

The Aesthetics of the Constant Mutability of Verbal Creation in

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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Abstract

This study presents a reading of *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf as an account of her aesthetics, created with the voices that constitute the novel as well as the explicit manifestation of it by means of its architectonic form. The aesthetics proposed is based upon the constant mutability in which verbal creation comes to life. Thus, the novel explores the limits of language in creating art, and the limits between literaryness and reality. The material and content are analyzed from an approach to the interludes and the soliloquies in order to understand how these are actualized in the form in order to present the aesthetics of the characters and become a portrayal of the aesthetics in the novel itself. This way, the absolutes in life and literature are demolished, presenting the waves that move within the characters while facing the waves of the shifting society they live in and the literal waves that allow the metaphor.

Key words: Aesthetics, architectonic form, mutability, polysemy, verbal creation, literary truth.

Este estudio presenta una lectura de *Las Olas* de Virginia Woolf como un texto que da cuenta de su propuesta estética, tanto dentro de las voces que construyen la novela como de manera explícita de esa propuesta en la forma arquitectónica de la novela. La propuesta estética se basa en la mutabilidad constante en la cual se concibe la creación verbal. Así, la novela explora los límites del lenguaje en la creación artística, así como los límites entre ficción y realidad. A partir de un acercamiento a los interludios y los soliloquios se analizan el material y el contenido para comprender la manera en que estos son actualizados por la forma y así presentar la estética de los personajes y la manera en que la novela se transforma en una representación de esa estética misma. De esta manera, la novela destruye los imaginarios absolutos en la literatura y la vida, y presenta solo las olas que se mueven dentro de los personajes mientras enfrentan las olas de la sociedad cambiante en la que viven.

Palabras clave: Estética, forma arquitectónica, mutabilidad, polisemia, creación verbal, verdad literaria.

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Introduction

The Waves is considered one of the most challenging of Virginia Woolf's novels. Even since it was published, the novel has caused different extreme impressions —love, hate, confusion— and it remains being a work that defies all absolutes about it. *The Waves* is a passionate, intense and uncommon novel that plays with different genres and resources to portray the life of a human being from childhood to death as the movement of waves on a beach from sunrise to sunset. The novel connects with drama and poetry through interludes and soliloquies of six voices that are assembled into a single consciousness; six identities that build an idea of beauty together. This beauty is detailed in the characters' perspectives and experiences, and is aimed to be defined through verbal art. This way, they create an aesthetic proposal that will be visible in the novel itself: the aesthetics of writing as the constant mutability in which verbal creation comes to life.

Although most approaches to *The Waves* seem to have focused on the process of defining the identity of each character or regarding stylistic features, it is important to deal with novel with a “teleological method”, understanding all elements in order to apprehend the architectonics of the novel. To do so, the content, the material and the form are essential to read beyond the aesthetics of the characters as individuals in order to build a single proposal when understanding the way the three moments work together to identify the way this proposal is achieved in the novel.

The voices go through a process of discovery. Everything changes and moves within and around them. This constant change will become a problem for the verbal creation they pursue: words are powerful and polysemic, but because of their nature it is impossible to

grasp the truth of life with them. This becomes the aesthetics that the novel will render: the exploration of the constant change, the movement in which verbal creation is achieved, distant from a defined and universal truth. Truth and beauty, then, are subjective, constantly wavering as identity is. The literary truth that the characters aim to portray in their writing is a myth since words are so filled with meaning, both from their own nature but also from cultural and contextual influences, that everything is a matter of perspectives. Words will work, then, as a way to assess reality and re-write it.

Justification

Reading Virginia Woolf is always a challenge to the mind and the senses. She uses such a rich vocabulary, such vivid images, and there are so many elements to take into account in her works, that the novel demands many readings and re-readings for it to settle down completely within oneself.

Many elements stand out while reading *The Waves*, beginning with the structure of the novel itself; it is divided into nine parts, each part starting with a lyrical preface that works as an allegory of its content. All prefaces as a whole describe the moving picture of a beach in different moments of the day, and work as an allegory of the changing life of a human being from his childhood –sunrise- to his death –sunset-. These prefaces blur the genre of the novel itself, because they make the reader feel that the work in itself is a sort of poem or, as Virginia herself has called it, a play-poem.

Because of these prefaces, and supported by the characters' dialogues and inner monologues, the reading flows guided by the sonority of the words and the beauty of the images. Words flow and alliteration is used to create a liquid feeling. *The Waves* is, inevitably, a discovery of the internal changes in the characters, of the complexity of each individuality and how different individualities can complement each other harmonically as facets of one same consciousness.

Although the novel works with six voices at first, it is shown at the end that the narrator of most of the story is Bernard, who not only has the ability to tell stories, but also who knows everyone's life and behavior as he is extremely observant of the people he cares about. The

tone is particularly personal as most of the stream of consciousness is made up of thoughts and feelings, more than dialogues. The reason why the novel becomes so poetic and complex is that the characterization is made, not through others' introduction, but implied through their thoughts and behaviors. This tone also provides an ethereal sensation during the reading, as the reader becomes the only omniscient party in the novel.

The evolution of the characters' preferences, their perspectives of the world, their lives, is smooth, yet noticeable. The novel deals with identity, as there is never a defined identity but it fluctuates throughout time. Nothing remains static and nothing is absolute: there is not a definite thing, and this will become the main struggle for art. All of the characters fascinate about beauty, a certain aesthetics, constantly built with every experience, yet true to each one's personality. In this pursuit of beauty, some elements such as solitude and imagination are highlighted as defining in the creative process. The characters that aim towards beauty in their creations are those who remain in solitude; outsiders do not seem to fit in. These outsiders are the ones who are more sensitive and, thus, are more in need of pursuing beauty yet are the ones that face change the most, so it is for them that art becomes their escape. Nonetheless, an element that turns into a leitmotif as a principle of reality is death. Death reminds the characters that their time is not limitless —death is the “enemy” that Bernard sees facing them all at the end. Five of the six characters, in some way or another, make a commitment to life in the face of death: Neville and Louis through art, Susan through the natural world, Jinny through her own physicality, and Bernard through language. Rhoda is the only one who does not commit to life. Bernard is standing in the awareness of death, vowing to fight for consciousness and meaning until the end,

while Rhoda stands on the opposite side, surrendering to the pull of oblivion and joining the world of inanimate things.

However, there is an element in the novel that destabilizes the idea of the wavering:

Percival. This character, as the symbol of truth and as a representation of the absolute, is the one loved and admired by everyone; the character most difficult to create a relationship with the reader, since his presence is distant. Worshiped by everyone, Percival stands as the resolved character with no development; he is well-defined whereas the others see in him a way to build themselves. The reader only becomes familiar with those closest to him, the ones who could portray him better: Bernard, Louis and Rhoda. Once again, the outsiders are closer to the truth and shorten the distance for the reader, unlike Neville who, blinded by Percival, offers no real image of him, and unlike Susan who remains focused on herself and the superficial beauty. However, it is Rhoda the one with most empathy for the reader: she is the outcast that works against her time, the one afraid of truth, afraid of the looking glass able to show her true self, yet seduced by the vertigo of finding oneself. In her solitude, Rhoda is able to look into her abyss and find refuge within herself. She is the one admired by Bernard, the conscious pursuer of beauty and that who still has to overcome superficial aspects to get to the truth.

