined as *focus of spatial attention*. It is the framed area to which the implied audience’s attention is directed by the discourse, that portion of the total story-space that is ‘remarked’ or closed upon” (102). *Discourse-space* is the explicit *story-space*, whereas *story-space* is the implied total of what the characters see outside of the frame; what the reader “is prompted to create in imagination” (104). According to Chatman, *discourse-space* in literature is abstract because it is verbal instead of expressed in icon or analogy as in cinema, and he proposes three ways in which verbal narratives can create mental images of space for the reader: by verbal qualifiers (such as “huge”, “shaggy”); by reference to existents which are standardized (such as “skyscraper”, “1940 Chevrolet coupe”), and through comparisons with standards (“a dog as big as a horse”) (102). To these three he adds *point of view* as

yet another way to identify through whose eyes space is perceived. In his comparison with film he considers space in literature inferior, stating that it is a medium not geared to present spatial relations. Chatman thus upholds the distinction from Lessing that pictures are better than words in dealing with space. Film techniques supply a vocabulary of how space operates in literature with concepts such as *the camera eye* and *the framed screen*. Finally, he lists three ways of creating mental images tied to the precise visual space in films, not to literature and how it – more than creating exact visual images of things and spaces – also strives to capture a synesthetic relation to the world that does not rely on the human perspective. Precisely such synesthetic perception provides the opportunity to look at space without a human character in the middle, guiding the reader's point of view. This pins down the problem with Chatman's conception of space. His is a concept with a human centre, implied even in the definition of space on the story level as the existent, which contains both character and setting. This anthropocentrism becomes even more obvious in his definition of setting as that which "sets the character off" in the usual figurative sense of the expression; it is the place and collection of objects 'against which' his actions and passions appropriately emerge" (138-139). The setting is the background upon which characters act. Chatman, as was also the case with Bal, does not in his examples and definitions show interest in the "setting"; instead he focuses on how to distinguish the figure from the ground and on which character might be defined as a character, and which is just part of the setting.

## 2. The Role of Space in Descriptive Theory

### 2.1. Field of Inquiry

So far I have been concerned with space in narrative definitions, dealing with the dichotomies time-space and narration-description. Approaching the question from another angle, I would like to substitute the point of view of narrative with a closer look at the parts of the novel where space most often appears: In description.

Description and space are often coupled opposite time and narrative, and just as space has been undervalued and underexposed, so has description. Despite this negligence, there has been a sub-branch of Narratology that has tried to establish description as an important element in the production of fiction. In a 1981s edition of *Yale French Studies*, different narratologists present their take on description and try to move beyond Barthes' disapproval of description as an element which only portrays a mimetic reality, and thus leaves no room for meaning and interpretation. Using this as my starting point, I will be tracing a history of description from Barthes' understanding of it as representational superfluity, as nothing more than an "effet de réel", to the way the French narratologist Philippe Hamon gives it interpretative meaning by positing it as an important component in the interpretation of plot and character. Despite their different approaches to description, both Barthes and Hamon neglect the role of space in descriptions. And for different reasons; to Barthes, it is unimportant mimesis, and for Hamon space is only important insofar as it predicts or adds something to the development of plot or characters. In the same 1981 edition, Edward S. Casey offers his own take on description. Unlike the narratologists, he proposes to consider it a presentation of reality, as a *making visible* of something already there. Along this line of thought, I suggest a change in direction away from both the representational and interpretational perspective on description, and towards an understanding of description as *presentation*. In the presentation of reality, space can be analysed as something important in itself; as an aspect of the literary work that does not have to be subservient to the interpretation of other elements. Since 1981, description has been the subject of scattered interest, most recently Werner Wolf's and Bernhart Walter's *Studies in Intermediality: Description in Literature and Other Media* (2007) stated the relevance of description in regard to intermediality. A juxtaposition of Wolf's nuanced and interdisciplinary view on description and Casey's idea of presentation will form the discussion at the end of this chapter, as the links between their methods may prove helpful when launching a new way of looking at space in description.

Description has been recognized as a valued category in narrative theory since the 1980s, as detailed by Ansgar Nünning in “Towards a Typology: Poetics and History of Description in Fiction” (2007), but its importance has always been attached to other narrative elements, such as character and narrative. There has never been a sustained interest in the things that description typically consists of: spaces. This means that even though space and description are often coupled, this pair is mostly intended to form a counterpart to time and narrative. In the desire to prove the relevance of either description or space, most theories relate them to other, more commonly known, narrative elements (time, character, plot) and not to each other, since both are equally undervalued. One of the problems with description is that even though most readers will recognize a passage as descriptive, there has been very little discussion as to what description actually consists of. Its often indistinct boundaries have led Philippe Hamon, the narratologist who reinstated description in literary theory in the 1980s, to create a formula for description:

C+F+IT (V+PE<sub>q</sub>/PE<sub>f</sub>) (Hamon 1982:160)

A description according to Hamon consists of C= a character, who F=looks at/speaks with/acts with an IT=setting/milieu/landscape/collection of objects, which triggers a series of sub-themes, a V=vocabulary, which is in a metonymic relation to the IT. The sub-themes can be expanded by a PE=predicative expansion that can either be PE<sub>q</sub>=qualificative or PE<sub>f</sub>=functional. With this definition it is made clear that Bal draws on Hamon in her understanding of description. According to Hamon, the bracket can be compared to a dictionary sequence of entry→definition→examples. In this comparison, one may find a reason why descriptions have a reputation of boring the reader with accumulative information as opposed to Brook’s desire for the plot.<sup>7</sup> The idea that literature could be distilled into a formula does

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<sup>7</sup> Perec’s novels and essays explicitly toy with this dictionary form, which may explain why Perec’s text *Still Life/Style leaf* is mentioned in the reference in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* concerning unreadability in cases of an overload of

also – at least to Gumbrecht’s present-based understanding of literature – seem rather misplaced, as it not only moves literature further away from the reality it portrays, but also reduces an already mediated relationship to the world to a number of mathematical symbols. Apart from any reservations one may have against formulaic thinking, the formula does raise the question of space in the development of Descriptive Theory, since one of the formula’s three components is an  $\Pi$ =setting, that is, a space. Yet when assessed only in relation to an action carried out by a character, space remains one of the problems that seem implicit when speaking of description, and one that is never addressed from a spatial or material point of view, but is always transferred to a question of character. Space indeed seems to be so closely tied to description that Nünning does not mention the role of space when he at the end of his essay traces still-unexplored areas of description. One question that remains unanswered is whether Descriptive Theory offers a way to examine the material side of space and things in novels. Is it possible to focus only on the bracket in Hamon’s formula – to establish other modes of analysing space that capture the passages where space is not subject to the story or the characters?

## 2.2. From Representation to Interpretation: Barthes and Hamon

Like space, description has been an underdeveloped and underestimated category not only in Narratology, but in general literary theory since the seventeenth century. In “The Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive” (1981) Hamon writes that since Boileau’s *Art Poétique* (1674), description has been regarded as pure ornament; something which must be as compressed and take up as little space as possible, so as to not to bore the reader. Boileau writes:

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space. It is thus also striking that Bal in “Over-writing as Un-writing: descriptions, World-making and Novelistic Time” (2001-2003) chooses Perec as an example of “not a particularly gripping read” (Bal 2007:580) and thus enforces the idea of boredom when descriptive order takes over the energy of the text.

Sometimes an Author, fond of his own Thought,  
Pursues his object till it's over-wrought:  
If he describes a House he shews the Face,  
And after walks you round from place to place;  
Here is the vista, there the doors unfold,  
Balconies' here are ballustered with Gold.  
Then counts the Rounds and Ovals in the Halls,  
"The Festoons the Friezes and the Astragals."  
Tir'd with his tedious Pomp, away I run,  
And skip over twenty Pages to be gone.  
Of such Descriptions the vain Folly flee,  
And shun their barren superfluity.  
All that is needless ("*detail inutile*") carefully avoid. (Hamon 1981:9)

Boileau defined three problems that have continued to haunt description up until today and that Hamon even reproduces. The first is Boileau's presentation of description as "barren superfluity"; something belonging to the surface, which is "needless" in comparison to the deeper levels of a text and the depiction of general ideas. The second problem is that of pure ornament; being not fundamental to the understanding of the text, description is just frippery. This judgment is typical of the rhetorical tradition. In "Some paradoxes of Description" (1981), Michel Beaujour traces the understanding of description back to the Greek word "ekphrasis" (Beaujour 1981:28), which means to picture in words. "Ekphrasis" is here epideictic oratory, that is, aesthetically autonomous and thus "tainted with the dubious reputation of sophistry" (Beaujour 1981:30). Description is considered a way for the author to display his rhetorical skills, as Boileau also illustrates; not belonging to the sensual world, but something conjured up in mind of the author. It follows that description is something the author does with "tedious Pomp" and "fond of his own thought"; a purely discursive problem without any relation to the world. The third problem is that of readability, closely related to the problem of boredom. Description makes the reader want to "skip over twenty pages". Due to the intellectual and rhetorical game, that is, the display of the author's skills and knowledge, the accumulation of details makes the reader want to skip the descriptive parts in order to arrive at the "meaningful" parts related to the story or the characters. The problem of readability is recited in many

introductory texts about description (c.f. Beaujour, Kittay, Hamon, Bal). The critique that Gumbrecht makes in *Production of Presence* of the way humanities always search for depth and meaning is clearly visible between the lines of this undervaluation of description, as Gumbrecht notes

The institutionally uncontested central position in the humanities of interpretation – that is, of the identification and of the attribution of meaning – for example, is backed up by the positive value that our languages quite automatically attach to the dimension of “depth” (Gumbrecht 2004:21)

Hamon acknowledges the problems posed by Boileau’s reading and in his effort to reinstate the role of description in narrative theory, he tries to counter them in the later text “What is a description?” (1982). But in his insistence on interpretation, he does not acknowledge the potential in the material things actually described, but succumbs to the need to go beyond or behind what is actually described.<sup>8</sup> Hamon explains how we must understand description not as something belonging to the surface, as ornamental pomp, as did Boileau, but as a passage where meaning is condensed; not needless, but meaningful. Hamon re-establishes description in Narratology by rendering its significance in the way it relates to other elements of the narrative structure:

the description is the point where the narrative stops, is suspended, but also the indispensable point where it is “preserved”, where the characters and the setting, in a kind of semantic “gymnastics”, to use Valéry’s term, participate in a

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<sup>8</sup> This is a typical tendency in Descriptive Theory, also shown in Michel Beaujour’s “Some paradoxes of Description” (1981). Here he argues that since description in its original meaning, “to picture in words”, is taken from classical rhetoric, where it means to describe paintings in words, it is so far removed from the real, (describing a reality that is represented on a canvas) that even when it describes objects of daily life, it does so in the desire to de-familiarize them. In this de-familiarizing process, “literary description always opens onto another scene set, so to speak, behind the worldly things it purports to depict” (Beaujour 1981: 42). Beaujour, as almost any of the narratologists, does not want to stay on the surface, but is searching for something behind it, and what he finds is that “descriptions, then, are *fantasies*. As the multifaceted mirror of Desire, description bears only an oblique and tangential relationship to real things, bodies and spaces. This is the reason why description is so intrinsically bound up with utopia, and with pornography” (59).

redundancy. The setting confirms, sharpens, or reveals the character as a bundle of simultaneous significant features, or else it introduces an indication (or a red herring) concerning what is to happen (Hamon 1982:168).

Description is important because it is either a possibility for the author to show features of the characters through the setting, or it is a way for the reader to interpret or predict the plot of the story. The material things and spaces that description depicts are thus not important in themselves, only as they refer to something else and by that become meaningful. Furthermore, description is for Hamon not related or limited to physical reality; instead it belongs to the world of language and thought. In accordance with Boileau, description to Hamon is a construction based upon the lexical knowledge of the author: “It is not the complexity of reality which induces the prolongation (and hence the closing) of the description, but the limits of the lexicon available to the author”(158) and “[t]o be precise, every description has the form of a metonymically homogeneous lexical block whose extension is related to the *available* vocabulary of the author, not the degree of complexity of the reality itself” (162). Even though Hamon identifies description as a concept exclusively dependent on the language available to the author, he does not regard it as just ornamental, as a rhetorical exercise. To demonstrate its importance, he ranks it as an integrated part of the narrative whole, which it reaffirms, reproduces, and reorganizes. Consequently, his entire theory of description is based upon the integration of description into the narrative. 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 act with it, as the formula showed. In this view, description is always subject to actions carried out by characters. Based upon these assumptions, Hamon categorizes five different types of description, the readability of each depending on the amount of detail, and the amount of knowledge required by the author to produce them and the reader to understand them, respectively.

Hamon may wish to reintroduce description into Narratology, but ends up repeating the very problems he condemns classical narratologists for creating, that is, “the conception of human beings

(that is “characters”) that must remain the center of the work” (10). As a consequence, he fails to observe the material qualities of description. His human-centred and meaning-oriented framework reduces his perspective, and this anthropocentric view on description permeates every level of his theory. First, he understands description as something conceived in the mind of the author by consulting notebooks and lexicons, thus not acknowledging the fact that descriptions may refer to and evolve around the concrete material world. As others have pointed out in their criticism of Hamon (c.f. Elrud Ibsch “Historical Changes in the Function of Spatial Description in Literary Texts” (1982)), this narrow definition may stem from his examples, as he is primarily analysing Realist novels, particularly Zola, who did use this method to construct the setting for his novels. Second, Hamon’s anthropocentric attitude is reproduced in the way description of places, spaces, and things must be integrated into the human-centred narration, to the extent that it is reduced to playing the part of showing features of the characters.

And yet Hamon does restore description in a significant way: by allowing it to be meaningful. To him, description is not just a setting or a pause that the reader can skip, but something packed with meaning that can be an indicator for both characters and the development of the plot. The reason for his interpretive emphasis must be found in the conception of description in the tradition he seeks to depart from. In earlier narratological theory, description was commonly viewed as plain representation, that is, as a mimetic reproduction of reality, adding nothing to the way we understand a text (cf. Genette). Roland Barthes is the most famous proponent of this view. In “L’Effet de Réel” (1968) he expressed a critique of description that went on to become one of the key texts that all descriptive narratologists measure their views against. In this short text, Barthes argues against adding meaning to passages that describe, for instance, the interior of a room. To the structural economy of a text, they are “scandaleuses [...], ou, ce qui est encore plus inquiétant, elles semblent accordées à une sorte de *luxe* de la narration, prodigue au point de dispenser des détails « inutiles » et d’élever ainsi par endroits le coût de l’information narrative”

(Barthes 1968:84). To Barthes, descriptive parts of a text do not fall within what he terms “de l’ordre du *notable*” (85), they are “inévitables” (85), and he asks us to recall, as did Boileau and Beaujour, their origin in the ekphrasis. Description is thus burdened by two opposite – and according to Barthes – equally negative elements. On the one hand, in its origin description is purely discursive and without meaning; its goal is ornamental and does not refer to any reality or meaning beyond itself. It is, in short, dispensable. On the other hand, with Flaubert a “contrainte [...] référentielle” (87) arises, where description pretends to render the objectivity of reality, but if description only reproduces reality, it loses its functional relevance according to Barthes; it then becomes nothing more than a “effet de réel”: “car dans le moment même où ces détails sont réputés dénoter directement le réel, ils ne font rien d’autre, sans le dire, que le signifier” (88). To Barthes, the problem with description is that it dissolves the distance between the thing and language, leaving no room for meaning, instead pretending that reality means something just by adding useless details. In the search for the autonomy of meaning, that is, its non-referentiality, descriptions that put forth things and spaces are suspicious. It is this understanding of description that Hamon reacts against.

It is now possible to trace a movement in the understanding of description – from its representational redundancy in Barthes to its interpretive and thus meaningful relevance in Hamon. The issue I take with both theories is that they are grounded in Saussure’s understanding of signs within a closed discursive system, if viewed from two different angles. According to Saussure, the meaning of a sign does not appear in its relation to an object outside of language, but in its relation to other signs. For Barthes, this means that descriptions consisting of details describing objects are without meaning and thus superfluous; in fact, they reveal what he calls a realist illusion. Hamon, on the other hand, takes his point of departure in the relational structure in Saussure’s understanding of signs. For Hamon, descriptions turn out to be important in their relation to other parts of the narrative whole. They are not just of representational value, referring to an outside object-world, but are compressed meaningful parts of the text, which helps the reader

interpret other parts of the text. Their assimilation into the relational system of the text is emphasized in the way descriptions are surrounded and motivated by events and actions made by the characters. In this way description for Hamon is not a question of mimesis, but of how its significance relates to other narrative parts.

### 2.3. From Interpretation to Presentation: Casey and Wolf

Hamon's interpretation of Boileau titled "Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive" appeared in the 1981 edition of *Yale French Studies No. 61* – "Towards a Theory of Description". That same issue featured Edward S. Casey, who in his submission "Literary Description and Phenomenological Method" suggests that it is possible to find a way out of the discursive circle. He advances an approach to allow descriptions to get back in touch with reality without being reduced to needless mimesis. In his text, Casey compares descriptive passages from Proust and Merleau-Ponty, and argues that in their descriptive modes phenomenology and literature each have a form of fiction in common that is not removed from reality, but refers to it from different positions: "*Each [phenomenology and Literature] is, rather, a form of 'fiction.'*" But they are the latter in quite different ways, since the one form of "fiction" is exemplary-suppositional in nature whereas the other operates by feigned commitment to a quasi-reality in the ambiance of avowal" (Casey 1981:184). In this comparison, Casey argues that neither purport to be a reconstruction or an explanation of a historical reality; instead the reality both descriptions tend towards is perceived reality, and the way they do this implies a complex blend of fiction and reality. Despite its dictum to get to the things themselves, phenomenology uses imagination in developing its perceptual examples whereas literature despite its "unfettered venture into the unreal" (184) avows or tries to bring forth "the perceptual real" (197). This comparison clarifies that description in literature does not have to be redundant representation or important interpretation, but in its kinship with phenomenology it can also be presentation. That means literary description does not have to be either related to a mimetic reality, and thus be purely representational, or be regarded

within its own fictional frame, referring to nothing but other elements within this frame. By freeing description from these obligations, its interpretive importance begins to take shape. And by approaching description in literature in the light of phenomenology it is possible to move beyond these constrictions and to consider literature as a possible opening towards a material reality.

In this view, “de-descriptive’ is taken literally as writing-about an object, person, or event” (186). To describe becomes a legitimate way to stay on the surface. According to Casey, both Proust and Merleau-Ponty find “the surface itself, the phenomenal play there, perfectly rich enough to give description its due” (186). This reveals a fundamental problem with narratological theory: its constant need to get beyond the surface. In its quest for meaning, it renders the surface suspect. Understood as *surface* is both literally what is directly there in front of us in the world and formally how these surroundings are depicted in a text. An interest in surface means not looking for hidden truths behind material things and spaces: what is *there* is enough, it is in Casey’s words “a remaining and resting at the surface of things, at their contours and movements, their colors and textures, without seeking what is latent or withheld from view” (Casey 187). Both Proust and Merleau-Ponty try in their descriptions to let this “*thisness*” (188) emerge. Implicit is a concept of surface as something neither static nor ornamental. For Casey “the surface is a moving surface” (199); it changes, and the description itself is a temporal event. As he develops his argument, he touches on the same dichotomy discussed in my previous chapter between narration and description. He wants to do away with the view that description is a static philosophical category used to exemplify ideas whereas narration is a literary temporal category used to narrate actions and events. He argues that in showing *thisness* Proust and Merleau-Ponty dissolve the boundary between description and narration, philosophy and literature, time and space. *Thisness* is for Casey not a moment frozen in time; brought forth through description are not just stable objects but also actions and events, and even when stable objects are described, time is not absent as “it *takes time* to describe anything” (193).

Casey avoids the interpretive trap that literary narratological scholars often fall into when faced with descriptions. That is, failing to come to terms with the fact that they “just” portray material phenomena and taking the further step to describe *how* they do it. Werner Wolf achieves something similar in “Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation – General Features and Possibilities of Realization in Painting, Fiction and Music” (2007). Here he attempts to conceptualize description as a mode of organizing signs that applies not only to literature, but to other media as well. To prepare the ground for this interdisciplinary and transmedial field of research, Wolf takes his point of departure in a definition of description from everyday use and his view is close to Casey’s. In so doing, he parts with the dominating understanding of description as representation and opens a path to something other than the purely meaning-oriented and thus interpretive understanding of description. He establishes three basic functions of description; the first is the referential function, which “implies either the identification of a real phenomenon (in particular if it is well-known) or the construction of a fictitious phenomenon within artistic or medial possible worlds. Both tasks are achieved through the attribution of usually a plurality of qualities to concrete phenomena” (Wolf 2007:16). The second is the representational and experiential function, which leaves “the impression of being re-centered in the space created by the described object and of experiencing it as a possible, even plausible world, in spite of the fact that one retains a residual consciousness of its being “made-up”” (16). The third is the pseudo-objectivizing and interpretive function, which in many everyday descriptions means “to provide facts about these phenomena rather than interpretations” (15), but which according to Wolf “is debatable in the context of the arts and media” (17). With these functions Wolf connects two strands of presentation and interpretation in Descriptive Theory, allowing description to present and not merely interpret, as descriptions create the “aura of objectivity” (17). This does not imply a naïve understanding of description as something absolutely objective, as Wolf notes:

in fact, there is no such thing as an absolutely objective object-centered referential description, since description, as mentioned above, always presupposes a subject, the descriptor, and his or her perspective (although the descriptor [...] need not necessarily be part of the descriptive representation). In practice a descriptive act could therefore even be said to be tendentially bipolar: in it, a dominant referential, object-centered pole is opposed to a subdominant subject-centered pole (Wolf 2007:26).

Too often this sub-domination of the subject has led to readings of the hidden agendas of character's thoughts and feelings instead of focusing on the dominant part of the description, that is, the object-centred pole. To Wolf description is "a representational use of signs that highlights the physical "whatness" of a concrete object through detailed attributions" (35). The accentuation of *whatness* recalls Casey's *thisness*; both accentuate the materiality of the world's objects, dwell on the surface of things and insist that things are what they are. Things appear to be rendered from an objective perspective, but always in the light of the constructed world, hence the "pseudo". Wolf thus parts with the constricting designation of description as only interpretation, while acknowledging that "the descriptive construction or representation of the "givens", for instance of a narrative possible world, is not an "innocent" business, but serves a purpose" (17). Wolf means to form a concept of description that includes not only literature but also paintings and music. In this transmedial perspective, he steers clear of the interpretive regime that is typical of literary theories of description, and, like Casey, founds his concept on material reality; the everyday experience that all media have in common. Even though he does not specifically focus on spaces and things, he offers a way to understand description that allows it to come into view and thus offers the background, if you will, upon which a reading for space can begin.

### 3. New Constellations

#### 3.1. Dynamic Descriptions: Hamon, Sternberg, Mosher

A continuing problem has so far been the distinction between narration and description, both in narrative theory in general and in more specialized Descriptive Theory. And even though I do not agree with the way narratologists such as Hamon approach description, he has proposed three ways in which description may be made dynamic. Also due to the work of Meir Sternberg and Harold F. Mosher Jr., a softening of the sharp distinction between narration and description has begun to take place, though their concepts still have the human subject as the focal point. In the following, I will outline how descriptions of space are indeed dynamic, even temporal, and to do this I use an example from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

One of the reasons why description has so often been cast in opposition to narration is because of their difference in order and structure. Description is understood as a text portraying “objects or persons or their qualities in stasis, in simultaneous relation, and these are organized by spatial markers like adverbs of place. [...] The pace and often the tempo are slow to the point of being arrested” (Mosher 1991:442-3). Narration, in contrast, depicts “persons or objects in successive movement or transformation in a context involving a telos and organized by chronological markers” (Mosher 1991:442). Much as space is a lacuna in narrative studies, so is time (but also space) in Descriptive Theory. This tendency originated in the traditional definition of description as linked to space and narrative as linked to time, hence description and space are something outside of time, something dead and static, whereas narrative is dynamic and temporal.<sup>9</sup> It follows that if narration is a

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<sup>9</sup> Beaujour writes on these contrasting terms: “Description, which opens (or should in principle open) windows in the reader’s imagination, which expands worlds and multiplies quasi-perceptions, ought to be considered a life-force, the ever-available key to inexhaustible treasures. It is, on the contrary, scorned, skipped, or else praised for the paradoxical reason that it has nothing to do with the real world” (Beaujour 1981:47). He makes it clear that description is not traditionally considered a life-force, but is often associated with something dead. Beaujour rediscovers this in Barthes, as

temporal flow of actions, description is what stops the chain of events with its simultaneous order. One example that challenges this notion of description, and reminds us that we need a more nuanced understanding of description, can be found in Virginia Woolf's depiction of the house in the interludes in *The Waves*. Here, description is not stasis, but borrows from narration its chronological markers such as "now", and uses temporal verbs such as "began" to indicate a change of events. Transformation, customarily associated with narration, is here used to describe events consisting solely of space and things. No static background here – *things* are happening:

*Now, too, the rising sun came in at the window, touching the red-edged curtain, and began to bring out circles and lines. Now in the growing light its whiteness settled in the plate; the blade condensed its gleam. Chairs and cupboards loomed behind so that though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved. The looking-glass whitened its pool upon the wall. The real flower on the window-sill was attainted by a phantom flower. Yet the phantom was part of the flower, for when a bud broke free the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too (Woolf 2000b:55).*

In this passage, time is passing and events are taking place, just not human-centred events or time. Instead space is an activity between the things presented: chairs and cupboards are not part of a static setting, but *loomed behind*, the looking-glass is not a mirror for the identity of a character, but is presented plainly in its materiality, in the way it *whitened its pool upon the wall*. Every sentence describes a movement. There are no passive verbs, such as different forms of the verb to be, which is otherwise what most narratologists describe as the dominant verb in descriptions. On the contrary, the passage is crowded by active sensorial verbs, such as *touching*, *condensed*, *loomed*, *whitened*, *opened*. Not only is time present and happening; as

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he writes that: "'Capturing life" really means seeing dead" (47). In criticizing description for giving life to dead things, Barthes echoes the tradition of "still life" paintings, to which description of spaces and things is often compared. In this regard a representation of things and spaces is a static view of objects as opposed to actions carried out by humans. "Still life" or "nature morte" is something artificially arranged without life. See also Marc Eli Blanchard "On Still Life" (1981) for a history of still life paintings and narrativity.

the repetition of the adverb *now* underlines, the passage is also full of events taking place on a physical level.

The problem with the order of description is that it does not adhere to a teleological Aristotelian narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end, comparable to the way a human life story develops. Viewed from a progressive linear perspective, description is an unordered text passage, but that does not mean that it is outside of time. Rather, the time that does pass is not human-centred time; it is not measured on a human scale with a beginning and end. The problem is, as Meir Sternberg notes in “Ordering the Unordered: Time, Space and Descriptive Coherence” (1981), “the asymmetry between the spatiality of its [descriptions] object and the temporality of its presentation” (Sternberg 1981:61). Echoing Lessing, Sternberg states the apparent paradox that description in literature puts forth spatial relations in a temporal medium. However, this does not mean that the temporality of the written medium cannot describe spatial relations. On the contrary, the narrative form can allow that which may otherwise be perceived as static to emerge as motion; indeed, it may temporalize spatial objects, as Woolf proves. Descriptive passages are often presented in the beginning of a novel, so as to set the scene, but by withholding information about for instance a place or object, it is Sternberg’s point (similar to Casey’s) that even the most static thing can become dynamic: “So, however static the represented object itself as an entity extending in space, its representation in or rather along a temporal medium becomes remarkable dynamic” (Sternberg 1981:84) – a point that will be further proven in the analysis of the way Woolf structures space in her novel.

One way to rethink the relationship between description and narration is to relate it to the conflict between the human and non-human world. Hamon’s formula stated that description is an encounter between a C=human and an IT=setting/objects. It is “the point at which a metaphorical assimilation of human/non-human, [...] intersect” (Hamon 1982:167). Hamon reads this metaphorical relation between human and non-human on behalf of the character; the non-human part must thus be assimilated so as



emphasizing a plot of mystery” (Mosher 1991:432). In *descriptized narration*, the pace is slowed down; progression is replaced with simultaneity; verbs are turned into adjectives, thus spatializing an otherwise temporal narrative mode. The concept of *descriptized narration* allows space to stand out in text passages other than in the passages normally characterized as description. The other category, *narratized description* is however of no great interest to Mosher: he briefly defines it as “a character acts by perceiving or describing or manufacturing an object, thus making the predominating descriptive subject matter appear to be part of narration” (443). Both of these terms turn out to be inadequate in the case of Woolf, who uses the opposite technique: instead of turning verbs into adjectives, she describes with the help of verbs. In Woolf’s depiction of space, the pace is not merely slowed; she in effect temporalizes description, as will become clear through my reading in chapter 3. The problem with Mosher’s categories is that they seem to favour plot, time and character. There is a softening of the distinction between narration and description in descriptized narration, an approximation of spatializing plot and the temporal flow; in narratized description, on the other hand, description is subject to the action of characters.

### 3.2. The Inclusion of Space in German Narratology: Hoffmann and Dennerlein

While classic Narratology only affords space a peripheral role, German Narratology has seen several individual attempts to integrate space more fully into a theory of narration. The first example was Gerhard Hoffmann’s *Raum, Situation, erzählte Wirklichkeit* (1978), which within the last couple of years has been followed by efforts by Ansgar Nünning, Wolfgang Hallet, Birgit Neumann, Birgit Haupt, and Katrin Dennerlein.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance the article by Ansgar Nünning in the collection by Wolfgang Hallet and Birgit Neumann *Raum und Bewegung in der Literatur* (2009), and Peter Wenzel’s *Einführung in die Erzähltextanalyse* (2004) where space has its own chapter “Zur Analyse des Raums” by Birgit Haupt.

Hoffmann's monumental work on space in the English and American novel takes its point of departure in what Dennerlein terms a "strukturalistisches Projekt, dem ein phänomenologisches Raumkonzept zu Grunde liegt" (Dennerlein 2009:25). With this theoretical constellation, Hoffmann seems a precursor to my attempt to combine a phenomenological approach with a narratological one. His Structuralist approach is apparent in that he understands a text as a coherent whole, which means that space for him is part of what he takes to be the smallest epic entity: the epic situation, alongside character, time and event. But opposite both Genette and Bal, the main aim of his book is to inscribe space as an equally important part of narrative as time. Instead of accentuating the dichotomy between story and discourse, and focusing on the formalistic side of language – as Chatman, Bal, and Genette do – Hoffmann regards the novel as

Wirklichkeitsrepräsentation [...] für die Raum und Zeit als Anschauungsformen bzw. im literarischen Text als Gestaltungskategorien konstitutiv sind. Sie [his reflections on space] verstehen Raum als narratives Element (und damit als artikulatorische Instanz) des Werkes, das sowohl von Strukturen des gelebten Raums der Empirie wie von Gestaltungsbedingungen des literarischen Texten abhängig ist (Hoffmann 1978:2).

Due to his understanding of the novel as a representation of reality, he is the first to succeed in inverting the terms and actually develop a definition of space based on the everyday experience of spaces. This leads him to phenomenology. In his introduction, Hoffmann describes his own method as a combination of "das Begriffsvokabular der philosophischen Anthropologie und der strukturalistischen Narrativitätsforschung" (3). His philosophical foundations rest on the work on space carried out by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Otto Friedrich Bollnow, David Émile Dürkheim, and Elisabeth Ströker, especially the latter from whom he borrows the concepts of "*Anschauungsraum, Aktionsraum und Gestimmterraum*" (5). These three concepts are the first of five different ways proposed by him to analyse space in the novel. They form useful tools in a reading for space and merit closer scrutiny for my

purposes. From this phenomenological starting point, his book changes directions, as he pursues not just space and things and how they are presented, but also what they mean. This interest arises from his understanding of literature “als situative Umsetzung von Bedeutung” (x). As a result, he in the second part of the book couples the three concepts of space-relations with different thematic “Sinnmodellen” (107), and shifts his attention from representation of space to the way it relates to characters and themes in novels. In this way the Structuralist approach, where each element of the text corresponds to another, obscures the place-phenomenological awareness of things and spaces in their own appearance, and thus, like Bal, he loses sight of space. He appears to end up supporting Gumbrecht’s critique in regard to the paradigm of meaning, and as a result neglects aspects of presence in the search for interpretations. The final part of the book adheres to this critique as Hoffmann first examines space as symbol, then different narrative situations dependent on their relationship with space, and lastly the “Räumliche Grossstrukturen im Roman”(587). Despite the fact that he is caught in the same anthropocentric snare as Bal, his three concepts of space attempt to provide a phenomenological foundation for readings of narrative texts, and do allow different representations of space and things, as they relate the phenomenological intertwining of subject and object to different narrative modes and structures. Before I continue, each of his three concepts of space warrants consideration.

The first, and, according to Hoffmann, most common space in the novel, is “*der gestimmte Raum*” (55), which he defines as atmospheric in the way it surrounds the subject. In its surrounding aspect it is both subjective and objective; it opens itself towards the subject, but at the same time its external qualities allow other subjects to experience its expressiveness. Hoffmann outlines two ways of looking at space and things in “*der gestimmte Raum*”: through its intersubjective character or through the way things express themselves in colour, form, and size. With the latter, he shifts the perspective towards the material and sensuous world. Yet consistent with classical Narratology, his interest remains anthropocentric, and he concludes that

seine [der gestimmte Raum] Subjektivität erlaubt es, die einzelnen Romanfiguren durch Verschiedenartigkeit und den jeweils verschiedenen Zeitpunkt ihres Angemutetwerdens zu unterscheiden und zu charakterisieren (55).

On the external character of *der gestimmte Raum*, he continues: “dabei kann das Äussere für etwas Inneres stehen, der Raumentwurf kann einen psychischen Process, eine Anmutung, einen nicht artikulierbaren inneren Vorgang spiegeln” (55). This fails to address that in the perceptive act, perspective can be turned away from the subject and onto things, which would allow the reader to see things in their own expressiveness, and that in this act of perception, a non-subjective perspective may emerge. In chapter 2, I will pursue how using Heidegger’s philosophy of things as the phenomenological starting point opens new possibilities. Characteristic of the *gestimmte Raum* is that it is not a measurable space, but a space for nearness and presence, which means that there are no designated places (*ausgezeichneter Ort*), only places to stay (*Stellen, Aufenthaltsorte*). Dramatizing this apparently-static sort of space is accomplished through characters reacting to the space, which transforms the spatial atmosphere and so “die Forderung Lessings erfüllt, Bilder in Handlungen aufzulösen” by not letting space only be “gegenständliche Anschauungsdetails” (56). With these traits, Hoffmann’s *gestimmter Raum* has a lot in common with Gumbrecht’s idea of both *presence* and *Stimmung*. Reading for the *gestimmte Raum* could offer a way to access the types of materialities that Gumbrecht is looking for. It also offers a method for considering things and spaces in the way they present themselves to both the characters and the narrator in the novel – this is a lead that Hoffmann does not himself follow because of his stress on the subject-centric perspective on space. Instead he focuses on the relationship between characters and space, and the way that every materiality must be related to a meaning, or “Sinnmodell”. To my reading of space, however, this concept of *gestimmter Raum*, before it is turned into models of meaning, is highly useful.

Hoffmann proposes four tools or ways to look at *der gestimmte Raum* in the novel. First, he emphasizes the inherent spatial

structure in the dichotomies up-down, inside-outside, near-far. They imply the composition of space, that is, whether it is seen from fore-, middle- or background, and whether it is centred on something in the descriptions. The second approach concerns the relationship between subject and object, that is, the attitude of the subject in a space; whether he/she is passive or active, whether he/she is an observer or a dweller – each mode determining if the space is static or dynamic, temporal or not. Third, a way to analyse the *gestimmte Raum* is through perspective; identifying whether space is perceived through one of the characters or through the narrator. Fourth, he proposes to look at the style, that is, how space is represented: is it through precise, objective descriptions of things or through a subject's impressions in metaphorical language? These are concepts that I will make use of in my reading of the novels of Woolf and Perec.

Hoffmann's second concept of space is *der Aktionsraum*: a space dependent on the acting subject, where any relationship to things is based on their usability. It bears a close resemblance to Heidegger's idea of *Zeug*, a similarity that I will pursue further in chapter 2. In this space, things are "etwas Greif- und Nutzbares", and this category of space thus becomes an "Ort des Aufbewahrens und Hingehörens der Dinge" (79). Here, things are mostly present in their everyday usage to support an action. When things are mostly "leblose Gegenstände" (84), the relationship between subject and object becomes functional, which means that things are only noticeable when they are missing; they do not, as in *der gestimmte Raum*, have any self-expressive value, they are only something "zuhandene" (79). Consequently, this space is characterized as goal-oriented and nearby: as soon as it becomes distant, the space is no longer *Aktionsraum*, but changes into the third category of space – an *Anschauungsraum*. *Der Aktionsraum* is often used to describe workplaces, represented in sparse description, and they are often a setting for the narrating event. This type of space is always related to an acting character, and because of this character-bound perspective a full depiction of the space itself is not possible. In order to create a comprehensive descriptive image, it must be fused with the two other forms of space, supplementing it with facts

about the appearance of the space and the mood that emanates from it.

Unlike the two others, the *Anschauungsraum* is a space of distance. In this space, things are “nicht auf blossen Nützlichkeits- oder Stimmungswert reduziert, es ist vielmehr das Ding mit all seinen Eigenschaften, und zwar den erkennbaren wie den zeitweilig verborgenen bzw. noch nicht erkannten” (92). Whereas the two other categories of space included the subjective side of the subject-object relation – depicting reactions and actions of the subject – this space is centred on the object; on what is visible in a static situation. It describes “ein Interesse an der Objektwelt, das sich leicht selbständig macht” (92). The degree and selection of details are the important aspects of representation in the *Anschauungsraum*, and Hoffmann attaches a panoramic viewpoint to it, which is either dominated by an investigative-analytic or a demonstrative-detached perspective. As the objective thing-world takes centre stage, this space offers the possibility of letting things and spaces emerge without being foregrounded by characters. Recalling Bal, who recognized space “as acting place” on the fabula level, but at the same time emphasized the importance of this being integrated into the narrative, this *Anschauungsraum* places space at the centre of attention, but Hoffmann also accentuates the importance of this kind of extensive descriptive space being integrated into the other elements of the epic situation. Furthermore, due to Hoffmann’s choice of examples, which are mostly from Naturalist and Realist fiction, the *Anschauungsraum* cannot be the place where things and spaces emerge; instead it figures as an example of the milieu of the presented world. Only by the end of the chapter does he briefly refer to Robbe-Grillet’s poetics, which, as I will argue in the chapter on Perec, articulated exactly this kind of objective presentation of space.

Hoffmann has taken us a step further into the space of the novel. With his three categories, he has demonstrated the need for a clear concept of space and has proposed some interesting tools – his differentiation between three concepts of spaces and the four elements in regard to the *gestimmte Raum* – which I will try to put to good use in my readings.

In *Narratologie des Raumes*, Katrin Dennerlein takes both Bal, Chatman, and Hoffmann into account in her history of space in Narratology, but finds fault with all of them; either in their too-vague definitions of space, or for not being interested in space in narrative as such and always relating it to something else. Dennerlein concludes that none of these theorists ever arrive at a clear definition space in narrative. To reach a clarification of the concept of space, Dennerlein bases her inquiry on an interdisciplinary approach, combining insights from social geography and cognitive psychology to get beyond “die in bisherigen Untersuchungen häufig zu einseitigen thematischen Ausrichtungen bei der Textbeschreibung” (Dennerlein 2009:8). This endeavour is parallel to my search for a reading for space, inasmuch as the typical reading of space within the “Spatial Turn” has also mostly led to thematic readings.<sup>11</sup> However, Dennerlein’s definition of space as a container: “nach der Räume durch die Merkmale Objektivität, Wahrnehmungsunabhängigkeit, Diskretion, eine Unterscheidung von innen und aussen und die Zuordnung von Menschen und Dinge zu ihnen gekennzeichnet sind” (71) differs a great deal from my own interdisciplinary approach, which takes its point of departure in New Materialism and the thing-phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. The latter understands space as something already given, from which humankind cannot be separated. Space in my terminology is thus something that happens in an interconnected relationship between human, things and place. Space can take place in time; can be both dynamic and relational; can *happen* as events; and, importantly, is not a container but a relational gathering, as I will further explain in chapter 2. From this point of view, I remain sceptical of Dennerlein’s critique of place-phenomenology as a theory that puts

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<sup>11</sup> An example of this can be found in *Locating Woolf – The Politics of Space and Place in Woolf* (2007) where the spatial readings are only concerned with the way place and space represent and underline different political and symbolic themes. These readings completely overlook the passages in Virginia Woolf’s novels where space gets its own narrative voice and rhythm, which is the case in the interludes in *The Waves* (1931) and in *To the Lighthouse’s* (1927) second part “Time Passes”. The thematic readings are also typical of the new materialist approach to literature as already argued in the instance of Boscagli and Brown, a point that will be further explained in the next chapter.

“Wahrnehmung und Verhalten des Menschen [...] im Vordergrund” (56). On the contrary, I would argue that when phenomenology is based on Heidegger and considered within the framework of New Materialism, its understanding of space is grounded in a non-anthropocentric attitude towards the surrounding world. Space and things are seen as an intertwining of subject and object, but with emphasis on the object; on the phenomenal world. Dennerlein, on the other hand, fundamentally understands space as a container. She emphasizes the idea of space as something the human subject stands in front of in its “Objekthaftigkeit”; as something that is not influenced by human perception; something not itself affecting humans; and thus, something stable. Because of this concept of space, her terminology remains within the constraints of distinguishing between description and narration. I will argue that this distinction can be dissolved if space is viewed from a New Materialist point of view.

Following classic narratological boundaries, Dennerlein distinguishes between story and discourse level in her inquiries about “der Raum der erzählten Welt” (196). In developing her terminology, she also integrates a communicative text model, which supposes that space on the level of the story implies a “Modell-Leser” (8). It is thus both through the discourse and the reader’s own knowledge that a full image of the total narrative space is created. She suggests that space can be directly represented as Chatman’s *discourse-space* and also indirectly implied; directly represented through what she calls “Raumreferentielle Ausdrücke” such as “Toponymika, Eigennamen, Gattungsbezeichnungen, Deiktika und weitere Konkrete” (197),<sup>12</sup> and indirectly emerge either through the name of a certain character type – each type implying a specific space; a baker implying a bakery, for example – or it can be implied through an action or event that takes place in a specific space – for instance skiing, which implies a place with snow and mountains. Finally, it can emerge indirectly through a metonymic relation, where a thing implies a specific space, e.g. in

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<sup>12</sup> Dennerlein’s examples for Toponymika: Berlin, Paris, Eigennamen: Blaues Schloss, Dörsche Gärtnerei, Gattungsbezeichnungen: Speisezimmer, Auto, Deiktika: hier, dort, da, Weitere konkrete: innen, aussen, Ferne, Dunkel. (Dennerlein 2009:209)

the way that a door implies a building of some sort. These distinctions are made on the most basic level, describing how space in a specific passage could be expressed to prompt the reader to form an image of the setting.

More useful to the development of a reading for space is the way she approaches space on a discursive level. With her attention turned towards concrete spaces in literature, she distinguishes between two techniques of spatial representation: On the one hand, the “situationsbezogene Thematisierung” with its depiction of “Ereignisregionen” which is the mode of narration, and, on the other hand, the “nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung” with its “Erwähnung räumlicher Gegebenheiten” (199), which is the mode of description. The *situationsbezogene Thematisierung* occurs when an event changes the surroundings in which it takes place. What sets Dennerlein apart from both Hoffmann and Bal is the way she understands “Ereignisse”, as she distinguishes between two types of ‘events’ (*Ereignisse*): a *Geschehen*, i.e., an event that happens, and a *Figurenhandlung*, i.e., a character’s (re)action (123). Both events influence space, the *Ereignisregion*. Dennerlein’s concept of events is valuable to my purpose of reading space; as she defines events formally, she also grants non-human actants the ability to set events in motion: “Formal betrachtet sind Ereignisse wie Aussagesätze aufgebaut, weil sie aus einem Subjekt und einem Prädikat bestehen. Als Subjekte kommen Gegenstände oder Personen und als Prädikate Geschehen, Handlungen und Zustände in Frage” (122). As Dennerlein borrows her concept of space from social geography, she only focuses on the way an outer event may change a space, which may happen when a character enters a room, or when a lightning strikes a building. To her, space in itself cannot affect the situation, making her blind to the possibilities inherent in her own differentiation of the event. By also allowing objects, events, and conditions a role on a sentence level, events do not only have to signify an action carried out by a character, as Hoffmann would have it, but might equally be how a thing (as subject in the sentence) changes a space, or, indeed, how space itself creates relations as it gathers everything within its frame. As a result, space is able to *happen*; no longer only playing the role of the affected, it

would have the agency of creating an affect. By using Dennerlein's formal model it becomes possible to place things and spaces in the foreground of the reading, as *Ereignisse* involve a change in a condition, in which an object can take the place of the grammatical subject in a sentence. An *event* is then not confined to mean an action carried out by characters in the novel; the term can also refer to something that *happens with* the space exclusively on a material level.

With her second distinction, *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung* as "erwähnte räumliche Gegebenheiten" (118), that is, descriptions of space that are not linked to any action, Dennerlein offers a method for reading those descriptions of spaces that in classic Narratology are regarded as mere setting or only allowed a peripheral role, as in Bal's *thematized space*. But by defining the *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung* as a description – which she understands as "ein Texttyp, bei dem auf der Ebene des Bedeuten stabile Eigenschaften eines Raumes, einer Figur oder eines Objekts mitgeteilt werden, ohne dass im selben Teilsatz, Satz oder Abschnitt ein bestimmtes einmaliges Ereignis erwähnt wird" (199-200) – she upholds the distinction between narration and description, thus leaving space in both categories as the stable, independent ingredient. To Dennerlein, description conveys stable qualities through a narrator or a character. According to her, the most common way to describe space is through a character's or narrator's perception (*Wahrnehmung*). In analogy to her conception of *event* (*Ereignis*), Dennerlein defines perception syntactically, meaning that there has to be a verb of perception, or an implied act of perception, before we can talk of perception. She further distinguishes between *position* and *presence* in the act of perception, and thus moves beyond Chatman's merely visual space. This distinction between position and presence is dependent on which sense dominates in the description. The visual sense equals *position*, whereas the other senses are not confined to a specific *position*, but are *present* all around – a notion not far removed from Gumbrecht's understanding of "Stimmung" and also related to Hoffmann's "*Gestimmter Raum*". This understanding of description, which also includes perception, poses the problem that it only considers

perception from the subject's point of view, and disregards the phenomenological intertwining of subject and object, which would have allowed the perspective in the act of perception to be directed at the object. In light of the definition of space as something that happens as a relational gathering, Dennerlein's distinction between a situated space of events and a space of description that is not eventful becomes obsolete. In the event of space, narration and description collapse into each other, resulting in narrated elements in description and descriptive elements in narration.

## CHAPTER 2

### FOREGROUNDING THE SPATIAL BACKGROUND AS BACKGROUND: NEW MATERIALISM AND MARTIN HEIDEGGER

## 1. Setting the scene – Virginia Woolf and New Materialism

The only thing that moved upon the vast semicircle of the beach was one small black spot. As it came nearer to the ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat, it became apparent from a certain tenuity in its blackness that this spot possessed four legs; and moment by moment it became more unmistakable that it was composed of the persons of two young men. Even thus in outline against the sand there was an unmistakable vitality in them; an indescribable vigour in the approach and withdrawal of the bodies, slight though it was, which proclaimed some violent argument issuing from the tiny mouths of the little round heads. This was corroborated on closer view by the repeated lunging of a walking-stick on the right-hand side. “You mean to tell me ... you actually believe...” thus the walking-stick on the right-hand side next the waves seemed to be asserting as it cut long straight stripes upon the sand (Woolf 1991:102).

So begins Woolf's short story *Solid Objects* (1920) about John, who becomes obsessed with objects. It is a story that thematically and formally engages with the relationship between the human being and his material surroundings. The opening of the story is an example of a description that fuses the human and non-human world: It describes a space, the beach, on which the contours of two men appear. As the men appear, the basic distinction between a foregrounded human and a backgrounded space is blurred. The men are first not recognized as human beings, but are part of the surroundings, that is, part of the ground. They are one black spot moving upon the beach. The standard definition of a character as the foregrounded figure upon a background setting – as also defined by Chatman – is dissolved, and, as the description continues, the two characters are not introduced through their socio-cultural identities, but remain material gestures, depersonalized bodies that move in the background. In this way, Woolf creates a space where man and surroundings appear as part of the same material substance. This material oneness is apparent in the characterization of the two young men and the way they move. Their movements are described akin to the way waves break on the shore: they approach and withdraw. When compared to a passage from the interludes in Woolf's later novel *The Waves* (1931), which

describes the movement of waves by anthropomorphizing them; “*As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously*” (Woolf 2000b:3), it becomes apparent that Woolf in *Solid Objects* is using the opposite technique; she describes the men using vocabulary from dehumanized surroundings. Rather than being separate entities, the surroundings and the two characters become intertwined. Depicted here is not a static setting, but a dynamic interchange between man and surroundings; a perceived space. The narrator perceiving it is not a typical distanced heterodiegetic narrator, whose vantage point is beyond the actual setting of the story. Instead, the narrator’s perception of the space is founded in a sensuous experience of the beach, yet the narrator does not appear to be bodily present, and this ambivalence imbues the passage with a precarious atmosphere. The human subjects are not first and foremost characterized as humans, but as a small black spot among other objects. Only later does the small black spot turn out to be men walking, and the passage ends not by letting the characters identify themselves, but by allowing their walking sticks to express themselves in conversation. The passage connects objects and subjects, foreground and background, narration and description in surprising ways. In its themes, the story goes on to furthermore challenge the dichotomy between a dominating subject and things as useful objects through the description of the young man John, as he slowly gets engulfed in a search for “solid objects” and loses interest in both his social and political life. The materiality of the things that he finds – the green glass, the cold and heavy iron and the star-shaped china – are in this story not props used to describe the human character, but have their own agency. They immerse John in their strange materiality. Woolf depicts this non-hierarchical subject-object relationship by giving voice to the lump of glass as it is found: “It might so easily have been any other of the millions of stones, but it was I, I, I...” (104). As the narrator views everything from a position outside, she does not have access to the private thoughts of either John or his friend Charles, and is limited to guessing from their gestures what they might be thinking, and since

the story does not differentiate rigidly between human and non-human, the narrator may just as well guess what the stone might be thinking when it is found. The indirect thought of the stone is thus an example of a narrative strategy by which human and thing are perceived as being on the same level. Woolf's story illustrates a new relational ontology between thing and human, but it also attaches agency to things.

