

## **The Risky In-betweenness of Performing Audiences**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper focuses on the powerful interrogation of the audience's agency as staged in two very different works that, despite their distance in terms of genre and cultural milieu, both call into question essentially normative notions of gender and nation: *Between the Acts* (1941) by Virginia Woolf and *England* (2007) by Tim Crouch. In Woolf's last novel, the process of writing and reading ambiguously frames the fragmentary staging of an eccentric village pageant on Englishness and its literary heritage. Indeed, the equivocal *mise en scène* of characters as readers/actors/spectators in the crucial 'interval' between the two world wars lends itself well to an inter-disciplinary investigation of the critical predicament underlying those slippery and delusive participatory claims. Crouch's acclaimed piece *England* is instead strategically positioned at the intersection of multiple 'ways of seeing' and multiple 'ways of doing things with words' by conflating the 'site specifics' of visual arts with the 'empty space' of theatrical experience. As such it urges the audience to 'see' the dubious ties between local, 'g/local', and globalised spaces and thus to face the invisible national, sexual and socio-normative 'scripts' that condition their responses at large.

### **1. Introduction: the audience as vanishing echo**

Given their inter-disciplinary or anti-disciplinary engagement with the interstitial and translational aspects of any politics of identity and culture, Performance Studies have lately enjoyed a growing, even if often suspicious, critical attention from an impressive

range of academic fields, thus also contributing to a radical interrogation of the ways in which texts ‘do things with words’. On the one hand, the cross-fertilisation of theatre studies with the social sciences, promoted by the influential work of Erving Goffman and the paradigmatic collaboration between Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, just to name a few, has marked a major shift from mimesis to poesis, from theoretic abstractions to living practices. On the other, the deconstructionist revision of John Austin’s linguistic category of the performative by Jacques Derrida (1988) and Judith Butler (1993 and 1997), among others, has paved the way for a radical critique of sign, text, subjectivity, language and law, providing the philosophical backdrop for an ongoing, contentious reconfiguration of performance in terms of “kinesis, as movement, motion, fluidity, fluctuation, all those restless energies that transgress boundaries and trouble closure” (Conquergood, 1995: 138).

Within the array of dramatic and theatrical disciplines the ‘turn to performance’ has further ignited the old debate on the problematic and multifarious ways that literary texts and their stage productions engage one another (Worthen, 1995), bringing to the fore the limits of representation-ability and the cultural stakes in the ‘post-dramatic’ endorsement of certain forms of spectatorship (Lehmann, 1999). Inspired by this theoretical framework, my paper focuses on the powerful interrogation of the audience’s agency as staged in two very different experimental works that, despite their distance in terms of genre and cultural milieu, both call into question essentially normative scripts of gender and nation: *Between the Acts* (1941) by Virginia Woolf and *England* (2007) by Tim Crouch.

In Woolf’s last novel, the action takes place on a June day soon before the start of the Second World War at a country house in the heart of England, where the villagers are presenting their annual pageant under the direction of a restless queer playwright, Miss La Trobe. The spectacle turns out to be a ludicrous pastiche of familiar plots harking back to England’s colonial history (from the brave inception of the Elizabethan days to the obsessive missionary urge of the Victorian age); whereas the scene of the Present abruptly shifts to a trick of mirrors mischievously reflecting pieces of the spectators’ own bodies on a stage left otherwise blank. In this extreme experiment in-between text and performance, the process of writing and reading thus ambiguously frames the fragmented amateur production of a communal pageant on Englishness and its literary heritage; as such, the narrative plays with a performing ethos which already seems to anticipate the new forms of audience participation that have lately flourished in contemporary theatre. Indeed, the furtive proliferation of inter-textual echoes within the novel’s equivocal *mise en scène* of characters as readers/actors/spectators in the crucial ‘interval’ between the two world wars lends itself perfectly to a multi-disciplinary investigation of the critical predicament underlying those slippery and delusive participatory claims.