In a first approach to the novel, it is possible to feel empathy for characters such as Rhoda, Susan and Louis; however, once the reading has settled down, Bernard and Percival stand out as the core of the intricate puzzle that the novel assembles. Bernard, as the narrator is able to connect all the stories, yet represents the failure of achieving an absolute story, an

absolute truth; and Percival as the idea of resolution, of certainty, that slowly fades away yet stands as a guide beyond his death.

Objectives

Taking into consideration the experience with the novel, the proposal is to interpret *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf as an account of the aesthetics of writing as the constant mutability in which verbal creation comes to life. In order to achieve this, the following objectives are considered:

- To define the way aesthetics works in the novel;
- describe the characters' personality traits and changes in their perceptions of beauty and their role as artists;
- explore the idea of mutability in verbal creation;
- analyze the symbols that represent mutability and stability of verbal creation and their role throughout the novel;
- determine the opposites within the novel and the way they become defining elements for mutability;
- state how the verbal creation becomes both the way to break away with the socially accepted and the means to re-write it in the novel.

Delimitation of the study

The ideas of mutability and re-writing reality will be considered from the perspectives of the relations -and oppositions- expressed in the interludes and soliloquies: the sensible world and the spiritual world, the private and the public spheres, city life and countryside life, the idea of being and appearing, the contrast between art and reality, the power and the limitation of language, and the constant duality of life and death. The four dualities

aforementioned will be the central part of discussion, since those aspects are the most substantial for the aesthetics the novel proposes in writing. To deal with these aspects in depth, the symbols of Percival, the looking glass and the waves will be analyzed throughout the novel.

The perspective of aesthetics will be covered mainly from the point of view of Louis, Neville, Rhoda and Bernard, who are the characters most interested in creation as such. Nonetheless, different elements and perspectives of the other characters will be included to make a contrast and to highlight different elements relevant to the thesis itself.

The focus will be on aesthetics, identity, literature, and writing so, literature about other disciplines will not be reviewed even though there is plenty. However, some literature related to the topic of identity throughout the novel will be reviewed since it is directly linked to the objectives regarding the description of the characters and their notions of beauty.

As the novel is highly poetic and symbolic, it is obvious that many symbols appear throughout the story. Yet, only the sources that review the symbols referred to in the objectives will be revised, as well as other symbols that support the thesis. The reason for this lies in the great amount of information that is taken into consideration and in order to keep the emphasis on the characters' perspectives above other elements.

State of the Art

Although there is plenty of literature about the novel, most of it connects the novel to other disciplines, which would expand this study beyond the novel and exceed the idea discussed here. The following authors, however, have contributed to one or more of the objectives of this paper in the following way:

In her thesis “El mar como principio creador en *The Waves* de Virginia Woolf”, M. Utrilla de Neira sees the novel as the representation of consciousness. She goes in detail into the interludes and their correspondence to the soliloquies in terms of topics and images, as well as the connecting thread amongst the soliloquies in a “mind thinking” -the stream of consciousness- and the poetic language that consolidates it. As the soliloquies use a similar language, the six voices can be interpreted as one mind; a communion of the individual with the collectivity. This refined language is poetic, using “the lyrics present”, a tense reserved in English for poetry to create a “timeless” dimension.

Utrilla de Neira affirms that Woolf's experimentation with inner monologue is directly connected to the sensation of loneliness and silence as in this type of writing; the characters are enclosed within themselves. Woolf uses “dramatic soliloquies”, a combination of elements of novels and plays, using them to explore the “reflective mind” of the characters –the idea that they are reflections of others, acting as mirrors–, through a structured language, yet not reciting them aloud but mixing the characters' cognition and perception in a “verbalized” way. This unique technique used by Woolf gives cohesion to the soliloquies, as well as the passing of time from childhood –sunrise– to death –sunset–. Through this, Woolf achieves not a conflict nor a solution, but utter and flowing reality. For Utrilla de

Neira, the ultimate metaphor of the novel consists in the liquid flux of reality, the waves that move unceasingly encompassed by a game with the language used.

In her paper "Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's 'The Waves'", E. Clements elaborates more on the style of the novel and its relation to music. According to her, Virginia Woolf sees in music a potential model for her novelistic methods from *The Waves* onward. This close relation with music is presented through Bernard as he sees in music the possibility "to give the effect of the whole". Even though the connections between music and literature have been presented before in terms of influences, Clements explains that in Virginia's works there is a novelty as she takes it as a concept and as a methodological principle, not presupposing a dichotomy between the usual form and content opposition. For Clements,

one of Woolf's significant contributions to modernist aesthetics is that her focus on "formal" properties does not privilege structure over her political and/or social concerns. Music facilitates this intermingling of "form," subjectivity, and cultural critique, which are inseparable in her experimental novels. The method for *The Waves*, then, is as much about reconstituting human interaction as it is about formulating new narrative structures. (162)

Clements, then, explores the lyrical interludes in the novel as well as the development of a "counterpoint" in Virginia's mature work, as her "structural material emulates simultaneous separation and correlation" (164), mainly in the characters' personalities. For Clements, each of the voices performs a unique yet interconnected part of the whole, comparing them to movements of a piece (including a seventh movement as well—Percival— as a "silent yet significant" part in the piece). This way, Woolf reconfigured the novelistic form by making

the “character” and the form indivisible, as all six consciousnesses are one splintered character.

By establishing the characters' role in the “musical piece”, Clements establishes their different representations: Neville as the portrayal of the “order” as well as its own limits (opposites that are indissoluble), Louis as the angry dissatisfaction with life and the perpetual suffering as the outsider, Susan as the connection to the natural world and the contrast to the urban sound that Louis presupposes, Jinny as the “physical” entity, related to dance, movement and social interaction, Rhoda as the outsider, the silent figure, and Bernard as the thread that joins everything together, the one joining opposites. For Clements, the way in which Virginia creates an aesthetic effect that depicts alternative social models and performs them through intermedial exchange is achieved by the interchange between the musicality and the narrative.

Some of these elements of musicality as the thread that joins everything in the novel are also used by Stephen J. Miko, in the paper “Reflections on “The Waves”: Virginia Woolf at the Limits of her Art”, although he expands on more topics. Miko manages to explore Virginia Woolf's efforts to connect idea and style in the novel, and how, through writing, it is possible to notice the limits between fact and fiction, truth and lie.

Miko focuses on the limits, both of idea and technique in Woolf's novel; first, because being it a novel about loneliness and silence, it captures and masters them through writing, and second, because writing in itself is a paradox: it is a lie of a world that cannot be known, yet it is an affirmation of *some* kind of reality. For Miko, then, there exists a

relation between the search for unity and a personal loneliness or emptiness, as emptiness can be filled with words, even being aware of its limits.

