

# INNER WORLD AND LANGUAGE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THE WAVES*

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## *Abstract*

In the present article, we approach the problem of the self from the perspective of communication understood as an attempt (either successful or failed) to coherently share or shape inner reality and as a mirroring of one's (in)ability to acknowledge otherness. We try to exemplify our point of view by focusing on one of the characters, namely Bernard, the spokesperson in the novel.

**Keywords:** reality, communication, self, otherness, language

This impressive novelistic experiment focusing on "life seen as consciousness" (Gordon in Woolf, 2003: 97), *The Waves*, takes us throughout one day and also throughout lifetime, each section simultaneously prefiguring a period of this one day Woolf imagined and a period in the life of the characters set adrift.

The issue of communication arises from the very beginning, of the world within being shared through language: "said Bernard", "said Susan", "said Rhoda", etc. Who are the characters talking to? Who is the receiver of their internalization of the outer world? There is no shared communication in *The Waves*, the characters are neither talking one to another, nor are they addressing a listener. The words are addressed to themselves, a monologue which we see as a way of trying to shape their emotions and sensations, to make them be contained by language, offering coherence to their world/self, and also as a means of emphasizing the loneliness that frames the individual's existence.

Creția's approach to the implications of the verb "to say" is also taken into account in our analysis. He (in Woolf, 1973: 7) asserts that the soliloquies in the novel are generally seen as interior monologues (the characters talking to themselves), whereas in his approach to the issue the characters are not talking to anybody, not even to themselves; as a result, adds Creția, their soliloquies are "taken out of the possible sphere of speech and placed in that of existence", the characters being told by "an absolute subjectivity" (op.cit. 7).

Flint labels these utterances "soliloquies, self-presentations and self-justifications" (in Woolf, 2000: xi) while Jensen (in Shiach, 2007: 121-122) focuses on "the agent of seeing, of poeticizing" who is not specified, an unnamed self that is present in the passages that function as "counterpoints to the characters' monologues", raising the question of identity of the one speaking, observing and interpreting. The voice of the omniscient narrator is limited to the descriptive interludes and to introducing each inner soliloquy ("said Bernard", "said Rhoda", "said Neville" etc.), the rest being represented by the characters' rumination.

Despite the fact that the monologues are "silent" ones, states Briggs, Woolf manages to give the impression that the characters "reach each other through them, at times speaking in chorus, as they do at the farewell party, and again at their final reunion, while Bernard often describes the feelings of the others, and identifies with them" (Briggs, 2005: 257).

Woolf uses language as a linking device as well as an individualizing one. It gives each character unique traits, a longed-for individuality, but at the same time it brings the characters together, connectedness being aimed at (see also Gordon in Woolf, 2003: 98; Flint in Woolf, 2000: xii), Woolf succeeding in constructing the image of a single mind, of one self incorporating the characters' selves, one voice only, that *formam dicendi* Petru Creștia (in Woolf, 1973: 6) referred to in the introduction to the translated edition of *The Waves*. The characters are, thus, not mere separate individuals/selves, but different facets of one character/self, representations of one mind only (androgyny being hinted at), which in our reading underlines the dynamic diversity on the inside the individual is characterized by, a quest for identity that brings forth the human diversity and complexity (all the selves one fosters). "But I did mean that in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people", writes Virginia Woolf in a letter to G. L. Dickinson. "The six characters were supposed to be one. I'm getting old myself – I shall be fifty next year; and I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia; even though the special Virginia in whose body I live for the moment is violently susceptible to all sorts of separate feelings" (in Woolf, 1978: 397).

Kate Flint highlights the fact that Woolf focuses on "the particularizing details of language through which one establishes one's own private sense of identity, internalizing aspects of the outer world" (in Woolf, 2000: x); these linguistic aspects, as Flint states, serve to differentiate one character from the others "for the syntax of their sentences works in the opposite direction, reminding one that similarity and difference can coexist" (ibid.), yet they "flatten out difference by indicating the continual oscillation of extremes and opposites which takes place in the world" (op.cit. xiii), a world that is presented from the perspective of "cohesion and unity", as Flint further asserts (ibid.).

