

**Communication in *The Waves*  
and *Between the Acts* by Virginia Woolf**

Solenne Lestienne

In context, Virginia Woolf is well-known for working out the psychology of her characters in a newly experimental manner. Trying to be as close as possible to the life taking place in the ego's consciousness, she emphasizes the themes of chaos and fragmentation either in connection with the self's intra-psychic battle or with its confrontation with otherness. She is peculiarly concerned with the psychic process, yet she clearly distinguishes between the external and internal realms "moving from the intellectual to the intimate" (Whitworth 2000, 148). The stake is thus to create bridges between both and, more generally, to reconcile contradictions and antagonisms through an attempt of communication. However, in both of Woolf's novels, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, this attempt is often aborted, particularly because of the gap existing between the self and the external realm. A void critically widens. On the one hand, the ego is looked into as an isolated entity characterized by a deep internal loneliness and enclosed in on-going soliloquies, and on the other hand it is looked into as an entity turned towards its relation to the world and its endeavour to get connected with the other selves. In brief, the problem for the self is to unify and reassemble its plural facets, and, regarding its conflict with the outside world, the ego is doomed to

cope with its social (like decorum and patriarchy frequently mentioned in Woolf's works or social relationships) and spatiotemporal environment (like the pageant unrolling in wartime in *Between the Acts*). Otherness may either fortify the ego or jeopardize its structure. Is solitude susceptible to be redeemed? May fragments be sorted out? That is why I mean to draw a parallel between two novels by Virginia Woolf, which are eloquent, to define identity and which are both concerned with disjunction. The lexical and syntactic texture coupled with the theme of chaos is similar in *The Waves* (1931) and *Between the Acts* (1941); still, the question of subjectivity is not treated from the same standpoint in the two works. In *The Waves*, the battle is inward, at grips with the painful construction of the being. In *Between the Acts*, even though the textual universe is analogous, regarding the rhythm, the female imagery, and the idea of the unsettled self, the communication gravitates towards the outside, war and creation *essentially* interrogating the relation to the world. *The Waves* may be seen as an *in camera* novel set in an enclosed mind; *Between the Acts* as a reflection on art and war. Both consider the connection of the self with the world as dolorous. May art be a likely way out?

The two novels handle the unfathomable despair and solitude connected to life. In order to render the texture of the mind, either in confrontation with inward thoughts or with the weight of a meaningless world, Woolf resorts to a peculiar technique interlacing the representation of the vaporous and of the tangible (as in the short story "Solid Objects"). The point is thus to tell life without using a plot, without a logical pattern of unrolling events, and, following a psychological reflection, to decipher the jolting, fleeting and untamed process of the ego's mind. The selves try to build their own personality (*The Waves*) and struggle against the chaos of the world outside tugged by war (in *Between the Acts*) and governed by patriarchy and absurdity. The plot is non-existent, since, in Woolf's opinion, "plot is nothing" (1992a, 56) and, in "Modern Fiction", she suggests that the classical account of facts belongs to the materialist Edwardian writers who are but

interested in accumulation. Artistically, Woolf breaks with what had been done before and she defines the rules of an “eyeless” (Woolf quoted in Briggs 2000, 75) and experimental fiction in *The Waves* in which one single self, maybe hers, is clearly divided into six others. There is a genuine control of the author over her fiction. In her writing, she uses literary devices, like allegories, rhythm, truncated sentences and metaphors. For instance, one character in the novel, the androgynous Percival, takes on a metafictional function. His ethereal presence provides equilibrium for the six friends who are as much connected as separate: “Yes it is Percival I need” (Woolf 1992c, 28). He symbolizes a bond which helps communication and as an artificial literary tool, he is in charge with solacing the loneliness of the six characters. Metatextually, he stands for balance and peace.

