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The Waves

VIRGINIA WOOLF

THE WAVES

Virginia Woolf

Introduction and Notes
DR DEBORAH PARSONS
University of Birmingham

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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This edition published 2000 by Wordsworth Editions Limited
8B East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ

ISBN 978-1-84022-410-8

Typeset in Great Britain by Antony Gray
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

General Advisor
KEITH CARABINE
Rutherford College
University of Kent at Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

'The author would be glad if the following pages were not read as a novel', Virginia Woolf wrote on the manuscript of *The Waves*, warning her readers that this work would be very different from conventional narrative. Comparing the arrangement of the novel to the medium of music, she told composer Ethel Smyth, 'my difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot', continuing that 'though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw to the reader'.[1] With its polyphonic, dialectical relationship between interludes and episodes, natural and aesthetic creation, universal and individual,

1 Woolf, 1978, p. 204. For full details of this and other references turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

The Waves (1931) is undoubtedly the most formally and thematically experimental of all Woolf's novels. It was, she worried, 'fundamentally unreadable', and yet also 'my first work in my own style' (Woolf, 1978, p. 357; Woolf, 1983, p. 53).

Critical discussion has generally defined *The Waves* as an archetype of the high modernist text. It is Woolf's most poetical work, and she described it as 'a playpoem' (Woolf, 1982, p. 203), in which she aimed to evoke, more accurately than she felt she had done before, the unconscious aspect of being and the innate substance of life. In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) she had already embarked upon an exploration of the cadences of the mind in response to the eternal flux and multiplicity of experience, and of some elemental core common to being which can be sensed across individuals during rare periods of vision, and in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) had emphasised the incapacity of conventional narrative structures for the expression of this new conception of identity. The fact that Woolf laboured more over *The Waves* than any of her previous novels, writing two full drafts under 'no great impulse; no fever; only a great pressure of difficulty' (Woolf, 1982, p. 142), reflects her ever-increasing concern with the inflexibility of language and the need to accomplish a greater elasticity of expression with the novel form. In 1927, during the writing of *To the Lighthouse*, she had recorded in her diary, 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel". A new — by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?' (Woolf, 1982, p. 34). The initial conception for the book occurred in the same year, following a letter sent to Woolf by her sister Vanessa Bell from Cassis, in which she complained of the moths that plagued her villa at night. In a letter to Quentin Bell on 20 March 1929 she then wrote that she was 'thinking about a book which I shall call the Moths I think – an entirely new kind of book' (Woolf, 1978, p. 35). A first draft was finished by April 1930, although Woolf had already decided by October 1929, that 'The Moths . . . won't be its title'. On the 13 June she began to rewrite the manuscript and it was not until 1931 that the novel was finally completed, this second draft having undergone still more major revisions. It was still, she felt, an 'impossible book', but a successful one, and she recorded in her diary, 'I respect myself for writing this book' (Woolf, 1982, p. 312).

The Waves is a novel of six different but synchronised lives, three male and three female, as Woolf follows them across nine parallel episodes from childhood to middle-age. The metaphor of the waves provides the formal structure for the presentation of these lives;

Woolf reported in her diary during the writing of the novel, 'The Waves is I think resolving itself... into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves' (Woolf, 1982, p. 312). The sonority of the waves provides a useful point of comparison with the term typically applied to Woolf's narrative style, 'stream of consciousness', capturing a sense of the fluid boundaries of selfhood, and the ebb and flow of human experience, but with the suggestion of an underlying permanence, dealing with what one of Woolf's most perceptive earliest reviewers, Edwin Muir, called 'the immediate and essential truths of experience', as opposed to the sense impressions and images striking the conscious surface of the mind. The monologues of the six characters, bound together by loose but fundamental ties, offer a rhythm of human existence, as Woolf explores the sensory, spiritual and sexualised aspects of life in actions, thoughts and emotions that are at once immediate and timeless. Each can be distinguished by the subject and tone of their thoughts, but the poetic rhythm through which these are expressed, along with certain mental images and emotions shared between characters, hint at a common element or pattern to human existence. The suggestion is a Romantic one, an allusion supported by the quotation from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* that Woolf copied into her diary in the summer of 1929, after discarding her first version of the novel:

> The matter that detains us now may seem,
> To many, neither dignified enough
> Nor arduous, yet will not be scorned by them,
> Who, looking inward, have observed the ties
> That bind the perishable hours of life
> Each to the other, & the curious props
> By which the world of memory and thought
> Exists and is sustained. [BOOK VII]

The voiced sections are framed and interspersed with italicised, impersonal interludes that describe the passing of a single day from dawn to dusk in a garden overlooking the sea. Woolf described these as 'very difficult, yet I think essential; so as to bridge & also give a background – the sea; insensitive nature – I dont know' (Woolf, 1982, p. 285). They evoke the immutability of Nature and the elements, and provide a temporal continuity against which the 'perishable hours' of the different lives can be mapped and paralleled.

The soliloquies begin in the same mystically described, Edenic garden, near the sea and within reach of the continuous sound of the waves. Woolf described the perceptions of childhood in her autobiographical piece 'A Sketch of the Past' in 1939 as, 'Many bright colours; many distinct sounds; some human beings, caricatures; comic; several violent moments of being . . . that is a rough visual description of childhood' (Woolf, 1989, p. 88). It is with such sensory experience and impressionistic language that she presents the almost pre-verbal thoughts of the children as they begin to establish their identities in relation to objects and each other. Finding Louis hiding in a hedge, Jinny kisses him on the neck, while Susan observes and is upset. Bernard leaves Neville to comfort her, running past Rhoda who sits on the path dreamily floating flower petals in a bowl of water. At first seemingly undifferentiated, the six voices begin to reveal individual temperaments and ambitions, and with the process of socialisation begin to form individual identities. Dividing to go to school, Bernard and Neville then move to university at Cambridge; Louis, the son of a banker, to an office in the City; Jinny and Rhoda to the London drawing room, and Susan back to her father and their beloved farm. They become more solidly defined, distinct in their individual life patterns and fates.

Perhaps in accordance with Woolf's own interpretation of her novel as a 'playpoem' and a collection of 'dramatic soliloquies', within their individual monologues the six characters present performances on the stage of life, revealing their fears, desires and ambitions. Bernard is genial, romantic and imaginative, writes love letters in the style of Byron and later marries and has a son. He is the storyteller, the figure who believes in the power of words, noting them down for future use under alphabetical headings in a little book. Neville, from the beginning, is associated with sharp instruments (a knife, scissors) that act as metaphors for his incisive mind, and becomes a don whose achievements are his mental acumen and his college room with its shelves of books. Louis, angrily resenting his bourgeois origins and desperate for social acceptance, is ambitious and concerned with status and mastery, the result of his need for order and control. His asceticism extends from his executive profession to his poetic writing with its at once despairing and controlling vision of the long history of civilisation. Susan dedicates herself to the natural and earthy, animal physicality of her being: 'I go then to the cupboard, and take the damp bags of rich sultanas; I lift the heavy flour on to the clean scrubbed kitchen table. I knead; I stretch; I pull, plunging my hands in the

warm inwards of the dough' (p. 55). She orders her life cyclically by the seasons, harvesting and bearing fruit, her body warm and nurturing. By the end of the novel however she is disgusted by her reproductive role and seeks release, stating, '... I am sick of natural happiness, and fruit growing, and children ... I am sick of the body, I am sick of my own craft, industry and cunning, of the unscrupulous ways of the mother who protects' (p. 108), and expressing Woolf's own ambivalence towards the female identification with the maternal. In direct contrast to Susan, Jinny resembles a flickering flame of exuberance and vitality, her continual refrain, 'I dance. I ripple' (p. 6). She flits promiscuously through life and men, responding to erotic sensation. Rhoda is mystical, her fractured identity constantly diffusing, like that of the nymph or shadow with which she is often compared. Her connection with the world beyond the internal psyche is always fragile, and she struggles to integrate finite and infinite sensory experience. Feeling trapped by her physical body and its single self, she constantly seeks to move beyond it, yet the extreme mental dispersal she consequently experiences, and that places her on the edge of the margin between mysticism and madness, terrifies her: '... I have no face ... I am whirled down caverns, and flap like paper against endless corridors, and must press my hand against the wall to draw myself back' (p. 72).

