THE SUICIDAL SELF

Cristina NICOLAE[1]

Abstract

The perspective we focus on in the present article takes account of the individual's (in)ability to externalize the inner world (which contains the subjective interpretation of the outside world) and the outcomes of such a process or of its absence. It is a process that acknowledges otherness (be it the latent other within/the shadow – Jung's archetype, or alterity outside the self). Yet it also implies its acceptance or rejection, a means of dealing with the inner turmoil, a path to self-discovery and improvement, counterbalanced by its dark side understood as self-exposure that might result in the dissolution of the self. The Woolfian character we have chosen for our analysis, Rhoda (*The Waves*), mirrors the destructive outcomes of such a denial.

Keywords: otherness, self-exposure, fear, alienation, disembodiment

A large majority of Virginia Woolf's characters are defined by fear and a sense of alienation, rooted in what we define as self-fear — fear of their own quest. It consumes them and leads, more or less, to self-exposure, which Woolf understands as a loss of self. They fear life itself, love (being loved and/or loving the other - both hypostases are related to exposure and conversion, the change of the individual's boundaries of the self as a result of the other's influence/felt intrusion), the passing of time, death, the Other (otherness within — their own identity, masculine and feminine identity taken into account; and otherness without – the intruder depriving the individual of his sense of self, altering the identity quest), the emptiness of the heart, loneliness, existential failure.

Her characters' fear mirrors Woolf's own approach to life, to a self she is painfully aware she cannot control as far as insanity (the other within) and external influences are considered, a perspective on a life she cannot frame on her own terms entirely. Reconsidering her life (past and present) by means of creation becomes a way of quieting down anxieties, of facing and sometimes conquering her fear. Her struggle with fear is one she translates in terms of the written discourse, an act of creation that would draw the contour of her self defined by a continuous existential crisis.

We see in *The Waves* the image of the self *par excellence*, a self whose mobility evokes the image of a diamond's facets suggested in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Practicing her "surgical eye" (in Woolf, 1982: 166) on human nature, Woolf transforms these facets into characters, they are given character contour and depth, and the self is revealed as a bringing together of the restless selves.

The novel begins, in our reading, with the image of unity, of a primordial wholeness in which the sea and the sky are one, not yet differentiated ("the sea was indistinguishable from the sky" [*W*3]), prefiguring the search of the six characters for entirety, for being a whole again, not apart, but together, a permanent, harrowing longing

[1] Assistant, PhD., „Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş

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for the certainty and sense of stability this unity provides. The reference to the four elements (water, air, earth, fire) re-emphasizes the suggestion of a world that is self-sufficient, here that of childhood. However, this image of the sea that cannot be distinguished from the sky may as well underline the characters' struggle for establishing the edges of their own identity, for shaping the boundaries that would tell them who they are and where the Other begins.

Starting from the relation between the four classical elements and the four temperaments (sanguine - air, choleric - fire, phlegmatic – water, and melancholic - earth), we employ Fand's (1999: 55-62) analysis of the characters in *The Waves* (yet we present only a selection of the arguments Fand enumerates). She asserts that the poetic language of the characters' inner discourse, indicative of their dominant traits, is reminiscent of the doctrine of the four basic elements. Accordingly, Bernard is referred to as being related to air; he is the chief spokesperson, says Fand, and breath is related to the act of 'speaking' and "to the 'spirit' of the thing, which he tries to capture in phrase-bubbles" (op.cit.55).

Jinny represents the element of fire (her perpetual motion, her passion and energy) and Rhoda is related to water (op.cit.56-57). Fand adds here the assertion that the opposition between Rhoda and Jinny is the opposition between fire and water (Jinny wanting to stand out, "a perpetual day self", as Fand labels her, always in motion, while Rhoda needs to hide, desires night and sleep). The other characters, Susan, Neville and Louis, are related to earth (op.cit. 58-61).