In this regard, it is worth stressing that Herbert Blau, co-founder of the pioneering Actor’s Workshop in San Francisco and a powerful voice in contemporary theatre studies, focused on *Between the Acts* in a two-part essay on reception as a most poignant illustration of his own theory of the audience as a ghostly precarious

embodiment of the vanishing point of (avant-garde) theatrical experience.<sup>1</sup> The very incipit of his essay is nicely resonant with Woolfian echoes:

“No audience. No echo. That’s part of one’s death,” wrote Virginia Woolf in her diary at the start of World War II. She was working on *Between the Acts*, in which the audience – “orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves” – is brutally and equivocally mirrored in its dispersion. Her dread over “this disparition of an echo” is a conspicuous deepening of one of the major anxieties in the history of modernism, extending into the indeterminacies of the postmodern. If the audience is not altogether an absence, it is by no means a reliable presence. When there is, today, the semblance of a gathered public, it is usually looked at askance by the most seminal practitioners in the theatre, as it was by Brecht and Artaud, and by social and critical theorists. Such an audience seems like the merest facsimile of remembered community paying its respects not so much to the still-echoing signals of a common set of values but to the better-forgotten remains of the most exhausted illusions. (Blau, 1985: 199)

Given Blau’s lifelong engagement “with the indeterminate borders between audience and community and the negotiations between theater and culture” (Minich Brewer, 2006: 101), his insights into Woolf’s last experimentation help to disentangle the performative implications of her authorial vulnerability, spotlighting the cluster of aesthetic and political issues which preoccupied the novelist at the end of her life. The first quote chosen by the American theorist is taken from her diary entry for 9 June 1940, in which the very ‘drama’ of war pressure is felt to be surreptitiously unfolding behind the delicate fabrics of everyday life, as follows:

I will continue – but can I? The pressure of this battle wipes out London pretty quick. A gritting day. As sample of my present mood, I reflect: capitulation will mean all Jews to be given up. Concentration camps. So to our garage. That’s behind correcting Roger, playing bowls. One taps any source of comfort ...

What we dread (its no exaggeration) is the news that the French Govt. have left Paris. A kind of growl behind the cuckoo & t’other birds: a furnace behind the sky. It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing ‘I’ has vanished. No audience. No echo. That’s part of one’s death. Not altogether serious, for I correct Roger: send finally I hope tomorrow: & could finish P.H. [Pointz Hall, the working title for *Between the Acts*]. But it is a fact —this disparition of an echo. (Woolf, 1985: 292-93)

At stake here is not only the brutality of war or the obstruction of Woolf’s imaginative activity, but the ‘disparition’ of any sense of adherence to reality itself, the sudden and disruptive perception that, to quote Blau again, “any semblance of dramatic meaning” has vanished: “It was as if reality were yoked not to warning or prophecy, but to a pure semiotic, the mere onomatopoetic flush of indeterminable sound” (Blau, 1986: 38).

That Woolf expresses her sense of literary death in theatrical terms, as the loss of her audience’s echo, makes clear to what extent the preposterous rhetoric of war had polluted and endangered the public space of social life, stripping reality of any illusion

about ‘real’ communion or action – like a stage left abruptly empty. Indeed, on the day of their first air raid warning her diary annotations sound like the script of an absurd play: “I note that force is the duller of experiences. It means feeling only bodily feelings: one gets cold & torpid. Endless interruptions. [...] Yes, its an empty meaningless world now” (Woolf, 1985: 234). Perhaps more than at any other period of her life, she was now acutely aware of the ‘drama’ of a vanishing common life: “all the blood has been let out of common life. No movies or theatres allowed. No letter except strays from America ... No friends write or ring up” (234). What infuriated her most was “the emotional falsity” fuelled by media on behalf of the murderous “myth making stage of the war we’re in” (292), what amounted to the adulterated, farcical scene of nationalistic propaganda: “patriotism, communal &c, all sentimental & emotional parodies of our real feelings” (302). Facing the pervasive ‘theatricality’ of the present she became almost obsessed with issues of continuity, history and memory and made all imaginative and critical efforts to recover a sense of really belonging to a common language and inheritance.<sup>2</sup> This explains why the idea of an audience becomes so urgent and at the same time so impaired, re-presenting the excruciating dilemma of how to salvage or perhaps to re-think a communal bond. Occasionally, she is aware that the loss of a common tradition can also open up a space for unthinkable freedom and thus have a liberating effect, but the need for an ethical and affective relation with a public remains ineludible, as she ruminates on the dreadful eve preceding the publication of her book on Roger Fry:

All the walls, the protecting & reflecting walls wear so terribly thin in this war. There’s no standard to write for: no public to echo back: even the ‘tradition’ has become transparent. Hence a certain energy & recklessness —part good— part bad I daresay. But it’s the only line to take. And perhaps the walls, if violently beaten against, will finally contain me.

I feel tonight still veiled. The veil will be lifted tomorrow, when my book comes out. That’s what may be painful: may be cordial. And then I may feel once more round me the wall I’ve missed —or vacancy? or chill? (304)

Considering that her last novel was conceived in the first half of 1938 as a sort of play to bring respite from the labour of forced, commissioned writing (the endless revision of her biography of Roger Fry) and as a fresh experiment with drama, poetry, and the “rambling, capricious” exploration of a collective subject (135) against the backdrop of the threatening rise of fascism and the very outbreak of the Second World War, it is easy to imagine how deeply her project of a new dramatic and choral narrative was to be exasperated by her strenuous attempt to resist and disrupt the very ‘theatricality’ of that total war that was suddenly to overwhelm the whole nation. Under the pressure of that ominous finale, the “we” envisaged for her last novel comes very near indeed to playing the part of an uncanny apparition, in line with the audience theorised by Blau that, as Minich Brewer comments, “enters into a productive tension with the disappearance of belief in a cohesive and homogenous *communitas*” (Minich Brewer, 2006: 102) and as such represents “at once the presence and absence of

community, its ‘intelligible contradictions’ rather than ‘a community of discourse’” (103).<sup>3</sup>

From a slightly different perspective, Woolf’s concern over the divisive concept of a plural, collective protagonist in social life and fiction has been aligned with the persistent urgency of ‘an ethics of listening’ in face and in spite of the epistemological and ontological crisis that has invested the modern subject. I refer here to Alice Rayner’s discussion of the audience as a vexed critical term which still embodies or rather performs the very precarious and interchangeable parts of its pronominal shifters: “[I]ike the syntax of the pronoun, the ‘audience’ is a shifter, changing both in what body it designates and in what position: variously operating as an ‘I,’ a ‘you,’ an ‘it,’ ‘we’ or ‘they.’” (Rayner, 1993: 7). Starting from this basis, Woolf’s anguished intuition of the audience’s disappearance as some sort of vanishing echo proves desperately indicative of “the need for a return (echo) of speech and gesture, a return that occurs in time as openness, not in a static image or closed meaning. The echo is life-giving because while it is rooted in a past, it is not fixed by the past. It returns the voice to the speaker, the same but different” (21).<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Woolf’s last novel: in-between page and stage**

