

“Am I All of Them?": Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* as Autobiography

“Sou todos eles?": As ondas de Virginia Woolf como autobiografia

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Abstract: In this essay, we depart from Virginia Woolf's overtly autobiographical writings, such as “A Sketch of the Past” (1976), in order to think through the writer's experimental literary stance towards autobiography as a genre and to investigate how the transgressive aspects of such a stance would appear in her fiction, notably in *The Waves* (1931). We argue, with Woolfian scholar Christine Froula (2005), that the novel could be read as an autobiography not in terms of Woolf's material, empirical life, but of the birth of a fluid and fragmented subjectivity of the writer as artist. We turn to theorists of autobiography as a genre in order to understand how the traditional autobiographical gesture was erected on the belief in truth and in an indivisible, knowable, and masculine “I”. By doing so, we discuss how modernist and Woolfian texts defy such authoritative ideas of the autobiographical author. We shall point out examples of genre (and gender) transgressions in Woolf's memoirs and diaries to finally depict how it also mobilises her fiction.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; autobiography; fiction; subjectivity.

Resumo: Neste ensaio, partimos dos escritos abertamente autobiográficos de Virginia Woolf, como “Um esboço do passado” (1976), a fim de analisar a postura experimental da escritora em relação ao gênero literário, de modo a pensar como esses aspectos transgressivos aparecem em sua ficção, notadamente em *As ondas* (1931). Defendemos, com a pesquisadora woolfiana Christine Froula (2005), que o romance poderia ser lido como uma autobiografia, não nos termos da vida



material e empírica de Woolf, mas do nascimento de uma subjetividade fluida e fragmentada da escritora enquanto artista. Recorreremos aos teóricos do gênero autobiográfico para entender como a autobiografia tradicional é erigida sobre a crença na verdade e em um “eu” indivisível, cognoscível e masculino. Nesse movimento, discutimos como os textos modernistas e woolfianos desafiam essa ideia autoritária de autor autobiográfico. Apontaremos exemplos de transgressões de gênero nas memórias e diários de Woolf para finalmente retratar como isso também mobiliza sua ficção.

Palavras-chave: Virginia Woolf; autobiografia; ficção; subjetividade.

Even though modernist writer Virginia Woolf at times refrained from using the term “autobiography” to define her literature,¹ in many of her works, we, as readers, catch glimpses of her life. These glimpses are scattered throughout her oeuvre, which – across the many genres she experimented with, having a special interest in forcing the novel and the essay to their limits – always uses fiction as its mode of thinking through language. We catch glimpses of her childhood in *To The Lighthouse* (1927), for example; glimpses of her life as an avid reader, researcher and public speaker in *A Room of One's Own* (1929); glimpses of people with whom she shared a life from *The Voyage Out* (1915) to *Between the Acts* (1941), to mention a few of the many different ways through which her real life leaks into her writing. In none of these instances, however, does Woolf conform to the constraints of autobiography as a traditional genre – or to other literary genres, as a matter of fact – as she challenges it by merging reality and fiction, as well as confounding concepts of truth and linearity. One of the best examples of Woolf’s experimentations with the genre, as we shall discuss, might be her autobiographical piece “A Sketch of the Past” (1976), in which she explores and defies notions of time, self and gender. But she does not stop there. We shall argue in this essay that Woolf transgresses the very tenet of autobiographical discourse, that is, the belief in an authoritative, masculine, indivisible “I” that controls the narrative. On the contrary, we shall turn to Woolf’s 1931 novel *The Waves* to demonstrate how she may have inaugurated a new form of self-disclosure. Through a multiple and fragmented “I” that heavily relies on fiction and lyricism to achieve a more comprehensive idea of life itself, what Woolf writes is her own subjective formation as *artist* – after all, “fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact” (Woolf, 2014, p. 18).

¹ In her text “Spaces of Time: Virginia Woolf’s Life Writing” (2014), scholar Elizabeth Abel affirms that Woolf was “wary of the term ‘autobiography’, which raises the specter of the ‘damned egotistical self’, and ‘biography’, inevitably constrained by the granite of fact” (Abel, 2014, p. 55). According to the author, Woolf’s “preferred term was ‘memoir’, a genre whose embrace within her milieu reflected the consensus that it offered a particular lens on a shared historical experience” (Abel, 2014, p. 55).

