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Fragmentation and Wholeness in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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Virginia Woolf's seventh novel, *The Waves*, first published by the Hogarth Press in 1931, is widely regarded as her most experimental piece of writing. The complex and elusive structure of the work, the least representational among Woolf's novels, challenges the reader's assumptions about the inner and the outer world. In the absence of a substantial story, of a convincing plot and well-defined characters, the reader is called upon to search for a deeper coherence and more profound meanings. Indeed, in *The Waves* the modernist writer strives for a fresh way of expressing a vision of wholeness in a broken world. The present article attempts to reread Woolf's self-conscious novel in the double perspective of separation and reunion, of dispersal and recomposition. A close reading of selected passages will show how the poetics of fragmentation and the poetics of wholeness coexist in Woolf's narrative, pervading the imagery and the symbols of the text. In more than one sense, the dialectic between division and unity, fragmentation and wholeness can be identified as the structuring force of the novel; most tellingly, this textual dynamism is reflected in the oscillatory motion of the waves, continuously breaking and merging.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, fragmentation, wholeness, rhythm, circle motif

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's seventh novel, *The Waves*, first published by the Hogarth Press in 1931, is widely regarded as her most experimental piece of writing. Woolf conceived this work as "a new kind of play […] prose yet poetry" (Woolf, 1984, p. 128), and certainly it represents a challenge to the reader. The novel is composed of nine sections, following one another without chapter numbers or titles. Each section opens with an italicized interlude —a sort of lyrical preface—describing the motion of the waves on the beach and the diurnal progress of the sun as it advances in the sky, passing from dawn to dusk as the narrative gradually progresses. These opening descriptive passages of depersonalized prose are interwoven with nine sections of 'dramatic soliloquies' (as Virginia Woolf termed them) by six characters, moving from childhood to maturity.

This complex yet elusive organization of *The Waves* exhibits Woolf's fascination with the relationship between inner and outer world, which had already appeared, in a different guise, in *To the Lighthouse*. It has been widely recognized how the impersonal italicized interludes borrow their register from the central section of *To the Lighthouse*, namely 'Time Passes'. In more than one sense, *The Waves* can be understood as a modernist meditation on time, as Nadia Fusini claims in her 'Introduction' to the Italian translation of the novel (Fusini, 2002). And yet, the rapturous and fragmentary style of this 'play-poem', so difficult to categorize, can make it

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hard to read, giving the impression of a substantial lack of coherence and unity. Through the pages of her *Diary*, Virginia Woolf reminds us that she was "writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot", a rhythm that "is in harmony with the painters" (Woolf, 1984, p. 316). It is up to the reader to become attuned to the pervasive rhythm that underlies, in different ways, both the opening lyrical descriptions and the multivocal sections of interrelated soliloquies (Bezircilioğlu, 2009; Clements, 2005; Levin, 1983). Passing from visual to auditory imagery, from the sounds of nature to the human voices, the reader is called upon to search for a deeper, harmonious coherence which is reflected in the rhythmic resonance of the waves.

From Chaos to Cosmos

The nine pastoral interludes of *The Waves* depict the passage of a single day, from the first light of dawn to the closing moments of sunset. At the very beginning of the novel the opening interlude, describing sunrise on a seascape, presents the double imagery of separation and unity. The lyrical prose of this passage has been often compared with the Biblical account of Genesis, where creation is conceived as the emergence of an ordered cosmos out of primordial chaos (Gen. 1: 2). The luminous precision of this description subtly introduces the theme of separation and distinction:

> The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened *a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky* and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually. (Woolf, 1992, p. 3; my emphasis)

The opening lines of *The Waves* closely depict, with an impersonal voice in the past tense, the beginning of dawn before sunrise, which brings the clarity of distinction into a world of obscurity and ambiguity. Thus, the initial impression of a confusing scene, where one thing "was indistinguishable" from another, gradually gives way to a clearer view. The symbolic meaning of the "dark line dividing the sea from the sky" cannot be overlooked: it implies the ability to differentiate and distinguish between things, considered as the primary condition for the perception and understanding of the world. However, as the description of the seascape proceeds, with the sun rising in the sky and light increasing, images of integration and cohesion become predominant:

> Gradually the fibres of *the burning bonfire* were fused into one haze, *one incandescence* which lifted the weight of the woolen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue. The surface of the sea slowly became transparent and lay rippling and sparkling until the dark stripes were almost rubbed out. Slowly […] *a broad flame* became visible; *an arc of fire* burnt on the rim of the horizon, and *all round it the sea blazed gold*. (Woolf, 1992, p. 3; my emphasis)

The progressive expansion of images of fire and light ("the burning bonfire", "one incandescence", "a broad flame", "an arc of fire") extends to the horizon line, covering the entire view: "and all round it the sea blazed gold". This striking descriptive sequence suggests the multiple, stunning visual effects of the unique power of the sun. A comparison of the two quoted passages clearly shows, through a series of eloquent images, a meaningful progression from the initial fragmentary perspective to the final, all-encompassing vision. Even more significantly, this primal scene of *The Waves* introduces the reader to one of the major archetypal symbols underlying the whole narrative: namely the circle motif, expressing totality, harmony, original perfection, and the cyclical movement of life. The circular figure of "an arc of fire on the rim of the horizon" recalls, within the

context of the scenery depicted here, the rainbow that appears in the clouds in Genesis, as the sign of "the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth" (Gen. 9: 13-16). Behind the density of literary allusions in Woolf's text, the first interlude tellingly evokes a sort of *absolute beginning*, such as the creation of the world, or the origin of a single day, or the appearance of humans on earth. At the same time, it alludes to destruction and rebirth and continual renewal, implicitly symbolized by the perpetual movement of the waves. In light of the above, it is worth noting that the concluding paragraph of this remarkable *overture* is focalized around the feeble signs of human presence in the natural world:

> The light struck upon the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another. One bird chirped high up; there was a pause; another chirped lower down. The sun sharpened the walls of the house, and rested like the tip of a fan upon a white blind and made a blue finger-print of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window. The blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial. The birds sang their *blank melody* outside. (Woolf, 1992, pp. 3-4; my emphasis)

The opening interlude moves from the description of a cosmic vision to a less sublime natural scene, set in a garden. Here the presence of life is announced by the chirping of birds among the trees; here domesticity may be perceived through the blind of a bedroom window. In this respect, it is not without significance that Woolf's writing style slowly moves from the visual to the auditory register, culminating in the "blank melody" of the birds.[1]

The Dialectic between Separation and Reunion

Tellingly, birdsong marks the shift from the opening interlude to the first section of soliloquies, where the six main characters—children in a boarding school—begin to explore the world around them at daybreak. The soliloquies, introduced in the past tense by a narrative voice, are uttered in the present:

> '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.'
> 'I see a crimson tassel,' said Jinny, 'twisted with gold threads.'
> 'I hear something stamping,' said Louis. 'A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 5)

Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis: each character imaginatively comments about the sights and sounds they experience in the early-morning sunlight. This narrative section develops principally through rhythmic movements—waves of vital energy and emotion, which connect the dawn of the world with the awakening of its human inhabitants. Surprisingly enough, the lyrical and accurate descriptions made by each character recall the stylistic diction and tone of the interlude:

> 'Birds are singing up and down and in and out all round us,' said Susan.
> 'The beast stamps; the elephant with its foot chained; the great brute on the beach stamps,' said Louis. […]
> 'The walls are cracked with gold cracks,' said Bernard, 'and there are blue, finger-shaped shadows of leaves beneath the windows.' […]

[1] For the symbolic importance of the birds in *The Waves*, see Banin (2021).

> 'The birds sang in chorus first,' said Rhoda. 'Now the scullery door is unbarred. Off they fly. Off they fly like a fling of seed. But one sings by the bedroom window alone.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 6)

Far from being a "blank melody", the children's expressions are full of meaning and reveal personal involvement. It suffices to consider Rhoda's comment about the birds—first singing in chorus and then flying away—which clearly foreshadows what will happen later to the group of friends, when they will be separated and scattered. Moreover, the image of the solitary bird, singing alone by the bedroom window, hints at Rhoda's own feelings and disposition of mind.

