EARTH AND THE SELF

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Abstract

Just like human existence, the self is fragmented and multifaceted, deeply marked by an abrupt syntax of personalized internalization of reality. Woolf's *The Waves* becomes an alienated and alienating chronicle of the characters' self and, as claimed by many, of the writer's. The novel stands out as a labyrinthine reading, a challenge in the rapport writer – reader, an intellectual experiment aiming to weave the textual and thematic 'net' that keeps the sections of the novel together, as well as the fictional personae and the fragments of the self, oscillating between unity and diversity, either merging the characters into one and losing track of their individuality, or preserving the boundaries of the self/their own individuality.
The present article focuses on the characters of Susan, Neville and Louis as representing the element of earth (Fand 55). Together with the other characters in the novel, they stand out as a web of identity lights and shadows, a voyage along the vertical and horizontal axis of the individual's inner universe.

Keywords: self, earth, quest, written discourse, inner reality

Virginia Woolf's space of initiation is the inner space reflected in the written discourse (fictional and non-fictional works), the space of the literary experiment seen as an extension of the self which she endeavors to frame through the characters she creates and/or remembers (the autobiographical element considered).

In *The Waves,* the fragmented and multifaceted self is deeply marked by an abrupt syntax of personalized internalization of reality. The opening up to exterior reality, the individual's vibration towards it and because of it, is marked once the characters' patterns of thought are mirrored, mediated by the sensory perceptions we find reflected in the verbs the characters begin their monologues with: "I see", "I hear", "Look". External reality is thus represented as filtered through their individuality, translated into their subjective language; their perception of the world becomes itself particularizing, drawing identity lines.

Yet, there are different approaches to these Woolfian characters burdened by their own insularity. In discussing whether the fictional personae in *The Waves* are differentiated and undergo development or not, Balossi (11) highlights three different views. According to the first one, the characters do not undergo real change, they are flat or static and do not display individuality; the second view stresses that the characters do show development and are differentiated by their own individuality, whereas the third view takes account of individual development, at the same time viewing the fictional personae as facets of a single mind, parts of a unity.

It has been largely argued that this single mind is the author's, the claim being that Woolf created six different versions of herself. They are "their creator's attempt 'to collect oneself in Virginia'," states Wagner"imaginatively to unify all the 'separate feelings' of

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which she was possessed" (83), while the characters are "continually bent over their lives and weighing its significance"(48), framing the thematic conflict of the novel: "consciousness must struggle to 'resist' the blank world of phenomena, the personal must 'oppose' the impersonal, the human voice must challenge the inhuman monotony of the waves" (65).

One of the many levels of interpretation of the multiple selves depicted in the novel furthers them as pertaining to the ancient discourse on the primary elements of air, fire, water and earth. According to Fand (58-62), Susan, Neville and Louis are the characters related to earth: Susan is depicted as a "kind of pagan earth-mother figure" with a "deep ancestral attachment to the fields of her farm and hearth" (58); Louis's childhood memory of organic connection places him in direct relation to the element of earth, and so does his desire to achieve success; Neville is characterized by "his tenacity for achieving worldly success" and also by his "need for being established in a domicile" (60) – Fand sees his need for "a cloistered life, a space intensely personal" (61) as rooted in his anxieties and bodily weakness.

The same idea of Neville and Louis being related to the primary element of earth is emphasized by Jane Garrity in her "Global Objects in *The Waves*": "Louis and Neville occupy perspectives from the ground: Louis anthropomorphically becomes an integrated totality with nature […] while Neville imagines himself on the ground 'look[ing] up through the trees into the sky' (25) and feels the curvature of the earth" (131).

From the beginning of the novel, we see that "organic connection" Flint (in Woolf, 1992: xxx) referred to in relation to Louis: "I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing" (*W* 7). He desires to be alone, not to be seen by the others, unnoticed with his hair "made of leaves" (*W* 8), part of the nature. The boundaries of the body disappear, the character feels he is one with the surrounding nature, individuality is suspended in this identification with the stalk, with the roots that go deep down. The divided self is present in the character's differentiating between himself "up here" – "a boy in grey flannels" (*W* 7) and "down there" – "a stone figure in the desert by Nile" (ibid.).

Louis' Australian accent and his "neatness" make the others mock him, which results in Louis distorting the value of his own individuality; he needs not be himself "in the light of this great clock, yellow-faced" (*W* 13), hence he needs to adopt a self (if only in terms of language) that follows a different pattern than his: "I will now try to imitate Bernard, softly lisping Latin" (*W* 14), "'I will not conjugate the verb,' said Louis, 'until Bernard has said it.'" He acknowledges his being different from the others ("I know more than they will ever know" [*W* 13]), but he resents showing it; yet, this difference is rooted in a feeling of shame given by some mutable and immutable limits. His self, defined in these terms, remains hidden: "But I do not wish to come to the top and say my lesson. My roots are threaded, like fibres in a flower-pot, round and round about the world. I do

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not wish to come to the top and live in the light of this great clock, yellow-faced, which ticks and ticks" (*W* 13).

