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# "Was That Voice Ourselves?": Virginia Woolf's Soundscapes of Identity

**Abstract I:** Attingendo ai sound studies e alla critica modernista, questo contributo esamina i *soundscapes* in *Between the Acts* di Virginia Woolf come luoghi di tensione/crisi culturale e identitaria. Attraverso rumori naturali e tecnologici, voci frammentate e collage sonori, Woolf costruisce ambienti sonori che destabilizzano progressivamente identità e narrazione, segnando una rottura epistemologica. I *soundscapes* oscillano, tuttavia, tra rassicurazione e disgregazione: trame polifoniche ed echeggianti svelano una totalità relazionale, mentre sonorità cacofoniche registrano ansia ontologica. Anche l'approdo di Woolf al silenzio ultimo racchiude il paradosso del suono come presenza e assenza, testimoniando un'eco persistente e relazionale che sfuma confini aprendosi a un orizzonte proto-postumanista.

**Abstract II:** Drawing on both sound studies and modernist criticism, this paper examines soundscapes in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* as sites of cultural tension and identity crisis. Through natural and technological noises, fragmented voices, and sonic collages, Woolf constructs aural environments that increasingly destabilise identity and collective narratives, marking an epistemological rupture. Nonetheless, soundscapes oscillate between healing and disruption: rhythmic polyphony and echoic textures foster relational wholeness, while cacophony registers ontological anxiety. Even Woolf's final turn to silence encapsulates the paradox of sound as presence and absence, testifying to a lingering, relational echo that blurs boundaries, opening onto a proto-posthumanist horizon.

**Keywords:** Echo, Identity, Modernism, Soundscapes, Virginia Woolf.

## 1. Introduction

By situating both Virginia Woolf's thematised and formal auditory strategies within modernist criticism and sound studies, this essay examines the role of soundscapes in *Between the Acts* as expressive sites of cultural tension, identity crisis, and aesthetic exploration. Woolf's attention to aurality must be located within the broader Western tendency to prioritise visual epistemological paradigms, as well as within her specific attraction to spatiality as a way of opposing the dissolution associated with temporality, itself a distinguishing feature of both verbal art and aural experience. This makes Woolf's aural imagination complex,

since it not only reflects modernist concerns with annihilation but also points to potential remedial responses to a new awareness underpinning what Angeliki Spiropoulou has labelled Modernism's "constitutional fragmentariness" (2015: 76)[1].

From the intrusive urban noises of *Mrs Dalloway* (1992a) to the intersecting variety of voices of *The Waves* (1977) and the chaotic aural collage of *Between the Acts* (2000), Woolf increasingly constructs cacophonous sonic environments that register both personal and communal anxiety, destabilising the coherence of individual identity and collective cultural narratives. Although sound increasingly marks moments of epistemological rupture in Woolf's work, her soundscapes oscillate between healing and disruption, a tension that structurally underpins her modernist interrogation of subjectivity. Healing soundscapes are characterised by their capacity to generate moments of relational attunement that foster aesthetic, emotional, and communal forms of coherence without fully resolving the fragmentariness of modern experience. Conversely, disruptive aural elements expose moments when self-perception falters and the boundaries between self and other, mind and world, are rendered unstable. Correspondingly, Woolf concurrently converts modernist narration into an acoustic form of knowledge. Reading this conversion through the lens of sound theories reveals that her fiction provides not only psychological or visual representations of consciousness but also highly relational and ecological models of listening in modern environments, which simultaneously celebrate the continuation of life in ways that anticipate posthumanism's critique of anthropocentrism. Within this framework, soundscape functions as the article's principal conceptual category and the echo as its key interpretative lens, while "acoustemology" and "proto-posthumanism" provide complementary theoretical perspectives.