Whereas Narratology can be said to be a theory of the foreground, New Materialism and the thing-philosophy of Martin Heidegger offer a way to focus on the background *as* background. Narratology's focus on the foreground is evident on two levels: First, by foregrounding the human subject and letting space fade into mere background for human action, and, second, by focusing on the formal aspect of language distinguishing it sharply from the reality it portrays – or, if narratologists look outside language, they do so in the search for meaning within a human context. The foreground is made up of discourse and human action. New Materialism and the thing-philosophy of Heidegger aim to put language back in touch with the things of the world, not just within a human context, but, as Bennett noted, to bracket the concepts of subjectivity and discourse to let another material reality appear. As New Materialists do not focus on space, the concept of *background* will in the following function as a transition from New Materialism to Heidegger's philosophy. Background is here understood as parallel to Timothy Morton's concept of environment:

In the same way, when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us (Morton 2009:1).

The environment is that which cannot be indicated directly. We could name it apophatically. It is not-in-the-foreground. It is the background caught in a relationship with a foreground. As soon as we concentrate on it, it turns into the foreground (Morton 2009:175).

Background is our everyday surroundings; not just nature, but all the things that surround us. In the following chapter, I seek to extract what happens in the background without turning it into the

foreground, that is, when it is not presented on the basis of the foregrounded human subject, but when it is presented as background, as something on its own. I propose to use impulses from New Materialism towards a new active understanding of materiality and combine them with Heidegger's understanding of space as something that happens. A detour past Heidegger's thing-phenomenology is necessary to understand and arrive at a new concept of space, because thing and space are for Heidegger intrinsically connected.

In short, I want to make use of the New Materialist emphasis on the need for a fresh perspective on background, so that the object may be freed from its role "as the eternal sidekick of the subject" (Boscagli 2014:3). However, these theorists do not describe what happens when the *background as background* is foregrounded. What I am interested is how the space that already surrounds us may emerge *in the way it surrounds us* – and not as an analytical object that is put in front of us for examination and is thus turned into something else. This mode of foregrounding sensitive to the background is precisely what Heidegger's concept of language as event offers: the event of poetic language performs a certain gesture of *Gelassenheit*, of letting-be. Whereas Narratology understands language as a representation, Heidegger proposes, as noted by Casey, to view it as a presentation, that is, as an actual invitation into the realm of things. To search for the *background as background* is to look for the way poetic language lets that which itself has no language appear without foregrounding it as an objectified thing. Taking Heidegger one step further, I propose in the next chapter that this gesture is especially prominent in the Modernist novel. By doing so, I mean to draw attention to the novel as the genre where "matter vibrates" – to use the words of Bennett – a trait often contributed exclusively to poetry, as seen in Heidegger's exclusive dialogue with the lyrical genre, and further developed by Sartre, and in New Materialism in Timothy Morton's version, growing as it does out of Ecocriticism and its entanglement with the poetry of the Romantic Age. In contrast to these readings, I want in the next chapters to consider the Modernist novel, and, by using a narratological framework, study how spaces emerge as non-

human agents in these novels; that is, how the spatial background is foregrounded as background in a genre known for being dominated by human agency.

By taking my point of departure in New Materialism and thing-theory, I wish to combine their notion of the agency of things with Heidegger's concept of thing, space, and artwork as events. Through this combination, a line of thought emerges that not only develops a new understanding of space, but also puts the work of art forward as the medium through which this space can be located. My argument will unfold in three parts: First, I will use New Materialism to make a clear distinction between kinds of spatial background. Here Jane Bennett sets the scene with her concept of thing-power, but given that her thinking is not specifically concerned with literature, I also introduce Bill Brown's critique of the thing, as it is founded in literary readings, not least of Woolf's story *Solid Objects*. While Brown only searches for *misused* things in literature, I propose with Heidegger's analysis of "Zeug" from *Sein und Zeit* (1927) that things do not have to be broken to emerge in their thingness. Secondly, I discuss Heidegger's analysis of "Zeug" in the painting of a pair of shoes by van Gogh in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36) and from his critique of the thing, I will thirdly move on to look at how language as an event shows not only – with a Heideggarian terminology – how the *thing things*, but also how *space spaces* and thus how *the background as background is foregrounded* in what he calls an attitude of *Gelassenheit*.

## 2. The Thing in New Materialism

In *Vibrant Matter – a political ecology of things* (2010), Jane Bennett introduces the concept of thing-power:

The notion of thing-power aims instead to attend to the it as actant; I will try, impossibly, to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things [...]. I will try to give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, in the process absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism (Bennett 2010:3).

Throughout her book Bennett finds examples of this thing-power in a variety of different everyday situations; in litter, food, electricity and metal, all showing “non-human materialities as bona fide participants rather than as recalcitrant objects, social constructs, or instrumentalities” (62). In the introduction to *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann have further proposed to read the encountered materials as narratives, as texts: “t[h]ere is an implicit textuality in the becoming of material formations, and this textuality resides in the way the agentic dimension of matter expresses itself” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014:6). Bennett illustrates this as she tells the story of how she encounters litter on her way home. In the retelling of this encounter, she ventures into a description that makes matter come forth as agentic:

When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they *were* all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them (5).

What Bennett concludes from this example is, first, a readiness in herself to be moved and thus tangled up with the surroundings, prepared by her reading of Thoreau, and, second, that the things encountered in this way – through this readiness – are *vibrant things*. She does not comment on how the thing-power in this example works – something I will try to answer later with Heidegger’s concept of spatial gathering. The question is, then; how are we to understand this thing-power and what is its relationship to literature? Apart from an implicit textuality in materiality, there is also a different level of material textuality already hidden in literature, in the depiction of things and spaces *in* texts. New

Materialism with its focus on things can help us look for non-human entities in the medium dominated by human thought; even if the New Materialist theorists themselves do not do it, they point us in the right direction. The concept of thing-power is useful as a provocative guide to a new understanding of spatial background that puts the object before the subject, but as Bennett searches for an intrinsic vibrant materiality common to all materials – human and non-human alike – she does not offer any answer to *how* we are to understand what happens in the material background, in the debris of her example, and further, how this is shown in literature. Literature is important to Bennett, but more as a strategy for a new line of thinking than as an object for analysis.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, “The secret life of things” (1999) by Bill Brown uses literature directly, as he reads Woolf’s story *Solid Objects* in light of his “thing theory”. It might be argued that his is an early branch of New Materialism, focusing on the relationship between objects and things, and it will serve as the foundation for this chapter. Brown points us in the direction of a different way to consider what background is, while also applying his *thing theory* to the same literary example as I have chosen. This allows me to refine my definition of background, as a reading of Brown gradually makes clear how the literary spatial background I am trying to develop differs from his concepts. It also leads us to Heidegger, because while Brown indirectly bases his concept of *misuse* on the philosophy of Heidegger from *Sein und Zeit*, I propose to include Heidegger’s late works on thing, space, and language to broaden the concept of “thingness” to not only mean *misuse*, as does Brown, but with Heidegger’s concept of “event” to find a way to look at the everyday spatial world without it having to be “broken” or “misused”.

According to Brown, the idea of things is always to be considered within its relationship to the subject, although he wants

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<sup>13</sup> One of the examples she gives of thing-power in literature is Franz Kafka’s figure of Odradek, that is, a character who is characterized as “wooden yet lively, verbal yet vegetal, alive yet inert” (8). From a spatial narratological point of view she thus analyses the foregrounded figure and not the background setting. An analysis that took the latter into account could for instance consider the description of the stairs and hallway of that text.

to move away from the dichotomy between the two. Clearly, he is not as radical in his concept of thing as Jane Bennett's "thing power": "Still, if things are indeed not exhausted by that relation, it is only in the subject/object nexus where they occur, or where they can be *narrated* as the *effect* (not the ground) of an interaction at once physical and psychological, at once intimate and alienating" (Brown 1999:2). Brown proposes a new relationship between the subject and the object, while still maintaining the point of view of the subject – what has to change is the way we perceive the object. So he seeks to find "the objects we see without ever looking?" and asks "What if we looked?"(2). This change of perspective is in line with my reading for space; Brown even touches on the way things are narrated, though without elaborating on what he means by narration. But as his argument continues, it becomes clear that his frame of reference is derived from consumerism and the cultural history of production, which causes him to focus on things as they are dislocated from this process:

Producing a thing – effecting thingness – depends, instead, on a fetishistic overvaluation or misappropriation, on an irregular if not unreasonable reobjectification of the object that dislodges it from the circuits through which it is what it typically is. Thingness is precipitated as a kind of misuse value. By *misuse value* I mean to name the aspect of an object – sensuous, aesthetic, semiotic – that become legible, audible, palpable when the object is experienced in whatever time it takes (in whatever time it is) for an object to become another (3).

Brown's *thingness* is not a concept of background, but a concept of foreground. As a result, he is not interested in the way things emerge in the spatial background as background, that is, as everyday things; what he is after are things as fragments, as something other than themselves. According to Brown, things reveal their thingness in this process of change. Fragmented things are taken out of their ordinary surroundings and contexts; they become something extra-ordinary. In this way, they are no longer seen in relation to other objects in the spatial background, but are foregrounded as they appear in an exceptional foregrounded

relation to the subject. In “Thing Theory” (2001), Brown asserts, echoing Heidegger’s example of the hammer from *Sein und Zeit*, that

we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuit of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation (Brown 2001:4).

Consequently, things are only things in a negative relationship with the subject; it is when their normal use is interrupted that the thingness of objects appears. The problem with this analysis is that when things are presented in literature, they have already by definition been taken out of their normal-use relationship. From this perspective, we may ask if it is possible to understand Brown’s analysis in such a way that literature itself is a kind of *misuse value* of the thing? If so, the question of literary form becomes acutely relevant, for how does literature present things in their *thingness*, “in their own time” as Brown puts it? I will argue that this happens precisely in the narrative form of the novel. But this is not Brown’s concern – when he moves on to Woolf’s story, it becomes clear from his examples that he is not studying the way things are described, but how they thematically appear, that is, the way *misused things* affect the characters. That is why he is able to write about Woolf that “though the novels never think through artifacts so exclusively, they continue to foreground the way objects mediate human relations, including the self’s relation to itself” (12). Brown has thus directed us towards a new understanding of things, but not of the spatial background. By only seeing objects in their use-relationship with subjects, even though this relationship is a negative one, Brown fails to grasp the way things are actually presented in Woolf’s novels, or in the short story “Solid Objects”. He focuses on the foregrounded subject-relations and not the background relations between objects in space. Significantly, his different readings of Woolf’s work do not include the two novels

that deal with space as background most explicitly in their form, namely *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*. Through a comparison of Brown's description of the knifeness of a knife, and the way Woolf quite similarly depicts this knifeness in *The Waves*, which Brown does not mention, it becomes clear that when only focusing on a changed subject-object relationship, one will fail to recognize literary works that actually describes the background as background, space as space. In Brown's text, this *knifeness* is described as follows:

in the process of using a knife as a screwdriver, of dislocating it from one routinized objectification and deploying it otherwise, we have the change (if just a chance) to sense its presence (its thinness ... its sharpness and flatness ... the peculiarity of its scalloped handle and slightly loose ... its knifeness and what exceeds that knifeness) as though for the first time (3).

And here is Woolf's similar description:

Things quiver as if not yet in being. The blankness of the white tablecloth glares [...]. And every moment he seems to pump into this room this prickly light, this intensity of being, so that things have lost their normal uses – the knife-blade is only a flash of light, not a thing to cut with. The normal is abolished (Woolf 2000b:66)

Comparing the two passages, it is evident that Brown is pursuing a changed subject-object relationship, and by describing this, he overlooks the way a thing is a thing and not an object. In the process of dislocation, he simply exchanges one object of use with another, as the knife becomes a screwdriver. By doing so, he forgoes the way a thing emerges *as thing* in its relation to other things and the space surrounding it. Woolf, on the other hand, depicts this kind of relational spatial background: She presents a space that “quivers” as an anticipating *gathering event* around the character of Neville, the room of the restaurant, and the things present in the room. In this quivering moment, the knife is depicted in its thingness, and not just as a tool; it is *misused*, but not as a fetish object of overvaluation, or as a broken tool turned into

something different. It is *foregrounded as background* as it relates to other non-human entities in the background. Each thing “quivers” in relation to the other.

Through Brown, it becomes apparent that by directing this kind of attention to background as a spatial interaction between things and humans, and not just towards broken things, a reading of materiality in novels can become something more than a search for broken objects within the work of art. Brown reads Woolf’s oeuvre as a poetics of space that is “in fact a poetics of the object” (12), yet he fails to mention the opening passage of *Solid Objects*, where space is described. In a reversal of this omission, I would like to read Woolf’s work in the light of just such a poetics of space.<sup>14</sup> This will require staying on the level of things in order to look at what Brown calls “a secret in plain sight – not a life behind or beneath the object but a life that is its fluctuating shape and substance and surface” (3), parallel to Casey’s idea of the de-scriptive. As Brown does away with the idea of “Ding an sich” in the search for the thingness of things, he ends up turning the spotlight away from precisely this *thingness*: he locates a cultural objectification of things instead of asking how literature makes the shape, substance, and surface of things appear. As a consequence, Brown ends his reading of Woolf far from the *thingness of things* in literature, instead describing the cultural history of glass and iron. According to him, this demonstrates the material fantasies of industrial production in Britain during the First World War, and for that reason he allows Woolf a “peripheral place in British literature of World War 1” (17), and further determines that “[t]he definiteness of solid objects seems rather to expose the vagueness of politics” (17). It is not enough for Brown to remain on the level of things in Woolf’s text; for him the solid objects must become symbols of a socio-political interpretation of meaning. In my own reading of Woolf, I propose

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<sup>14</sup>The kind of poetics of space that I develop in my reading for space differs from that of Gaston Bachelard and his study *La poétique de l’espace* (1958). Though Bachelard’s method also takes its point of departure in Heidegger, his readings of small spaces inside the house such as drawers, wardrobes and chests always bear witness to a hidden psychology. That is, his phenomenological method is also based on the psychological theories of C.G. Jung. In the end Bachelard cannot escape a subject-centric attitude to literature, despite his otherwise fruitful concrete focus on small spaces.

to utilize Brown's interest in the cultural history of materiality, but instead of focusing on iron – that Modernist favourite – I propose to read her use of air as one of the ways she contributes to a “greening” of Modernism. By so doing, I am not dismissing the formal implications of a presentation of things in her novels – on the contrary, I want to consider both *what* constitutes space and *how* it is presented.

### 3. Heidegger's Critique of the Thing

New Materialism and the thing-philosophy of Heidegger have in common a revision of an anthropocentric and static view of space and things. Most new materialists are indebted to Heidegger's thinking on the thing; meanwhile they dissociate themselves from him in other respects.<sup>15</sup> Taking my point of departure in the way Heidegger understands the thing as a *relational gathering*, it becomes possible to view the background as an event that appears through the work of art.

To understand Heidegger's concept of the thing, I propose to begin – bearing the previous discussion on description and narration in mind – with a close look at how he actually describes a thing in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), that is, his famous example of a pair of shoes in a painting by van Gogh. Through a reading of this description, I will show how art opens up new understanding of the thing for Heidegger, but the description also entails Heidegger's critique of previous conceptions of things.

In *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Heidegger makes an ekphrasis of a van Gogh-painting. From a narratological point of view,

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance Timothy Morton, as he in his concluding chapter in *Ecology without Nature* (2009), proposes that “ecocritique needs a figurehead as significant on the left as Heidegger has been on the right” (Morton 2009:162) and thus proposes Walter Benjamin instead. Morton does though in *Hyperobjects* (2013) modify this view and acknowledges some legacy to Heidegger through a reading of Graham Harman's Heidegger reading. Neither Bennett nor Brown mention Heidegger as their theoretical inspiration. This is probably due to New Materialism's need to distinguish itself from Ecocriticism (Lawrence Buell, Kate Rigby and Jonathan Bate) and its entanglement with the philosophy of Heidegger, which have led to an understanding of Heidegger as the advocate for an earthbound, local conception of nature that the new materialist wants to avoid. One exception is the founder of “object-oriented-ontology” Graham Harman, who bases his concept of objects on Heidegger (cf. footnote 17).

Heidegger does not describe a static scene, even though the painting is a still life of a pair of shoes: His is a dynamic description, where the shoes and their material are alive and *happening*. In his account of the thing, Heidegger uses ekphrasis to make the *thingness of the thing* present for us. He uses an artwork as his example because thinking and philosophy alone cannot capture the thing: “[d]as unscheinbare Ding entzieht sich dem Denken am hartnäckigsten” (1977:17). Since philosophy’s need to extract some abstract idea from behind the thing misses the thingness of things, Heidegger turns to art for an answer to the question of *how* a thing is a thing. The thingness of the thing is to be found *in the way in which* it is this specific thing. It is not a question of *what* a thing is, but *how* a thing is, and it is this *how* that the artwork makes apparent: ”Vielmehr kommt erst durch das Werk und nur im Werk das Zeugsein des Zeuges eigens zu seinem Vorschein” (21). As he needs an artwork to think with, he uses the literary technique of ekphrasis in order to not only tell but also show what he understands by *thing*. His description begins thus:

Aus der dunklen Öffnung des ausgetretenen Inwendigen des Schuhzeuges starrt die Mühsal der Arbeitsschritte. In der derbgediegenen Schwere des Schuhzeuges ist aufgestaut die Zähigkeit des langsamen Ganges durch die weithin gestreckten und immer gleichen Furchen des Ackers, über dem ein rauher Wind steht. Auf dem Leder liegt das Feuchte und Satte des Bodens. Unter den Sohlen schiebt sich hin die Einsamkeit des Feldweges durch den sinkenden Abend. In dem Schuhzeug schwingt der verschwiegene Zuruf der Erde, ihr stilles Verschenken des reifenden Kornes und ihr unerklärtes Sichversagen in der öden Brache des winterlichen Feldes. Durch dieses Zeug zieht das klaglose Bangen um die Sicherheit des Brotes, die wortlose Freude des Wiederüberstehens der Not, das Beben in der Ankunft der Geburt und das Zittern in der Umdrehung des Todes. Zur Erde gehört dieses Zeug und in der Welt der Bäuerin ist es behütet. Aus diesem behüteten Zugehören ersteht das Zeug selbst zu seinem Insichruhen (1977:19).

The ekphrasis of the shoes is characterized by what Charles Taylor in “Heidegger, Language and Ecology” (1995) has called Heidegger’s “antisubjectivist and anti-humanist” (100) philosophy:

In the context of description/narration it means that the grammatical action of the passage is associated exclusively with things, describing not the way the woman has worn the shoes, but instead recalling the use from a material perspective. Heidegger does not use the wornness of the shoes to narrate the life of the woman, or turn his ekphrasis into a narration of the making of the shoes – as the most famous example of ekphrasis, that is, Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield, does –almost all narratologists use this example to show how description is indeed also narration, but accordingly the narratologists lose the thing, here the shield, from sight. Heidegger starts with the materiality of the shoes, but instead of merely describing it, he lets it emerge as a *happening* through the use of verbs instead of adjectives. Out from the inner part of the shoe “startt die Mühsal des Schuhzeuges” and from out under the soles “schiebt sich hin die Einsamkeit des Feldweges durch den sinkenden Abend.” In this way, he equals the human and non-human; the feelings of the peasant woman are embedded in the material of the shoe in such a way that they seem to emerge not from the person, but from their use, which is inscribed in the material form. As the action of the passage is assigned to the material, he anthropomorphizes it. And by doing this, he anticipates what Bennett emphasizes when she writes that “[w]e need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in non-human nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (Bennett 2010:xvi). The manner in which Heidegger uses art as a form of witness to the way that the thing is something that happens is also at work in Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, whose concept of thing is closely related to Heidegger’s. The difference between them is that for Bennett it is not a question of showing how things are happening, that is, how agentic powers are not something exclusively human, but also how we as humans are part of the same materiality as things. She asserts that since both humans and things are part of the same vibrant materiality, we may use the same literary devices to describe both human and non-human agencies. It allows her to encourage anthropomorphism: As there is no difference on an ontological level between subject and object, the language that we use to describe each may also be the

same. From this point of view, to anthropomorphize is not a way of showing how humans master the non-human world through language; instead it accentuates equality between the human and the non-human. This argument is repeated by Iovino and Oppermann:

We want to challenge the criticism of anthropomorphizing matter and use this human lense as a heuristic strategy aimed at reducing the (linguistic, perceptive, and ethical) distance between human and the non-human. So understood, anthropomorphism can even act against dualistic ontologies and be a “dis-anthropocentric” stratagem meant to reveal the similarities and symmetries existing between humans and non-humans (Iovino, Oppermann 2014:8).

With this new materialist perspective it is possible to view the often maligned position of anthropomorphism<sup>16</sup> in a positive, even useful, light; as giving voice to the silent background. As I will later show, yet another way to let the background emerge as background is by paying attention to punctuation. Heidegger’s description of the shoes not only reverses the normal grammatical relationship between subject and object by granting objects the dynamic role, it also turn perspective inside out. Each sentence starts with a preposition: “Aus der dunkeln, In der derbgediegenen, Auf dem Leder, Unter der Sohlen, Durch dieses Zeug, Aus diesem behüteten” which, from a narratological point of view, drops the reader right in the middle of the depicted thing. These prepositions give the passage a spatial configuration; they create a space around and in the shoe, which also bears witness to a place beyond the shoe. The thing, here the shoe, is then not a distanced foregrounded analysable object. It is not a thing in use either. The thing is what Heidegger later calls a “relational gathering”, a material event that collects both the human and non-human world. I will return to this concept below.

To further explicate Heidegger’s concept of thing, it is helpful not only to outline his critique of previous misconceptions of things held within the tradition of Western philosophy, but also to

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance the negative reception of the work of Francis Ponge by Jean-Paul Sartre, who in “L’Homme et les Choses” (1944) accuses Ponge in *Les parti pris des choses* (1942) of not taking the point of view of things, but instead forcing human traits upon the thing and at the same time turning humans into things.

flesh out this critique through the descriptive paragraph on the shoes. He criticizes three interpretations of the thing that define it as either carrier of properties and qualities, a gatherer of sensation, or as formed substance. According to Heidegger, all of these are attacks on the thing that obliterate the *thingness of the thing*. As the descriptive passage demonstrated, a thing cannot be apprehended by simply listing its properties; he does not describe the painting as a list consisting of the leather, the soles, etc. The thing is also not simply a carrier of qualities, as the passage does not show a person sensing qualities, but instead describes qualities as materialities emerging from their use. It would also be wrong to understand the thing as a formed substance. Rather, the materiality of the shoe is formed according to its use, and this use shows itself in the way that the steps taken in the field have manifested themselves in the form. A thing such as the shoe is a “Zeug”, that is, a thing in its usefulness. In its use, the thing is something that happens, but in this “happening as use”, the thing becomes transparent.

In *Sein und Zeit* (1927) Heidegger distinguishes between two ways of relating to things: One is presence-at-hand, *Vorhandenheit*, and the other is readiness-to-hand, *Zuhandenheit*.<sup>17</sup> *Presence-at-hand* is

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<sup>17</sup> Graham Harman – the founder of object-oriented ontology – bases his thinking of “the objects themselves” on Heidegger’s analysis of “Zuhandenheit”. In *Tool-being* (2002) he finds “the key to Heidegger’s philosophy [in] the concept of *Zuhandenheit* or readiness-to-hand” (Harman 2002:4). Opposite both Bennett and Morton, Harman does engage with the philosophy of Heidegger. His object-oriented philosophy is linked to New Materialism in their common critique of anthropocentrism, but with the difference that for Harman, objects withdraw into some “dark subterranean reality” (2002:2) inaccessible for humans. I am in line with the first part of Harman’s reading of Heidegger, as he places things (for him objects) at the centre of Heidegger’s thinking and even pinpoints their agency, as “the hammer and broken hammer are the first personae to appear on Heidegger’s philosophical stage” (9). Doing away with the typical reception of Heidegger’s work he writes: “[m]eanwhile, the philosopher’s promising insights into the structure of *things* have barely been developed. Against the ever-increasing calls for “historical awareness” in Heidegger studies, I would like to suggest that it is time to try the opposite. Rather than endless summer symposia about “Heidegger and the Greeks”, we should ask to hear more about jugs and artworks, as well as about oceans and diamonds and earthquakes” (19). Harman accentuates the importance Heidegger placed upon things and their character of event, as he writes: “In fact, Heidegger does *anything but* abandon objects; his discovery of tool-being even restores the things to the very centre of philosophy, transforming them from *phenomena* into equipmental *events*” (20). But while I agree with Harman’s accentuation of the importance of things in the work of Heidegger, I disagree with his understanding of background. For Harman, the background is something that

described as an abstract analytical relation, viewing the object at a distance, as an entity present in abstract space, but not present to us. Reversely, the thing as *readiness-to-hand* is accessible, but in its accessibility its thingness also retreats from our view: “Das Eigentümliche des zunächst Zuhandenen ist es, in seiner Zuhandenheit sich gleichsam zurückziehen, um gerade eigentlich zuhanden zu sein” (Heidegger 2006:69). The relation *readiness-to-hand* describes the thing in its usefulness, which means that the thing is always related *to* (zu) something; it is never something definite on its own, that is, something standing isolated before (vor) us. Heidegger mentions a room as an example of how a thing never shows itself as a definite unit, but always *as* and *in* its relation to other things and space:

Zeug ist seiner Zeughaftigkeit entsprechend immer *aus* der Zugehörigkeit zu anderem Zeug: Schreibzeug, Feder, Tinte, Papier, Unterlage, Tisch, Lampe, Möbel, Fenster, Türen, Zimmer. Diese “Dinge” zeigen sich nie zunächst für sich, um dann als Summe von Realen auszufüllen. Das Nächstbegegnende, obzwar nicht thematisch erfasste, ist das Zimmer, und dieses wiederum nicht als das “Zwischen den vier Wänden” in einem geometrischen räumlichen Sinne – sondern als Wohnzeug. Aus ihm heraus zeigt sich die “Einrichtung”, in dieser das jeweilige “einzelne” Zeug. *Vor* diesem ist je schon eine Zeugganzheit entdeckt (2006:68-69).

The question that he continues to pursue in *Sein und Zeit* is how we become aware of the things we are surrounded by and care for, without reducing them to concepts we stand in front of – *how to reach the “nicht thematisch erfasste” everyday surroundings?* In other words, how to foreground that which always stays in the background *as background* without turning it into foreground, and thus objectifying and making it into something else? In *Sein und Zeit*, this foregrounding happens as a fracture, when the things are “Unzuhanden”:

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disappears; it is that which we cannot have access to: “Since tool-beings are always more than what they present to humans and to other entities, they must lie somewhere outside of Heidegger’s “world”, in some *metaphysical vacuum* whose features are yet to be determined” (11).

Das Zuhandene kommt im Bemerkten von Unzuhandenem in den Modus der *Aufdringlichkeit*. Je dringlicher das Fehlende gebraucht wird, je eigentlicher es in seiner Unzuhandenheit begegnet, umso aufdringlicher wird das Zuhandene, so zwar, dass es dem Charakter der Zuhandene zu verlieren scheint (73).

When the thing stops working, we are made aware of its working character and the thing comes to be more intrusive: “[i]mgleichen ist das Fehlen eines Zuhandenes, dessen alltägliches Zugegensein so selbstverständlich war, dass wir von ihm gar nicht erst Notiz nahmen, ein *Bruch* der in der Umsicht entdeckten Verweisungszusammenhänge” (75). When the thing loses its usefulness, it is not-readiness-to-hand and in this mode it becomes possible to see “die Vorhandenheit des Zuhandenen” (74). In the fracture, relations appear; the fracture shows the “nichts thematisch erfasste” without the thing losing its character as not themed, that is, the thing appears in its relational being, rather than as an object removed and isolated from its context. The thing is thus always part of “ein Relationssystem” (87). Bill Brown’s *misused thing theory* echoes this idea of objects being turned into things when they stop working for us, which allows him to search for broken things in literature, and writing a new cultural history of matter. But as a consequence, Brown neglects the kind of thingness in the artwork that lets the background be *foregrounded as background*. In Heidegger’s thinking, the very fracture that shows the not-themed readiness-at-hand relationship eventually becomes the artwork itself. As Heidegger turns to language and things in his later writings, it is not just *misused* things that may show a new relationship to things, but the artwork itself is seen as a presentation, as a kind of *misuse*, that lets things appear in their thingness without having to be broken.

New materialist Timothy Morton seems to have the same impulses as Heidegger. In *Ecology without Nature* (2007), he states that “to evoke the background *as background* – to drag it into the foreground would dissolve it – [background] must resort to oblique rhetorical strategies” (Morton 2009:45). He continues by saying that “[t]he environment is that which cannot be indicated directly. We could name it apophatically. It is not-in-the-foreground. It is background, caught in a relationship with a foreground. As soon as

we concentrate on it, it turns into the foreground”(175). Much in the same way as Heidegger inquires after readiness-to-hand as the not themed, Morton pursues the background “not-in-the-foreground”. *Ecomimesis* is Morton’s proposed strategy for arriving at the background *as* background through a negative textual strategy. It is through what he calls “oblique rhetorical strategies” and the “apophatical” that a text may show what it is not, that is, the environment. The same argument is also found in Ecocritic Kate Rigby’s concept of a negative ecopoetic in *Topographies of the Sacred* (2004). To Morton, this means that “a text can describe something by delineating it negatively” (45). In the same line of thought, Graham Harman in *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012) develops a way to indirectly glimpse at “things-in-themselves”. In Harman’s view, poetic language may allude to the “*metaphysical vacuum*” (Harman 2002:11) that we do not have access to:

the inability to make the things-in-themselves directly known to us does not forbid us from having *indirect* access to them. [...] The absent thing-in-itself can have gravitational effects on the internal content of knowledge, just as Lovecraft can allude to the physical form of Cthulhu even while cancelling the literal terms of description (Harman 2012b:17).

The issue I take with both Harman’s and Morton’s concepts of negative alluding-to or hinting-at, is that they both dismiss descriptions. Yet focusing solely on things that withdraw from humans into a non-reachable dark realm – as Harman does with science fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft as his example – or using all kinds of non-literary devices to describe a medium that in its self-referential style make us more aware of what is not text, as Morton does, is of little use when faced with question of how things and space make themselves present and *happen* in novels.

Instead I propose not to dismiss Heidegger’s thinking on the thing as “the ideological fantasy object of a certain regressive strain in nationalism” (Morton 2009: 173), as Timothy Morton does, but to reread Heidegger in light of Jane Bennett’s “thing-power”, so as to actualize his mode of describing thing and art. Such a reading

may in fact provide an answer to Morton's own claim towards "a strong theoretical approach" that transgresses a purely content-oriented mode of reading: "If we restrict our examination to the citation of ecological "content" – listing what is included and excluded in the thematic of the (literary) text – we hand over aesthetic form, the aesthetic dimension and even theory itself, to the reactionary wing of ecological criticism" (Morton 2009:171). Morton actually dismisses Heidegger's *thing* by repeating Meyer Shapiro's earlier contention that the shoes in the van Gogh-painting are not the shoes of a farmer, but that of a city dweller.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, in his critique of what Morton calls Heidegger's "investment in the primitive and the feudal" (172), he misses the potential for a new kind of materialism based on Heidegger. This potential lies in looking more closely into what Morton criticizes

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<sup>18</sup> In "The Still Life as a Personal Object – a note on Heidegger and van Gogh" (1968) Meyer Shapiro criticizes Heidegger's analysis of the van Gogh painting because the painting according to Shapiro does not present a pair of peasant shoes, but are "clearly pictures of the artist's own shoes, not the shoes of a peasant" (Shapiro 2009:297). That the shoes belong to the city dweller van Gogh allows Shapiro to conclude that Heidegger "has indeed deceived himself. He has retained from his encounter with van Gogh's canvas a moving set of associations with peasants and the soil, which are not sustained by the picture itself but are grounded rather in his own social outlook with its heavy pathos of the primordial and earthy" (298). What Heidegger misses according to Shapiro is the artist's own presence in the work of art. Comparing the painting with a paragraph from Hamsun's novel *Sult*, Shapiro concludes that the painting does not have anything to do with use, as he writes: "[n]ot the shoes as an instrument of use, though the landscape painter as a worker in the fields shares something of the peasant's life outdoors, but the shoes as 'a portion of the self' (in Hamsun's words) are van Gogh's revealing theme" (299). Yet Shapiro's critique bypasses the fact that Heidegger's interest lies not in art as an imitation of an already given reality – as Derrida also in "Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing [*Pointure*]" (1978) comments in his defense of Heidegger against Shapiro: "Thus Shapiro is mistaken about the primary function of the pictorial reference. He also gets wrong a Heideggerian argument which should ruin in advance his own restitution of the shoes to van Gogh: art 'as putting to work of truth' is neither an 'imitation' nor 'description' copying the 'real', nor a 'reproduction', whether it represents a singular thing or a general essence" (Derrida 2009:310). Not only that, Shapiro also fails to see that the shoes may just as well have been the shoes of a city dweller, because, as Derrida also emphasizes, "[t]he 'peasant' characteristic remains secondary here. The same truth could have be 'presented' by any shoe painting, or even by any experience of the shoes and even any 'product' in general" (310). Accordingly, Shapiro's critique is not only a misunderstanding of Heidegger's text, since Heidegger's claim indeed concerns the use-character of the shoes, which for Heidegger reveals what a thing is: a trait only made apparent in the work of art. Shapiro also in his critique emphasizes exactly the point of view that Heidegger wants do to away with, namely anthropocentric subjectivity which Shapiro ascribes to the thing as a personal object.

Heidegger for doing. That is, instead of criticizing Heidegger's interest in *how* these things are what they are, which according to Morton allows Heidegger to mistake *what* kind of shoes they are, I will argue that it is exactly in this *how* that a new perspective on materiality appears.

#### 4. Language, Thing and Space as Events

In the description of the shoes from *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, the thing is depicted as an event. Heidegger takes this concept of event even further to include space, and, as a result, the artwork becomes something that *happens*. It is this concept of event that makes Heidegger's thinking useful for a new dynamic concept of space in the novel. Heidegger comprehends the artwork and its relation to things on two levels: The artwork itself is a thing that *happens*, and the artwork makes things appear *in the way that they happen*, in their *thingness*. The following will consist of a four-step argument: First, I will show how Heidegger understands the artwork as event. Second, I will expand my previous reading of Heidegger's *thing* with his concept of *relational gathering*, which, third, leads to a broader understanding of background, as the relational gathering also includes place and space. Finally, to get a glimpse of this relational gathering, I will conclude my argument by introducing Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit*, and by trying, through Heidegger's own readings of different poems, to single out the way he proves *how* the thing may emerge in language, namely through punctuation, which will lead me back to Woolf's *Solid Objects*.

##### 4.1. Language as Event

First, the artwork is itself an event. In a small addition to *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Heidegger writes: "Die Besinnung darauf was die *Kunst* sei, ist ganz und entschieden nur aus der Frage nach dem Sein bestimmt. Die Kunst gilt weder als Leistungsbezirk der Kultur, noch als eine Erscheinung des Geistes, sie gehört in das *Ereignis*" (1977:73). The work of art is an event (*Ereignis*) and what

constitutes the *eventness* of the artwork is an emergence of truth. It is this truth-happening that separates the artwork as a thing from other things. Truth, for Heidegger, means un-hiddenness (*Un-Verborgenheit*), itself a spatial concept, and, explaining what happens in the painting by van Gogh, he writes:

Was geschieht hier? Was ist im Werk am Werk? Van Goghs Gemälde ist die Eröffnung dessen, was das Zeug, das Paar Bauernschue, in Wahrheit *ist*. Diese Seiende tritt in die Unverborgenheit seines Seins heraus. Die Unverborgenheit des Seienden nannten die Griechen *alétheia*. Wir sagen Wahrheit und denken wenig genug bei diesem Wort. Im Werk ist, wenn hier eine Eröffnung des Seiende geschieht in das, was und wie es ist, ein Geschehen der Wahrheit am Werk. Im Werk der Kunst hat sich die Wahrheit des Seienden ins Werk gesetzt. "Setzen" sagt hier: zum Stehen bringen. Ein Seiendes, ein Paar Bauernschue, kommt im Werk in das Lichte seines Seins zu stehen (1977:21).

The artwork presents and brings forth the shoe in its *Being*, showing it as something emerging. And what emerges? Relations: The material, the leather, the soles testify not only to the life of the peasant woman, but also to the environment, the earth. The shoe is not only in a relationship with a user-subject, but also with other objects, such as the wind, the earth, and the road. Describing how the shoes belong to the earth, and how this earth is preserved in the world of the peasant woman, Heidegger introduces the concepts of *world* and *earth*. With these two concepts, *truth-happening* becomes a struggle between the hidden and the visible, as the artwork lets what is otherwise hidden emerge *as hidden*. He repeats the figure from the analysis of *Zeug* from *Sein und Zeit*, showing the inaccessible as inaccessible, or in other words *foregrounding the background as background*.

The artwork is understood as an event of truth, as a struggle between *earth* and *world*: "Das Werksein des Werkes besteht in der Bestreitung des Streitiges zwischen Welt und Erde" (1977:36). In "Mapping the Earth in Works of Art" (2004), Edward S. Casey takes earth "to be what subtends human experience", and world to be "the communal and historical and linguistic domain of human speech and action" (Casey 2004:262). In the first edition of *Vom*

*Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1931/32), Heidegger clarifies what he means by *earth*:

Wie können wir es nennen? Gewiss nicht Stoff als Mittel zur Verfertigung von etwas. Wir heissen den Einklang dieser unüberbietbaren Fülle die *Erde* und meinen damit nicht eine abgelagerte Stoffmasse und nicht den Planeten, sondern den Einklang des Gebirges und des Meeres, der Stürme und der Luft, des Tages und der Nacht, die Bäume und das Gras, den Adler und das Ross. Diese Erde – was ist sie? Jenes, das Ständige Fülle entfaltet und doch das Entfaltete immer sich zurücknimmt und einbehält (2007a:156).

*Earth* is the united background upon which all things appear and relate, but is itself unrelatable. Michel Haar interprets four meanings of *earth* in *La Chant de la terre* (1985). They are: the earth as truth, that is, unconcealment; the earth as nature; the earth as the materiality in the artwork; and the earth as dwelling (cf. 122-136). *Earth* is thus a permanent, if unaccessible, materiality, and not a material to be formed or used. It needs the world of the artwork to become visible. The *earth* is that which always draws itself back from representation and language, and, in the artwork, this always-withdrawing force of the *earth* enters into the struggle with the always-opening world of humans and language. At the same time, the struggle holds the world back, that is, keeps it from disappearing into abstract thinking. The materiality that the artwork puts forward – *earth* – is never used and consumed, and made transparent. Heidegger writes: “im Werkschaffen muss der Streit als Riss in die Erde zurückgestellt, die Erde selbst muss als das Sichverschliessende hervorge stellt und gebraucht werden. Dieses Brauchen aber verbraucht und missbraucht die Erde nicht als einen Stoff, sondern es befreit sie erst zu ihr selbst” (1977:52). The artwork lets the earth emerge, as the language of art is not a medium for communication: “die Sprache ist nicht nur und nicht erstlich ein lautlicher und schriftlicher Ausdruck dessen, was mitgeteilt werden soll” (61). Rather, it is the place where “in der Bereitung des Sagbaren zugleich das Unsagbare als ein solches zur Welt bringt” (61-62). In other words, poetic language lets that

which itself has no language emerge in its inaccessibility, by creating a space for the struggle to be put forth.

The notion of the artwork as event is similar to Gumbrecht's idea of presentation. This event is not a constant unit with a structure of interpretive depth out of which you must extract its meaning. According to Gumbrecht, it is "a tension/oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects [which] endows the objects of aesthetic experience with a component of provocative instability and unrest" (Gumbrecht 2004:108). As Matthias Flatscher argues in "Dichtung als Wesen der Kunst?" (2011):

Heidegger möchte die Dichtung also ausdrücklich aus jedem repräsentationalistischen Verständnis befreien, den die bildet seiner Auffassung nach nicht etwas Vorgegebenes ab und drückt auch keinen Gemütszustand aus, sondern lässt etwas in dem ihr spezifischen Zeigen bzw. Weisen – auf deren Eigentümlichkeit noch zurückkommen werden muss – allererst ins Offene treten (Flatscher 2011:112).

When the artwork is viewed not as representation, but as an emerging presentation, the possibility arises for a non-hierarchical – or horizontal – understanding of the discussion between surface and depth, figure and ground. And when the artwork is a field of unstable components that are both human and non-human, all on the same level or surface, nothing needs to be foregrounded at the expense of something else. In other words, non-themed *readiness-at-hand things* are made visible without losing their character as non-themed; they are not foregrounded and made into objects, but are part of the field of relations that emerges through the artwork. The things that in our everyday use-relationship are invisible, that is, in the background, can emerge as things in the artwork. The background can emerge *as background* without having to be foregrounded as an object, as it emerges in a horizontal field. Heidegger's own comments on the reading of the shoes in van Gogh's painting demonstrate how a changed understanding of the artwork may also include a changed understanding of the thing. At first glance, the shoes appear as nothing more than a pair of shoes, as the painting really is a still life of nothing but the shoes – a point

that Heidegger emphasizes: “Um dieses Paar Bauernschuhe herum ist nichts, wozu und wohin sie gehören könnten, nur ein unbestimmter Raum” (Heidegger 1977:18-19). The shoes may from this first impression seem to be a foregrounded object without any connection to the background, which, Heidegger stresses, is “ein unbestimmter Raum”. But as he continues with the words “Und dennoch” (19), he extracts from this foregrounded thing the background *as background*. What he sees is not an abstract form depicting a used-object; he sees how this use materializes itself and bears witness to the places it was used. During his description, he turns that which appeared to be a foregrounded still life object into a thing related to and beholding the earth. The earth thus emerges in this pair of shoes indirectly as the way the weather and the fields have worn and formed the shoe. Instead of depicting a foregrounded object, the painting shows the *thing as thing*, as relational.

#### 4.2. Thing as a Relational Gathering Event

Second, what the artwork displays is the *thing in its thingness*. But what does this thingness mean and how is it related to the concept of space? In “Das Ding” (1950), Heidegger describes the thing as: “Das Ding dingt. Das Dingen versammelt. Es sammelt, das Geviert ereignend, dessen Weile in ein je weiliges: in dieses, in jenes Ding” (2009:166): the thing “things as a gathering“. What the thing *gathers* is what Heidegger calls the fourfold, consisting of the sky, the earth, the gods, and the mortals. The transcendental – even religious – tone of this category of the fourfold is one of the reasons why many theorists have avoided Heidegger. It is however not so much each of the four elements that are of interest to me here, but rather the way Heidegger describes them, and the way they operate.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>19</sup> In my reading of Heidegger’s concept of gathering and the fourfold, I owe much of my argumentation to Jeff Malpas and E.S. Casey, who both are in favor of not dismissing Heidegger’s thinking on thing and space merely because he operates with a transcendental category. In this regard, the fourfold is an example of a relational ontology that places neither humans nor gods as the “Ursprung”. On the other end of the spectrum, Karsten Harris counterargues in “Das Ding”, “Bauen Wohnen Denken”, “...Dichterisch wohnt der Mensch..” und andere Texte aus dem Umfeld.

fourfold is to be understood as a *relational gathering* and not as a unit. The thing in question gathers the fourfold in such a way that each element emerges as itself in the so-called “gathering event”. As a gathering, the thing is no longer something we simply face; instead it emerges towards us as something that gathers us as well. This highly criticized category is part of Heidegger’s turn away from an anthropocentric and Kantian understanding of materiality, and represents an approach that moves beyond the subject-object dichotomy, and into an intertwining of the two as they meet. Agency is placed within the thing and does not originate from the human-subject. The human being is just one part of this fourfold, and, as Heidegger repeats several times: “Sagen wir Erde, dann denken wir schon die anderen Drei mit”. (2009:171). What is remarkable seen from a descriptive/narrative point of view is that in the description of each of the four aspects in “Bauen Wohnen Denken” (1950), three of them are described as events, that is, with verbs in participle, and not only passive adjectives or nouns: “Die Erde ist die dienend Tragende, die blühend Fruchtende, hingebreitet in Gestein und Gewässer, aufgehend zu Gewächs und Getier” (2009:143), the sky is the “wölbende Sonnengang, der gestaltwechselnde Mondlauf”, and the gods “sind die winkende Boten der Gottheit”. The last, mortals, is the only category described with a passive noun: “Die Sterblichen sind die Menschen” (144). As was the case in the passage from *Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, materiality takes on an active role. A *thing that things* is thus an event on more than one level: first, it gathers the fourfold; it creates relations to other materials and beings, including the human. Second, it does so in such a way that three of the four elements – normally conceived as passive – emerge as events in themselves.

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Unterwegs zum Geviert” (2003): “Geviert und philosophische Verantwortlichkeit? Wie past das Zusammen? [...] “So ist Heideggers Weg in der Tat ein Weg von der Theologie zur Philosophie und zurück zur Theologie, allerdings zu einer Theologie” (Harris 2003:301).

### 4.3. Space as Event

In “Bauen Wohnen Denken”, Heidegger further relates this gathering quality of things to place and space, and elaborates on the concept of background. With his incorporation of space and place, Heidegger adds a very useful tool for describing what happens when the background emerges in novels; something which is otherwise lacking in the theory of New Materialism. With Heidegger’s concept of space it becomes possible not only to recognize that things possess their own power, but also how this power is always related to the space it takes place in, and how space itself is a *happening event*. In “Bauen Wohnen Denken”, the thing in question is a built thing, a bridge:

Die Brücke schwingt sich “leicht und kräftig” über den Strom. Sie verbindet nicht nur schon vorhandene Ufer. Im Übergang der Brücke treten die Ufer erst als Ufer hervor. Die Brücke lässt sie eigens gegeneinander über liegen. Die andere Seite ist durch die Brücke gegen die eine abgesetzt. Die Ufer ziehen auch nicht als gleichgültige Grenzstreifen des festen Landes den Strom entlang. Die Brücke bringt mit den Ufern jeweils die eine und die andere Weite der rückwärtigen Uferlandschaft an den Strom. Sie bringt Storm und Ufer und Land in die wechselseitige Nachbarschaft. Die Brücke *versammelt* die Erde als Landschaft um den Strom. [...] Die Brücke *versammelt* auf *ihre* Weise Erde und Himmel, die Göttlichen und die Sterblichen bei sich (146-147).

As was the case with the description of the van Gogh painting, a main characteristic of the description of this built thing is agency. The bridge “swingt”, “verbindet”, “lässt”, “bringt”, “versammelt” – the built thing happens, but equally important is the creation of space through place. The bridge is not a thing put upon an already existing place; it *creates* this place as a gathering of the fourfold, which thus makes room for space. In the *gathering event*, each part of the setting emerges as it is. Not until the bridge is there does each side of the bank become bank; before they were just sites. The bridge gathers the landscape into a place, and, by so doing, places into relation what could otherwise be seen as separate elements,

such as the water of the river and the earth of the land. Heidegger continues:

Der Brücke ist freilich ein Ding *eigener* Art; den sie versammelt das Geviert in *der* Weise, dass sie ihm eine *Stätte* verstattet. Aber nur solches, was selber ein *Ort* ist, kann eine Stätte einräumen. Der Ort ist nicht schon vor der Brücke vorhanden. Zwar gibt es, bevor die Brücke steht, den Strom entlang viele Stellen, die durch etwas besetzt werden können. Eine unter ihnen ergibt sich ein Ort und zwar *durch die Brücke*. So kommt den die Brücke nicht erst an einem Ort hin zu stehen, sondern von der Brücke selbst her entsteht erst ein Ort. Sie ist ein Ding, versammelt jedoch in der Weise, dass sie Dem Geviert eine Stätte verstattet. Aus dieser Stätte bestimmen sich Plätze und Wege, durch die ein Raum eingeräumt wird. (148)

So far, agency has only been ascribed to things, but as the thing gathers the fourfold in such a way that it gives it a place, space is also given agency. To Heidegger, space is no longer an abstract category of Cartesian *res extensa*, nor an empty space that can be measured according to mechanical and geometrical laws: “der Raum ist kein Gegenüber für den Menschen. Er ist weder ein äusserer Gegenstand noch ein inneres Erlebnis” (151). Heidegger places his concept of space between objective and subjective conception. Space consists of relations: it cannot exist without the human to create it, but it is not subject to the human being. Space *happens* in the intertwining of the two; as a way of making space for place, one might say. Casey emphasizes in “Proceeding to Place by Indirection” (1997) that “[t]o begin with place – that is, with things-as-locations – is to start with something that contains space *in potential*. There is no return to place from space, but from place space is (eventually generated)” (Casey 1997:275). Consequently, space is something we experience in the world of things; it is *a making space* for a place where man can dwell. Heidegger elaborates this agentic quality of space in his later text “Bemerkungen zu Kunst-Plastik-Raum” (1964), as he demonstrates that “der Raum räumt” (1969:13). Just as the *thing things*, so *space spaces*, and what happens is a “space making process”, “[d]er Mensch lässt dem Raum als Räumende, Freigebende zu und richtet sich und die

Dinge in diesem Freien ein.“ (1969:13). In other words, the quality of *gathering* relates space, place, and things, and it is a quality that Casey also calls attention to in “How to get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time” (1993). To Casey, gathering means not “merely amassing. To gather placewise is to have a peculiar hold on what is presented (as well as represented) in a given place. Not just the contents but the very mode of containment is held by a place. “The hold is held”. The hold of place, its gathering action, is held in quite special ways” (328). To Casey, whose point of departure is place, the agency of things and space are subordinated to the category of place. To Heidegger, all three are events, a point he expands on in “Die Kunst und der Raum” (1969). Here, place is the event that opens a region where things gather and relate: “[d]er Ort öffnet jeweils eine Gegend, indem er die Dinge auf das Zusammengehören in ihr versammelt” (1983:207). Continuing, he writes: “[w]ir müssen erkennen lernen, dass die Dinge selbst die Orte sind und nicht nur an einen Ort gehören” (1983:208). The fourfold is the configuration of relations that also includes humans. In this gathering event, the thing creates a place that itself opens a region, where things are related, which in turn creates spaces – that in themselves are *happening*. As is the case with the fourfold, the relationship between space, place and things is horizontal; a process of intertwinements that make it impossible for one of the three to subjugate the other. In this intertwinement, a background emerges in the form of a complex of relations where no foreground can be fixed: a happening, active setting that includes and levels human and nature, man-made and built things.