The author explores the idea of the style of the text; this “play-poem” recited in silence; a conversation that is never reproduced as dialogue; a stream of voices so similar that sometimes seem to overlap each other. Each voice has a “rule”, a form that defines a difference with the others: Louis yearns to appear solid, Neville has a poetic concern for words and things, Susan has basic passions and a narrowed life, Jinny dances exploring the body and social life, Rhoda creates a shell against the world and Bernard is the story-teller that unites everything. These rules are not only the mode of perception of the characters and the path for their actions, but they are also the limits they are defined by.

For Miko, the most intimate relation between the voices and Virginia Woolf as a writer revolves around Rhoda and Bernard; the first being the defenseless and fearful character, and the latter being the one that defines himself through and against others. In the case of Rhoda, she stands with her own music as she has the principle of the lack of being, being metamorphic throughout the novel, not fitting a consistent set of labels. She defines her life through others, yet is so terrified by them that she prefers solitude. Her musicality lies within her own time and her unique continuity. For Miko, here is where Rhoda embodies Virginia Woolf's aesthetics of art as the portrayal of emotions, yet using controlled and precise patterns that, ultimately, cannot face all the mimesis problems. In the novel, the images seem to represent plenitude and completion, but this illusion is just momentary. In the author's words: “words allow only *images* of completeness, and the more complete the closure of meaning the more obviously the images have been arranged, willed, and stylized,

until finally [...] they are merely reflections of the author's wishes" (76). This final part is presented by Bernard at the end: he has aimed for that fundamental and final utterance that stands as the "completion", but it does not come and he must return into struggling with himself, with life, and this means, returning to mutability. Death seems to be the utter definite truth, and his returning to life becomes an act of heroism.

In addition to what the author has stated, he devotes one brief part to the character of Percival: the ultimate image of perfection, the embodiment of achieved life. However, this perfection is achieved only by silence, as speech constitutes impurity. He is the measure of the incompleteness for the others, and he becomes the touchstone of reality. But for Miko, Percival stands for the idea of perfection that Virginia Woolf does not and cannot believe, as his flaws are existent, but the characters refuse to see them. For Miko, the act of writing is an ambivalent act that needs to make gestures of affirmation and *The Waves* is an attempt to construct an honest exploration of the human condition and its mutability.

Continuing the examination of Percival, in the paper "The Absent Presence: A Study of Percival in *The Waves*", Qiuxia Li explores the role of this absent character and analyzes four possibilities of interpretation for Percival's role. All the interpretations are consolidations of Percival's role of beauty. The first interpretation is a Percival that acts as a "lighthouse" for the characters, as his strong figure, his leadership and his love of life make him an ideal for the six characters. In this interpretation, Percival embodies hope, courage, love and harmony, uniting the characters together. In the midst of chaos, Percival stands for the portrayal of beauty, as the writers manifest their desire for harmony, order and love through him.

The second interpretation revolves around Percival as the mirror of the other six characters, taking into consideration that the novel conveys the search for identity in a world of solitude and alienation. In this sense, Percival is the only character in the novel that seems to have a stable self; he then becomes the mirror for everyone's identity. He is the ideal figure; the one they admire and worship. Percival's role is abstract, becoming any person.

The third interpretation conceives Percival as the image of the Empire (being the center; the hero) but his image is broken into pieces in the monologues and his image becomes absurd after his pointless death.

Finally, the fourth interpretation is that of Percival as the embodiment of death. Starting from his absent presence, he acts as the shadow that reminds others of their inevitable death. However, he becomes the portrayal of the duality between life and death and the beauty of it, as he shows how, when a man is brave enough to face death, he creates the beauty of life. This idea complements the general allegory of the novel as "The Waves conveys the rhythm of life in synchrony with the cycle of nature and the passage of time" (79).

Following the idea of the absent, J. Hills Miller introduces in "*The Waves* as Exploration of (An)aesthetic [sic] of Absence", the idea of *The Waves* as the portrayal of an aesthetics of absence; this means, that there is a "memory bank" filled with all the events, thoughts and feelings that, however, cannot be accessed by direct experience. The characters are aware of their existence in an absent center to which they are attached but they cannot reach it, since every time something is felt with great intensity, it "goes on happening somewhere

with an independent existence” (673), something of what they are aware of but is out of their control.

To support this thesis, Hills Miller relies on the soliloquies, first in terms of the style and then in terms of content. Regarding the style, because it seems impossible for the soliloquies to be stream of consciousness as they have a poetic inventiveness and a polished prose. Furthermore, in terms of the content of the soliloquies, Hills Miller points out how some of the thoughts are shared by different characters even when nothing has been said, and explains that this is due to that “memory bank” they can access. Moreover, this thesis explains the odd alternation of tenses present in the novel, as this center holds everything that happened in the past.

Hills Miller states that for Virginia Woolf, the world is already put into words and every individual piece of art reveals the beauty of that hidden artwork, independently of the writers, meaning that all knowledge is part of the world and is up to the people to make it a piece of art.

Following the idea of the relevance of the grammatical features of the novel, in her paper “Waves and Fragments: Linguistic Construction as Subject Formation in Virginia Woolf”, Julie Vandivere focuses on the elaboration of identity by exploring the use of language. For the author, Woolf's concern about the relationship between the grammatical and the ontological features emerges in different parts of the novel, taking into account that some grammatical features are related to knowing and materializing the world around them. By acknowledging and using features such as genders and cases, the characters are able to understand the world in terms of circumstances such as gender roles in society, class,

education and social status, since the relationship between grammar and reality is symbiotic, not one miming the other. This way, the grammatical structures have a significant role in the process of self-definition.

Nonetheless, the novel itself transforms the idea that words are specific objects in order to make them fluid, ethereal, mutable elements that are impossible to hold together and, less, for them to be the basis to build neither the self nor reality. Words are unpredictable and unstable, therefore grammar also is. However, the characters find a way to claim reality in repetition, a sort of insistence on existing. Moreover, Vandivere insists on the link of Virginia Woolf's feminist consciousness to this grammatical configuration of the world as it is through writing that social change can happen; it is through grammar that one can challenge reality, subjectivity and hegemony. For Vandivere, Virginia "suggests on a grammatical level that any reliance on posited reality will give way, revealing the fragility and despair of inherited modes of conceptualization, and refuting traditional models of subject construction through complex grammatical games" (231).

Following this idea of building the self through language, Tamlyn Monson, In "A Trick of the Mind": Alterity, Ontology, and Representation in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*", presents the close relationship between ontology and epistemology in the development and construction of the self. As Monson explains, through the character of Bernard, Woolf explores the paradoxical situation of searching for totality and infinity, yet being exposed to the limits of language and life. Bernard is always on a quest for an eternal and unchanging truth that aims for totality; a narrative where the other characters help him build his identity. However, language is limited and it fails to portray him and the others, reducing

the singularity of each one and making them uniform. Trying to capture their “truths” within the narrative limits them, confronting Bernard to the failure of trying to achieve wholeness. Moreover, life in itself becomes a limit, pushing Bernard to feel attracted to the ultimate limit: death.