As seen in the sequence of perceptions/events following Jinny's kissing Louis, Rhoda, just like Bernard, is caught in the ***structure of imagination***, in this act of creating one's own reality on the fragments of the outside reality; the petals she is "rocking to and fro in her brown basin" (*W* 12) become a fleet "swimming from shore to shore", a twig becomes "a raft for a drowning sailor", a head of Sweet Alice becomes a lighthouse. Solitude frames the time and space when given boundaries disappear and imagination gives rise to creation and the feeling of being trapped is obliterated: "I have a short time alone", says Rhoda, "I have a short space of freedom" (*W* 12).

For Rhoda, the childhood experience carries a different approach to reality; Miss Hudson's lesson is a source of terror, Rhoda cannot keep up with the others and, in her case, the difference she senses is translated in feeling outside the world "looped" in the figure she is drawing: "the world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, 'Oh save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!'" (*W* 15). The (written) figures represent a language she cannot understand, a rigid world she is not part of, an identity that leaves her disembodied, as Louis 'reflects back': "and as she stares as the chalk figures, her mind lodges in those white circles; it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone. They have no meaning for her. She has no answer for them. She has no body as the others have" (*W*15). The meaning is missing, there is no answer, there is no communication to bridge the gap. Rhoda's sense of self is altered by her inability to understand figures, to see the meaning of this language, prefiguring her inability to

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understand and accept life/reality/the others. The individual is trapped in a space that accelerates the dissolution of the self.

We perceive this disembodiment as implying an identity without contour, one that cannot sustain itself. It is, in fact, not assuming this fragile identity and the desire to be somebody else, one with a stronger, clearer identity contour.

Going to bed, Rhoda "puts off" her desire to borrow/copy somebody else's identity ("my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny" [*W* 19]), an identity that can stay "upright" without the fear of being "knocked against and damaged" (*W* 19). She feels safe as she lies on the mattress, and it is now that her mind is free to build on the structure of imagination: "out of me my mind can pour". She can no longer fall into the darkness of her fear, of her insecurities with her self, of her anxieties: "Now I cannot sink; cannot altogether fall through the thin sheet now. Now I spread my body on this frail mattress and hang suspended. I am above the earth now. I am no longer upright, to be knocked against and damaged. All is soft, and bending" (*W* 19). Falling/sinking is associated with outward reality, even with sleep.

Perceived from the perspective of these patterns of thought, the world of childhood bears some dramatic notes; the depth of the feelings and the perception of the outside reality surprise the reader through the contrast with the expected world of innocence, of joy. The Games are given an aura of solitude, which, in most of the cases, seems to be longed for, not only as being triggered by the character's felt difference from the others, but also as a medium for the manifestation of the self.

The second part of the novel refers in its descriptive passage to another time of the day, the sun having risen higher, life and death implied by the use of the buds that "split asunder and shook out flowers" and the waves breaking, falling "with muffled thuds, like logs falling, on the shore" (*W*20). This part of the novel depicts the six characters' days at school. Their leaving home, their way to a new setting, and the time spent there are again understood in terms of manifestation of the self, each character's internalization of these experiences being again rendered in particularizing manner. A time of unknown follows, hence stability seems shattered and, to some of them, fear comes to frame their journey that reveals a fragmentation of the self (of both the seven-sided one and the individual one).

Rhoda's sense of self is suppressed at the school she has been sent to as well. She feels she has lost her identity in this place where uniformity is promoted (suggested in the text by the use of the "brown serge" everybody is wearing) and identity becomes amorphous: "But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity" (*W* 23). Rhoda resents mirrors; she *hides* her face, she does not want to see its reflection since this would be a proof of it being real, not a created self, but the real one – the one the others can see ("I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face" [*W* 31]). Her self is defined/built in the imaginary world she creates when there is silence, when there is sleep, a world in which she can "excite their admiration" (*W* 31). She denies the real, where the self is not built but suppressed, where

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she needs to be somebody else, to do what the others do in order to be accepted and to function:

> 'That is my face,' said Rhoda, 'in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder – that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; […] they laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it. (*W* 31)

She needs to be acknowledged by the others, not ignored or looked down on. Frustration defines her self, a violent emotion, as we are told. But fear is present even when she is alone, fear of falling into "nothingness", of dissipating; she needs to 'collect herself', to reinhabit her body – the imaginary world she feels safe in is also one that makes her come off her body:

> I am rocked from side to side by the violence of my emotion. […] I leap high to excite their admiration. At night, in bed, I excite their complete wonder. I often die pierced with arrows to win their tears. […] Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body. (*W* 31)

Rhoda needs darkness: it is at night-time that she becomes 'alive', that she can make herself up at her own will, without being interrupted; to her, continuity is occasioned precisely by this time of stillness. She feels her body full of emotions, "warm" and "porous", "unsealed" and "incandescent" (*W* 41-42). She needs to open up, she needs to share, to tell about herself but "to whom?" Her need remains unanswered.