In the second part of the novel, there is a new change that challenges the characters' ability to handle life – their leaving home and their time spent in a new setting (i.e. school). On seeing Bernard at the station, Louis chooses to follow him, sensing he is not afraid; already marked by his own origin and accent, Louis's sense of self grows even weaker on facing the 'new territory', therefore he chooses to submit to a stronger one — Bernard's: "I will follow Bernard, because he is not afraid" (*W* 21). Once arrived in this place, a new self would emerge; on entering the chapel, Louis (just like Rhoda) feels the differences falling apart ("we put off our distinctions as we enter" [*W* 24]), but to him, this flattening of personal identity in favour of group identity does not have negative implications – they provide him a sense of stability and meaning, roots he could use to muster his self-esteem. The authority that Dr. Crane, the headmaster, stands for makes Louis "rejoice", "my heart expands in his bulk, in his authority" (*W* 24). It is this character, the headmaster, that brings order and relief in Louis's "tremulous", "ignominiously agitated mind".

The memories that bring to the surface the image of a child who was forgotten on Christmas present sharing are now silenced. He can no longer be overlooked in this place where they are all the same, all being given the same status; it is here that he feels he has won a new identity, one that is noticed and rooted in the stability and continuity that the headmaster's presence and reading trigger:

> Now all is laid by his authority, his crucifix, and I feel come over me the sense of the earth under me, and my roots going down and down till they wrap themselves round some hardness at the centre. I recover my continuity, as he reads. (*W* 24-25)

Deprived of some identity roots or ashamed of others, he can now cultivate an identity, he can build himself a sense of self that he no longer needs to keep hidden in the dark, he is "a spoke in the huge wheel" (*W* 25), a spoke that comes out to light on the turning of the wheel as he listens to Dr. Crane's reading.

To Louis, darkness is the medium for change, a time when he can put aside his "unenviable body" and "inhabit space" (*W* 38). Protected by it, he can be whoever he wants (Virgil's and Plato's "companion", "the last scion of one of the great houses of France", and one that would "desert these windy and moonlit territories" [*W* 38]), he can inhabit whatever body he wants; identity becomes his choice, a choice that the outside reality denies.

Going back to group identity, Louis (like Rhoda) desires to be like the other boys, part of a group that would function on the principle of order and obedience to given rules. Being part of this entirety would have opposed his inability with language generated by his awareness of his provincial self, changing it into a voice that could be heard: "How majestic is their order, how beautiful is their obedience! If I could follow, if I could be with them, I would sacrifice all I know. […] I should thunder out songs at midnight! In

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what a torrent the words would rush from my throat!" (*W* 34). Instead he is always reading a book with "ferocious tenacity" (ibid.), as Bernard describes him, a passive approach to the language that, in this case, does neither serve communication (seen as an act of sharing) nor imply individuation.

The burden of his identity makes him feel "not included", "alien", "external", as Woolf re-emphasizes in the third part of the novel. He does not want to be different, he longs for sameness, for "the protective waves of the ordinary" (*W* 70). The outside world (as suggested in the people passing by) is one that lacks order and detracts his attention, yet a world of a continuous flux ("the rhythm of the eating-house" [*W* 69]), one that is self-sufficient ("the circle is unbroken; the harmony complete" [*W* 70]) and which he is not part of. The past that haunts him makes him try to stop time, to turn it into a perpetual present; his identity roots prevent him from enjoying life, from feeling protected: "you are all protected. I am naked" (*W* 72); "hence my pursed lips, my sickly pallor; my distasteful and uninviting aspect" (*W* 71). He resents the "the nature of the human flesh" (*W* 186), as Bernard explains in the last part of the novel, an exile defined by the inability to attach to people.

Louis's struggle with life is one that is materialized in defining the present moment, in the creation of a "ring of steel" (*W* 28), "a ring of clear poetry" (*W* 96) which would contain that moment, and would change it into eternity, defying time. The effort to make these moments last recalls, to some extent, Mrs. Ramsay's endeavor to create moments that defy time, to be remembered, to bring memory and creation together and have her vision. The act of creation is reiterated here as well: Louis's attempts to make the past and the present meet (to "realize the meeting-place of past and present" [*W* 48]), to offer history "a moment's vision", and not to deprive it of such creation, are given by his efforts of "stating the moment", of "coercing my brain to form in my forehead" (*W* 48).