Monson holds that through the novel it is possible to see Virginia Woolf's idea that the relation between words and reality is arbitrary, as “words [...] cover over reality rather than reveal [...] it in its essence” (183). In this sense, language has a reductive nature that becomes a limit to becoming anything. Bernard would finally realize that there is no “true story” as there are elements that slip his narrative: “He sees that choosing to create a narrative about any other reality elides a multitude of other truths, providing a partisan, partial view, and not, in fact, ‘representing’ reality at all” (187). In addition, as he fails to understand the “other” as a whole, it is not possible for him to identify himself other than through the other. He cannot place himself along with the others, nor without them, making it impossible to participate entirely neither in totality nor infinity.

Reygadas Castillo further elaborates on this exploration of the self and the relation with others through the symbol of the looking glass in her master's thesis “Los espejos en *The Waves* de Virginia Woolf”. In this paper, the symbol of the looking glass is approached from the perspective of a revelation, as it portrays the physical and psychological development of the characters, defines their personalities and attitudes towards their world, and depicts the perception of reality for the artist. The author alludes to the appearance of mirrors in each chapter and the way they accomplish a different objective throughout the novel. In this way, the mirror evolves with the characters as they become more complex

and sophisticated. The mirror portrays the limits of the world of the characters. Moreover, the author explores how some mirrors could reflect the true being of a character through self-reflection in the mirror and by seeing other's reflection in it. Because of this, the perceptions change, especially in the role of Jinny and Rhoda, the first being the most physical being, who feels absolutely compelled by mirrors that show her entirely, while the latter feels insecure about mirrors as she cannot bear her face, her existence.

But there are other instances worth referring to. First, it is through the mirror that the world of the interludes and that of the soliloquies are connected as one, as reflections of one world onto the other. Second, the idea that the mirror, as they become more mature, becomes a symbol of the distortion of the world of the characters and how they become aware of their vulnerability to this distortion. Third, the mirror reflects the passage of time in the characters; then, in the last interlude, the mirror depicts the quiet and absent life, as it evokes a mysterious and unknown land. Finally, the last mirror that confronts Bernard at the end of his life frames the limit of his reflection and the constant flux in which the mirror will remain reflecting other people's lives even after they are gone.

Reygadas Castillo also examines the relation of the mirror and the characters, and focuses on Rhoda, as she is the first to see the mirror as something different from a common object; for her, the mirror had always been a symbol of her distorted reality that would lead to her existence and that would finally lead to her death. As for the others, the mirror will be the one helping the reader understand their identity and will help the characters understand themselves, especially the female characters. Reygadas Castillo reveals at the end that Bernard, in that final reflection referred to before, would represent the creative

consciousness as he is trapped, blocked and forced to express the mystery he sees in the flow of life. For Reygadas Castillo, Virginia Woolf here expresses here the difficulty of the artist to achieve the representation of life. The author quotes Roger Fry, as he states that the mirror symbolizes the labor of the artist to fix the moment; emphasizing the idea that Virginia leaked her vision of reality into the novel.

To round up the aspect of identity in the novel, G. Lowes Dickinson wrote a letter to Virginia Woolf in 1931, in which he stated his perception of the novel in stylistic and regarding the “universal an perpetual” theme she wrote about. Virginia replied to his letter by saying: “What you say you felt about *The Waves* is exactly what I wanted to convey... I did mean that in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one” (Woolf, 1978: 397).

Taking into account all the elements previously referred to, it becomes essential to consider certain key concepts to understand and support the interpretation of the novel. These concepts will be considered to expose the standpoint of the present interpretation.

Theoretical framework

Aesthetics is certainly the *leitmotif* of the thesis proposed, yet it is a concept difficult to take hold of. From a philosophical perspective, aesthetics has gone a long way in trying to be defined within the timeless characteristics of the subject of beauty. However, when understanding aesthetics regarding a particular work of art, it has to be related to the principles underlying the work of the artist understood in the ground of culture, the subsequent value system and the evaluation of it being done in the work. In words of Bakhtin, aesthetics is the “essential interaction and interdetermination with all other areas of cultural creativity within the unity of culture” (1990: 272). The aesthetic activity towards an aesthetic object, in this case the novel, is built upon the evaluation of the world being done by the artist within the unity of a culture; in the case of Virginia, that culture of England in the first decades of the 20th century. However, in order to understand the aesthetics and how it will be taken into consideration, it is important to settle the three components of aesthetics in writing and verbal creation: material, content and form.

Mikhail Bakhtin differentiates these components as the essence of the aesthetic act, understanding the relation that the piece of art establishes with reality, not by inventing or creating new realities but by filtering reality through a cognitive and ethical moment in order to actualize and evaluate it in a new way. The three elements are codependent, yet have to be understood as different moments.

The content is an indispensable moment in the aesthetic object as it is the provider of meaning, as “no creative, cultural act has anything to do with completely random and unordered matter that is completely indifferent to value. Rather, it always has to do with

something already evaluated and somehow ordered, in relation to which it must responsibly assume its own valuational position” (Ibid. 174-75). In order to understand this “evaluated and ordered” matter, the content is based upon two perspectives: the cognitive givenness and the ethical moment. The cognitive givenness takes the prior cognition and presents it with no independent position, no new evaluation and with no certain aesthetics. This givenness is then transposed to another axiological level through the individualization, concretization, isolation and consummation made in the ethical moment. The content, then, cannot only be cognitive —reduced to concepts and ideas—, nor only ethical —a raw performed action. In the content, “art celebrates, adorns, and recollects this conveniently encountered reality of cognition and action (nature and social humanity); it enriches and completes them, and above all else *it creates the concrete intuitive unity of these two worlds*” (Ibid. 279). But in order to fulfill this task, the content establishes a correlation with the material “in the axiological and meaning-related movement of an action” (Ibid. 281).

The material of the literary work of art is the word. Yet, the word is not limited to its linguistic nature although it has to be understood firstly that way, making the work of art a phenomenon of language. However, Bakhtin expresses the difference of this mere linguistic approach to the word by exploring the idea that, beyond a notion or a representation, poetic language has a different composition made of all kinds of nuances of the word. Then, what it is used in the piece of art is not language but *verbal material*, words filled with the utmost meaning, endowed with cognitive, ethical and aesthetic peculiarities that give them their polysemic character within the material. As Bakhtin says, “poetry squeezes, as it were, all the juices from language, and language exceeds itself here” (Ibid). The verbal material,

then, is not only the technical element organized in a certain form “devoid of any axiological constituent” (Ibid. 264), but it conveys psychophysical stimuli for sensations and states that deprive all verbal creation from utility, making the material the one that establishes the aesthetic object as language phenomena and as a cultural act.