In his pioneering work on mainly human-centric acoustic ecology, Schafer coins the term "soundscape", meaning the sonic environment, namely the constant interaction of sounds, whether pleasant or harsh, subtle or overwhelming, heard, listened to, or ignored, within which we continuously live, to which we relate, and in response to which we act (1977). Schafer's statement that a "soundscape consists of events *heard* not objects *seen*" (1994: 8)[2] implies that such events are both physiological (an inescapable phenomenon since we do not have earlids) and psychological, encompassing both hearing and listening (Barthes 1985). Across her macro-text, Woolf "continually makes her reader aware of the acoustic environment" (Flint 2003: 187) as well as of "the internal 'noise' of consciousness" (Toth 2017: 566) through both her thematic focus on aural spatiality and the words that materialise it on the page. Her composite acoustic space conjoins communal knowledge with the individual's physical and psychological experience of sound, which seems to connect to Steven Feld's phenomenological interpretation of sound as a cognitive instrument exposing the

[1] Unless otherwise specified, all italics are original. Spiropoulou crucially connects such fragmentariness to "modernity's destruction of the transcendental" (2015: 86).

[2] R. Murray Schafer further defines the soundscape as "any acoustic field of study", also claiming that "it is less easy to formulate an exact impression of a soundscape than of a landscape" (1994: 7). Moreover, his claim that "the eye points outward; the ear draws inward" (1994: 11) suggests that the visual modality may be more defensive than the aural one.

"conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place [and time]" (1996: 91)[3]. In the case of Woolf's layered soundscapes, such cultural localisation also reveals her attunement to the era's changing soundscape alongside a renewed aural sensitivity and related aesthetic innovations shaped by emergent sound technologies, such as the gramophone and the wireless (Caughie 2000; Flint 2003; Frattarola 2005, 2018)[4].

Woolf's overall soundscapes incorporate thematised representations of sound through hearing and listening, as well as the sonic materiality that the reader experiences through formal phonic plays performed either silently or aloud. Simultaneously, this allows Woolf to trigger the reader's spatial sensibility and an awareness that the distinctive feature of auditory experience is – borrowing Steven Connor's words from his seminal essay on the modern "Auditory I" – "its capacity to disintegrate and reconfigure space" (1997: 206), which Woolf also provides with graphic materiality, particularly in her last novel.

The real and metaphorical sounds of a crumbling world are recorded early by Woolf in "Character in Fiction" (1924): "the smashing and the crashing began. Thus it is that we hear all round us […], the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction" (2008: 51). Any crumbling implies the possibility of renewal and rebuilding, but this crashing signals a dramatically destabilising shift in the inherited value system. It is a form of breaking highly emblematic of modernity and deeply connected to the experience of the Great War, which had left profound scars, shaken faith in previously unshakable ideas, and brought about disillusionment with civilisation and its foundational beliefs.

In response to this sense of fragmentation, Woolf devises a kind of remedy through a specific mode of writing aimed at re-establishing relational unity, first of all in aesthetic terms. Crucially, to construct this sense of wholeness, Woolf's poetics employs a device that, in a variety of contexts, she labels "echo" – an *acoustic* metaphor that functions as both a thematic concern and a formal strategy. This idea is explicitly articulated by the painter Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1992b) and simultaneously serves as a metanarrative key to Woolf's own practice: it is a "sense of repetition – of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations" (1992b: 215). The concept resonates throughout Woolf's work, in both its compositional and acoustic dimensions (although here I will focus primarily on the former). Rhythmic polyphony, collective voices, and echoic textures – both thematised and practised by Woolf – act as re-

[3] In this essay Feld also considers the culturally relevant dialectical interplay between audition and vision, which is in line with his later refusal to substitute "ocularcentrism" with "sonocentrism" (2015: 15). In this later essay, he also clarifies the difference between his theory of "acoustemology" and Schafer's "acoustic ecology" and "soundscape". On the importance of the auditory dimension in modernist literature, see also Murphet, Groth & Hone (2017), and Snaith (2020).