Autobiography as Genre

As scholar Laura Marcus explains (2018, p. 9), the textual practice of self-disclosure began centuries ago, as narratives such as conversions, testimonies, and confessions – from Saint Augustine to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, staples of the life narrative genre – were written as a model of self-expression, which mostly dealt with the subject's relation to religion, in the case of confessions and conversions, and to the Law, in the case of testimonies. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (1966), the term “autobiography” derives from the Greek *autós*, which means “self”, “of or by oneself, independently” (Onions, 1966, p. 63). It also clarifies that “bio” comes from the Greek *bíos*, meaning “life” (Onions, 1966, p. 96), while “graph”, which comes from the Greek *graphós*, means “written”, or “writing” (Onions, 1966, p. 410). Therefore, as Marcus argues, in the word “autobiography”, the “element of writing or text is inscribed in the term itself. Language, as well as the workings of memory, shapes the past” (Marcus, 2018, p. 1).

Some theorists have striven to confine and define autobiography as a fixed genre. One of the pioneers of autobiographical studies, the French theorist Philippe Lejeune, has defined autobiography in his *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (1975) as the following: “DEFINITION: Retrospective narrative in prose that a real person writes of their own life, inasmuch as they deal with their individual lives, particularly the history of their own personality”² (Lejeune, 1975, p. 14). Lejeune defends that every reader must expect veracity out of an autobiography since, as authors of their own life narrative, autobiographers should be able to disclose the whole truth about the events of their life and about their personality. This veracity is supported by what Lejeune names as “Autobiographical Pact”, which, as explained by the theorist, is established through the employment of the first person, that is, the text is necessarily self-referential, and through the condition that it makes reference to the author of the narrative. In other words, the “I” in the text, or the “grammatical person”, as Lejeune puts it, must refer to the author of the book (Lejeune, 1975, p. 15).

As Laura Marcus points out, even though his definition is problematically strict, the emphasis Lejeune places on “the textual aspects and generic markers of autobiography” (Marcus, 2018, p. 3) is an important contribution to the field, one that generated renewed critical and theoretical attention to autobiography as a genre in the late twentieth century. Before that, as scholars Martine Watson Brownley and Allison B. Kimmich (1999, p. XI) suggest, autobiography was considered a “subliterary genre”. It was believed that, since it drew its events from real life, it required lesser skills than other genres, such as poetry and novels, which required imagination. Brownley and Kimmich also demonstrate that early 1980s autobiographical criticism would assume and perpetuate the belief that “autobiographer” was automatically a representation of the Western, white man. Therefore, “scholars did not treat

² The translations from French and Portuguese into English are ours. In the source text: “DÉFINITION: Récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité”.

works by women as 'real' autobiographies, especially if women wrote life stories that diverged from the textual models established by their counterparts" (Brownley; Kimmich, 1999, p. XII).

In this sense, there are, as life writing critics point out,³ limitations and inconsistencies when it comes to the tenets of the autobiographical genre as elaborated by Lejeune and other theorists from the early eighties – such as their belief in truth and textual veracity and in the fated condition that would allow for autobiography as a gesture, that is, a knowable self who is absolutely certain of its own narrative, and an author who believes to be able to recapture this known self through memory and consciousness, as life writing critic Shari Benstock (1988, p. 145) summarises. These critics argue that, when this condition is called into question, it becomes very difficult to attain any sense of a single and strict truth or identity through discursive means even when it comes to autobiographies or any other kind of life narrative. After all, as Viana, Dalmaso and Morais (2021, p. 12) state, life writing "is as much about the truth as it is about discourses of the truth [...] Some authors even take advantage of the fluidity of these discourses of the truth, playing with the notion of fictionality in their own life writing". Autobiography, then, starts to be read as producing this double gesture.

According to Benstock, instead of revealing a unified and conscious subject, autobiography would precisely depict subjects marked by the unconscious, whose workings produce the gaps in a supposedly linear narrative informed by an instance as uncertain as memory (Benstock, 1988, p. 146). In this sense, Laura Marcus demonstrates that the efforts to define and constrict autobiography into a generic form, as done by some early theorists such as Lejeune himself, are less productive than to assume its fluidity, its transitions, and its shifting definitions. After all,

Lejeune's vocabulary of 'pact' and 'contract' has [...] been criticized for its 'legalism'. For the literary theorist Paul de Man, the attempt to define autobiography was a fruitless endeavour [...]. The drive to define and demarcate autobiographical writings is thus countered by an equally strong sense that autobiography escapes final definition (Marcus, 2018, p. 3).