Moreover, Mușina (1997: 225-226) sees language as "an imperfect instrument" that distorts not only communication but also the individual by its artificiality and arbitrariness. The impotence of language, its limited capacity to render the nuances of the world (be it outward or inward) is highlighted in Woolf's *The Waves*. Selfhood cannot be reduced to the reality of the body, nor to that of the language; in other words, as Flint puts it, "language cannot control, cannot stabilize our sense of selfhood" (in Woolf, 2000: xxxviii).

Taken separately, the monologued sequences cannot offer a complete image of the novel and of the self; coherence is attained only when they are brought together, completing one another, each bringing something new to this quest for the exploration and reconstruction of a single self (diversity/multiplicity converges into unity) Had the narrative, or even the reading process, followed each character in turn end-to-end, in terms of continuity this would have conferred coherence to that particular character, but it would not have been of any help either to the novel seen as experiment, or to the representation of the self as a multitude of selves that intermingle, a complicated weave that advances identity as a matter of sameness and distinctiveness. Following the line of experimentalism, Woolf rejects "conventional narrative viewpoints, voices and tenses" trying to find "a new way of redefining the compound, complex nature of consciousness itself" (Briggs, 2005: 257).

The way each character perceives the world is never the same with the other characters'. Each of them becomes a mirror reflecting the outside world, and the angle from which they observe the world is an individualized one, never superimposed on another's,

never perceived in the same way (see also Cretia, in Woolf, 1973: 8). The characters translate reality differently, their choice of words is an individualized and individualizing one, and woven together their perceptions offer a complex image of the outward reality.

The unity of the novel, its coherence is given by some linking/unifying devices that Woolf employs, managing to bring all the six subjectivities together and at the same time to keep them distinct. Fand enumerates three such unifying factors: “the uniformity of style” in the characters’ soliloquies, “the positioning of a seventh character”, Percival (to whom all converge), and “the use of the character of Bernard as the chief spokesperson of their relationship” (Fand, 1999: 53-54).

Bernard, the one who enjoys and takes full advantage of the potential of words, using them to adorn the worlds he creates on the foundations of the real, is also a character that is introduced as resenting insincerity, words that are not felt as true, which comes in opposition with the stories that he creates, disregarding the true one; if in Woolf’s novel identity is also framed by language and the ability to express oneself into words, then untrue words conceal or alter identity, they are but a mask meant to deceive the others and/or to protect the self, or even a frail attempt to contain and create a longed-for identity.

Just like Jinny who is always in need of an *audience* to display the image of her body to (an audience of viewers), Bernard too is in need of an audience that, in his case, would listen to his words (an audience of listeners); Jinny’s language of *seduction* is one of *the body*, whereas Bernard’s is of his *creative mind*. He needs to get words outside himself, to be heard, to share them, to talk and be listened to, and even if there is no listener, he would speak to himself, which is to be seen in the notebook that he plans to write in when growing up: “When I am grown up I shall carry a notebook – a fat book with many pages, methodically lettered”; “soon I fail, unless talked to” (W26). It is an act of creation and liberation through language, a way of “methodically” structuring his vision of the world.

The others represent for the gregarious Bernard an incentive to create, to build on the structure of imagination, to verbalize the world as he sees it. When alone, he sees the imperfections of his stories, those “thin places” (W 59) as he calls them, that result in felt vulnerability; therefore, at this stage, solitude does not represent the medium for creative contemplation, but it leads to the cessation of the act of creation (“I cease to invent” [W 59]).

Bernard’s stories, the worlds he creates out of words, make the others feel “freed”, as if they had escaped a world entrapping the self. Indulging in this “abandonment” as Neville calls it, triggers building an identity they feel satisfied with or freeing the one that some others impose foreign boundaries on: “when he makes his foolish comparisons, a lightness comes over one. One floats, too, as if one were that bubble; one is freed; I have escaped, one feels. Even the chubby little boys [...] feel the same abandonment” (W 27). Bernard’s weave of words implies offering coherence and fluency to language and to the inner and outer reality: “I must open the little trap-door and let out these *linked phrases* in which I run together whatever happens, so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering *thread*, lightly *joining* one thing to another” (W 36, emphasis added). However, Bernard’s stories are not brought to an end, they remain unfinished, their power weakens and continuity is interrupted while the gap makes one aware of his/her own solitude; insincerity transpires — the imagined world comes to be felt as lacking truth, a false one they withdraw from:

Yet, the appalling moment has come when Bernard's power fails him and there is no longer any sequence and he sags and twiddles a bit of string and falls silent, gaping as if about to burst into tears. Among the tortures and devastations of life is this then – our friends are not able to finish their stories. (W 28)

We see this inability to complete the act of creation also reflected in the letter Bernard attempts to write (in the third part of the novel); he carefully structures it, planning every detail, but it all “falls flat” (W 58), a failure or, let us say, clumsiness with words that reminds us, to a certain extent, of Orlando's clumsiness (in handling both the real and the language) that would place him among the “sacred” (the creators, the poets). The gap (or the “transition”, as Bernard calls it) between the real self and the “assumed” one cannot be bridged, and attempting to re-write the letter, to recreate the process of building on the structure of imagination (the assumed self) without disregarding the true self would be felt by the other – the “she” the letter is addressed to – as “posing”, as insincerity.

Language makes Bernard shape the others, give them contour, build them an identity. However, it is only by means of shared language that he can make images concrete, which is his way of “laying hands upon the world” (W 50), his attempt (frail as it is) to control life. Bernard is not only a story-teller but also an observer that sees beyond the surface of things, drawing “the veil off things with words”, gathering piles of images he could give life to.

“What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that. [...] I am not one and simple, but complex and many” (W 56), says Bernard at the beginning of the third part of the novel. The image of a multi-layered self that escapes framing (“I escape them, am evasive”) is thus reemphasized, and so is the connection between self and circumstance (“which of these people am I? It depends so much upon the room” [W 60]).

Bernard's self is one that is subject to perpetual change, a protean one (“I am made and remade continually” [W 100]), yet, one that does not belong to himself entirely, but partly becomes the others' creation, the others being seen as stimulus and mirrors. Aware of the frail boundaries of such a self, Bernard fears time and solitude; his victory against time is only over the passing, present moment, yet a victory that will fall into oblivion as his voice is not entirely his: “but because there is something that comes from outside and not from within I shall be forgotten; when my voice is silent you will not remember me, save as the echo of a voice that once wreathed the fruit into phrases” (W 101). If solitude makes Louis see clearly and understand, and Rhoda define her sense of being, in Bernard's case it triggers silence: when alone, he falls silent, he turns lethargic (W 99).

Bernard is the character that sees the roots of loneliness and despair in terms of unshared images (implying unshared language, broken communication, missing audience) which the metaphorical opening and shutting of the doors bring to the surface, images of the past and/or future, as seen in the fifth part of the novel on Percival's death (linked to the death of Woolf's brother, Thoby): “I see sights that make me weep. For they cannot be imparted. Hence our loneliness; hence our desolation. I turn to that spot in my mind and find it empty. My own infirmities oppress me. There is no longer him to oppose them” (W 118).

The relationship between self, body and language is approached from the perspective of containment: if language/the word confers contour to thoughts, emotions, and sensations,

to the outward reality as filtered by the mind, containing them, also the body offers contour and becomes a recipient for the self, granting it the contour of a story that is continuously changed and told. Therefore, both language and body frame the story of the self Woolf was concerned with in *The Waves*.

In analyzing the novel, Flint (in Woolf, 2000: xxvi, xxxii, xxxiii), refers to the relationship between body and self, and the capacity of language to contain/mirror this relationship; one's sense of body comes to shape, to a certain extent, one's sense of self, and language becomes the subjective means of mirroring this perception. However, language and body prove too limited to offer a complete mirroring of the self (xxxvii), their power to render the dynamics of one's identity is revealed as frustrating due to its limitations.