Louis's anguish caused by the awareness of his own individuality he feels uncomfortable with seems to have been alleviated: the life he is now living (the sixth part of the novel) and which places him in a different area of the manifestation of the self, offering him the authority he has so much admired in others, makes him feel coherent, come together. The echoing of this identity that turns him into a deciding factor makes all his selves converge into one defined by his name, "clear-cut", "unequivocal": "'I have signed my name,' said Louis, 'already twenty times. I, and again I, and again I. Clear, firm, unequivocal, there it stands, my name. Clear-cut and unequivocal I am, too'", "But now I am compact; now I am gathered together", "I have fused my many lives into one" (*W* 127). His need to exert his ego (strongly emphasized in the repetitive use of the personal pronoun I) is indicative of his rapport with himself and with the outside world.

Susan is another character who strives to integrate the self into the world. At the beginning of the novel, Bernard sees Susan welcoming/entering the woods and the shadow "like a swimmer" (*W* 9), tripping and falling on the roots. Woolf suggests rhythmicity, pulsation, even breathing by employing the structures "in and out", "up and down": "the light seems to pant in and out, in and out. The branches heave up and

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down" (*W* 9). Nevertheless, from a different perspective, the use of the adverbials suggesting vertical and inside-outside movement highlights the opposite poles where Susan's feelings are placed: "I love and I hate" (*W* 10); what is more, this to and fro blocks the ascending and the forward movement, it brings it to the same point – the character is blocked, trapped, and change is denied. The woods, as Bernard presents it, is a gloomy place of "agitation and trouble", where anguish is present, and the roots give the impression of a skeleton lying on the ground.

Susan feels trapped inside language, inside those "single words" she refers to: "I am tied down with single words". The liberating ascending movement is denied ("tied down") as opposed to the impact of words on Bernard, who can "wander off", "slip away" and "rise up higher", and whom Susan 'sees' "trailing away" and escaping her.

To Susan, leaving her home behind and her coming to school is felt as a loss of order, of meaning, and most importantly, as a loss of freedom. The repetitive use of "I hate" (on her first night at school) sends the reader to her "I love and I hate" which we parallel here: it is home and the sense of freedom it offers that she loves, it is this new setting and life with the subsequent restrictions (and narrowing of the individual's freedom, hence identity) that she hates. She perceives this new world as a false one: "all here is false", "all is meretricious" (*W* 23). All the resulting feelings need to be held within given limits, to be shaped, which Woolf manages to suggest through the handkerchief that Susan screws and in which she enfolds her despair, unhappiness and hatred. She is deprived of the freedom that allows her self grow, the restrictions imposed on them (the order and obedience that make Louis feel safe) make her self wither, they "wrinkle and shiver" (*W* 39). It is not others that she wants, but solitude in which "to unfold my possessions" (*W* 39).

She needs to oppose that "hard thing that has grown here in my side" in which she gathered all her frustrations, disillusionment and captivity. She can do that only back home where there are no such limitations, where freedom can allow for a safe manifestation of the self.

In the third part of the novel, we come across another reference to this hard thing that has formed in her side while she was sent to complete her education. The period spent there appears as a time when the self was divided: "I cannot be divided, or kept apart. I was sent to school" (*W* 72). The place was one that did not belong to her, it was not hers, hence it confined her individuality. Susan's characterization in this third part of *The Waves*, reveals her as following uncomplicated paths of the self, simple, not alienating ones as far as feelings and the language (seen as an extension of identity) are concerned.

It is with this character that Woolf introduces in the novel the issue of motherhood and domestic patterns; Susan comes to represent the maternal, fertile self defined by domestic patterns, following the conventional path of women and their role within the society: "I shall be like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards" (*W* 73). Life to her becomes a "dwelling-place" whose construction presupposes continuity that follows a "hereditary pattern" (*W* 165).

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Susan represents the domestic submission to male order (Goldman 72). Her language, the one that she understands, is an elemental one, made up of "love, hate, rage and pain". Her quest for self is framed by "natural happiness", by basic things; however, from time to time, she gets saturated with this life of the body, of this natural happiness: "Yet, sometimes I am sick of natural happiness […]. I am sick of the body, I am sick of my own craft, industry and cunning, of the unscrupulous ways of the mother who protects […]" (*W* 146-147).The roots that stabilize her sense of self are given by her conviction of continuity, by her belief that she will be carried on by her children, an inheritance she passes on to them through which she survives time. Death (Percival's death) makes Susan rejoice in this victory against time that the continuity through her children grants her. Her desire to protect is implied by the "fine thread round the craddle" she sees herself as, "wrapping in a cocoon made of my own blood the delicate limbs of the baby" (*W* 130). To her, the rhythm of life is the rhythm of motherhood, of family pulsation, of a comforting "laboriously gathered, relentlessly pressed down life" (*W* 146) that anchors her.