Bernard, in the final section of the novel, after his last reunion with his friends, attempts to act as the biographer of their different identities, to describe, he says, what 'we call optimistically, "characters of our friends" ' (p. 138). Woolf is involved in a similar act, creating fictionalised biographies of those close to her. Susan is a portrait of Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell; Louis resembles partly Leonard Woolf and partly T. S. Eliot; Neville possesses the traits of Lytton Strachey but also at times Duncan Grant; Jinny those of both Kitty Maxse, the model for Clarissa Dalloway, and Woolf herself (Jinny was the nickname that Leslie Stephen gave to his daughter); Bernard those of another friend, Desmond MacCarthy, and Rhoda another aspect of Woolf. The friends in the novel gather around a central charismatic figure, Percival, just as Bloomsbury had formed around the memory of Woolf's brother Thoby who died of typhoid in 1906. Yet *The Waves* is not only a work of biography but also of fictional *auto*biography, in which Woolf vicariously inhabits other lives in order to present her own various 'selves'. In contrast to what she described as the 'damned egotistical self' of James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson (Woolf, 1981, p. 14), Woolf speculated on the collective rather than the

individual aspects of identity, and her aim was to focus on the breaking down of conventional character and the impermeable boundaries of identity, of self and world, and of self and other. In *The Waves* she considered the six monologists as facets of one, larger and complex identity, writing to G. L. Dickinson that, 'I did mean that in some way we are the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one,' and continuing, 'I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia, even though the special Virginia in whose body I live for the moment is violently susceptible to all sorts of separate feelings. I wanted to give the sense of continuity' (Woolf, 1978, p. 397). It is with a similar sentiment that Rhoda entreats, 'To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self' (p. 64), and Bernard states at the end of the novel, when he attempts to tell the story of his life, 'when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call "my life", it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs' (p. 156). Indeed, although the different voices may often seem distinctly personal, inward-looking and self-absorbed, during brief epiphanic moments the individual limits of consciousness dissolve and the self blurs and merges with a wider whole that transcends physical and temporal reality. Woolf argues here the inadequacy of the conventional narrative of the coherent, individual subject following a linear passage through time, suggesting instead, as she famously stated in her 1919 essay 'Modern Fiction', that life should be understood not as 'a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged' but as 'a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end' (Woolf, 1925, p. 189). Woolf's sense of time is often compared to the philosopher Henri Bergson's concept of *la durée* or 'inner time'. Time is as expansive and in flux as the waves, and identity is not developed socially and in sequence, but in relation to fundamental connections and memories that exist across the individual and those around him. We are, Woolf implies, constituted in part by those close to us, and their lives and memories.

The notion of identity that Woolf intended the characters in the novel to express is therefore not singular but symphonic. When the members of the group come together again after childhood, their normally idiosyncratic and divergent voices sound in harmony and

mutual connection. This occurs twice, both times inspired by the silent figure of Percival: the first a farewell dinner in a London restaurant when they are in their twenties, before he leaves for India, and the second a visit to Hampton Court in middle-age in memory of his death. The only character in the novel to be presented wholly externally from the perceptions of the others, Percival, sports-captain, huntsman and man of Empire, is described by Bernard as 'a hero' (p. 68). He is the representative of conventional literary character, embodying a confident assumption of unified, unreflective selfhood that Woolf is generally taken to critique. The other characters, however, are drawn to him, to refer to Woolf's original title metaphor, like moths to light. Waiting for him in the restaurant, for example, they each feel a lack, Neville stating that 'without Percival there is no solidity. We are silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background' (p. 68). Once he arrives they are immediately organised into a united whole, and their differences endowed with an underlying connection. No longer separated from the phenomenal world within their own private subjectivities, their differences of perspective seem less clear cut and instead complement each other. Describing the transformation inspired by Percival, Bernard, for example, draws attention to a red carnation on the table, 'A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves – a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution' (p. 70). Percival assumes and thus embodies a stability, solidity and objectivity of identity and experience that modernism regards with scepticism as obsolete and yet harbours a degree of nostalgia for. In the final meeting of all six figures, for example, marked this time by his absence, they imagine 'for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time cannot forget' (p. 156). Percival is only ever a hollow ideal, a figurehead of authority who provides the others with the security of the dominant order and its values, as for example when 'By applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him, the bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes' (p. 75). His gift, like that of the musicians Rhoda listens to after his death, was the imposition of shape on to their disparity: 'Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing. There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is

inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean' (p. 90). This form of structure, however, spatially precise, controlling and all-encompassing, can be contrasted with that of Woolf in the novel as a whole, who seeks a pattern in the basic and underlying connections and interactions of multiple selves, as opposed to the single-mindedness of an autocratic order. The condition of human experience, as Woolf conceived it, was one of constant flux and fluidity, on to which any imposed system of order could only be 'a convenience, a lie' (p. 144). Percival's pointless death in India, after he is thrown from his horse when it trips over a molehill, signals the fall of the imperialist and patriarchal social regime that he stood for, as well as the personal loss and sorrow felt by his friends as they confront death and the turning of the tide of life.

If the six friends offer the different dramatis personae of Woolf's own multiple self, then Rhoda and Bernard are perhaps those whom she most fully resembles and who are endowed with an awareness of their multifarious sensibilities. In a diary entry for October 1926, while revising *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf noted that 'I am now & then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident – say the fall of a flower – might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist – nor time either' (Woolf, 1982, p. 118). This woman was to become Rhoda, who lets fall a bunch of flowers into the sea at Greenwich as her memorial token to the dead Percival. In part the visionary, Woolf is also the writer, concerned with the possibilities of literature for giving shape to life. A month earlier, for example, she had recorded a mystical vision of a fin in the sea: 'It is this that is frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is: One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? . . . The interesting thing is that in all my feeling & thinking I have never come up against this before. Life is, soberly & accurately, the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. I used to feel this as a child – couldn't step across a puddle once I remember, for thinking, how strange – what am I? &c. But by writing I dont reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind. I hazard the guess that it may be the impulse behind another book' (Woolf, 1982, p. 113). Woolf gave the experience of the puddle to Rhoda, who states after the death of Percival, '"There is the puddle . . . and I cannot cross it" ' (p. 88).

The vision of the fin, however, is given to Bernard when he is in Rome: 'Leaning over this parapet I see far out a waste of water. A fin turns. This bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason, it springs up as one might see the fin of a porpoise on the horizon. Visual impressions often communicate thus briefly statements that we shall in time to come uncover and coax into words. I note under F, therefore, "Fin in a waste of waters". I, who am perpetually making notes in the margin of my mind for some final statement, make this mark, waiting for some winter's evening' (p. 106–7). Early in the novel Neville describes Bernard's proclivity to see stories in everything, commenting, 'Let him burble on, telling us stories, while we lie recumbent. Let him describe what we have all seen so that it becomes a sequence' (p. 20). Bernard's voice is that of the novelist; as Bernard says to Neville at Cambridge, 'Let me then create you. (You have done as much for me)' (p. 47). As the compulsive storyteller of the group, his constant desire to compose lives through phrases and dramatisation makes him a particularly appropriate figure with which to explore Woolf's use of the dramatic monologue in order to emphasise the dialectic of the singular and multiple self. His extended soliloquy in the final section of *The Waves* is spoken directly to a silent listener, a dramatised figure of the reader. At once one with the characters he aims to define and yet distinct from them, and aware of the falsity of neat, individual life stories, his voice blurs with that of Woolf herself, as he questions, 'And now I ask, "Who am I?" I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know' (pp. 162–3). In Woolf's rather Shakespearian outlook all individuals are actors, and should recognise themselves as such, a theme also explored in the contemporaneously written *Orlando* (1928) and taken up more explicitly a decade later in *Between the Acts* (1941).

The last section of the novel breaks from the multiple structure that characterises the previous episodes, and Bernard's is the sole voice, taking up the authorship of the novel to narrate his past. Always the storyteller, he attempts to articulate and explain; yet at this final stage the capacity of language to convey the quality of experience now seems inadequate: 'How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! . . . how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of notepaper' (p. 135). Woolf too referred to her frustrations with the medium of words for capturing the deep rhythms of human life, writing to Ethel Smyth that 'one's sentences are only an approximation, a net one flings over some sea

pearl which may vanish' (Woolf, 1978, p. 223). Bernard may flounder, as Neville predicts earlier in the novel when he describes 'the appalling moment has come when Bernard's power fails him and there is no longer any sequence and he sags and twiddles a bit of string and fall silent, gaping as if about to burst into tears. Among the tortures and devastations of life is this then – our friends are not able to finish their stories' (p. 21); but Woolf felt she had succeeded in expressing a collective interior monologue in *The Waves*. On its completion she declared in her diary, 'I have netted that fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell when I was coming to the end of To the Lighthouse' (Woolf, 1983).