On their last meeting, Bernard reveals himself as stuck, his freedom to move is limited by fatherhood and the choices he has made. Being stagnant, however, relates to the body only, the mind 'moving' freely in the world it creates, where the boundaries fall and the self is omnipotent. Bernard remains "a traveller", as he explains himself, "a pedlar, paying for my lodging with a ballad", "a guest" who does not ask for much (*W* 167). His unfinished phrases, his incomplete stories hanging like "clothes in a cupboard, waiting for someone to wear them" (*ibid.*), can be analyzed from various perspectives: wearing the mask of the imaginary, of a world that is not true, they cease to arouse interest when insincerity is felt - once the audience cease to admire and to believe in his stories, Bernard's vision stumbles and gradually withers; another perspective concentrates on the 'space' that is not filled by words, the space that is out of Bernard's reach - their being left unfinished would leave room for the true story, the one Bernard does not know (*W* 167), and also for a continuation that, by its nature, defies death; his stories highlight the blurred boundaries between the self and the other, between the real and the fictional, revealing an egotistic androgynous character that imposes his worked-on reality on the other. Finally, it is an incomplete act of creation that mirrors Bernard's sense of unaccomplished self as he discovers it in the last part of the novel, and at the same time it brings forth the always changing nature of the self – a never-ending story.

The last part of the novel makes all the stories converge into one, all the fragments make up one story silently voiced by Bernard who acts now as the central consciousness of the novel, in which the six perspectives on the world (inward and outward reality) are coherently combined, and the story-teller offers, in his final soliloquy, "the outcome of that long gestation, his sermon in the form of a rereading of what has happened so far" (Briggs, 2005: 260), a retrospect on their lives and on "these minute objects which we call optimistically 'characters of our friends'" (*W* 187), trying to see inside their "locked caskets" (*W* 205).

As his story unfolds, we discover a Bernard that has grown tired of telling stories and longs for a language that needs no effort, no imagination and adorning, one made of "broken", "inarticulate" words. It is a story he stumbles in when it comes to Percival, a story that loses its symmetry, highlighting the disequilibrium and the "unhinged" "apparatus of observation" (*W* 187). He falls silent and indifferent only to find then another impulse to hang on to, another wave that stirs his imagination and makes him shout "Fight! Fight!" (*W* 207) and want to explore more.

Having given contour to the others' selves, he turns to himself, shaping his own life, trying to bring everything into a whole, a "complete thing" (*W* 222). Being part of the others'

lives, his contour is unclear “for 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). But Percival’s and Rhoda’s death altered the unity; the circle has been irrevocably broken and one’s sense of self needs redefining. The identity formula includes the other; the interaction between the individual and the other does not result only in becoming aware of one’s individuality, but it also implies the risk of one (un)consciously ‘borrowing’ some identity characteristics, thus blurring the edges of individuality. Viewed from a different perspective, Bernard’s failure to recognize the others’ edges might be seen as mere egotism, disregarding their autonomy and superimposing his own stories on their true one, which he comes to ignore.

Bernard’s search for the self recalls Orlando’s and the moment when the true self is revealed on all the others having fallen silent; in *The Waves*, everything falls silent, too — everything is brought to a still, the tidal rhythm of life stops, and so do “the rhymes and the hummings, the nonsense and the poetry” (W 217), and Bernard can see now beyond the frame given by routine. The imperfection of his life is brought to the surface, its being incomplete just like his unfinished phrases and stories. The self he tries to trace is the one that opposed the passage of time, that offered coherence to words joining them into the phrases that offered continuity and colour to reality, that self that explored and fought. The absence of an answer, of the echo, reveals the old Bernard as “a man without a self”, without a centre, just a “heavy” and opaque body, “a dead man” (W 219). Language fails Bernard too: the landscape is a bare one, devoid of substance, withered by repetition, a “habitual” (W 221) one on which the creative mind does not add its structure of imagination any more; words can no longer offer contour and coherence to a world devoid of substance.

Memory and certainty fail him while the contour of the outward reality is not clearly perceived: “I begin now to forget; I begin to doubt the fixity of tables, the reality of here and now” (W 221). “Who am I?” asks Bernard and feels his identity overcome: he is one and many, himself and the others, no clear-cut boundaries to divide them, made up of memories, dreams, things around him, his “inmates” — “those old half-articulate ghosts”, “shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves” (W 222) and “the old brute”, the “savage, hairy” man whose language is but “guttural, visceral” (ibid.).