Both material and content become moments that are actualized through form. Form individualizes, concretizes, isolates, and consummates the object extracted from reality (Ibid. 278) and it is realized in the material. Then, by taking both content and form, form is categorized in two directions: the compositional form and the architectural form. The first is related to the organization of the material, conditioned by the aesthetic object and the nature of the material; and the latter, is “the unification and organization of cognitive and ethical values” (Ibid. 304), mainly oriented towards content.

Because both the architectonic and the compositional form belong to the aesthetic object, they act through contemplation. The compositional form will reify the content in the architectonic form and will provide the reader with the axiological position towards the aesthetic object. This way, “form is the expression of the active, axiological relationship of the author-creator and of the recipient (who co-creates the form) to content” (Ibid. 306). The architectonic form will be performed through the compositional form, making it possible to approach the aesthetic object from the teleological method, understanding how and why the material was manipulated in order to perform through it, the work of art.

This understanding of the work of art in the light of content, material and form, is vital to perform the analysis and interpretation of a work with such complexity as *The Waves*. But, in order to establish the teleological approach to the novel, it is necessary to explore not

only her works, but also her perspectives regarding writing, which will allow to identify some recurrent elements in her works that consolidate her aesthetics¹.

Virginia's novels, stories and essays present a recurrent element: they explore the idea of the limit between life and art, and life and words. It becomes an issue in her writing that art and words are a possibility of expression, creation and exploration; still it seems impossible to grasp the "truth" of life with them. This "truth" is constantly referred to as the characters' aim in her novels and stories, and art is the means to convey it, mainly through a "literary truth". As Virginia herself explains in *Craftsmanship* that according to the dictionary there are three kinds of truth: God's truth, literary truth and home truth.

Nonetheless, "the only test of truth is the length of life, and since words survive the chops and changes of time longer than any other substance, therefore they are the truest [...] But words, if properly used, seem able to live for ever." (247). Therefore, this "literary truth" is what her characters search for and the basis of Woolf's aesthetics. Yet, Virginia states, "It is the nature of words to mean many things" (Ibid.), because words live in the mind. It is not possible to grasp truth with such mutable material; words deceive by the possibilities they keep within. As Bakhtin explained, words are endowed with everything peculiar to culture, whether cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic; the artist overcomes the word:

That is to say, the process of realizing the aesthetic object, i.e., of realizing the artistic task in its essence, is a process of consistently transforming a linguistically and compositionally conceived verbal whole into the architectonic whole of an aesthetically consummated event. At the same time, of course, all the verbal interconnections and interrelations of a

¹ The essays that follow can be found in the *Collected Essays*, Volume 2.

linguistic and compositional order are transformed into extraverbal architectonic event-related interconnections" (1990: 297). The verbal material that Bakhtin defines is widely polysemic, and connects to Virginia's idea of language. Then, Virginia feels the need to explore this mutability and these possibilities of reading the world as her aesthetics. There is no constant truth, nothing definite, nothing absolute; the only way to achieve the truth is to present the mutability within it, taking advantage of the mutability of words as well. As she says in *Modern Fiction*:

Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless, we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds [...]

If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it...life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and the external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (1966: 105-106)

Although, as she explains in *The Art of Fiction*, "... nobody knows anything about the laws of fiction; or what its relation is to life [sic]; or to what effects it can lend itself" (Ibid. 53), Virginia assets to use her aesthetics as a means to break with the abstract truths, sharp divisions and fixed essences. She explores the possibilities and the limits of the verbal

material, the mutability of language, in order to portray the constant changes and, therefore, capture the truth of life.

Nevertheless, the possibilities of the verbal material have to be seen beyond the word alone, establishing a connection with other texts through *intertextuality*. As Bakhtin states (quoted by Kristeva); “any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*” [italics in the original] (1986: 37). This way, there is a mosaic of correlated texts that load the words with meaning, making the reading of a novel a weaving of discourses in constant dialogue, highlighting the ambivalence, “the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history” (ibid.:39). The ambivalence works as words have the meaning the author has provided them with while retaining the one they had in another discourse. This situation provides the possibility of polysemy and ambiguity in the novel, denying an absolute truth, exposing the dialogue of the characters with others, with themselves and with the world that will provide different perceptions that are in constant change. “Truths” are fragile and built upon processes that involve lies and fictions, discourses permeated by subjective extremes, prejudices and common places. Even though aesthetic contemplation focuses on the same aesthetic object —the work of art—, meaning will differ based on the eye of the reader, providing multiple and indefinite readings.

Virginia Woolf's writing also explores Julia Kristeva's notion of “movement”, in which the idea of mutability is positioned. First, in the truth that verbal creation conveys and in the words that reproduce it; second, in the debate of the limit between the static and dynamic text, understanding a literary piece in both synchronic and diachronic spaces, positioning it

within history and society as part of a continuing social process. This provides the characters with the possibility of reading and writing the world, writing and re-writing history and society from a critical perspective. The voices are in a constant dialogue with themselves, each other and the world around them, making them plural, ambiguous and complex, providing different meanings for themselves and acting differently in different times and places, in different readers, providing the text with autonomy.

In order to make all of these elements part of the novel, Virginia Woolf uses intertextuality and incorporates different traditions, customs and official discourses from the standard institutions in order to state and re-write them: a way to evaluate and re-evaluate the world she presents. For her architectonics, nothing is affirmed as an absolute, but rather the novel questions and criticizes all social values, and acts as “el lugar donde se plasma, donde toma forma, un debate ideológico crítico complejo, cuyas vicisitudes deben leerse en el nivel del discurso mismo ...”² (Pouliquen, 1995: 24). This way, all parts are linked to a “whole” in a teleological way –following Bakhtin’s aesthetic analysis. This “evaluation of the world”, inseparable from the verbal material that elaborates it and the multiple ideas and value systems that underlie it, is what Mikhail Bahktin defines as the “architectural form” (Ibíd.: 15). According to this perspective, Virginia elaborates a “un nuevo sistema ético de gran complejidad a partir de varios sistemas éticos”³ (Ibíd.: 16), based on the active and complex characters that evaluate and re-create the world around them through art.

² In the original: “the place where a complex critical-ideological debate takes shape, whose vicissitudes must be read at the discourse level” (Free translation by the author)

³ In the original: “new ethical system of great complexity on the basis of different ethical systems”. (Free translation by the author)

In *The Waves*, it can be seen how Virginia Woolf explored the limits of her own writing through the form by making a metatextual comment on aesthetics through the experimentation of the compositional form through the wavering between genres and by pushing the material to extremes, consolidating the architectural form as a manifestation of her own aesthetics.

The Aesthetics of Constant Mutability of Verbal Creation in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

‘The flower,’ said Bernard, ‘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.’

—Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*.

Taking a hold of the aesthetics of a work of art is always a challenge. It is not only going through the experience of understanding the essence of the beauty and principles underlying the work of the artist, but understanding them in the ground of culture and the subsequent value system. The challenge gets more complex when addressing a work of art that performs as a metatextual comment of the author on her own aesthetics since it is not only portraying the aesthetics but also exposing it.