The Waves received excellent reviews and was a commercial success, selling almost ten thousand copies by the end of the year. Early critical response focused on the novel's aestheticist, experimental and abstract qualities, in relation to contemporaries such as James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Marcel Proust, and the aesthetic and philosophical theories of the Bloomsbury Group. Harold Nicolson, for example, in a review for *Action*, applauded her depiction of the 'fluidity of human experience, the insistent interest of the inconsequent, the half-realised, the half-articulate, the unfinished and the unfinishable', and Winifred Holtby similarly commented that, with *The Waves*, Woolf had 'explored further and further into the regions of human experience lying outside our bright, busy world of deliberate speech and action'.[2] Several critics, however, were more inclined to view the novel as an aesthetic arrangement of empty artifice rather than as a visionary masterpiece. Louis Kronenberger, for the *New York Times Book Review*, concedes that 'No one has ever described better than Mrs Woolf has here our common wish to imprint on our memory all the detail of a scene before it changes, to arrest a moment in time', but with the reservation that 'yet it is simply a marvellous description, it is not quite vision', and Frank Swinnerton, writing for the *Evening News*, complained that the six characters were little more than 'receptive sensationalists' who 'never live' and whose 'incessant chanting effect grows monotonous'.[3]

With the development of a critical orthodoxy on 'modernism', and the consolidation of Woolf's literary reputation, *The Waves* became

2 Harold Nicolson, *Action*, 8 October 1931, p. 8; Winifred Holtby, *Time and Tide*, October 1931, pp. 1163–4

3 Louis Kronenberger, *New York Times Book Review*, 25 October 1931, p. 5; Frank Swinnerton, *Evening News*, 9 October 1931, p. 8

regarded as the pinnacle of Woolf's literary achievement and the dominant expression of her philosophical symbolism and psychological perspective. More recently, however, the novel has been relatively neglected, with critics more ambivalent towards the visionary poetics that they feel detached Woolf's work from the more materialist concerns of Marxist or feminist approaches. Alex Zwerdling, for example, comments that its 'relentlessly elevated discourse' excludes any reference to 'the prosaic, the comic, the particular' (Zwerdling, p. 12), and Jane Marcus, one of the predominant figures in Woolf studies, writes: 'As a feminist critic I had avoided the subject of Woolf's mysticism, and of *The Waves*, feeling that acknowledging her as a visionary was a trap that would allow her to be dismissed as another female crank, irrational and eccentric. I was drawn to her most anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist novels, to Woolf the socialist and feminist, logical, witty, and devastating in argument' (Marcus, p. 27). Increasingly, however, contextual readings of Woolf, reflecting revisionary interpretations in modernist criticism more generally, are recognising the social, cultural and political currents of the novel, and highlighting its place within the critique of war, imperialism and gender hierarchies that Woolf presented overtly in the contemporaneously written yet more polemical *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Marcus again is perhaps the surprising example; reversing her early opinion in an account of the novel's anti-imperialism, she calls attention to the ironic portrayal of Percival as hero, arguing that Woolf mocks the ideology of British public school and colonialist culture and 'interrogates the color problem, setting a metropolitan "whiteness" against the coloured colonial world as a vast desert against which an intellectual elite like the Bloomsbury Group creates itself as a culture' (Marcus, 1992, pp. 139).

In 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf delineated a view of life and art that she thought she 'might call a philosophy'; 'that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art . . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself' (Woolf, 1990, p. 81). With *The Waves* she aimed to express this idea, evoking a pattern of connections that runs submerged beneath the surface impressions and thoughts that differentiate six figures, a continuity created from 'broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights – elm trees, willow trees, gardeners sweeping, women writing' (p. 144).

DEBORAH PARSONS
University of Birmingham

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