Indeed, according to Brownley and Kimmich (1999), the notion of the fluid, decentred self, as well as the defence of autobiography as an undefinable genre, became a benefit for the studying and writing of women's marginal, unconventional, and contradictory lives in a patriarchal society that held strong beliefs in the unity of the dominant, masculine ego. After all, the theories that posited fragmented identities would precisely question the notion of self-knowledge and true self, which would, in turn, favour women's positions as outsiders in a masculine system that constantly excluded them from public life. Therefore, the value of women's autobiographies would be the disclosure of their otherness. As Brownley and Kimmich defend,

If identity is a fluid process, we cannot discover an individual's one true self but rather the individual's many selves. The concept of multiple selves has been a liberating one for many feminist critics because traditional ideas of selfhood go hand in hand with unity, and the notion of a unified, essential self has historically been more appropriate for a man's life than a woman's (Brownley; Kimmich, 1999, p. XIII).

³ See MARCUS, Laura (2018); SMITH, Sidonie; WATSON, Julia (1998); BROWNLEY, Martine Watson; KIMMICH, Allison B. (1999).

Thus, these feminist critics argue that women's autobiographies represent a transgression both in terms of content and form, since their writing decentres the masculine ego (and debunks its universality) by presenting fluid subjectivities which are expressive of the fragmented aspects of women's lives. Shari Benstock (1999, p. 9), for instance, defends this idea when she affirms that, in women's autobiographies, the "relation of the conscious to the unconscious, of the mind to writing, of the inside to the outside of political and narrative systems, indicates not only a problematizing of social and literary conventions – a questioning of Symbolic law – but also the need to reconceptualize form itself". From Margery Kempe⁴ and her dictated autobiography in the third person onwards, women have been undoing the gender and genre of autobiography itself, disturbing the idea of "woman" as a category in the process. It is their double gesture that Virginia Woolf inherits as her own.

Virginia Woolf and Life Writing

As Laura Marcus (2018, p. 6) argues, towards the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th century, writers began to question autobiography's claim of disclosing life in full, with no gaps or omissions. Their scepticism towards the genre would, in turn, give rise to the memoir as a narrative of self-disclosure precisely because of its penchant for impressions rather than truth, and its toleration towards imprecisions, non-linearity and loose accounts of specific life events. As Marcus (2018, p. 6) specifies, while autobiography would be viewed as "a sustained and serious self-investigation", the memoir could be defined as "a more outward-facing record of experiences and events", though the term "autobiography" is still broad and general, and is normally used to account for any self-referential narrative.

If we consider Virginia Woolf's modernist scene, then, we could suggest that her generation was indeed questioning and transforming how the self was to be perceived and expressed in narrative. According to Marcus (2018), in the past, theorists and researchers of modernism would have easily declared that most modernist writers did not write autobiographies at all. However, in recent years, this understanding has been refined thanks to the expansion of the term life writing and the wide range of narratives about the self it encompasses. In this sense, modernist life narratives are understood as important pieces of life writing that do not abide by the form and norms of traditional autobiography (retroactively challenging strict genre definitions). One of the main differences between modernist life writing and traditional autobiographies is the insertion of fiction, or fictionalised events and characters, into supposedly real life narratives. Modernists adopt a conscious aesthetic approach to the genre, an aesthetic approach that is marked by the growing interest in psychoanalytical theories circulating at the time. If experience, narrative and fiction came to be understood as inextricably intertwined in the first half of the twentieth century, formal experimentations with

⁴ *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1438) is considered to be the first autobiography in the English language. It depicts the life of medieval mystic Margery Kempe, whose pilgrimages through holy places around Europe are documented in the narrative. It is interesting to note that, even though it is categorised as autobiography, *The Book* blurs, from the outset, the strong contours that the genre would gain through the work of later theorists and critics: her narrative is believed to have been dictated by Margery to a priest who wrote it, and her story may have been annotated by a number of different "scribes", "listeners", and readers, challenging, thus, the very notion of authorship in the collective writing of her life (see Bale, 2015, p. xviii).

the genre of autobiography, then, became part of a literary practice that tried to resize the possibilities of narrating life in the modern world. Marcus (2018, p. 112) reminds readers, for instance, that “autobiographical fiction, with its possibilities for multiple perspectives on characters and situations, answered to the need to represent complex, composite, and divided selves, creating the most appropriate vehicles for identities which can never be fully known”.

