

Waves Theory: An Anachronistic Reading

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1. **J**ust what in *The Waves* needs accounting for? Anyone who has tried to read this strange text knows that its conventions are exceedingly peculiar, idiosyncratic. *The Waves* is made up of two sorts of discourse juxtaposed: the “interludes” and the “soliloquies” (her words) of the six characters at various times in their lives. Let me look a little more closely at these two quite different forms of language, one by one.
2. The *Waves* is punctuated at intervals, beginning with the opening two paragraphs, by ten passages in italics and in the past tense invoking the sun at ten times during a past day, from dawn to sunset, as it rose and set, illuminated the sea and shore, wakened flocks of birds in the landscape, and entered the room of a house near the beach. The interludes also follow the course of a year. The same elements enter into each interlude, but in a different specification in each case, as the day and year progressed. This is something like Wallace Stevens’ “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” in which each stanza is another permutation of the verbal elements in the one before.
3. Each of these entries includes, usually at the end, the waves crashing on the shore. The novel ends with the last of these interludes, just one sentence: “*The waves broke on the shore*”.¹ Much attention in these interludes is paid to colors. It is an intensely colorful world. The descriptions have no personified narrator. They seem to be spoken or written by some anonymous power of language, perhaps by that “voix narrative (le ‘il,’ le neutre)” which Maurice Blanchot identifies in an essay still crucial for narrative theory, at least for mine.² Each such passage is both “realistically” referential (though of an imaginary scene) and at the same time extravagantly figurative. These passages seem to have been Woolf’s attempt to do what

1 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 211.

2 M. Blanchot, “The Narrative Voice (the ‘he,’ the neutral)”, 379-87. (*L’Entretien infini*, 556.) I think, given what Blanchot argues in this essay, that a better translation of “il” in this case, would be “it,” though the word can mean both “he” and “it.”

Bernard, toward the end of his last soliloquy, says cannot be done: “But how describe the world without a self? There are no words”.³

4. “Like” is a key word in these italicized interludes, as in the soliloquies of the six characters, to which I shall turn in a moment. What is within the fiction actually there is said to be like all sorts of unlikely other things, as in the following example, one among a great many:

*The sun fell in sharp wedges inside the room. Whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical [sic! Could she have meant “fantastic”? What could “fanatical” mean in this case?] existence. A plate was like a white lake. A knife looked like a dagger of ice. Suddenly tumblers revealed themselves upheld by streaks of light. Tables and chairs rose to the surface as if they had been sunk under water and rose, filmed in red, orange, purple like the bloom on the skin of ripe fruit. . . . And as the light increased, flocks of shadow were driven before it and conglomerated and hung in many-pleated folds in the background.*⁴

5. All the text between the interludes is made up of what Woolf calls “dramatic soliloquies” said by one or another of the six characters: Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda. The soliloquies are enclosed within quotation marks. “*The Waves*,” said Woolf in her diary as she was revising the text, “is, I think, resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves”.⁵ Each soliloquy, this passage implies, would be like a wave gathering and then crashing on the shore, or perhaps contain a number of such waves. The soliloquies come in no particular rotation. Some are quite short. Others go on for pages, especially Bernard’s. *The Waves* ends with a forty-two-page soliloquy by Bernard in old age that recapitulates all the motifs and moments that have come before in the soliloquies of all six characters. Each soliloquy is given in quotation marks. The speaker is indicated by the disembodied narrative voice that says, “said Susan,” or “said Louis,” and so on. Woolf’s soliloquies differ from Hamlet’s, however, in that, with the exception, perhaps, of Bernard’s last long soliloquy, they are not said out loud. They are interior monologues, interminable inner voices speaking to themselves.
6. The stylistic texture of the soliloquies is more than a little bewildering. Though the soliloquies of each character are individualized, they all mix present thoughts and sensations with spontaneous memories that recur; extravagant figures of speech, often similes; anticipations of the future; recurrent fantasy motifs that are frequently present in more than one character’s mind or in the interludes. Examples are the image of women carrying pitchers to the Nile⁶, or of a desert with pillars, or of a spike of sea-holly on the shore, or of “turbaned men with poisoned asse-gais”⁷, or the phrases about the lady sitting at Elvedon, between two long

3 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 204

4 *Ibid.*, 79.

5 V. Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, 153.

6 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 201, and see 8 for the first example.

7 *Ibid.*, 54, 78, 100.

windows, writing, while the gardeners sweep the lawn with giant brooms.⁸ The reader sometimes has difficulty distinguishing one of these strata of language from the others. Is a given item “really there,” or is it just imagined?