The last earth-bound character we concentrate our analysis on is Neville. A very intriguing and challenging episode, as far as the analysis of the experience of the self is concerned, is represented by the contemplation of death in Neville's trying to re-live the same sensation he experienced on hearing about the dead man. It is Neville's turn now to acknowledge his being different from the others, a difference that keeps him separate, but at the same time occasions the solitude that contemplation presupposes: "I am supposed […] to be too delicate to go with them, since I get easily tired and then I am sick" (*W* 16). Solitude becomes a "reprieve from conversation" and death is analyzed: the apple tree that has witnessed the death becomes an obstacle, the one that condemns them all (a suggestion of the inevitability of death), possibly a metaphor for the boundary between life and death, also indicative of Neville's fascination with as well as fear of death and decay: "I was unable to pass by. There was an obstacle. 'I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle', I said. And the others passed on. But we are doomed, all of us, by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass" (*W* 17).

Neville feels their arrival in the new place he has been sent to as "a solemn moment" and himself coming "like a lord to his halls appointed" (*W* 22); to him, the place is one that invites exploration and experimenting, the mastering of the Latin language. Unlike Louis, Neville sees the authoritative figure Dr. Crane stands for as a threat to his sense of freedom, "an instrument of inquisition" (*W* 188). The language that the headmaster makes use of is one devoid of imagination, powerless, sterile, "corrupted" (*W*25). He cannot be part of the others' group, he cannot join them because of his weak body that truncates his sense of self. Bernard's stories make him indulge in another world, where solitude is forgotten, but once they end abruptly, he grows aware of his being alone. It is in such moments that he longs for privacy and the presence of the other, nature being "too vegetable, too vapid" (*W*38) to comfort him, all that it can offer being "only sublimities, and vastitudes and water and leaves" (ibid.), sterile in its being devoid of

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the presence of the other. Neville's love for Percival is one deepened by the awareness of an unanswered feeling, by the other's inaccessibility.

Neville sees himself as a great poet who feels the rhythm of the words, waves that "fall and rise"; the movement is not a horizontal one, but a vertical one, one that would suggest the reiterated emergence of the self from its depth to the surface, understood as the boundary between the inward and outward reality. Yet there is uncertainty; the always changing self, or better said, the multi-layered self is puzzling. The connection between the self and the circumstance (in this particular case, the intrusion of the other) results in confusion in Neville's case, and it is another one's perspective on it that he needs in order to see his true self, to see beyond the "adulterated" self:

> I do not know myself sometimes, or how to measure and name and count out the grains that make me what I am. […] How curiously one is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend. (*W* 61-62)

Neville's self-mirroring reveals him as always hunting ("I hunt from dawn to dusk" [*W* 97]), always longing for something he will never have. The discrepancy between mind and body perception is brought forward ("the swiftness of my mind is too strong for my body" [*W*97]), which causes deep suffering. The others' response to the reality of his body is pity, yet he finds his sense of balance in the clarity of his perspective on the world: "That is my saving. That is what gives my suffering an unceasing excitement" (ibid.). If Jinny's restlessness is one of the body, Neville's is one of the mind, never "stagnant", which again underlines the protean self; the passion that he feels is, as Briggs points out, "always directed towards a single companion, though that companion is continually changing" (2005: 249)

Life, to Neville, is a play in which each plays their part, a poem he does not need to write any more for he has "picked" his own "fruit", as he says (*W* 150). He does not need to take part in this play, his language does not need to be shared or heard, he can watch "dispassionately"; observing life, however, needs "a myriad eyes", the capacity to see it from multiple perspectives (each subjective), fragments that, once put together, make up one complex image, poetry: "I need not speak. But I listen. I am marvellously on the alert. Certainly, one cannot read this poem without effort. [...] To read this poem one must have myriad eyes, like one of those lamps that turn on slabs of racing water at midnight in the Atlantic" (*W* 152).

"The whole of *The Waves* acts out a struggle between organicism and civilization, interior and exterior spaces; language and silence" states Roe (184). Indeed, Woolf's unconventional characters that have no surname (an identity marker they are deprived of) and inhabit ordinary spaces belonging to ordinary reality become the author's and the reader's means of exploring reality as filtered through their consciousness, a means of mirroring the individual's struggle with fears, failure of communication and (in)ability to relate to the other. It is a novel that goes to the core of the human mind and quest for self.

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