Obviously enough, many critics have already discussed the novel in relation with its apocalyptic context and also, more recently, with the insular nationalism and the rural, pastoral revival that marked English late Modernism in the Thirties as a consequence of the declining Empire (Morgan, 2001; Esty, 2002 and 2004). An emerging body of research has addressed the more specific question of class and gender, either with reference to “the particular political and class alignments of the popular front period” (Harker, 2011: 436), or to the novel’s gendered inflection of class and consumption (Adolph, 2005), or to the contradictory terms of its underlying feminist-pacifist utopia (Kono, 2003). On the whole, scholars have always discussed the issue of community in Woolf’s late work not only from a large variety of perspectives, but also in highly divergent ways: now celebrating its recuperative, humorous and carnivalesque dimension, now engaging with its tragic, solipsistic and desperate intimations, now embracing the indefinite and ‘queer’ instability of its hybrid inter-textuality. In fact, the extensive critical bibliography on the novel that keeps growing at a disconcerting rate makes one immediately aware of the inherent contentiousness of the “referential” issues<sup>5</sup> at stake in Woolf’s idea of the audience ‘as’ a national community or in terms of the (im)possibility of a common performativity, since those issues are all precariously mirrored, displayed and ultimately suspended through the work in progress of her first provisional drafts, *Pointz Hall* and *The Pageant*, up to the deliberate liminality of the last – but not final – version posthumously published as *Between the Acts*.

It would be quite impossible to detail here all the performative implications of Woolf’s deconstruction of ‘Englishness’: from her dazzling subversion of the pageant’s national themes, symbols, choreography and music (cf., among others, Miller, 1998) to

the spectacle's tense juxtaposition both with the fluid, impromptu frames of the surrounding landscape (a kind of parallel, non-human, natural pageant in itself; cf. Kosugi, 2007) and the private, haunted 'scenery' of the country house itself that, as one critic has persuasively argued, "deliberately invokes the idyllic, timeless pastoral ideal as part of the social and cultural currency of England in the late 1930s." (Schröder, 2006: 269).<sup>6</sup> Within the limited space of this contribution I will just select a couple of recent developments in the novel's reception that seem to me most fruitfully responsive to the notions of performance and performativity, and more specifically to the tension between 'the disciplines of the text' and 'the sites of performance' (Worthen, 1995). That tension is indeed already palpable through the different 'stages' of the three working titles, and the authorial shift to *Between the Acts* lends itself well to advocate a sort of Woolfian 'turn to performance'<sup>7</sup> in more than one sense. First, the interstitial, processual dimension appears the most congenial not only in the face of her lifelong fascination with some overlapping of the narrative and dramatic mode; but also in terms of her increasingly compelling recognition of the 'un-acted,' 'abortive' parts that haunt both the stage of everyday life and the theatre of collective memory. No less relevant is her radical critique of the national pageantry through her re-creative exploration of that obscure and slippery terrain between silence and speech and through a deliberate oscillation "between two kinds of speech act: the mediated and the unmediated" which serves to stage a sort of "public intimacy", as has recently been underlined (See, 2010: 655). From this perspective, the "titular transformation" is interpreted as a move "from a specific location steeped in national identity", that is Pointz Hall, the country manor house, "to an abstract concept of liminality" which would allegorically mark Woolf's aesthetic endeavour with concentration (653). This reading refers both to Woolf's existential effort at concentration, as an act of intellectual resistance to the impending danger of ending up in a Nazi camp, and to her diary ruminations on the 'new' novel as a "concentrated small book" (Woolf, 1985: 114), "a concentration—a screw" (311) amidst the air raids of World War II. See discusses this element in its ethical, affective and aesthetic implications suggesting that concentration is of vital importance to strip the audience to the bone and theatricalise their 'descent' from instrumental reason and patriarchal civilization to the hybrid, re-generative prospect of a queer Darwinian feminism. The most subversive scene, from his perspective, is the last one. Here, instead of lowering the curtain, the narrative frame collapses leaving room for another play to unfold beyond the limit of the last page. The equivocal turning point, a sort of vertiginous turntable between life, fiction and drama, has been detailed as follows:

At first glance, this scene might seem anything but queer, let alone feminist, for it resolves the novel's marriage plot between Isa and Giles, forcing them to both "fight" and "embrace" in the night to come, where the word *embrace* functions as a euphemism for sexual intercourse that "might" reproductively bear "another life." Signaled by an equivocal "might" that includes the possibility of non-reproductive sexual behavior, however, this scene is actually written by a queer character in the novel named Miss La Trobe, who scribes the two plays featured in the novel: the first, the failed pageant play; and the second, the play with which the novel closes but that, unlike the pageant, is not

demarcated by discourse tags. With what are ultimately stage directions for a new play, Woolf strips her novel of external mediation here and makes the novel the drama. (649)

Not only does the narrative ending turn into the beginning of another play, but the “rising curtain” opens on the rather ob-scene matter of Isa and Giles’ linguistic and sexual intercourse, and in so doing it locates “laughable and terrifying private acts on the public page and stage” (652-53). Thus the audience is left with an offensive scene that offers a sort of contrapuntal reading to the literary and national plots that Woolf had already mocked in the pageant play.

A deepening of the audience’s affective indeterminacy is also at work in another recent article that explores the psycho-physical uneasiness marking the audience’s responses in several crucial sections of *Between the Acts*. The key-word in this case is ‘fidgeting’ which is discussed not only as “the symptom of modernist anxiety that appears in Woolf’s diary”, but more significantly as the bodily enactment of “the characters’ productive suspicion of both rabid individualism and collective consciousness, of both being yoked to history and split from it” (Wanczyk, 2011: 110). On the one hand, the spectators’ predicament before the beginning of the play seems above all a question of troubled proximity: “Their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough” (BA 45)<sup>8</sup>. On the other, the unexpected douche of reality contrived by Miss La Trobe for the alienating Section of the “Present Time: Ourselves” elicits the audience’s embarrassed but ironically unanimous resistance to her presumptuous act of self-exposure:<sup>9</sup>

But what could she [Miss La Trobe] know about ourselves? The Elizabethans, yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939—it was ridiculous. “Myself—it was impossible. Other people, perhaps ... Cobbet of Cobbs Comer; the Major; old Bartholomew; Mrs. Swithin—they, perhaps. But she won’t get me—no, not me. The audience fidgeted. (BA 121)

Wanczyk’s commentary on this passage brings to the fore “a curious in-between space – together and separate” that the characters/spectators seem to occupy when they “duplicate their own thoughts of individualism” (110). Thus the focus on fidgeting helps to make different stages and levels of “betweenness” more perceptible (cf. Barrett, 1987:18), as well as the audience’s reluctance to any fixed location and over-simplification: “The people collectively fidget *against* collectivism, against identification; they fidget against being known, being placed, being timed”<sup>10</sup> (110).

### **3. The translational impact of *England. A Play for Galleries***

If, as a contemporary reviewer immediately recognized, the subject of Woolf’s novel-play was ultimately “England under glass, this England where people of breeding were sometimes not quite sure whether they were themselves or their family portraits” (Cowley, 1941, in Majumdar and McLaurin, 1975: 448), *England* is the provocative

title of the play Tim Crouch wrote to be performed on Traverse Theatre's commission at the Fruitmarket Gallery for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007. The premiere's reviewer for the *Fest Magazine* appositely starts from the strikingly contentious resonances triggered by the title: "England. A play called England. Turn over the name in your head and alternative plays of your own should start to emerge. With all of its historical and literary baggage, such a simple name is one hell of a prelude for drama." Given this premise, he brings to the fore the inspirational force the cultural and translational density of the performance's Scottish location (an art gallery that once was a fruit market in place of a proper theatre stage) played on Crouch's mind, as the playwright himself explains in the course of the interview:

"I was shitting myself over the decision to call it England. I'm aware that giving a play that name is provocative – incredibly provocative in that we're launching it in Scotland. But that's the nature of the piece: it's about one thing being placed inside another. The narrative of the piece is about a heart transplant." [...]