This is what Virginia Woolf does with *The Waves*. With this novel, she elaborates on the idea of the limits between life and art, and between life and words, both recurrent elements in her novels that have become essential to her aesthetics. With *The Waves*, aesthetic object takes form by exploring the inner self of the characters in relation to these limits and their role in creating art. The six voices that construct the novel, although shaped with a different identities based on completely different backgrounds and perspectives, make part of one shared consciousness; together they all build the aesthetics of the author, that is in constant change throughout the novel, making waves between the extremes. Giving prevalence to art—mainly writing—as a way to accomplish this perception of beauty and this evaluation of reality, *The Waves* acts as a metatextual comment of the author regarding the aesthetics of

her own work, making it an account of the aesthetics of writing as the constant mutability in which verbal creation comes to life.

The constant mutability is initially portrayed by the very structure of the novel. Built upon preludes and soliloquies, the novel is divided into nine parts that turn into an allegory of the changing life of a human being from childhood –sunrise– to death –sunset. The lyrical preludes that introduce each part create the moving picture of a beach at different moments in a day. They focus on small changes that appeal to the senses by mentioning sounds, animals, lights, wind, and the ocean, producing a synesthetic effect and making use of different rhetorical resources that blur the genre of the novel into a poem:

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, 1978: 150)

Not only the preludes have this poetic quality as the soliloquies also make an exposure of it. The soliloquies characterize the voices as they are not created by a narrator nor by the characters' dialogues. Through their soliloquies, the voices share their true perceptions and thoughts, filtered by a thoughtful, organized and revised language that does not correspond to their ages nor to the stream of consciousness often used to present the inner monologue common in modernism. In the soliloquies, they remain true to themselves yet they are not the reflection of a wandering mind nor the sensibility of children. The characters seem to have the mind of adults independently of the moment they are going through.

Both the prefaces and the soliloquies find the way to give the text a “liquid feeling” through alliteration, a poetic discovery of the internal changes in the characters, the complexity of each individuality and the way different individualities can complement each other so harmonically as facets of one same consciousness. The novel, then, is not a novel, a poem and or a play. Virginia herself has called *The Waves* a play-poem, distorting genres and exposing the readers to the impossibility of an absolute as the genres are in constant dialogue.

Six voices in the novel realize the soliloquies. These six characters have a particular identity that remains true to each one throughout their lives. Bernard, the observer, always fond of stories, describes them at an early stage: “I see Louis, stone-carved, sculptresque; Neville, scissor-cutting, exact; Susan with eyes like lumps of crystal; Jinny dancing like a flame, febrile, hot, over dry earth; and Rhoda the nymph of the fountain always wet” (Ibid.: 117). There are shared facets in some voices, like solitude and concealment of weaknesses in Rhoda, Louis and Susan; or Neville's, Louis', and Bernard's tendency to art. Likewise, there are some very dissimilar characteristics that contrast each other's personalities: Jinny's impossibility to dream or Bernard's difficulty to imagine, in opposition to Rhoda's perpetual longing for dreams or Louis' sordid imagination; the desire for admiration which Jinny, Bernard and Louis look for and that Neville, Susan and Rhoda despise. To these characteristics, gender and social status add fears and aspirations to their personalities, and all these will gain enormous relevance in their interactions with each other and their development as individuals and as a community. For some, separation is key to define their identity while others do not believe in separation but can only define identity in the eyes of others. Nonetheless, all of them live in a constant dialogue with each other's discourses,

intertwined with voices of writers and people that have had an influence in them in at some specific time. Through this dialogism, they discover they are not one and simple, but complex and many (Ibid. 76).

Although each personality and perspective appears to be stable within each character throughout the novel, there are subtle changes as they grow up. The evolution of the characters' preferences, their perspectives of the world and their lives is smooth, yet noticeable. Neville's perspective changes with Percival's death; Bernard's, when he realizes the limited power of words to portray truth; Louis', as he is exposed to a job and a relationship; Susan's, with the impact of enclosure and solitude; Jinny's, with social pressure and sexual awakening, and Rhoda's, as she sees death circling around her. Every contrast is presented within the characters and among them, and it is through their perceptions of the world that the form of the novel is created and their sensitivities allow them to create art with their thoughts and, some of them, with words.

Although not every character pursues an aesthetics in writing, they all have a fascination towards beauty, a certain aesthetics, constantly built with every experience, yet true to each one's personality:

“[...] like Louis, desiring perfection; or like Rhoda leave us, flying past us, to the desert; or choose one out of millions and one only like Neville; better be like Susan and love and hate the heart of the sun or the frost-bitten grass; or be like Jinny, honest, an animal. All had their rapture; their common feeling with death; something that stood them instead. [...] Some people go to priests; others to poetry; I to my friends, I to my own heart, I to seek among phrases and fragments something unbroken. (Ibid.: 266)

In this quote, Bernard believes everyone's perception of beauty and reality has different foundations that will make a continuous contrast of both the sensitive and the spiritual

world, the private and public spheres, city life and countryside life, the idea of being and appearing, the contrast between art and reality, the power and the limitation of language, and the constant debate between life and death. Moreover, in this pursuit of beauty, some elements such as solitude and imagination are highlighted as defining in the creative process. The characters that aim at beauty in their creations are those who remain in solitude; outsiders do not seem to fit in. These outsiders are the ones who are more sensitive and, thus, are more in need of pursuing beauty yet are the ones that face change the most, so it is for them that art becomes their escape.

The characters who commit to life through art are mainly Neville, Louis and Bernard. For Rhoda, art is not a commitment to life, but an escape from it. Throughout the novel, the four of them develop a different sensitivity but stay true to their perspectives of life. It is through art that they find meaning to their existence yet they are never satisfied with their aesthetics, nor with the ones of their peers: Bernard questions Louis' approach, Louis rejects Bernard's approach, Neville criticizes Louis and Rhoda since they "want a plot, a reason, 'they say truth is to be found there entire, and virtue, that shuffles along here, down blind alleys, is to be had there perfect'" (Ibid. 198), while Rhoda despises everyone's perception of life and beauty as, for her, they all pursue stillness, an absolute. Yet nothing remains static and nothing is absolute: there is nothing definite and they are aware of that to a certain degree. This will become the main struggle of their art. The whole novel is the pursuit of their own truths without ever achieving an absolute one. They experiment with topics, ideas, styles, but never seem to feel completely satisfied with them: "That would be a glorious life, to addict oneself to perfection; to follow the curve of the sentence wherever it might lead..." (Ibid. 88). As Neville refers to in this quote, the novel is a journey, and so

is art. There is nothing definite in art nor in life but a flux leading everyone on different paths.