Briggs (2005: 250) asserts that Rhoda and Louis are characterized by a spirituality that is deeper than the others': having lived other lives, Louis, promotes the issue of reincarnation, of "a historical continuum, of eternal cycles of recurrence"; Rhoda's mysticism is a negative one and her "to whom?" suggests her "search for an absent God" (ibid.).

In the third part of the novel, Rhoda's awareness of her real body is carefully insisted on. Rhoda evokes the image of a victim under permanent assault; she feels the people "seize" her, she needs to hide or to be hidden, always edging behind somebody; truth needs to be concealed as well, masks worn. The "clumsy", "ill-fitting" body she is trapped into makes her feel "exposed", "pinned down", "the most naked" of them all (*W* 78-79). Solitude is again approached in relation to Rhoda's self, and we further relate it to the individual's feeling of power and control over one's own self: it is when being alone that Rhoda feels in control of her reality, of her "fleet of ships", which results in a feeling of safety and being one, whereas among others she feels fragmented, not in control but vulnerable: "Alone I rock my basins; I am mistress of my fleet of ships. But here, twisting the tassels of this brocaded curtain in my hostess's window, I am broken into separate pieces" (*W* 79). Language fails her too; her sentences are incomplete, coherence is missing and the fluency is suspended: "But I am not composed enough […] to make even one sentence. What I say is perpetually contradicted. Each time the door opens I am interrupted" (*W* 80).

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Rado (171) sees Rhoda as the incarnation of another Woolfian character, Orlando, and the imaginary world she creates out of her fear of being "marginalized", rejected and annihilated as a social being ("I have no face" [*W* 23]), as the outcome of Rhoda's aestheticizing of fear, sublimating it into "a sublime fantasy of transcendence", "an imaginative world in which she can triumph" (Rado, 2000: 171).

Gordon (in Woolf, 2003: 98) highlights the fact that Woolf insists on "human connection" and "interpenetration". Life separates the characters — these fragments of a broken self, yet fragmentation is overcome through the ties that have formed and which provide the necessary anchors, roots that offer the individual a sense of stability vital in the process of building one's identity.

The characters are again brought together before Percival's departure for India, which occasions other images reflected by these mirror-characters, reflections to which other features are added throughout the novel, as the characters change throughout time. Bernard sees "Louis, stone-carved, sculpturesque; Neville, scissor-cutting, exact; Susan with eyes like lumps of crystal; Jinny dancing like a flame, febrile, hot, over dry earth; and Rhoda the nymph of the fountain always wet" (*W* 87). Further descriptions reveal Rhoda as hiding, postponing "the shock of recognition" triggered by the moment when she has to show herself, the real and not the imagined self/body; Louis is depicted as a mixture of opposite features: shy but also self-confident, "suspicious", "domineering" but also "formidable" (*W* 89); Susan evokes the image of a "wild beast" which finds her way instinctively.

Jinny's impact on the people is strong — she still stirs admiration and "seems to centre everything" (*W* 90), her presence induces time stillness; Percival is there too, his silent presence ties them together, the frame that offers boundaries to this complex self they stand for; he is the silent character to whom all converge, the one whose absence/death leads to the dissolution of their unity: "he is like a stone fallen into a pond round which minnows swarm", says Rhoda, "Like minnows, we who had been shooting this way, that way, all shot round him when he came" (*W* 102). Yet, the emotion they share is larger than their "love for Percival" (*W* 95) seen as "too small, too particular a name" – they serve the very definition of the self, each in charge of a self-reflection and one of the outward reality, highlighting Woolf's experimental technique: "We have come together […] to make one thing, not enduring – for what endures? – but seen by many eyes simultaneously" (*W* 95).