"The ideas behind the piece are those of transplantation; there is a theme of one country being placed inside another, and one art form being placed in a space designed for a different art form, one heart being placed in another person's body, and one culture being placed in another culture. So although we had lots of ideas for titles, I'm afraid this one stuck." (Reed, 2007)

True to the uncanny displacement of its familiar spaces, the play-within-the gallery stages the story of a heart transplant which gradually develops into a tense, multi-layered exploration of 'Englishness' in terms of a complex process of cultural and political transactions and translations. As a result, "Crouch obliges spectators to ask themselves difficult questions about the cultural institutions they are situated in" (Bottoms, 2011: 17). Not only are they insistently invited 'to see' the dubious ties and multiple intersections between local, 'g/local', and globalised spaces, and thus to measure the uneasy overlapping of art trade routes and the traffic of human organs. But by degrees, "using their own imaginations and emotional resources" (13), they are also urged to reflect upon their own spectatorial roles as entangled within that unequal politics of cultural spaces and places. Since they are continuously called to fill in the 'gaps' of the performance by switching, as it were, rooms, codes and ways of seeing, ultimately they are induced to feel with growing tension the need to focus on the invisible 'scripts' that condition their responses. As I have already argued elsewhere (Laudando, 2011), the forceful visual and inter-relational focus that characterizes not only *England* but Crouch's theatre at large is clearly indebted to contemporary visual art: his inspiration from Duchamps's concept of the art co-efficient; his lifelong fascination with the conceptual dimension of art fruition, with the request that is made of the viewers "to work hard" in order to establish an active relationship with the piece (Crouch, 2003: 10). Formally and thematically, his guiding principle, to quote his own words again, is to activate a process of transformation by creating "small acts on stage which trigger much larger re-actions in the audience" (cf. Svich, 2006). In fact, his

starting point is always an apparently simple story-line whose narrative content has to be tightly and deeply interrelated with the form of its theatrical staging.

In the printed text of *England*, the epigraph that precedes the first act explicitly references the deadening effect of certain politics of art spaces: “One has to have died already to be there” (Crouch, 2007: 11). This is a brief but crucial quote from the famous three-part essay of Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, first published in *Artforum* (1976). At stake here is the aseptic, temple-like location of modern galleries where “art exists in a kind of eternity of display”, and the atmosphere is heavily suffused with “a limbolike status” that requires the body to disappear: “Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not – or are tolerated only as kinaesthetic mannequins for further study” (O’Doherty, 1999: 15). In Crouch’s own play, echoes of this sanitized conception of art ‘sanctuaries’ clash with the narrative fragments concerning the protagonist’s heart illness that the audience comes gradually to visualise and assemble – in a crescendo of tension nicely punctuated by ambient music. At the opening a man and a woman (Crouch himself and Hannah Ringham) warmly welcome the audience as a tour group that is acknowledged to play the essential part. From the start, the spectators are even emphatically addressed as the ‘saviours’ of the spectacle/exhibition:

Thank you.  
Thanks very much.  
Thanks.  
Ladies and gentlemen.  
Thank you.  
If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here.  
You saved my life!

Welcome to the Fruitmarket Gallery here in Edinburgh.  
World class contemporary art at the heart of the city. (Crouch, 2007: 13)

But very soon the two actors/guides betray a growing emotional strain staring vacantly with nervous smiles, and at times also overlapping their lines as if they were speaking a troubled mind instead of addressing each other. By such elusive means, the spectators become aware that a parallel story is obliquely unfolding behind the references to the real art works displayed in the room, and they themselves become disoriented, at a loss with a series of deliberate uncertainties, as Bottoms has explained:

As the play develops, though, it becomes clear that the central character is strangely absent: the two actors alternate lines in a long monologue, as if they were the same person, leaving us uncertain as to whether this person is male or female, gay or straight. The only thing we can be fairly certain of is that this character – unlike the eternally preserved artefacts on the walls – is dying. He or she is betwixt and between life and death, neither here nor there, and thus not fully present with us. (Bottoms, 2011: 18)

