THE WAVES AND THE SELF

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Abstract

The novel the present paper focuses on proves once again Virginia Woolf's mastery of technical experimentation, her ability to play with the boundaries of the self, and to represent both the visible and the invisible world in the mind of the observers, the reader following the interior monologues of the six characters, the continuous rumination of their consciousness covering different periods of life.

Keywords: self, androgynous mind, impersonality, subjectivity

Considered Woolf's most thought-provoking, most difficult and intricate novel from a structural and thematical point of view, high modernist text, *The Waves* embodies its author's will and ability to innovate, to experiment while exploring life within and without from a different, much more challenging perspective. Woolf, the novelist, follows the path she describes in her essay "Modern Fiction", having the courage to change the "ill-fitting vestments", to "come closer to life", as she puts it, and to say what interests her, not "this" as novelists commonly understood by the point of interest, but "that" – an experiment, a new (and obviously endeavoring) approach to the written word and (again) to what was conventionally understood as worth writing about.

> He has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer 'this' but 'that': out of 'that' alone must he construct his work. For the moderns 'that', the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors.
>
> (Woolf, "Modern Fiction")

The mind becomes Woolf's both battleground and playground. The writer cannot let life escape and she 'moves' the writing, the point of interest inside the characters' mental world where the myriad-faceted life is revealed; keeping it focused on the outside world would mean, indeed, escaping life, missing it…

> 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 impressions trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of

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> 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. (ibidem)

According to Goldman (2008: 69), the novel the present paper focuses on can be regarded as an **elegy** on Percival and Rhoda (the former dies in youth and the latter commits suicide) as well as a **Künstlerroman** if one sees the three male characters as "aspiring writers of sorts" who "develop open literary ambitions, taking themselves seriously as writers, authors in the world" (72).

In *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, Alex Zwerdling (1986: 10-11) deems *The Waves* a novel about **silence** ("the things people don't say but think"), offering a vision of human solitude/isolation as it is "based on the feeling that even our most intimate relationships are flawed by our **limited access to other minds**" (emphasis added). Consequently communication is replaced by thoughts, the outer lives (mere fictional details?) of the characters by their inner lives (or, to put it differently, by their perceptions of life). It is the thought that prevails indeed and, by means of the written word, the writer empowers the reader to learn about the characters' apparently chaotic tidal sea of their mental life that frames impressions differently at different times, about their representations of anxiety, inner conflict, (lack of) strength and certainty that the problem of identity is concerned with.

If the novel is to be seen as a novel about human isolation, then the fact that Woolf the writer gives the reader access to the characters' minds, does nothing else than to painfully deepen the sadness and frustration triggered by limitation, by solitude, by unheard and unshared speech. Essentially the novel becomes the channel by which the reader is given **limited** access to the writer's own mental life, the book being seen not as a mere façade, but, to some extent, as the mirroring of the author's mental perception of the world in the created characters, an attempt to come closer to life and a representation (limited/partial as it is) of Woolf's self; a sequence of atoms (if we were to parallel Woolf's words in her above mentioned essay) that fall upon the mind.

> 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 in what is commonly thought small.
>
> (Woolf, "Modern Fiction")

Worth mentioning here is the assertion that the mind is not a free agent but "the helpless target of a relentless bombarding force", that is the force of the external stimuli (Zwerdling 14) – "sights" and "incidents" that can shape or alter the individual's sense of

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self. Following this approach to the outer life as well as the perspective on realism as it was conventionally understood, Zwerdling (24-25) underlines the fact that Woolf did not reject realism and focused on both society and individual consciousness (linked to solitude), on the public and the private, trying to expand the theory as well as practice of this genre by following two 'paths':

1. using the mimetic techniques of realism in order to provide a detailed representation of the psychic process,
2. pointing out the fact that the individual's mental (and emotional, we might add) life is to a large extent influenced by external forces.

The Waves follows this alternation of realism and psychic life by interweaving objective passages with subjective ones, that is descriptive pastoral interludes (following the sun across a seascape and landscape) interwoven with interrelated soliloquies by six characters (from childhood- implied by dawn - to maturity), the three men and three women struggling "against the amorphous collectivity of the waves to create form, to attain one moment of rested perfection" (Gruber 1935: 124).

According to Goldman (2008: 71), in *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*, Wool's oganisation of the novel suggests: "a concern both with subjectivity (individual and collective) and phenomenology, with subjective engagement and objective detachment, with processes of **the self**, as well as **absence of the self**" (emphasis added).

Roxanne Fand (1999: 46) introduces a different and interesting understanding of this distinction between impersonality/objectivity and subjectivity in that she no longer refers to objectivity but to "impersonal subjectivity" and argues that "Woolf's detachment is not just f*rom* the self as ego, but *through* multiple subjectivities of self". 'Otherness' becomes internalized, which is in fact Woolf's choice/method of potraying her characters.

Besides the six characters, there is another one, the seventh character, Percival, always absent and at the same time always present, "the voiceless centre of their circle" (Goldman 69), acting as "the focal point of the other six selves" (the dinner party) (72). The characters are not mere separate individuals/selves, but representations of one character/self, of one working mind only (androgyny being hinted at as well). And in bringing all these selves together in the attempt to see the life of the individual as a 'complete thing', the reader must not forget about the "shadows of people one might have been; **unborn selves**" - "those old half-articulate ghosts who keep up their **hauntings** by day and night" (*W* 222; emphasis added)

> …this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am a man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny or Rhoda – so strange is the contact of one with another. (*W* 216)
>
> And now I ask, "Who am I?" I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us.