This intertwinement of space, place, and things in a *relational gathering* returns us to Bennett’s assemblage of debris. What happened in Bennett’s example is exactly this: As she encounters the debris, she is *gathered* in a *relational event* that not only includes thing-power attributed to the glove, the dead rat, or the bottle cap, but to the space and place as well. Read in this light, Bennett’s description reveals a specific *holding* of what is present. “The contingent tableau” and “the assemblage” (Bennett 2010:5) are equivalent to Heidegger’s *gathering*. Instead of merely reading her encounter as an encounter with vibrant things, I will venture, aided

by Heidegger, that indeed she does encounter things that “vibrate”, but that these vibrant things appear and vibrate in a space that itself makes room for this specific configuration to be held in place. In other words: when Bennett describes the debris, she describes a background that *happens*, that is to say, what happens is a *gathering* of her, of each of the things that in themselves happen as they “shimmer and spark” (5), of the place, that is, the street, and of the weather. What Bennett depicts is a way *to foreground the background as background* and this happens as she describes the encounter in a narrative form. This short descriptive narrative is contrasted by her design of the event, which in her text is depicted not in narrative form, but like a poem:

one large men’s black plastic work glove  
one dense mat of oak pollen  
one unblemished dead rat  
one white plastic bottle cap  
one smooth stick of wood  
(Bennett 2010:4)

In the poem-like listing of the found things, they appear separated and abstract on several levels. First, they are formally separated in the division of lines: each thing has its own line and is set apart from the next thing. Second, the things are depicted with nouns and adjectives, which make them appear as objects and not as Heideggerian *things that thing*. Third, in the listing of the things, she herself, as the person sensing them – including the space and the place where this takes place – is absent, which make the things appear as something you cannot relate to; as abstract objects. In short, when the things are presented by Bennett in the form of a list, they lose their character as *things that thing*. Here, the background is foregrounded, but as a foregrounded object, precisely not as background, thus corroborating Heidegger’s critique of the thing. This supports my idea of the descriptive narrative form as the form in which the background can emerge as background, and in which the relational intertwinement appears, as will be shown in the following chapter. Unlike what examples from

Heidegger and New Materialism might suggest, the *thingness of things* does not only appear in poetry.

## 5. Language as “Gelassenheit”

On her openness towards the assemblage, Bennett writes how important it is “to be able [...] to be surprised by what we see” (Bennett 2010:5). This openness is equal to Heidegger’s “Gelassenheit”. Introduced by Heidegger in the text from 1959 by the same name, the concept of *Gelassenheit* is a way to get a glimpse of the relational gathering and avoid centring the human subject. In “Bauen Wohnen Denken”, this attitude is anticipated in the concept of “schonen” (2009:143), which means “etwas eigens in sein Wesen zurückbergen, es entsprechend dem Wort freien: einfrieden” (143). To have a “gelassen” attitude means to let something be in its own Being, and not try to inflict some concept upon it or try to place one’s own feelings within it. Both “Bauen Wohnen Denken” and “Gelassenheit” are critiques of a technical and scientific attitude towards things. Instead of viewing things as resources easily used according to our demands, Heidegger proposes to leave them intact in their diversity of relations. He calls this attitude *Gelassenheit*:

Wir lassen die technische Gegenstände in unsere tägliche Welt herein und lassen sie zugleich draussen, d.h. auf sich beruhen als Dinge, die nichts Absolutes sind, sondern selbst auf Höheres angewiesen bleiben. Ich möchte diese Haltung des gleichzeitigen Ja und Nein zur technischen Welt mit einem alten Wort nennen: *die Gelassenheit zu den Dingen* (1959:25).

These texts point us in the direction of a new attitude, without linking this directly to poetic language. To find a place where this attitude already exists, we must again look to the poetic language.

In “Die Sprache” (1950), language is understood as a kind of *Gelassenheit*, or “a calling forth”; language calls forth things as a relational gathering:

Das Heissen ist Einladen. Es lädt die Dinge ein, dass sie als Dinge die Menschen angehen. [...] Die genannten Dinge versammeln, also gerufen, bei sich Himmel und Erde, die Sterblichen und die Göttlichen. Die Vier sind ein ursprünglich-einiges Zueinander. Die Dinge lassen das Geviert der Vier bei sich verweilen. Dieses versammeln Verweilenlassen ist das Dingen der Dinge (2007b:22).

The attitude of *Gelassenheit* is here a “letting linger” (*Verweilenlassen*). *Gelassenheit* of poetic language lets things be things; it puts them forth in the complexity of the relational gathering. When we understand poetic language as *Gelassenheit*, we accentuate the critique of language as representation. That is, language is not merely a replica of something more real, as Heidegger points out, “[a]lle Welt weiss, dass ein Gedicht Dichtung ist. Es dichtet sogar dort, wo es zu beschreiben scheint. Dichtend bildet sich der Dichter ein möglicherweise Anwesendes in seinem Anwesen vor” (2007b:19): To describe is to create, but to create means making something present (*Anwesen*). The question is, how does the poetic language accomplish this? Even though Heidegger is not a literary critic, he uses poetry and art to illustrate his thinking – they are, as Otto Pöggeler writes, more “der Partner von Heideggers Denken” (Pöggeler 1992:60) than objects for analysis. Yet Heidegger does give a hint as to *how* poetic language lets things emerge. In his reading of the poems of Georg Trakl, Stefan George, and Hölderlin in “Die Sprache im Gedicht” (1953), “Das Wesen der Sprache” (1957) and “Das Wort” (1958) respectively, he highlights the use of the colon as a way for language to speak – a method for giving the thing a voice. First in the poem by Trakl in “Die Sprache im Gedicht”: “Der Doppelpunkt nach dem Wort ‘Stein’ am Ende des Verses zeigt an, das hier *der Stein* spricht” (2007b:63). Next in the poem by George in “Das Wesen der Sprache”:

Was auf den Doppelpunkt nach dem Wort “Verzicht” folgt, nennt nicht das, worauf verzichtet wird, sondern nennt den Bereich, in den sich der Verzicht einlassen muss, nennt das Geheiss zum Sicheinlassen auf das jetzt erfahrene Verhältnis zwischen Wort und Ding [...] Das Wort sagt dem Dichter als das zu, was ein Ding in dessen Sein halt und erhält (2007b:168)

And finally in the poem by Hölderlin in “Das Wort”: “Weil das Verzichten eine Weise des Sagens ist, kann es sich in der Schrift durch einen Doppelpunkt einführen. [...] aber der Doppelpunkt öffnet das Verzichten als ein Sagen für das, worauf es sich einlässt” (2007b:223). In all three readings, the “Doppelpunkt” is an opening; it opens language in such a way that the thing may emerge without any preconceived notions. In the two latter examples, the colon is equaled to a renunciation (*Verzicht*). To Heidegger, this renunciation is a variety of showing, that is, “zeigen heist: sehen lassen” (2007b:222); showing without determining what is shown; presentation as an invitation into the realm of things. This kind of language is far removed from any scientific definitions and determinations; just as it is far from any subject-centred experience of the thing. As in the example of anthropomorphism and the prepositions from *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Heidegger’s analysis of the use of colon points us in the direction of how to read language as presentation.

With this in mind, we may return to *Solid Objects*. What strikes me now is Woolf’s use of semicolon in the depiction of the found lump of glass:

It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone (Woolf 1991:103)

With Heidegger in mind, the semicolon surrounding the line “it was nothing but glass” can be read as a way of putting the thing forth. The semicolon presents the *thing as thing*, but at the same time, the sentence is declamatory in its need to point us in the direction of the thing. Woolf is thus not as radical as Heidegger; she uses the semicolon to direct attention to the thing, but the semicolon is not enough. At the same time, she writes “it was nothing but”; she proclaims instead of just presenting – *glass*. This however diminishes not the fact that the thing she presents is stripped of any preconceived meaning. The found lump of glass is described as unbound to any use-relationships and this “pure” materiality of

glass is formally underlined by the semicolon. With her use of the semicolon, Woolf demonstrates that it is possible for the glass to be nothing but glass. It is freed from the industrial cultural history that Brown ascribes to it, and despite the fact that glass is human-made, it appears in this description freed from its human-relations (relations that are often as invisible as the window). Instead it appears visible and green, and the human context is replaced with Heidegger's *earth*. With Heidegger's earth in mind, the passage may be read as a form of bearing witness to the way the earth shows itself at the same time that it withdraws. The sea (as part of *earth*) is present, but only in the way it has formed and reshaped the glass: it is present, yet hidden. I would argue that the use of punctuation is central to the methods employed by both Woolf and Perec to depict space and things in their novels, and I will expand on this statement in my later analysis of their works. As was previously shown in this chapter, Woolf also gives the stone of glass a voice, with the line "but it was I,I,I." (104) and thus confronts Heidegger's idea of a language that lets "der *Stein* [sprechen]" with a narrative form. Heidegger shows how language presents *things in their thingness*, but when confronted with the narrative form of the novel, things are not only events, but achieve in the novel their own narrative temporality. A presentation of thingness becomes in the novel a narration of space.

## CHAPTER 3

### VIRGINIA WOOLF AND SPACE

# 1. The Presence of Space in the Works of Virginia Woolf

## 1.1 Preliminary Remarks

If we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves. *A Room of One's Own*

“Think of a kitchen table then’, he told her, ‘when you’re not there.’ *To the Lighthouse*

“But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red – even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting through.” *The Waves*

In the late 1920s, Virginia Woolf’s writing turned a corner: Reacting against the normative claims of the novel from the previous generation of Edwardian writers, such as Arnold Bennett, yet dissatisfied with the way other modernist writers such as James Joyce trod new paths for the novel, Woolf developed her own distinct form. Mixing traits from poetry and drama, she created a modernist novel that – contrary to Joyce’s – sought to evoke not only the consciousness of subjects, but also evoke “the world seen without a self”, as Bernard notably puts it in his final monologue in *The Waves*. In “Modern Fiction”, she calls this an “attempt to come closer to life” (Woolf 1994:161) (1925). At the same time she is in accordance with Joyce, Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann in developing a new novel, which, as Auerbach notes in his celebrated chapter on *To the Lighthouse* in *Mimesis – Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (1946), represents

eine Akzentverschiebung[...] viele Schriftsteller geben die kleinen und als äussere Schicksalswendung unbedeutenden Vorgänge und ihrer selbst willen, oder vielmehr als Anlass zur Entwicklung von Motiven, von perspektivistischer Versenkung in ein Milieu oder in ein Bewusstsein oder in den Zeitenhintergrund (Auerbach 2001:508).

The “Akzentverschiebung” that Auerbach locates has led to a tradition of reading modernist fiction that stresses the

“Bewusstsein”; the “Zeitenhintergrund”; the focus on “die kleinen”. But when it comes to the “perspektivistischer Versenkung in ein Milieu”, few critics have focused on the “Milieu” instead of the “perspektivischer” representation of it. Significantly, Auerbach’s own analysis of *To the Lighthouse* pays no attention to the part of the novel where the “Milieu” is provided its own perspective, that is, the novels’ middle section, “Time Passes”. Alongside the intersecting chapters in *The Waves* describing the sun, the sea, the garden and the house, “Time Passes” is what sets Woolf apart from other modernist writers. Here, she offers a perspective on space that is not overshadowed by the consciousness of a character, nor simply constitutes a background for a character’s actions. In these two novels, space is *foregrounded as background* in a way that has no parallel in any other modernist novel that I am aware of.

The aim of the following chapter is examining the role of space in the works of Virginia Woolf, specifically the aforementioned two sections of *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*, while also trying to develop a new methodology for analysing space in the novel. Using the theoretical framework developed in my two previous chapters, I will put different concepts from Narratology to the test in my readings of Woolf, and analyse how, in her work, space emerges as a Heideggerian *thing that happens*. I am particularly intent on exploring how the background emerges as background through *discreetness*. As the following analysis will show, discreetness is present both on story- and discourse level. On the discourse level, I will pursue Woolf’s use of discreet signs, such as semicolon, comma and brackets; discreetness thus becomes a question of what might be conceived as the background typographical signs, as opposed to the foregrounded meaningful words, in accordance with Heidegger’s analysis of the semicolon in the poems. Discreetness is also key to describing Woolf’s narrators, and here Ann Banfield’s concept of a “deictic center but without any explicit or implicit representation of an observer” (Banfield 1987:273) allows a discreet perspective on an unobserved reality to emerge, close to Werner Wolf’s concept *whatness* and Casey’s *thisness*. On the story level, I will show how discreetness is central to the materiality that constitutes space in Woolf’s novels, as space is an encounter between discreet

material elements, such as air and light, and the solid, i.e. the furniture, the house. Furthermore, the optics of discreetness allows a re-evaluation of our understanding of the concept of *event*; no longer only designating extraordinary, life-changing actions carried out by characters, but also small, infraordinary events taking place between space and things. Through these different discreet elements, Woolf can be seen to develop a concept of space that challenges the classic divide between narration and description. This in turn calls for a new vocabulary in order to understand how space functions in her novels, thus challenging Dennerlein's concepts of *situationsbezogene Thematisierung* and *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung*. In a radical way, this also supports a new understanding of space in Modernism, as Woolf introduces discreet spaces, such as nature and the domestic house, into the dominant sensational and dramatic urban setting of Modernism. In order to understand Woolf's distinct modernist space, I will first trace a spatial line of thought through her essays and previous works, before turning my attention to the novels, and by so doing, examine how she herself thinks about space and understands the tradition that she departs from. This also means that I want to draw attention to the manuscripts of the two novels, as they are testament to the spatial awareness in her construction of the novels.

What culminates in "Time Passes" and the interludes is a spatial focus that can be traced through Woolf's oeuvre, and it is my contention that an awakening interest in space is evident from her earliest work onwards. Her two first novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), are often considered traditional rather than anticipating the modernist tradition; characteristically, Kathrine Mansfield<sup>20</sup>, contemporary (and rival) of Woolf writes in a review of *Night and Day* in *Athenaum* on 21 November 1919, that:

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<sup>20</sup> The relationship between Mansfield and Woolf, and in particular Mansfield's influence on the works of Woolf, is discussed in Ann Banfield's "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-impressionism, and Cambridge Time" (2003), where she argues that: "'The Window' and 'The Lighthouse' in *To the Lighthouse* are short stories uncannily reminiscent of Mansfield's 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay'. The interlude 'Time Passes' transforms story into novel by relating past to future in a time-series, creating a post-impressionist 'modern fiction' (Banfield 2003:471).

We have thought that this world was vanishing forever, that it was impossible to find on the great ocean of literature a ship that was unaware of what has been happening. Yet here is *Night and Day*, fresh, new and exquisite, a novel in the tradition of the English novel. In the midst of our admiration it makes us feel old and chill: we had never thought to look upon its like again! (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975:83)<sup>21</sup>

Woolf's two first novels depict space in the realist tradition through an omnipresent narrator. And even though the house does play a central role in the depiction of the Hilberys, it is still mainly a *setting* for action and characters; the house is there to mirror the characters, as evident in the description of the rooms of Mr. Denham, "the only object that threw any light upon the character of the room's owner was a large perch" (Woolf 1992b:18), and by so doing, she continues Zola's notion that the setting must always serve the characters. In *Night and Day*, Katharine is extremely sensitive to the rooms she enters, and the novel is filled with passages such as "Katharine was unconsciously affected, each time she entered her mother's room [...] All the books and the pictures, even the chairs and tables, had belonged to him" (103), and, later in the novel, "the unsparing light revealed more ugliness than Katharine had seen in one room for a very long time. It was the ugliness of enormous folds of brown material, looped and festooned" (359). Woolf shows a keen interest in her characters' houses and their interiors in her second novel, but still space remains background for the foregrounded character; it is there to say something about either the character perceiving it or the character living there. This would make the novel fit for an analysis of space based on the classical distinction in Narratology between description and narration.<sup>22</sup> The same is true of *Jacob's Room* (1922),

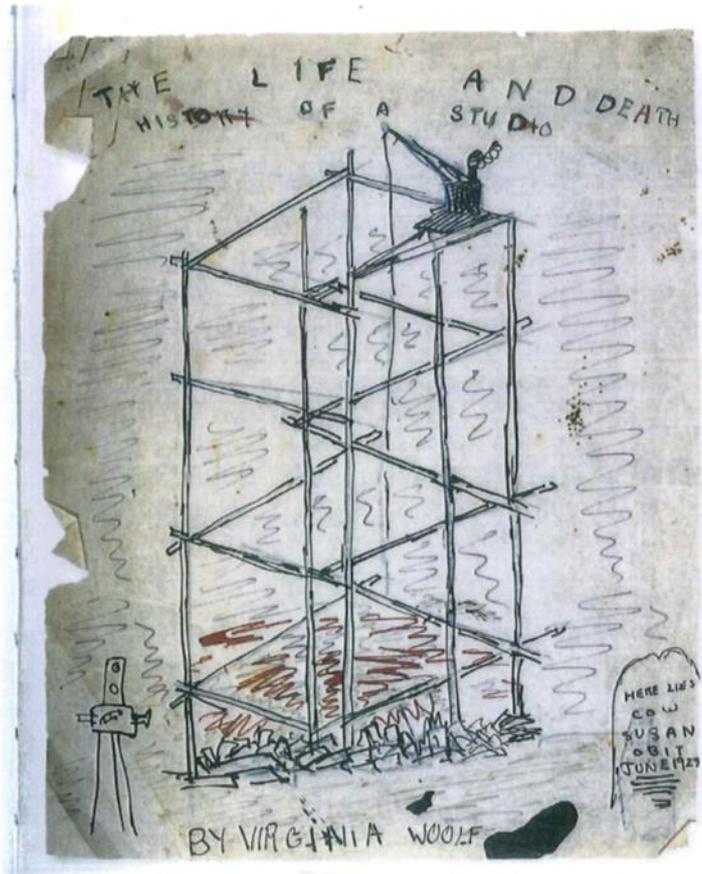
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<sup>21</sup> Majumdar and McLaurin have in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (1975) reprinted and gathered the contemporary critique of Woolf's works. It has since been the main source for all critiques of her critical contemporary reception (cf. Klitgård, Lee, Mills and Goldman).

<sup>22</sup> An endeavour which I, because of my search for a new dynamic concept of space, will not be able to undertake here for the sake of the argument running through the dissertation, but such an investigation might benefit a future project that would explore how space figures in novels outside of the modern tradition, going all the way back to Zola.

Woolf's first modernist, experimental novel, with the important exception that here space, even if only in a few short passages, does emerge as something independent of characters: at the end of a long description of Jacob's rooms, something happens that anticipates what Woolf is going to do in "Time Passes" and the interludes in *The Waves*. She writes: "[l]istless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there" (Woolf 1992a:31). Jacob's rooms do not simply mirror his character or provide background for his actions; they are also depicted when "no one sits there". A room left behind (predicting the novel's ending where the only thing left of Jacob is his empty room), is here not described as a stale and static setting; instead Woolf lets what Auerbach stressed as "das kleinen" appear. But by "the small", Auerbach meant not "the things in themselves" (Woolf 2000b:227), as Bernard from *The Waves* puts it, but rather the small incidents concerning subjects. What Woolf – even if in miniature – begins in *Jacob's Room* is telling the story of spatial event, which she refines in her later novels *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*.

Space runs as a powerful undercurrent in Woolf's thinking on the novel: this is apparent not only in the novels themselves, but in her essays and other peripheral writings, too. An example of an early explicit spatial figuration is found in the recently published – but within Woolf's oeuvre quite marginal – *The Charleston Bulletin Supplements* (1923), the family newspaper created for fun by Woolf and her young nephew Quentin Bell. In it is an illustrated story that tells of a studio being built, "The Life and Death History of a Studio":



(Woolf, Bell 2013:63)

The third chapter of this story consists of a list of the commodities collected in order to build the studio, with the character Duncan depicted underneath all the things:



(Woolf, Bell 2013:66)

The great collection of commodities for making a studio now began: consisting of drain pipes, old hats, 25 vols. on architecture, sheep's jaw bones, walking sticks, enamel bed pans, water troughs, tooth brushes, fenders, chalk, cheese, mousetraps & glass tumblers: Duncan is shown beneath. (Woolf, Bell 2013:65)

Significantly, the studio is never built, and the story ends in a quarrel between caricatures of the art-critic Roger Fry and the painter Duncan Grant (both of whom in real life had an interest in architecture, and thus in space). Nevertheless, this chapter shows Woolf's imaginative interest in small things. In listing collected equipment, accent is not placed on useful things needed in the process of building, i.e. not on props for actions made by characters; instead the things are – to use Heidegger's vocabulary – not only usable tools whose *thingness* disappear in their use, but as one thing is placed next to another (very different) thing, this *thingness* emerges. Indeed, the irony of the story lies in the disparate

items physically overwhelming the character Duncan. These items are not equipment used for building (apart from drain pipes), but instead each thing glows with its own eccentricity and lack of relation to the next: water troughs alongside tooth brushes, quite like Bennett's debris. Even though this story is in the periphery of Woolf's work, and was written mostly for the "skimble-skamble milieu of Charleston" (Bell, Woolf 2013:vi), as David Bradshaw notes, it nevertheless demonstrates Woolf's special interest in things and space. As it accentuates the listing of things instead of the plot of building, I would argue that this story, as was the case with *Jacob's Room*, anticipates the re-evaluation of plot in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. This paves the way for a new understanding of space, just as the "buried" Duncan gives occasion to a re-evaluation of the relationship between character and space. These are issues that Woolf faces in her essays on the novel, and I will attempt to trace them as a spatial strain of thought in her work, before turning my attention to the novels.

Space as an undercurrent running through Woolf's work has not received much attention. The inferiority of space in the works of Woolf is emphasized in A. Snaith's and M. Whitworth's *Locating Woolf – The Politics of Space and Place* (2007). While identifying that space has been overlooked in the reception of Woolf's work, this collection of articles does not show much interest in the way that space in itself is represented in her oeuvre. As this anthology's understanding of space is based on the sociological dimension of space<sup>23</sup>, with Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and Michel de Certeau

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<sup>23</sup> In the introduction to *Stedsvandringer – analyser af stedets betydning i kunst, kultur og medier* (2013), Søren Frank, Hjørdis Brandrup Kortbæk, and Sten Pultz Moslund outline four steps in the development within the Spatial Turn. The first step is taken with the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard. Frank et al. describe how, during the 1950s, Heidegger and Bachelard independently try to do away with the tendency in Modernity to view space as an abstract and geometrical category, instead proposing to look at space as something existential, and stress the relationship between humans and things. This material perspective is challenged by the second wave of sociology: With Henri Lefebvre and Michael Foucault, the intersubjective and the social are introduced into the Spatial Turn, as these theorists criticize Heidegger and Bachelard for being too nostalgic and place-oriented. These are the two main trends within the Spatial Turn, which in recent years has developed in two different directions. The first is place-phenomenology, represented by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Edward S. Casey, and Christopher Tilley, which continues the line of thought from Heidegger, but with emphasis on the bodily dimension. The second

as their main points of reference, differing from my Heideggarian and new materialist conception of space, the writers only deal with space as a “relationship between the material and the psychological” (Snaith and Whitworth 2007:4), and as something “produced through social practice” (8). As a result, they neglect the places in Woolf’s novels where space is present outside any social practices, such as in “Time Passes” and the Interludes. The forgetting of space in the reception of Woolf’s work is also partly due to the fact that Woolf herself, whenever she mentions space, is not talking about space in fiction, but real spaces connected to the author. In one of her earliest essays entitled “Literary Geography” (1905), Woolf directly describes space – but not space in literature at all. Instead, it is a critique of the widespread interest of her time in the houses and places of famous authors, such as Thackeray and Dickens. Even though Woolf in this essay criticizes this factual interest, numerous articles and books on this autobiographical bond between space and author regarding Woolf herself have appeared in print.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it serves as the very framework for Tracey Seeley’s “Virginia Woolf’s Poetics of Space: ‘The Lady in the looking-glass: a Reflection’”(1996). The poetics of space that Seeley tries to extract from Woolf’s work is “how the spaces of Woolf’s childhood give shape to fictional rooms” (Seeley 1996:90). It is a line of research for which Woolf herself, despite her dislike for literary auto-geography, has sown the seeds. In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), she stresses the importance of having a room of one’s own and one’s own money in order to be a writer. This interest is also supported in the authoritative Woolf biography by Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (1996), which begins with a chapter on the houses in

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is the late modern and global tendency continuing the thoughts of Foucault and Lefebvre, represented by Doreen Massey, Marc Augé, and Ulrich Beck. The article does not mention New Materialism, but as already stated in my previous chapter, the perspective on New Materialism – through which I read Heidegger – places itself within the same line of thought as Gumbrecht and Casey, but instead of a bodily focus, the attention is here turned towards the thing-world and its materiality.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Susan Merrill Squir’s *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City* (1985) and Jean Moorcroft Wilson’s *Virginia Woolf Life and London: A Biography of Place* (1987). There is also a whole range of more popular books regarding Woolf, Bloomsbury, and their gardens and houses, see for instance *Charleston – a Bloomsbury House and Garden* (1997) and *Virginia Woolf’s Garden: The story of the garden at Monk’s House* (2013).

which Woolf lived. Consequently, when writing about Woolf and space, it is important to differentiate clearly between the spaces found in her works of fiction and the spaces outside of fiction. Woolf did explicitly deal with spaces outside of fiction and it is this political side of her essays that has received most attention in regard to space. By instead drawing attention to spatial aspects of her essays, I want to connect her famous concepts of *life* and *reality* to space.

Yet before turning to these concepts, sketching a brief historical framework of the novel is necessary in order to understand what it is that Woolf reacts against when she introduces these two concepts, and also to better grasp what kind of Modernism she develops. As the examples from her early novels show, making space appear dynamic and as something other than a setting is a question of literary tradition, as already noted in my introductory chapter. Woolf herself made a survey of the "Phases of Fiction" (1929), wherein she indirectly demonstrated the shapes in which space has appeared through the history of the novel, despite the fact that space is not often mentioned by name in the essay, but appears tantamount to environment, room, nature, trees or simply things. My argument is that in Woolf's work, space emerges as something different from anything seen before in the history of the novel. Her own essays on the history of the novel, whimsical as they are in style, support this notion. In short, without intending to, Woolf writes a history of space in the novel. The following is thus both a spatial reading of Woolf's essays and a historical argument as to why space does not achieve an independent, active role in the novel before the rise of Modernism. But, as I hope to prove through readings of Woolf's novels, this spatial perspective also introduces a new kind of discreet space into the otherwise urban setting of Modernism.

## 1.2 Proceeding to Space by Indirection<sup>25</sup>

“Phases of Fiction” (1929) was originally drafted as Woolf’s first book of criticism, but after several years of rewriting it, it ended up being one of her longest reflections on the novel. In it she makes an impressionistic inventory of the development in the history of the novel: from Defoe to Proust, Woolf installs herself as a “common reader”<sup>26</sup>, jumping from one selection of authors to the next according to her reading desire. As a result, she ends up with a literary history composed of Truth-tellers, Romantics, Character-mongers and Comedians, Psychologists, Satirists and Fantastics, and Poets. In her critique and in the listing of the different authors in these categories, important aspects of her own view on the novel as a genre emerge, as she indirectly reflects on the relationship between character and space. Reading the literary history of “Phases of Fiction” with particular attention to space, several of the issues discussed in my chapter on Narratology are echoed, as Woolf often comments on the dynamic between foreground/background, and between narration of plot/description of landscapes. Each category of writers in her history follows a norm and it is according to this norm that a valuation of space becomes apparent, and indirectly illustrates Woolf’s own thoughts on the role of space in the novel.

In the category of the Truth-tellers, which includes Defoe, Swift, Trollope, W. E. Norris, and Maupassant, Woolf emphasizes that “what they describe happens actually before our eyes” (Woolf 2009:42), the “emphasis is laid upon the very facts that must reassure us of stability in real life, upon money, furniture, food, until we seem wedged among *solid objects in a solid universe*” (43) [my italics]. Truth-tellers are factual describers, who create a trustworthy and solid universe, and in that sense space becomes important in

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<sup>25</sup> My inspiration for reading for space in this manner stems from E.S. Casey’s method of reading place in Heidegger as something indirect throughout his work, see “Proceeding to place by indirection: Heidegger”, in *The Fate of Place – A Philosophical History* (1998). Much like the way Casey reads against the typical reception of Heidegger’s earliest work in his search for place, I read Woolf’s essays in a spatial fashion, contrary to their traditional reception.

<sup>26</sup> The idea of a common reader is a recurring theme in Woolf’s work, see for example her two-volume *Common Reader* (1925, 1932), wherein this essay also appeared.

their work. In this category, space is the socio-economic basis for the life of the characters; not important in itself, but necessary as a framework that supports the characters. It is however a static and solid setting; the “solid objects” do not have a life of their own and do not take hold of the characters as they do in Woolf’s own short story *Solid Objects* (see the opening of chapter 2). In this category, they must remain in the background, as Woolf writes about Defoe:

Or, suppose that he lets himself dwell upon the green shades of the forest depths or upon the sliding glass of the summer stream. Again, however much we were delighted by the *description*, we should have been uneasy because this other reality would have wronged the massive and monumental reality of Crusoe or Moll Flanders (43) [my italics].

Reality, that is, the surroundings, only concerns the characters –it is essential that the narrative is not interrupted by long descriptive parts that support neither the characters nor the plot. Woolf stresses the importance for this category of novelist of moving “on with the story [...] action and event quickly succeeding each other, [which] set in motion this dense accumulation of facts” (44).

After describing these fact-recording novels, Woolf feels “[a] desire for distance, for music, for shadow, for space” (49), and so she moves on to the Romantics. This shift causes the following reflection:

The truth-tellers had very little love, it seems, of nature. They used nature almost entirely as an obstacle to overcome or as a *background* to complete, not aesthetically for contemplation or for any part it might play in the affairs of their characters (49-50) [my italics].

Contrary to the Truth-tellers, the Romantics give nature its own part to play in the development of both story and characters. Nature, and more broadly, space, comes to transcend setting, affecting the foregrounded character and destabilizing the relationship between a foregrounded character and a backgrounded setting. Space creates the atmosphere of uncertainty that Woolf

longed for after the reading of Truth-tellers, as evidenced by her thoughts on Ann Radcliffe:

With the sinking of the lights, *the solidity of the foreground* disappears, other shapes become apparent and other senses are roused. We become aware of the danger and darkness of our existence; comfortable reality has proved itself a phantom too. Outside our little shelter we hear the wind raging and the waves breaking. In this mood our senses are strained and apprehensive. Noises are audible which we should not hear normally. Curtains rustle. Something in the semidarkness seems to move. Is it alive? And what is it? And what is it seeking here? Mrs Radcliffe succeeds in making us feel all this, largely because she is able to make us aware of the *landscape* and, thus, induces a detached mood favorable to romance (53) [my italics].

As background gets foregrounded as a reflection of characters' moods, the setting no longer provides static security and is instead influencing and disturbing the characters as "the solidity of the foreground disappears". The dominating subject in its "little shelter" is forced to turn its perspective to "the wind and the waves". It cannot be said to be a complete change in perspective, as the one Woolf herself achieves in *The Waves*, where the wind and the waves come to take over the scene of the characters, but with the Romantics, space has entered the scene of action.<sup>27</sup> The solid objects from the world of the Truth-tellers are turned into phantoms in semidarkness.

From this world of Romantics, Woolf goes on to argue that she "need[s] a new scene; a return to human faces; a sense of walls and towns about us, with their lights and their characters after the silence of the wind-blown heath" (55). This means moving on to the Character-mongers and Comedians: Dickens, Austen. In light of my previous discussion on space in Narratology, I see a pattern in Woolf's reading of the phases of fiction: Even though she does not explicitly deal with the question of space or the theoretical discussion of narration and description, she seems to be addressing some of the same issues using another vocabulary. Although she

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<sup>27</sup> This changed perspective on nature is a point that within recent years have occupied many Ecocritics. They often take their point of departure in the Romantic lyrical genre. Cf. for instance Morton (2009), Rigby (2004), Bate (2002).

does not use the word space, instead she writes about nature and objects, and in her distinction between the different phases of fiction, she actually addresses phenomena such as a foreground and background, character and space. On Character-mongers, she writes (about Dickens) that “the character-making power is so prodigious that the very houses and streets and fields featured in sympathy with the people” (55). Again she stresses a spatial relationship, but in contrast to the style of the Romantics, characters are now foregrounded:

For in order to develop personal relations to the utmost, it is important to keep put the range of the abstract, the impersonal; and to suggest that there is anything that lies outside men and women would cast the shadow of doubt upon the comedy of their relationships and its sufficiency (59).

Each leap from one category to the next is, significantly, led by shifts between the emphasis on character and space. In the three last phases – the Psychologists, the Satirists, and the Poets – character and space merge. Woolf describes Proust’s novel as a “universe [...] steeped in the light of intelligence. The commonest *object*, such as the telephone, loses its simplicity, its *solidity*, and becomes a part of life and transparent” (66) [my italics]. She continues: “[o]ne’s relations are not only with another person but with the weather, food, clothes, smells, with art and religion and science and history and a thousand other influences” (67). To Woolf, the Psychologists depict a relationship with the outer world that is always mirrored in the mind of a character. Backgrounded setting is not foregrounded as such, but mixed up in the thoughts of a foregrounded character, causing the setting to lose its “solidity.” With the repetition of “solidity” as a trait of space in all categories, Woolf’s own method for presenting space begins to take shape. Throughout “Phases of Fiction”, she circles the question of how to depict solid background as something *relational* and *happening*. After immersing herself in the psychological world of Proust, Woolf’s common reader feels the need for a freer relation to reality, which she finds in the Satirists, such as Sterne. This freedom is not obtained by the novelist getting closer to a material

reality, though, but instead through the creation of a stylistic and discursive universe, which makes Woolf note that “the great pain is perhaps that our relation with things is more distant” (73). In the end, this makes her turn her attention to the Poets – Hardy, Brontë and Melville – because “[p]oetry it would seem, requires a different ordering of the scene; human beings are needed, but needed in their relation to love, or death, or *nature* rather than to each other” (80) [my italics]. From a spatial and material point of view, it would not be all that surprising to see Woolf then abandon the genre of the novel in favour of the poem in order to turn the perspective towards space and things. But this is not the case. To Woolf, poetry is a genre that does not dwell on the concrete. It may evolve around a thing or a space, but it turns them into abstractions such as “love, death, or nature”, as also pointed out by Ralph Freedman in *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Herman Hesse, André Gide and Virginia Woolf* (1963). This view is quite contrary to Heidegger’s understanding of poetry, asserting as he does poetry as the genre that lets materiality of space and thing appear in contrast to the symbols and abstractions of science. The difference between these two views is perhaps most marked in what they distance themselves from: Heidegger from the scientific misapprehension of the thing, and Woolf from the symbolizations of reality in poetry, as will later become clear in my reading of Woolf as part of what Bonnie Kime Scott has called a “greening of modernism” (Kime Scott 2012:13). In line with Heidegger, Woolf’s fictive space is a space of the ordinary; a relational space, not without the human, but in relation to the human. The concluding remark of the essay thus states that

one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; they excite in us the feelings that people excite in us in real life. The novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of the life of a real person. And in order to give that full record of life, not the climax and crisis but the growth and development of feelings, which is the novelist’s aim, *he copies the order of the day, observes the sequence of ordinary things even if such fidelity entails chapters of description and hours of research.* Thus we glide into the novel with far less effort and less break with our *surroundings* than into any other form of

imaginative literature. We seem to be continuing to live, only in another *house and country* perhaps (81) [my italics].

Contrary to what is true of poetry, the novel has the human element at its centre. This does not mean that space plays no role in it; summing up her history of the novel, what Woolf ends up accentuating as ideal is a novel that depicts “a full and truthful record of the life of a real person”, and space does have a role to play other than just background in this fullness. In her emphasis on the ordinary, she moves away from the plot-driven novels of Truth-tellers – it is “not the climax and crisis” that must fill the novel; it is the ordinary and Auerbach’s *kleinen*. She thus introduces “chapters of description” as an important device. To give what she calls “a full record of life”, the role of description must be re-evaluated, as the novel can no longer only rely on recording extraordinary events set in motion by characters, but must depict the “sequence of ordinary things.”

This view is carried to even more explicit spatial expression in *A Room of One’s Own* as Woolf introduces her concept of *reality*. As the concluding paragraph of *A Room of One’s Own*, cited in the beginning of this chapter, emphasizes: It is important to “see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the threes or whatever it may be in themselves”. *Reality* is thus a concept alongside *life* that is repeated throughout her essays, and through both these concepts Woolf allows space its own place in the novel. Her emancipatory ideas within a political, feminist framework are in direct continuation of liberating impulses on behalf of the novel as a genre. To see humans in relation to reality means to free them from any preconceived categories. It means literally to allow women their right to a room of their own and, as a result, their right and freedom to move freely about and, consequently, to write about the reality that they experience. What Woolf here departs from is the idea based on the example of Jane Austen that “if a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting room” and “training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the

common sitting-room” (Woolf 2004: 77-78). Instead of focusing on the relationship between people within the sitting-room, Woolf proposes to broaden the gaze and also look at

where we are now sitting, what lies beneath its gallant red brick and the wild unkempt grasses of the garden? What force lies behind that plain china off which we dined, and (here it popped out of my mouth before I could stop it) the beef, the custard and the prunes? (Woolf 2004:23).

The expansion of that reality depicted by women writers – to not only include human relationships in the common-sitting-room but also the “trees and the wind” outdoors – is directly employed by Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, which is structured as a walk through the city. Here she practices what she proposes in “Phases of Fiction”: to depict the ordinary, even if it includes chapters of description. The essay is full of descriptions of ordinary spaces that she encounters on her way through the city: “To the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson, glowed with the colour, even it seemed burnt with heat, of fire. On the further bank the willows wept in perpetual lamentation” (2004:5). What Woolf here both says and does is not only to use space as a trope for an oppressive patriarchy, as Tracy Seeley argues in “Flights of fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in *A Room of One’s Own*” (2007), but to actually “practice” the kind of space that she later develops in the novels. To Woolf, reality in the novel means an expansion of spatiality. If women are allowed freedom, that is, the right to be seen as something in themselves, it consequently means that space is seen as something in itself, too. Hence reality in the novel is a flattening of hierarchies; a relational ontology that allows humans, things, and spaces each their own point of reference. Whereas Heidegger arrived at his relational ontology through a philosophical critique of the western conceptualization of the thing, Woolf arrives at hers from a political, feminist point of view: All the same, they both end up ascribing to spaces and things a significant role in what it means to be human, while differing on the question of which medium is best suited to depicting it. The flattening of hierarchies also applies to the way Woolf thinks about genre and space. While

she renounces the lyrical genre on the account of its lack of ability to contain the ordinary, she nevertheless recognizes its stylistic devices as a possible way for future novels. In the essay “Poetry, Fiction and the Future” (1927), she outlines what the novel of the future might look like: “It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic and yet not a play” (1994:435). She wants the novel to move away from “the sociological novel or the novel of environment” (1994:435). This entails moving personal relations to the background and foregrounding

emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone: we are not entirely occupied in personal relationships; all our energies are not absorbed in making our livings (435).

Through this combination of genres she arrives at a novel that makes room for and gives voice to non-human entities. The dialogue or monologue from drama is substituted with “soliloquy in solitude” (435), where the centre of attention is shifted from human relations to “relations of the mind” (435). The essay stresses that the topics normally attributed to poetry, such as roses, nightingales and the sunset, will in the novel of the future be presented in their ordinariness and not as condensed pictures of poetry. Even though Woolf in her essays puts a lot of stress on the human element, and on the idea of “emotions” and “mind”, she in her novels does something far more radical: she lets the surrounding space appear outside of the mind and emotions of characters. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf anticipates her own method in her later novels, depicting the essential work of the novelist as a capacity towards this silent world of things; an obligation to give voice to reality:

What is meant by ‘reality’? It would seem to be something erratic, very undependable – now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up in a group in a room and stamps some causal saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and *makes the*

*silent world more real than the world of speech* [...] Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the *presence of this reality*. It is his business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us (Woolf 2004:127) [my italics].

This ability bears much resemblance to Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit*: the writer can be said to be open to what Woolf calls *reality*, which means to be impressed by things and spaces, and to give voice to that which has no language.

### 1.3. Materialism contra Life

Woolf's concepts of *reality* and *life* must be distinguished from her idea of materialism. In the early essays "Modern Fiction" (1919/25), "How it Strikes a Contemporary" (1923), "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1923), and "Character in Fiction" (1924), Woolf criticizes the previous generation of Edwardian writers (Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy) for being materialists. In this way, she condenses the literary history from "Phases of Fiction" to the generation just before her own Georgian generation of writers. Through her critique of their materialism, Woolf elaborates on the relationship between character and space, and foreground and background.

"Character in Fiction" is a critique of the way the Edwardians create characters, and it has a pronounced spatial leaning, taking as its example descriptive passages on houses. At first glance, it appears as if Woolf is arguing against long descriptions of space in the novel. She rhetorically asks this older generation for help in describing her recurring character of Mrs Brown, and cries out to stop the description before it ruins the character:

How shall I begin to *describe* this woman's character? And they say, 'Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. *Describe* cancer. *Describe* calico. *Describe* –' But I cried 'Stop! Stop!'" (Woolf 1988:432) [my italics].

The problem is not the description of space, but the division between space and character, foreground and background. The Edwardians separate character and space in such a way that space becomes a setting to describe a character's social and economic status. Alex Zwerdling argues in *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1986) that "her pursuit of descriptive economy were expressions of Woolf's impatience with "the Edwardians" [...] with their emphasis on material fact, circumstantial detail, and recognizable social setting" (Zwerdling 1986:23). This is what characterizes the materialism of the Edwardians, according to Woolf. She emphasizes this in "Modern Fiction":

If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word *materialists*, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring (1994:159) [my italics].

The trivial is the account of the economic foundation and social tradition out of which their characters arise. They give, as Woolf continues in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown", "a vast sense of things in general; but a very vague one of things in particular" (1988:387). The best way to illustrate the materialism that Woolf is trying to dispose of, is by quoting the passage chosen by Woolf from Bennett's novel *Hilda Lessways* (1925):

It was one of the two middle houses of a detached terrace of four houses built by her grandfather Lessways, the teapot manufacturer; it was the chief of the four, obviously the habitation of the proprietor of the terrace. One of the corner houses comprised a grocer's shop, and this house had been robbed of its just proportion of garden so that the seigneurial gardenplot might be triflingly larger than the other. The terrace was not a terrace of cottages, but of houses rated at from twenty-six to thirty-six pounds a year; beyond the means of artisans and petty insurance agents and rentcollectors (Woolf 1988:430).

The passage is a static spatial description of the main character's house. Even though space is described here, the focus is not on the materiality of house and garden; instead, space is a symbol of status,

emphasized in the accentuation of ownership. Depicted are the rates and size and not for instance the colours, smells, or fabrics of the house. The focus of this passage is consequently turned away from space and to the characters inhabiting it. To Woolf, the problem is that such descriptions take the life out of a character, and Bennett ends up creating houses that no one could live in. Woolf's critique of this passage focuses on the creation of a character, but as the example comprises a spatial description, I would argue that it says a lot about how fundamentally *spatial* Woolf's critique of the Edwardians is. The chosen passage directly recalls my previous discussion on description, as an example of the way a description conveys facts about a character. That is, it serves as background information that stops the narration of the plot. This static, accumulative information about the size, cost, and thus the status of the house may be one of the reasons why spatial description earned itself a bad reputation among narratologists, and probably also why Woolf calls for a stop. The descriptive interest lies not with space itself, but in what a space may tell the reader about the character living there. It describes, as Woolf comments, "facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines" (Woolf 1988:430). The Edwardians operate with a static notion of space and thus a clear distinction between foreground and background. In the above passage, the description of space gets foregrounded as a separate part of the narrative plot, but it appears only as a background for the foregrounded character. It is not present in itself, but gets foregrounded as a utilized object; the opposite of what Woolf herself does in "The story of a Studio". The passage is an example of the way space can be represented when the background gets *foregrounded as foreground* and not as background. In "Modern Fiction", Woolf writes about the description of a house created by Mr Bennett that "[t]here is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet – if life should refuse to live there?" (Woolf 1994: 158-159). Whereas the Edwardians conform to a separation between descriptions of space on the one hand, and narration of events made by characters on the other, Woolf wants spaces that are alive. In the houses of the Edwardians nothing moves, no "draught" is to

be found between the windows – a draught which might have disturbed the otherwise static spatial description, and would have created a house that characters could believably live in. As a contrast to this kind of materialism, Woolf asserts the concept of *life*.

The previous generation of writers seems to Woolf “constrained [...] to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability”, prompting her to ask: “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” (1994:160). The novels of the Edwardians have been structured according to probability and everything in them has been subordinate to the dogma of plot. Woolf’s solution is introducing the concept of *life*. Viewed through this concept, plot no longer only refers to large events activated by characters according to “comedy, tragedy or love interest”, but may also include characters’ everyday experiences. Accordingly, attention is shifted from extraordinary events to the ordinary experience:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this’. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end (1994:160).

With this new concept, Woolf proposes a new valuation of descriptions of space. *Life* is spatial. It is not space, but it is described as a “semitransparent envelope surrounding us”. *Life* is surrounding, it is relational gathering. It is not “a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged”; not a separate well-constructed part

distinguishable from actions carried out by characters. *Relational* means an intertwinement between humans and space, and the “myriad of impressions” that this quote is most famous for describing – as a reference to Woolf’s narrative technique – are impressions “coming from all sides” that the mind receives. Significantly, the active part in this process is not the subject receiving, but instead the surroundings that provide stimuli. These surroundings are not static backgrounds; they impact the characters. To record *life* is not only to look at what impressions the mind receives, but also to turn the perspective inside out and trace the emerging impressions in order to allow the pattern of things and spaces its own perspective:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than what is commonly thought small (1994:161).

With the human element still her central concern, Woolf does not herself mention this spatial perspective. Nevertheless, a consequence of this “recording of life” is the possibility of a new kind of space emerging within the novel, a space that is alive and *happening*. Events do not have to be comic or tragic to be included in the plot of the novel, but can consist solely of the event of the wind sweeping the floor of a house, banging on doors. In “Time Passes”, the draught missing from Mr Bennett’s house becomes an event in itself. Woolf’s concept of *life* thus activates space; it creates a connection between space and character that goes both ways and dissolves the sharp distinction between narration and description.

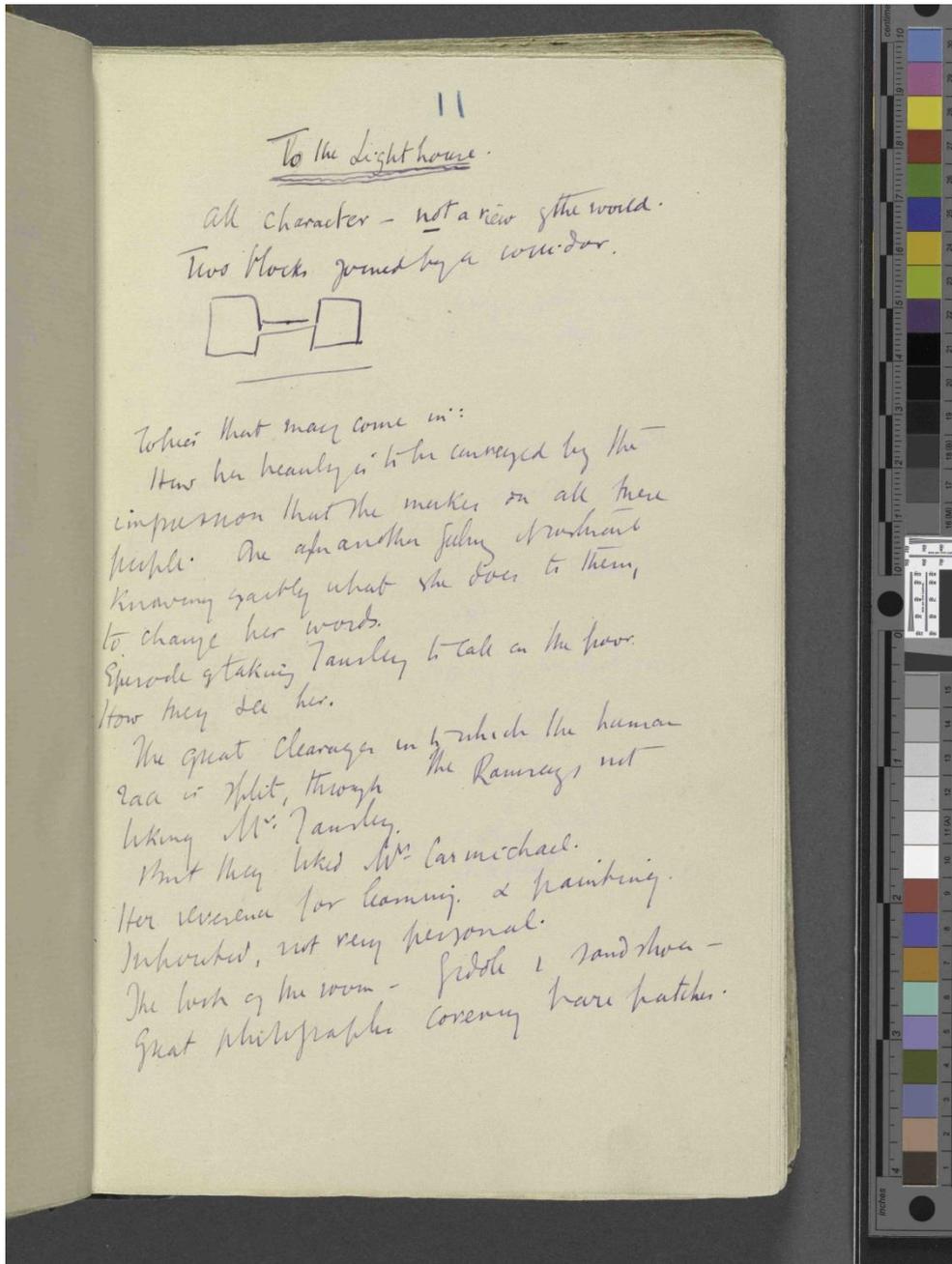
## 2. Spatial Readings of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*

### 2.1. The Corridor and the Seasons

Woolf's manuscripts of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, the so-called *Holograph Drafts*<sup>28</sup>, bear witness to the role space has played in the process of writing. In one of the earliest drafts of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf depicts her novel with a figure:

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<sup>28</sup> *The Original Holograph Draft for To the Lighthouse* appeared in 1982, edited by Susan Dick, but also made available as part of the [woolffonline.com](http://woolffonline.com), an online archive with all available materials concerning *To the Lighthouse*, such as manuscripts, editions, pictures, diary, notes and critical reception. *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, edited by J.W. Graham appeared in 1976.