7. Just who or what is speaking in the italicized interludes, and from where and when? To whom or to what are the soliloquies addressed? Who or what is it, and speaking from where or when, who (or which) says, “said Bernard,” “said Jinny,” “said Susan,” and so on, once more for each soliloquy enclosed within quotation marks. Just what set of interpretative hypotheses will best and most economically account for the strange stylistic features of *The Waves*?
8. The simplest answer, I think, is that *The Waves* presupposes a vast impersonal memory bank that stores everything that has ever happened, every thought or feeling of every person, but turned into appropriate language, complete with figures of speech for sensations and feelings that cannot be said literally. Somewhere the endless interior speech of all the characters is going on happening, endlessly. Whoever or whatever says ‘said Bernard,’ or ‘said Jinny,’ has chosen or has happened to tune in again from time to time on the characters’ interiorities, what they have said to themselves and are interminably going on saying.
9. This is, in my judgment, what Woolf meant when she spoke repeatedly in the diary of the fundamental presupposition of *The Waves* as “mystical.” This presupposition appears in the text itself in the way all the characters, in one way or another, have the intuition that they are floating on some absent center or some silence that always just eludes their grasp.
10. This “worded memory bank” explanatory hypothesis would explain the odd alternation of tenses in *The Waves*. The past tense of the interludes about the waves breaking on the shore expresses the eternal pastness of everything stored in this memory bank. There, as permanently past, everything that has ever happened goes on happening in rhythmic repetition, but turned into language, as in the last sentence of all: “*The waves broke on the shore*”.⁹ This also explains why that ghostly or uncanny narrative voice, a voice completely anonymous and impersonal, speaks in the past tense: “said Jinny,” “said Neville.” The soliloquies originally happened for the characters, however, in the present, and so the soliloquies must be in the present tense. The narrative voice must not be identified with Virginia Woolf, the author. In her diary, at a point when she is deciding on the rhetorical form her unwritten novel must take, Woolf says: “several problems cry out at once to be solved. Who thinks it? And am I outside the thinker? One wants some device which is not a trick”.¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.* 211

¹⁰ V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 142.

11. Woolf herself is outside the narrative voice, and she makes up the novel, or as she says in the diary when she has just written the last pages, she puts down on paper an anonymous voice that speaks within her: “I wrote the words O death fifteen minutes ago, having reeled across the last ten pages with some moments of such intensity and intoxication that I seemed only to stumble after my own voice or, almost, after some sort of speaker (as when I was mad); I was almost afraid, remembering the voices that used to fly ahead”.¹¹
12. My hypothesis also explains how the characters use language, including figures of speech, borrowed from the language of others’ soliloquies. It is not that they are telepathic, but that each has unconscious access to the language of that universal memory-bank. In a similar way, the characters speak certain motifs drawn from that collective language: the phrase about the warriors with assegais, the phrase about women going with pitchers to the Nile, the phrase about the fin in the waste of waters, and so on. In a passage in the diary, written while she was planning *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf speaks of digging caves beneath the characters, caves that meet in some hidden cavern: “my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humor, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment”.¹²
13. What Woolf says about her own memories in “A Sketch of the Past,” a segment of *Moments of Being*, is plausibly psychologistic. It makes sense to say that strong emotion at a given time, pleasurable or not, tags an event so that it recurs in memory ever after, time after time, in all its specificity. Woolf, however, draws quite remarkable conclusions from her experience of this return of repressed memories. Apropos of her assertion that in certain favorable moods, forgotten memories “come to the top,” Woolf writes: “is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?”¹³ If that is the case, she continues, “will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them?”¹⁴ If we had such a device, this might mean that: “Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug to into the wall; and listen in to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start”.¹⁵ Amazing speculation!

11 *Ibid.* 161.

12 *Ibid.*, 65-66.

13 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 67.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

14. “Leave its trace” on what? Woolf’s answer is strong confirmation that my hypothesis about the soliloquies in *The Waves* is correct. For Woolf in that novel, once something has happened that is felt with great intensity, it goes on happening somewhere with an independent existence. Such events become like data stored in a hard drive, or, better still, like all the billions of files in the Internet that float around in cyberspace in innumerable backups, therefore without specific location. To retrieve these events one has only to “fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past,” just as I can listen in on iTunes to music that was recorded long ago. I can hear Glenn Gould, for example, brought back from the dead and playing Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* with fingers long since turned to dust.
15. The anonymous and impersonal narrative voice of *The Waves*, which never says anything but “said Bernard,” or “said Jinny,” has plugged into the independently existing data bank. That voice recovers at will a selection of the dramatic soliloquies of the six personages. They are all still taking place in the present tense, in an eternal repetition, over and over, without end. That includes all the intervening soliloquies that the narrative voice does not choose to pass on to the reader. Only a small selection is given.
16. My anachronistic figures of hard drives and the Internet testify to the strange prescience of Woolf’s “fit a plug into the wall; and listen to the past.” Today we can do just that, as one could of course already with gramophone records in Woolf’s day. I claim that we should not struggle to resist the temptation to read old works of literature in the light of present knowledge and present technologies. It is going to happen anyway, since we are children of our own time and of our own technologies, so why not take advantage of the insights these analogies afford?
17. One fundamental feature of *The Waves*, however, is not accounted for in the passage from “A Sketch of the Past” I have been analyzing. This is the way all these memories reach the reader already turned into elaborate and highly figured language. It is as if they exist as always already turned into language. Woolf speaks rather of the way memories return as vision, like vivid images on a television screen, to adduce another anachronistic analogue. A passage a few pages later in “A Sketch of the Past,” however, adds language to the paradigm as well as a quite extraordinary idea about a hidden and elusive order behind the surface of things. “From this I reach,” writes Woolf, “what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. . . . *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I