[4] On Woolf's radical aurality and her creation of environmental soundscapes in words, see Pamela Caughie (2000). On the role of the gramophone in *Between the Acts*, see Bonnie Scott (2000). Interest in aurality, as part of a concern with the sensory overload of the twentieth century, was shared by European artists and avant-gardes in both celebratory and preoccupied terms, through the internalisation or externalisation of soundscapes. The futurist celebration of external *bruits* (including art, war, and the machine) coexisted with Woolf's focus on external soundscapes and their inner counterpart in the characters' consciousness.

lational markers of wholeness, suggesting possible sites of connection. Coexisting with dissonance, where sound itself becomes a site of tension or rupture, these echoic soundscapes open onto a renewed sense of identity and positive awareness.

**2. The Soundscape of *Between the Acts***

*Between the Acts* is Woolf's last novel, published posthumously in 1941, and it represents a climax that encapsulates the dichotomous nature of her auditory imagination. In her 1938 diary, Woolf writes of her intention to explore a collective form of identity grounded in national history, culture, and literature: "'I' rejected: 'We' substituted […] composed of many different things […] we all life, all art, all waifs & strays – a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole" (1984: 135). If *The Waves* is centred on separation from the Other, which is a form of fragmentation entailed by the development of the self's consciousness and identification (Blodgett 1983), *Between the Acts* shifts its focus to the identity of a community, explored mainly through the lens of art. The novel portrays an emblematic English village as a microcosm of the nation at a moment of crisis, exploring the sense, formation, and recognition of identity across individual and collective dimensions on the brink of World War II. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf had explored similar questions in the aftermath of World War I, ultimately affirming life and the possibility of reconstructing identity in its multiple forms. In *Between the Acts*, this inquiry, with its problematic outcome, is staged through a pageant that traces the general history of England and foregrounds auditory experience as both a communal and individual phenomenon, suggesting at once union and separation. In this last novel, Woolf's soundscapes mark a triple concern:

1) an overarching epistemological shift, reflective of the tensions modernism variously registers;
2) a cultural crisis that encompasses both communal and personal identity construction;
3) a thematised aesthetic failure epitomised by the gradual absence of the echo[5] in its relational capacity (in stark contrast to its formal presence in the novel but conspicuously lacking within the pageant itself).

These dimensions are not discrete but mutually reinforcing: the epistemological shift underpinning modernity informs the crisis of individual and communal identity, while the gradual erosion of the echo's relational capacity registers both processes at the aesthetic level.

*Between the Acts* is rightly considered by Angela Frattarola to be Woolf's "most sound-oriented novel" (2005: 143), representing a thematic and formal climax in her attention to sound, and Kate Flint likewise argues that its overall soundscape is composed of "an aural collage of interpenetrating rural, human, and mechanical sounds" (2003: 189). Whereas Woolf's other

[5] The novel refers explicitly to the echo by showing that its relational power increasingly becomes simple repetition: "strange echoes through the house, so that in the library, the sitting-room, the dining-room, and the nursery, whatever they were doing, thinking, saying, they knew, they all knew", Woolf (2000: 22); "He said (without words) 'I'm damnably unhappy'. 'So am I', Dodge echoed. 'And I too', Isa thought" (105); "O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together" (116); "'This year, last year, next year, never…'. Isa murmured", "'This year, last year, next year, never', Isa murmured. 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor', Bartholomew echoed" (127, 129).

novels often describe and rely on sound – suffice it to think of the violent, urban, and booming aural experiences in *Mrs Dalloway* (the car, the airplane, the striking clocks) – *Between the Acts* performs sound phonetically by repeatedly incorporating a variety of phonic and onomatopoeic fragments arranged in pairs and triplets ("chuff, chuff, chuff", "ding, dong", "tick, tick, tick"). The novel is thus inhabited by a rich plurality of voices, sounds, and noises drawn from both reality and art, composing a complex and dichotomous soundscape.