29

The figure is described as “Two blocks joined by a corridor”. In “*To the Lighthouse’s Use of Language and Form*” (2015) Jane Goldman states that “[t]his initiating form starkly survives in the published Work. The two blocks may correspond to the first and third parts of the published novel, “The Window” and “The

29 Reprinted from woolfonline.com:  
<http://woolfonline.com/?node=content/image/gallery&project=1&parent=6&taxa=16&content=732&pos=4>.

Lighthouse”, the corridor to the one linking them, “Time Passes”” (Goldman 2015:30). With this figure, Woolf introduces something other than words to the understanding of her novel: This figure allows space to emerge on a level outside of the conventional interpretation of the meaning of language, which anticipates Woolf’s use of discreet signs in her novels.

The figure may be read in two different ways: it may either be a letter of the alphabet, or it may be a spatial representation of the novel. In the first reading, the figure could either be understood as an “H” or an “T”; as Goldman notes, both interpretations stressing the human element in the novel. This reading directs our attention to the importance of letters in the novel, for instance, as Goldman points out, Mr Ramsay’s trouble with the letter “R”. Continuing this reading, Goldman suggests that the figure may also be the letter “T” lying down, which makes her conclude that the shape may be a “signifier of subjective personality” (34), as she compares it with the quote above the figure: “All character – not a view of the world”. As Goldman’s interest lies in the formal aspects of the novel, through which she interprets the characters, she does not consider the spatial implications of this figural use of language. She does however note that the figure has a spatial aspect to it; as “an architectural plan, a room plan of the house at the book’s center, or a geographical map” (34). But instead of interpreting the space within the novel, Goldman chooses the path of traditional “spatial” readings of Woolf and looks for an answer not in the novel itself, but in Woolf’s notes to find out where the novelist herself was physically situated while she wrote it. In *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, Alex Zwerdling offers another reading of this figure, as he stresses that

she invented a fictional structure that would allow her to contrast the settled order of the traditional nuclear family with a freer but more chaotic relationship of modern life, and the narrow corridor of “Time Passes” serves to emphasize the tenuous connection between old and new (Zwerdling 1986:194).

In Zwerdling’s reading, the spatiality of the figure is not even mentioned, nor is what takes place in “Time Passes”. Instead the

figure is interpreted in line with what he calls “the domestic Policy” (180). “Time Passes” is in this instance seen as a gap of time between part one and three, which each represents two different family structures.

Despite Zwerdling’s interpretation, the figure is also a spatial representation of the novel; it represents “Two blocks joined by a corridor.” Apart from depicting the overall structure of the novel, which takes a spatial form – and finds the novel parallel to Marcel Proust’s reflections of the construction of *À La recherché du temps perdu* as that of a church<sup>30</sup> – the spatiality of the figure also stresses the importance of space in the novel. If we assume that the figure is a representation of the three-part structure of the novel as Goldman noted, Woolf’s description of the structure just below the figure is not so much interesting because of the two blocks in the quote “two blocks joined by a corridor”, but because of the corridor itself. As the corridor denotes “Time Passes” – the part of the novel where space is given its own chapter – Woolf with the combination of figure-corridor and the word “corridor” accentuates the importance of space in the novel. The two lines printed above the figure, “All character – not a world view, Two blocks joined by a corridor”, thus appear to echo the conflict between Woolf’s own accentuation of “the human element” as the main point of reference in the novel versus the understanding of the human as something relational, which allows space a significant and new role in the novel, important on its own terms. If space is a corridor, it is something that relates and not something that separates; not a gap, as Zwerdling would have it. With this figure Woolf heightens our awareness of the relational. The novel does not consist of three separate blocks, but of two blocks and a corridor – space is not a separate “view of the world”, but rather that which holds the structure together. As the figure shows, the corridor has its own shape: it is a long passage relating one block to the other. If we consider the two blocks to be “all character”, that

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<sup>30</sup> In the last volume *Le temps retrouvé*, Marcel the narrator comes up with the idea for a novel having the form of a church: “ l’idée de ma construction ne me quittait pas un instant. Je ne savais pas si ce serait une église où des fidèles sauraient peu à peu apprendre des vérités et découvrir des harmonies, le grand plan d’ensemble” (Proust 1990: 346).

is, each a narrative with a human character at the centre, and the corridor is space without humans, then the novel could also be said to play with the typical distinction between narration and description. Why? Because it is in the section without humans – in the description – that the novel narratively moves forward, as it is a passage. It is here that “time passes” and years go by, whereas the two narrative blocks stand still in their depiction of one day each. At the same time, it is important to note that neither the first nor the third part are exclusively subject-oriented; indeed space and objects do play a large role in these sections of the novel, as the characters are not only related to each other, but their relations to things and spaces figure prominently as well, as for instance does the brown stocking for Mrs Ramsay, or the lighthouse for Cam and James, and the kitchen table for Lily. In the next chapter, I will further explore how space appears in these sections.

Returning to the figure; from a Heideggerian point of view, a spatial reading of it may seem contradictory. While the figure points to the importance of the concrete space in the novel, this figure may also be read as an abstract sign, and so represents a step away from the concreteness of the poetic quality of language.

Contrary to this three-step figure of *To the Lighthouse*, which accentuates space by the corridor, Woolf's notes and drafts on her most experimental novel *The Waves* (1931), first entitled *The Moths*, display an opposite compositional strategy, where the spatial interludes appear in the very first drafts, then disappear completely, only to reappear in the final version of the novel. According to Ida Klitgård, there is an inherent conflict between the unity of its design and the structure of the novel with its nine chapters of episodes containing the thoughts of the six characters, the nine interludes depicting the sun, the sky, the sea, and the house intersecting each chapter. In her interpretation of Woolf's manuscripts in *A Modernist Poetics of the Sublime in Virginia Woolf's The Waves* (2000), Klitgård stresses “the fluency and unity in a novel which is composed of two diametrically opposite structural designs” (Klitgård 2000:101). The two opposing designs are mirrored in the development of the different drafts. In the first

draft, the seasons structure the novel, anticipating that which in the final version has turned into the interludes:

Spring ...1  
Summer...2  
Autumn...3  
Winter...4  
(Woolf 1976: 1)

Later, Woolf adds the lives of the characters according to season, thus placing emphasis on the character-centred episodes:

1. Childhood  
2. London  
3. Maturity  
4.  
(14)

In the gradual development of the drafts, the seasonal structure is established first, and is only later elaborated with the presence of characters. In the drafts' last synopsis of the novel, which closely resembles the final nine chapters of the published work, the four seasons have been replaced with a thematic structure for each chapter:

1. The light quickens – the garden  
2. The garden  
3. School -----20  
4. College.  
5. London.  
6. Maturity  
7. Death  
8. Love.  
9. Books. & sensation  
(400)

The description of the first chapter as “light that quickens” could be said to anticipate the first interlude with the sun rising, but, as Klitgård stresses, “the interludes are not once interpolated in any of the above outlines. [Suggesting] that this circumstance bears witness to the struggle Woolf had with these interchapters, and was the

reason why she kept revising them *en bloc* in the end to secure continuity between them” (100). As Klitgård’s comment suggests, the unity of design does not only adhere to the unity of the whole novel, but also to the continuity of the spatial interludes, which bears resemblance to the chapter on space in *To the Lighthouse*. The first “seasonal” draft, and the scrutiny with which Woolf revised the interludes, suggest the importance of both of them for the structure of the novel, as well as their importance as a separate unity in relation to the rest of the novel depicting space. This struggle resembles the problem Woolf had with “Time Passes”, which she noted in her diary on the 5 May 1926 as

the most difficult abstract piece of writing – I have to give an empty house, no people’s characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to: well I rush at it, and at once scatter out for two pages. Is it nonsense, is it brilliance? (Woolf 2008: 210).

I will return to the ways in which “Time Passes” has been overlooked in the reception of *To the Lighthouse*<sup>31</sup>, but for now it is important to note that the interludes in *The Waves* have received some critical attention and that Klitgård herself devotes a whole chapter to what she calls “a Comprehensive analysis of the interludes” (163). The problem with Klitgård’s reading of the interludes is that while allowing them an important role in her interpretation of the sublime, she reads the interludes either allegorically, as Tania Ørum does in “Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. The novel as play and poem” [Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* Romanen som skuespil og digt] (1999) [My translation], or as descriptions of

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<sup>31</sup> An exception from this rule is the work of Ann Banfield, who, in her book *The Phantom Table* (2000) and in the article “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-impressionism, and Cambridge Time” (2003), has dealt with both the interludes and “Time Passes”. Her endeavour to make an “analysis of the common-sense world” (2000:1) and “an aesthetic of the impersonal” (55) comes the closest to my search for things and space in the modern novel as something independent of characters. Despite of this similarity, Banfield has a historical agenda contrary to my methodological agenda, as she calls “upon analytic philosophy” (Banfield 2000:xi) in the attempt to place Woolf’s works within the framework of contemporary Cambridge philosophers, such as Russel, Moore, and the Post-impressionistic aesthetics of the art critic Fry.

background, in order to understand the narrative and language used by the characters in the episodic chapters. Klitgaard writes: “The interludes form a bridge between and background to the episodes. They form a containing allegorical frame of the events of the novel. They describe the passage of the sun on the sky from early dawn to sunset” (Klitgård 101). To interpret the interludes as the important bridge in the unity of novel also implies that she interprets them as episodic chapters, considering them only for the structure they offer and not, as the corridor-figure of “Time Passes” merits, as important in themselves. Not that there is no continuity between the interludes and the episode; indeed as in *To the Lighthouse*, the rhythm of interludes, with its ebb and flow of the waves, is repeated in the episodes, which create a continuity between the human world of the episodes and the non-human world of the interludes. It does however not follow that that the interludes are merely background to the episodes because there is a bridge between the two parts. And to an even greater extent than in *To the Lighthouse*, space and things are important to the characters in *The Waves*. Here, their identity is closely related to the materiality of things: Rhoda to the hardness of her bed, Louis to the roots in the ground, Bernard to the cup which makes him form phrases, Susan to the surrounding nature, and Jinny to the bodily sensations in a room. Accentuating the interludes as a separate spatial part of the novel does not mean that space plays no role in the episodes; rather, it means that in my search for space, I have focused my attention on the places where space emerges as something important in itself.

## 2.2. Semicolon and Comma

The H-shaped figure of the corridor from Woolf's notes on *To the Lighthouse* purported that the first and third parts of the novel are dominated by “all character and “no view of world”. However, through a closer examination of the use of the non-verbal side of language, space does emerge outside of the characters' thoughts in these two parts of the novel; not as a direct view of the world, as in the novels of the Edwardians, but allowing the background to appear discreetly as something dynamic and relational. The

discreetness becomes visible in Woolf's shifts in punctuation. Goldman's reading does take into account this non-verbal side of Woolf's style, but she does not comment on its significance for the role of space in the novel:

Yet the armature of her design is most starkly available in the stylized, self-conscious repetition of forms that are not strictly verbal: Woolf's strategic use of blank spaces, her virtuosic deployment of punctuation marks, her hinging semicolons, and her corraling and excising parenthesis (Goldman 2015:39).

The following passage is one of the few examples of Woolf's use of punctuation to make space emerge as something dynamic in (what first appears as) a narration of character actions in the first part of the novel. At first glance, the subtlety of the shift allows the reader to find the passage simply describing children leaving the dinner-table, an unimportant event with no one character in focus, which may be why the reception of the novel has paid very little attention to this passage, unlike the episode with Mrs. Ramsay and the brown-stockings, which Auerbach made famous. The episode describes:

Disappearing as stealthily as stags from the dinner-table directly the meal was over, the eight sons and daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay sought their bedrooms, their fastnesses in a house where there was no other privacy to debate anything, everything; Tansley's tie; the passing of the Reform Bill; sea-birds and butterflies; people; while the sun poured into those attics, which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard and the Swiss girl sobbing for her father who was dying of cancer in a valley of the Grisons, and 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 smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing (Woolf 2000a:12).

Here Woolf begins by narrating the action of the children, but the action itself is a disappearance of characters. Accordingly, the narration turns into an enumeration of things. Woolf is not only telling the reader that something is happening, she is also showing that it is, and, as a result, she transforms what seems to be a

narrative passage into a description without interrupting the passage. What might seem to be as an example of what Hoffmann describes as an *Aktionsraum*, where things and space are represented as usable, but also “Leblose Gegenstände” (Hoffmann 1978:84), turns out to be something very different. It bears some resemblance to his *Gestimmte Raum*, in the way that the expressiveness of the objects surrounds the characters, and thus allows them to experience the room together, but with the difference that the children are left out of the second half of the passage. What is left? Just space and things. And they do not appear as distanced objects, as in Hoffmann’s third space, the *Anschaunungsraum*; they emerge with a presence of nearness. The passage is characterized by having no ellipses or dots, contrary to the narrative passages surrounding, which makes it appear unified, and could thus be characterized by what it first appears to be: a narration of an action carried out by the characters. This is probably why James Naremore in *The World without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (1973) notes that in *To the Lighthouse* “the details of the setting have been reduced to a minimum” (Naremore 1973:113). In this example, the background emerges indirectly, and, as a result, can easily be overlooked when the reader’s attention is turned toward the characters. And truly, the passage is extraordinary in its seeming ordinariness. Bearing the discussion on the literary tradition from “Phases of Fiction” in mind, the passage can be placed between two paradigms: Realism and Modernism. It is in keeping with the realistic novel’s paradigm of narration of actions from an omnipresent point of view, but at the same time goes against it by the use of punctuation and the intermingling of narration and description, though not in a modernist stream of consciousness-way. Woolf is rendering an action, but this action turns into a listing of things. As such, it is an example of the exact opposite of how Naremore describes Woolf’s method: “She devotes comparatively little attention to the details of her character’s surroundings and even avoids the direct rendition of action” (119). As already apparent in her notes on the novel, Woolf does not aim for “[a] view of the world”, that is, a separate static description of background, but instead seeks to portray “all character”. The example above illustrates that this does not mean

that space is absent; indeed, this passage shows that space makes its appearance far earlier than in the second part of the book. Space creeps into the novel even in the sections that narrate characters, and it does so not only as a reflection of a character, but as a comment made by the narrator. As both Naramore and Michael Levenson state, Woolf uses interior monologue not only linked to a single person, as does James Joyce, but practices “multipersonal subjectivity” (Naramore 1973: 121-122) and “offers nothing so straightforward as the monologue of a self but locates individuals within a network of glancing reactions, suggesting that identity is a perpetual negotiation” (Levenson 2015:24). Woolf uses “an all-listening voice” (Levenson 24) and this particular method allows space to emerge in a passage narrating character actions. Ann Banfield argues in *The Phantom Table* (2000) that

Thus built into this shifting language is the possibility of multiple perspectives. Each sentence of represented thought linguistically represents a subject’s occupied perspective. Shifting from perspective to perspective, the novel’s language constructs a public world which “enables us to pass beyond the limits of our private experience” (Banfield 2000:316).

The limits of our private experience do not only result in “multiple perspectives” of characters (312), but also in “creating perspectives whose language is subjective without being psychological” (317), allowing what Banfield calls “an unobserved reality” (318) to surface – a concept that will be discussed further in chapter 3, paragraph 2.7. The disappearing of the characters from the dinner-table and into the bedrooms is not accompanied by narration of the children’s actions in the bedroom. As the characters disappear from one room, what appears in the next room as they enter is not them, but the things surrounding them; not the impressions of the room upon the mind of one character, but instead each thing as it appears to all of them, not linked to a single person as in the *Gestimmte Raum*. This non-focalized perspective is also supported by the use of punctuation: dots are substituted with a repetitive use of semicolons and commas. After the children’s disappearance has been narrated, it is the gesture of their action and its relation to the

house that takes over the narrative, and from this perspective Woolf uses semicolon to depict what the children talk about: “Everything; Tansley’s tie; the passing of the reform bill; sea-birds and butterflies; people;” but after this listing, sentences are separated by commas instead. Through this almost invisible change in punctuation – not by force of the full stop dot, but a slight change from semicolon to comma – the passage transforms into a description. From here on, the only punctuation used is comma: “while the sun poured into those attics, which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard” (12). In this subtle shift, the descriptive mode takes over the narrative, yet this description is not a static background; it is told as if *someone* perceives the room. Because of the subtlety of the shift, we assume that this someone is the children, while what in fact takes place is that agency shifts from the children to the sun. In the entire passage that follows the semicolon, it is the sun that creates action: It is the sun that “poured into those attics [...] and lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skull of small birds, while it drew from the long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds”. The sun both lights up the attic and points its beams towards the different things, and its heat makes the seaweed smell. The sun here becomes an active agent creating the room for the characters.

Later in this first part of the novel, Woolf again uses punctuation as way to let things and space appear. In the more famous passage about Mrs. Ramsay and the stroke of light from the lighthouse, the point of view lies with Mrs. Ramsay but through the repetitive use of commas, the lighthouse appears as something more than just a backdrop for her thoughts. As with the previous example, where the narration of the action constituted a disappearing of characters, this example is an interior monologue about losing oneself, and it falls in the category of Hoffmann’s *Gestimmte Raum*. I find that using his four tools can help clarify what is going on in this space, but instead of focusing solely on the inner feeling of the characters as expressed by this space, as Hoffmann would, the disappearing of the subject in favour of the object calls for a reading of the object:

losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example (70).

In this instance, the thing, the lighthouse, is not the active part; its stroke “meets” Mrs. Ramsay, but it does not take on the active role as the sun did in the previous example. Hoffmann would describe this as a space composed of a relationship between inside and outside: Mrs. Ramsay is sitting at the window and the stroke of the lighthouse from outside disrupts her thoughts, yet the passage does not address this difference, but stresses instead how the distanced light meets and touches Mrs. Ramsay. The emphasis on looking could suggest Hoffmann’s *Anschauungsraum*, but the object – the stroke of the lighthouse – is not a distanced, objectified thing. It is a thing emerging towards the subject. Depicted, then, is a transference from Mrs. Ramsay to lighthouse, supported by the use of semicolon and comma. From the first semicolon, sentences vary between describing her actions and the lighthouse, which makes the passage on a sentence level appear as an interchange between the subject and the object, without the object taking the action. The paratactic sentences support the interchange between Mrs. Ramsay and the lighthouse, and the use of semicolon and comma is taken a step further as this interior monologue develops. In the following passage, the shift between comma and semicolon turns those inanimate things Mrs. Ramsay thinks about into entities in themselves, that is, they become something other than merely the product of her thought:

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one learnt to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense

were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself (70).

The passage is full of repetitions, and among these, three things are singled out: “trees, streams, flowers”. These three things distinguish themselves from the rest of the passage by being surrounded by semicolons: before and after the semicolon, Mrs. Ramsay’s feelings and thoughts dominate; feelings and thoughts turning upside down the relationship to things. Here, what is told is also shown: the surrounding semicolon forms a kind of bracket around the three, making the sentence formally depict an encircling. Repetitive use of the impersonal “one” and the verb “felt” also emphasize the distinctiveness of the three things, just as the parenthesis with the “long steady stroke” stands out compared to the following repetition of one in “oneself”.

In the first part of the novel, space most often appears and is commented upon in the passages linked to Mrs. Ramsay, and each time it is distinguished with a special use of punctuation, which both sets it apart from and makes it comparable to the use of space in for instance *Night and Day*, particularly Katharine’s perceptions of the rooms. Whenever Mrs. Ramsay views the rooms, they always shift from being mere background to being elaborated, as in the following sentence: “She looked up – what demon possessed him, her youngest, her cherished? – and saw the room, saw the chairs, thought them fearfully shabby” (31). By separating each of the three last sentences with a comma, the focus of the passage is turned from only depicting the judgment of Mrs. Ramsay – as was the case with Katharine in *Night and Day* – to including the room and the chairs. The same happens when Mrs. Ramsay reflects on the atmosphere of the house: “and all the rooms of the house made full of life – the drawing-room; behind the drawing-room the kitchen; above the kitchen the bedrooms; and beyond them the nurseries; they must be furnished, they must be filled with life” (43). Through the use of semicolon and repetition, Woolf creates a relational space without having any character traversing the rooms; it is all happening in Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts, but even in abstract thought the depiction of space is quite concretely positioned. After each

semicolon, the previous room is moved into the next sentence by a preposition. Each room is thus related to the next, which creates a flowing movement. On a sentence level, this equals the “life” that Mrs. Ramsay fantasizes about, and which can be compared to the concept of *life* from Woolf’s essays.

This flowing movement anticipates the role that space comes to play in the second part of the novel, “Time Passes”. Stripped of characters, space is left to its own. However, this is not space in the sense of Hoffmann’s *Anschauungsraum*. While space emerges on its own, it does not do so as a background that gets *foregrounded as foreground*, that is, as an objectified thing; instead it gets *foregrounded as background*. With characters absent, all that happens happens on a non-human level. And on this non-human level, events take place in a flowing movement on a discreet material level. One way of presenting this movement without any characters present is through the use of flowing punctuation, that is, through semicolon and comma. This paratactic way of building sentences is a way to spatialize language. Instead of the otherwise temporal 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 sentences let many things happen at once in space without any hierarchical levelling:

And so, nosing, rubbing, they 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 (138-139).

The passage is divided in two by a full stop, but before and after Woolf uses comma and semicolon to show the movement of “the little airs” (138) that nose and rub around the house. The little airs are not mentioned directly in the passage but only referred to as “they”. Characteristic of the first part of the passage is the use of

verbs, prepositions and substantives, though the substantives are not subjects in the sentence, but are part of the prepositions. Instead of subjects, Woolf is using paratactic sentences with commas and semicolon to create a movement, accentuating location and action instead of identity. The first commas between “nosing, rubbing, they went” stress that an act is taking place. The airs do not merely move around the house; a further sensuous dimension is added by multiplying the verbs that depict the movement, and adding them one after another, so that the connotations of one verb affect the following. Next, as in the previous example with Mrs. Ramsay and the rooms, 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 clutched together in one end of the passage and the prepositions at the other end, creating not only a sensuous dimension to the movement, but at the same time positioning the movement concretely through the house. A change then occurs, and this next new movement is indicated by a semicolon: “the attics; descending”. The semicolon underlines a semi-stop; a new movement is taking place. This happens on the story level as the airs change their direction; from nosing around they now descend the stairs, but also on the discourse level, as the change can be traced in sentences after the semicolon, where the prepositional sentences are substituted with verbs and substantives, 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 distinct use of punctuation it becomes possible for Woolf to depict what happens in a house without a human character in it. The non-verbal, typographical 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.

Contours of a new concept of event are taking shape in the wake of this relation between event and punctuation, and I will return to its implications in more depth in chapter 3, paragraph 2.4. Meanwhile, temporal adverbs 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. When this changes in the second part of the passage, the change is imprinted and anticipated by the use of semicolon. Here, a grammatical subject is introduced: the airs are now fused with the rooms that they in the first part of the passage “nosed around in”, 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 Heideggerian *gathering*, 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 event that ends this passage: a door slamming to.

Woolf has other uses for the semicolon, too; in her repetitive use of 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 semicolon Woolf creates a thing-dialogue. The semicolon is allowing the action made by the door to appear without giving it a human voice other than the material gesture of “slamming to”.

Compared to the use of punctuation in *The Waves*, *To the Lighthouse* seems quite extraordinary in its abundance of semicolons and commas, especially in “Time Passes”. However, on the non-verbal typographical level of language, the interludes of *The Waves* stand out because Woolf has italicized them. This separates the spatial parts of the novel from the other chapters on a typographical level, and the italicized interludes appear more dynamic than the linear episodes that are typographically upright. In this way, the typographical framework emphasizes how space is transformed into a dynamic happening.

As a contrast to “Time Passes”, the punctuation in the interludes in *The Waves* mainly consists of commas and dots. The repetitive use of dots in each of the first sentences of the nine interludes in *The Waves* bears the same significance to space as the semicolon did in *To the Lighthouse*. Taken in isolation, each of first sentences in the interludes may seem declamatory and static, as a

typical description of a static setting, but in the repetition and variation from the first to the last interlude, Woolf creates a movement which varies across the intersecting chapters, depicting the sun over the course of a day, thus accentuating Sternberg's point that descriptions can be made dynamic when divided across the novel. Here the nine beginnings listed:

"*The sun has not yet risen.*" (Woolf 200b:3)

"*The sun rose higher.*" (20)

"*The sun rose.*" (54)

"*The sun, risen, no longer couched on a green mattress darting a fitful glance through watery jewels, bared its face and looked straight over the waves.*" (81)

"*The sun had risen to its full height.*" (111)

"*The sun no longer stood in the middle of the sky.*" (125)

"*The sun has now sunk lower in the sky.*" (139)

"*The sun was sinking.*" (159)

"*Now the sun had sunk.*" (181).

The list of these beginnings depicts a movement, which takes place *across* the dots, so to speak. Each dot does in this instance not signify a full stop, instead seen together, in the repetitive variation, they depict a continuation. An important difference between "Time Passes" and the interludes is thus made apparent: Even though both the interludes in *The Waves* and "Time Passes" in *To the Lighthouse* provides space its own distinct role in the narrative – depicting as they both do a dynamic space with no characters present – they do it quite differently. In *To the Lighthouse*, space is allowed its own section and within this limited and definite designation, the use of semicolon and the comma forms a space that *happens*. The continuous flow created by semicolons and commas on a sentence basis is how space appears in "Time Passes", verily a strictly spatial part of the novel. In contrast, space is dispersed into nine interludes in *The Waves*, but *across* as well as *within* these nine interludes, space is *happening*. One way that this is achieved is through the repetitive use and variation of dots in the beginning of each interlude. Space is in this instance spread across the novel. The flowing use of semicolon in "Time Passes" has its parallel in the dots that underline the dispersed interludes, but also mirrors the structure of the episodes. In the episodes, each

character appears separated from the next, as their thoughts and impressions stand next to each other, accentuated by the use of inverted commas, as for instance in the opening scene:

‘I see a ring,’ said Bernard, ‘hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.’

‘I see a slap of yellow,’ said Susan, ‘spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.’

‘I hear a sound,’ said Rhoda, ‘cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.’

‘I see a globe,’ said Neville, ‘hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.’

‘I see a crimson tassel,’ said Jinny, ‘twisted with gold threads.’

‘I hear something stamping,’ said Louis. ‘A great beast’s foot chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.’

(Woolf 2000b: 5).

Here, each character is presented through his or her sense impression. On the one hand, space is presented as fragmented; dispersed through six different impressions, but, on the other hand, the six impressions create a unity of synesthesia, each character contributing with a new sensation: from the visual images of Bernard, Susan and Neville, to the audible images of Rhoda and Louis, to the tactile image of Jinny. The inverted commas separate each impression from the next, while the repetition of impressions from each character presented in exactly the same way sustains a unity – just as the dots stopped the flow of space in the opening line of each interlude, but the repetition of dots across the interludes created continuity.

### 2.3. The Bracketing of Narration – The Greening of Modernism

As the previous reading has shown, Woolf’s use of semicolon, comma, and dots is one way that she uses non-verbal forms to let the materiality of space and things emerge without being surpassed by the more meaning-oriented and subject-centred aspects of language. Yet interpreting punctuation in this material and thing-oriented way is quite contrary to what has become known as Woolf’s use of punctuation in the reception of her novels. As

Goldman notes, Woolf is famous for her use of punctuation, but most of the reception of her novels seems to focus solely on her use of brackets. Naremore, along with David Daiches, read her use of brackets as a way to let comments from the narrator mingle with the thoughts of a character (cf. Naremore 124-125). Naremore summarizes this technique in connection with Woolf's use of metaphoric language and concludes that

the author provides a poetic description of a state of mind in order to express feelings which are essentially nonverbal (or in this case perhaps too explicitly sexual) [...] One advantage of this method is that it allows Virginia Woolf to portray intangibles that cannot be directly presented" (127-128).

To Naremore, the use of non-verbal techniques is a way to let a "vaguely erotic sensibility" (1) appear. As his interest lies not in the physical settings of her novels, but in the psychological, he stresses that he has "wanted to convey the unusual 'world' of her novels, if we understand world to mean not just the physical trappings of her vision, but her way of seeing" (2). He reads the non-verbal technique as an expression of an inner conflict, as something "intangible". In so doing, he misses that the non-verbal may actually also point towards the physicality of the setting. Nor Goldman connects Woolf's use of non-verbal language to space. Again stressing Woolf's use of brackets, the only thing she notices in the spatial "Time Passes" is how the square brackets form a narrative of their own in the way that they summarize the life of the characters. This emphasis removes the focus from the space that fills up the rest of "Time Passes":

In the terms of postimpressionist mosaicking, whereby patches of color are orchestrated to unify the design, we might well pull them [the square brackets] out for special scrutiny as a set of connected or entombed utterances that form a narrative, or fragmented narrative, a central line, within the larger work (Goldman 2015:41-42).

In "Time Passes", Woolf reverses the relationship between what the main text conventionally consists of and what is normally placed in brackets. The main text in "Time Passes" is a form of

description of space (a concept which will be scrutinized in my next chapter), and the character narratives are placed in brackets. With only nine square brackets in the entire novel, “Time Passes” stands out with seven square brackets. As Goldman notes, square brackets is something which first appears in “Time Passes”:

[t]his instance of square brackets is the second of only nine in the entire book, which might be said to resemble the confines of coffins. Although there are numerous round-bracketed parentheses in part I, and these persist throughout the text, there are no square brackets in part I. They are noticeably first intruded in part II (41).

The second square bracket is the one which has received most attention. It tells the reader of the death of 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.]” (Woolf 2000a:140). Woolf thus kills her main character, not only in a bracket, but in a subordinate clause in a bracket. This happens at the end of chapter 3 in “Time Passes”, marking the end of a chapter completely devoted to space. 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”: The temporal description has morphed into a spatial narration, with the accumulative commas narrating and not simply listing things that takes place. This narration of things 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. These small events are contrasted with the suddenness of the life-changing event of Mrs. Ramsay dying. A bracketing of narration is happening on one level, but is substituted on another level with a different kind that combines traits from description and narration.

In Hamon's formula,  $C+F+IT(V+PE_q/PE_f)$  (Hamon 1982:160), a description is mainly characterized by having a character to set it in motion, with the character as the active part, and space at the end of the equation as the IT, asserting a clear hierarchy between subject and object. The bracket in Hamon's formula defines the subthemes used to describe the setting: things described in the bracket can thus be either qualitative or functional, always referring to the subject perceiving, acting or thinking about them. Woolf not only turns the formula upside down as she places the setting first in the equation, she also turns the description into a narration, and thus inscribes a change into the otherwise static space of Hamon's description. But most 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 descriptive theorists have tried to distinguish description from – is placed inside the bracket and so turned into a subtheme, assigning space the main part in the equation. Woolf is pushing the relationship between narration and description to the extreme, but she is also placing her novels in a gap between two literary traditions: the descriptive realism of the Edwardians and the fragmented “closer-to-life” narrative of Modernism. Whereas “The Window” and “The Lighthouse” can be characterized as typical modernist narratives, what happens narratively in “Time Passes” is something altogether different.

As stated in an earlier chapter, Auerbach takes Woolf's novel to be an example of represented reality in the modernist novel. Discussing the scene where Mrs. Ramsay is knitting the brown stocking, he concludes that:

In den hier festgestellten Eigentümlichkeiten des realistischen Romans aus der Zeit zwischen den beiden grossen Kriegen – vielpersonige Bewusstseinsdarstellung, Zeitenschichtung, Auflockerung des Zusammenhangs im äusseren Geschehen, Wechsel des Standortes, von dem aus berichtet wird – die alle miteinander verbunden und schwer zu sondern sind, zeigen sich, so scheint uns, gewisse Bemühungen, Tendenzen und Bedürfnisse sowohl der Schriftsteller wie des Publikums (Auerbach 2001:508).

Counting James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Mann in this category, what distinguishes these novelists is their departure from and fracture of realistic representation of reality. According to Auerbach, their attention is fixed on the internal experiences of small, everyday events within a fragmented timeline. He emphasizes the one-day structure of these novels and their indeterminacy towards an objective reality. All this holds true in regard to the first and third parts of *To the Lighthouse*, and to the novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *Jacob's Room*, but what happens in "Time Passes" and in the interludes in *The Waves* departs a great deal from this definition. The temporality and the focus on the inner experiences of the spatial parts of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* differ both from each other and from other modernist novels. "Time Passes" describes the passing of ten years from the perspective of the house, which is contrasted by the one-day structure told through different characters' inner experiences of small everyday events in part one and three. The interludes describe the sun rising and its light striking the garden and the house over the course of one day across nine chapters, appearing like brackets. They intersect the chapters that narrate the lives of the six characters in different moments of their lives. The spatial "Time Passes" depicts a long period of time; the spatial interludes depict only one day. Woolf thus establishes two different ways of providing space its own part in the novel told from a non-focalized position; two different ways of temporalizing space. And while Auerbach's characterization of the novel is in fact in line with Woolf's own reflections on a new novel in her essays, her method in "Time Passes" and the interludes – with their inverted relationship between text and bracket, narration and description – does not purely dismiss the devices used by the previous generation and replace them with something completely new. To do so would mean that there would be no exterior reality outside the characters, and no description of large events; no broad time span, and no authoritative remarks from the narrator. Indeed, both "Time Passes" and the interludes contain all of these traits; the difference is that they do so centred on space and not on the foundation of characters.

That Woolf's experiments to some extent built on the previous generation's style did not mean that the Edwardians saw this new mode of writing as an heir to their methods. On the contrary, Arnold Bennett wrote a harsh critique of precisely this spatial section of the novel in his otherwise more positive review of *To the Lighthouse* in *Evening Standard* 23 June 1927:

The middle part, entitled "Time Passes", shows a novel device to give the reader the impression of the passing of time – a sort of cataloguing of intermediate events. In my opinion it does not succeed. It is a short cut, but a short cut that does not get anywhere. To convey the idea of a passage of considerable length of time is an extremely difficult business, and I doubt it can be accomplished by means of a device, except the device of simply saying 'Time Passes', and leaving the effort of imagination to the reader (Majumdar and McLaurin 200).

To the author whom Woolf had called materialist, the middle part of the book offends in its "cataloguing of intermediate events", that is, the bracketing of the large events in the lives of the characters. What Bennett instead pays attention to is the surpassing of plot events in brackets, and he only focuses on the temporal aspect of this part, a focus that is repeated in the majority of the reception of this part of the novel. So far from the materialism that Woolf accused Bennett's novels of is her description of space that Bennett does not even acknowledge it as such, but only views it as an abstract temporal shortcut. With "Time Passes", Woolf is distancing herself from the Edwardians while still using some of their devices, but she is reworking their style to the extent that they do not recognize it. The very assistance in emphasizing how to "describe" that she called for in "Character in Fiction", she has managed in "Time Passes" to transfer into something so radical that the authors of the previous generation – who used so much description in their own novels – do not even regard this work as anything to do with a description of a setting.

At the same time, with "Time Passes" Woolf is creating something unlike what her contemporaries were doing in the modernist novel, and indeed what she herself does in other parts of this and other novels. Her formal opposition to other modernist

novelists, and particularly to James Joyce, was something Woolf herself was aware of. In “Modern Fiction”, she includes Joyce in the strife for a new modernist method, but also notes in “How it Strikes a Contemporary” that “*Ulysses* was a memorable catastrophe – immense in daring, terrific in disaster” (Vol3 1988:356). The exceptional novelty of “Time Passes” was something that Louis Kronenberger noticed in *New York Times* on 8 May 1927. He praised it, not for its spatial qualities, but for its poetry:

It is, I think, in the superb interlude called ‘Time Passes’ that Mrs Woolf reaches the most impressive height of the book, and there one can find a new note in her work, something beyond the ironic sophistication and civilized human values of Mrs Dalloway. [...] The great beauty of the eighteen pages of prose carries in it an emotional and ironical undertone that is superior to anything else that the first-class technician, the expert stylist, the deft student of human life in Mrs Woolf ever have done. Here is prose of extraordinary distinction in our time: here is poetry. (Majumdar and McLaurin 198).

Jean Mills notes in *To the Lighthouse: the Critical Heritage* (2015) that this lyrical quality was what many of the novel’s early critics appreciated (see 160). While stressing the extraordinariness of “Time Passes”, these early reviews also turned their criticism of the novel into a question of form and style, dismissing entirely the content of this lyrical part. On that account, “Time Passes” makes visible a conflict between form and content. Certain critics appreciate its form without paying any attention to what the passage actually describes, and if they do, their only focus is on the content of the brackets containing character. As a consequence, space is neglected on more than one level: it is disregarded as an abstraction of time by those critics interested in the form of “Time Passes”, and by those who turn their attention to the content it is overlooked in favour of the content of the brackets without space. According to Mills, it was Auerbach’s analysis of *To the Lighthouse* that turned the “emphasis in Woolf criticism away from preoccupations of form towards narrative theory” (2015:163). But with this shift, criticism has also afforded “Time Passes” less attention than the parts of the novel where characters are present,

always asking: “Who is speaking in this paragraph?” (163). In line with Narratology, most efforts have been focused on temporal arrangement of plot and on focalization of the characters. Significantly, “Time Passes” does not play any role in Auerbach’s analysis, it is only mentioned as the

certain airs, detached from the body of the wind, die an einer späteren Stelle (II,2) sich nächtlich durch das schlafende Haus schleichen, questioning and wondering. Wie dem aber auch sei: es handelt sich auch hier nicht, um die objective Äusserung des Schriftstellers über eine person (Auerbach 2001:494).

Auerbach is not concerned with what kind of narrator figures in the passage itself, and addresses it only as a clarification of the uncertainty towards Mrs. Ramsay; a question that I will try to come to terms with in chapter 3 paragraph 2.7. In Mills’ examination of the critical heritage of Woolf’s work, as well as in Klitgård’s examination of the critical reception towards *The Waves* in *A Modernist Poetics of the Sublime in Virginia Woolf’s The Waves*, the critique that Gumbrecht made of both deconstruction and Cultural Studies almost adheres to the reception of Woolf’s work, which leaves out its material and spatial qualities. After the initial narrative focus, feminism and Cultural Studies come to dominate the reception of her works with their emphasis on “cultural, social, and political reading of the novel” (164). While this causes a shift in the reading of the novels – no longer is Mrs. Ramsay the only character of interest in readings of *To the Lighthouse*; Lily Briscoe is read as an example of a new model for women – space is still left out, and “Time Passes” is only briefly touched upon, or viewed as symbolic, as in Anna Snaith and Michael WH. Whitworth’s *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (2007).

In a diary entry from the 20 July 1925 before beginning the writing of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf reflects that “[i]t might contain all characters boiled down; & childhood; & then this impersonal thing, which I’m dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, & the

consequent break of unity in my design”.<sup>32</sup> It is possible from Woolf’s own comments to highlight the temporal side of “Time Passes”, but the diary also stresses that what she is doing with “Time Passes” is something radically new; it is a “dare” from her friends that will result in a rupture within the unity of the novel, and with this break comes the introduction of a new kind of space in the novel. The poetic side of “Time Passes” that the early critics valued may thus not only refer to the style, but may also refer to its content. In “Poetry, Fiction and the Future” (1927) published the same year as *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf addresses this poetical aspect by saying that the novel of the future “will be written in prose, but in a prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose” (1994:435). Instead of interpreting this quote to only refer to the style of a novel, it may also refer to its theme, especially when compared to what she later in the essay stresses; that “we have come to forget that a large and important part of life consist in our emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset” (435) – that is, subjects normally confined to poetry contrary to “the human element” in the novel. In “Time Passes” and in the interludes, Woolf takes the subject of poetry out of its abstract “exaltation” and combines it with the “ordinariness of prose”, thus creating a narrative of space by introducing the subject of poetry into the novelistic form.

From this perspective, “Time Passes” and the interludes form a new thread in the history of Modernism, bringing the Edwardian materialism into the next century. Space and Modernism are often taken to entail an urban setting: the street impressions of a flâneur, with Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith, and Stephen Daudalus as its main literary figures. Marshall Berman symbolically describes in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience of Modernity* (1982) Modernism as either “the expressway world” or “a shout in the street” (Berman 1988:329). “Time Passes” and the interludes depict the exact opposite: both depict a house in the country; they

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<http://woolfonline.com/?node=content/contextual/transcriptions&project=1&parent=41&taxa=42&content=6301&pos=5>.

follow the movements of nature and the interior domesticity of the house, and neither features a character to experience any of it. “Time Passes” and the interludes are examples of what Bonnie Kime Scott has named “a Greening of Modernism” in her recent book *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (2012). Here Kime Scott introduces a new concept of nature into the otherwise nature-hostile development in Modernism, which challenges “the nature/culture binary, and fosters richly varied, contextual, and relational thinking, holding in high regard all living beings” (Kime Scott 2012:2). This hostile thread is, according to her, led by the “men of 1914” referring to Wyndham Lewis, T.E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound, who promoted a Classicist view on nature, as opposed to the Romantics. Kime Scott writes that “Hulme’s idea on classicism complemented the interest in immediate experiences and mental control characteristic of that founding group of modernist poets, the imagists” (Kime Scott 2012:15). Nature was to them “an objectified thing” (15), which they sought to control:

In reaching for a metaphor suitable to his [Hulme’s] goal of “accurate, precise and definite description”, he thinks first of an architect’s variously curved wooden templates, but settles finally upon a springy piece of steel that can be bent precisely, using the pressure of the artist’s fingers. The goal with this implement is “to bend the steel out of its own curve and into the exact curve you want” (15).

Kime Scott also tells of “numerous occasions, [when] Pound sought to edit nature out of Modernism, shaping modernist form and history. He for instance convinced T.S. Eliot to eliminate large segments of seascapes originally in “The Waste Land” (16). And while Kime Scott does not pay much heed to “Time Passes” or the interludes, focusing her attention instead on the biographical and contextual side of Woolf’s work, “Time Passes” and the interludes can be seen as examples of how nature, and thus space, inhabits Woolf’s work in ways untypical of what Kime Scott terms the classical version of Modernism, influenced by Baudelaire and in its literary form executed most fully by Ezra Pound.

In a similar reaction to Kime Scott's, Victoria Rosner has recently in *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2005) been advocating for a new understanding of domesticity in Modernism. Here she argues that when critics trace "the impact of modernity they bypass the kitchen table in favor of other locations more traditionally sanctified by the avant-garde: the street, the café, and the gallery" (Rosner 2005:3-4) and further that "if gender is now understood to be integral to modernist studies, domesticity remains, for many critics, the antithesis of modernism. [...] With its origins thought to lie in urban culture and flânerie, modernism is widely considered an art of the public sphere" (13). She counters the idea that life within the four walls of house is a reactionary and conservative status quo. In her reading, it is not a static setting upholding the structure of family and tradition, but within the walls of the house of Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, Thomas Hardy, Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and Oscar Wilde, just to name a few of the writes treated by Rosner, "the home was seen as a kind of laboratory for social experimentation" (5). Inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement led by William Morris, these authors began to depict a new spatiality in their novels:

Unlike the Victorians, whose country house architecture represented a physical embodiment of "proper" social organization, modern British middle- and upper-class private life lacked an architecture to house and give shape to its values and hierarchies. The novel offered a space for reinvention of life, dramatizing the defects of the Victorian domestic sphere and sometimes articulating fantasized alternatives (7-8).

As with the forgetting of space in the modernist novel, Rosner stresses that the "spatial arrangements are influential in modernist texts, yet the confluences between architectural history and modernist literature have gone largely unremarked by critics" (8). Yet Rosner, in her method of combining literary studies with architecture, pays no substantial attention to "Time Passes" and the interludes, instead focusing her attention on a retracing of a new kind of domesticity in different modernist writers and their contexts.

These two new approaches to Modernism – the greening and the domestic – demonstrate a need for a new understanding of space in Woolf’s works. Both nature and domesticity are at play in the way Woolf creates space in “Time Passes” and the interludes, and in such ways that these parts of the novels fit into neither the realistic paradigm of description from Bennett nor the modernist dogma of stream of consciousness and urbanity.

#### 2.4. A Descriptive Narration of Space

Placing “Time Passes” and the interludes within a green or domestic Modernism invites questions as to how Woolf creates a space of nature and domesticity that neither provides a static picture of the house as a background – as is typical of the Realist and Naturalist description of the interior décor – nor depicts nature as something in need of taming and control – as the modernist Classicist does. Picking up the thread on description as presentation from chapter 1 paragraph 2.3, I will in the following examine how Woolf in “Time Passes” and the interludes presents a dynamic space that in the combination of nature and the domestic household uses traits from both narration and description. To fully grasp what happens in a text when space is not simply described, constructing a new set of concepts is necessary.

As Casey pointed out, description does not have to be referred to and subjugated by some other element in the story. According to him, “de-descriptive” means writing about an object, person, or event, by which he opens the possibility of staying on the surface, meaning both literally the material appearances of things, and not the psychological depth behind them, but also formally looking at how a thing is described. This makes it possible to move beyond the typical conception of description in regard to the interludes in *The Waves*. Unlike “Time Passes”, the interludes were from the beginning labelled descriptive by the contemporary reception of the novel. But this label was interpreted in two distinct ways, both of them failing to notice what happen in the interludes. On one end of the spectrum, M.C. Bradbury writes in his review “Notes on the Style of Mrs Woolf” in *Scrutiny* May 1932 that:

The interchapters describe the movements of sun and tides (the sea is for Mrs Woolf a symbol of the eternal and the indifferent natural forces) [...]: this movement forms a kind of parallel to the development of the lives of the characters. But the effect of a page or two of epigrammatic metaphor is very fatiguing: the myopic observation, the lack of variations in the tension impose a strain on the reader (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975:312).

While Bradbury recognizes the interludes as description, he also corroborates the bad reputation that description has suffered and dismisses these “interchapters” as a failed parallel to the lives of the characters, which bores the reader, and by doing so he reproduces Boileau’s critique of description. On the other end of the spectrum, William Troy writes in his review on “Virginia Woolf’s poetic method” in *Symposium* 1932 that

For this reason, for example, description has always occupied a most uncertain place in fiction. Description, which deals with things rather than events, interposes a space-world in the march of that time-world which is the subject of fiction. For this reason the use of poetic symbols in fiction, as in all Mrs. Woolf’s work since *Monday and Tuesday*, seems to be in direct contradiction to the foundations of our response to that form (Majumadar and McLaurin 1975:315).

Troy’s more favourable review both recognizes the interludes as description and links them to a “space-world”, without explicating what he means by this, but at the same time he derogates the possibility that the interludes are something other than poetic symbols, which present things and not events. If we instead consider the interludes and “Time Passes” through Casey’s optics, it allows us to move beyond the dichotomy between content and form: Not just study the content with a narrow focus on the “hidden” events of the characters in the brackets in “Time Passes”, nor interpreting the interludes as a parallel thread. Nor regarding the form, as Klitgård does, simply to view the interludes as “a secondary level of allegorical significance” (Klitgård 2000: 97), or interpreting “Time Passes” as a lyrical expression of the abstract concept of “time passing” and viewing the interludes as poetic

symbols – in all cases disregarding space. Instead of interpreting these spatial chapters with reference to the absent characters, or analyzing the passages as a representation of an abstract category far from a tangible reality, I propose viewing the passages as *presentation*. This means directing attention to *what* is presented, but also to *how* it is presented. In short, I would like to combine Gumbrecht's and Casey's presence-oriented and "de-scriptive" way of reading with a formalistic analysis of the way space emerges in the interludes and "Time Passes". To do this, it is necessary to observe the ways in which space is presented as a conflict between description and narration. That is, it is not enough to note, as Casey does, that it takes time to describe, thus ascribing a temporal aspect to space; I am interested in how, specifically, Woolf creates a dynamic space when no characters are present.

Apart from the use of non-verbal signs, Woolf uses devices that are normally distinctive of narration to present space. According to Mosher, description is characterized as a text passage that

portray objects or persons or their qualities in stasis, in simultaneous relation, and these are organized by spatial markers like adverbs of place. [...] The pace and often the tempo are slow to the point of being arrested (Mosher 1991:442-3).

Contrary to this, narration depicts "persons or objects in successive movement or transformation in a context involving a telos and organized by chronological markers" (Mosher 442). In "Time Passes" and in the interludes Woolf fuses the two definitions. She depicts objects, not in stasis, but in successive movement and transformation without a telos though in simultaneous relations. The objects are organized not only through adverbs of place but by chronological markers as well. Woolf uses temporal adverbs to indicate movement and transformation, while the accumulative use of semicolon and comma, especially in "Time Passes", creates a relational simultaneity of space. She replaces the characteristic descriptive device of adjectives with verbs to indicate a non-static space. What she does cannot be understood in either of Mosher's intermediate terms, *narratized description* or *descriptized narration*, because as both plot and characters are absent, everything that

happens, happens on account of space. On the level of content, the exchange between nature and the domestic depicts a space that has a flowing movement; it is eventful without any characters present to create the event. The event is a Heideggarian *gathering*, and an encounter between natural elements and the house. What Woolf creates is a descriptive narration of space.

#### 2.4.1. “Time Passes” – Temporalizing Space

The second chapter of “Time Passes” is framed by the adverb “so”. Within the three parts of this chapter, the first and last part begins: “So with the lamps all put out” (137) and “So some random light directing them”(138). “So” is in this instance used as a summarizing adverb stating a change in the narrative. The change is the disappearing of the characters as they go to sleep in chapter one. The use of “so” is a way to inscribe a cause and consequence in the otherwise non-causal chapter, without directly naming the cause. What “so” indicates is a new narrative strategy: moving away from a narration of characters into a narration of space, not simply a description of it. “So” specifies that something has happened without narrating the event itself. The event of going to sleep is indirectly hinted at in the previous chapter as “One by one the lamps were all extinguished” (137). The new narrative strategy is thus underlined twice, each time indirectly: first by telling the event of the disappearing of the characters through a spatial action: the lamps are turned off and darkness prevails, and secondly by the use of “so” in the following chapter.