The encounter occasions their going back into the past, wandering through memories that offer as many anchors for an identity seen, in this context, as a matter of being first of all. Change is now acknowledged (identity as a matter of becoming), triggered by having been "exposed to all these different lights" (*W* 94), emphasizing the continuous change the self is subject to.

Rhoda's self-mirroring concentrates on the fear rooted in her conviction that everything perishes. Life is repeatedly envisioned as "a tiger" waiting behind the door to jump; she then becomes the tiger's prey, a victim that needs to hide. She fears her friends

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as well since they cause sensations she cannot deal with. The acknowledged difference is taken even further: while the others know the path they either need or want to follow (beauty, "one person to sit beside", a certain idea), Rhoda wanders aimlessly, with "no end in view" (*W* 97): "but there is no single scent, no single body for me to follow" (*W* 98). Yet, in order to protect the self, she comes to wear the mask of having an aim, of pretending to be other than she is by imitating people so that she could hang on to something, finding an anchor while floating adrift. This façade of imitating the others is understood as a strategy for survival, a way of coping with her fear of the others seen as (threatening) audience, resulting in the repression of the body (her physical self/reality) and in the dissolution of the self, eventually.

Lisa Rado (2000: 172-173) adds a valuable perspective on this character's rapport with her body and self. She states that Rhoda tries to avoid the dissolution of the self by "repressing the vulnerable corporeal realm", which in fact leads to "the feelings of fragmentation and bifurcation that she has been trying to avoid by splitting herself in two", Rado underlining the fact that this alienation from the physical self is carried to such an extent that Rhoda is no longer aware of it unless she bumps into or touches a concrete thing. Rado brings together Rhoda's and Orlando's madness and suicide in that they are both the result of self-alienation, which is seen as Woolf's intent to present "their androgyny as a kind of *female castration*, a forced lack, a requisite sublimation that precipitates a terrifying void of sexless absence", Rhoda bringing forth "her fear of her female body and of the male gaze" (op.cit.173).

However, we would draw attention on the fact that Rhoda's alienation from her body and her fear of being seen/looked at is not restricted to "the male gaze", to use Rado's words, but it applies to men and women alike. The futility of Rhoda's efforts (impotent, sterile ones) contribute to the dissolution of the self, to her taking refuge into her inner world by rejecting the outward one; the fragile self is threatened precisely by the felt insincerity of the act of pretending and also by being rejected. Her coming to meet the others is, consequently, an attempt to "light my fire at the general blaze of you who live wholly, indivisibly and without caring" (*W* 98).

Percival's death in the fifth part of the novel breaks the circle again, and triggers a loss of cohesion of the others' world. His death makes Rhoda feel drawn into "the eternal corridors for ever" (*W* 120) — being exiled, alienated and adrift is what she sees in the mirror now; she needs to hang on to something outside herself (which brings to our mind Mrs. Ramsay's elm trees, or Orlando's oak tree). Yet, her vacillation from one thing to another, her inability to decide, reveals her as a doomed character; there are no identity roots to offer her stability, no aim to follow a path to, no contour to give her the feeling of being included, of belonging, of being contained (if only in terms of body):

> All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? And so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely? (*W* 120)

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If to some Woolfian characters the ability to acknowledge otherness proves a means of survival, therapy and/or self-discovery and improvement, to Rhoda opening up to otherness implies self-exposure that triggers vulnerability and risk, impacting her sense of self.

Rhoda represents the self that is annihilated by the others: "I have been stained by you and corrupted" (*W* 156). Percival's death draws her out of the world she found balance in, the inner world of her fleet and petals; the reality ("faces and faces" [*W* 121]) becomes inevitable, it is a "present", as she says, Percival has given her, a "terror" she has been exposed to, triggering a burning desire to "relinquish", to "let loose", "to be consumed" (*W* 124). The mask she is wearing is to be seen as a way of giving in, accepting some boundaries that are not hers but the others', as well as a shield she could live behind, holding up "shade after shade" (*W* 157) as she says, to protect the self.