In *The Waves*, the characters are in quest for unity, for oneness. In Pirandello's play *Six characters in search of an author* (1921), six figures seek a playwright to write a drama, thus recalling the search of coherence animating the characters from *The Waves* and the importance of creation in *Between the Acts*. The notion of creation intermingles with the dialectic of reality and fiction. What is real or fake? If Pirandello's play evokes the role of the artist, like in *Between the Acts* via Miss La Trobe, then it also echoes *The Waves* and the power of the storyteller. The author is the guide in charge of the desires of the characters. The desire in *The Waves* is double. They are not only in quest for distinctive identity but also for a group in which they could feel protected. Finding sometimes the presence of the other intrusive or ominous, they are nonetheless well aware that division and separation are paramount to danger, to adult age and to ineluctable deterioration. They speak in turn as though disconnected but at times, rather rarely, at Hampton Court, they express feelings of friendship. They are even close to spiritual communion in these moments. In this way, there is an oscillating movement between acceptance and repulsion, between misunderstanding and comprehension, between compassion and betrayal like the motion of the waves.

The novel opens *in medias res* into perceptions emanating from the six figures but even if they try to communicate, dialogue fails and each perception is detached, deeply isolated. Against all odds, the dramatis personae of *The Waves* strive to define their identity despite the overwhelming pangs of anguish. Paradoxically, loneliness is experienced both alone and with otherness. *The Waves* (1931) tackles the life of six distinct characters from nursery to adult age. The six friends are part of one personality in spite of their differences. In the following excerpt, the rendering of the separation is all the stronger as the abruptness of the monologues is stressed, even visible in the layout. No understanding can be found.

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

“I see a slab of pale yellow”, said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.”

“I hear a sound”, said Rhoda, “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.”

“I see a globe”, said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.” (Woolf 1992c, 5)

In *The Waves*, being totally unprepared, the reader is “whirled asunder” (Woolf 1992c, 53) into the onslaught of run-on thoughts, into a form of stream, which encapsulates the loneliness and the “absence of love” (Brisac and Desarthe 2004, 46) suffusing the novel. From this point of view, the mother is missing in *The Waves* replaced by the natural rhythm in the intervals which may be compared to a ritual lullaby. The first interlude connotes birth; the “sun had not yet risen” (Woolf 1992c, 3) and a flame became “visible” (Woolf 1992c, 3). Still, soon, the competition between the six friends and the omnipresence of death, showing through Rhoda’s suicide and Percival’s absurd death, hinder serenity and coherence.

As meaning is wasting away, as time passes in a merciless way, then condemning beings to accept aging and deterioration and profound solitude, the characters are to reconsider the question of identity particularly because self-knowledge oscillates with time passing. No element is monolithic, in regard to the

inevitable evolution of the being or to the endless motion of the waves. The questions at stake in *The Waves* may recall some aspects of *Between the Acts*: who am I without the other? What is my identity? “Dispersed are we?” (Woolf 1992a, 60) Between “unity” and “dispersity” (Woolf 1992a, 119) or between “the broken” (Woolf 1992a, 73) and the unified, is there an equilibrium to be found? Maybe the “re-created” (Woolf 1992a, 92) world, mostly “universal” (Woolf 1992a, 107) allowed by fiction and by the artistic voice is a clue. Actually, Woolf always meant to make her reader “see” (Woolf 1992a, 60) by resorting to an unconventional reading pact. A coherent “thread” (Woolf 1992a, 115) - either formal or thematic - thus patches up pieces. The novels seem to be experimental yet controlled by a voice in which the reader can confide. There is a tenuous sense of the detail in Woolf's fiction, coupled with sensitivity and abstraction.

*Between the Acts* (1941) is more about the attempt of communication of an artist with her audience. The novel is a deep reflection about art and develops profound thoughts about the absurdity of war and of the human life: “Civilization (the wall) in ruins” (Woolf 1992a, 108); “Solitude had come again” (Woolf 1992a, 121); “death, death, death” (Woolf 1992a, 107). Ontologically, the self is at a loss. In a context of in-between wars - of an “interval” (Woolf 1992a, 90), the work deals with a pageant which is intensely disturbed by the noise of planes flying around in the sky, by “voices” (Woolf 1992a, 91) and by a gramophone which is so discordant that it prevents the play from unrolling normally. The artist's involvement is not respected nor understood. The playwright, Miss La Trobe, as an echo to Woolf herself, is invaded with doubts about creation. Being undermined by the meaning of art, she denounces the absurdity of life and of war, thus putting forward the sense of fragmentation of the self. In the final scene, quite graphically, the artist hands mirrors to each onlooker and, being deadlocked to the reflections, visibly dismantled and split up, the audience is highly destabilized. Should the most significant stakes of the existence be kept unveiled?