With the absence of characters and characters’ actions, a descriptive mode takes over “Time Passes”, but narrative elements still prevail in this section. One of the narrative elements is temporality: In the third chapter a new material time is presented; as the characters disappear, so does chronometric time, but not time all together. As the title “Time Passes” in itself makes clear, time is central to this part of the novel, yet while many readings have acknowledged this, none have examined the temporal aspect from the point of view of space. Using Genette’s concept of speed in fiction, that is, the relationship between a temporal dimension

and a spatial dimension, Michael Levenson notes in “Narrative Perspective in *To the Lighthouse*” that

In Part One, the pace had slowed with an almost infinite patience: long reveries unfolded during brief physical acts (strolling across the lawn, eating soup). But when *To the Lighthouse* shifts from its patient record of a few hours on a summer’s day to the passage of ten years, it accelerates in a way that disrupts convention and startles reader. “But what after all is one night?” asks the text, and answers, “A short space” (198). As Genette has taught us to notice, it will also require only a short space to traverse *many* years (Levenson 2015:26).

Spatiality, in Genette’s terms, reads as the relationship between: “a duration (that of the story, measured in seconds, hours, days, months, and years) and a length (that of the text) measured in lines and pages” (Levenson 2015:25), not the space depicted as narrative speed accelerates. In this way, there is a discrepancy between the notions of temporal and spatial dimensions: as time accelerates in “Time Passes”, the “short space” – the 18 pages used to depict the ten-year period – actually protract space. “Time Passes” thus creates, not “the perspective of eternity” (26) as Levenson concludes, but the perspective of space. By introducing a spatial perspective other than the length of text into the temporal reading of “Time Passes”, another temporal dimension is added, that of the everyday.

In the same edition of *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse* (2015) in which the article by Levenson appeared, another temporal aspect of the reading of “Time Passes” appears which indirectly supports my argument about the interchange of literary traditions in this part of the novel. In “Time as Protagonist in *To the Lighthouse*”, Paul Sheehan writes that “Woolf effectively launches a new temporal regime, bolstering and advancing modernist resistance to the hegemony of clock-time” (Sheehan 2015:47). Supporting the argument that what Woolf does in “Time Passes” is something different from both the realistic and the modernist tradition, Sheehan notes that: “in the realistic novel, for example, the typical unit of time is the year, illustrating the gradual change within the periodic cycles of everyday life. Modernism’s

temporal rhythms, by contrast, in its best-known instances, are organized around day-long time schemes” (50-51). Sheehan does not comment on this interchange of tradition in “Time Passes”, but using his distinction, it is worth noting that Woolf uses “the periodic cycles of everyday” from the realistic novel, yet the everyday she depicts is an everyday world without humans. It does not suffice to note that “time passes” as A. Bennett did in his critique of this part of the novel, but rather that the passing of time from one season to the next, as it is described in the opening of chapter 3,

But what after all is one night? A short space, especially when darkness dims so soon [...] Night, however succeeds to night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them equally [...] The autumn trees, ravaged as they are” (139)

also bears witness to punctual changes that emerge in moments of presence. This is contrary to what both Levenson and Sheehan argue. Sheehan asks: “What shape does the present tense take in the absence of the human compulsion to apprehend it? As Woolf demonstrates, the present itself vanishes. There is no “now” in “Time Passes”, because other time scales have taking over” (Sheehan 2015:53). Yet even though the grammatical present tense is absent – as the whole passage is depicted in the past tense – there are moments of presence, which are distinguished from the continual flow of time. Having a temporal starting point for his argument, based on the understanding of time through the philosophical tradition of Woolf’s contemporaries such as Walter Pater, Henri Bergson, and Bertrand Russell, Sheehan neglects to address what in fact takes place in “Time Passes”, as does Levenson. Sheehan’s conclusions are always drawn from the two other parts of the novel with the human narrative at the centre of his attention, focusing on the relationship between past, present and the future and on the historical events in the novel. He reads the wandering airs that invade the house as a reference to the First World War: “The airs, the darkness, and the nothingness bespeak a historical irruption, a fold or rent in the temporal order” (55), and, concerning the level of events in this section, he notes: “there are

events in this section, both implied and actual, but no story; and the major (implicit) event is the Great War” (54). Banfield echoes this focus on time in her essay “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-impressionism, and Cambridge Time”, but unlike Sheehan and Levenson she maintains that “Time passes not as *durée* but as a series of still moments” (Banfield 2003:471), yet when comparing Woolf to Fry’s Post-impressionism, she too overlooks space, and ends up repeating Lessing’s old opposition between the spatial qualities of painting and the temporal qualities of language, as she writes: “Where literary aesthetic needed only to convey Fry’s spatial categories into temporal versions of his dualism of “vision and design”: Its first requirement was the dualist theory of time” (Banfield 478).

What takes place in “Time Passes” encompasses both moments of presence and events. That time is present as something other than eternal is made apparent by the use of one of Hamon’s vehicles to make description dynamic, namely contamination from narration, in the form of temporal adverbs. There is a repetitive use of the temporal adverb “now” throughout “Time Passes”:

It seemed *now* as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil” (139), “The nights *now* are full of wind and destruction” (140), “*Now*, day after day, light turned” (141), “And *now* in the heat of the summer the wind” (144), “*Now* and again some glass tinkled in the cupboard” (145), “For *now* has come that moment” (151) and “And *now* as if the cleaning and the scrubbing” (154) [my italics].

Apart from the repetition of “now”, other temporal adverbs such as “once only” (142) and “meanwhile” (143) emphasize that in the flow of time in this section, momentary changes create events that turn this passage into something other than a description of space as a static setting or an abstract description of eternal time. The description is temporal, not only as Casey noted because it takes time to describe, but because time is inscribed into the description, rendering it a fusion of narration and description.

Apart from using chronological markers distinctive of the narrative mode of telling, Woolf also temporalizes the way she describes. Both Bal and Hamon defined description as “a textual

fragment where features are attributed to objects” (Bal 2002: 36) whose features could be predicated as either qualitative or functional, the main content of a description consisting of substantives and adjectives. With *descriptized narration*, Mosher attempted to introduce temporality into description. Based on narration, this could be done by turning verbs into adjectives. Contrary to both of these definitions, in “Time Passes” Woolf describes things through verbs. Here, each thing is not a static object with distinct features attributed to it; each thing is what it does, like Heidegger’s *thing that things*, the thing is not its essence but its existence; it is *happening* and *relational*. The thing is “the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking” (139), “Hangings that flapped, wood that creaked” (140-141). In “Time Passes” a thing is something that happens, and domestic things, such as furniture, as well as natural things are narrated in their everyday cycles. They emerge as “things in themselves” and do not have to be broken in order to show their *thingness*, because the human interaction with and use of them is absent.

It is now apparent that Woolf with “Time Passes” does not produce a description of space; the question remains if she instead offers a narration of space? In the category of narration, Dennerlein introduced the *situationsbezogene Thematisierung*; a category involving both space and events. In this category, space is changed because of an event taking place. Dennerlein distinguished between two types of events: a happening (*Geschehen*) and an action (*Figurenhandlung*). Transferred to a formal grammatical level, the event was depicted as a subject with a predicate. The subject in the sentence could either be persons or objects, and the predicate could be happenings, actions, or conditions. In this way, unlike in the descriptive mode, a sentence consists of substantives and verbs. The problem with Dennerlein’s conclusions is that she did not regard the event as something stemming from an object or space itself. Because of her philosophical understanding of space as a container, she did not acknowledge that her differentiation opened the possibility to allow non-human agencies an active part. Opposite narration, Dennerlein placed *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung*, which is description of

space that conveys stable qualities of space. “Time Passes” falls somewhere between these categorizations.

In the example where the temporal “once only” is found, Woolf describes the silence and stillness in the house, but an event occurs in the middle of last passage, disrupting the silence:

So loveliness reigned and stillness, and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted; solitary lie a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen. Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom, and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs even the prying of the wind, and the soft nose of the clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffling, iterating, and reiterating their questions – ‘Will you fade? Will you perish?’ – scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity; as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: we remain.

Nothing it seemed could break that image, corrupt that innocence, or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room, wove into itself the falling of cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog’s bark, a man’s shout, and folded them round the house in silence. Once only a board sprang on the landing; once in the middle of the night with a roar, with a rupture, as after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley, one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro (141-142).

Viewed through the lens of Dennerlein’s categorizations, the first part of the passage may appear to be a description of a house with stable qualities; Woolf herself accentuates that “Nothing it seemed could break that image” of “pure integrity”. Stillness and loveliness reign in the house after the characters have left it, but in “Time Passes” stillness and silence are not only abstract lyrical images; they achieve a physicality which is “scarcely” noticeable. Woolf’s way of describing things, not with adjectives but with verbs, extends to how she approaches these two abstract concepts. The stillness is not nothing; it is not abstract, but spatial. Stillness becomes an opening towards another layer of reality, and that means that in the absence of characters, things emerge as they relate to one another in space. “Loveliness and stillness” are not two

qualities attributed to the house; they are intrinsic to the house. They are happenings that move through the house: they “clasped hands in the bedroom, and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs” (141). In this silence, domesticity meets nature, and in this meeting an event *happens*: “Once only a board sprang on the landing”. What first appears as a *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung* is through the event of the springing board turned into a *situationsbezogene Thematisierung*; an event created not by a character’s action, but initiated by the nosing of the wind. Mosher’s definition of narration as a successive movement or transformation with a telos organized by chronological markers only fits halfway: The airs that move through the house create a successive movement, which causes a transformation of the house with the board that sprang. The passage’s second half begins with the remark that “nothing [...]could [...]disturb the swaying mantle of silence”, but something does disturb the silence: “a rupture, as if after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley, one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro”. There is a certain progress in this description which interferes with the idea of a description of space as stable, but the development happens solely on a material level; there is no motif or telos involved when non-human nature creates the development. The event of the springing board happens because the (natural) wind permeates the (domestic) house. Woolf thus creates a *situationsbezogene Thematisierung* without any characters present. In the intertwinement of nature and domesticity, space is presented as a *relational gathering*, where the airs of the wind move round the house: “rubbing, snuffling, iterating and reiterating”. The result is that the everyday cycle of things and space emerges as something *happening*, it gets narratized. In Heidegger’s reading of the thing, a thing’s use was not made apparent until the thing stopped working. In “Time Passes” things are made apparent in a rupture, not occasioned by the thing stopping working for man, but with a rupture from the encounter between nature and the house. The rupture does in this instance only confirm and clarify what was already apparent: it is thus not necessary for things to be broken to become visible, i.e. to be things and not objects, as in Brown’s

analysis of Woolf's works. "Time Passes" is in itself the rupture that *foregrounds the background as background*.

#### 2.4.2. The Interludes – Vibrant Matter

While the adverb "so" indicated a new narrative strategy in "Time Passes", as the middle of this part was surrounded by the more traditionally modernist narrative with the experience of characters at the centre, the interludes are the first thing that the reader encounters in *The Waves*. Consequently, the space described in the nine interludes does not need a transition where the characters disappear. This seems to be a play on the tradition of an opening description setting the scene of the plot in a trustworthy environment, but the environment of the descriptive interludes is not the setting for the story, as the space in the interludes has nothing to do with the six characters. This means there is no narrative of characters entering, which in a continuous flow takes over the descriptive mode in the interludes. The nine chapters are separated from the other episodic chapters, and on the level of the story, the characters never enter the space described in the interludes. Because of this separation, the interludes are often read as allegorical; indeed, much in the same way that "Time Passes" is read as an abstract description of time passing, the interludes are read as an allegorical framework showing the life cycle of the six characters. In Klitgård's outline, it looks like this:

Interlude 1: Sunrise	Episode 1: Childhood
Interlude 2: Midmorning	Episode 2: Early adolescence
Interlude 3: Late morning	Episode 3: Adolescence
Interlude 4: Midday	Episode 4: Adulthood
Interlude 5: Noon	Episode 5: The death of Percival
Interludes 6: Early afternoon	Episode 6: Adulthood
Interludes 7: Late afternoon	Episode 7: Maturity
Interludes 8: Evening	Episode 8: Old age
Interludes 9: Night	Episode 9: Death
Interludes 10: The cycle begins again	

(Klitgård 2000:97).

Even though this cycle fits the structure of the novel, its limited focus bypasses the space that actually fills the interludes, and also the time that actually is present in the interludes as something other than the life cycle accompanying the episodes. As is the case with “Time Passes” the interludes are not descriptions of a static setting. Here, too, narrative elements prevail, inscribing a temporality underlined by the use of temporal adverbs. Woolf depicts how “*The sun had not yet risen*”, and continues to stress that a process is going on, as “*Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line*”, and “*Gradually the dark bar rose on the horizon*”, and again, “*Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire*”, ending by twice repeating how “*The surface of the sea slowly became transparent*”, and “*Slowly the arm that held the lamp raised it higher*” (Woolf 2000b:3, my underlining). As the temporal adverbs show, something happens in this interlude; in each interlude a movement is inscribed – the movement of the sun, which makes everything visible. This movement also extends across the nine interludes. The first five interludes narrate how the sun gradually rises until it “had risen to its full height” (111), by the sixth it starts sinking until it has disappeared in the tenth, and all that is left is how “*The waves broke on the shore*” (228). Woolf introduces a narrative not in miniature, but on a macro level, with the sun as the main protagonist and the temporal plot following its movements. This is however not all that happens in the interludes, for while the sun sets the movement across the interludes in motion, each interlude also contains its own miniature narrative, where nothing is static, but each part of the space is something that happens, from the waves that “*as they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously*” (3), to the birds that “*chirped high up; there was a pause; another chirped lower down*” (3), to the interior of the house, where the sun with its light makes the static furniture emerge as it “*sharpened the walls of the house, and rested like a tip of a fan upon a white blind and made a blue finger-print of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window. The blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial*” (4). What the interludes depict is Dennerlein’s *situationsbezogene Thematisierung*, but contrary to “Time Passes”, it is apparent from the beginning of

each interlude that an event is taking place that changes the space, namely the event is the rising of the sun. Dennerlein's concepts, stripped of their human-centred conclusions, make it clear that what happens in the interludes has the form of a narrative event. At the beginning of each interlude, an event occurs which changes the following space. Each event consists of the subject – the sun with the predicate verb: rising. The interludes do not first describe a stable setting, but set descriptions in motion from the very beginning. Within each interlude, the rising sun changes the space, as its light divides the sky from the sea, makes the flower bloom, and the interior shine, but as the sun also combines one interlude with the next in its continuous rise and setting, it also forms a narrative across the interludes.

Through this continuous movement across the interludes, the interior of the house is slowly made visible, and so narrated; not described. That which in the first interlude appeared “*dim and unsubstantial*” has in the second been transformed into something “*softly amorphous*”:

*The sun laid broader blades upon the house. The light touched something green in the window corner and made it a lump of emerald, a cave of pure green like stoneless fruit. It sharpened the edges of chairs and tables and stitched white table-cloths with fine gold wires. As the light increased a bud here and there split asunder and shook out flowers, green veined and quivering, as if the effort of opening had set them rocking, and pealing a faint carillon as they beat their frail clappers against their white walls. Everything became softly amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid (20).*

Stillness is not static in the interludes. On the contrary – and to an even greater extent than in “Time Passes” – spaces without characters are narrated as a process. This means that even though space here is foregrounded, it is not objectified, but *foregrounded as a happening and relational background*. In this relation – created by the light – each thing not only appears in its materiality, but this materiality itself changes and becomes something else: “*the green in the window corner*” is made into “*a lump of emerald, a cave of pure green*” and “*the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid*”. As space vibrates and is changed by the touch of light, what Woolf

here depicts comes close to Jane Bennett's thing-power and to her description of the assemblage of debris. In the interludes, Woolf portrays what Bennett calls an "energetic vitality inside each thing" (Bennett 2010:5) and Woolf does it not in a poem-like listing, but in narrative form. With the use of temporal adverbs and semicolon, and with the sun as the catalyst, things take on an agency of their own, as seen here, in the third interlude:

*Now, too, the rising sun came in at the window, touching the red-curtain, and began to bring out circles and lines. Now in the growing light its whiteness settled in the plate; the blade condensed its gleam. Chairs and cupboards loomed behind so that though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved. The looking glass whitened its pool upon the wall. The real flower on the window-sill was attended by a phantom flower. Yet the phantom was part of the flower, for when a bud broke free the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too (55).*

Under the successive movements of the sun, a transformation happens that not only changes the room of the house, but also transforms the agency in the passage. The repetition of the temporal adverb "now" stresses that two events are happening: the first is continual movement of the light of the sun, but with the second "now", agency changes: the light from the sun has catalyzed a change in the room, so that now "*chairs and cupboards loomed behind*" and "*[t]he looking glass whitened its pool*". Things have achieved a power, an energetic vitality, which makes each thing stand out, and at the same time relate to one another: "*so that though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved*". The transformation that Woolf has used the narrative mode to describe is not a transformation towards a telos, as Mosher's definition would have it, but a transformation in which a simultaneous relation is shown.

In this simultaneous relation, the sun is not only the active part giving life to the dead matter of furniture – and not an abstract "symbol of eternal and indifferent natural forces" as Bradbury would have it – it itself also achieves material form. The sun is the catalyst for change in the room, but in this relational space, agency is also extended to the chairs; they achieve a power of their own and take over the active part in the passage. The sun does not make a materiality appear that it then passes on to the furniture; vibrant

materiality is something immanently present in the chairs and cupboards themselves, which emerges in the encounter with the sun. The relational influence moves both ways, so that in the moment when the light enters the room and touches the furniture, the sun also loses its immateriality; it is not an immanent spirit giving life to things, but something capable of achieving materiality as it “touches” and “[n]ow in the growing light its whiteness settled in the plate; the blade condensed its gleam”. As the interludes proceed, Woolf succeeds in creating a narrative plot in the encounter between the light from the sun and the furniture, reaching a climax in the fourth interlude:

*The sun fell in sharp wedges inside the room. Whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence. A plate was like a white lake. A knife looked like a dagger of ice. Suddenly tumblers revealed themselves upheld by streaks of light. Tables and chairs rose to the surface as if they had been sunk under water and rose, filmed with red, orange, purple like the bloom on the skin of ripe fruit (82).*

If “Time Passes” created a dialogue between things, Woolf here stages a duel between the light and the furniture, and the violence of the duel is made explicit as the knife takes the form a dagger. That Woolf here should stage the encounter between two different materialities as a duel is significant in its resemblance to Heidegger’s description of the artwork as a struggle between the visible world and the hidden earth. What the artwork made appear, according to Heidegger, was the always withdrawing materiality of earth. In this struggle, the invisible became visible. In Heidegger’s terms, the artwork made the *thing in its thingness* appear; it showed *relations*. That is what happens in the interludes: the hidden background emerges in the encounter between light and thing. The interludes present the happening of space as a *relational gathering*, and what is gathered is itself changed. The sun, the things, and the room all achieve a new materiality in this gathering event. The processual movement, which until the fourth interlude has characterized the temporal flow of the narrative, is in the fourth interlude changed, as the duel is staged as an event, with the event-aspect reinforced by the use of the temporal adverb “*suddenly*”. From then on things achieve a new

material form as “*everything was without shadow. A jar was so green that the eye seemed sucked up through a funnel by its intensity and stuck to it like a limpet. Then shapes took on mass and edge*” (82). The cycle that Klitgård read as parallel to the lives of the characters has a plot of its own. The cycle is a plot of changing materials; it is a struggle between materialities, and the staging of the duel lets the different materialities emerge. The interludes thus describe how the furniture changes from the insubstantiality of the first interludes to their amorphous state of vibrant matter in the second; how they proceed to take on shape and mass; and then, in the sixth interlude, are penetrated by the light as “[*t*]he blind hung red at the window’s edge and within the room daggers of light fell upon chairs and tables making cracks across their lacquer and polish” (125). Maintaining the image of the dagger and emphasizing the struggle, the materials are shot through with light until the light withdraws in the seventh interlude, leaving the furniture scattered by the light, and “[*a*]ll for a moment wavered and bent in uncertainty and ambiguity” (140), which, in the eighth interlude “*made chairs and tables mellower and inlaid them with lozengers of brown and yellow. Lined with shadows their weight seemed more ponderous, as if colour, tilted, had run to one side. Here lay knife, fork and glass, but lengthened, swollen, and made portentous*” (160) until they in the ninth are swallowed up in darkness:

*All the colours in the room had overflowed their banks. The precise brush stroke was swollen and lop-sided; cupboards and chairs melted their brown masses into one huge obscurity. The height from floor to ceiling was hung with vast curtains of shaking darkness. The looking-glass was pale as the mouth of a cave shadowed by hanging creepers* (181).

In presenting the space of the interludes as a struggle, Woolf creates a relational space where everything vibrates, and where the materiality of the chairs is put forward in the light, even as they draw themselves back from this presentation in the same instance: they “loomed behind” as the light directs its beam upon them. They are foregrounded as they withdraw. Here, the vibrant materiality from Bennett intersects with Heidegger’s struggle and the presenting of the thing as it draws itself away from presentation. This opposes Banfield’s reading of materiality, as she in *The Phantom*

*Table* identifies the two kinds of materialities, the sun and the furniture, as a dualism between “Granite and Rainbow”<sup>33</sup> where “granite stands for the primary qualities of matter, those “stripped of all sensible qualities[...] against granite is set the insubstantiality of rainbow of the secondary qualities. Rainbow belongs with things with “almost no permanence or rigidity”” (Banfield 2000: 149-150). Rainbow and sun are here the ephemeral secondary qualities that need granite, “something solid to cling to” (151). These two materials do not, in Banfield’s reading, exchange materialities; they relate, but according to her concept of “sensibilia” from Russell, materialities intrinsic to things do not mix or relate, as they are only “sense-data”. I would argue that space is here an encounter between things, where one thing lends it materiality to another: where “*cupboards and chairs melted their brown masses into one huge obscurity*”, and where the darkness normally conceived as immaterial borrows the solidity from the curtains as “*the height from floor to ceiling was hung with vast curtains of shaking darkness*”. The solid does not melt into air, to borrow a quote from Marshall Berman, but the solid becomes amorphous, and air becomes solid.

## 2.5. The Discreetness of Air

In “Time Passes”, Woolf has replaced light with air, and I agree with Banfield that it is the “alternation of fluid and solid [that] gives the world its shape” (Banfield 2000:127), but I would add that the world taking shape is a spatial-material happening. What characterizes “Time Passes” is that Woolf here foregrounds the background as background through discreetness instead of the opening event of the sun in the interludes. The background emerges discreetly through the 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 another miniature level of events taking place within the

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<sup>33</sup> A collection of Woolf’s essays that appeared posthumous was called *Granite and Rainbow* (1958).

house, engendered by the encounter between nature and the domestic things. Her choice of element for making the event happen, the element of air, is an element of discreetness and invisibility. It is the exact opposite of the one preferred by the modernist Hulme, whose favourite texture was the “dry hardness” of steel, “which suggests that for him the best organism is a dead, or at least a desiccated, one” (Kime Scott 2012:15). Where steel is an extracted alloy of iron, a refined and industrial product, air is the natural atmospheric element surrounding the Earth, as well as the bodily breathable condition for human life (cf. Connor *The Matter of Air* (2010)).

The two materials articulate two different attitudes to nature in Modernism: one seeking to control and desiccate nature, the other accentuating the interconnectedness of human and nature. This preoccupation with raw materials has a historical dimension, which underscores the dominant trends in Modernism in regard to materials. The turn of the century saw a rising interest in raw materials in Great Britain, which Hulme, by choosing iron, corroborated. This trend is recounted by Brown in “The Secret Life of things” (1999), writing that:

the industrial revolution and the empire converged as an “intense preoccupation with material things,” a demand for raw materials, coupled with the production technologies, that resulted in “the whole world [being] ransacked for mines and metals. [...] The globalization that culminates in war, and in the compression of time and space that has been said to constitute modernity, originates with what we might call a passion for materials (Brown 1999:15).

Steven Connor opposes this fixation on solidity in “Modernism in Midair” (2003) and in *The Matter of Air* (2010). Taking his point of departure in the

fixation upon the values of solidity and density and definition, Imagist and others, Pound, Hulme, H.D, Eliot, Williams sought, or convinced themselves and others that they should be seeking, precision, hardness, dryness, definition, ‘concreteness (Connor 2003:3).

He adds the countermovement of flux, and thus sums up the tendencies in Modernism in regard to materials as follows:

As has often been noted, the still-life, objectivist aesthetics of modernism were answered or opposed by a subjectivist aesthetics, which emphasised flux and instability, that preferred dynamic blur to static definition, aura to contour. In a crude sort of way, we might say that this difference maps on to the generic difference between poetry and fiction, since to be modern meant opposed things in those two areas. Where the hardboiled modernist poet sought to avoid the runniness and cloudiness associated with poetry, writers of fiction like Proust, James, Conrad, Woolf and Joyce, sought to animate and evaporate the inherited materialism in the novel (Connor 2003:6).

Connor's emphasis here supports my argument that "Time Passes" is placed between two literary traditions. Connor identifies two trends in Modernism according to genre: the poets, such as Pound, who sought to do away with the romantic inheritance of sensibility and its interest in air, the idea "that romanticism seems to 'crystallise' in the idea of flight" (Connor 2003:4) thus turning towards "classicism [...] as a clinging to the solidity and finitude of the ground" (4), and the novelists, who sought to do away with the inherited materialism from the Edwardians and thus turned to flux and instability. These two accounts of Modernism have led to an underestimation of materialism in the novel, and flux and instability are typically read as what Connor calls "subjectivist aesthetics". "Time Passes" inherited an interest in materialism and description from the previous generation of writers, not simply a "subjectivist aesthetics", it is another kind of materialism: a materialism that mixes the solidity of the domestic house with the instability of air. Connor does not comment on the role of materialism in Woolf's novels, but focuses on her thoughts about writing, noting that "Woolf's image of her work is therefore a kind of air-compacted matter" (13).

The role of air in "Time Passes" is significant; this is something that different interpretations agree on. It has been read as the historical interruption that Sheehan noted; as Auerbach's "namenlosen Geister" (Auerbach 2001:494); or as the ghost of Mrs.

Ramsay, or “The Greek chorus” (Lee 1992:xxxvi) as Hermione Lee proposes. These different interpretations propose a reading of air as either nothingness (Sheehan) or as spirituality (Auerbach, Lee). In each case, air is considered literally immaterial. This is a typical reading of air according to Connor, in *The Matter of Air*. 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” (2010: 31). This status of the in-betweenness of air, between matter and immateriality, is Woolf’s choice for her narration of space in “Time Passes”. Here, nothing moves; it happens. 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 a 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”. Woolf’s use of verbs to depict their movements changes what could have been a description into narration. The two passages follow the point of view of the airs, and their movements are described with spatial directional verbs: “creeping, stole round, swallowed up, crept round, entered”. It is through space that the airs gain materiality, as did the sun in the interludes. In the encounter between the solidity of the furniture and the fluidity 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 New Materialism takes shape: a materialism, whose agentic power lies in the relationality of things material and immaterial. The Edwardian descriptive materialism is contrasted with the flux of modernity; not the flux of consciousness, but a flux intrinsic to space.

## 2.6. To Anthropomorphise

In “The Living Diffractions of Matter and Text: Narrative Agency, Strategic Anthropomorphism, and how interpretation works” (2015), Serenella Iovino proposes a new understanding of anthropomorphism in light of the material turn, which “investigates matter both *in* texts and *as* text” (Iovino 2015: 69). While focusing her attention on the way matter has a narrative agency of its own, she joins Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, and W.J.T. Mitchell in favouring a new valorization of anthropomorphism, arguing that “an important implication of this argument in favor of a “strategic anthropomorphism” is that liberating things from their silence is also a way to reveal the dumbness and disenchantment of a world” (82). Following this line of thought, to *not* anthropomorphize would show an indifferent forgetting of and disinterest in materiality. To re-introduce anthropomorphism, then, is a device to set things free, not a way to assess a non-human reality through human perspective by applying human traits to non-human things. To anthropomorphize is not purely a mirroring of human forms in things, but can be a way to reveal the dominant dualism already present in our encounter with the world.

In “Time Passes” as well as in the interludes, the materiality of one thing rubs itself onto the materiality of another, but human traits are also attributed to things. Woolf anthropomorphizes in order to describe the material movements of things, and to be able to ascribe a sensuous aspect to space without any character sensing it. Her method can thus be seen in the light of this new understanding of anthropomorphism. In the interludes, the link between the human and the non-human world is directly present,

whereas in “Time Passes”, she anthropomorphizes things while omitting the human comparison.

In the interludes, Woolf anthropomorphizes the waves by comparing them to the breath of a sleeper: “*The waves paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously*” (2000b:3). Here, anthropomorphism adds a new sensuous element, as the tactile movement of the waves is given an auditory aspect as they are “*sighing like a sleeper*”. I would argue that the comparison between the movements of the waves and the breath of a sleeper is not a way to demonstrate the mastery of human language upon the non-human environment, but a means to show a non-hierarchical relation between human and surroundings. Woolf thus practices what Jane Bennett advocates:

I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of non-human forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought. 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 (Bennett 2010:xvi).

To cultivate anthropomorphism is, according to Bennett, a way to show “*thing-power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). Woolf dramatizes space in the interludes by anthropomorphizing things, and this leads me to consider anthropomorphization in light of the narratological understanding of event. As both Mosher and Dennerlein emphasized, events are linked to characters, but in the interludes, this human understanding of event lends its connotative meaning to things, so that when Woolf describes an spatial event, she anthropomorphizes this event. When she – in the first interlude – describes the event of light increasing, it is a movement compared to that made by a human arm:

*Gradually, the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green. Behind it, too, the sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flats of bars of white,*

*green and yellow spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. Then she raised her lamp higher and the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres like the smoke fire that roars from a bonfire (2000b:3).*

This is the long version of “*the sky cleared*”. But what could have been a short ascertainment is turned into a prolonged narrative of a space that *happens*, as the comparisons pile up with the repetition of “*as if*”. The first comparison is to another material thing: the clearing of sediments within a wine-bottle. In this comparison, a transfer of materiality happens, so that the aerial materiality of the sky is supplemented by the liquid materiality of wine. Then the light is compared to the raising of an arm, which lends the material event of making visible the intention and the directedness of the human action. In the event of making visible, a form of agency usually attributed to human characters is ascribed to the light. The thing, in this instance the light, is animated. This transfer is not only taking place on the level of action and event; an exchange is also happening on a sensuous level, as the immaterial light achieves materiality. The tactility of a woman who is “*couched*” is transferred to the air, so that “*the air seemed to become fibrous*”, thus achieving a new tactile level. The different levels of comparison are intertwined in the last comparison: the bottle green from the first comparison is pulled into the fibrous surface created by the woman raising the lamp, which continues merging with the third comparison, the smoke of the fire, leaving the fibers red and yellow. In this way, one level of comparison relates to another and not to the original level of comparison with the sky that cleared. The anthropomorphism of the arm is thus just one level in the complex tissue of relations that constitute Woolf’s happening of space.

The raising of the hand in the interludes has its equivalent in “Time Passes”. As the characters disappear in the first part of “Time Passes”, a hand is raised, not as a metaphorical transfer of materialities, but in the form of an actual hand raised unconsciously by characters in their sleep: “Sometimes a hand was raised as if to clutch something or ward off something” (2000a 137-138). But later, as the characters have left the house, Woolf begins to anthropomorphize what happens in the house in a way similar to

her method in the interludes. Again she repeats the comparison conjunction “as if”, and so stresses that a transfer is happening between two different levels of meaning. She describes the movement of the airs around the house; “then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper whether they would fade” (138). In contrast to the anthropomorphism of the interludes, the human level is only discreetly, indirectly present here as Woolf seems to give things a voice. As I have argued, she adds a discursive level to the material things, staging a dialogue between the room and the things, where: “the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing; and slammed to” (139). Whereas *the event of things* in the interludes was told through a comparison to a human action, here the human has been left out, and things assume an agentic discursive power intrinsic to their own materiality. Not just on a discursive level does Woolf anthropomorphize; the tactile dimension from the interludes is also present in “Time Passes”, though again with the human figure absent from the comparison:

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 (144-145).

The light from the lighthouse mixed with the moonlight is here anthropomorphized, “as if it laid its caress and lingered stealthily and looked”, but, as in the interludes, anthropomorphism is just one part of the different relations that effect each other. The anthropocentric caress thus gets its material texture from the carpet, which the light has laid itself upon in the previous sentence. The textual effect of the carpet, its solidity, gets transferred onto the way the light moves as it “glid[es] gently”. This is not “the narcissitic reflex of human language and thought” as Bennett notes, but letting space and things appear through poetic language

as relations that are being created. The poetic quality of this passage is underlined by alliterations, which again emphasize 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 ascribed life 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) – it is what it does, and what it does is material in both content and form. The formal alliterations add an auditive aspect to the visual of light on the level of content.

An illustrative counterexample to Woolf’s use of anthropomorphism in the interludes and “Time Passes” can be found in her short story *A Haunted House* (1921), which employs a typical dichotomic and human-centred use of anthropomorphism. It is a ghost story about a ghostly couple haunting a house at night, the perspective shifting between the ghosts and a “real” couple, the current occupants of the house.

But they had found it in the drawing-room. Not that one could ever see them. The window-panes reflected apples, reflected roses; all the leaves were green in the glass. If they moved in the drawing-room, the apple only turned its yellow side. Yet, the moment after, if the door was opened, spread about the floor, hung upon the walls, pendant from the ceiling – what? My hands are empty. The shadow of a thrush crossed the carpet; from the deepest wells of silence the wood pigeon drew its bubble of sound. ‘Safe, safe, safe,’ the pulse of the house beat softly. ‘The treasure buried; the room...’ the pulse stopped short. Oh, was that the buried treasure?” (Woolf 1991:122).

The description of the house in the short story *foregrounds the background*, that is, the house is the pivotal point in the story. It is through the house that the two couples intertwine; it is here that the past meets the present in the form of haunting movements in the house, but the house is not *foregrounded as background*. The house

assumes agentic power, not as something intrinsic to the house itself, but as a materialization of its previous owners. The house is made into a material foreground for the invisible spirits and thus appears as dead matter being brought to life by the human element. The present owners interpret “the pulse of the house” as saying “Safe, safe, safe”, and this chanting melody is repeated three times as “Safe, safe, safe, the pulse of the house beat gladly” and “Safe, safe, safe, the heart of the house beats proudly” (Woolf 1991:123). Anthropomorphizing the house by giving it a pulse and a voice is not a way to foreground the background as background. Instead, it is an interpretation of something hidden behind the foregrounded background. The house is either used as a background setting for the actions of characters; it is “a door shutting. From room to room they went” (122), or it is interpreted as spiritual; as the beating pulse of the house. The short story provides a good example of Mosher’s *narratized description*, where spatial narration unravels a plot of the past. Hermione Lee reads *To the Lighthouse* as “a ghost story” (Lee 2000: xxxiv) and compares it to *A Haunted House*, as she reads the airs in “Time Passes” as “disembodied voices” (xxxiv) and compares them to the ghosts haunting the house in the short story. My argument, contrary to Lee’s, is that the difference between the two descriptions of houses becomes clear when we understand anthropomorphism as something interpreted not only in light of the human, but as a way to let non-human reality appear. Both stories conform to Hamon’s understanding of dynamic descriptions as a way to create coherence between the human and non-human world. Yet, significantly, while the coherence created in *A Haunted House* through the use of anthropomorphism foregrounds the human, “Time Passes” uses anthropomorphism to foreground the non-human background. Space in the short story is not “descriptive”, but “sub-scriptive”; its events are not horizontal, but vertical, as the house becomes a melting pot of characters and time. Anthropomorphism in this story is also relational, but what it relates is not space and things, but past and present. It adds only purely discursive and plot-oriented aspects, not sensuous ones, to the anthropomorphized things. By making use of anthropomorphism, Woolf makes visible the relational aspect of

space: depicted in “Time Passes” and the interludes is not a post-human world of eternity, but a perspective that is turned towards the non-human, employing a human vocabulary to depict that which itself is not human.

## 2.7. Narrator – A view from Nowhere that Sees Everywhere<sup>34</sup>

‘So the landscape returned to me; so I saw fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me, but now with this difference; I saw but was not seen. I walked unshadowed; I came unheralded. From me had dropped the old cloak, the old response; the hollowed hand that beats back sounds. Thin as a ghost, leaving no trace where I trod, perceiving merely, I walked alone in a new world, never trodden; brushing new flowers, unable to speak save in a child’s words of one syllable; without shelter from phrases. [...] ‘But how to describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red – even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through’ (220-221).

This is Bernard’s final monologue in *The Waves*; the landscape returning to him is described in the section just before this quote, and consists of the sun descending and the earth vaporizing. In this monologue, he seems to refer to the space from the interludes, while at the same time thematizing the perspective dominant in the interludes; indeed, the line “how to describe the world seen without a self” captures perfectly the narrative dilemma in both the interludes and “Time Passes”. It seems to be a meta-reflective commentary from the narrator, placed in the thoughts of one of her characters. It resumes and revives the idea from the first draft of *To the Lighthouse*. In the draft with the H-shaped figure, the second to last sentence reads: “The look of the room”. It is this look of the room, seen without a self that both the interludes and “Time Passes” present. As *The Waves* presents each character with his or her own perspective, it offers space equal perspective. Space poses a problem in that it does not have its own language. The soliloquies

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<sup>34</sup> In “Narrative perspective in *To the Lighthouse*”, Levenson notes that Woolf “achieves the formal ascendancy of a view from nowhere that lets us see everywhere” (Levenson 2015: 27).

of the characters form self-presentations that cannot help but challenge representation when it comes to self-presenting the world outside of language, as Bernard reflects: “there are no words. Blue, red – even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through”. Woolf, through Bernard, anticipates the ecological criticism recently put forth by Morton, whose sentiment here reflects this phenomenon: “In the same way when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground” (Morton 2009:1). But while Bernard does not see any other option than to stop forming phrases, Woolf does provide a way to “let the light through”: In accordance with Heidegger’s concept of *Gelassenheit*, she develops a form in the interludes and in “Time Passes” to show the thing in its *thingness*.

In “Describing the unobserved: events grouped around an empty center” (1987), Ann Banfield introduces an understanding of novelistic language, which strives to grasp “the appearance of things *when* no one was present” (Banfield 1987:265). Taking her point of departure in “the advent of modern science [...] and the development of scientific instruments” (265), she emphasizes that contrary to spoken language, written language – and especially novelistic language – expresses

a subjectivity reduced to nothing else but what the instrument can record, namely sense-datum given to no one. The instrument is a ‘sensitive’ instrument, aiming to reproduce, as under laboratory conditions only those aspects of subjectivity which crucially concern our knowledge of the external world (266).

Banfield continues to name novelistic description as an example of how things emerge unobserved: “This uniquely novelistic style seeks to capture, to arrest within the moment, the appearance of things independent of any observer and his or her desires, prejudices, intentions” (278). Moving away from an ego-centred understanding of deixis, as a “demonstrative referring”, where the here and now no longer only means “the place and time which *I* occupy, as *my* spatio-temporal perspective” (271), but questions whether

there are sentences with a deictic center but without any explicit or implicit representation of an observer. Grammatically, such sentences would contain place and time deictics, *here* and *now* or their equivalents; they might also contain demonstratives designating sensibilia. But they would not contain those subjective elements and constructions implying the mental states of a personal subject (273).

Banfield observes such sentences in the interludes in *The Waves* and in “Time Passes”. ““The sun had now sunk lower in the sky”” (273), is one of her examples of an impersonal subjectivity: it is a “subjectless subjective description of sensibilia” (276). She thus rejects the idea that “language can never be anything but anthropocentric” (2000:349), as she puts it in *A Phantom Table*, and, continuing in “Describing the unobserved”, she notes that:

This assumption about the necessary egocentricity of all deictic forms, however as we have also seen, is not justified if the language of written narrative is taking into account. Indeed novelistic sentences of the form of those in 1-7 [quoting Woolf among others] remain the only linguistic way to represent this impersonal subjectivity, this ‘centric particularity’ which is not egocentric. For speech is always occupied by the speaking subject who says “I”; it is writing and, specifically, the writing of the novel which by virtue of a possible absence of the first person, permits sentences which are no longer egocentric (1987:276).

But whereas Banfield concludes that these “speakerless sentences of Narration recount a public space and time that is also centreless – that of physics, of geometry, of history” (276), I will argue with Heidegger that the speakerless sentences show the *thing that things* – an everyday view of the world, and not that of an “object-glass” (266) of physics. Even though I disagree as to what these sentences let appear, Banfield’s concept of a physical subjectivity that perceives while remaining unobserved itself is useful to my understanding of Woolf’s method in “Time Passes” and the interludes. As Banfield observes, Woolf leaves out the “I” in the act of perception and leaves only a verb of perception: ““listening” – remains subjectless, and the sound waves go unobserved” (274).

In *The Phantom Table*, Banfield links this descriptive language to a child's language; it is "a nursery language registering the child's pure looking" (298). Bernard in *The Waves* speaks of "a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak" (Woolf 200b:227). This comes close to the naïve ambition of Jane Bennett's vital materialism. Bennett speaks of a "self-criticism of conceptualization, a sensory attentiveness to the qualitative singularities of the object, the exercise of an unrealistic imagination, and of the courage of a clown" (Bennett 2010:15). All of "Time Passes" is framed within this ambition. The unrealistic imagination is the narrator in "Time Passes", which, as Levenson notes, is an "[a]ll listening voice" (Levenson 2015:25); it is "a view from nowhere that lets us see everywhere" (27), or, in Banfield's terms, Woolf here describes unobserved reality.

This materialization of a reality otherwise hidden from our view is something that Woolf quite literally plays with, as she frames the view shown in "Time Passes" as a curtain being pulled back from a setting that has remained hidden while the characters took up the foreground in the previous section:

It now seemed 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 (2000a:139).

"Time Passes" displays a background, which like Bennett's encounter with the debris, shows each thing's singularity. When the characters re-enter the novel in the third part, the curtain is again closed as "Time Passes" ends:

Through the open window the voice of the beauty of the world came murmuring, too softly to hear exactly what it said – but what mattered if the meaning were plain? [...] Indeed the voice might resume, as the curtains of dark wrapped themselves over the house, over Mrs. Beckwith, Mr Carmichael, and Lily Briscoe so that they lay with several folds of blackness on their eyes, why not accept this, be content with this, acquiesce and resign? (154-155).

Here, the narrator is present as the all-listening voice, but a voice that is clearly human: she relates herself not to the boat, wave, and hare, but – in the including pronouns “we” and “ours” – to the human. But unlike the point of view linked to the different characters, the narrator here assumes a perspective that is derived of personhood and subjectivity; she perceives space without being present, observes but is herself unobserved: “Listening (had there been anyone to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightening could have been heard tumbling and tossing” (146-147). Here the narrator listens and actually describes what happens in the empty house, while at the same time pointing out in the bracket that there is no one there to listen. The hypothetical perception of this passage is further underlined by the use of conditional perfect, indicating what might have happened *if* anyone was present to perceive it. According to Levenson “[t]he shudder created by “Time Passes” is its elevation beyond personhood” in an “attempt to see from the perspective of the inorganic world: wind and water, the light and “stray airs” (26). But what the framing quotes with the curtain also introduce is the mystic category of “divine goodness” and “the beauty of the world”, contrasted by the human “penitence and all its toil”. However, the narrator does not assume the perspective of this divine goodness or the beauty of the world; instead these aspects are the narrator’s interpretations of what she perceives. “It seemed” and “as if” express a distance to this picture of goodness, and so these pictures become an almost ironical gesture, as she continues with this imagery, making the divine goodness into a childish disapproving magician, closer to Bennett’s clownish traits, as is the case in the following passage: “but alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain; it does not please him” (139). This reflective opposition and questioning between human and nature continues, as the narrator asks:

Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacence she saw his misery, condoned this meanness, and acquiesced in his torture. That dream, then, of sharing, completing, finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror

itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence  
when the nobler powers sleep beneath? (146)

– and again later, “[w]hat power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature?”(150). The narrator is an all listening voice, but in “Time Passes”, she is also directly present with these questions and comments. She thus does not, as Levenson notes, “offer no signature or sign of a narrating presence” (21). What she presents in “Time Passes” is not a neutral description of a setting from a withdrawn, observing narrator; instead the narrator reflects upon the subject at hand, that is, the relationship between nature and human. This is the opposite of what happens in the interludes, where the level of reflections is omitted. As a contrast to the image of the curtain that darkens space at the end of “Time Passes”, the ending of the ninth interlude describes darkness overwhelming the space as follows:

*Darkness rolled its waves along the grassy rides and over the wrinkled skin of the turf, enveloping the solitary thorn tree and the empty snail shell at its foot. Mounting higher, darkness blew along the upland slopes, and met the fretted and abraded pinnacles of the mountain [...] Them, too, darkness covered* (2000b:182).

The perspective lies in darkness itself, following its movements. The narrator in *The Waves* offers no signature or presence; only through the imagery and the comparisons – with for instance the sleeper and the arm of a woman – does the space described express a human presence. Here it is only in the voice of Bernard that a meta-reflective comment shines through.

In “Towards a Typology, Poetics and History of Description in Fiction” (2007), Ansgar Nünning has outlined an analytical framework to designate what kind of narrative mediation there could be at play in descriptions. Among types of narrators, Nünning differentiates between:

A heterodiegetic, covert narrator situated outside of the level of the characters or whether they are focalized from the point of view of one of the characters whose sense perceptions they represent. On the basis of this criterion one can posit a distinction

between externally and internally focalized types of description. Whereas the former is typically associated with conveying potentially objective or at least reliable information about the existents and facts of the fictional world, the latter kind of description, which becomes predominant in the Victorian *fin de siècle* and the modernist novel, tends to be much more tinged with a subjective bias and potential unreliability" (103).

The Modernism that Woolf has created in these two parts of the novels does not quite fit this historical categorization. She employs a heterodiegetic narrator, but in "Time Passes", this narrator is not completely covert; she is externally focalized, yet does not convey objective and reliable information. Narration is perceived, not from the internally focalized position of a character, but from a subjectless perception of space. Woolf succeeds in creating what Bernard calls a "picture-book" (221) of space; by using punctuation, anthropomorphism, and narration, she moves beyond what Bernard termed the thickness of language. Whereas Heidegger transformed the still life by van Gogh into a relational gathering thing, Woolf turns the stillness of an empty house into a narrative of space, and, by doing so, proves that the novel, despite the opposite contention in her own essays, is fit not only for the human-element, but indeed can present the non-human environment.

## CHAPTER 4

### GEORGES PEREC AND SPACE

## 1. The Essays

### 1.1. Preliminary remarks: *Still life/Style leaf* – Perec in the Light of New Materialism and Descriptive Theory

Le bureau sur lequel j'écris est une ancienne table de joaillier, en bois massif, munie de quatre grand tiroirs, et don't le plan de travail, légèrement déprimé par rapport aux rebords, sans doute pour empêcher que les perles qui jadis y étaient triées ne risquent de tomber par terre, est tendu d'un drap noir d'une texture extrêmement serrée (Perec 1989:107).

So begins Perec's *Still life/Style leaf* (1981), which is a short mise en abyme description of a writing desk: The desk is described in detail, and, as the description comes to an end – as it reaches the paper on the desk, upon which the description has been written – a second description takes over, retelling what is written on the paper, and thus repeating the first description with small variations. By so doing, the text places itself squarely between the new materialist discussion of the problem of representing the background and the narratological discussion of description's relation to reality. It implicitly questions the relationship between foreground and background, text and space, word and thing, and it does so both formally and thematically.

Theoretical kinship with Descriptive Theory is apparent in its history of publication, as it was written to form the end piece of the very same edition of *Yale French Studies* 1981 which launched a re-evaluation of description. In the introduction, Jeffrey Kittay writes that “[t]he volume closes with “Still Life/Style Leaf”, a description, or so it seems, written for this issue by Georges Perec. [...] Perec's piece is a description of a writing, or rather of a written” (Kittay 1981a:iv). In context of my previous discussion of the re-evaluation of description, where the textual relation to a material reality is downplayed in favour of meaningful narrative elements, it is significant that what Kittay takes away from Perec's description, as he compares it to Derrida's self-reflective understanding of language, is its only narrative element: that of writing, and indeed the text can be read as a description of writing. That is: not only

does Kittay pay no attention to the things that take up the whole of Perec's description, but he considers the description unrelated to any reality outside of itself. To Kittay, the repetitive structure of the text only stresses its own representational status; a recurring tendency in the reception of Perec's other works, as will become apparent in the following chapter. This kind of reading is a far cry from a spatial one.

Indeed, this Deconstructive art of reading is taken up by Morton and given a material turn. In *Ecology without Nature*, he touches on the paradoxical relationship between environment and text, as he writes that

The more I try to evoke where I am – the “I” who is writing this text – the more phrases and figures of speech I must employ. I must get involved in a process of writing, the very writing that I am *not* describing when I evoke the environment in which writing is taking place. The more convincingly I render my surroundings, the more figurative language I end up with. The more I try to show you what lies beyond this page, the more of a page I have (Morton 2009:30).

Instead of regarding this growing textuality as a problem, Morton tries with his concept of *ecomimesis* to move beyond the Ecocritical paradox concerning text and nature, and, with a Deconstructive vocabulary, he proceeds to investigate how the medium, too, with its meta-textual elements has its own materiality, which, instead of merely referring to more signs, may itself hold “in the negative an ecology without nature” (187). To Morton, this is not a question of moving beyond language, but of understanding the intrinsic relationship between nature and language. This takes Woolf's and Heidegger's understanding of language a step further: while Heidegger emphasized that the artwork is a thing among other things, distinguished by its truth-revealing character as it displayed space as a *relational gathering event*, Morton, and to an even greater extent Perec, thinks of language as a material thing. And whereas Woolf – through the use of discreet language – showed how matter vibrates as a *relational gathering event* by describing space with an agency of its own, Perec takes the thing-character of language

literally. The title *Still life/ Style leaf* bears witness to both similarity to and difference from Heidegger, who too had an interest in still lifes. In his narrated description of van Gogh's still life of a pair of shoes, Heidegger used punctuation and verbs instead of adjectives (some of the same discreet signs as Woolf) to show how the work of art revealed the thing and its use without it being used, and how, in the artwork, the thing is allowed to emerge in its materiality; put forth as an *emergent event*. The artwork, being crafted, is itself a thing, yet language for Heidegger, as his narrated description illustrates, is a poetic presentation rather than a concrete material thing. As Perec's title illustrates, language is more than presentation to him: it is not just a still life, but also a style leaf. It is stylized matter.