Although the sequence of interrelated soliloquies inevitably conveys an initial impression of fragmentation and dispersion, as the reader proceeds through the text, each utterance begins to reveal a particular concern and a special emphasis in relation to one of the six characters. Consequently, in the subsequent sections, the different personality traits begin to emerge: Bernard's loquacity and obsession with language; Neville's intellectual ambition and delight in personal relationships; Louis's desire to impose order upon material things; Jinny's sensuality and pleasure of the body; Susan's attachment to nature and joy in motherhood; Rhoda's high sensitivity and desire for solitude.

Even so, the attempt to identify six separate characters in *The Waves* is intrinsically misleading, as Jane Goldman authoritatively claims (Goldman, 2006, p. 71). The alternation between subjective soliloquies and objective interludes is crucial to understanding and interpreting the multiple voices occurring in the novel. Throughout the text, the diverse soliloquies do not sound as separate and individualized voices, but appear as overlapping waves, recycling and borrowing imagery from each other. "The six characters were supposed to be one", Virginia Woolf suggested in a letter (Goldman, 2006, p. 71). The symbol of the wave itself conveys the idea of unfixed unity, fluidity of identity, recurring movement of collision and separation. The complex structure of *The Waves* suggests a concern both with subjective engagement and objective detachment, with phenomenology and psychological growth.

In the second section of the novel the characters leave the boarding school and the enchanted garden of their childhood, and experience a forced separation of the close bonds they had forged there. Boys and girls are divided and sent to different schools. Waves of intense emotion reveal the vulnerability of early adolescence in the transition from childhood to adult life. Especially the female voices capture what Woolf called 'the real life' in a manner never done before:

> 'This is my first night at school,' said Susan, 'away from my father, away from my home. My eyes swell; my eyes prick with tears. I hate the smell of pine and linoleum. I hate the wind-bitten shrubs and the sanitary tiles. I hate the cheerful jokes and the glazed look of everyone. I left my squirrel and my doves for the boy to look after. The kitchen door slams, and shot patters among the leaves when Percy fires at the rooks. All here is false; all is meretricious.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 23)

And after Susan, Rhoda describes herself in terms of absence and lack:

> 'There are desks with wells for the ink. We shall write our exercises in ink here. But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity. We are callous, unfriended. I will seek out a face, a composed, a monumental face, and will endow it with omniscience, and wear it under my dress like a talisman and then (I promise this) I will find some dingle in a wood where I can display my assortment of curious treasures. I promise myself this. So I will not cry.' (Woolf, 1992, pp. 23-24)

On the other hand, Bernard, Neville and Louis have all become friends with Percival, who is a greatly respected boy at their new school. He is depicted by Louis as a "mediaeval commander", as a true leader:

> 'Look now, how everybody follows Percival. He is heavy. He walks clumsily down the field, through the long grass, to where the great elm trees stand. His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him. Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 26)

Indeed, the wave-like movement between breaking and merging, separation and unity may be observed at different levels throughout the novel. In the third section the soliloquies of the six characters, now young men and women, demonstrate the emerging of adult personalities. Bernard speaks first, beginning his self-examination with an objective statement: "The complexity of things becomes more close" (Woolf, 1992, p. 56). He recognizes his divided being, indulging in a lengthy description of his intention to perform the various Bernards that make up his identity:

> 'What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that. […] then it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many. Bernard in public, bubbles; in private, is secretive. That is what they do not understand, for they are now undoubtedly discussing me, saying I escape them, am evasive. They do not understand that I have to effect different transitions; have to cover the entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 56)

But, finally, "the truth is that I need the stimulus of other people" (Woolf, 1992, p. 59). Bernard's consciousness of his multiple and incomplete subjectivity prepares the central scene in the following section, where the six friends will be reunited for a dinner party in honour of Percival. As the name suggests, this unvoiced character appears in the novel like a knight in Arthurian legend, surrounded by the aura of the chivalric English hero. Handsome and charming, admired by everyone, Percival never speaks in *The Waves*; his perfection lies in his inaccessibility. Destined for India to serve in the colonial government, he remains the projection of other characters' universal desire (Balossi, 2017).