The village is full of voices that seem almost autonomous, personified presences rather than metonymically indicating the human or natural beings to which they belong. They pass through open doors and windows as agents of a cacophonous collectivity in which borders become ambiguous:

> Across the hall a door opened. One voice, another voice, a third voice came wimpling and warbling: gruff – Bart's voice; quavering – Lucy's voice; middle-toned – Isa's voice. Their voices impetuously, impatiently, protestingly came across the hall saying: "The train's late"; saying: "Keep it hot"; saying: "We won't, no Candish, we won't wait" […] Utterly impossible was it, even in the heart of the country, to be alone? […] There must be society (Woolf 2000: 25)[6].

Other sounds – musical, animal, linguistic – rush from open windows: "From the garden – the window was open – came the sound of someone practising scales. A.B.C. A.B.C. A.B.C." (71). When people meet between the acts of the pageant, they are again represented vocally: "Voices interrupted […] More voices sounded" (94), with "sounds of laughter" (39, 106) coming from every direction. Acoustic variety also encompasses inner and outer voices, sounds produced by separate bodily parts, and the music of the pageant: "Feet crunched the gravel. Voices chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music […] is expressive of some inner harmony?" (73). Sound also calls the audience back to the performance while providing a form of union: "The audience was assembling. The music was summoning them"; "Scattered, shattered, hither thither summoned by the bell" (72, 73). Accordingly, relational power seems to pertain to aural threads: "Over the tops of the bushes came stray voices, voices without bodies, symbolical voices they seemed to her, half hearing, seeing nothing, but still, over the bushes, feeling invisible threads connecting the bodiless voices"[7] (91).

This sonic diversity is tightly interwoven with the performance of Miss La Trobe's pageant and its layered *phoné*. The outdoor setting enhances the acoustic interplay between nature and art, allowing for a dynamic sonic exchange: the ambient sounds of the natural environment blend with the actors' and the audience members' voices, tunes, songs, the gramophone's music and noises. This plural, fragmented soundscape introduces dissonance and confusion, complicating the process of (self-)identification. It also disrupts narrative coherence, as the disjointed layering of voices and sounds mirrors the disintegration of sha-

[6] All subsequent quotations from *Between the Acts* are taken from this edition, and page references will be provided parenthetically in the text.

[7] In line with the increasing sense of self-fragmentation, the novel also refers to "bodiless eyes" (45).

red meaning and stable subjectivity in a world shattered by war and shaped by shifting cultural paradigms. Ultimately, the soundscape of this novel offers a composite space in which identity resonates with the epistemological uncertainty of its historical moment and reflects the broader crisis at the core of modernist aesthetics.

*2.1. Technological Voices and Sounds*

There are two specific typologies of sound in *Between the Acts* that deserve close attention. The first is the recurring voice of the gramophone, a technological and multivocal voice that: a) produces a variety of musical tunes; b) emits peculiar sounds, conveyed onomatopoetically, such as the "chuffing" and "ticking" of its needle in the grooves; and c) suggests the haunting formula "dispersed are we".

Concealed behind the bushes, the gramophone mediates a sonic interplay between mechanical and natural sounds, acting as what Lawrence Kramer calls "a dark choral commentary" (2024: 64) on both art and the present moment, within the pageant and the novel alike. The music played by the gramophone is intended to operate as an acoustic and rhythmic device capable of gathering and unifying the audience during and between the acts of the performance, holding the dispersing company together, but this project fails. On the one hand, the music is preceded by a sudden and menacing shower upon the audience in the open air, as if it were nature's voice, figuring a universal pouring of tears – "all the people's tears, weeping for all the people" (107). On the other hand, when the tune begins after the shower, it first seems to be another voice speaking, "the voice that was no one's voice [...] that wept for human pain unending" (107); then the music becomes increasingly erratic, and in the fourth act a crescendo of aural and rhythmic confusion culminates in, and epitomises the smashing of wholeness:

> [music] changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Fox-trot was it? Jazz? Anyhow the rhythm kicked, reared, snapped short. What a jangle and a jingle! […] What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult; And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put the finger to the nose? Squint and pry? Peek and spy? […] The young, who can't make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole (109).