The first part of the title refers to the genre of still lifes, described in the same issue of *Yale French Studies* by Marc Eli Blanchard in "On Still Life" as "the description of objects originally set apart from the course of daily life" (Blanchard 1981:276). Here Blanchard continues to identify its "static qualities", depicting "nature morte" and how it "lacks a subject" (277). Even if Perec in the title categorizes his text as a still life, he also challenges Blanchard's definitions, as his own still life describes objects in their daily environment, with a subject (though just because there is a subject it does not require all the attention of the reader as Narratology would have it), and the static qualities of this genre are contested by the second part of the title, which switches the meaning of the words. The second part of the title does not refer to how language presents objects as *nature mortes*, but refers to language itself. "Style leaf" is a play on words; a variation on "still life", referring to the materiality of the letter, and it can be interpreted as both a leaf that has been stylized: matter that has been given a style; and as a page in a style booklet. The latter refers to the sheet of paper on the desk that triggers repetition of the description within the text, referring in turn to the sheet of paper that the text itself is written upon. Hence "style leaf" directs our attention to the surprising change within the text, provoked by the materiality of paper, while it also makes us aware of a textual materiality outside the words on the page, namely to that of the paper upon which the text is written, and, lastly, its wordplay

emphasizes the physicality of letters. All these levels are repeated in the text, but the question remains where this play on the materiality of language leaves the things and the space that the text depicts? Or, the question is, if rather than just refer to a Deconstructive and Postmodern loop of signs, this intertextual text and self-reflective language may also be read as a radicalization of what Woolf and Heidegger did with language? And, if so, does Perce conceive of a new way to let things and space emerge? These questions will shape my discussion of space in Perce's works.

*Still life/Style leaf* is an illuminating example of the way Perce approaches things and words. There is an abundance of things in this text; Woolf's short, comical collection of impedimenta in the *Charleston Bulletin* seems only a preview compared to Perce's overwhelming description of the items on the desk.<sup>35</sup> In Heideggerian terms, the desk is the thing that *gathers* other things; words, and the history of its use. Yet whereas Heidegger's description of van Gogh's shoes depicted the shoes as they were left behind, and noted how their use emerged from their physical appearance, thus bearing witness to the body of a woman as well as to the earth of the field, Perce describes the thing in use. But the use does not foreground the human using it, as "le bureau sur lequel j'écris" is the only witness to a using subject; indeed, it seems as if the use – instead of foregrounding the act of writing – displays the relationship between foreground and background, and thus lets the background emerge as the background for writing. The background, in this instance the desk, is in the description foregrounded as the spatial background for writing; here each thing is listed as it sits next to another thing. The moment that the background no longer is foregrounded as the background for writing, a loop begins. When the writing itself gets thematised, as the text zooms in on the paper – which thus becomes foregrounded as an object separated from the rest of the desk –the

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<sup>35</sup> What Woolf does in *Charleston Bulletin* bears a close resemblance to Perce's work, as she (with Quentin Bell) also provides a sketch of the studio, which resembles Perce's model of the apartment building in Paris in *La Vie mode d'emploi*. Also the use of friends and family within these texts resembles how Perce includes his friends in his texts, as for instance the appearance of Paul Virilio in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*.

sheet of paper with the written words on it takes over the description, and the *mise en abyme* begins:

Au premier plan, se détachant nettement sur le drap noir de la table, se trouve une feuille de papier quadrillé, de format 21 x 29,7, presque entièrement couverte d'une écriture exagérément serrée, et sur laquelle on peut lire: le bureau sur lequel j'écris est une ancienne table de joaillier (113).

Stressing the shift between foreground and background in the description by “au premier plan”, the text expressly makes its readers aware that something happens. The style leaf from the title is here repeated as the “feuille de papier”, an object that not only gets foregrounded, but also draws attention to the background paper, upon which the foregrounded words are written. The foreground/background distinction thus lets more than things and spaces emerge, it also let the background materiality of paper come into focus. As the second description takes over, Perec also plays with the readability of description, and so re-actualizes and plays with Boileau's critique of descriptions. In the first description, the reader may easily lose her orientation and read absentmindedly the abundant listing and positioning of things on the table, as it piles up: “à gauche et un peu avant de la table. A l'extrême gauche de la table, se trouvent deux vide-poches rectangulaires, en verre épais, disposés l'un à côté de l'autre” (107). But as the second description takes over, what at first appears to be a repetition of the first description, turns out to be a variation, as some words have been exchanged with others: in the second, the desk is no longer “en bois massif”, but “en bois verni”, the black fabric that covered the desk in the first with “d'une texture extrêmement serrée” (107) is in the second “d'une texture très fine” (113). This makes the reader stop, and instead of skimming the description – something which in this text would be pointless, as it unlike a novel or a short story consists of nothing but descriptions – the reader must go back to the former description and take a closer look at the things described. In so doing, Perec has created a still life of a writing desk, but even though he does not describe things that happen, in contrast to Woolf and Heidegger, *Still life/Style leaf* is not a static

description. A displacement occurs between the first and the second description, not only placing a sort of puzzle within the description – copying a narrative strategy from a narration of plot and inscribing temporality to the still life – but also demonstrating a new way of *foregrounding the background as background*; a new strategy for things and words.

## 1.2. Space as the Missing Link in the Reception of Perec's Novels

As *Still life/Style leaf* demonstrates, Perec is a writer who directly deals with questions of things and words, language and space. Unlike Woolf, he in a number of texts explicitly dealt with space, for instance in *Espèces d'espaces* (1974) where he investigated types of spaces, or in *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1975) where he tries to describe a square in Paris while he sits experiencing it. These texts belong to a phase in his work that he himself in "Notes sur ce que je cherche" (1978) has termed interest into the "sociologique: comment regarder le quotidien" (Perec 1985:10). This interest is closely linked to his concept of "L'infra-ordinaire" (Perec 1989:11), a concept that he launches in the text "Approches de quoi?" (1973). These are texts that Perec differentiates from his novels, either belonging to the phases of the "ludique" or the "romanesque" – his terms (Perec 1985:10). This differentiation is reproduced in the reception of his work, which has caused space and the infra-ordinary to go missing from readings of his novels. Not until the most recent issue (2015) of the annual *Cahier Georges Perec*, was a whole edition devoted to his spatial thinking, and I place my reading of Perec within this new line of interest; here Perec is introduced as an "écrivain topographe, un *architexteur*" (Constantin 2015:9).

Until recently, as Warren Motte and Jean-Jacques Poucel argues in the introduction to the issue of *Yale French Studies* devoted to Perec, every reading of his work "had to be accompanied by a preface, cast in more or less serious terms, arguing the legitimacy of dealing with Georges Perec in a serious manner" (Motte and Poucel 2004:1). The critical reception of Perec's works has within the last fifteen years acknowledged that indeed "Perec is one of the major

French writers of the twentieth century” (Motte and Poucel 2004:1), yet academic readers of his novels have mainly focused their attention on his autobiographical writings such as *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975), or on the novels *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978) and *La Disparition* as hypertexts removed from reality. Indeed, in this same issue of *Yale French Studies*, Jacques Roubaud rewrites the history of the group of writers and mathematicians called Oulipo in Perec's name, describing a pre- and post-Perecquian Oulipo (see Roubaud 2004:99), and on that occasion, Roubaud stresses that the weight of Perec's work consists of wordplay and representation, not of the materiality of the infra-ordinary, a concept that will be explained in the following. Roubaud continues this interpretation in regard to space in an essay from the new *Cahier Georges Perec* (see Roubaud “L'éternel et l'éphémère” (2015)), and this is also the case in the reception of Perec's breakthrough novel *Les Choses* (1965), placed by Perec in the sociological phase of his oeuvre, yet its reception has not focused on the material things directly indicated by the novel's title, but on the social and Marxist aspect of the “sociological”, as exemplified by Yvonne Goga's “*Les Choses – histoire d'un reception*” (2000). It is clear that the material aspects of this novel was overlooked because of the novel's affiliation with the sociological dimension of the Spatial Turn, written as it was with direct inspiration from both Roland Barthes and Henri Lefebvre, as David Bellos describes in *Georges Perec A Life in Words* (1993). Because of this affiliation, the novel – even when read by a new materialist such as Maurizia Boscagli in *Stuff Theory* (2014) – is read not for its representation of things and spaces, but for its representation of the social dimension of the changed consumer society in Paris around 1968, neglecting the actual presentation of materiality. In *L'œuvre de Georges Perec Réceptions et mythisation* (2000) Jean-Luc Joly launches six different tendencies that have dominated the reading of Perec's works, that is, first; “la personne même”, second; “la question du lecteur”, third, “œuvre universelle”, fourth; “d'hypertext”, fifth; “un métaphysicien de l'absence”, and sixth; “la préoccupation de totalité” (Joly 2000:41-43), which confirms that space and the infra-ordinary background have been undervalued.

What I would like to do is continue to challenge the narratological understanding of the novel as narrative and temporal and read *La Vie mode d'emploi*, the novel that Roubaud names the “Chef d’œuvre Oulipien” (Roubaud 2004:103), as a novel that tries to present the infra-ordinary spatial background; as a novel that not only is a hypertext, but a spatial text. Whereas Woolf’s novels activated the narrative aspect of the narratological discussion on space, Perec’s novel activates the descriptive aspects. In the following chapter, I will connect Perec’s thinking on space and the infra-ordinary in his essays with the way he presents space in this novel, thus challenging his own division of his work into four phases. Part of this endeavour is establishing a continuous line of thought from his early discussion on realism in the literary debate in the early sixties with Jean-Paul Sartre and Alain Robbe-Grillet (a debate that in the light of his involvement with Oulipo is often distinguished from the way that he later wrote his own novels), to his sociological investigations into the space of Paris, and to the final construction of his masterwork *La Vie mode d'emploi*.

My aim is thus twofold: On the one hand, I will further develop my theoretical narratological framework, as it with Perec is confronted with a description of space very different from that of Woolf. This will allow me – through the vocabulary of New Materialism and Heidegger – to read Perec against the dominant trend in the reception of his work, countering the common notion that what his language presents is only “Konstruktion und Negativität”, as Jürgen Ritte writes in *Das Sprachspiel der Moderne – Eine Studie zur Literaturästhetik Georges Perecs* (1992). Instead, it is my contention that those things and spaces that are so dominant in his work refer to something other than signs; the things are not, I will argue, “reine Zeichen” (36) as Ritte would have it. On the other hand, my argument stipulates that exactly because Perec thinks of both things and words as material, he not only lets the background emerge, but a different kind of background emerges than that of Woolf. Here, the background is not nature but things that are already “worked upon” (Boscagli 2014:4), as Boscagli notes in *Stuff Theory*. Even though Boscagli does not read for space in her study of *Les Choses*, she does add a new historical framework to the

understanding of materiality, placing it within the everyday, an element that is also directly at play in Perec's work. The concept of the everyday combines historical materialism's interest in the commodity with the volatile materiality of New Materialism. Boscagli describes it as follows:

The subject's experience of materiality in modernity is governed by reification – the subject's alienation from the sensual world, brought about because matter, once commodified, had its true nature, the labor involved in producing it, hidden. The new materialism throws open this monologic narrative, but it should not lose sight of the fact that stuff is already worked upon, hence aestheticized, matter, that exists inside the commodity circulation under capital (Boscagli 2014:4).

Although things as commodities are suspicious, as historical materialism would have them hide a secret repressive ideology, the reader is tasked with the challenge of not stagnating in this suspicion towards anything material as it alienates the human, but instead to reply with a new concept of things. Jane Bennett notes in this regard that the "hermeneutics of suspicion calls for the theorist to be on high alert for signs of the secret truth (a human will to power) below the false appearance of nonhuman agency" (Bennett 2010: xiv), and adds that this "[d]emystification tends to screen from view the vitality of matter and to reduce *political* agency to *human* agency"(xv). Boscagli's answer to this new conception of things as commodity beyond reification is her concept of *stuff*, as she notes: "By focusing on stuff we take the theorization of materiality into the everyday and into the open air of history. The word "stuff" appropriately expresses the everydayness of hybrid materiality" (Boscagli 2014:5).

What I intend to show in the following is that Perec provides another answer to reification: instead of turning the perspective away from the *thingness* of commodities as objects governed by a hidden ideology, Perec in fact portrays commodities as *things*. According to Perec, literature is not a closed system of signs, but must make the reader aware of these things in their infra-ordinary surroundings. Indeed in "Approches de quoi?" the concept of the

infra-ordinary is introduced within the framework of historical materialism, as it is a response to the way history is always told through large-scale events and fails to acknowledge the problems of the habitual:

Il faut qu'il y ait derrière l'événement un scandale, une fissure, un danger, comme si la vie ne devait se révéler qu'à travers le spectaculaire, comme si le parlant, le significatif était toujours anormal: cataclysmes naturels ou bouleversements historiques, conflits sociaux, scandales politiques... Dans notre précipitation à mesurer l'historique, le significatif, le révélateur, ne laissons pas de côté l'essentiel : le véritablement intolérable, le vraiment inadmissible : le scandale, ce n'est pas le grisou, c'est le travail dans les mines (Perec 1989:10).

His response to history's focus on the extraordinary is turning to the materiality of the everyday; in other words, he turns to that which makes up the habitual background:

Interroger l'habituel. Mais justement, nous y sommes habités. Nous ne l'interrogeons pas, il ne nous interroge pas, il semble ne pas faire problème, nous le vivons sans y penser, comme s'il ne véhiculait ni question ni réponse, comme s'il n'était porteur d'aucune information. Ce n'est même plus du conditionnement, c'est de l'anesthésie. Nous dormons notre vie d'un sommeil sans rêves. Mais où est notre corps? Où est notre espace? (Perec 1989: 11).

Noticing our space and our bodily being in the world is, according to Perec, framed within the context of political awareness, but the political awareness is not reduced to *human* agency. To Perec, political agency means awareness of materiality, towards “la briques, le béton, le verre” (12). Much in the way of Sartre's engaged literature, Perec intends for literature to make people react and become aware, not only of each other, but of the infra-ordinary background that constitutes our everyday lives. He thus accumulates and presents the infra-ordinary. As he writes in *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*; he intends to present the things “que l'on ne note généralement pas, ce qui ne se remarque pas, ce qui n'a pas d'importance” (Perec 1975:10).

### 1.3. A Debate about Descriptions of Reality – the French Literary Scene around 1960

As Rob Halpern remarks in his introduction to one of Perec's essays "Georges Perec isn't typically associated with anything we call "realism", but from 1958 to 1963 before joining the Oulipo, he belonged to a group of young intellectuals who called themselves *La Ligne générale*" (Halpern 2007:28). Halpern emphasizes the political, Marx-inspired dimension of the essays that Perec wrote for the group, and thus neglects the role that the description of things play in the essays, something I would like to remedy in the following with my reading of three of these essays: "Le Nouveau Roman et le refus du réel", "Pour une littérature réaliste", and "Engagement ou crise du langage", all written in 1962 and collected posthumously in *L.G. Une Aventure des années soixante* (1992). My reading will continue on the heels of the debate on descriptions of reality from my previous chapters, and continue to address the non-human-centred parts of reality that are often absent from discussions on the novel, that is, description and space. By doing so, I will also place Perec's thinking on thing and word, language and space in the context of 1960, partly by referring to Perec's own reflections as he positions himself between the engaged literature of Jean-Paul Sartre and the aestheticism of Alain Robbe-Grillet. What he advances is an engaged literature directed towards the infra-ordinary background, described in a concrete and literal language. As Woolf distanced herself in her essays from both the descriptive realism of the Edwardians, and the subjective Modernism of Joyce, so Perec places himself between committed literature and *l'art pour l'art*. In positioning himself between these two stances, his essays and their debate on Realism reveal Perec's double-sided interest in materialism; that is, both the materialism of language and the materialism of things and spaces. In his critique of especially Robbe-Grillet and the Nouveau Roman, the role of descriptions in the novel is viewed from a new angle as Perec enters into deliberations on the relationship between human and thing;

between anthropomorphism and the language used to convey non-human entities.

“Pour une littérature réaliste” begins by outlining the literary landscape on the Left in France since the liberation: “comme l’histoire de deux grands échecs: celle de la littérature «engagée», d’une part, celle du Nouveau Roman, d’autre part” (Perec 1992:47-48). Of the two failures, the first was Jean-Paul Sartre’s engaged literature, which dominated the literary scene during and after the war. Narrative literature was here regarded opposite poetry as an instrument for action. Language was supposed to be transparent, as it communicated and revealed one human being to another, as noted in the introduction. To write and speak was to act and influence society. In opposition to this committed literature, Alain Robbe-Grillet created the Nouveau Roman, which Perec regards as the second failure. Here, attention was turned away from humans and onto things and language. The formal aspect of the novel was its primary concern. As Robbe-Grillet accentuates in *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963), the novel should instead of showing “cet univers des «significations» (psychologiques, sociales, fonctionelles), il faudrait donc essayer de construire un monde plus solide, plus immédiat” (Robbe-Grillet 2013: 23). It is not my aim to expound in detail the theories of Sartre and Robbe-Grillet respectively, but instead through Perec’s reflections upon their two positions extract his thoughts on the novel and its relation to a material reality. But even from this very brief summary of the two positions, it might seem contradictory to a reading for space – and foreign to the interests that guided *Still life/still leaf* – that Perec in the end aligns himself more with Sartre than with Robbe-Grillet. As will become apparent in the following reading, this kinship with Sartre indicates that Perec is indeed not only concerned with language, wordplay, and representation, but sees himself as an heir to Realism. The question is: What does Perec mean by *realism*?

The problem with these two positions was for Perec that they created a literary milieu of irreconcilable oppositions. The two fractions have, as he stresses in “Engagement ou crise du langage”, fed upon one another as they were created in opposition to each other: “l’opposition entre engagement et esthétisme, même si elle es

tun *fait* de notre littérature, reste stérile. Elle es tun va-et-vient entre un échec et une faillite” (68), sustaining a false dichotomy between a political, committed, and useful literature on the one hand, and the artistic, non-committed beauty of *l’art pour l’art* on the other. Hence literature that wanted to be recognized as art must be non-committed: “La littérature, donc, est un art ; la littérature engagée n’est pas un art : l’art est ce qui n’est pas engagé” (70). By opposing itself so strongly to Sartre’s understanding of engaged literature, the Nouveau Roman made all other possible positions impossible, Percec notes:

elle ne pouvait se penser que comme combinaison formelle intrinsèque de mots, et non par exemple, comme expression globale ; elle ne pouvait se penser que comme technique, et non, par exemple, comme expérience ; que comme beauté et non comme valeur ; que comme gratuité et non comme perspective. Il ne restait qu’une alternative : ou bien la littérature politique, ou bien la forme (71).

In this pair of opposites, it was either form *or* politics; either the novel was engaged or else it was “comme si le Roman existait ! alors qu’il n’existe que des romans” (73). The novel was either turned towards reality, or else it existed in a vacuum. The Nouveau Roman occurred “comme un décrassage de la sensibilité, comme une propédeutique nécessaire à une description rénovée du monde” (74). But neither the cleansing of sensibility, nor the new description of the world pointed towards reality. Indeed, what Percec emphasizes in his critique of both the engaged novel and the Nouveau Roman is their denial of the real, their forgetting of the concrete. In “Le Nouveau Roman et le refus du réel”, he notes that “le refus du réel est, nous semble-t-il, la caractéristique fondamentale de la culture française contemporaine” (25) and continues in regard to the engaged novel:

Cette crise fut rendue particulièrement sensible par l’échec, à peu près inévitable, de ce que l’on appela la « littérature engagée » : à quelques rares exceptions près, aucune œuvre ne parvient à dépasser les structures conventionnelles qui les régissaient toutes : l’engagement se situait au niveau de bons sentiments et, par son schématisme arbitraire, n’avait aucune prise sur le concret (28).

The denial of the real has led to a forgetting of realism. It is a culmination of what he calls “L’humanisme occidental éclata en 1914 et cet éclatement devint l’image prépondérante d’une littérature qui ne sut bientôt plus déboucher que sur le cataclysme ou sur le silence” (63). The preoccupation with silence and the absurd that he also finds in the works of Woolf, Joyce, Mann, Svevo, and Kafka has with the Nouveau Roman been “élevé à la hauteur de critères le désespoir, l’absurde, le silence: l’homme dévoré, l’homme démoli” (64). He continues:

L’on ne saurait s’étonner, en l’occurrence, que la notion de réalisme ait été oubliée et surtout falsifiée : lors même qu’on le revendiquait, car il était, dans une certaine mesure, nécessaire d’objectiver la vision irrationnelle du monde que l’on voulait imposer, il s’agissait de naturalisme (un monde sans hiérarchie où tout venait s’inscrire dans un ordre éternel et immuable) ou de subjectivisme (pour Nathalie Sarraute, le réalisme c’est décrire ce que l’on *croit* être la réalité) (64).

Realism is forgotten, and the only realism left either inscribes everything into a higher abstract order, or turns it into pure subjectivism, thus forgetting what he later in “Approches de quoi?” names “notre corps, notre espace” (1989:11).

This recalls Woolf’s critique of the Edwardians and the Modernists, as they either only described reality in the abstract terms of an economic or social hierarchy, or perceived it through an individual consciousness. What is comparable in both of their critiques, even if Perec takes Woolf as the literary starting point for this forgetting of reality, is that they both point out the institutionalized oblivion of a more complex material reality – a materiality that is not only dependent on *human* agency, but takes other non-human entities into account as well. According to Perec “le réalisme est description de la réalité, mais décrire la réalité c’est plonger en elle et lui donner forme, c’est mettre à jour l’essence du monde: son mouvement, son histoire” (51). What Woolf demands of modernist literature is that it must provide a full image of reality, a reality that does not only include human beings, but things and surroundings as well, and that this reality must retain its movement

and vitality as it is transformed into a novel. For this to be possible, Woolf departs from the realistic conception of the novel with plot and characters, and introduces aspects of poetry and drama into the novelistic genre. Perec's idea of realism can be viewed in a similar light: Realism is to delve into reality and give it shape – a shape that does not forego the movement of reality. But whereas Woolf wants the novel to capture the world in its fragmental state by using a language that is poetic and discreet, Perec accentuates that the artwork must make a totality out of that which in the everyday seems chaotic; realism unmask and organizes the world, and it does so not by using poetic figurative language, but by transporting the literal language of the everyday into the novel:

Ce que nous appelons œuvre d'art, ce n'est justement pas cette création sans racines qu'est l'œuvre esthétiste, c'est, au contraire, l'expression la plus totale des réalités concrètes: si la littérature crée une œuvre d'art, c'est parce qu'elle ordonne le monde, c'est parce qu'elle le fait apparaître dans sa cohérence, c'est parce qu'elle dévoile, au-delà de son anarchie quotidienne, en intégrant et en dépassant les contingences qui en forment la trame immédiate, dans sa nécessité et dans son mouvement (51).

To reintroduce realism also means, as it did for Woolf, a new understanding of the novel: it means, as Perec stresses in "Le Nouveau Roman et le refus du réel" to "introduire dans le roman cette nouvelle dimension « a-romanesque » ou « anti-romanesque » d'ambiguïté, cette problématique qui signalait, encore informulée, l'impossibilité ressentie d'utiliser comme par le passé le langage" (28). In the final remarks of "Pour une littérature réaliste", Perec suggests that

un nouveau réalisme est aujourd'hui possible. Nous attendons de lui qu'il décrive notre réalité, sans rien perdre de sa richesse et de sa complexité, en prenant ses distances, vis-à-vis d'elle, en évitant les pièges qu'elle nous tend. Réalisme n'est pas un mot magique : il est un aboutissement ; toute situation décrite d'un bout à l'autre nous y mène ; il suffit de refuser les mythes, les explications trop faciles, les hasards, l'inexplicable (65).

A new realism must take the committed novel's engagement with reality a step further, as it accentuates not only its engagement with human society, but extends its perspective to include other non-human entities by stressing the richness and complexity of reality. It further borrows the concept of distance from the Nouveau Roman: the language with which Woolf presented space was marked by discreet signs and narrative elements; a language that was not self-aware. A new realism, on the other hand, describes reality through a self-aware language, and this kind of textual language upholds a distance between itself and the thing described. This does however not mean that language must be separated from the reality it describes to the extent of ending in the unexplainable, the way it did in the Nouveau Roman, according to Perec. Instead, the distance at work in a new realism should through use of the medium stress this very distance in the materialism of language. "Still life/still leaf" is an example of this, in that the foregrounding of language also points towards the things that it describes; the effect of *mise en abyme* and the exchanged words makes the reader pay extra attention to the unending list of items on the writing desk.

Through Perec's essayistic reflections on the Nouveau Roman – especially in its incarnation by Robbe-Grillet – it further becomes possible to address the question of description. My previous discussions on description in *Narratology* and on Woolf's critique of Edwardians are here further explicated, but whereas both the reception of Woolf's works and the narratologists undervalued description and always subordinated it to characters or plot, Perec's discussion of Robbe-Grillet is directed at descriptions and, further, at descriptions of things; that is, towards the literary form used to describe non-human entities.

Perec follows both Nathalie Sarraute's and Robbe-Grillet's interest into the real, including to some extent their rejection of the form of the novel, but he does not agree with their execution, as their novels end up further away from the concrete, he argues. Of Robbe-Grillet's description, Perec writes that he "confond la description d'un monde «déhumanisé» (l'expression est de Lucien Goldmann) avec la description déhumanisée du monde, un peu comme s'il confondait une description de l'ennui avec une

description ennuyeuse” (57). In the search for a descriptive language that can grasp the world “déhumanisé”, Robbe-Grillet ends up producing a dehumanized description. The problem is not so much what he is trying to attain, but how he gets there: In his search for a world that just *is*, he ends up with a description of a world that is indecipherable; when the human element is subtracted from the description of the world, the described world does no longer bears any resemblance to reality, because instead of describing a concrete and complex reality, it reduces it to artificial abstractions: ”mais c’est ce « *est* » qui ne signifie rien : privé de ses tenants et de ses aboutissants, il est indéchiffrable ; privée de perspective, la réalité reste chaotique, le rôle de l’homme est anéanti, l’absurde et l’angoisse triomphent” (58).

The novelistic approach of Robbe-Grillet and the Nouveau Roman seems to share many traits with my interest in paying more attention to non-human entities in the novel, yet Robbe-Grillet’s search for the real gives rise to a form of description that is even further removed from the reality that it was supposed to describe. As Perec notes:

la Volonté de trouver « autre chose », d’étudier le réel, d’affronter le concret, semble unanime. Mais rien ne se passe. Ou plutôt si: la disparition des conventions héritées de Stendhal et de Flaubert, d’Hemingway et de Dickens, ne débouche que sur l’apparition de conventions nouvelles. Simplement, au lieu de renvoyer à une réalité sclérosée, elles se réfèrent, fondamentalement, à irrationnel (33).

What Robbe-Grillet and his Nouveau Roman end up producing is a novel that describes space, but space as foreground, not as background. The very scientific conception of things as objects that Heidegger tried to amend reappears here incarnated in the novel. Heidegger pursued the creation of a vocabulary for the thing as background, turning the perspective for the experience of the thing away from the subject and onto the object, while still maintaining the relational aspect of the thing. In direct opposition to this pursuit, Robbe-Grillet subtracted the subject and isolated the thing into abstractions: the thing in his novels is thus no longer a *thing as*

*thing*, but *thing as object* – thus losing the complexity of the *thingness of things*. Robbe-Grillet may have turned the focus of the novel onto describing and including spaces, but in his search for a new novel, he reactivates the vocabulary of an abstract and scientific reality that Heidegger from a philosophical point of view has tried to do away with. Whereas Heidegger used literature, and especially poetry, to witness how the *thing things*, Robbe-Grillet objectifies the language of the novel in order to introduce objects into the genre of the novel, and as a result objectifying the novel as well. And: Language for Heidegger with its poetic quality of emergence showed space as a *gathering event* that relates human and thing; language for Robbe-Grillet also shows what he understands as *thing*, that is, not a *relational happening*, but a thing separable from humans. Robbe-Grillet thus tries to strip language of all human traces; to remove every anthropomorphic adjective; to minimize the distance between narrator and character, human language and the non-human thing. In Perce's words:

Il s'agit, en somme, et pour nous résumer, d'enlever à l'univers romanesque, aux objets, aux paysages, aux êtres, les petits adjectifs complaisamment anthropomorphiques et sentimentaux dont quatre siècles de mauvaise littérature les ont indécrottement qualifiés. Si le roman est description du monde, que celle-ci soit débarrassée de tous les masques dont nous l'avons affublée, qui nous protègent en nous empêchant de voir, qui sont autant d'œillères à notre lucidité (32).

Perce is here through Robbe-Grillet entering into that same discussion on anthropomorphism which has been re-actualized within recent years by New Materialism. Robbe-Grillet wants to challenge the literary tradition of anthropomorphism by introducing a new kind of description that does not mask objects, landscapes and lifeforms through human-centred adjectives. Perce takes issue not so much with the goal of making the world visible instead of meaningful, but with what Robbe-Grillet offers in its place:

Le tâche essentielle et première du romancier, s'il veut être honnête, est donné à voir le monde, au lieu de s'acharner à rendre signifiant. Or, ce qu'on peut décrire du monde, ce sont les choses,

parce qu'elles « sont là » [...] Et, de ces choses, on ne peut décrire que la surface « nette, lisse, intacte ... sans éclat louche, ni transparence ». C'est « le cœur romantique de choses » qu'il faut refuser et, en face de cette apparence d'ascétisme littéraire, la critique a parlé d'une démarche « hygiénique », « chirurgicale » (34).

In his pursuit of making the world visible, Robbe-Grillet replaces anthropomorphic adjectives with an exact, abstract, and thus artificial description. Paraphrasing him, Perec remarks:

Je vous décris la surface des choses – dit-il en substance – car (ou donc) on ne peut connaître que la surface des choses, et elle seulement. Le monde n'est que ce qu'on en voit. Il n'a pas de profondeur. Il est impénétrable. Si je lui téés, c'est que finalement, on ne peut lui en donner aucune. Car le monde ne signifie rien : « il est, tout simplement » (34).

This interest in the surface of things resembles Casey's understanding of description; the problem with this strict visual focus is that not only does it render things as objects – as something that humans face – but furthermore it excludes the other senses. As Perec notes, Robbe-Grillet

pretend avoir les « yeux libres » : sa « lucidité » est une mise entre parenthèses du monde et la réalité qu' il nous donne à voir est une réalité gratuite, coupée de tout lien social, hors de l'histoire, hors du temps même. Nulle évolution : le monde est statique. C'est, en somme, un monde non dialectique, une conception schizophrénique de la réalité, fondée sur une dichotomie fondamentale entre l'homme et les choses (35).

Perec criticizes this as it offers no opportunity for change, or, in his political vocabulary, for revolution. Additionally, as my previous discussion on description and narration has shown, things and spaces that are described in this way end up enforcing the dichotomy between static description and dynamic narration, as space is described as a stable setting.

Just as our understanding of Woolf's critique of Arnold Bennett's mode of description was helped by an example from his novel, so an example of Robbe-Grillet's description may illuminate

Perec's critique. Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie* (1957) begins with a description of the terrace in front of the house:

Maintenant l'ombre du pilier – le pilier qui soutient l'angle sud-ouest du toit – divise en deux parties égales l'angle correspondant de la terrasse. Cette terrasse est une large galerie couverte, entourant la maison sur trois de ses côtes. Comme sa largeur est la même dans la portion médiane et dans les branches latérales, le trait d'ombre projeté par le pilier arrive exactement au coin de la maison ; mais il s'arrête là, car seules les dalles de la terrasse sont atteintes par le soleil, qui se trouve encore trop haut dans le ciel (Robbe-Grillet 1957:9).

This is a still life of a terrace; it describes how the terrace looked “maintenant”, in a specific moment of time. *Still life* here literally means that nothing moves: the shadow of the sun that throws its rays upon the terrace is not – as it was by Woolf – described as an event, indeed it almost seems as if Robbe-Grillet demonstratively wants to break off all activity intrinsic to non-human entities, as the rays “l'arrête là”. This is a static description of a space, stripped of adjectives except those which describe the geometrical measures: such as “large, haut”. It strives to give an exact description; yet the question is if this is closer to reality? Perec argues that Robbe-Grillet does not render a habitual space, and that the space he describes is without perspective; that it is not an experienced space but an artificial space. As Perec observes, to describe a space without any characters present does not have to result in a dehumanized description.

In “Engagement ou crise du langage”, Perec approached the question of description from another angle. He here proposes to address the dichotomic positions of committed and non-committed literature within a larger framework. He suggests moving beyond Robbe-Grillet's technical and formal approach to language, while also not (like Sartre) being indifferent to form, as he notes that “[c]e cadre existe : 'c'est la crise du langage [...] [e]lle surgit lorsque la tradition, la routine, l'habitude chassent petit à petit la spontanéité, l'authenticité, la naïveté, la fraîcheur, qui font tout le prix de l'expression d'un sentiment” (75). According to Perec, the answer to this crisis is not to be indifferent to language, nor replacing its

imagery with a technical language, but to cultivate language. Continuing to question descriptions, he wonders: "[on] ne dit pas « un ciel constellé » [...] Et comment le ciel, qui n'est plus constellé, peut-il encore être étoilé?" (75-76). That is, just because Robbe-Grillet has turned description into an ordered object, it does not follow that the things of the world stop being things, unordered and manifold. The answer for Perec is to turn this dichotomy into an advantage. To the same extent that Heidegger wanted to show the usefulness of things even when they were not in use, as to let the *thingness of things* appear, so Perec wants to let the usefulness of language emerge. He proposes a cultivation of the materiality of language, to let the *language that languages* appear, to stay within the vocabulary of Heidegger, as he himself notes: "[s]i le langage est dérision, détournons-le plus encore, délibérément, de son sens, écrivons entre les lignes, faisons-en trop ; réintégrons les proverbes, les on-dit, les mots éculés, jouons d'audace" (76-77). Sartre's answer to this crisis of language was the engaged novel, while Barthes' and Robbe-Grillet's was a kind of blank writing, a surgical operation that tried to neutralize language, but ended up distorting the very thing they wanted to present. Perec notes that the latter made "un monde mal déchiffré à un monde indéchiffrable ; d'un monde à découvrir à un monde indécouvrable" (83), and Perec would rather align himself with Sartre than with creating a language that does not feel obliged to reality. As Rob Halpern notes in "Beyond the Terms of Commitment: Georges Perec's Critique of the literary Field, circa 1960" (2009), Perec places himself between "the incompatible literary tendencies in France circa 1960" (Halpern 2009:109). He would rather as Sartre 'd'appeler un chat un chat' (83), than subscribe to an understanding of language that withdraws from the world in abstractions. As Perec notes towards the end of "Engagement ou crise du langage", Sartre was wrong to presuppose a shared consciousness between reader and writer, as it assumed "cette communication directe, cette absence totale de médiation" (83), and, turning towards the "Verfremdungseffekt" of Bertolt Brecht, Perec instead concludes "Le réalisme n'a jamais été la brutale restitution du réel [...] Mais Brecht pris toujours soin de rappeler le théâtre" (84). The new realism that Perec in the early

essays wanted to introduce was a realism based on the concrete; the concreteness of language and the concreteness of everyday world. He thus aligns himself with Sartre's engaged literature, as he intends for literature to make people react and become aware, not only in a social context but in a material manner as well, thus agreeing with Robbe-Grillet's reinvention of the novel as a genre that may also include and portray non-human things. Perec uses the materiality of language to foreground the complexity of the infra-ordinary background.

#### 1.4. The Infra-ordinary Background

In the short text "Approches de quoi?" (1973), the question of realism and the concrete is turned into a question of what Perec calls "l'infra-ordinaire" (1989:11). The *infra-ordinary* is the opposite of the extra-ordinary, it is "le banal, le quotidien, l'évident, le commun, l'ordinaire [...], le bruit de fond, l'habituel" (11). This opposition between the infra-ordinary and the extra-ordinary marks a stylistic turn in his essays. From the heated intellectual debate that the essays in *La Ligne Générale* participated in, with its revolt against both Sartre and Robbe-Grillet, Perec's essays in the 1970s turn away from what John Sturrock has called "the megaphone role of a Paris intellectual" (Sturrock 1999:xiii) and towards the things that surround him in his everyday life. From the more academic poetological essays discussing the role of the novel after 1945, the essays of the 1970s take the shape of short personal inquiries, thus exchanging the polemical extra-ordinary extrovert form with infra-ordinary phenomenological inquiries. The path for this changed form is laid out in "Approches de quoi?" and continued in a dozen of other essays posthumously collected in *Penser/classer* (1985) and *l'infra-ordinaire* (1989). Despite its brevity, this text engages in a discussion about event, description, and background, and it does so in ways that sum up and reactivate the thoughts discussed in all three of my previous chapters.

His interest in the infra-ordinary places Perec in a different context than the strictly literary discussions that he engaged in with his essays concerning realism, namely within historical materialism

and the contemporary debate about the everyday, while still continuing the line of thought concerning descriptions. In “Attending to the everyday: Blanchot, Lefebvre, Certeau, Perce” (2000), Michael Sheringham aligns Perce with Henri Lefebvre, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel de Certeau in a common project trying to grasp the everyday. The problem that the everyday poses to all of these writers is according to Sheringham that:

The everyday is both superficial and profound, strange and familiar, insignificant and fundamental, outside praxis yet harbinger of anarchic energies. “Le quotidien” is both too much with us and too far away from us: we are both ‘*enfoncé dans*’, and ‘*privé de* [la quotidienneté]’. We are regulated by it, but at the same time it is ‘*ce qui échappe à loi*’. We can’t see it, and yet it is ‘*toujours déjà là*’ (Sheringham 2000:188).

The problem of representing the everyday that Sheringham here mentions is similar to the problem raised by my discussion on background. In short, it concerns how to let that which is so much with us appear, without it losing its character of being *with us* and not *in front of us*. The struggles of these theorists mirror the problems of the new materialists in regard to the background: it is too close to be seen; it is that which is always there, but if it is removed from this closeness, it loses its everydayness and stops being the everyday, just like the background that loses its backgroundedness if it is foregrounded. What sets Perce apart from these thinkers of the everyday, and places him along the line of Heidegger’s late thinking on the thing, is his distinct eye for things and their representation in the *thingness of words*. Also opposite the neglected interest into commodities as things in historical materialism, Perce presents with his concept of the infra-ordinary a way to turn the political perspective onto the materiality of things. The infra-ordinary is thus not only in opposition to the extra-ordinary, it also provides the question of the everyday with a material aspect. The infra-ordinary is not just the ordinary: it is the overlooked spatial background of the ordinary. It is one thing to always look for events that transgress the ordinary by being extraordinary; another is to look for that which constitutes our

habitual existence. The *infra* in infra-ordinary means to let the background of our everyday actions appear.

In the opening lines of “Approches de quoi?”, Perec questions the dominant interest into everything extra-ordinary:

Ce qui nous parle, me semble-t-il, c’est toujours l’événement,  
l’insolite, l’extra-ordinaire : cinq colonnes à la une, grosse  
manchettes. Les trains ne se mettent à exister que lorsqu’ils  
déraillent, et plus il y a de voyageurs morts, plus les trains existent  
(9).

The extra-ordinary is that which attracts attention. It is only when things break down; when a catastrophe occurs that we begin to pay attention to the infra-ordinary upon which the extra-ordinary is based. This analysis of fracture bears a strong resemblance to Heidegger’s analysis of the *Zeng*. Bearing Heidegger’s critique of the forgetting of things in our everyday encounter with them in mind, what Perec here is pursuing could be said to be the thing in use when it is not broken; the train, as we for instance encounter it every day on our way to work, not when it is derailed. The infra-ordinary can thus be said to be the *materiality of use*, focusing on the use and not the subject using it. With this concept, Perec also shows how the thing does not have to be broken before it can appear as thing, as Heidegger – contrary to Bill Brown’s search for broken things in Woolf’s short story– depicted in his understanding of the artwork. To focus on the infra-ordinary means to focus on the miniature *eventness* of the everyday; to render the background for “ce qui se passe chaque jour et qui revient chaque jour” (11). In order to do this, Perec suggests to “Décrivez vous rue. Décrivez-en une autre. Comparez” (12). To let the backgrounded space of the ordinary habitual experience appear is thus a question of language, it is a question of:

Comment parler de ces « choses communes », comment les  
traquer plutôt, comment les débusquer, les arracher à la gangue  
dans laquelle elles restent engluées, comment leur donner un sens,  
une langue: qu’elles parlent enfin de ce qui est, de ce que nous  
sommes (11).

To question the common things is to let the background emerge *as background*. It means to see the *background as it backgrounds*, to watch what happens in the background when nothing really happens. Unlike the extra-ordinary, which *foregrounds the background* in an exceptional situation and thus changes it into something else, the infra-ordinary *foregrounds the background as background*. And where the extra-ordinary transforms the background into a setting for an event, the background of the infra-ordinary is itself turned into an event.

The contrast between the extra-ordinary and the infra-ordinary recalls the narratological focus on plot in terms of events, which caused the descriptive spatial parts of the novels to be forgotten, focusing as it did on situations that changed the lives of the characters. A conflict that was repeated in the reception of the interludes in Woolf's novel, as the extra-ordinary events of the life and death of the characters in the brackets took precedence over the spatial infra-ordinary events of the wind and the house. Seen in this light, it is noteworthy that Perec's answer to how we may come to pay more attention to the infra-ordinary is indeed to describe:

Ce qu'il s'agit d'interroger, c'est la brique, le béton, le verre, nos manières de table, nos ustensiles, nos outils, nos emplois du temps, nos rythmes. Interroger ce qui semble avoir cessé à jamais de nous étonner. Nous vivons, certes, nous respirons, certes ; nous marchons, nous ouvrons de portes, nous descendrons des escalier, nous nous asseyons à une table pour manger, nous nous couchons dans un lit pour dormir. Comment? Où? Quand? Pourquoi?" (12).

But *describing* means something other to Perec than it did to both Heidegger and Woolf. Whereas Heidegger introduced the concept of *Gelassenheit* as a way that poetic language lets the thing emerge *as thing* as it puts the thing forth as a *letting-linger* – thus accentuating a discreet quality of language that also Woolf used – Perec has exchanged the discreetness of language with a focus directed towards an overload of words that defines and describes. To Perec, *describing* is an attempt to investigate space and things through words; a way of engaging reality through language. It is an exercise that unlike Heidegger's non-demanding attitude of *Gelassenheit*, tries

to use language as a tool. Whereas the will is suspended in the attitude of *Gelassenheit*, Perec's attempt has a distinct intentionality. Both Heidegger and Perec seek to give things a voice: In Heidegger's reading, the thing emerged as the stone in the poem spoke through the use of semicolon. The bricks in Perec's works are given a voice through lists and inventories. To let the infra-ordinary appear means to "faire l'inventaire de vos poches, de votre sac. Interrogez-vous sur la provenance, l'usage et le devenir de chacun des objets que vous en retirez" (12).

Perec does this in *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*. It is an account of three days spent in the square Saint Sulpice in Paris from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1974, describing the infra-ordinary spatial background of this place. As he notes in the foreword:

Mon propos dans les pages qui suivent a plutôt été de décrire le reste : ce que l'on ne note généralement pas, ce qui ne se remarque pas, ce qui n'a pas d'importance : ce qui se passe quand il ne se passe rien, sinon du temps, des gens, des voitures et des nuages (Perec 1975:10).

Over the course of fifty pages, he uses language to experience space, trying to minimize that same distance that he criticized the language of Robbe-Grillet for maintaining. Language becomes a sort of vehicle, then; serving both as the fracture that makes the otherwise hidden infra-ordinary background emerge, and also as the element of distance. Indeed, language and space are here intermingled in such a way that the distance needed to present the infra-ordinary as the infra-ordinary is lost. Language thus becomes infra-ordinary and the infra-ordinary becomes language. As Jürgen Hasse writes about Perec's attempt in "Ein apfelgrüner 2CV." Über die Schwierigkeiten, einen Ort zu beschreiben" (2011): "So gilt der Versuch, einen Platz zu beschreiben, weniger der Sache des Platzes, als Vielmehr der Sache des Versuchs, etwas zu beschreiben" (Hasse 2011:1). The attempt to exhaustively describe a specific place is not only directed towards the object of description, Saint-Sulpice; instead the description itself becomes the object of the attempt. This might be considered a step in the

direction of constructivism, and away from the reality he tries to portray, but to Percec, this interchange between language and space is the very reason that spaces and things comes to form such a momentous part of his work. The small book thus prefigures the descriptive technique that Percec later refines and further develops in his novels, and what he fails to achieve in this attempt, succeeds in *La Vie mode d'emploi*, as will be explained in the following analysis.

With this practice he is placing himself in methodological affiliation with the theoreticians of the everyday, who “combine brain-work with leg-work, grasping the everydayness at the level of movements, gestures, practices” (Sheringham 2000:187). Percec indeed seems to pre-empt Henri Lefebvres rhythm analyst from *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (1992) who:

listen[s] to the world, and above all to what are disdainfully called noises, which are said without meaning and to *murmurs* [rumeurs], full of meaning – and finally he will listen to silences. [...] For him nothing is immobile. He hears the wind, the rain, storms; but if he considers a stone, a wall, a trunk, he understands their slowness, their interminable rhythm. This *object* is not inert, time is not set aside for the *subject*. It is only slow in relation to our time, to our body, the measure of rhythms (Lefebvre 2010:19-20).

Percec is a rhythm analyst in *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, but he is also the poet that Lefebvre both aligns and distances the rhythm analyst with and from: “Like the poet, the rhythm analyst performs a verbal action, which has an *aesthetic* import. The poet concerns himself above all with words, the verbal. Whereas the rhythm analyst concerns himself with temporalities and their relations within wholes” (24). Percec listens to the world, but he is writing it down as he listens. His form of description is thus close to Casey’s idea of description: it is a way of making that which is already there visible by presenting it. Like Casey, he is interested in the surface of things; Casey notes that there is “a certain essential superficiality of description: a remaining and resting on the surface of things, at their contours and movements, their colours and textures, without seeking what is latent or withheld from view” (Casey 1981:187). Percec does seem to succeed in producing what Casey distills from Proust and Merleau-Ponty; mixing traits from

phenomenology with fiction. Consequently, description is far removed from its ornamental and representational status and closer to a phenomenological investigation. This objective intention aligns Perec with Heidegger in the sense that the latter's phenomenology similarly understands literature as a way to witness the thing in its *thingness*. Their difference lies in that while Perec does take his point of departure in literature, he uses it here as a tool to get closer to the thing. The allusive character that Heidegger and Woolf ascribe to spaces, things, and language is by Perec substituted by grasping the exact contours of spaces, things, and language their visible surfaces, and in this he is sharing a common goal with Robbe-Grillet.

So he begins *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* with: an "Esquisse d'un inventaire de quelques-unes des choses strictement visible" (10). The attempt's insistence on exactness is emphasized by the fact that he for each day and for each new position makes a note about the date, time, weather, and location of his observations. At first, the attempt resembles a three-day diary with still life pictures from different cafés around Saint-Sulpice. The author seemingly aligns the idea of description with that of a still life, as he lists what he sees:

Des lettres de l'alphabet, des mots: «KLM» (sur la pochette d'un promeneur), un «P» majuscule qui signifie «parking»; «Hôtel Récamier», «St-Raphäel», «l'épargne à la dérive» [...]  
 "Des Symbols conventionels", "des chiffres: 86 (au sommet d'un autobus de la ligne n° 86, surmontant l'indication du lieu où il se rend: Saint-Germain-des-Près) [...]  
 Des slogans fugitifs: « De l'autobus, je regarde Paris»  
 De la terre: du gravier tassé et du sable.  
 De la pierre: la bordure de trottoirs, une fontaine, une église, des maison...  
 De l'asphalte  
 Des arbres (feuillus, souvent jaunissants)  
 Un morceau assez grand de ciel (peut-être 1/6<sup>e</sup> de mon champ visuel) (11).

The listing continues; the next list is of "Trajectoires" (12) which mainly consists of buses leaving and arriving at the square: "Le 96 va à la gare Montparnasse, Le 84 va à la Porte de Champerret" (12),

but as the description continues over the course of the following two days, the headlines disappear and the buses that first started out as a separate list keep reappearing, thus creating a rhythm that goes far beyond the list and the idea of still life. Consequently, what at first seemed like a descriptive still life of the square turns out to have its own rhythm and its own narrative; one that also draws him, the observer, into the description, as he remarks: “Lassitude des yeux. Lassitude des mots” (25). The weariness that he feels has also left its mark on the form: immediately prior to this quote, description shifts from the present tense – up until this point the book has been in the present tense – to the past tense as he sums up a visit to another café. Instead of describing it while he was there, he sums up in general terms what he saw: “Plus tard, je suis allé qu tabac Saint-Sulpice. [...] J’ai revu autobus, des taxis, des voitures particulières, des cars de touristes, des camions et des camionnettes, des vélos..] (24). The rhythm of nothing really happening except the infra-ordinary has affected the observer and his powers of description, which causes the particularity of the infra-ordinary space to disappear: the veil of habit makes him lose sight of the *thingness of things*. The familiar transparency of the infra-ordinary that he criticized in “Approches de quoi?” has in this text sneaked up on him. The language used to foreground the infra-ordinary has itself become infra-ordinary; habit has forced itself way into the description, causing the distance needed to foreground the infra-ordinary as infra-ordinary to disappear.