The “words” are considered as “without meaning” (Woolf 1992a, 125) and, as “the audience s(ee) themselves, not whole by any means” (Woolf 1992a, 110); “orts, scraps and fragments” (Woolf 1992a, 111) whirl them asunder. While the audience is prey to horror, the dialogue between the artist and the on-looker “fails” (Woolf 1992a, 60) again. Being pervaded with impressions of uneasiness coming from spilled out fragments, the characters are reluctant to see the truth, to see beyond, “to wander beyond” the line of the expressible; in a way, they are rooted to doorways, objecting to go ahead. That is how Miss La Trobe, being cruelly disappointed, declares: “It was a failure, another damned failure! As usual. (my) vision escaped (me)” (Woolf 1992a, 60). There is “agony” (Woolf 1992a, 60). As La Trobe cannot make them “see”, creation ends up in nonsense. Accepting the naked truth means giving up comfort. For instance, in Woolf's story "The Lady in the Looking-Glass", the lady's solitude shows in the mirror. Her body is presented in separate versions. The looking-glass becomes a symbol connoting lucidity and offers a barely acceptable truth. In the story, the lady suddenly realizes the cracks and breaches of her life. As suggested by Paul Klee, the aim of art is to “make visible” (1968, 182). Many a time, the vision shakes up well-rooted certainties. The mirror takes on the same function as art: it brutally *reveals* what used to be behind a veil. In *Between the Acts*, the characters are in search of someone helpful to solace their pain and to share the harsh revelation of the mirrors. Pangs of loneliness are at that moment unbearable.

In *Between the Acts*, the absence of communication is stressed through the evocation of marital life. One couple, Isa and Giles, do not succeed in speaking with each other: “the wave has broken” (Woolf 1992a, 59), Isa says, as the feeling of division is deepening. The longing for sharing intimacy is always deceived. Moreover, uncertainty permeates the novel and relationships are subject to fluctuations. The characters stand in doorways and on thresholds (Woolf 1992a, 62); they pertain to “liminal spaces” (“liminal” means “threshold” in Latin), as if

they were at the margins of themselves; apparently no comfortable place, as the word “unsettled” suggests (Woolf 1992a, 17), is allowed to them. They may echo tightrope walkers, always in danger and on a tenuous thread, all uncertain. They are often tormented, women being isolated in their water imagery (note the importance of lily pools), and men being locked up in a form of violent materialism and inhabited by murderous instincts. Men and women find it hard to understand each other. For instance, Rhoda and Louis from *The Waves* keep platonic relationships since sex is a too intrusive for both of them. Sex is the closest relation susceptible to happen. Where is the right distance then between the ego and the other? The question of femininity is also raised in the two novels, as women represent the soft and the evanescent, in contradiction with men who embody action. Woolf “raise(s) the difficult question of male and female “likeness” and “difference” and the significance of sexual identity in literature” (Marcus 2000, 214). In Woolf’s own life, the relation to masculinity was stained by sexual abuse and by the patriarchy imposed by her father and which harmed her mother. The dialectics of body and mind, of the sensual and the androgynous, of unity and disjunction govern Woolf’s textual universe. Communication is hindered by the gaping impossibility to reunite fragments.

Therefore, the communication of the self with otherness is a burning issue. There is a compulsory passage from the ego, from the very *intimate* self (etymologically, “very interior”) to its relation to the outside world. While Woolf carries further her insight into consciousness, she also interrogates the impact of the environment on the self’s mind. Each event, even the tiniest, “scores upon” consciousness. As Woolf declares, “everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought” (1984, 154). Whereas Europe attended the genesis of psychoanalysis, Woolf, as a visionary writer, positions the individual as essential, central. Its existence as itself and its existence as an entity impacted upon by the external realm are both examined in the novels by Woolf. Moreover, the formal

approach is allied to the thematic one either positively or negatively. On the one hand, ternary rhythm and poetic devices are interwoven with the themes of unity and epiphany. On the other, truncated sentences and unrelated speeches are thematically mingled with chaos and absurdity, war and loneliness. The right perspective is certainly not to find an idealistic solution to chaos and disjunction (“orts and fragments” in *Between the Acts*) but rather to make the contradictions evener and less sore.