We argue that most of Woolf’s works involve this dimension of life writing as a double gesture – in between lived and imagined experience, marked by the impossibility of knowing the self and the possibility of creating an open-ended narrative subjectivity – and we single out her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* as an example of Marcus’s autobiographical fictions, especially when it comes to the attribution of real experience to fictional characters. Indeed, it is possible to establish parallels between Woolf’s childhood summer house in St. Ives, a fishing village in Cornwall, and the Ramsays’ summer house in the Hebrides, in Scotland. Furthermore, the personality of the fictional couple Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay had been consciously drawn from Woolf’s parents, Sir Leslie Stephen and Julia Stephen, and the relationship they had had with their children. The young son James, who desperately wants to go to the lighthouse but has his desires castrated by his father and soothed by his mother, represents the impressions Sir Leslie and Julia left on the young Stephen children, described by Woolf elsewhere.

We learn of this autobiographical dimension of *To the Lighthouse* in “A Sketch of the Past”, which was written in between hiatuses and long pauses between 1939 and 1940 as Woolf’s way of insisting on narrating life when all about her signalled death. In terms of form and genre, “A Sketch”, posthumously edited and compiled by Jeanne Schulkind with other autobiographical accounts⁵ in *Moments of Being* (1976), displays loose narrative and diaristic tones, being, thus, defined by Woolf and her critics as a memoir. Throughout her narrative, Woolf herself admits to the fragmentary and loose format of the text, which at times she calls her “notes” (Woolf, 1976, p. 95), and even seems to forget about their existence altogether: “I have just found this sheaf of notes, thrown away into my waste-paper basket. I had been tidying up; and had cast all my life of Roger into that large basket, and with it, these sheets too” (Woolf, 1976, p. 100). If the sketch-like quality already suggested by the title seems to highlight the informal or unintentional method of this unfinished piece, Woolfian scholar Julia Briggs (2005) is apt to affirm that Woolf’s loose and diary-resembling writing is nothing but intentional. In Briggs’s reading, Woolf’s aim is precisely to construct a fragmentary subjectivity and experiment with unfixed notions of time and genre by engaging with a non-linear process of writing, mixing diary and memoir. For Briggs, Woolf’s diaries would become a pivotal tool for debating and experimenting with writing. The diary would eventually turn into a formal methodology in itself, that is, an alternative to other rigid life narrative genres. In this sense, diary-writing would intentionally inform and inspire Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” (Briggs, 2005, n.p.).

Woolf herself would remark on the diary as a possibility and alternative to life narrative in an entry dated 20 April 1919, years before she began writing “A Sketch” in 1939, which demonstrates that Woolf had been pondering on conflating the genres for a long time:

⁵ They are *Reminiscences*, an account addressed to Vanessa Bell’s unborn son, Julian; *Hyde Park Gate, Old Bloomsbury*, and *Am I a Snob?*, contributions read to the Memoir Club.

I believe that during the past year I can trace some increase of ease in my professional writing which I attribute to my casual half hours after tea. Moreover there looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously & scrupulously, in fiction. What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit, & yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace any thing, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes to mind (Woolf, 1977, p. 266).

Furthermore, Woolf was not only experimenting with notions of literary genre in her life writing: she was also worried with the very category of the author itself, and how this identity should – or should not – be portrayed. Her thoughts on whether she believed writers should insert themselves in their texts are very clearly stated in a particular diary entry dated January 26, 1920. She discusses the effect she is trying to achieve in her short stories “The Mark on the Wall”, “Kew Gardens” and “An Unwritten Novel” as she ponders on what could be a new form for a new novel. Woolf realises she must search for a kind of unity unhindered by personal limitations:

What the unity shall be I have yet to discover: the theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon more or less by chance 2 weeks ago. I suppose the danger is the damned egotistical self; which ruins Joyce and [Dorothy] Richardson to my mind: is one pliant & rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without its becoming, as in Joyce and Richardson, narrowing & restricting? (Woolf, 1978, p. 14).

The dangers of the “damned egotistical self” in writing is a theme that cuts across many of her essays. She criticises, for example, the expression of an author’s ego in literature in “Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights” (1925). As she compared the sisters Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Woolf considered the latter’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) poetically superior to the former’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) because Charlotte’s book carried too many of her personal grievances, which diminished its poetic potency, whereas Emily’s managed to be collective and atemporal. For Woolf, Charlotte Brontë wrote the personal anger she felt for the restrictions of being an English woman in the nineteenth century into the character of Jane Eyre. In Woolf’s hypothesis, readers would eventually lose their ability to identify with Jane, since the Victorian governess would forever mimic the author’s historically and personally specific anger. This lack of identification would not occur in Emily’s work, since, according to Woolf, she was able to dissolve her own self and let her characters speak on their own (Woolf, 1953, p. 159).