The fourth section is set in early adulthood and centred on a send-off dinner for Percival, who is moving to India. At first the six characters, sitting together in a London restaurant, experience tension and uneasiness in one another's company. While they are all waiting for Percival, Bernard observes: "Now is our festival; now we are together. But without Percival there is no solidity. We are silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background". The atmosphere is lightened considerably by Percival's arrival. As the dinner proceeds, the friends reminisce about their childhood at the boarding school and celebrate the time they are having together. During the dinner party, "the unvoiced Percival acts as the focal point of the other six selves" (Goldman, 2006, p. 72). The dinner scene clearly shows that, in the absence of Percival, the original group of the six friends suffers from a lack of completeness and harmony.[2] Percival's presence is able to communicate a sense of unity and completion, as Bernard points out:

> 'We have come together […] to make *one thing, not enduring*—for what endures?—but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now *a seven-sided flower*,

[2] Bearing in mind the Genesis creation narrative, which is evoked at the beginning of Woolf's novel, the symbolic meaning of numbers cannot be overlooked. In biblical numerology, 'seven' symbolizes completion and perfection.

> many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—*a whole flower* to which every eye brings its own contribution.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 95; my emphasis)

A flower in a vase, a red carnation with many petals and different colour shades, becomes the symbol of a complete and harmonious whole, to which everybody brings his/her own contribution. It is not without significance that this "one thing, not enduring" but perceivable by everyone, is emblematically described as "a seven-sided flower": a sort of objective correlative of this special and everlasting *moment of being* (Woolf, 1985; Mattison, 2011). As the narrative proceeds, the desire to preserve this intangible feeling of mutual communion inspires the prayer that concludes the dinner party. Just before leaving the restaurant, Louis exhorts his companions to maintain their relationship forever:

> 'Now once more,' said Louis, 'as we are about to part, having paid our bill, *the circle* in our blood, broken so often, so sharply, for we are so different, closes in *a ring*. Something is made. Yes, as we rise and fidget, a little nervously, we pray, holding in our hands this common feeling. Do not move, do not let the swing door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, *that globe itself* here, among these lights, these peelings, this litter of bread crumbs and people passing. Do not move, do not go. Hold it forever.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 109; my emphasis)

The recurring figure of the circle, or ring, or globe underlines the intensity of the emotional bond linking the characters, despite the peculiar nature of their different personalities. And yet, at the close of the section, a feeling of disappointment and confusion pervades the group of friends, when Percival takes a taxi and disappears in the urban chaos of the larger world.

One might suppose that such a reunion of the six friends in London, around the presence of Percival, could easily be considered the climax of the story, inasmuch as it achieves a high degree of interrelationship and unity. However, in order to follow the underlying movement of *The Waves*, the reader has to become attuned to the primary function of the interludes that introduce the soliloquy sections. The fifth chapter of the novel takes place not too long after the dinner party. The opening words of the interlude, depicting the journey of the sun in the sky, should make us aware that we are approaching the climax of the narrative: "The sun had risen to its full height" (author, year, p. 111). The description of the sun that has reached its zenith is indeed striking:

> Now the sun *burnt* uncompromising, undeniable. It *struck* upon the hard sand, and the rocks became furnaces of red heat; it searched each pool and *caught* the minnow hiding in the cranny, and showed the rusty cartwheel, the white bone, or the boot without laces stuck, black as iron, in the sand. *It gave to everything its exact measure of colour*; to the sandhills their innumerable glitter, to the wild grasses their glancing green; or it *fell upon* the arid waste of the desert, here wind-scourged into furrows, here swept into desolate cairns, here sprinkled with stunted dark-green jungle trees. (Woolf, 1992, p. 111; my emphasis)