In tune with the major theme and structure of the play, the character of the main protagonist has thus been performatively displaced across and ‘transplanted’ into two actors, challenging not only “the generic distinctions we take for granted in drama, in particular the assumed correlation between character and actor” (Reed, 2007), but also a univocal correspondence between sex and character. Indeed, the sexual indeterminacy of this strange ‘duologue’ may offer a powerful illustration of Butler’s critique of the discursive limits of sex. Another relevant issue concerns the nationality of this character: he/she is English, and throughout the first act shows a sort of submissive reverence for his/her American boyfriend of Dutch origin who is quite brilliant at languages and even more successful as art dealer. The following passage humorously brings to light their imbalanced relationship pointing out the contrast between their attitudes and their linguistic/cultural performances (on the one hand a rampant transnational cosmopolitanism, on the other the fear of losing even one’s own national language):

My boyfriend is American.  
 But he’s actually Dutch  
 No one in America is really American!  
 My boyfriend has three passports.  
 He calls me kiddo. ...  
 My boyfriend can speak four different languages  
 He’s a citizen of the world!  
 I have no languages.  
 Everyone speaks English. (14-15)

The second act, entitled “Wringing”, is performed in a different room in the gallery in which spectators can finally resume their traditional seats as theatre-goers. Analogously, the ‘narrative’ setting moves to an unidentified country in the Middle East, where the protagonist – “now saved from death and invested with a name, English” – has travelled to thank the widow of his/her heart donor “with a gift of priceless art” (Bottoms, 2011: 18). The preliminary stage direction immediately makes clear the echoic, ghostly role that the audience is called to play in this new setting:

*A different room in the gallery.  
 Seats for the audience.  
 The wife is us, the audience. When the audience enters the space, it is entering her space. The Interpreter interprets her words and translates what is said to her. (44)*

Thus the spectators are welcomed with the same emphatic words that had opened the play: “Thank you”, “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here”, “You saved my life!” However, English’s speech acts of addressing the widow/audience with the support of an interpreter soon shift from the hopeful, garrulous and direct pronominal form of “you” to the more hesitant and detached use of ‘her’.<sup>11</sup> This change of ‘shifters’

eloquently points to the cultural and emotional abyss that divides the two interlocutors, as in the following example:

ENGLISH: I've brought something for you. A gift to say thank you. Thank you to you!  
From me. For me! For my life!

INTERPRETER: It's an honour to meet you. I have a gift to thank you.

*Silence*

ENGLISH: Would she like some refreshments ask her?

Would she like some tea? Or a coke?

[...]

Are they allowed Coke?

*Silence*

I can't thank her enough, tell her.

INTERPRETER: Would you like something to drink? (45)

There is no space here to engage further with the tensions and ambiguities of this final and disturbingly uneven confrontation. But the brief examples from *England's* printed text may suffice to give a taste of the play's exquisite intersection of multiple 'ways of seeing' and multiple 'ways of doing things with words'. By conflating the 'site specific' of visual arts with the 'empty space' of theatrical experience (Brook, 1968), *England* plays with notions, frames and places of cultural difference, and dismantles before its audience all the 'protecting and reflecting walls' of national and gendered socio-normative prisons, as Woolf's last novel had already done for its fidgeting readers/spectators. Eventually, both works urge us to concentrate and choose at any step how to 'echo back'. In the hope that, to slightly alter a previous quotation, "the echo *might be* life-giving because while it is rooted in a past, it is not fixed by the past. It returns the voice to the speaker, the same but different"(Rayner, 1993: 21).

## Notes

1. The American scholar, who died last May, closes his essay with the suggestive intuition that Miss La Trobe/Woolf's thorny relation with her audience may be read as an intimation of the tense spectatorial predicament at the core of *Waiting for Godot*: "When it first appeared out of silence in the alluvium of the Absurd, *Godot* seemed to be the play Miss La Trobe wanted to write." (1986: 42) As is well known, that play had marked a turning point in his early career as an iconoclastic director, including the memorable *Godot* production at San Quentin State Prison in 1957. The two-part essay was reprinted as the first chapter of his influential study of reception theory, *The Audience* (1990), mentioned in Putzel's contribution to a special issue on *Virginia Woolf in Performance* (1999: 433).