Woolf also defended that this authorial voice in works of fiction often bore the mark of a masculine ego in a sort of writing dominated by what she understood as a masculine sentence, short and direct (Woolf, 2014, p. 105), in *A Room of One’s Own*. Following the apparition of the masculine “I” across the page, Woolf famously elaborated: “It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’. One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure” (Woolf, 2014, p. 133). Read alongside this monolithic phallic “I” barring all other manifestations of life, Woolf’s discussion of the Brontë sisters gains a different dimension: it seems to be the self-enclosed ego (a phallic “I”) that is being called into question, not a disavowal of anger itself. This sort of egotistical writing is often gendered masculine in

Woolf's oeuvre, a writing that submits everything to its own form, one that violently keeps other lives (whether women or trees, as we see in *A Room*) behind its erect bar ("I"). That she reads this phallic "I" as a position in language disturbs sex and gender as natural categories, it is important to note.

Woolf's life writing, then, strives to accommodate, formally as well as thematically, a fluid subjectivity that is not ruled by the angry egotistical self of masculine ego, but that expresses its feelings and experiences in an increasingly mutable world through a feminine perspective. As the institutions that structured the world repeatedly crumbled under the horrors of wars, Woolf's self-disclosure in "A Sketch of the Past" (1976) is written so as to make all the certainties that formed the unified subject, such as truth and chronological time, crumble as well. Memory's unreliability becomes the source of life-narrative, which comes to depict such fluctuations and inconsistencies through new aesthetic forms. As scholar Elizabeth Abel puts it,

Unable to maintain confidence in the power of form to stay the relentless march toward a second world war, Woolf both relaxed her hold over the tightly crafted novelistic form and embraced the more flexible endeavor of life-writing. The challenge was to find a shape that could resist both the impersonal unravelling of time and the dubious consolation of aesthetic form (Abel, 2014, p. 56).

But it is not only towards the end of her life, while writing "A Sketch", that Woolf employed such conscious omissions and lapses as a constitutive part of life writing beyond fixed genres. If Woolf's choice of a fragmented narration and a diaristic format for her autobiographical account is a response to her uncertain times, as well as to the fragmentation of the subject who faced such uncertainties, she had tried her hand at other ways of responding to the destructive forces of the world with a different deconstructive understanding of subjectivity, one whose "I" is the sign of an interdependent existence.

The Waves as Autobiography

In order to discuss Virginia Woolf's insistence on fiction as a mode of thinking and writing the interdependent porous subject into existence (beyond sex and gender and through an intensification of genre itself⁶), we turn to the exemplary case of her 1931 novel, *The Waves*. In this novel, Woolf enacts, from the outset, the birth of subjectivity through figurations of the sun and the sea as the symbolic day encompassing the life of her characters passes. The novel consists of monologues enacted by six friends (with Percival, a seventh character, as a silent bond among these friends): Bernard, Rhoda, Louis, Susan, Neville, and Jinny. Their monologues are interspersed with interludes in which a voice, or rather an *eye* without an *I*, captures and describes the landscape. The monologues are marked by the timid tags ("said Rhoda", "said Bernard", etc.) that a narrator applies in order to clarify to which character they belong. Woolf's experiment tries to do away with many of the staples of the novel as a genre (narrative, plot, linearity), which she carries out by thinking of the work rather as a "play-poem":

⁶ This process constitutes what Rosi Braidotti has aptly called "Woolf's intensive genre", which ultimately produces "the demise of gender" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 151).

a play, as it evinces the intercalation of actors delivering interdependent soliloquies, and a poem, as it highlights the way language should suggest its meaning through sound and rhythm rather than narrative. In one of her 1927 diary entries, while she still thought about calling it “The Moths”, Woolf explains her “play-poem idea” as “the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night etc, all flowing together: intersected by the arrival of the bright moth” (Woolf, 1980, p. 139). It is not by chance that perhaps the most pressing question each character addresses in *The Waves* has to do with the formation of their own subjectivities: who am I?

Prefacing these soliloquies and, thus, grouping them into sections of the passing day, the interludes become a “This without an I”, as proposed by Brazilian scholar Flavia Trocoli: “the Interludes reveal themselves to be pictures that look, as if they were a pure gaze that transforms the I into a looked object, engulfed by the picture, confused with the landscape of the Interlude, in which there is no one who says or looks. Pure voice and pure gaze”⁷ (Trocoli, 2015, p. 79). In her diaries, Woolf describes her urge to achieve the effect of “This without an I”, as phrased by Trocoli, at the same time that she resorts to “autobiography” as a possible way of naming such an urge:

I'm not trying to tell a story. It should still be done that way. Yet perhaps it might be done in that way. A mind thinking. They might be islands of light – islands in the stream that I am trying to convey: life itself going on. The current of the moths flying strongly this way. A lamp & a flower pot in the centre. The flower can always be changing. But there must be more unity between each scene than I can find at present. Autobiography it might be called (Woolf, 1980, p. 229).