The brightness of the sun has a strong impact on the earth. In its relentless glare and heat, it illuminates every detail on the landscape. It reveals the distinct cracks and furrows of all that is exposed to sunlight, giving "to everything its exact measure of colour". The description proceeds with an unexpected view of the house, which, conversely, seems to be wrapped in darkness:

> The sun struck straight upon the house, making the white walls glare between the dark windows. Their panes, woven thickly with green branches, held *circles of impenetrable darkness*. […] Behind their conglomeration hung a zone of shadow in which might be a further shape to be disencumbered of shadow or still *denser depths of darkness*. (Woolf, 1992, p. 112; my emphasis)

One cannot help but be impressed by the sharp images of this lengthy passage—the longest interlude in Woolf's novel. It suffices to consider the harsh impact of verbs such as "burnt", "struck", "caught", "fell upon", referring to the sun. On the other hand, the gloomy appearance of the house, evoking abandonment and loss, seems to conceal "denser depths of darkness". But the dramatic tension of this scenery culminates in the final paragraph, with the waves breaking on the shore:

> The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and *fell*; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their *fall*. The waves were steeped deep-blue save for a pattern of diamond-pointed light on their backs which rippled as the backs of great horses ripple with muscles as they move. The waves *fell*; withdrew and *fell* again, like the thud of a great beast stamping. (Woolf, 1992, pp. 112-113; my emphasis)

Through visual and auditory imagery, the waves are depicted "as the backs of great horses" or "like the thud of a great beast stamping". The energy of the oscillatory motion of the waves is emphasized by the peculiar insistence on their falling: in a few lines the lexeme *fall / fell* occurs four times, three of which are definitely in the simple past. At the beginning of the narrative section that immediately follows, the same definite word describes the fatal accident occurred to Percival:

> 'He is dead,' said Neville. 'He *fell.* His horse tripped. He was thrown. The sails of the world have swung round and caught me on the head. All is over. The lights of the world have gone out. There stands the tree which I cannot pass.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 114; my emphasis)

"He is dead […]. He *fell.* His horse tripped. He was thrown." Short, truncated sentences announce the sudden, brutal death of Percival. His name is not even mentioned, since he had been the dominant presence in the previous section and the last character to be featured. Placed at the very centre of the novel, Percival's death marks the climax of the narrative, symbolically foreshadowed by the corresponding interlude, as shown above. The gradual and detailed progression of the descriptive passage contrasts with the abrupt news of Percival's death, telegraphically transmitted to Neville. It is worth noting that this narrative part, which is the shortest among the soliloquy sections, is focused on the reactions of only three characters: Neville, Bernard and Rhoda. Nevertheless, the distinctive responses to Percival's untimely death eventually merge into a common grief, shared by the six friends.

In the dialectical relationship between separation and reunion, dispersal and recomposition, the fifth section of the novel marks the climax of division and separateness, emblematically represented by Percival's death. On the other hand, this tragic event appears to be a pivotal point for the psychological development of the six characters: facing Percival's death, each of them becomes aware of the failures of one's own beliefs and ideals. Throughout *The Waves*, each character undergoes a painful process of individuation, which inevitably involves fragmentation and division. As Bernard remarks towards the end of the narrative, "we suffered terribly as we became separate bodies" (Woolf, 1992, p. 186). Yet, separation from the whole is needed in order to reform the self and achieve an eventual reunion.

In the eighth chapter, the next-to-last chapter of the novel, the six friends are meeting together for dinner at Hampton Court. The scene on the beach is autumnal for these middle-aged characters, while the sun is sinking in the sky with rays of red and gold shooting through the waves. "But the waves, as they neared the shore, were robbed of light, and *fell in one long concussion*" (Woolf, 1992, p. 159; my emphasis): thus the lyrical interlude

foreshadows the moments of communion among the characters, along with their perception of failure and loss. This reunion of the group of friends at Hampton Court, so many years after the dinner party in London, reaches its highest intensity when Bernard recalls the image of the flower: "the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives" (Woolf, 1992, p. 175). As Rhoda remarks, Percival's death has brought the gift of a mutual communion among them. His memory unites the six friends in the deep intuition of the "One life" (Woolf, 1992, p. 176), which includes the loss and the acceptance of death.