This dissonant breakdown sonically registers the discord of the age. It reflects the world of the 1930s, marked by social and political fragmentation, and underscores the difficulty of identifying oneself as part of a historical, social, cultural, collective, and familial context, and of perceiving oneself as unified[8]. From the outset, this crisis of recognition is thematised through missing or failed sounds. The play opens ambiguously – "the play began. Was it, or was it not, the play?" – with an empty stage and the gramophone buzzing without mu-

[8] Triplets are not only sound-related; Woolf also uses them to mark the fragmentation of the self visually, as it appears in Isabella's mirror, which is divided into three different parts: "she […] stood in front of the three-folded mirror, so that she could see three separate versions of her […] face" (11).

sic: "Chuff, chuff, chuff sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. […] For the stage was empty" (47-48). The baby actress forgets her lines; the actors' voices are inaudible or blown away by the wind; even the playwright's call for louder sounds is thwarted by reality, as nature overtakes art:

> The stage was empty […]; the only thing to continue the emotion was the song; and the words were inaudible […] 'Louder, louder!' Miss La Trobe vociferated […] Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden […] and bellowed (84-85).

Hence, set against art is nature's prehistoric voice, acoustically reminding the present of its force and presence: "It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment" (85)[9], which also functions as a metonymic personification that reduces the figurative unity of the present into shreds.

What further contributes to the near materialisation of a sense of absence is the noise of the needle in the groove, which "exposes spacing as a void" (Kramer 2024: 64). Nevertheless, and paradoxically, it is not meaning or artistic coherence that ultimately unites the audience but the very mechanical regularity of the sounds from the gramophone: "Only the tick tick […] held them together" (92). Union and communal identity are entrusted to the persistent ticking of the gramophone. Even the groove noise, apparently meaningless, potentially signifies something, since the scratching needle[10] also triggers a shared lamentation of dispersal.

In line with this dichotomous potential of sounds, the gramophone also emits a "megaphonic, anonymous" voice, "whose it was no one knew", which intermittently and increasingly addresses the confused collectivity in an attempt to prompt both a shared interpretive conclusion and a form of self-awareness: "The voice said: […] *let's* […] *calmly consider ourselves*" (111). Alongside this anonymous voice, there is another voice, induced by the gramophone and expressing separation and unknowability, which the villagers repeat and remember collectively – "Dispersed are we" (59) – as a paradoxical form of reciprocal recognition in reciprocal dispersal:

> *All you can see of yourselves is scraps, orts and fragments? Well then listen to the gramophone affirming …* A hitch occurred here. The records had been mixed. Fox trot, Sweet lavender, Home Sweet Home, Rule Britannia […] was it Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mozart or nobody famous, but merely a traditional tune? (112); *Dispersed are we*, the gramophone repeated […] *Dispersed are we*, the gramophone […] dismissed them […] triumphed, yet lamented *Dispersed are we* (116-117).

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[9] In *Mrs Dalloway*'s urban panorama, the characters' voices are frail and often overwhelmed by the roar of the city, but here too Woolf introduces a voice that opposes civilization's linguistic and technological soundscapes, singing meaningless and ancestral sounds that gesture toward a different form of pre-civilised existence.

[10] In Woolf's macro-text, the potentially remedial connotation of needles frequently emerges in relation to both thematised and metanarrative references to the acts of knitting and writing, considered healing strategies for obtaining unity out of fragmentariness through the interrelation of parts.

Against the background of a chaotic mixing of musical sounds that prevents the audience from identifying the tunes played by the gramophone, the obsessive refrain marks the breakdown of the pageant's coherence and leaves the audience unsure of its meaning, while simultaneously prompting reflection on their own identity as members of a nation, a tradition, and a community.