Many have noted autobiographical correlations between Woolf's novel and her life, taking serious heed of the idea that “autobiography it might be called”. Hermione Lee, for instance, remarks that *The Waves* is Woolf's “Bloomsbury novel”, as it emulates Bloomsbury's real characters, meetings and their conversational practices (Lee, 1996, p. 265). Moving away from such correspondent readings, however, Christine Froula proposes that *Orlando* (1928), *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and *The Waves* (1931) form what she calls “Woolf's middle series of self-portraits” (2005, n.p.): works in which the author reflects upon herself, her own life, and the formation of her subjectivity as artist, actively creating this subjectivity rather than representing any directly corresponding subject.

We follow Froula's understanding here, for, in these self-portraits, Woolf seems not to be concerned with recording life events that have shaped her identity, but rather with intervening fictionally and lyrically in such life events. “Loosed from objectivist notions of a singular, discrete individual”, in Froula's (2005) words, Woolf abandons “conventional ideas of resemblance between image and object (the subject as bounded identifiable entity; a recognizable body; its observable doings) to explore a more expansive and abstract concept of being” (Froula, 2005, n.p.). For Froula, each of the three self-portraits presents fictional artists who enact Woolf's struggles against the representational practices of the past. Woolf, then,

⁷ “Isso sem Eu. [...] os Interlúdios se revelam quadros que olham, como se fossem um puro olhar que transforma o Eu em objeto olhado, tragado pelo quadro, confundido com a paisagem do Interlúdio, em que não há ninguém que diz ou olha. Pura voz e puro olhar”.

seeks a greater freedom – a freedom that surpasses contingencies of politics and of identity – even as a woman artist's actualization of such freedom in a world in which it is said that women can't paint or write is implicitly political. In quest of this greater freedom, Woolf's autobiographical artist-figures play strategically with and against identity: Lily defies the identity Tansley predicates on her sex; Orlando calls some of her 'many thousand' selves; *Room*'s speaker creates a persona of four legendary Maries in the spirit of an anonymous, androgynous Shakespeare; and *The Waves* ventriloquizes a [woman]'s vision through six lyric voices that tell a 'life of anybody' (Froula, 2005, n.p.).

If we consider *The Waves* as an autobiography in these terms, as the self-portrait Froula proposes, we are able to read Woolf's exercise of trying to write beyond identity, gender or otherwise, toward the creation of a collective, impersonal subjectivity. In this sense, turning back to Woolf's diary entry, the "unity" that she attempts to achieve between each group of soliloquies seems to be suggested precisely by the poetic voice that permeates the entire novel, and not through an individual self in the narrative. At first glance, the Interludes seem to represent an impersonal voice while the soliloquies become an articulation of different Selves, that is, the six different subjectivities of the novel. However, as Flávia Trocoli ponders, the impersonality of the Interludes seems to leak into the soliloquies, as some images reappear in what each character says (Trocoli, 2015, p. 73), thus characterising this poetic voice as "a mind thinking": a mind that is only one in its many-folded quality, in its pulverised and dissipated existence between the six different voices of the characters.

Woolfian scholar Makiko Minow-Pinkney (2010, p. 156) argues that the "book inscribes the emergence of subjectivity and the process of its consolidation. Its scenic details serve as a metaphor for the life process of the characters, and the first interlude evokes an undivided state before the subject appears". As "pure voice and pure gaze" – in Trocoli's terms –, this is how the first Interlude opens the novel:

The sun had yet not 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, 2000, p. 3).

This initial passage converts the dawn into the scene of emergence of subjectivity, while the indistinction between sky and sea suggests the "undivided state" prior to this emergence. It is interesting to note that as the sun/the subject emerges from the sea, this perhaps indicates that Woolf writes this sea precisely as a dominant metaphor for the amorphous and undivided state prior to subjectivity pointed out by Minow-Pinkney. Furthermore, the initial landscape seen by the eye without I of the Interludes indicates that the emergence of the sun/subject implies the appearance of the dark line of the horizon that separates sea and sky and transforms the slightly wrinkled cloth of the sea into bars that follow each other into "thick strokes". This dominant image sends us back to *A Room of One's Own*, in which a masculine position in writing delineates a "straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter 'I'" (Woolf, 2014, p. 133). Between the divisive dark line of the horizon and the dark bar of the letter I, isn't Woolf suggesting that the amorphous substance of everything between sky

and sea is separated into binary oppositions not by subjectivity itself, but rather through the naming practices of a phallic “I”?