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> There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt "I am you". This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome. (*W* 222)

Ruth Gruber (133) sees the characters in the novel as "variations" of Woolf's polarity and observations, and she offers some analogical guidelines that bring the novelist and her characters together:

> Bernard – Woolf's poetic romanticism
> Neville – Woolf's struggle for classical formal order
> Louis – the desire to attest the victory against the waves ("her longing for success to manifest, at least to the world, that she has […] freed herself from the tyranny of the waves")
> Rhoda – moving away from reality to "fantastic loveliness"
> Susan – the fulfilled woman
> Jinny – Woolf' sense of "flowingness", her joy in taking part in the tidal rhythm of life.

There is a further division to be taken into account whenever one refers to Woolf's character creation and representation of the self, that is the division between reason/mind and senses/heart. Gruber (134) refers to two phases of "human thought" and divides the characters accordingly: characters whose struggle for the meaning of life is ruled by the intellect (seeking "a Reason behind the universe") and characters for which reason ceases to be an on-going force that regulates/limits their search and who see life as a tidal sea, waves rising and falling ("no absolute Reason within and beyond their own existence").

In *The Dialogic Self: Reconstructing Subjectivity in Woolf, Lessing and Atwood*, Roxanne Fand makes the distinction between two dynamic facets/states of the self which are always in a dialectic relationship, emotions oscillating within them:

1. the night self – a dark phase of formlessness, of dissolution
2. the day self – a creative phase of form.

> The more sharply defined and firm one's identity is, the more it might be thought of as day-dominated; the vaguer and more incoherent the forms, or the less attachment to any form there is, the more the night dominates, including intermediate "twilight" states of dream or fantasy in which the ego still hovers.(48)

The analysis of the self reflects the complexity of life objectively described and its subjective perception by the human mind. On the one hand, the self is explored in relation to the outside world, which is understood in terms of the others mainly; on the other hand the analysis focuses on "the solitary self in existential crisis" (Goldman 73). In Goldman's presentation and brief analysis of the novel, Bernard's soliloquy is focused on,

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being labeled as an expression of (masculine) subjective loss of the sense of individual self as well as "a metafictional moment in a self-conscious stylized work that seeks to test the limits of language itself" (73). The tidal rhythm stops: the self Bernard used to address makes no answer, it does neither oppose nor echo words; there is no sound, no light but shadow while "no fin breaks the waste of this immeasurable sea" (*W* 218). And in losing himself/his self ("a man without a self" 219), language fails Bernard too: the words cannot describe a world without substance. The individual remains "weightless and visionless" in an alienating world "weightless, without illusions" (ibidem). The self without a world and the world without a self, as many would put it.

Nevertheless, the self returns and so does the light, the landscape Bernard feels coming back to him comprising both the world and the self; he can now walk "unshadowed" (*W* 220). Still, there is a change, a difference the character feels: a newly-born self (one of the numerous immeasurable selves within), a self he 'sees' when the light returns to the previously shadowed world, a self known only to him ("I saw but was not seen"): "There is a sense of the break of day. I will not call it dawn. […] Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again" (228). The tidal rhythm of life felt again…

In her novel, Woolf attempts to deconstruct the binary opposition between the gendered notions; the very balance between three male characters and three female ones hints at Woolf's interest in this androgynous state as a form of crossing self-boundaries, the characters being either perceived as distinct individuals, or as interconnected identities merging into one, mere "components of a tidal sea: the same molecules, in constant process of rearrangement, directed, like waves, by forces beyond themselves" (Flint xxvi). Thus, we can once again assert that the novel can be seen as one character, one representation of the writer's self, the sum of waves/characters that stand for Woolf's waves/self/inward voyage ("I want to trace my own process" Woolf writes in her diary).

The qualities that the characters display in their soliloquies are difficult to be labelled as masculine or feminine, which again underlines this feeling and image of balanced identity, a sense of equilibrium Woolf herself was in need of. And we, as readers/observers, follow the characters aproaching the shore and then, going back into the living and forever changing sea. Or, at a linguistic level, as Fand puts it (67), "as Woolf gives us words of the self, so does she take them away."

Woolf moves from 'I' to 'we', from the individual to the individual seen and presented as part of a community. In her essay "The Body of the People: *Mrs Dalloway* to *The Waves*", Gillian Beer (1996:48) claims that Woolf "excels at recording the repetitive, fickle movements of an individual's thought and feeling", at the same time being "fascinated by communities: the family, groups of friends, the nation and history." She then goes on by stating that the novel explores different structures, or "diads", as she calls them: the I/not I; the I/you and the I/we, and underlines the fact that this 'we' "may be coercive and treacherous"; it is not a given constant but "an elastic pronoun, stretching in

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numbers and through time. Its population ranges from the exclusive pair of lovers, now, to the whole past of human history." (50)

Time barrier disappears as well, temporal boundaries having lost their traditional understanding: the problem of time - a constant throughout Woolf's novels and search for identity - is no longer approached from a solely objective perspective (time as given), but from a subjective one (time as felt). It is in the mind of these individuals where time and space lose their coordinates, it is in their mind where identity is built or altered, where the rise or fall of the self takes place...

Identity formation turns out to be, first of all, our walk along the mind path, the result of our perspective on the world, of our choice of experiencing/experimenting it, the way in which we mentally decode/encode our lives, all 'bearing the signature' of all the factors that influence our choices, factors that have been analysed extensively by researchers in the field... A more or less aware-of-it struggle for understanding, for equilibrium and, why not, for sanity...

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