The failed attempt to present the infra-ordinary is particularly apparent in regard to the buses: To list the buses is first of all not to draw the background as background into the foreground; it is to focus on the background as ordinary and not as infra-ordinary. By describing the bus as it appears to its everyday user, Perce loses its infra-ordinariness. What Perce here describes is not the *background as background*, not the materiality of the bus, nor, as Casey would have it, description dwelling on surface, on colour, form, nor distinct movement, but described as it in its everyday use: as a means for transportation, that is, in its transparent use, as a number going somewhere. When it is described as nothing more than its transparent use, the bus itself ends up disappearing from the

description. What starts out as “le 63 va à la Porte de la Muette” (14), is as it reappears described as “un 63 passe” (16) and then reduced to “un 63” (18), until the observer on the second day notes: “Des autobus passent. Je m’en désintéresse complètement” (34). The description of the buses changes from recounting their movements and directions, to just stating their movements, until the only thing left is their number. The thing in use has escaped Perec’s descriptive attempt to bring it into focus, but this is not all the buses do in his description. He himself asks the question: “(pourquoi compter les autobus? sans doute parce qu’ils sont reconnaissables et réguliers: ils découpent le temps, ils rythment le bruit de fond ; à la limite ils sont prévisibles” (28). Yet the buses are not just numbers, they also create a rhythm as they reappear according to a regulated system, thus instigating a repetitive pace upon the rest that is “aléatoire, improbable, anarchique” (28). In the observer’s experience of the square, they constitute the fracture needed in order to record the background noise. After he has lost interest in them, he paraphrases Proust in the search for a new difference: “*À la recherche d’une différence*” (35). Perec here demonstrates that the infra-ordinary background is not one unified thing; it too consists of differences. He observes in regard to a parked car:

ne pas voir les seules déchirures, mais le tissu (mais comment voir le tissu si ce sont seulement les déchirures qui le font apparaître: personne ne voit jamais passer les autobus, sauf s’il en attend un, ou s’il attend quelqu’un qui va descendre (38-39).

It is the “tissue” and “le bruit de fond” that Perec is after in recording the buses in their use and not separate from it. He is careful not to let language provide another view of the thing than that which is available to passengers on the bus. His form of descriptive language is not a new, different language that lets the materiality of the thing emerge, as it was for Woolf; instead he presents the bus from the user’s point of view, in its use, and when they lose sight of it, so does he. In the attempt to *foreground the infra-ordinary as infra-ordinary*, language itself becomes infra-ordinary, that is, it is reduced to only depicting numbers. The accustomed attitude

towards the buses is underlined by the fact that the indefinite pronouns that up until the last day has registered the number on the buses, “un 63” (17), on the last day are exchanged with definite pronouns; “le 63, le 96”(48), “le 96” (49), “le 63, le 96, le 96, le 63” (50). As the background repeatedly is described, it loses its distinctiveness, even if it the distinctiveness only consisted of movements and directions. Consequently, Perec has on a textual level imitated the everyday habitual ignorance in regard to infra-ordinary surroundings. He has created a textual form that expresses the infra-ordinary, as the text too becomes infra-ordinary.

The form shows an exchange between language and reality, but it also shows an interchange between the observer and the observed that adds a narrative element into the otherwise very descriptive text. The observer’s decreasing interest in describing the buses has an inherent narrative element, even if the narrativity only appears through numbers and pronouns and not through temporal verbs. Indirectly present in the listing of the buses is a narrative of perceiving the infra-ordinary, of the very difficulties in showing the background as background. Perec thus provides another angle on Morton’s *ecomimesis*. The authenticating “shared virtual present time of reading and narrating” (Morton 2009:32) that Morton favours to evoke the “situatedness” (32) of the written text is employed quite literally in Perec’ text. Perec tries to evoke the infra-ordinary background of Saint Sulpice, but in the attempt to exhaustingly describe what he sees, the text ends up being so situated that it draws itself back from representation, underlined by the fact that the description of the last two days are distinctively shorter than the first. Instead of Morton’s maximizing paradox of “the more I try to show you what lies beyond this page, the more of a page I have” (30), Perec uses the opposite technique: the more he tries to describe what he sees, the more he becomes accustomed to the background; the less he sees, and the less he describes. The text thus ends in the minimal esoteric description: “Quatre enfants. Un chien. Un petit rayon de soleil. Le 96. Il est deux heures” (50).

Perec in this text tried to use language as a tool to capture that which escapes the user of the square, and this text has posthumously left a mark on the real space of Saint-Sulpice, as the

square from 2012 has gotten a second name: “Plac d G org s P r c”, (the letter “e” missing as it did in his novel *La Disparition*, composed entirely without using the letter e):



Photo: Marlene Karlsson Marcussen

Significantly, the sign is placed at the unimportant, infra-ordinary space under the sunblind of the café de la Mairie, and not, as the official sign of the square, high up on the wall. It is thus only likely to be noticed by those who assume Perec’s infra-ordinary attitude to the square. Where the focus on the infra-ordinary space leaves its mark on language, causing it to come to a descriptive halt, descriptive language too has left its mark on the space, causing the user of it to halt in wonder of the missing letters on the sign. With this text, the engagement of literature moves a step closer to reality: it can by no means be said to be an enclosed system of signs, as descriptive language is here itself caught up in reality, in the infra-ordinary.

## 2. A Spatial reading of *La Vie mode d'emploi*

### 2.1. *Cahier des charges de La Vie mode d'emploi* and the Oulipo

So far I have addressed Perec's work from two different angles: first, via his engagement in the contemporary discussion about the novel's description of and relation to reality, which evolved around the group *La Ligne générale*, and, second, through his interest into the infra-ordinary, expressed in the journal *Cause commune*. Both modes of writing can be called attempts to find a new way for literature to be engaged. What I have so far drawn from these two different positions is Perec's interest in the close relationship between literature, language, and material reality; an interest that in the reception of his work most often is viewed in opposition to his involvement with the Oulipo. When in "Notes sur ce que je cherche" (1978), written the same year that *La Vie mode d'emploi* was published, Perec divides his own work into four categories, and his novels are categorized under the third and fourth interests; the ludic and the romanesque, both of which are tied his involvement with the Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*), thus connecting the novels and the Oulipo closely. The Oulipo was founded in 1960 by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau. Roubaud describes the aim of the group as: "the research, the discovery, and the invention of **constraints** for the composition of literary texts. [...] An *Oulipian author* is one who *writes under constraints*" (Roubaud 2004:100). What Roubaud accentuates is not literature's relation to reality, but its experiments with language – in opposition to the contention of my two previous chapters on Perec's work. Perec entered the group in 1967, and in 1969 he published his Oulipian novel *La Disparition* (1969). It is a novel written with the constraint of leaving the letter "e" out entirely, which generates the story of Anton Vowl who, like the "e", has gone missing. To Roubaud, this novel marked the beginning of what he calls the Perecquian period of Oulipo. The aim for the Oulipo is to write literature under constraints to show "Potentiality" (Roubaud 100) and the work that best captures potentiality is according to Roubaud *La Vie mode d'emploi*, which makes it "a *Chef-d'œuvre Oulipien*" (104). According to

Roubaud, this is evident in the *Cahier des charges de La Vie mode d'emploi* (1993), Perec's manuscripts, which were posthumously published by Hans Hartje, Bernard Magné, and Jacques Neefs. Roubaud argues that the manuscripts prove how Perec constructed his novel according to constraints, as he used different mathematical structures such as: "the orthogonal bi-square of order 10, the polygraphy of the knight and the pseudo-queen of order 10" (Roubaud 2004:104). To him, the manuscript's lists and structures are a mark of the Oulipian potentiality actualized in the novel.

This is however not all; the manuscripts also bear witness to a keen interest into material things, an interest which continues Perec's infra-ordinary inquiries. I would argue that in the very epicentre of the Oulipian experiments with language, language goes beyond its self-referentiality and points to something outside of itself. In the document that attests the process of the workshop for potential literature we also find an elaborate list of things. Much in the way that Woolf's manuscripts indicated that she did consider space an important aspect of her novels, so do Perec's manuscripts show not only just how spatial the novel is (an obvious point, since it is about an apartment building), but also how the many lists that the manuscript contains are not just rhetorical tools, but are indeed lists that depict the infra-ordinary spatial background.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	position	agenouillé	descendre ou accroupi	à plat ventre	assis	debout	monter ou + haut que le sol	entrer	sortir	couché sur le dos	un bras en l'air
	activité	peindre	entretien	toilette	érotique	classement ranger	se servir d'un plan	réparer	lire ou écrire	tenir un morceau de bois	manger
1	citation 2	Flaubert	Stendhal	Proust	Kafka	Leiris	Roussel	Queneau	Verne	Borges	Mathews
		Mann	Nabokov	Roubaud	Burton	Rabelais	Freud	Stendhal	Joyce	Lowry	Calvino
2	nombre rôle	1	2	3	4	5	+5	1	2	3	0
	3 <sup>e</sup> secteur	OCCUPANT	OCCUPANT	OCCUPANT	démarcheur	ouvrier	autre (enquêteur, factus)	client	fournisseur	domestique	ami
2	ressort ?	Fait divers	Biblio.	article diction. Règlements	Faire-part	recette cuisine	prop. pharmacie	agendas calendriers	programme	dictionnaire règlements	modèles d'emploi guide valencec
		posséder une chaise revenir de voyage	recevoir une lecture	établir une filtration	apprêt du gain	baigner dans la nostalgie	faire un rêve	"créer"	résoudre une énigme	revenir de voyage poursuivre une chimère	oudir une vengeance
3	MURS	peinture mate	tissu ou de jute autre	boiseries	lège	panneaux métal	papier uni ou géométrique	peinture brillante	toile de Jouy	papier à motifs	cuir ou vinyyle
	SOLS	parquet à l'anglaise	p. à point de Hongrie	p. à bitons rompus	p. mosaïque ou compartiments	carrelage rectangul.	moquette	tapis de laine ou soie	lino	tomettes	tapis de corde sisal, raffia
3	époque	ANTIQUITE	MOYEN-AGE	RENAISSANCE	17 <sup>e</sup>	18 <sup>e</sup>	Révolution et Empire	19 <sup>e</sup>	→ 39	39-45	l'après-guerre
	lieu style	Allemagne	Italie	Gde-Bretagne	Espagne	Russie, URSS	France-Union	Extrême-Orient	Afrique du Nord	Amérique du Sud	Moyen-Orient
4	meubles	chinois	contemporain	Louis XV Louis XVI	Empire	Regency bateau etc...	Napoléon III	Louis XIII	"rustique"	"camping"	modern style 1900, nouille
	longueur DIVERS	≤ quelques lignes	~ 1 p. argent (billers)	~ 2 p. miliaire	~ 3 p. flamme	~ 4 p.	~ 5 p. Institutions	~ 6 p. clergé	~ 8 p. couteau	~ 10 p. Physiologie 1860	12 + p. littérature danoise
5	âge & sexe animaux	Femme 30/35-60	Homme 30/35-60	vieillard ♂	vieillard ♀	jeune femme 18 - 30/35	jeune homme 18-30/35	♂ → 17 ans	♀ → 17 ans	jeune enfant → 10 ans	nouveau-né → 1 an
	Vêtements	costume, ensemble	manteau	veste d'intérieur	Pantalon ou jupe	gilet	chemise...	chandail...	Uniforme Impermeable	Impémeable Uniforme	blouson...
6	Tissus (nature)	Uni	à rayures	à pois	à carreaux	écossais	patchwork	à ramages	à fleurs	imprimé, à motifs	brodé
	Tissus (matière)	Soie 1	laine 2	cashmere 3	flanelle 4 ou feutre	nylon 5	cuir 6	fil 7	coton 8	velours 9	lin 0
6	Couleurs	blanc	vert	brun	noir	jaune	orange	gris	rouge	violet	bleu ciel
	Accessoires	chapeau	cravate, foulard	écharpe, cache-col	gants	chaussures	mouchoirs	brerelles	ceintures	caléçons sous-vêtements	bas et chaussettes
7	bijoux	collier	bague	bracelet	canne	lunettes	médailles décorations	montre	sac à main briquet	boisnet sac à main	épingles de crav. broche
	Lectures	Quotidien	roman, essai	hebdo	lettre	3 <sup>e</sup> secteur	revue	policier, SF	rapport technique ou livre de classe	livre d'art	porno
7	Musiques	ancienne	classique	romantique	serielle	contemporaine	jazz	pop et folk	rengaines tubes	militaires	Opéras
	Tableaux	Arnolfini	S Jérôme	Ambassadeurs	Chute d'Icare	Mémoires	Leson d'Anatomie La Tempête	Metzys	Carpaccio	Dieges Bosch	Beugim Chardin
8	Livres	10 petits nègres	Disparition	Cristal qui sonne	Moby Dick	Conversions	Pierrot	100 ans de solitude	Hamlet	Le Graal	Ubu
	BOISSONS nourriture	Eau Pain	Vin charcuteries	Alcool	Bière, cidre	Thé	Café	Infusion	jus de fruits	lait	coca etc...
8	Peutis meubles	Pendules horloges	cendriers	Oufs, crudités, salades	Viandes, abats Gibier	Poissons et crustacés	Légumes, Féculents	fromages	fruits	gâteaux sucreries	zakouskis
	Jeux et jouets	Cartes	dés cuselets	jeu domino	Solitaire	Go, échecs, dames	Jaquet	dominos mont croisés	mont-croisés puzzle	automates	roupies, bilboquets
9	Sentiments	Indifférence	joie	Douleur	ennui	colère	angoisse	étonnement	haine	amour	ambition
	Peintures	mur nu	dessin	gravure	aquarelle gouache	Tableau	reproduction	Cartes et Plan	photos	affiches	cartes postales
9	SURFACES	caré	rectangle	triangle	hexagone	octogone	en étoile Trapèze	rond	ovale	en losange	en trapèze étoile
	VOLUMES	cube	parallépip. rectangle	pyramide	cylindre	sphère	œuf	polyèdre	cône	hémisphère	tonneau
0	fleurs	Fleurs	immortelles chardons, etc...	Arbustes	pl. vertes	épices	bois flotté	fl. sous verre fl. artificielles	fruits séchés	jardins japonais arbres nains	pl. grasses
	biblotels	marbre	pierres semi-précieuses	minéraux de métal	cuivre, étain	or, argent	ivoire, nacre	cristal verre taillé	albatre	bronze	acier, alu
0	manque FAUX	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
	1c	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
1c	COUPLES	Laurel Hardy	Fauvette Marteau	Racine Shakespeare	Philonon Baucis	Crime Châtiment	Orgueil Préjugé	Nuit Brouillard	cendres diamants	Labourage Pâture	Belle Bête

(Perec 1993:41)

In this "Tableau générale des listes", a list of 420 elements distributed in each chapter according to the structure of the orthogonal bi-square of 10, the 21 categories out of 41 are related to elements that describespace: such as "position, murs, sols, époque, lieu, style, meubles, tissus (nature), tissus (matière), couleur, petits meubles, surface, volumes". Certainly, as each

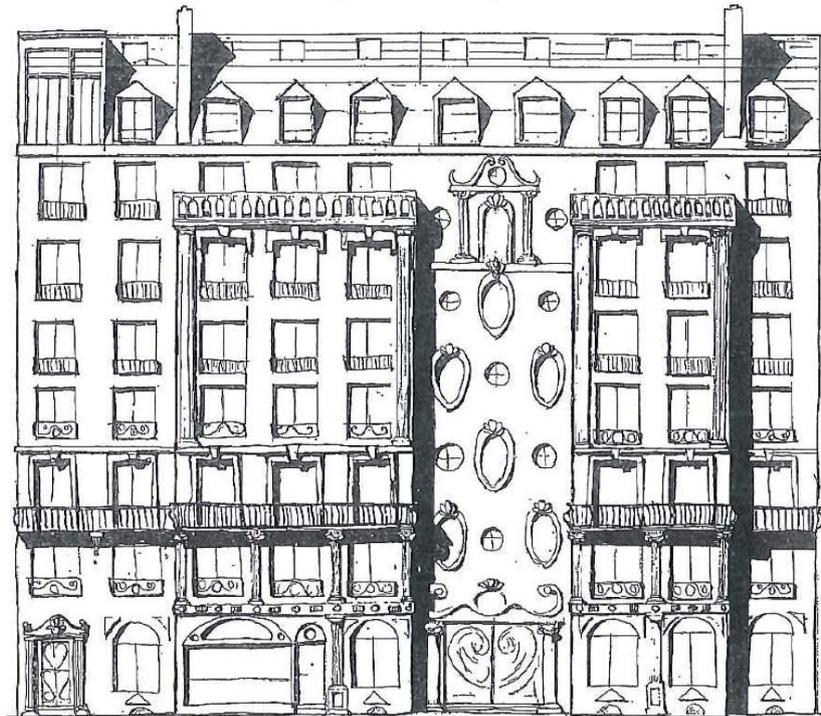
category consist of a list of 10 elements that each describes a specific materiality or thing, as for instance in the category of “petits meubles”, which consists of: “Pendules horloges, cendriers, lampes ou chandeliers, sculptures mobiles, miroirs, pianos, lustres, telephone, radio, hifi, boîtes” (44), the manuscripts also bear witness to a pursuit of materiality; an interest that goes far beyond the purely rhetorical and mathematical. Perec is allowing us a glimpse into how he in novel’s structure and form ensured that the infra-ordinary spatial background is foregrounded. The mathematical structure of the orthogonal bi-square of order 10 makes sure that each chapter encompasses one specific thing from each of the 41 categories, combining “style, surface, volume, meubles” in new ways for each chapter. He is thus using the mathematical structure to secure that the novel captures the many different small details that make up the spatial background in a novel. This interest may thus point us in another direction than that of the purely representational conflict most often featured in regard to Oulipo. In Roubaud’s view, the manuscript has Perec “demonstrate his mastery of the tools of his trade. He varies strophe forms and meters; he composes ballads, *chants-royaux*, and rondeaux; he demonstrates all sorts of variations on the rhymes; he adds the icing, he casts the spin, etc...” (104). The editors of the manuscripts also accentuate this level of rhetorical constructivism, as they state in their preface:

Georges Perec expérimentait ainsi, de manière radicale, une alliance nouvelle dans l’art d’écrire des romans, entre un système «mathématique» de structuration et de composition et l’impulsion imitative et narrative. Le très complexe ensemble de règles que Perec se donne (une combinaison de formules de transformations et de variations greffées les unes sur les autres) est étranger à toute fonction mimétique, et pourtant il devient le moyen de produire et d’organiser une multitude de descriptions et de récits parfaitement identifiables et, à leur manière, parfaitement «réalistes» (Perec 1993:9).

They argue that even though the novel is constructed using mathematical systems, lists and rhetorical constraints – all very far removed from a mimetic function – it does not mean that the novel

is not realistic. Indeed, what Perec himself in both the manuscripts and in other texts about the construction of the novel accentuates is that along with the rhetorical and mathematical tools, space and its material components play an equally important role in the construction and writing of the novel. In *Quatre Figures pour La Vie mode d'emploi* (1979), a small text that appeared in L'Arc No 76 a year after the publication of the novel, Perec introduces four structures that inspired him to write the novel:

Le première, intitulée «carrés Latins» datait de 1967 : il s'agissait d'appliquer à un roman (ou à un ensemble de nouvelles) une structure mathématique connue sous le nom de «bi-carré latin orthogonal d'ordre 10» [...] La seconde ébauche, encore plus imprécise, sans titre et pratiquement sans texte, envisageait vaguement la description d'un immeuble parisien don't la façade aurait été enlevée.



La troisième, enfin, imagine à la fin de l'année 1969, pendant la reconstitution laborieuse d'un gigantesque puzzle représentant le port de la Rochelle, racontait ce qui allait devenir l'histoire de Bartlebooth. [...] Au terme de ces laborieuses permutations, j'en arrivai ainsi à une sorte de «cahier des charges» dans lequel, pour chaque chapitre, était énumérée une liste de 42 thèmes qui devaient figurer dans le chapitre" (Perec 1979:50-52).

The drawing of the building in the middle of the quote is made by an architect friend of Perec, made at his request to: “concrétiser les différents schémas” (51). Significantly, the second structure regarding the building is omitted in Roubauds description of the novel’s structures, thus ignoring the spatial quality that allows the novel to be read in a more realistic and material direction. So instead of the materiality of language that Roubaud accentuates, materiality in Perec’s work also means the materiality of space and things. The tool-character of language that Roubaud described can thus also be seen as a way of gathering and presenting the infra-ordinary spatial background that escaped Perec in *tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*. The attempt to foreground the background as background that failed in the small phenomenological exercise in the form of an essay can thus, as I will show in the following, be presented and gathered in the form of the novel.

Perec uses the materiality of language to let the materiality of reality appear. The novel is committed to reality, but the reality it portrays is more than the sociological and political reality that Sartre and the committed novel subscribed to: it also depicts the reality of things and spaces. This is partly the material reality that Robbe-Grillet also sought to describe, but for Perec it emerges in a language that does not separate the novel from the everyday infra-ordinary *thing-world*.

## 2.2. Space as Frame

Similar to how Woolf in her manuscripts – especially that of *To the Lighthouse* – accentuated the novel’s spatial structure with the idea of the corridor for “Time Passes”, Perec’s manuscripts and particularly in his spatial book *Espèces d’espaces* (1974) emphasizes that the framework for his novel – or “Romans” in plural as the subtitle of *La Vie mode d’emploi* reads – is indeed space. In *Espèces d’espaces*, a book devoted to thinking on space, he outlines a “*Project de roman*” and explains it as follows:

J'imagine un immeuble parisien don't la façade a été enlevée – une sorte d'équivalent du toit soulevé dans «Le Diable boiteux» ou de la scène de jeu de go représentée dans le *Gengi monogatori emaki* – de telle sorte que, du rez-de-chaussée aux mansards, toutes les pieces qui se trouvent en façade soient instantanément et simultanément visible.

Le Roman – don't le titre est *La vie, mode d'emploi* – se borne (si j'ose employer ce verbe pour une projet dont le développement final aura quelque chose comme quatre cents pages) à décrire les pieces ainsi dévoilées et els activités qui s'y déroulent, le tout selon des processus formals dans le detail desquels il ne me semble pas necessaire d'entrer ici (Perec 2000:81).

Space is here not only theme and main character of the novel; it also structures the novel, as each chapter is a room in the apartment building. The apartment building and its rooms are the grid upon which Perec makes a polygraph of the moves made by the chess knight upon a board of 10 squares by 10; its movements select which room next to describe.

84	60	96	14	47	56	49	8	53	44			
5 <sup>e</sup> partie Cinoc Hélène Brodin Gratiolet → 1947		Dr Dinteville				6	de 25 à 32 M <sup>e</sup> Jérôme Winckler					
12	98	81	86	95	17	28	43	50	5			
Reol anc. Mme Hourcade		ancien <sup>e</sup> Emile GRATTOLET puis François et Marthe				5	Geneviève Foulerot anciennement Hébert S d B					
61	85	13	18	27	79	94	4	41	30			
Berger anc: le Russe anc: vieille dame au petit chien		Rémi Rorschach et [Mlle] Olivia anc Grifalconi				4	Marquiseaux anc: Echard [dont la fille épouse M.] S d B					
99	70	26	80	87	1	42	19	ex M <sup>e</sup> Colomb 3				
Bureau s à m		Bartlebooth anc: Danglars				3	lendemain 93 de fête 6 <sup>e</sup> partie Propriétaire Foureau loc inconnu					
25	62	88	Gd salon ch	69	36	78	2	31	40			
Comme S a M boud		Altamont anc: Appenzell avant: Hardy				2	M <sup>me</sup> de Beaumont					
71	65	20	23	89	68	34	37	77	92			
Moreau						1	Louvet fin 5 <sup>e</sup> partie					
63	24	67/8	73	35	22	90	75	39	32			
Entrée Service		arr. b. Marcia Antiquaire		anc. CLAVEAU M <sup>me</sup> Nocher		rdc	ancien Massy Marcia					
	72	64	21	67	74	38	33	91	76			
	Caves Barr.	chaufferie		cave ROBS	cave DINT	machinerie ascenseur	cave ALTAIR	cave GRATI	cave MASCIA	cave MARG URSEAU	cave BEAUM	cave HEA BERT
		3		1								

(Perec 1993:40)

He has, in order not to describe the building room for room, invented a system that creates a dynamic selection for the order of rooms. As he notes in *L'Arc*, “il aurait été fastidieux de décrire l'immeuble étage par étage et appartement par appartement. Mais la succession des chapitres ne pouvait pas pour autant être laissée au seul hasard” (51). In *Espèces d'espaces* Perec stresses not the formal procedures that Roubaud noted, but space. What he has created is a still life of an apartment-building, as the novel describes what happens on one specific day (23 June 1977)<sup>36</sup>, but as with *Still life/ Style leaf* and *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* he challenges the idea of still lives by providing it with a narrative form. In this way, he also challenges the narratological valuation of narration of plot and characters over descriptions of space. The narrative technique used in the novel must be viewed in light of this strategy: each chapter describes what can be seen in each room as the facade of the building has been removed, making each chapter a variation of a still life of a room. Consequently, description and space are the foundations upon which narrative develops and time unfolds.

The reception of *La Vie mode d'emploi* acknowledges the novel's spatial character, but often its descriptive spatiality is mentioned in the introductory remarks, and then bypassed in order to focus on other subjects: on what the description *leads to*, that is, the stories of the characters or the meta-level of the novel and its readability. Both Sydney Lévy's “Emergence in Georges Perec” (2004) and Steen Bille Jørgensen's “Figureskraft i Georges Perec's *Livet en brugsanvisning*” (1998) focus on the novel's readability. They both begin by mentioning the novel's descriptive outset, but Lévy then moves on to look at the discrepancy between the complexity of the manuscripts and the easy read of the novel, and after Jørgensen has described the novel's form as a “epistemology of description” [my translation] (Jørgensen 1998:1), he moves on to question the role of the reader. In their eagerness to discuss the act of reading itself, both overlook those parts of the novel where its readability is put

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<sup>36</sup> With this one-day structure the novel inscribes itself in the tradition of great Modernist novels taking place in one day such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses*, but being centred on one apartment building in Paris at the Rue Simon-Cruebellier 11, it adds another one-space structure to the temporal structure of this modern tradition.

to the test, namely its descriptive parts. Focusing on the readability of the novel is in direct continuation of the line of thought that dominated the field of description in Narratology; from Boileau to Bal descriptions bored the reader, causing them to skip the parts where space was described. Both Levy and Jørgensen end up doing exactly this: Reading for the role of the reader, they skip the spatial sections of the novel. To remedy this lack, I will do the opposite and analyse how Perec with his many modes of description creates a manual for describing space.

### 2.3. The Staircase – Showing the Infra-ordinary Background

Oui, cela pourrait commencer ainsi, ici, comme ça, d'une manière un peu lourde et lente, dans cet endroit neutre qui est à tous et à personne, où les gens se croisent presque sans se voir, où la vie de l'immeuble se répercute, lointaine et régulière. De ce qui se passe derrière les lourdes portes des appartements, on ne perçoit le plus souvent que ces échos éclatés, ces bribes, ces débris, ces esquisses, ces amorces, ces incidents ou accidents qui se déroulent dans ce que l'on appelle les «parties communes», ces bruits feutrés que le tapis de laine rouge passé étouffé, ces embryons de vie communautaire qui s'arrêtent toujours aux paliers (Perec 1978:21).

So begins the first chapter of *La Vie mode d'emploi*; we enter the book as we enter the building. The “manière un peu lourde et lente” may refer both to the way the words slowly begins to come as the novel begins: “Oui, cela pourrait commencer ainsi, ici, comme ça”, with many small adverbs accumulating, and it may also refer to the hesitant attitude of someone arriving at the building for the first time; taking a look inside before entering, one foot at a time: the gradual bodily movement imitated by the small words separated by a comma: “Oui, ici, comme ça”. Entering the novel in this way makes it clear that this is a novel that not only sets forth space, but is also aware of how it does it. What further is striking in this first quote is the kind of space that we enter: The staircase. In *Espèces d'espaces* Perec notes “On ne pense pas assez aux escalier” (Perec 2000:76) and this is exactly what he tries to do in the chapters on the staircase in *La Vie mode d'emploi*. With 12 chapters devoted to the staircase, it is the most revisited space in the novel,

and in every one of these chapters the description of space is thematized. The staircase is the building's infra-ordinary space par excellence; it is an "endroit neutre", a space you enter without paying attention to it. It is a space in between other spaces, and this *inbetweenness* of daily comings and goings, not visible to the characters living there, is in this opening chapter put forward in its infra-ordinary materiality, as background. The description of this space is attuned not to the human sounds heard from different apartments – such as bits of conversation and actions behind closed doors – but towards material sounds devoid of meaning: "ces échos éclatés, ces bribes, ces débris". Sounds, not what is said, are described, and so is how the sound meets the materiality of the room: "ces petits bruits feutrés que le tapis de laine rouge passé étouffe".

This introductory focus continues as the chapter goes on to describe the space, not introducing the identity of the characters living in the different apartments, only their everyday movements in the building:

Les habitants d'un même immeuble vivent à quelques centimeters les unes des autres, une simple cloison les sépare, ils se partagent les mêmes espaces répétés le long des étages, ils font les mêmes gestes en même temps, ouvrir le robinet, tirer la chasse d'eau, allumer la lumière, mettre la table, quelques dizaines d'existences simultanées qui se répètent d'étage en étage, et l'immeuble en immeuble, et de rue en rue (21).

The inhabitants are here identified by their movements; they are stripped of any individuality as focus instead lies on their interactions with a functional space. This passage thus also shows the problem of *foregrounding the infra-ordinary as infra-ordinary* the way *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* did. In the above quote, space too is reduced to its functionality. On the one hand, this generic description of the rooms in the apartments negates the whole project of the novel, because if each room is fundamentally the same, then why use 639 pages meticulously describing each room? This question resembles the investigation that Perec engages in in

*Espèces d'espace*, wondering what space consists of as he describes the rooms in an apartment:

Une chambre, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a un lit; une salle à manger, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a une table et des chaises, et souvent un buffet; une salon, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a des fauteuils et un divan; une cuisine, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a une cuisinière et une arrive d'eau (57-58).

So he continues, until he ends up concluding:

1. Tout appartement est composé d'un nombre variable, mais fini, de pièces;
2. Chaque pièce a une fonction particulière (58).

But on the other hand, Perec is mimicking the very problem that the everyday space itself faces, that is, how to let it appear without it disappearing as it is being used? This is the heart of the problem facing the ordinary background: its ordinariness so easily becomes invisible in its functionality, and so does the materiality behind the different actions. This materiality is the infra-ordinary; behind the ordinary action of flushing the toilet and of setting the table, the infra-ordinary materiality of the toilet and the table is hidden. And it is this materiality that the novel foregrounds with its many minutely described rooms; an extensive descriptive practice that will be analysed in the following chapters.

The chapters describing the staircase seem to address and play with the question of representation as they present many different types of descriptions of space. The first chapter thus introduces the site of the building and its structures through a plan drawn on a piece of paper:

Sur la feuille ont été en fait esquissés non pas un, mais trois plans: le premier, en haut et à droite, permet de localiser l'immeuble, à peu près au milieu de la rue Simon-Crubellier qui partage obliquement le quadrilatère que forment entre elles, dans le quartier de la Plaine Monceau, XVII<sup>e</sup> arrondissement, les rues Médéric, Jadin, de Chazelles et Léon-Jost; le second, en haut et à gauche, est un plan en coupe de l'immeuble indiquant schématiquement la disposition des appartements [...] le troisième

plan, sur la moitié inférieure de la feuille, est celui de l'appartement de Winckler (22-23).

And in the third chapter on the staircase, the painter Valène imagines a picture, which resembles the novel:

L'idée même de cet immeuble éventré montrant à nu les fissures de son passé, l'écroulement de son présent, cet entassement sans suite d'histoires grandioses ou dérisoires, frivoles ou pitoyables, lui faisait l'effet d'un mausolée grotesque dressé à la mémoire de comparses pétrifiées dans des postures ultimes tout aussi insignifiantes dans leur solennité ou dans leur banalité (164).

In both cases space is presented through another medium; either a drawing of a map, or a picture, not reprinted as is sometimes the case in other parts of the novel, but instead described in ekphrasis. Yet, as with the purely functional description of the apartments, these two ekphrases do not capture the infra-ordinary character of the apartment-building. The first captures only the cartographic aspect of space, and the second focuses on the inhabitants. Valène's picture is a still life, a tableau, as it portrays "le temps s'était arrêté, suspendu, figé autour d'il ne savait quelle attente. L'idée même de ce tableau" (164), but whereas this genre normally depicts "a nature morte" (Blanchard 1981:277), the description of the picture has replaced these dead things with the very topics normally associated with novels, that is, humans and their stories. The novel itself does the opposite: It too is a still life, but it describes extensively the spaces and things left out in the description of Valène's picture, in this way molding the topics normally associated with pictures into the form of a novel.

The staircase is not only an infra-ordinary space; it is also a space that stores infra-ordinary things. The ninth and twelfth chapters on the staircase consist entirely of a "*Tentative d'inventaire de quelques-unes des choses qui ont été trouvées dans les escalier au fil des ans*" (391) that includes:

Plusieurs photos, dont celle d'une jeune fille de quinze ans vêtue d'un slip de bain noir et d'un chandail blanc, agenouillée sur une plage,

un réveil radio de toute évidence destiné à un réparateur,  
 dans un sac plastique des Établissements Nicolas,  
 un soulier noir orné de brillants,  
 une mule en chevreau doré,  
 une boîte de pastilles Géraudel contre la toux,  
 une muselière,  
 un étui à cigarettes en cuir de Russie,  
 des courroies,  
 divers carnets et agendas,  
 un abat-jour cubique en papier métal couleur bronze, dans  
 un sac provenant d'un disquaire de la rue Jacob, (391).

The lists are clearly related to the attempt Perce made in *tentative épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, but whereas that list was compiled as he observed the square in Paris, this list consists of yet another list; the list from the manuscript. The ninth chapter on the staircase is in the manuscript described to include among its material elements: “agenouillé, réparer, panneaux de métal, Style Louis XV, Table, couteau, chandail, bleu ciel, rectangle, cube, plusieurs sacs plastiques” (Perce 1993: ch 68). The transfer from the list in the manuscript to the list in the novel is not 1:1. Instead, general elements from the manuscript list are incorporated into elements of specific things that are also found in the novel: the position of kneeling –the first word in the manuscript – appears in the form of the kneeling girl on the photo in the novel, just as the activity of repairing is ascribed to the radio that “de toute évidence destiné à un réparateur”, and the volume of a cube appears in the “abat-jour cubique en papier”. In this way, Perce heightens the readability of the lists, as the things go from one-word description in the manuscript lists to being awarded a certain specificity of detail in the novel. It was indeed the element of readability that Bal accused his novels of lacking. The list in the novel foregrounds infra-ordinary things; as a result, whereas the buses disappeared from the text in *tentative épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, things reappear in *La Vie mode d'emploi*. These things are things that belong in the realm of the novel as they bear witness to character history, but instead of telling the story behind these things, as is the case in other chapters, in these lists, things are allowed to appear in their *thingness*, not related to the characters that have left them behind, but to other things

also left behind. This material *relatedness of things* is emphasized by the fact that the chapter is a single long list, only commas separating one thing from the next. These things are props once used but now discarded, and as they appear in a chapter of their own, it is their *propness*, their *thingness*, that emerges, and not the use of them as props. The bodily position and the human activity that is supposed to appear in the chapter, according to the list from the manuscript, are here not human activities that use and master the things, but instead something originating from and intrinsic to the things themselves; the act of repairing from the manuscript list does thus not appear in the chapter as a human activity, but the need for repair is established through the perspective of the radio itself.

With this double listing, Percec revives Hamon's understanding of the role of description in the novel. At first glance, Percec seems to share the same practice as Zola, the author that Hamon based his idea of description on, as both writers create a system of notes as a backbone for describing setting in their novels. But Hamon understood these notes as a lexical knowledge, pointing the description in the direction of meaning; he defined description as a rhetorical and discursive element that made it possible for the author to show characters' features through the setting or to predict the development of the plot. Hamon was thus not interested in the things and the spaces that were described in themselves but in how they related to other narrative elements, such as time, plot, and character. He did not stay on the surface of what was described, he searched beyond the surface for meaning; the sign did not point to the thing, but beyond it, to what it symbolized. In contrast, Percec stays on the surface of both language and things. That means even though he also uses manuscripts with lists that seem far away from a mimetic practice, these lists form an attempt to get closer to reality. As his attempt of describing the square in Paris revealed, once language was brought out into reality as an observational tool it became impossible to maintain the distance needed to catch the infra-ordinary. Language was itself caught up in the habit of observing, and the infra-ordinary slipped out of reach as descriptive language assumed the same view that he had tried to avoid in the first place. The opposite is true for the novel. Here, the manuscript

lists provide a systematic background of things and space that guarantees the distance needed to let the infra-ordinary spatial background appear; the infra-ordinary is taken out of its ordinariness and through this detour reintroduced into the novel as *foregrounded background*. The tentative lists in the ninth and twelfth chapter on the staircase thus *foreground the infra-ordinary things as infra-ordinary*; they are not descriptions of things that show features of the characters, or that predict a plot, they are things *after* having been features and after having been part of a plot: they no longer point to anything other than their own surfaces, their own materiality. The list is thus far removed from epideictic oratory, or from being mere ornament; instead it establishes an appearance of reality behind the novel, assuming that the stories told in the novel are true and that the building in fact once existed. The lists seem to want to prove a point of being a kind of evidence of the background setting, and by creating an effect of reality they call to mind Barthes' disapproval of description as a mere mimetic device; he considered it a necessity for establishing the world of the novel, thus making it, according to Barthes, a feature of no interest since it does not include any displacement between the word and the thing. Not so in Perec's novel; here a displacement does take place between the word in the manuscript list and the word in the novel, but it does not – as Barthes would have it – end in an infinite chain of displaced signs, but points instead towards the thing. The setting that in other novels only supplies background for the narrative is placed at centre stage: The description of props takes up the foreground of the novel, leaving the background to characters and plot.

## 2.4. Description – A User's Manual

### 2.4.1. Winckler's Apartment – A Description of Nothing

As one of the structures behind the novel was to “*envisageait vaguement la description d'un immeuble parisien dont le façade aurait été enlevée*” (Perec 1979: 50), description comes to be the dominant mode of showing in the novel. Indeed, the novel seems

to be a manual, not only for life, but for how to describe space. Perec appears to continue the task he set for himself in *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, but here, instead of describing the things that go unnoticed in our everyday encounter with spaces, his aim could be said to be describing that which goes unnoticed when reading a novel. The first thing that the reader encounters in almost every chapter is a description of the room in the apartment that the chapter takes place in, and in many chapters, this description takes up the whole chapter. By so doing, Perec challenges the classic narratological valuation of narration over description; of temporal plot over spatial description. Even though this is the case, the reception of the novel has not focused on *how* he describes, but instead on the meta-textual and intertextual elements or on the narrative element.

Warren F. Motte Jr. does devote one chapter to description in his study *The Poetics of Experiments A study of the works of Georges Perec* (1984), but leaves out description in *La Vie mode d'emploi* in favour of *La Choses* and *Espèces d'espace*, because, as he notes, "Perec appears to have modified his descriptive poetics gradually, relying less on "imitations" of external reality and more on purely fictive constructs" (Motte 1984:69). According to Motte, this means that "the word, having served the world, comes to serve only itself: from the sociological Perec's concern shifts slowly to the poetic" (69), and with this "his principal loyalty in his descriptive technique is finally to the language, to the words themselves" (81). According to Motte, what Perec describes in *La Vie mode d'emploi* does not have anything to do with a foregrounding of the infra-ordinary space and things, but is solely a concern within language itself. In this way, Motte reads *La Vie mode d'emploi* as a shift away from external reality: according to Motte, the descriptive difficulties that Perec suffered in texts like *tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* makes him turn away from things and onto words without any relation to what they represent, the "external phenomena become almost incidental, secondary concern" (82). I will argue contrary to this that the many different types of description that the novel contains – with their massive accumulation of things – are really a continuation of Perec's interest into the infra-ordinary, only set

within the frame of the novel. In fact, I read the novel as a continuation of the debate about realism that Perec engaged in in *La Ligne générale*, and in direct opposition to the misguided tendency in the reception of his work that separates this early debate about realism from his later novels. One example of this tendency can be seen in Manet van Manfrans' *Georges Perec La Contrainte du reel* (1999), which emphasizes that the realism Perec develops from 1967 and onwards is a "réalisme citationnel" (Manfrans 1999:67), a realism based on intertextuality rather than the infra-ordinary.

It is significant that Levy in "Emergence in Georges Perec", in his analysis of the readability of the novel, leaves out the descriptive parts in order to focus on the novel's element of crime in the ending of the first chapter. He could have attended to what appears before the introduction of the revenge of Winckler, that is, the distinct way his apartment is described. To focus on the revenge and on the puzzle, in both of its meanings of riddle and game, is to read for the plot. To read for space means to consider the actual description just prior to it. Here is the first clue (to stay within the language of crime) that the novel may be read as an investigation into possible modes of describing space, as a way of exploring the possibilities of *foregrounding the infra-ordinary background* repeatedly throughout the novel: What appears right before the narrative riddle is a description of the apartment of Gaspard Winckler; it is the first and also the most radical example of Perec's "manual" of description:

De ces trois petites chambres dans lesquelles pendant presque quarante ans a vécu et travaillé Gaspard Winckler, il ne reste plus grand-chose. Ses quelques meubles, son petit établi, sa scie sauteuse, ses minuscules limes sont partis. Il n'y a plus sur le mur de la chambre, en face de son lit, à côté de la fenêtre, ce tableau carré qu'il aimait tant: il représentait une antichambre dans laquelle se tenaient trois hommes [...] Bientôt, le vieil appartement deviendra une coquet logement, double liv. + ch., cft., vue, calme. (24).

The first description of an apartment in the novel is of a space that dissolves: things as well as words disappear as the description progresses. By describing what is no longer present in the

apartment, Perec is providing the opening sentence of *Espèces d'espace* with a concrete manifestation, as “L’objet de ce livre n’est pas exactement le vide, ce serait plutôt ce qu’il y a autour” (Perec 2000:13). He describes the “autour”; that which surrounds the empty apartment when things have been removed. The surrounding space – the walls and the windows – are rendered through what they no longer hold or position. Instead of describing the emptiness of the room, Perec describes positions and relations even when things are gone. This changes once the apartment no longer belong to Winckler: then the disappearance of his personal things leaves its mark on language, too, turning the description into an advertisement for real estate. Part of Perec’s method here is abbreviation, minimizing the letters needed to describe space by introducing a descriptive mode from outside: from real estate. He is thus providing an answer to the question of language’s ability to present reality that he rose in “Engagement ou crise du langage”. By introducing the language of real estate into the novel, he is cultivating language. As a contrast to what he criticized Robbe-Grillet for doing, Perec brings literary descriptive language back in contact with reality by using a form of spatial description from ordinary life. In this way, he not only demonstrates the usefulness of space by subtracting its very use – as the description is of a space no longer used for living – he also proves the usefulness of language in the same way; the ad is a tool used to sell apartments, and though in this very use, language is made transparent; by placing the ad within the frame of the novel, its original use is no longer applicable, which lets the usefulness of language appear.

However, this apartment does not just appear in this subtracted way in the novel, because, as Perec noted in *tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*, his interest is centred on “ce qui se remarque pas, ce qui n’a pas d’importance : ce qui passe quand il ne se passe rien” (Perec 1975:10), which, transferred to the world of novel, means that an empty room left by a deceased character is not simply nothing. The following description appears in the second chapter on the apartment of Winckler, adding a new level to his descriptive method:

Maintenant, dans le petit salon, il reste ce qui reste quand il ne reste rien, des mouches par exemple, ou bien des prospectus que des étudiants ont glissés sous toutes les portes de l'immeuble et qui vantent un nouveau dentifrice ou offrent une réduction de vingt-cinq centimes à tout acheteur de trois paquets de lessive ou bien des vieux numéros du *Jouet français*, la revue qu'il a recue toute sa vie et don't l'abonnement a continué à courir quelques mois après sa mort, ou bien de ces choses insignifiantes qui traînent sur les parquets ou dans des coins de placard et don't on ne sait pas comment elles sont venues là ni pourquoi elles y sont restées : trois fleurs des champs fanées, des tiges molles à l'extrémité desquelles s'étiolent des filaments qu'on dirait calcines, une bouteille vide de coca-cola, un carton à gâteaux, ouvert (51).

It is a description of “rien”, of the unimportant and insignificant things left behind in the apartment. Things are here stripped of their use, as infra-ordinary. They are Brown's *broken things*: empty bottles and tins, withered flowers, old leaflets. What the description of these infra-ordinary things also bears witness to is a descriptive practice close to that of Woolf. The empty rooms in her novels were also *not nothing*; they became something as they vibrated in the encounter between furniture and air. The empty rooms are here not nothing, but become something as the materiality of one thing relates it to another thing. The rooms are not vibrant, but static – though still relational and material. The flowers are not merely withered flowers, but “trois fleurs des champs fanées, des tiges molles à l'extrémité desquelles s'étiolent des filaments qu'on dirait calcines”. And, as was the case in Woolf's works, this material relationality is underlined by the use of punctuation. Like Woolf, Perec is not using full stops: The entire descriptive passage (that continues beyond what is here quoted) is punctuated by commas and one colon. As opposed to the rest of the chapter, which is carried in hypotactic sentences, the infra-ordinary things are allowed to emerge as a *relational spatial background* through the use of paratactic sentences; they thus appear as the unordered things of ordinary life – and not as the geometrical ordered space that Perec criticized in the novels of Robbe-Grillet.

## 2.4.2. Towards a Descriptive Spectrum

The first two descriptions of Winckler's apartment appear in the middle of the chapters. In this respect they are not representative of the way space is described in the rest of the novel, where spatial description most often opens the chapters. And it is in these beginnings that a manual of description can be traced. In "Towards a Typology, Poetics and History of Description in Fiction", Ansgar Nünning differentiates between diegetic and extra-diegetic forms of description, which can be either character-oriented or narratee-oriented, emanating from either "a heterodiegetic, covert narrator situated outside of the level of the characters or whether they are focalized from the point of view of one of the characters whose sense perceptions they represent" (Nünning 2007:103). Perec's descriptions of space combine these traits and form a spectrum that includes both the extra-diegetic and the diegetic level.

At one end of the spectrum, the descriptions are extra-diegetic, or indeed metadiegetic. The building is here viewed from a higher vantage-point: that of a narrator looking inside the halved apartment-building, inviting the narratee to share his view. This is the case in the opening of the chapter on Winckler's apartment:

Maintenant nous sommes dans la pièce que Gaspard Winckler appelait le salon. Des trois pièces de son logement, c'est la plus proche de l'escalier, la plus à gauche par rapport à notre regard (49).

Woolf struggled with "how to describe the world seen without a self?" and let one of her characters pose that very question, thus pre-empting Morton's problem of how to thematize the background without it losing its character of background. Perec has a more direct approach. He places a narrator and a narratee within the space of the novel: it is through their bodily position in the room that the description is launched. The description is not of a world without a self, yet the self viewing the apartment is nothing more than a pair of eyes; as the motto from Jules Verne quoted at the start of the novel states: "Regarde de tous tes yeux, regarde" (15). This visual dominance is underscored in the first chapter on

the cellar, where the point of view literally is that of an eye: “L’œil, s’habituant petit à petit à l’obacurité, finirait par connaître sous leur fine couche de poussière grise des restes épars provenant de tous les Gratiolet” (197). The narrator is in these examples a physical position; establishing relations between the different rooms in the different apartments, all related to second structure of the halved building that Perce presented in *L’Arc*. Whereas the lists from the manuscripts are concealed in the novel, this spatial structure actually guides the narrator and narratee through the novel. It might be seen as way to stop the real reader from skipping these spatial descriptive parts, as a way of inviting her inside the space instead of boring or intimidating her – as has been case with most narratologists. This kind of narrator-oriented description reappears throughout the novel as a way of positioning description, as for instance: “La pièce où nous nous trouvons maintenant – un fumoir bibliothèque” (131) and “La pièce où nous nous trouvons actuellement est une chambre parquetée avec un canapé susceptible de se transformer en lit” (246). Whereas both Woolf and Heidegger thought of language as presentation, Perce makes the reader aware of this presentation: to show the materiality of space also means to show the material out of which it is formed: in the novel this means to address the questions of *who sees that which is described* and *to whom is the description addressed*. However, this does not mean that the metadiegetic level diverts from the described space, as the theorists of readability would have it. On the contrary, it is only a way to position which room the chapters centres on, which then allows the description to continue, meticulously describing what can be seen in the room.

Moving from one end of the spectrum to its middle, still within the extra-diegetic level, Perce here seems to be close to what Ann Banfield calls the empty centre in “Describing the unobserved: events grouped around an empty center” (1987). She describes it is a “physical subjectivity emptied of a subject and sensibilia” (Banfield 1987:268), which can be expressed in “terms of the special features of deictic or demonstrative referring: demonstratives constitute those elements of language which establish a relation of reference, narrowly defined as that between

an utterance, an instance of language, and a sensed object or referent” (268). “This is a table” (269) is provided as an example of demonstrative referring. And Perec uses precisely this kind of demonstrative referring in the middle of the descriptive spectrum; here, the descriptions begin with either: “C’est une sale de bains” (172), “C’est là, en face du lit, à côté de la fenêtre” (296), or with “Un salon vide au quatrième droite. Sur le sol il y a un tapis de sisal tressé dont les fibres” (34). The demonstrative referring of “c’est” or “il y a” solely presents the space and the things in it; the metadiegetic level is gone, but still the hint of referring remains through the pronouns. Even this hint disappears when he later in the novel describes the cellars; here the pronouns have been replaced with the bare name of the room of the description: “Caves. La cave des Altamont, propre, bien rangée, nette: du sol au plafond, des étagères et des casiers munis d’étiquettes larges et bien lisible” (195) and “Caves. La cave de Madame de Beaumont. Vieux objets: lampe jadis de bureau avec un socle de cuivre et un abat-hour hémisphérique en opaline vert clair” (434).

At the other far end of the spectrum, Perec introduces diegetic descriptions, still directed towards a narratee, but from the point of view of a character. This happens in the case of the painter Valène. The empty centre is here replaced with his subjective view. This does however not take focus away from the space that he experiences, but adds another sensuous aspect to the description, as he introduces other senses to what so far have been primarily visual descriptions. As the description is perceived from Valène’s point of view, the space of the staircase is added sound and smell:

Les escaliers pour lui, c’était, à chaque étage, un souvenir, une émotion, quelque chose de suranné et d’impalpable, quelque chose qui palpitait quelque part, à la flamme vacillante de sa mémoire: une geste, un parfum, un bruit, un miroitement (90).