see this when I have a shock”.¹⁶ That idea appears intermittently, at important moments, in *The Waves*.

18. Q.E.D. I claim to have demonstrated that passages in “A Sketch of the Past” confirm the hypothesis I had reached inductively to account for the distinctive narratological and stylistic features of *The Waves*.

19. Does anything at all like Woolf’s strange idea of an already worded reservoir of events of consciousness exist in any other philosophers, critics, or writers? I shall in conclusion briefly adduce five, in chronological order. A short lecture does not permit full discussion. Most were impossible for Woolf to have known because they wrote after her death, but two (Husserl and James) were her contemporaries. They had ideas similar to her own that she might possibly have encountered. Here are the five names: Edmund Husserl, Henry James, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, and Wolfgang Iser.

20. Husserl, in *The Origin of Geometry*¹⁷, had the strange notion of “ideal objects.” An example is the ideal triangle that exists before and after any inscribed triangles or any triangular objects, as their ghostly paradigm.

21. James, in the Preface for the New York Edition of *The Golden Bowl*¹⁸, asserts by way of an extravagant figure of footsteps on a field of untrodden snow, that the text of the novel pre-exists its writing down and that this can be discovered when he rereads the novel in view of rewriting it for the New York Edition. In rereading he compares the text with an ideal text that precedes any physical writing down and continues to exist thereafter.

22. Blanchot wrote a brief text about *The Waves*¹⁹. In “Two Versions of the Imaginary”²⁰, and in “The Song of the Sirens”²¹, Blanchot asserts the existence of a dangerous realm of the imaginary, of the image, toward which narratives move at their peril as both what they are “about” and as what will destroy them.

23. Iser, in *The Fictive and the Imaginary*²² posits the existence of a third realm different from either the real or the fictive. He calls this “the imaginary.” To follow up my computer and Internet analogy, Iser’s imaginary is like an empty hard disk or data-base receptacle waiting to be filled with data.

16 *Ibid.*, 72.

17 E. Husserl, *The Origin of Geometry*, 157-80.

18 W. James, *The Golden Bowl*, xiii-xiv.

19 M. Blanchot, “Le Temps et le roman,” 282-86; trans. Charlotte Mandell, 248-251.

20 M. Blanchot, “Les Deux versions de l’imaginaire,” 266-77; trans. Lydia Davis, 79-89.

21 M. Blanchot, “Le Chant des Sirènes,” 7-34; trans. Charlotte Mandell, 1-24.

22 W. Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*.

24. Derrida, finally, in “The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations”, asserts that his early thesis project was “a matter of bending (ployer), more or less violently, the techniques of transcendental phenomenology to the needs of elaborating a new theory of literature, of that very peculiar (*très particulier*) type of ideal object that is the literary object, a bound ideality (*idéauté enchaînée*) Husserl would have said, bound to so-called 'natural' language, a non-mathematical or non-mathematizable object, and yet one that differs from the objects of plastic or musical art, that is to say from all of the examples privileged by Husserl in his analyses of ideal objectivity”.²³ Though the reader can have access to the “world” opened up by *The Golden Bowl* only by reading *The Golden Bowl* and in no other way, nevertheless that world would remain in existence as an ideal object bound to its English words even if every single copy of *The Golden Bowl* were destroyed. It is in this sense that Derrida speaks of “the ideality of the literary object.”
25. To distinguish among these five, particularly in the different roles of language in the “imaginary” realms they posit, and to identify their similarity and difference from Virginia Woolf’s idea that the whole world is a work of art, would be a long business. I conclude by stressing that for all six the ideality of the literary object is neither a Platonism nor a conventional religious concept. All would agree with Woolf when she says, “certainly and emphatically there is no God.”²⁴
26. I claim to have fulfilled my contract. I have sketched a reading of *The Waves*. I have shown Woolf among the philosophers. Do I believe in this strange theory of an all-inclusive data-base of the imaginary? That is a question I prefer not to answer. I neither believe nor disbelieve. I only report what I have found. *The Waves* is a striking example of the true strangeness of literature and of ideas about literature.

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²³ J. Derrida, “Punctuations : le temps de la thèse,” 443; trans. Kevin McLaughlin, 37.

²⁴ V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 72.

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