Yet, despite this fragmentation, the novel insists on foregrounding shared aural experiences: the villagers feel bound to listen to the pageant by a "communal obligation" (Frattarola 2005: 146); they collectively attend to the gramophone's "chuffs", "ticks", and music, as well as to the sounds of war. These auditory experiences create a fleeting but palpable cohesive effect: "The tune stopped. Chuff, chuff, chuff, the machine ticked […] only the tick of the gramophone needle was heard. The tick, tick, tick seemed to hold them together, tranced" (50). The final movement evokes this paradoxical experience of fragmentation and unity more explicitly:

> Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third […] On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; […] from chaos and cacophony measure; […] To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united […] Was that voice ourselves? Scraps, orts and fragments, are we, also, that? (112).

Sounds allow a brief experience of togetherness that nevertheless emphasises the persistence of separation, as the Shakespearean quotation indicates. Woolf's use of the gramophone reveals her modern understanding of community and individuality: her characters are briefly united – like a chorus – through shared auditory experience, even as they remain separate, isolated, and unresolved[11].

The second typology of sound in *Between the Acts* is another technological voice that signals the looming threat of war. This voice breaks into the pageant when warplanes rip through the air above the stage and connects directly to what Woolf describes in her coeval essay "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" (1940) as a "death rattle overhead" (2008: 216). These wartime soundscapes become collective auditory events shared by everybody, evoking shared feelings of fear, vulnerability, and even patriotism. Yet, in stark opposition to the harmless airplane in *Mrs Dalloway*, which writes letters in the sky, this sound marks a more violent and irreversible rupture. The booming voice of war becomes a sonic symbol of disintegration, against which both art and religion are powerless.

After the pageant ends, Reverend Streatfield's comment and hopeful words are interrupted mid-sentence by the warplanes' disruptive sound, which imposes an acoustic severance on his words and literally cuts them, as this sentence itself graphically mimics:

[11] Both the chorus-like aspect of the pageant's audience in this novel and the choral component in Woolf's other works have been variously explored by, among others, Melba Cuddy-Keane (2000) and Frattarola (2018).

> Each of us who has enjoyed this pageant has still an opp …". The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation […] came overhead. *That* was the music […] The planes had passed. "… portunity," Mr. Streatfield continued (114-115).

The graphic severance of the word "opportunity" literalises the violence of history on language. Reading this from Kramer's perspective – who also draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of "spacing" as a possible mark of death in writing (1976: 39, 69) – requires attention to the fact that any "articulate expression needs space between its units" (2024: 64) such as, for instance, the gaps separating written or printed words, or the spaces dividing the individual letters within them. Spoken language likewise depends on pauses and separations between words and syllables, though these intervals ordinarily remain unnoticed unless particular attention is directed toward them, as Woolf does through the graphic dots. In such moments, "spacing undercuts articulation; it becomes a kind of fracture that potentially opens into an abyss" and "introduces death into the utterance" (Kramer 2024: 64). The spacing enacted by the planes' sonic intrusion does precisely that – it fractures speech and conveys death. The novel thus invites further reflection on the relationship between fractured soundscapes and the destabilisation of linguistic meaning, a question that exceeds the scope of the present essay but remains closely connected to its concerns. This motif is echoed again at the novel's end when the gramophone voices a final broken utterance: "gurgled *Unity – Dispersity*. It gurgled *Un … dis …* And ceased" (119). Here, too, fragmentation is simultaneously graphic, acoustic, and thematic. It marks the disintegration of both sound and meaning, paralleling the collapse of all forms of unity in Woolf's era.

This leads us back to Woolf's complex use of the echo, a concept that functions not only as a recurring motif but also as a key interpretative lens through which the novel's soundscapes articulate the tension between fragmentation and relationality. The echo serves as a relational and compositional device, while also signifying artistic continuity and the resonance of life. As Kramer argues, we always "need to hear *something*. The continuity of the audible assures us […] of the continuation of life" in that sound is "the sensory medium in which the awareness of continuing life is felt" (2024: 2). Therefore, the idea that "sound is the measure of life" and that "its end must be a measure of death" (x)[12] resonates with Woolf's understanding of the echo.