In Woolf’s works, making body and mind, materiality and spirituality, the “halo” (1984, 150) of life and the concrete relation to the world communicate is dodgy and intricate. Disorganization basically provides from the perception, being legitimate or warped, of reality which tugs and hurts. For instance, the schizophrenic Rhoda from *The Waves* cannot cross a puddle at one point of the narrative. Emblematically, she is unable to establish a proper link between her body and her mind. She is scattered into detached pieces. Being far from the acceptance of the solidity of life (let us remember again Woolf’s short story “Solid Objects”), she is like in abeyance, in a suspended world. She cannot conceive her concrete existence either: “I have no face” (Woolf 1992c, 31); “without anchorage” (Woolf 1992c, 91). The factual is denied, she can only dream. She is elsewhere. Here body and mind are separate, far from a sense of unity and accomplishment. Hopefully, the quest for formal epiphany runs along both novels and certainly, art and creation may amend breaches partly and perhaps attenuate gaps. The ternary rhythm is often resorted to in this respect.

The self may be seen as a complex embedding of internal contradictions and complexities. It “bears” (etymologically “to suffer”) plural facets. In a way, a few figures are vaporous and resigned to be sheer voices. For instance, the narrator in *The Waves* evokes Rhoda’s “vagueness” (Woolf 1992c, 30). Still, some characters are just connected with their bodies; Jinny “move(s), dance(s)” (Woolf 1992c, 30). She has no spirituality. Two aspects of the same personality

are thus contending. In *The Waves*, the characters are members of “a unified whole” (Woolf quoted in Dibattista 2000, 133). So Jinny and Rhoda belong to the same personality; Rhoda’s vision competes with facts, the latter being featured by Jinny. In *Between the Acts*, if Lucy is dreaming of lily pools, being a unifier, her brother Bart is a “separatist” (Woolf 1992a, 72). If the characters “wrestle with the meaning” (Woolf 1992a, 112), they are also asunder coping with the acceptance of themselves and of the other self. During a dinner at Hampton Court, all the characters are ashamed of themselves; they feel “acrid”, different. Again, communicating is difficult. The ego is surely involved into an inward battle. Life is actually about motion, fluttering impressions and with jolts happening all the time and this constant on-going movement is susceptible to endanger the comfort inside the self. Identity is not fixed. Past and present pop up often simultaneously in the consciousness. Time is disjunctive. To Eric Warner, *The Waves* accounts for “a plethora of perceptions, implications and understandings, a multiplication of potential meanings, which is confusing, contradictory and destructive of coherence” (Warner 1987, 58). Whereas “there is no stability in th (e) world” (Woolf 1992c, 88) the protagonists put up with “the sunless territory of non-identity” (Woolf 1992c, 87). That is certainly why the stories of Bernard creating a thread between all his friends may alleviate their deepest solitude. For once, it makes sense out of it all.

The divisions taking place within the self are not only disrupting but also providers of instability. For example, Jinny is at ease with her body and with that of others (“our bodies communicate” (Woolf 1992c, 73)) but her body, as we said above, exists with no connection with her mind as she confesses that she “do (es) not dream” (Woolf 1992c, 30). There is one element which particularly conveys the idea of disjunction. In the reflection given by the mirror, one feels a stranger to oneself (see “The lady in the Looking-glass”). As Jean-Paul Vernant puts it, “in the confrontation with the mirror, there are duality, duplication and unity at a

time” (Zazzo 1993, 200). The multiplication of egos is foregrounded by the mirror while the human mind is assaulted by a wide range of thoughts. No link between the perception of oneself and the reflection seems to be possible; in addition, the several versions rendered by the reflection are not related to one another. Thus, a void of meaning threatens the attempt to unite the different pieces. Bernard of *The Waves* experiences uncomfortable plurality: “many Bernards” (Woolf 1992c, 200). In Woolf’s novels, the looking-glass dismantles the perception of oneself by showing separate parts of the body being just disconnected from one another. The self is not homely in face of its reflection. The attack to coherence is compounded. The mirror in *Between the Acts* provides “three separate versions” (Woolf 1992a, 11). It may even be considered as an extended eye deforming bodies. As an element of the “uncanny”, the term being typically Freudian, the looking-glass causes anxiety and sometimes repulsion. The self is no more “one” but “many”. It is lost to itself.