This is a very different description of space than the one which appeared in the first chapter on the staircase in the language of real estate. It comes closer to Woolf’s space; it has the same vibratory dynamic, it is “suranné et d’impalpable” and it “palpitait”. Though, as opposed to Woolf, this description fits Hamon’s formula: It is

set in motion by a character, who perceives an object, which is described through qualitative elements. With this diegetic end of the descriptive spectrum – a character perceiving space – Perec is making use of a more traditional way of describing space, a mode which Marcel Proust is famous for using in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. But Perec takes the diegetic description one step further; while space most often in diegetic descriptions is overlooked in favour of the thoughts of the characters, as Woolf also pointed out in regard to Proust, space is in Perec’s diegetic descriptions accumulated in such a way that the thoughts of Valène do not point away from space, but causes a new descriptive world to appear. As Valène in the second chapter on the elevator is again invested with the point of view, his point of view is lost in the accumulative description of what goes on underneath the apartment building:

Parfois il imaginait que l'immeuble était comme un iceberg dont les étages et les combles auraient constitué la partie visible. Au-delà du premier niveau des caves auraient commence les masses immergées: des escaliers aux marches sonores qui descendraient en tournant sur eux-mêmes, de par des treillis métalliques et des portes de fer marquées de têtes de mort (426).

Instead of the typical anthropocentric diegetic description with the human being at its centre, diegetic description here reaches beyond the human realm, almost mimicking the speculative realism that Graham Hamon extrapolates from Lovecraft. The description is a downwards movement; from one level to the next; a movement that continues for several pages, describing the different materials that fill each level, as for instance: “et plus loin encore des montagnes de sable, de gravier, de coke, de scories, de ballast, des bétonneuses, des crassiers” (427). The substance of the description is shifted from its diegetic point of departure to a listing of materials and things; a listing that has its own movement inscribed. The downwards movement is accentuated by the change in punctuation: after the first three sections, which each describe one level, all of them ending with a full stop, the next eight sections are only separated by a semicolon, and each thing separated from the next through a comma. Punctuation thus emphasizes the increasing

chaos that reigns the farther down the description gets, ending in “un monde de caverns aux parois couvertes de suie, un monde de cloaques et de borbiers, un monde de larves et de bêtes, avec des êtres sans yeux traînant des carcasses d’animaux” (429), in a world without or beneath humans. In this spatial movement, the reader is hardly bored or eager to skip ahead – as Bal suggested in her mention of Perec and the readability of descriptions – but rather sucked into the whirlwind of description.

In his manual of description, Perec foregrounds the mode of description in the novel, but he also *foregrounds space as background* in the descriptive parts: from the metadiegetic narrator to the diegetic level, the material elements of space and things are never lost from sight. Space is, as he writes in *Espèces d’espace*, “inventaire, espace inventé” (Perec 1974:26): Space is both inventory and invention. To let space emerge in the novel, to foreground the background, is to Perec a matter of making an inventory of it; an inventory of how to describe. And in this inventory, which ends in an invention of a nonhuman world, he has created a form which accumulates things and spaces to such a degree that plot and characters in the novel become secondary.

## 2.5. The Apartment after the Event

That space indeed takes precedence over both plot and character is apparent in chapter XXIV. The entirety of the chapter is a description of an apartment after a party, as the opening line from the chapter states: “Le grand salon de l’appartement du troisième droit pourrait offrir les images classiques d’un lendemain de fête” (168). Here space testifies to an event, but the event itself is absent; what is left is only space and things. To read this chapter for the plot, as Levy did in the example of Winckler’s apartment, would mean analysing what kind of event this space bears witness to; to read things as traces and not as things. Reading this chapter for space instead means analysing *how* Perec describes, and what kind of space is described. To do this, Hoffmann’s three types of spaces are useful.

Space in Woolf's novels could be understood in relation to Hoffmann's *Gestimmter Raum* and *Aktionsraum*, even as it also challenged these two categories. Space in Perec's novel can be understood as a combination between *Aktionsraum* and *Anschauungsraum*. Hoffmann defines the *Aktionsraum* as a space where things are used; it is most often not a space that appears through description, instead it appears as setting for a narrative event. It is a space that centres on things in their everyday use, a goal-oriented space with its main focus on the subject using the thing. As opposed to this narrative space of action, Hoffmann establishes the *Anschauungsraum*; a space not of interaction, but of distance. In this space, focus is on the object world "das sich leicht selbstständig macht" (Hoffmann 1978:92); things are here "sowohl aus dem funktionellen wie dem stimmungsmäßigen Bezug zum Subject gelöst und sind ihm reines isoliertes Gegenüber" (92). It is a space of observation, often from a panoramic point of view, where things are objects being observed. Attention is directed at the degree and selection of details rather than at narration. Hoffmann is interested in the integration of space into the narrative whole, and he notes in regard to this spatial category that "Die Schwierigkeit bei der Fiktionalisierung des Anschauungsraum liegt darin, daß die Beschreibung aus der epischen Situation des Einzelwerks begründet werden muß" (92).

The apartment in Perec's novel is an *Aktionsraum* that has been turned into an *Anschauungsraum*, yet the action that for Hoffmann creates the epic situation is absent. In Perec's novel, it no longer makes sense to imagine integrating the extensive description of the *Anschauungsraum* into the epic situation. Perec turns the relationship upside down; here, the narrative event must be understood on the grounds of description. Whereas Woolf in her novels challenged the classic narratological understanding of narration by also narrating space, Perec challenges the idea of description by describing a narrative event through space. The apartment is an *Aktionsraum* after the action has taking place; the narration of the party has been skipped, and all that remains are the things after the event. The characters that in the *Aktionsraum* used the things are

here no longer acting subjects, but appear alongside the things as leftovers:

Dans le salon, une autre jeune fille – peut-être est-ce à elle qu'est destiné ce verre réparateur – est couchée, endormie, sur un divan recouvert de daim gris: enfouie au milieu des coussins, à demi recouvert par un châle noir brodé de fleurs et de feuillages (168).

The sleeping girl is not only *not* an acting subject, but she seems – as Duncan was in Woolf's story from *The Charleston Bulletin* – to be physically overwhelmed by the things as she almost disappears among the pillows. Indeed, the description does not dwell on her, but on the fabric of the sofa, its pillows, and the scarf. The space thus becomes Hoffmann's *Anschauungsraum*, but the distance that characterizes this space for Hoffmann as "Fernraum" (92), is by Perec's metadiegetic narrator turned into a space that *surrounds*. What it surrounds is not things as "reines isoliertes Gegenüber" but those usable, everyday things that Hoffmann subscribed to the *Aktionsraum*, just after they have been used. The things are here those infra-ordinary things that in the event of the party merely amounted to setting, but in this chapter get foregrounded. Quite literally, the chapter foregrounds the ground upon which the event took place, as it opens with a description of the floor: "C'est une vaste pièce aux boiseries claires, dont on a roulé ou repoussé les tapis mettant en évidence un parquet délicatement cloisonné" (168). In short, the chapter is a *foregrounding of the background as the background for a plot*. The background is foregrounded through spatial positions and the accumulation of things:

Par terre, partout, les restes du raout: plusieurs chaussures dépareillées, une longue chaussette blanche, une paire de collants, un haut-de-forme, un faux nez, des assiettes de carton, empilées, froissées ou isolée, pleines de déchets, fanes de radis, têtes de sardines, morceaux de pain un peu rongés, os de poulets, croustes de fromages, barquettes en papier plissé ayant contenu des petits fours ou des chocolats, mégots, serviettes en papier, gobelets de carton; sur une table basse diverses bouteilles vides et une motte de beurre (168).

This description of the floor is characterized by its lack of active verbs, which underlines that this is a space after an event has taken place; only the surroundings are left. The verbs in this passage appear as adjectives subject to the thing; they are “morceaux de pain un peu rongés”, or they describe what the leftover things once contained, such as “barquettes en papier plissé ayant contenu des petits four ou des chocolat”. Whereas Woolf anthropomorphized space and things as they became events taking place, especially by using verbs to create a dynamic space, Perec describes space through prepositions, adjectives, and nouns. The two writers can thus be said to be representatives of the two styles that Hoffmann introduces in his four tools to analyse the *gestimmter Raum*, as he differentiates between exact objective descriptions on the one hand, and the metaphorical imagery on the other: Perec answers to the first and Woolf to the second.

What the two have in common is their use of punctuation, for, like Woolf, Perec in this passage does not use full stops; this description continues for another page with only commas and semicolons. Whereas the semicolon in Woolf's novels expressed a movement in the space, supporting the way she narratized space, the semicolon expresses an exact position in this case. What emerges in this space after the event is *relations*: the surroundings appear *as they surround*, they are “dans le salon”, “par terre” and “sur un table”, and the infra-ordinary things appear as infra-ordinary: “des assiettes de carton, empilées, froissées ou isolées, pleines de déchets”. Taking up more space than anything else in the description of the apartment, is not the furniture, but the small infra-ordinary things. The furniture only outlines positions that almost disappear in the amount of things leftover. In the accumulation of these small things, however, the specificity of each thing is also lost. That which during the event was a background is here foregrounded in such detail that the infra-ordinary almost becomes extra-ordinary; the amount of scraps and pieces of leftover things almost overwhelms the reader.

## 2.6. The Massiveness of Things

If space in Woolf's novels is characterized by vibrant materiality, that through discreet signs turns nothing into something, thus giving voice to an unrecognized green and domestic strand in Modernism, space in Perec's novel is characterized by a heavy materiality that can be seen as an opposition to what Boscagli calls "the minimalist functionalism" (Boscagli 2014:127) of post-World war II France. In "Paris circa 1968: Cool Space, Decoration, Revolution" (2014), Boscagli records "the fate of stuff in the post-World war II era of glass" (127) as an era where

the minimalist clean lines and glass curtain walls of prewar modernist architecture became the approved and official style of the whole society. Cleanliness, smoothness, transparency, convenience, a complete lack of ornament: the white wall and the glass box became ubiquitous and characteristic of the new modernization. In this context, the object, even the stray commodity, became all the more excessive and out of place in a milieu shorn of ornament (127).

The minimalist tendency was according to Boscagli a result of American modernization and the abstraction of space in post-World war Europe; it was "the fantasy of a total techno-environment where life is perfectly and efficiently run, while objects and machines guarantee the least expenditure of energy for the individual, a key effect of Fordism" (131). As opposed to this "cool space", Boscagli traces a "materialist critique [...] a turn to the everyday as a temporal category [...] and a turn to the question of the organization of space" (127) in the works of Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Guy Debord, and with an aesthetic representation in the works of Georges Perec and Jacques Tati. These critics all seem to Boscagli to answer to the same question: "if all lived space is now commodified, that is, fully managed for the smooth flow of consumers, goods, and money, then what possibilities exist to escape from or challenge this very system?" (128) – each proposing different strategies:

Barthes, in his reading of some characteristic new commodities, searches for the “language-object” as the degree-zero of the object. Baudrillard announces the flatness of “simulation” as the modus of the new order. Debord turns the three-dimensionality of consumer culture into the two-dimensional image of the spectacle (127-128).

The strategies have one thing in common seen from a new materialist point of view; they all seem dedicated to the representative aspect of space, on what Boscagli calls “the modern evaporation of the object. In forms of consumption that are linguistic, ideological, and visual. In [the] abstraction of the object into a sign” (134) and, continuing the typical investigation of space in Modernism, they all focus on the street as “the street becomes a crucial element for all three critics” (134). The street and the figure of the flâneur are also the focus of Boscagli in her analysis of Perec’s novel *Les Choses*. In her reading, Perec becomes a literary representation of Barthes’ myth, as his characters are “caught in the mythology of modernity, that is, in its objects as signs and myths” (165).

In *La Vie mode d’emploi*, Perec directly challenges and questions the minimalist trend of the clean, smooth, and transparent space, a critique that was already apparent in Silvie’s and Jérôme’s dream of a perfect apartment in *Les Choses*. Here, as was the case with Woolf, the typical modern space of the street is substituted with the domestic, though not set in the country as Woolf did, but placed in the middle of Paris. With this choice, Perec engages directly in the material contemporary critique of the organization of space, and he does it not by abstracting the object into a sign, but by describing the very *thingness* of the commodity. Set against the context of glass curtain walls and minimalist clean lines, Perec depicts an apartment building where modern functionalism is out of order as the “vieil ascenseur presque toujours en panne” and where “l’escalier est un lieu vétuste, d’une propreté douteuse” (22). Glass is here exchanged with a “façade en pierres de taille” (23), and things are more than the myths and signs that Boscagli emphasizes in *Les Choses*; indeed, seen in light of the minimalist context, the novel seems to gather the stray commodity. The things that are “out of place in a milieu

shorn of ornament” accumulate and take up whole chapters in *La Vie mode d'emploi*. Woolf, in an era obsessed with the heaviness of steel, a material shaped and mastered by human, turned to the invisible material of air, which she made visible and material by narratizing it as it touched the furniture within a room. Perec does the opposite. In an era occupied with glass, clean lines, transparency, and the efficient consumption of commodities, he describes an overload of things removed from the circulation of consumption. Whereas Woolf narratized space by letting “certain airs” nose around the rooms, there is no room for air in Perec’s description of, for instance, the cellars in *La Vie mode d'emploi*. Here, Woolf’s discreet signs are replaced with the accumulative comma, which piles up one thing after another.

In the five chapters on the cellar, Perec does not narrate space, but describes space according to classification. He thus engages in the functional language of his era; the cellar of Altamont is described through the classification of their supply of food, but by meticulously describing each item of food in a continuous account, and not in the form of a list, the order and function of the classification gets lost, and what is left is just a lot of things:

Le mur de gauche est réservé aux produits alimentaires. D’abord les produits de base: farine, semoule, maïzena, fécule de pommes de terre, tapioca, flocons d’avoine, sucre en morceaux, sucre en poudre, sucre glace, sel, olives, câpres, condiments, grands bocaux de moutarde et de cornichons, bidons d’huile, paquets de d’herbes séchées, paquets de poivre en grains, clous de girofles, champignons lyophilisés, petites boîtes de pelures de truffes (195).

The accumulation of food items forms a chapter stuffed with materials, and the uninterrupted description of one thing next to another for three continuous pages mimic the stuffed storage room of the cellar. Woolf’s use of discreet signs to describe the discreet movements of the air is echoed in Perec’s use of the comma to describe the accumulation of things, even as he is creating a space that does not vibrate; it stores. Through five chapters describing the cellars of the building with no characters present, Perec foregrounds and exhibits the thingness of the commodities. The

storage rooms tell the story of what happens to commodities when the minimalist efficiency has discarded them: they do not disappear but assemble in the basement. Perec here foregrounds not only the background, but the repressed background of the minimalist functionalism. Read in this light, the descriptions of the rooms are not only a matter of language; these things are more than Barthes' signs, as the chapters on the cellar use the functional language of classification as a frame to foreground the materiality of the commodity.

Perec so enters into a critique of modernity in two ways. One, he distances himself from the dominant material trend of the late 1960s: In *La Vie mode d'emploi* the cool, clean glass spaces are replaced by a brick building filled with commodities and furniture; not an efficient space, but a space full of things with no function, and with a story to tell. Here, characters appear through their apartments and through the things that fill their rooms. It might be a human space, but a human space focused on the environment. Here, the two opposing tendencies that Hamon extracted from Zola's descriptions have been gathered, and have almost changed places: The novel illustrates how the individual is subject to environment to the extent that the environment in Perec's novel takes over the narrative. Second, this is caused by Perec's critique of reification. While Barthes, Debord, and Baudrillard reacted against the commodified lived space by reading space as signs, Perec reacts by creating a literature that seeks not to move away from the commodity, but to get closer to it as a material thing. His response to modern reification is commitment to the things of the capitalist world. He does not search for a hidden ideology behind the commodity, nor does he run aground on "the flatness of simulation" turning everything into signs. Instead, he engages with the commodity. He puts forth the commodity as thing: language is here not empty signs referring to a system of their own; it is a way to near reality. According to Perec, language is capable of showing that which we overlook in our everyday lives: it shows the infra-ordinary, the infra-commodity: the thingness of our spatial being in the world – *the background as background*. Perec's novel is thus, as Sartre would have it, *engaging* as it also takes seriously Robbe-

Grillet's wish to introduce non-human entities into the novel: it makes its readers aware of that which constitutes our being in the world; of our space, and it does so by inviting the narratee into the novel, and into the apartment building.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

## 1. Framing the Spatial Background

The environment is that which cannot be indicated directly. We could name it apophatically. It is not-in-the-foreground. It is the background, caught in a relationship with a foreground. As soon as we concentrate on it, it turns into the foreground (Morton 2009:175).

In this dissertation, I have tried to identify ways of grasping the spatial background as it was caught in a relationship with the foregrounding of language in the novel. By combining formal insights from Narratology with a concept of space developed through a New Materialist reading of Heidegger, I have shown how Woolf and Percec in their novels draw background forth *as background*, that is, without turning it into something else. This reading challenges the subject-centric conception of the novel to such a degree that the novel – a genre usually depicting and describing human activity – comes to be a model for a re-evaluation of the human position in the world. This re-evaluation is made visible through Heidegger's relational thinking. With the introduction of his concept of *Ereignis*, things, space, and language are conceived as something actively *happening*. When poetic language is assigned the role of event, we as readers are able to "catch" the background in the moment when it is caught in a relationship with the foreground. From a New Materialist perspective, the novels were shown to provide a language for describing how *matter vibrates* and *space spaces*. They have, in other words, offered a reimagining of the position of the human in a relationally constituted material world. Morton notes that "coming up with a new worldview means dealing with how humans experience their place in the world. Aesthetics thus performs a crucial role, establishing ways of feeling and perceiving this place" (2). For the New Materialist, aesthetics play an essential part in repositioning the subject-object relationship, but what is often overlooked is *how* this is achieved.

To arrive at a new framework which makes it possible to grasp *how* the novels do this, I began by outlining the way that classic Narratology has treated space as an inferior category within the

novel. Because of their subject-centric concept of narrative, Genette, Bal, and Chatman pay no great attention to space in their Narratological work, and, whenever they do mention it, it is as something related- and subject to actions carried out by characters, or subordinated the temporal flow of narration. I then turned to the Narratological relaunch of description in the 1981 edition of *Yale French Studies*, yet there is no significant role for space to play in this movement, either. Zola's anxiety towards description proves itself durable enough that the very act of including description is so precarious that it cannot also bear the inclusion of the suspect category of space. Descriptive Theorists Hamon, Sternberg, and Mosher each emphasize different ways for description to be meaningful, primarily by illuminating and helping the development of the narration of characters. Yet both classic Narratology and Descriptive Theory continue to lack a nuanced understanding of space. Space is regarded either as a diffuse, abstract concept, as is the case for Genette – who categorizes space as everything from rhetorical figures, to the material book, to a library – or as mere setting, as is the case with the bracket in Hamon's formula of description. Still not satisfied with my findings, I turned to Dennerlein and Hoffmann, who each introduce space into their theory of Narratology: Hoffmann with his three modes of spatial representations from *gestimmter Raum* to *Aktionsraum* and *Anschauungsraum*, and Dennerlein through her two concepts of *situationsbezogene Thematisierung* and *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung*. Along with Mosher's concept of *descriptized narration* and *narrativized description*, and Hamon's idea of ways to make descriptions dynamic, these represent attempts to engage both space and description more fully in Narratology, and they proved useful as I carried their concepts with me in a reading for space, .

However, a problem remained: A subject-centric world view continues to dominate these theories. This means that space – even in Dennerlein's *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung* – is something that cannot itself generate a situation. The dichotomy between the active narration of characters' actions and the static description of setting is upheld. To challenge this dichotomy, a more comprehensive re-evaluation of the concept of situation was

necessary. This became possible through Heidegger's concept of *Ereignis*, which I expounded in my second chapter, reading Heidegger through a New Materialist emphasis on an active background. Heidegger's *Ereignis* is something intrinsic to space itself. Consequently, in a concept of space based on Heidegger's terminology – and not on social geography and cognitive psychology, as for Dennerlein – space itself is allowed to extend beyond Dennerlein's static container. With this concept, a notion of space as an event in itself began to take shape in my pursuit; space as something which *gathers* and *relates* things and humans; something that can change a given situation, and break free from the static conception of description. For Heidegger, the exemplary site of this spatial gathering is the work of art. In this way, the work of art transgresses the representational and interpretational status that some parts of Descriptive Theory have ascribed to it. It becomes what Gumbrecht and Casey – via Heidegger – termed *presentation*.

When language is regarded as presentation, it can *foreground the background as background*; Morton describes this as a language that “must resort to oblique rhetorical strategies” (45). But while Morton stresses this quality of language, – as does Heidegger, Gumbrecht, and Casey – I have sought to move beyond this apparent constraint, and I have through my readings of the novels of Perec and Woolf undertaken to analyse *how* this presentation appears. Though Heidegger did indicate the direction by asking *how* through his analysis of the semicolon, and through his own use of verbs to describe the still life by van Gogh, I propose to investigate this further using a Narratological framework. As opposed to Morton's oblique method, mainly formed through aesthetic concepts from other mediums than language, I have tried to face the question of *how* straight on: analysing word-for-word *how* Woolf and Perec foreground space as space. Informed by Narratological as well as New Materialist notions of space, I have tried to develop a new mode of reading for space through close analysis of specific literary works.

A reading for space takes the medium of the novel seriously, but it also reads against the dominant trend in theories of the novel. The canonic reception of both Woolf's and Perec's novels confirms

the tendency outlined in Gumbrecht's critique of Deconstruction and Cultural Studies: a tendency to overemphasize interpretation. This results in a forgetting of the very aspect of the novels that offers a view of the world that does not succumb to meaning: the spatial. My reading for space in the novels of Woolf and Perec has also been a reading of space in their respective bodies of work, including their essays and the literary debates of their times to the extent that they took part in them. I have done this to show that they both – contrary to consensus in their literary reception – dealt at length with space in their reflections upon their own works, and even in their critiques of their contemporary literary milieus. Retracing the concept of space in their essays turned out to mirror the Narratological debate on description and narration, showing that even though space and description are absent from the theory of the novel, both concepts are subject to inquiry by the Modernist writers who use them. As Perec places himself between Sartre's engaged literature and Robbe-Grillet's Nouveau Roman, he partakes in a discussion on the role of description and things in the novel to come. Similarly, Woolf departs from the economic and social descriptions of the house favoured by the Edwardians, while at the same time distancing herself from other Modernist writers and their focus on consciousness and the inner life of the character. In so doing, she presents a vision for a future novel that engages in a more complex reality; one that is not content to merely describe the world of men and women, but which also makes room for non-human entities – such as space. To both of them, then, the novel moves (and ought to attempt to move) beyond the subject-centric position that the theory of the novel has historically fixed it in. It becomes the place that makes “the silent world more real than the world of speech” (Woolf 2004:127) – the genre that through its narrative modes can present the otherwise silent spatial background as a *happening event*. The Edwardians (to Woolf) and the Nouveau Roman (to Perec) presented artificial spaces that no character could inhabit, prompting Woolf and Perec to present in their own works – in different ways – liveable, living spaces.

## 2. A Sketch for a Reading for Space

A reading for space, as a *foregrounding of the background as background*, can consist of the following elements:

Text editions	Manuscripts, notes
Typography and punctuation	Comma, semicolon, dot, bracket, italics
Reevaluation of narration/description	New concept of event: narration of space, description through verbs
Superficial reading	Resting on the surface: close reading of the kind of space, its materials, what it consists of
Narrator	Narrator as empty deictic center, demonstrative referring, diegetic, extra-diegetic, meta-diegetic
Re-evaluation of anthropomorphism	Ways of creating spatial movement of non-human entities
Kinds of spaces	Urban, domestic, green, consumerist

My readings of Woolf and Perceval began in their manuscripts. In that way, I have tried to literally include the background for their writings – and indeed, in their notes and lists from the manuscripts, both writers affirm a spatial interest that has otherwise gone unnoticed in their works: Woolf through the figure of the corridor describing “Time Passes”, and Perceval through the overload of material items on his “Tableau générale des Listes”, and through the structure of the novel as a “plan de l’immeuble”.

What the manuscripts further indicated was a special awareness of typographic markers within the novels themselves, perhaps most immediately visible in the italicized interludes of *The Waves*, separated on a material level from the rest of novel, thus drawing attention to both the materiality of language and to the space they

depict. Percec goes one step further. Contrary to the unanimous reception of his work, I argued that his use of the materiality of language points to something beyond itself; it presents a material space, and his small text *Still Life/Style leaf* is emblematic in this respect. This awareness led me to a reading of the use of punctuation in these novels; inspired by Heidegger's reading of the semicolon in the poems of George, Hölderlin, and Trakl. I found that Woolf used semicolon and comma to present space as *happening*. The non-verbal signs allowed her to depict movement on a spatial level without focusing on "who" is acting. Her use of paratactic sentences spatialized language in a way that let many things happen at once with no hierarchical leveling; letting one thing relate to another thing without a character perceiving it or using it. This is markedly different from the temporal linearity of a narrative told in hypotactic sentences, consisting of chains of actions set in motion by characters, focusing on cause and effect. With this distinct use of punctuation, Woolf depicts what happens in a house without any human characters present. Typically emphasized in regard to Woolf's use of punctuation is her distinct use of brackets, but while most readings of her work – centred as they are on human activity – only read inside the brackets in "Time Passes", a reading for space, based on Narratology and a New Materialist reading of Heidegger, can grasp that which surrounds the brackets. Woolf thus turns Hamon's formula upside down and places the human subject in brackets. In this respect, her novels clearly fulfill the ambition of Bennett's request for a new "flat" ontology. In Woolf's novels, space appears outside the bracket *as narrative*: here, time is passing and present – as made apparent by her use of chronological markers. Furthermore, she temporalizes her modes of description. Woolf challenges both Dennerlein's and Mosher's concepts in that space in her novels has the ability to change a situation, create events – proving that space can be narrated as something happening on its own.

For Percec, semicolon and comma are part of his method for accumulation and the construction of lists, but also a way to invite the reader inside, allowing her simultaneously to enter the building and the novel. If Woolf can be said to have turned Hamon's

formula upside down, Perec's novel to an even greater extent challenges traditional Narratological focus on plot and characters – indeed, space and description take up most of *La vie mode d'emploi*.

In addition to my reading of typography and punctuation, I would argue that my readings have also made visible the need for a new understanding of narration and description. Based on Heidegger's concepts of thing and space, space in Woolf's and Perec's novels emerge as both narration and description. In these novels, space presented on its own, without active characters present, is not merely static description. In Woolf's novels, space is presented as *happening* with the same characteristics that Narratology ascribe to narration. I would argue that in order to analyse this kind of space, we must look closely at the way space is described: whether through adjectives, as Hamon proposed, or through verbs and chronological markers, forming a space that relates and gathers rather than being an inert setting. What has become clear to me through this New Materialist analysis of the novels is that we need a new concept of situation and event; one that allows other entities than humans the agency to perform and create *events*. At the same time, viewed through a Narratological lens, the novels outline a possible way to present *vibrant matter*, a way to *foreground the background as background*. To this end, Woolf, especially, favours anthropomorphism, which for her becomes a way of presenting movement between material things. By making use of anthropomorphism, Woolf makes visible the relational aspect of space: turning perspective towards the non-human, while still employing a human vocabulary to depict what itself is not human, without letting the *thingness* of the thing disappear.

A reading for space calls for a departure from the dominant mode of searching for hidden meaning. Instead of reading for what spaces symbolize, or say about the character, or provide as clues to the narrative plot, a spatial reading must stay on the surface of what is described. In the case of Perec, this means not reading the descriptions of Winckler's apartment as a characterization of Winckler, or as a clue for his revenge against Bartlebooth, but instead reading the apartment left behind as foregrounding of what Perec terms the *infra-ordinary*. That is, the novel gives evidence to all

the things that are backgrounded in other plot- and character-driven novels. It is thus important to pay close attention to *how* and *what* is described, to the things left behind. In another example, the apartment after the party, a reading for plot would search for traces from (the human event of) the party, but Perec has created a space that might, in Hoffmann's terms, be called an *Aktionsraum* turned into an *Anschauungsraum*. Yet while Hoffmann focuses on the way that this space can be reintegrated into the narrative whole, Perec's novel offers no such integration, and stays on the surface level of things present in the room. Perec presents what is present; he shares with Woolf the will to assert that an empty room, certain airs, and darkness are material appearances that do not have to be turned into symbols for something other than what they are. My reading for space has been a study of how Woolf and Perec turn no-thing into some-thing and allow the infra-ordinary background to emerge.

To understand *how*, I sought to reconceptualize the narrator through Banfield's concept of an empty deictic center. With her concept, it became possible to grasp how Bernard's question of "how to describe the world seen without a self" was expressed done in the novel. Following the lead of Heidegger's understanding of language as *Gelassenheit* – a "letting be" – the concept of an empty deictic centre allowed the reading of novelistic language to shift away from a subject-centred understanding of deixis onto a demonstrative referring, where only the here and now was presented, with no "I" at its centre. In this view, novelistic language can present an impersonal subjectivity, where language figures as something other than ego-centric. Through demonstrative referring, it was possible for me to focus on how space was presented as something on its own in the novels, even indicating a possible solution to what Bennett terms "the charge of performative self-contradiction" (Bennett 2010:ix), that is, to regard language and especially the novel as a medium capable of showing something beyond the subject. Demonstrative referring is repeated in Perec's novel, but he also introduces what Nünning terms extra-diegetic and metadiegetic ways of describing, as he places a narrator and a narratee within the space of the novel, letting their bodily

position in the room structure the description. Contrary to the attitude of *Gelassenheit*, Perec makes the reader aware of the act of communication taking place between narrator and narratee, thus pointing to the medium of language itself.

Finally, my readings identified a striking use of materiality in both writers' works. In contrast to the dominant materials trends of their contemporary contexts, Woolf and Perec each introduce new materials as central to their work: Woolf favours the physicality of air opposite the predominance of steel in Modernism, and Perec piles up bricks and masses of things without function in opposition to the smooth, clean spaces of Functionalism. Furthermore, both accentuate the domestic, in contrast to the traditional emphasis of urbanity in Modernism. They exchange the street for the interior of a building, and in Woolf's case, the interior room is connected with the outdoor environment, giving voice to a green Modernism, otherwise absent from the canon. Likewise, Perec's novel engages directly in the material reality of consumer society – in his critique of reification he has created a literature that does not seek to move away from the commodity, but instead to get closer to it as a material thing imbedded in material language.

Having identified these elements, it becomes possible to revisit other novels that do not necessarily foreground space as unequivocally as the works of Woolf and Perec do. I propose that close readings of surfaces – using the method that I have outlined above – may prove space to be something more than just a setting for the story in many novels, as evidenced in the case of Zola and Robbe-Grillet. Through a combination of Narratology and a New Materialist reading of Heidegger, my readings of Woolf and Perec have not only indicated a repositioning and reimagining of the human subject as to present a relational ontology, but with this new view, a fresh mode of reading has been sketched, which calls for a re-evaluation of the way we understand and analyse novels, taking space into account on equal terms with time, plot, and character.

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## Dansk Resume

### At læse rummet

#### Et møde mellem narratologi og ny materialisme i Virginia Woolfs og Georges Perecs værker

Alle romaner udspiller sig i et rum, men hvad sker der, når dette rum ikke længere blot er en ren og skær kulisse for karakterers handlinger? Når rummet selv går ind og bliver en begivenhed? Dette er spørgsmålene, som min afhandling forsøger at svare på. At sådanne rum rent faktisk findes, er Virginia Woolfs og Georges Perecs romaner et eksempel på. Her træder rummet ud af sin rolle som kulisse og præsenteres som et relationelt rum, der samler både karakterer og ting.

Gennem en kombination af ny materialisme og narratologi forsøger jeg at udvikle en ny læsemetode, som kan indfange *hvad* der sker i disse rum og *hvordan* det fremstilles. Gennem denne teoretiske konstellation tilføjes de ellers adskilte fagområder begge noget nyt. På den ene side gives ny materialisme, gennem læsninger af romanerne, et sprog for, hvordan ikke-menneskelige ting kan fremstilles i et menneskeligt sprog uden at det forvandles til et statisk objekt, som mennesket står overfor. Gennem romanernes narrative form kan rum og ting derimod stå frem som det Jane Bennett kalder *vibrant matter*, altså noget der aktivt møder mennesket, noget der forbinder og samler. På den anden side, idet rummet nu opfattes som noget aktivt, nedbrydes narratologiens skelnen mellem narration af karakterers handlinger i et tidsligt forløb og beskrivelse af et statisk rum. I denne dikotomi er rum og beskrivelse altid blevet stedmoderligt behandlet i forhold til en privilegering af tid og plot. Min afhandling forsøger således gennem læsninger af romaner af Woolf og Perec at gentænke forholdet mellem rum og menneske, mellem subjekt og objekt, og på denne baggrund at skitsere en ny måde at læse romaner på, hvor rum i sig selv tages alvorligt.

Afhandlingen opnår altså sin teoretiske profil gennem en diskussion med både narratologi og ny materialisme samt med de to

forfatteres værker og respektive reception. Det overordnede argument udgør derfor en glidende bevægelse, hvor jeg ved hjælp af en diskussion af henholdsvis narratologi og ny materialisme udstikker en tænkning af sprog og rum, som dernæst bliver konfronteret med romanerne af Woolf og Perec. Mit standpunkt er således, at det er ud fra en nærlæsning af romanerne, at en ny læsemetode med baggrund i narratologi og ny materialisme kan udvikles og skitseres. Parallelt hertil er afhandlingen bygget op af fire kapitler.

I første kapitel sporer jeg, hvordan narratologien har overset rummet, da fokuset på tid, form og plot er baseret på en teori, der har subjektet i centrum. På denne baggrund skelnes der skarpt mellem narration og deskription, hvor rum ofte placeres i den sidste kategori og heri forstås som en statisk baggrundskulisse, som noget, læseren kan springe over i begæret efter plottets videre udvikling. Jeg viser således først, hvordan rummet er blevet behandlet i klassisk narratologi, sådan som den kommer til udtryk hos Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal og Seymour Chatman. Alle tre lader ikke rummet spille en større rolle i deres teorier og når det inddrages, er det altid underlagt karakternes handlen eller er af mindre betydning end det tidslige forløb.

Jeg vender mig derfor i næste del mod den genopdagelse af deskriptionsbegrebet, som sker med Philippe Hamon og 1981-udgaven af *Yale French Studies*. Her forsøger Hamon, Meir Sternberg og Harold S. Mosher med flere at argumentere for deskriptionens betydning i narratologien, men måden de opvurderer deskription på, er ved at lade den være betydningsfuld, det vil sige, ved at vise dens relevans for tolkning af karakterer og plot. Derved overses det rumlige aspekt ved deskription: når rummet beskrives opnår det betydning, fordi det kan sige noget om karakterer eller være en nøgle til at forstå, hvad der videre vil ske i plottet. Rummet som noget vigtigt i sig selv overses. Herved gentages en typisk tendens i teorier om romanen, hvor især Émile Zolas forbehold overfor miljøbeskrivelser kan fremhæves som eksemplarisk, idet disse – ifølge Zola – tilsyneladende altid skal være underlagt karakterer. Gennem en ny materialistisk teori bliver det muligt at revidere dette forhold og netop lade romanen være stedet, hvor rummet kan vises

som relationelt og altså ikke underlagt mennesket. Vejen for sådan en revision udstikkes af Edward. S. Casey og Werner Wolf, der begge forsøger med en interdisciplinær tilgang til deskription at gå udover den dominerende subjekt-centrerede forståelse af deskription. Især Caseys begreb om *presentation* giver en mulighed for at blive ved selve rumbeskrivelsen uden nødvendigvis at henføre den til noget andet.

Der findes flere dog i grunden perifere forsøg på at genindskrive rummet i narratologien, særlig indenfor den tyske narratologi. Jeg behandler derfor i tredje del af første kapitel Gerhard Hoffmanns og Katrin Dennerleins teorier, som begge med begreber som *gestimmter Raum*, *Aktionsraum* og *Anschauungsraum* såvel som *situationsbezogene Thematisierung* og *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung* åbner op for rummets indtræden i narratologien. De tilbyder, sammen med Moshers begreber *descriptized narration* og *narrativized description* samt Hamons ide om måder at gøre beskrivelser dynamiske på, måder, rummet kan læses på. Problemet er dog stadig, at de nævnte begrebsligheder alle er domineret af en subjekt-centreret forståelse. Det vil sige, at selv i Dennerleins tematisering af rum, er rum forsat underlagt mennesket og altså ikke noget der i sig selv kan skabe plot eller situationer.

Hvad der derfor er behov for, er en nytænkning af rum hinsides subjektet, hvilket delvis kan opnås gennem ny materialismens flade ontologi, men efter min overbevisning endnu bedre lader sig løse gennem en sammenknytning af ny materialisme med Martin Heideggers tingsfænomenologi. Dette er emnet for afhandlingens andet kapitel, som er et forsøg på at læse Heidegger gennem ny materialismens fokus på tingenes agens, som samtidig viser, hvordan Heideggers sammentænkning af rum, ting og sprog forbinder den baggrund, som ny materialisme efterspørger, tæt sammen med kunstværket. Gennem Heideggers begreb om *Ereignis* bliver rum, ting og sprog noget relationelt – noget, der *skeer*. Rummet bliver således en begivenhed i sig selv, der samler mennesket og stedet, hvor denne begivenhed kan træde frem, bliver for Heidegger i kunstværket. Kunstværket lader tingen og rummet træde frem i deres materialitet. Det åbner for et blik på ting og rum, som i menneskets vanlig-brugende omgang med verden overses. På

denne måde overskrider kunstværket og videre romanen sin kun repræsentationelle og fortolkningsmæssige status, som deskriptionsteorien tilskrev den. Den bliver en åbning af verden, en *presentation*, som Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht og Edward S. Casey videre formulerer. Modsat ny materialisme, der ofte bruger litteratur som et slags vidne eller som et udelukkende tematisk terræn, så forsøger jeg i det følgende kapitel at tage litteraturen som medium i betragtning. Ikke kun at se på *hvad* litteraturen fremstiller, men også *hvordan* den gør det.

Tredje og fjerde kapitel af afhandlingen består således af en undersøgelse af rummets rolle i Virginia Woolfs og Georges Perecs værker. Læsningerne er her informeret af den teoretiske ramme, men videreudvikler og udfordrer den også. Ved begge forfattere er deres essays inddraget for at se på, hvordan de også selv tænker rum. Modsat receptionen af deres værker, medtænker begge forfattere nemlig rum i deres forståelse af romanen. Dette sker i en kritisk dialog med deres egen samtid. Woolf kritiserer på den ene side den tidligere Edwardianske generation af forfattere for en rent økonomisk og derfor livsløs beskrivelse af huse, mens hun på den anden side heller ikke godtager modernisternes rent subjektive og indre gengivelse af omverden. Det, hun ønsker for fremtidens roman, er en roman, som også tager andre dele af virkeligheden med end den mellem menneskelige, altså implicit de rumlige og materielle omgivelser. Samme tendens ses hos Péc. Han modsætter sig på den ene side Jean-Paul Sartres rent politiske og indholdsmæssige engagerede litteratur, der kun henvender sig til og beskriver menneskelige forhold og på den anden side tager han afstand fra Robbe-Grillet's nye roman, hvis adskillelse af menneske og omgivelser, indhold og form, skaber et abstrakt og ikke-levende rum. Péc ønsker sig i stedet en engageret roman, der i et materielt sprog viser den materielle virkelighed, en roman, der viser det i hverdagen oversete *infra-ordinære*.

Med dette essayistisk-kritiske udgangspunkt læser jeg videre efter rummet i deres romaner. Først inddrages deres manuskripter, for også her viser det sig, at begge har tænkt deres romaner rumligt. Dette ses gennem figurer og lister, det vil sige elementer af sproget, der går udover det betydende ord. Selvom romanteorien ikke lade

rummet spille nogen større rolle, noget som også afspejles i receptionen af begges værker, så tænker romanforfatterne altså selv rumligt: både i essays og i udformningen af deres værker. Med dette fokus på andre elementer af sproget end de betydende ord, læser jeg – inspireret af Heideggers fremlæsning af semikolon i tyske digte – hvordan de to forfattere bruger typografi og tegnsætning til at lade rummet præsenteres som noget i sig selv, relationelt og samlende. Herigennem bliver det muligt at se hvordan rummet i *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* og *La Vie mode d'emploi* uden nogen karakterer til stede stadig skaber bevægelse og kan ændre situationer. Ved hjælp af diskrete tegn og det Ann Banfield kalder *demonstrative referring* vises rummet som begivenhed. Herved udfordres Hoffmanns og Dennerleins begreber og modstillingen mellem narration og deskription nedbrydes. Romanerne viser på hver deres måde rummet som rum, det vil sige, som noget relationelt samlende. Her forgrundes baggrunden som baggrund. Det bliver nu karaktererne, der samles af rummet og der, hvor karaktererne er fraværende, vises det, hvordan forskellige materialiter forbindes. Woolf gør dette, ved at lade luft gennemstrømme det forladte sommerhus i *To the Lighthouse*. Hos Perec træder baggrunden frem gennem de forladte værelser, som uden karakterer beskrives som tomme, men gennem en læsning af rum er tomheden netop ikke tom, men materiel, det vil sige, at her træder rummet og de ting, der er til stede, frem i relationen til hinanden. Ved at se på hvordan rummet træder frem i disse romaner, vises et andet rum end det, andre forfattere og filosoffer var optaget af i samtiden: begge introducerer hjemmet i en ellers urban-fikseret modernitet med gaden som dens emblematiske eksempel. Derudover tager Woolf luften ind som modsætning til samtidens optagethed af stål, pegende mod en grøn modernisme. Ligesom Perec præsenterer en ophobning af varer og ikke-funktionelle ting i en æra optaget af glatte funktionelle rum.

Min afhandling udpeger og udvikler således gennem læsninger af rum i romanerne af Woolf og Perec et nyt vokabular, hvorigennem rum kan spille en ny rolle i romananalyser. De afgørende begrebslige korrektioner og præciseringer sker gennem en ny forståelse af narration og deskription, hvorved rum som

kategori endelig løsrives fra dets reducering til en blot og bar kulisser, således som narratologien ofte har udlagt det. Denne korrektur sker ved hjælp af en fundering af ny materialisme på Heideggers begreb om *Ereignis*, hvorved en vej til at lade den rumlige baggrund træde frem som baggrund opstår, sådan som også romanforfatterne konkret viser.

## English Summary

### Reading for Space

#### An Encounter between New Materialism and Narratology in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Georges Perec

Every novel unfolds in a space, yet what happens when this space is no longer mere setting for actions performed by characters? When space itself becomes an event? These are the questions that my dissertation tries to answer. The novels of Virginia Woolf and Georges Perec bear witness to the fact that such spaces do indeed exist. In these novels, space moves beyond its role as setting and is presented as a relational space that gathers both characters and things.

Through a combination of New Materialism and Narratology, I have tried to develop a new way of reading that can capture *what* happens in these spaces, and *how* this is presented. Through this theoretical constellation, the two otherwise very different areas of research both gain something. On the one hand, through readings of the novels, New Materialism is provided a new language, that allows non-human things to be presented in a human language without being turned into static objects that humans face. Through the narrative form of the novel, things and space can be presented as what Jane Bennett calls *vibrant matter*, that is, as something actively encountering the human; something that relates and gathers. On the other hand, when space is considered active, the narratological separation between a narration of character's actions in a temporal flow and a description of a static space is challenged. Through readings of novels by Woolf and Perec, I attempt to rethink the relationship between space and human, and on this background sketch a new mode of reading novels, where space in itself is taken into account.

The dissertation finds its theoretical bearings through a discussion of both Narratology and New Materialism, combined with the works of Woolf and Perec and their critical reception. My overall argument thus follows a gradual movement, where I, with

the help of a discussion of both Narratology and New Materialism, present a thinking on space and language, which then is challenged and expanded by the novels of Woolf and Perec. My assertion is that a new mode of reading based on Narratology and New Materialism must arise from a close reading of the novels. To do so, my dissertation is divided into four chapters.

In the first chapter, I trace how space has been overlooked in Narratology, as its focus on time and plot is based on a theory with the human subject at its centre. Narratologists thus separate narration from description, placing space in the latter category, and as a result regard it as a static setting; as something the reader can skip in her desire for development in the plot. I first discuss how space was treated in Classic Narratology, represented by Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, and Seymour Chatman. Their theories share a view of space as a category of inferior importance, and whenever space is mentioned, it is always subordinate to the actions performed by characters, or of lesser significance than time.

In the next part of this chapter, I turn to the rehabilitation of description, as it occurred with Philippe Hamon and the 1981 issue of *Yale French Studies*. Here Hamon, Meir Sternberg, and Harold S. Mosher among others argue for the significance of description to Narratology, but their rehabilitation is centred on showing its relevance in regard to the interpretation of character and plot. And by so doing, they fail to consider the spatial aspects of description. If they consider space meaningful, it is because it may reveal something about the characters, or is regarded as a key to predict the developments in the plot. Space as something important in itself is overlooked. In this way, they repeat a pattern from the theory of the novel – Émile Zola's reservations towards descriptions of environment are emblematic of a conviction that space must always be at the service of the characters. New materialist theory makes it possible to re-evaluate this relationship, furthermore allowing the novel be the place where space can be shown as something relational; something not governed by subject-centred activity. The path for such a revision is laid out by Edward S. Casey and Werner Wolf, who both pursue the matter through an interdisciplinary approach to description. They move beyond the

dominating subject-centred understanding of description; especially Casey's concept of *presentation* proves an opportunity to concentrate on spatial description without expecting it to mean something else.

There have been several attempts to restore the role of space in Narratology, particularly within a German context. In the third part of this first chapter, I thus turn to Gerhard Hoffmann's and Katrin Dennerlein's theories, who with their concepts *gestimmter Raum*, *Aktionsraum*, and *Anschauungsraum* (Hoffmann) as well as *situationsbezogene Thematisierung* and *nicht-situationsbezogene Thematisierung* (Dennerlein) opens a field through which space can be included in Narratology. They offer – along with Mosher's concepts *descriptized narration* and *narrativized description*, as well as Hamon's idea of dynamic descriptions – new modes of reading space. However, to my inquiry, these concepts are still limited by their subject-centred understanding of situations. Even Dennerlein's thematized space is a space subject to humans, and not something that in itself can create plot or movement.

To break new ground, a rethinking of space beyond the subject is necessary. The flat ontology of New Materialism offers a foundation for this re-evaluation, but I argue for also including vital concepts from Martin Heidegger's thing-phenomenology to form a rewarding concept of agency. This is the topic for the second chapter of this dissertation, in which I attempt to read Heidegger through New Materialism's focus on the agency of things. This reading indicates that Heidegger's intertwining of space, thing and language provides an answer to New Materialism's question of how to let the *background appear as background*. Through Heidegger's concept of *Ereignis*, space, things, and language become something relational; something that *happens*. Space is seen as an event in itself, which gathers humans – according to Heidegger, this gathering emerges in the work of art. The work of art lets thing and space emerge in their materiality. It opens a perspective on things and space that is disregarded in the conventional use-oriented relation to the world. In this way, the artwork – the novel – transgresses the representational and interpretive status attributed to it by the theory of description. The novel becomes an opening of the world, or a *presentation*, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Edward S. Casey phrase

it. Contrary to New Materialism, which often regards literature as a witness, or as a purely thematic field, I try in the chapters that follow to take the medium of literature into account, that is, to not only analyse *what* the novels present, but also *how* they do it.

And so, in the third and fourth chapters, I pursue my study of the role of space in the works of Virginia Woolf and Georges Perec. My readings are informed by the theoretical framework, but they also continually develop and challenge it. Essays by both authors are included to further shed light on how they themselves think about space. Contrary to consensus in the critical reception of Woolf and Perec, I argue that space is central to both authors in their understanding of the novel, and show how they each engaged in dialogue with their respective contemporaries on this topic. Woolf objected to the former generation of writers – the Edwardians – and their purely economic and thus lifeless depiction of houses, while also rejecting the purely subjective rendering of the environment by the Modernists. She wishes for a novel of the future that includes other aspects of reality than merely the human, that is, she wants a novel that also makes room to encompass spatial and material surroundings. The same tendency can be seen in Perec: He opposes Jean-Paul Sartre's political and content-oriented engaged literature that only addresses human relations, but he also distances himself from the Nouveau Roman of Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose separation of human and surroundings, form and content, creates an abstract, dead space. Perec wants an engaged novel that in a material language shows a material reality; a novel that shows the neglected *infra-ordinary* of the everyday.

With this essayistic-critical point of departure, I then move on to a reading for space. First, manuscripts for Woolf's and Perec's novels are included, to demonstrate the spatial grounding of their work through figures and lists, that is, through elements of language that are non-verbal and that thus surpass language as meaning. Countering the absence of space in the theory of the novel and in the reception of these novelists, I argue that spatiality is at the heart of both of their methods, as is evidenced by their essays, as well as in the construction of their novels. Focusing on other elements of language than the purely meaningful words, my reading – inspired

by Heidegger's reading of the semicolon in German poems – explores how Woolf and Perec make use of typography and punctuation to let space be presented as something in itself; as it gathers and relates. My readings make it possible to see how a space without characters in *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *La Vie mode d'emploi* can still create movement and alter situations. Through discreet signs, and what Ann Banfield calls *demonstrative referring*, space appears as an event. This challenges the concepts by Hoffmann and Dennerlein, and the divide between narration and description is torn down. In different ways, these novels show space as space, that is, as something that gathers and relates. Here, *background is foregrounded as background*, and the characters are gathered by space; when characters are absent, it is shown how different materialities are connected. Woolf accomplishes this by letting the air permeate the abandoned house in *To the Lighthouse*. In Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi*, the background is shown through the abandoned rooms. Through a reading for space, the emptiness of the rooms becomes something other than empty; it appears as a material presence in its own right; that is, space and things appear materially in relation to each other. Woolf and Perec, focusing on how space makes itself visible in these novels, put forth a different category of space than those preoccupying their contemporaries in literature and philosophy: Both favour the domestic in a modernity otherwise fixated on urban spaces. Woolf uses the discreet lightness of air as opposed to the contemporary preoccupation with steel, whereby she points towards a green Modernism. In turn, Perec presents an accumulation of goods and non-functional things in an era preoccupied with smooth, functional spaces.

By reading for space in the novels of Woolf and Perec, my dissertation identifies and further develops a vocabulary through which space can assume a new position in the analysis of novels. The decisive conceptual corrections are achieved through a new understanding of narration and description, whereby space as category is finally released from its reduction to mere setting. This correction grows from a connection between New Materialism and Heidegger's concept of *Ereignis*, through which a new way of letting

the spatial background appear as background is made possible in the novels.