Froula (2005) unpacks this question in relevant ways. While tracing Woolf’s use of the pronoun “she” as she started to work on her novel, Froula reveals Woolf’s impetus to establish this mind that gazes, describes, and, by doing so, resizes the world as a feminine position in language. Woolf annotates in her diaries, for instance: “I shall have two different currents – the moths flying along; the flower upright in the centre; a perpetual crumbling & renewing of the plant. In its leaves she might see things happening. But who is she? I am very anxious that she should have no name” (Woolf, 1980, p. 229). Froula notes that Woolf changed this initial “she” into the impersonal pronoun “one”, which, for Froula, intensifies the political potential of a woman who writes this feminine position in language “under erasure” (Froula, 2005, n.p.). Jacques Derrida’s term “under erasure” is precious here, for it signifies something that is there, but not yet there, at the same time. In her English translation of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1967), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains the term *sous rature* (and the reason behind her translating it into “under erasure”) as the act of “writ[ing] a word, cross[ing] it out, and then print[ing] both word and deletion” (Spivak, 2016, p. XXXII). Froula graphs the term “woman” as “[woman]”, and also “[she]”, in between brackets, so to evince the terms as being under erasure. Her ultimate argument, then, is that even though Woolf speaks in the name of a collective “one” in the final text, there is still a [she] that incorporates it, a “she” that impresses her material view of the world as the very matter of writing. This contradicts the idea that Woolf’s aesthetic experimentations in *The Waves* eschew any sort of political interference: instead of reproducing the binary sex/gender system that has historically naturalised the feminine as a subaltern position, her “play-poem” transforms “she” into “one”, writing sex/gender under erasure:

In exploring the movement from *she* to *[she]/one* – from woman in particular to woman as universal – Woolf leaves open the question of whether its creator’s sexed body and/or gender-inflected history necessarily register the work of art, and if so, as an essential or a merely contingent feature, and in what sort of relation to the universal (Froula, 2005, n.p.).

This notion of the woman “under erasure” is not only marked by this transit between “she” and “one”. To go back to the opening interlude, there is a woman under erasure already there:

Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green. Behind it, too, the sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. Then she raised her lamp higher and the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away [...] (Woolf, 2000, p. 3).

That the work that cleared the dark bar of the horizon from the sky and changed its monotone colour to a multiple “white, green and yellow” comes from a woman, specifically, should be no coincidence; and that this woman is hidden beneath the horizon sounds even less coincidental. This image might reinforce the reading of the feminine appearing in Woolf’s oeuvre as gateway to the collective, for “the [woman] in *The Waves* is still there, in the *one* and the omniscient voice: as woman unmarked and/or as woman simulating the condition

of being unmarked” (Froula, 2005, n.p.). However, this writing under erasure takes place not without the violence that it crosses out and inscribes at the same time, since Woolfian scholars like Jane Goldman (1998, p. 189) note that the couched woman “suggests both woman as enslaved functionary of the patriarchal order, and woman as appropriating the icon of masculine subjectivity (the sun)”. That “the imagery fits with suffragist iconography”, “the white, green, and yellow blades of the sun may perhaps recall the white, green, and gold of the Women’s Freedom League” (Goldman, 1998, p. 189), adds to the complex writing of [woman] under erasure in Woolf’s novel.

This discussion also leaks into the soliloquies, in which the individual subjectivities of the characters also enact their gendered anxieties. The first words spoken by each friend are the descriptions and impressions of how each one of them apprehends the landscape of dawn through the senses of sight and hearing. Focusing on Bernard, Louis and Rhoda as examples, we read: “‘I see a ring,’ said Bernard, ‘hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light’”; “‘I hear a sound,’ said Rhoda, ‘cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down’”; “‘I hear something stamping,’ said Louis, ‘a great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps’” (Woolf, 2000, p. 4). While Bernard sees the sun, Rhoda hears the birds, and Louis the waves. The waves are described in the initial interlude after the appearance of the dark line of the horizon as barred with thick strokes. In this sense, Woolf seems to relate Louis to the bar of the masculine ego, and indeed, this is how he will be identified throughout the novel. According to Minow-Pinkney (2010, p. 159), “Louis necessarily embodies this hated ‘masculine’ ego — Acrid, suspicious, domineering, difficult, and formidable”. Unlike other friends who inquire over and over about their multiple and transforming subjectivities, Louis seems to be certain of his individuality by perceiving himself as a complete and indivisible subject, besides recognising himself, we may interpret, as part of a masculine and capitalist tradition that has ferociously consumed many peoples and places in History through the image of a worm eating through an oak; a tradition that results in an understanding of a masculine position as compact, finished, and impermeable as his:

“I have signed my name,” said Louis, “already twenty times. I, and I again, and again I. Clear, firm, unequivocal, there it stands, my name. Clear-cut and unequivocal am I too. Yet a vast inheritance of experience is packed in me. I have lived thousands of years. I am like a worm that has eaten its way through the wood of a very old oak beam. But now I am compact; now I am gathered together this fine morning” (Woolf, 2000, p. 93).

Indeed, Minow-Pinkney locates in Louis a domineering and homogenising impulse, “a will for integration [that] extends to the whole world, indeed to the whole of human history. His megalomaniac ambition is to produce some vast totalization [...]” (Minow-Pinkney, 2010, p. 160).

Rhoda, on the other hand, cannot see herself as a unified subject, and constantly feels scattered and fragmented, tormented by a world of impressions. As Flavia Trocoli points out, Rhoda’s initial words mark her state of fragmentation and incompleteness, since “in addition to there being no creation of an image, the sound does not gain a figuration like the foot stumping heard by Louis, what Rhoda hears is noise”⁸ (Trocoli, 2015, p. 71). Therefore, Rhoda does

⁸ “Além de não haver criação de uma imagem, o som não chega a ganhar uma figuração como a pata batendo ouvida por Louis, o que Rhoda ouve é ruído”.

not adhere to an identity position: “I have come to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell” (Woolf, 2000, p. 34). If Louis embodies the masculine as imperviousness, Rhoda embodies the feminine as absolute porosity, refusing to gather anything that amounts to one single thing.

Woolf’s earlier self-portrait, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), envisions a position beyond this impossible binary, an androgynous mind that she attempts to read as a way of finding a different sentence (beyond the binary masculine/feminine sentences) for the living human creature. “To think, as I had been thinking for these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind” (Woolf, 2014, p. 130). Unlike Louis or Rhoda – whose minds are distorted by different sentences (as position in language and verdict for human performance) – Bernard seems to desire an androgynous position in language, one that oscillates among the different subjectivities of the six friends by the end of the novel, one that can only raise the letter “I” as an interdependent trace that does not obliterate their lives:

And now I ask, ‘Who am I?’ I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, 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. 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 (Woolf, 2000, p. 162-163).

Indeed, if we recall how Bernard apprehends the opening scene of dawn, we realise that unlike Rhoda, who does not see herself as a subject, Bernard can relate to his subjectivity once he perceives the sun, the figuration of the subject’s birth; but unlike Louis, who perceives himself as one and indivisible, Bernard’s sun is a ring, not a solid circle, that is, the interior of his circle is empty to write subjectivities other than his own under erasure, as critics such as Christine Froula annotate in spite of the sun’s “predominantly patriarchal” figuration in readings such as Jane Goldman’s (1998, p. 187). Maintaining the contradictions and ambivalences that writing under erasure produces, Froula argues that it is Bernard’s capacity to remain open to multiplicity that makes him an androgynous writer and artist: “Bernard paints human beings as neither ‘slaves’ suffering ‘incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs’ nor ‘sheep... following a master’ but ‘creators’ whose ‘force’ transforms ‘chaos’ into thought and art [...] [Woolf, 2000, p. 81]” (Froula, 2005, n.p.).

It is in this sense that we read the novel as redoubling autobiographical gestures beyond corresponding events of Woolf’s life. *The Waves* constitutes the self-disclosure of Woolf’s subjectivity as artist, and art here also means the struggle to escape gender binaries by writing the collective perspectives of friends who always remain under erasure, tracing the *I*. Woolf, we conclude, struggled, like Bernard, to reframe this *I* as interdependent, which imposes its own risks. Who, after all, “is to foretell the flight of a word”?

The entirely unexpected nature of this explosion – that is the joy of intercourse. I, mixed with an unknown Italian waiter – what am I? There is no stability in this world. Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over the tree-tops. To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities. What is to come? I know not. But as I put down my glass I

remember: I am engaged to be married. I am to dine with my friends tonight. I am Bernard, myself (Woolf, 2000, p. 66).

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