In a way, the self is often without the world and the “world without a self” as the title of a work by James Naremore indicates. There is an obvious lack of connection between the two. Yet, since the self is at a grip with unity and self-knowledge, it needs the outside to define its contours: may it be the other self? When Bernard declares that he is “too complex” and that there is “something floating, unattached” (Woolf 1992a, 57), then the difficulty defining one’s subjectivity is called forth. Is the self in itself to be regarded as non-existent? Does it need the other’s gaze to justify its existence? Is, as Nietzsche supposes, the “doing” everything and the “being” nothing? Surely, the self feels “acrid”, “difficult” (Woolf 1992c, 89) when it deals with the other. Surely, Jinny asserts that she “lives a life of (her) own” (Woolf 1992c, 46), as if she did not need anybody to reach coherent identity. Surely, there is the question of “how bridge the distance between (one and the others)” (Woolf 1992c, 110). Still, there is the idea that selves, even multiple, can complement one another, soothe the pain,

make up for loneliness, like in *Between the Acts* when the audience is gathered by a providential even universal rain bringing people back together. Thanks to its presence, the other may heal the breaches in the construction of the identity. All the characters in *The Waves* actually struggle to form one whole self, a completed being: a “six-sided flower; made of six lives” (Woolf 1992c, 175); the other is also involved into the history of the individual. There are occasions in *Between the Acts* when the characters are “remembering the play” together (Woolf 1992a, 65). In the novel, “D’you remember” (Woolf 1992a, 95) is repeated three times on a single page and reoccurs as a leitmotiv. Remembering allows the connection, even the communication, between past and present, between reality and illusions, between the ego and otherness. Storytelling too may be a bridge between people. Furthermore, each of the six characters of *The Waves* represents a feature which helps define in the end a whole person, finally unified. Jinny helps with her physical easiness in social occasions, Susan is very skilled at mothering children, Rhoda is characterized by a strong imagery, and Bernard is good at making links between people. Thus, artificially, through fictional devices; Woolf succeeds in reshaping fragments into a whole. When evoking the whole I intend a finally reshaped world, a global entity. *The Waves* is set in an enclosed mind, as if *in camera*. In one soul made out of plural facets, the contention is inward, like in the famous *Huis clos* by J.P Sartre. The characters in *The Waves* inhabit one mind; however they are isolated, distinct from one another, even jealous and hateful towards each other.

A sense of unity emerges out of multiplicity in the end. A voice is found out in the two novels. Abstraction and distance allow the unification of scraps of meaning, partly reassembled. Indeed, the two works recreate a world, through the play performed in *Between the Acts* for example which turns out to be a *mise en abyme*. They define a new form of realism, the realism of the mind. How does the human mind deal with society and with the absurd nature of life? The two novels

retort differently. *The Waves* is without anchorage in reality or in a usual setting. The texture of the writing is vaporous and ethereal like the essence of the soul. *Between the Acts* fathoms the complexity of the human being. The discontinuity of the ego is all the more important as creation reveals the inexpressible pain of life. *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* constitute two interpretations of life from an inward point of view. In the end, the exploration of the mental process leads to the creation of a world of its own: a “ring” or “globe!” (Woolf 1992c, 5) in suspension trying to escape from “orts and fragments” (Woolf 1992a, 26).