**3. Resonances and After-Sounds**

In Woolf's fiction, the thematised and gradual disappearance of the echo signals the collapse of civilisation, culture, and aesthetic form itself. Near the end of *The Waves*, when the grown-up characters confront loss and separation, Bernard reflects on the absence of the echo and compares it to death: "no echo comes when I speak, no varied words. This is more truly death than the death of friends, than the death of youth" (Woolf 1977: 224). Bernard is an aspiring narrator, therefore his reference to the disappearance of the echo may also operate as a metaliterary hint at the failure of artistic form. This is confirmed by Woolf's 1940 diary,

[12] On the "Recovery of Positive Silence", see Schafer (1994: 258).

which recalls Bernard's words and connects writing to identity as mutually interdependent: "the writing 'I', has vanished. No audience. No echo. Thats [sic] part of one's death. Not altogether serious […] But it is a fact – this disparition of an echo" (1984: 293). At the end of *Between the Acts*, the echo appears once again but it is not stabilising; rather, it is formalised only to be weakened through repetition and contradiction, while being ironically undermined since the gramophone only echoes the impossibility of communal togetherness:

> The gramophone was affirming in tones there was no denying, triumphant yet valedictory: *Dispersed are we; who have come together. But,* the gramophone asserted, *let us retain whatever made that harmony.* O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company. *Dispersed are we,* the gramophone repeated (116).

This dynamic appears to invalidate the unifying potential of the echo as a formal and compositional device designed to secure both artistic coherence and authorial identity – a function successfully thematised and formally realised in *To the Lighthouse* by both Lily and Woolf (the painter and the writer), but one that ultimately fails here. Indeed, Miss La Trobe is finally unable to reassemble the fractured voices of modernity.

Still, there may be a final aural twist, implied by the disrupted but inherently choral nature of the polyphonic "dispersed are we" voice. The gramophone's last fragmented utterance – "*Un … dis …* And ceased" (119) – contains within it a hidden acoustic reconstruction that contrasts with its own graphic spacing, apparently conveying death. These phonic shards – *un*, *dis*, *ceased* – when recombined, suggest the opposite: "undeceased" (/ʌndɪsi:st/)[13], a ghostly, aural reversal hinting at life, union, artistic renewal, and art's efficacy. Through this sound play, Woolf suggests that meaning can still be reassembled, since aesthetic efficacy may persist even amid fragmentation. The novel closes accordingly with a line that restores both voice and collective presence, ushering in a further stage: "the curtain rose. They spoke" (130). This final aesthetic soundscape echoes and harmonises with the novel's opening – which is similarly attuned to the villagers' reality: "It was a summer's night and they were talking" (5). This frames the text through audible and communal speech. While the echo has thematically "vanished", it persists formally through this textual configuration despite its thematised absence.

Ultimately, biography and art diverge. Woolf withdrew into silence as her final remedy for the overall crisis and sense of failure she was experiencing in both historical and personal terms. Nonetheless, this turn to silence encapsulates the paradox of sound as both presence and absence, as it is a withdrawal that leaves behind a lingering echo. It is not a return to wholeness, but an acoustic trace that resists oblivion and dissolution while testifying to relationality. As Bernard foresaw in *The Waves*: "When my voice is silent you will not remember me, save as the echo of a voice" (1977: 106-107). This echo articulates Woolf's use of sound as a formal and thematic medium, revealing how, on the one hand, her auditory

[13] This sound play has also been noticed by the Italian translators of the novel, Francesca Wagner and Franco Cordelli.

imagination reflects modernist concerns with an overall sense of crisis. On the other hand, it strongly suggests relational openness and potential mutual recognition through the aural pluralism and vibratory force that foreground betweenness, within and across human and non-human domains. In this sense, Woolf's soundscapes challenge a strictly anthropocentric understanding of subjectivity by presenting identity as an effect of resonance, interdependence, and acoustic coexistence rather than as a self-contained individual essence. From an already proto-posthuman perspective, Woolf's last novel ends with a promise of future sounds still to be listened to: "They spoke" (130).

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