2. Her only way of resisting war's insouciant theatricality was through her "thinking": "This idea struck me: the army is the body: I am the brain. Thinking is my fighting" (Woolf, 1985: 285). Indeed, since the day of the first air raid warning she had asserted the empowering action of her intellectual resistance: "[Later] Its like an invalid who can look up & take a cup of tea— Suddenly one can take to the pen with relish. [...] And for the 100<sup>th</sup> time I repeat — any idea is more real than any amount of war misery" (234-235).

3. Minich Brewer discusses Blau's theory of the audience in relation to Adorno, Brecht and the debate on postmodernity, underlining the challenging persistence of this problematic shifter: "As the idea of a common performativity in culture becomes an increasingly problematic means of grounding the relationship between self and other, performer and audience, the past and the present, the plural 'we' persists as a wager in Blau's work" (Minich Brewer, 2006: 103).

4. Intriguingly enough, Tim Crouch has used the same quote from Virginia Woolf's diary as the title for one of his theatrical lectures, given in Madrid in 2008 (cf. Coloquio "No audience no echo." Tim Crouch: "El teatro es una extensión del público" *Primer acto: Cuadernos de investigación teatral*, n. 323 Abril / Junio 2008).

5. I use the qualification of "referential" as suggested in a recent article to rethink the elusive pervasiveness of performance through a renovated and sustained attention "to the context, place, and historical specificity": "In other words, the question of performance and its generalization can usefully be rethought in turning to issues that might be qualified as 'referential.' It is, for instance, the referent that is at stake when social, cultural, and historical maps are redrawn so as to engage the complexity and diversity that constituted them in the first place" (Minich Brewer, 2006: 98).

6. I have discussed elsewhere (Laudando 2012) the performative/archaeological role of this 'scenic' country-house on the model proposed by Pearson and Shanks (2001).

7. In this respect, see, among others, Sally Greene's "Introduction" to the Special Issue on *Woolf in Performance* (1999) and the groundbreaking study by Penny Farfan on *Women, Modernism, & Performance* (2004), where Woolf occupies a key position.

8. *Between the Acts* will be henceforth quoted as *BA*.

9. This section has predictably occupied a privileged position in the novel's reception eliciting an intricate web of rich and disparate inter-textual resonances from classic sources (such as *The Golden Ass*) and Egyptian matriarchal rituals to modern experiments such as the aleatory compositions by Cage. For one of the most intriguing readings in relation with Brecht's concept of epic theatre cf. Catherine Wiley (1995).

10. Cf. also the persuasive reading of Isa's response: "'Yes, no,' says Isa, but she can't decide: whether we can be a constructive part of each other's lives or not, a part of the past or not. And when she fidgets, she seems to be operating from an ambivalent space in between, a space in which a shaky reconciliation of opposites might allow for a new way, a re-imagined blend of individuality and harmony." (Wanczyk, 2011: 124) This ambivalent space has elsewhere been related to Bhabha's influential concept of the third space between the performative and the pedagogical and to Butler's revision of the notion of the performative (cf. Detloff, 1999).

11. Here I follow again Rayner's functional discussion of pronominal shifters as a valuable tool for rethinking the controversial role of the audience in terms of an ethics of listening, as follows: "The dissolution of the unitary subject does not eliminate ethical obligations: it puts them in the foreground. In terms of the audience, multiplicity furthermore points at meaning, understanding and community not as entities to recover and hold but as processes through which to create and develop values. [...] From this view, the audience appears as an intentional opening for a speaker or performer and, thus, as a receptive space for which and from which social meanings emerge and circulate" (1993: 7).

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