However, there is an interesting opposition to this denial of an absolute in Percival's character. This character, of whom almost nothing is known, is regarded by all the other characters as the most appealing, attractive and amusing being. They all seem to envy him and, at the same time, they all aim to get his approval. As Louis says, Percival "is always the first to detect insincerity" (ibid: 34) and "the one who inspires poetry" (ibid: 35); making a direct relation between sincerity and truth, with poetry. Bernard's' insistence at the end of the novel is that Percival's beauty lies in his constant pursuit of growth, edification, refinement, as well as justice and truth. Percival stands as the resolved character with no development; he is well-defined whereas the others see in him a way to build themselves. Percival acts as a fixed and absolute being, the contrast and, therefore, the one who highlights the others' changes. All six voices see in him a pillar, as the one who provides solidity to everything they are, but his presence vanishes and he dies, not only breaking with his static being, but also breaking with the official discourses he represents: the perfect Victorian man. In the interludes, with Percival's death comes the sunset. He was the one who brought light and different shades of color to the landscape, to the waves, to their lives. Yet, with his death, only shadows remain. As Percival's presence fades, each character builds an individual notion of beauty and establishes a breaking point in which they become critical of their context and begin re-stating the social conventions in their own words.

Percival's death confronts the voices as a principle of reality. Death reminds the characters that their time is not limitless —death is the “enemy” that Bernard sees facing them all at the end. Five of the six characters, in some way or another, make a commitment to life in the face of death: Neville and Louis through art, fusing their “many lives” into one; Susan through the natural world; Jinny through her own physicality; and Bernard through language. Rhoda is the only one who does not commit to life. While Bernard welcomes his new birth and reassures his fight for consciousness and meaning until the end, Rhoda stands on the opposite side, surrendering to the pull of oblivion and joining the world of inanimate things: “I implored day would break into night [...] I desired always to stretch the night and fill it fuller and fuller with dreams” (Ibid. 205). She is in the midst of going on and giving up the pursuit of truth. She is afraid of the looking glass able to show her true self yet feels attracted by the vertigo of finding herself. In her solitude, Rhoda is able to look into her abyss and find refuge within herself. She is the one admired by Bernard, the conscious pursuer of beauty.

Rhoda leads to one of Woolf's persistent symbols: the looking-glass. This symbol acts for most characters as the reflection of truth, identity and, therefore, beauty. However, Rhoda refuses it by all means. She says, “I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face. Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness” (1933: 38). Rhoda struggles with her own identity and, therefore, she avoids mirrors as reflectors of truth. Identity is Rhoda's main conflict and mirrors are a constant reminder of it. Others, like Jinny and Susan, stare at themselves in mirrors in order to confront themselves, build their identities and pursue the truth within themselves. A mirror is also what confronts Bernard in the end, the one that

reflects the passage of time in his face. Art, therefore, is the looking-glass that reflects life and the truth behind it.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the limits of a looking-glass: it can distort things, show only parts, and it will never be the same image depending on the point of view and moment at which is seen. In here the contrast between reduplication and reality is shown. The image is partial, static and limited to the frame: "Rimmed in a gold circle the looking-glass held the scene immobile as if everlasting in its eye" (1978: 208). Each character assumes the role of the reflexive being that follows a series of thoughts, interpreting what is in the mirror based upon what is seen and then filling it with meaning due to the experience and the knowledge he/she possesses outside of it, giving life to the piece because of that particular reading.

Yet the picture in the looking-glass keeps on changing. Life keeps on moving and cannot be settled within a frame. As Bernard reflects, "Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it [...] After Monday, Tuesday comes" (Ibid.: 267). This last sentence is repeated constantly in Bernard's last soliloquy as a way to insist on how time runs slowly yet, after a while, it makes a difference. There is a sense of comfort in time passing that distracts from how everything has been shaken through time; there is an illusion of a true order when, in fact, everything has changed. As Bernard points out,

To see things without attachment, from the outside, and to realise their beauty in itself—how strange! And then the sense that a burden has been removed; pretence and make-believe and unreality are gone, and lightness has come with a kind of transparency, making oneself invisible and things seen through as one walks—how strange. (Ibid. 263-64)

This “walking” is the subtle hint of mutability. His reflection will continue by noticing all the changes the voices have gone through, how that walk sets oneself in the face of change, and how impossible it is to try to grasp it.

The constant mutability of life, of these identities, of their perspectives and everything surrounding them, becomes an issue for the verbal creation they are pursuing. The fact that art and words are a possibility of expression, creation and exploration of life becomes persistent, yet it is impossible to grasp the “truth” of life with them. This “truth” is constantly referred to as the characters’ aim and art is the means to convey it, mainly through a “literary truth”.

But in the novel, Virginia proposes the impossibility of the pursuit of an absolute truth in fiction while exploring the uncertainty of any absolutism surrounding fiction. Truths are fragile and built upon processes that involve lies and fictions. It is not about indetermination of the self, rather it is about all the discourses behind that self that are permeated by subjective extremes, prejudices and common places. As Louis says: “So imperfect are my senses that they never blot out with one purple the serious charge that my reason adds and adds against us, even as we sit here. What is the solution, I ask myself, and the bridge? How can I reduce these dazzling, these dancing apparitions to one line capable of linking all in one?” (219).

Virginia explores words as the material that can overcome the test of length of life, still questions the material of the literary piece as “it is the nature of words to mean many things” (1966-67: 247), especially when the world is seen through so many perspectives, all of them subjective. It is not possible to grasp truth with such mutable material; words

deceive because of the possibilities they keep within. The voices themselves start questioning themselves how feasible it is to achieve that “literary truth”. Bernard says: “I have made up thousands of stories; I have filled innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when I have found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer. But I have never yet found that story. And I begin to ask, Are there stories?” (1987: 187). They all fail to make one defined story, one truth, voicing Virginia’s aesthetic proposal: the only way to achieve truth is to give form to the constant mutability in which verbal creation comes to life, taking advantage of the mutability of words as well. Bernard affirms: “How describe or say anything in articulate words again?—save that it fades, save that it undergoes a gradual transformation, becomes, even in the course of one short walk, habitual—this scene also” (287). He has come to this conclusion at the end of his life in the light of all the other voices and the constant dialogue throughout their lives.

However, the architecture of the novel is created with six voices that oppose each other when defining an aesthetics. Then, how could these perspectives of beauty act as an account of one single proposal of aesthetics? This happens both as individuals and as a single consciousness. Jinny’s aesthetics is that of movement, change: “I do not want to be fixed, to be pinioned” (Ibid.: 55). Susan’s also finds it in movement, although this is a slow-paced one. Rhoda represents the violent movement between extremes:

I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces. I have no end in view. I do not know how to run minute to minute, and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life. (Ibid. 130).

They begin building one consciousness based on their contrasts. They always see themselves in the light of others, some while being alone, and others only in the illumination of other people's eyes. They are all different, yet their stories cannot be made without the others, and it becomes obvious in the contrast of their own perceptions and the perceptions of others of each one of them. As Neville points out: "Outside lines twist and intersect, but round us, wrapping us about" (ibid. 179).