So, Woolf worked hard to find an artistic voice that could be heard. The poetic voice she adopts recalls the etymology of the term “poetry” which means “creation”. When writing *The Waves*, Woolf intended was to create a “playpoem” (Woolf quoted in Briggs 2000, 75). She was highly conscious “of flux and disorder; of annihilation and despair” (Woolf 1992c, 69), also that “life is a perpetual warfare” (Woolf 1992c, 207). In her life, she was also turned towards the external realm, standing as a feminist and a pacifist. In her works, it seems that women and men experience a deep problem communicating. In Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, men are related to prosaic “action” (Woolf 1992a, 61), whereas women are spiritual, in a bubble, often plunged into water imagery. Lucy, the female “unifier” (Woolf 1992a, 72), does not approve of her brother Bart, who is a “separatist” (Woolf 1992a, 72). Another example is Giles who stamps on a toad and snake so that “blood” splashes (Woolf 1992a, 61); he then symbolizes men’s violent world. Woolf’s position against patriarchy hence echoes her position against war. Men are always concerned with action and most frequently with violence. Being despaired by war, even destabilized, and fighting for the rights and freedom of women in a perspective of justice, Woolf was completely part of the world. In *Between the Acts* in particular, she denounces the surrounding climate. Civilization is endangered by the side effects of war. Miss La Trobe, the artist, Woolf’s semblance, looks for harmony out of the disorderly pattern in

which war participates. During the pageant, planes are flying in the sky cutting words in half. There are multiple interruptions: “the wind blew the words away” (Woolf 1992a, 76). There is a “quivering cacophony” (Woolf 1992a, 124). “Words became inaudible” (Woolf 1992a, 84). War is opposed to creativity, communication is aborted, nonsense contends with free expression. Bazin and Lauter hence points at La Trobe “as an artist struggling to achieve her vision despite the war” (Topping Bazin and Lauter 1991, 37). The image of chaos grows in depth with war as expression is gaged: “without civilization, there is no order, only chaos” (Bazin and Lauter 1991, 39). War creates an unsteady and violent climate which is pervaded with incoherence. People are “shot” (Woolf 1992a, 30) or imprisoned. There are “the refugees” (Woolf 1992a, 74) in a sharp world. Intended violence causes a feeling of absurdity like brutality which is akin to nonsense.

Endeavouring to go beyond her own inward contradictions and to assert her place as a fully responsible citizen, Woolf is confronted with the unfathomable lack of dialogue between people. Facing what Kant defines as “the unsociable sociability” (1963, np) of the human being, Woolf, in *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, evokes the self and its relation to otherness in parallel with the absence of understanding between men and women. What is more, the difficulties conveying an artistically personal and invested vision are raised in both novels. Even Woolf’s style may be seen as truncated, even schizophrenic, as sentences are aborted and structurally disturbed. Her voice as an artist cannot be considered as entire if the invasive hallucinations haunting some of her characters are not taken into account. Septimus, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, hears birds speaking in Greek. The voice becomes multi-layered, intensely “human and fallible” (Briggs 2000, 72).

In a nutshell, if the characters are split into different selves or remain in an uncomfortable mid-way (see the repetition of the terms “threshold” and

“doorway”), if the sentences are cut off violently in the middle, or if the writing is more largely disturbed, a vision of unity arising out of puzzling diversity is conjured up to amend fragments and to create a kind of communication between the different pieces. Even the image of the waves connotes the idea of a simultaneous process of creation and destruction, of grouping and dispersion, of acceptance and rejection. The absorbing whole is meant to bring coherence to disorder, and to formlessness and to absurdity. Neville’s remark “oh, I am in love with life” (Woolf 1992c, 60) and then, a bit further “how painful!” (Woolf 1992c, 61) lays emphasis on the unsolvable dichotomies between the internal and the external, between the love of life and its ineluctable anguish, between the visionary and the tangible. Woolf “can’t fight any longer”, she begins “to hear voices”, she “shan’t recover this time”; (Rose 1986, 243). However, the world she created is no more “self-centred” (Woolf 1992a, 28); it is open to the reader. The vision tends towards universality, beyond times and social matters. As a universal issue, communication is at the heart of life and art. There are voids which may be redeemed by dialogue but which are widened by the disorganized and destabilized world surrounding the self. Woolf’s works appeal to epiphany yet she got injured by the impossibility reconciling deep contradictions. No solution can be found. There is a regrettable dead-end. The fictional voice only remains. Some “moments of vision” (Whitworth 2000, 153) allow the void to be less sore; it helps optimism and attenuates what cannot be properly unified. In the end, the evanescent and ethereal and distanced voice in the two novels saves the darkest part. Creation is achieved.

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