Her suicide recalls Septimus's and his alienation, his estrangement from the word/reality taken to the extreme; both of them lack coherence and their longing and struggle for it is the expression of their inner torment. Hermione Lee sees Rhoda as "an extreme version of the tension between isolation and participation" and her suicide as the expression of "her judgement on the real world, with which she can never be reconciled" (in Bloom, 1986: 114).

As it is getting darker and the light and power of the sun decreases, the characters (now middle-aged) are brought together once more, on their meeting at Hampton Court. Change is again focused on: the gradual transformation of the self shows them burdened by sorrow and experiences. Rhoda does not hide any more; yet the displayed lack of fear is of the body only, not of the self, it is that mask, that subterfuge she has "taught her body":

> the leaves might have hidden me still. But I did not hide behind them. I walked straight up to you instead of circling round to avoid the shock of sensation as I used. But it is only that I have taught my body to do a certain trick. Inwardly, I am not taught; I fear, I hate, I love, I envy and despise you, but I never join you happily. (*W* 170-171)

Being together makes them feel they are no longer adrift, they have reached a symbolic shore where they can rest for a while, where fear is suspended and time itself becomes still; it is in this "still", "disembodied" mood that they become a whole which evokes different images: to Rhoda, it shapes into a square standing on an oblong, their "dwelling-place"; Bernard sees it as "a many-sided substance", a "six-sided flower" in which their lives combine; to Louis it becomes an "illumination", an enigmatic one "visible against those yew trees" (*W* 175). They are part of this wholeness that they form, still each of them indivisible.

The voices of these six Woolfian characters rise and fall like the waves rushing to the shore; paralleled by the references to the waves in the descriptive passages, the characters' monologues , as Jensen puts it, "surface and ebb away over the course of their lives like the waves of the title" (in Shiach, 2007: 121). It is a poetics of the water that carries within the individual's search for meaning, for individuation rooted in one's past

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(mutable and immutable limits considered), also indicative of the change the individual is subject to.

Gaston Bachelard (1997: 9) sees *water* as an element that is more feminine and uniform than fire, and the images that are concealed underneath the surface are ones that go deeper and deeper, becoming more and more profound. He goes on by stating that water implies a certain "intimacy" (different from that of fire or stone) and it constitutes itself as "a type of destiny" that presupposes the continuous metamorphosis of the essence of the being, as he puts it (10); the individual that is defined by water, destined to it, says Bachelard, is adrift, experiencing a perpetual, quotidian death, a horizontal one.

Analyzed from this perspective, most of Woolf's characters are defined by water, and their being adrift is seen in their emotional torment (the inner waves), in the changes which they cannot control. The narrative waves conceal and/or bring to the surface the profound reality of the self, of the labyrinthic search, of life itself (lived and relived), catharsis for Woolf through the written word – an act of creation that is subject to change and at the same time imposes change. The death that water carries within is indeed a horizontal one (see Bachelard, 1997: 10), not on the vertical axis divinity – human being, but on the horizontal one of the individual's telluric existence. Following the destiny of the water Bachelard referred to, we discover underneath the surface, the deep waters of the privileged and/or doomed characters and the reality of their depth becomes the defining reality of the individual. Woolf's characters do not depict individuals that ascend/progress, their achievements and 'illuminations' do not reveal ascension but survival, not a vertical existence but a horizontal one seen as an exercise of coping with oneself and with life. To some of Woolf's characters (Septimus, Rhoda, even Orlando) plunging into the deep waters of thought and feelings proves a too alienating experience that triggers insanity and death.

We see, thus, reiterated in the novel the two-sided impact of the individual's encounter with the Other that reveals identity not only as a matter of 'being' but also of 'becoming': not only that the others impact our own process of building identity, but we ourselves affect the others, writing, to a certain extent, their stories. Still, being in control of the power to 'sanely' perceive the world (inner and outer) or not implies either being the one that controls the identity path without weighing too much the influence of the others/circumstance or being influenced by the others/circumstance to such an extent that they become the ones that dictate the identity path while we stay vulnerable to the outside mirroring world. The 'overpowering' of the self, if we might say so, is triggered by the way the individual internalizes the outside world, by the extent to which one allows the external influences to become alienating and annihilating for the self.

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