The characters that have dedicated their lives to art all turn to this aesthetics in the end: Louis says: "My destiny has been that I remember and must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads, the thin, the thick, the broken, the enduring of our long history, of our tumultuous and varied day" (ibid. 202). For Louis it is easier to understand it, as they have never been so defined in their posture of the "truth". However, for Bernard it becomes a disillusion:

With dispassionate despair, with entire disillusionment, I surveyed the dust dance; my life, my friends' lives, and those fabulous presences, men with brooms, women writing, the willow tree by the river — clouds and phantoms made of dust too, of dust that changed, as clouds lose and gain and take gold or red and lose their summits and billow this way and that, mutable, vain. I, carrying a notebook, making phrases, had recorded mere changes; a shadow. I had been sedulous to take note of shadows. (Ibid. 285)

Thus, change is the only constant in life, and beauty is subjective, constantly wavering as one's identity does. The literary truth that the characters aim to portray is impossible to grasp. Every time they seem to take hold of it, it runs through their fingers just like sand. No matter how steady the sea appears, it is always moving. Truth underlies the whole story, the whole creative process, and the journey they have been through to find themselves. In the end, Bernard says he would give "you" his life as it were complete, but to do this he

“must tell you a story, but there are so many, and so many stories [...] and none of them are true” (ibid: 161). The artist, therefore, portrays the never-ending change of mankind and the world around, and uses words as a means to break with it and re-write it. Words, then, will be the way to explore the worlds of many distinguishable, not melded, identities, not as a universal truth because life is always changing and it will always be different in the eyes of the person who sees it. Bernard describes this impossibility of the absolute, this defined idea, within a frame:

The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers [...] How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole. (Ibid. 256)

The only possibility in order to give this effect of the whole is as a way of distinct melodies that the members of a choir perform. As stated in one interlude, the birds sing in chorus, “shrill and sharp, now together, as if conscious of companionship, now alone as if to the pale blue sky” (Ibid. 73). These birds are the voices of *The Waves*, leaving in the last interlude, just one bird singing, Bernard, before everything is covered in darkness.

Considering the aesthetic proposal of the aesthetics in writing as the mutability in verbal creation, it is obvious that it is clearly fulfilled in the novel. There are different perspectives, different voices, and yet, the novel portrays different related truths: the physical beauty of the landscapes, the focalized beauty of the characters' physical traits and personalities, beauty in relationships, experiences and death itself... Moreover, the novel portrays the changes of these beauties throughout time as it takes a toll on the characters: “I now made the contribution of maturity to childhood's intuitions—satiety and doom; the

sense of what is unescapable in our lot; death; the knowledge of limitations; how life is more obdurate than one had thought it" (Ibid. 269). The novel demystifies the "true nature of human life" that Bernard so eagerly aimed at by creating a work so full of contrasts, changes, waves that move within the characters while facing the waves of the shifting society they live in.

By using the six voices, Virginia creates the mutability of life by showing how change happens also in the characters' identity to move towards different spheres, both individual and social, taking into account the age, gender and social background of each character and setting different limitations on them and on words. Words are so filled with meaning that everything is a matter of perspectives, a way of breaking away from reality to re-write it, because life is an unfinished phrase to be faced, as Neville says,

"One must put aside antipathies and jealousies and not interrupt. One must have patience and infinite care and let the light sound [...] Nothing is to be rejected in fear or horror. The poet who has written this page (what I read with people talking) has withdrawn. There are no commas or semi-colons. The lines do not run in convenient lengths. Much is sheer nonsense. One must be skeptical, but throw caution to the winds and when the door opens accept absolutely. [...] And so (while they talk) let down one's net deeper and deeper and gently draw in and bring to the surface what he said and she said and make poetry" (Ibid. 198-99).

This way, Virginia's aesthetics of writing is shown through the voices' aesthetics while the novel acts as the living proof of that constant mutability in which verbal creation comes to life.

Conclusions

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is a complex work that explores the limits on writing both from the perspectives of the characters and from the structure of the novel itself. It plays with drama and poetry through different voices that assemble one united consciousness. Life is allegorically portrayed as the movement of waves on a day on a beach; a constant change, a permanent shift between extremes. Being an utterly human novel, it explores the inner self of its characters in order to define their identity, but all identities seem part of one consciousness; they all have their different perspectives and, yet, they build an idea of beauty together. And since it is through art, and more specifically through writing, that this beauty is created, the novel acts as an account of the aesthetics of writing as the constant mutability in which verbal creation comes to life.

The novel is created upon six voices: six characters with a particular identity that remain true to each other throughout their lives. They all have different perspectives of life and beauty and they all approach it differently. Although these perspectives appear stable within each character, there are subtle changes as they grow up. All these ideas are presented within the characters and among them, and it is through them and the subtle changes in their perspectives, that the architecture of the novel is created and their sensitivities allow them to create art with their thoughts and with words. But the whole novel is the pursuit of their own truths without ever achieving an absolute truth because of constant issues regarding the material and the content of what they aim to do. They experiment with topics, ideas, styles, but never seem to feel completely satisfied with them. The novel is a journey, just like art.

There is nothing definite in art nor in life except the two main symbols present in the novel: Percival and the looking-glass. Percival is the static and beautiful character, and the looking-glass acts for most characters as the reflection of truth, identity and, beauty. However, Percival's presence fades and his death brings on a breaking point where the others become critical of their context and begin re-stating the social conventions in their own words. As for the looking-glass, the way it can distort images is shown; it shows only parts, and it is never the same: the limitation of the frame makes it an impossible reflection of truth. Life keeps on going, it keeps on changing.

This constant change becomes a problem for the verbal creation they pursue. Words are the possibility of expression, creation and exploration of life, yet it is impossible to grasp the truth of life with them. So this becomes the aesthetics that the novel renders: the exploration of the constant mutability in which verbal creation is achieved, distant from a defined and universal truth. Change is the only constant in life, and beauty is subjective, constantly wavering as one's identity does. The literary truth that the characters aim to portray is impossible to grasp. No matter how steady the sea appears, it is always moving, creating a work so full of contrasts, changes, and waves that move within the characters while facing the waves of the shifting society they live in. Words are filled with the utmost meaning, and this polysemic nature of language will make everything a subject of perspectives that will assess reality in order to re-write it. This material is the one that overcomes Virginia's "test of the length of life", yet it is questioned by means of the different voices. All voices act as a choir, all of the different voices juxtapose their notions of beauty and how these change throughout time. Moreover, because of Virginia's experimentation with the material and the content, taking the genres to their limits and

shaping the form to highlight its uniqueness, the novel accomplishes to give an account of what Virginia Woolf's aesthetics in writing is, while being the living proof of that constant mutability in which verbal creation comes to life.

However, this exploration remains superficial to the architectonics and still requires further exploration. To do so, it would be enlightening to study the material in depth, especially when establishing the relation between the interludes and the soliloquies in order to expound on the compositional form that realizes the architectonic form. Moreover, it would also be interesting to undertake a further study of the mutability in verbal creation in other works, both as the aesthetics of the piece of art, but also as a metatextual comment on the works that deal with the verbal creation.

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