A Symphony of Discordant Voices

One of the most effective devices used in Woolf's novel to achieve interconnectedness, on various and multiple levels, is the figure of circularity. The recurring image of the circle, or ring, or globe, or arc is not only a unifying motif in *The Waves*, but also an archetypal symbol structuring the whole work. At the macrostructure level, the nine pastoral interludes depict the daily arc-like path that the sun appears to follow across the sky. Moreover, the circular structure is emphasized through the repetition of the same words, at the beginning of the first and the last descriptive passage, to indicate the absence of light: "The sea was indistinguishable from the sky" in the opening interlude (Woolf, 1992, p. 3); and "sky and sea were indistinguishable" in the final one (Woolf, 1992, p. 181). Throughout the narrative, the complete circle of the sun's apparent motion is described, from initial obscurity to full daylight and then back into darkness.

Similarly, in the dramatic sections, the first and the last soliloquy are uttered by the same voice (Bernard's voice), evoking images of circularity and completeness from beginning to end. It is Bernard who opens the soliloquy series, when the six characters are children in the boarding school: "I see a ring hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light" (Woolf, 1992, p. 5). It has been observed how the ring or circle imagery becomes a recurring motif through the different stages of Bernard's life, expressing his need for completeness and interpersonal relationships (Young, 1986). Suffice it to think of the red carnation mentioned above, the "six-sided flower" representing the interrelated lives of the six friends. But the circle motif also points to the overall coherence of the novel, in which Bernard appears as the creative writer, the storyteller, the artist in search of wholeness. In Woolf's self-conscious narrative, however, the "phrasemaker" can only recognize the illusory yet compelling nature of language. Already at an early stage, sitting close to Susan, Bernard claims: "We melt into each other with phrases. […] We make an unsubstantial territory" (Woolf, 1992, p. 10).

Most significantly, in the concluding soliloquy, which is entirely spoken by Bernard, the acceptance of his own insubstantiality is reaffirmed: "The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed. This, for the moment, seems to be my life" (Woolf, 1992, p. 183). The elderly Bernard, who has spent years recording fragments of life in his notebooks, finally proclaims the irrelevance of the story being told:

> 'How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper. I begin to long for *some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words*, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement.' (Woolf, 1992, 183; my emphasis)

What really matters in the end, for the modernist artist, is the invention of "some little language such as lovers use"—the creation of a lyrical prose which is able to capture an almost infinite variety of shades and sounds. Tellingly, in this long final soliloquy the characters are meant to be heard as one collective voice—or better, as a symphony of 'discordant' voices:

> 'Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole—again like music. *What a symphony with its concord and its discord*, and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up! Each played his own tune, fiddle, flute, trumpet, drum or whatever the instrument might be.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 197; my emphasis)

The musical combination of instruments and sounds recalls the up and down motion of the waves, continuously overlapping and merging. It is not without significance that the last words of Woolf's narrative coincide with the "broken, inarticulate words" of the waves. Unexpectedly, at the very end of the text, the reader finds a short italicized sentence in the same style as the interludes: "The waves broke on the shore" (Woolf, 1992, p. 228). Thus, Bernard's final meditation on death, which would seem to conclude the book, is contrasted with the perpetual movement of the waves, reaffirming the cyclical life of the world.

Conclusion

In *The Waves*, the least representational among Woolf's novels, the modernist writer challenges narrative conventions and readers' assumptions about the inner and the outer world. In the absence of a substantial story, of a convincing plot and well-defined characters, the reader is called upon to search for a deeper coherence and more profound meanings. Indeed, in *The Waves* the author strives for a fresh way of expressing a vision of wholeness in a broken world. The present article has shown how the poetics of fragmentation and the poetics of wholeness coexist in Woolf's narrative, pervading the imagery and the symbols of the text. In more than one sense, the dialectic between division and unity, fragmentation and wholeness can be identified as the structuring force of the novel: significantly, this textual dynamism is reflected in the rhythmic resonance of the waves.

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