His body suggests the image of a grave for that Bernard who kept making notes in the book he kept in his pocket (which recalls Orlando and his “The Oak Tree”) and who has now become “tideless” and “immune” once the waves have fallen silent. He sees reality as it is, there is no desire to create stories any more, the freedom of his mind has vanished and he remains deprived of the imaginary world of his phrases that even offered him a body that gave him a sense of self-assurance, the shape of “a temple, a church, a whole universe” (W 224). What is left is but an aged man whose reflection he sees in the glass - “tired”, “spent”, “almost worn out” (W 227). His struggle with life proves fruitless; no longer in need of an audience, he finds relief in solitude and silence (the language he needs is one that reminds of the lovers’ or of the children’s one-syllabled words, “a howl”, a “cry” [ibid.]), no notebook to record his experiences is needed any more. We see now but a man who changes no more and who has lost his vision, himself, his self ...

Mu□ina (1997: 227-228) asserts that, when facing his own identity and the task of defining it, the modern individual becomes a burdened one facing the “crisis of the lack of the

I”, as Mu□ina calls it, which comprises the lack of inward reality/life and the impossibility of framing the self, of defining it, resulting in a crisis of the language and of reality. We apply these three interdependent crises to Bernard who is now unable to define himself and who sees life going on around him, hears the tidal rhythm of the world, yet is no longer a participant but a mere witness to “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again” (W 228). The use of *we* in the last paragraph may be interpreted as suggesting the coming back of the self, that *you* he has addressed throughout life/the novel (“but *you* understand, *you*, my self” [W 57]) now incorporated in *we*, and at the same time it opposes that *you* he addresses now: death, which he welcomes. A last wave rises in him and he feels again the desire to fight, to oppose the approaching enemy, death, and to write the phrase that would complete his story. The sentence the novel ends with — “*The waves broke on the shore*” (W 228), brings the story back to the omniscient narrator, “the lady writing” the characters and the self, and also suggests the continuity of life, its victory against the awaiting death.

The final image of the character of Bernard riding with his “spear couched” and his hair “flying back like a young man’s” (W 228) is a quixotic one, says Ruotolo, which “crystallizes like a work of art into something permanent” (1986: 170).

Due to its ambiguity, the end of the novel is differently interpreted. McConnell states that interpreting the last line as either “an affirmation or a denial of Bernard’s resolve” is irrelevant as it is “simply and sublimely irrelevant to Bernard, as Bernard to it, and therein lies its enormous power” (in Bloom, 1986: 63). Additionally, Hermione Lee sees this last line as indicative of the fact that Bernard’s facing death is but another wave whose inevitability lies in the very nature of existence, and also that his “individual effort is set against an arbitrary, uncaring universe” (op.cit. 108).

If analyzed from the perspective of the androgynous sublime, then the end of the novel suggests precisely the alienation and destructiveness of the self brought about by androgyny. In Rado’s view (2000: 176), Bernard’s egotism is a form of androgyny (an “egocentric, appropriative” one) and his racing against the enemy is his way of defying feminization, which he sees as death. Rado (op.cit. 175) also states that Bernard’s survival is the result of the “refuge” he finds “in the patriarchal legacy of the ‘I’”, which we see in the repetition of the personal pronoun Woolf employs:

However beat and done with it all I am, I must haul myself up, and find the particular coat that belongs to me; must push my arms into the sleeves; must muffle myself up against the night air and be off. I, I, I, tired as I am, spent as I am, and almost worn out with all this rubbing of my nose along the surfaces of things, even I, an elderly man who is getting rather heavy and dislikes exertion, must take myself off and catch some last train. (W 227)

Briggs sees this final wave as carrying Bernard “on a final ride against imminent dissolution”, and further asserts that the end of the novel brings into the foreground the theme of “heroic struggle” “as imagination triumphs over the irresistible advance of time and physical decay, in a gesture at once exultant and absurd” (2005: 262).

On following the search for self as reflected in this Woolfian character, it becomes clear once again that relying on words to draw the boundaries of one's self turns into a failure as language does not suffice, and trying to mirror or contain one's quest for identity into words brings to the surface only a partial, often frustrating and frustrated representation of the self, a glimpse into the depth of one's emotional, mental sea. Just as Woolf's writing did.

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Note: The translation of the quotations or reformulations from books printed in the Romanian language are the author's of the present article.