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BERNARD'S CUBIST "SELF" IN *THE WAVES*

RACHEL BOLTON '99

In many ways, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* resists definition as a novel, disregarding as it does all the formal conventions one expects from a novel, including such usually indispensable components as narration, dialogue, and plot in their traditional senses. Instead, the vague storyline of six people progressing from childhood through middle age and beyond is presented to the reader only via those characters' individual thoughts, full of personal symbols and peculiarities and complexities which create a style very different from traditional narration and replace the traditional unifying conventions with a web of subtle meaning connecting the characters' thoughts and experiences.

This choice on Woolf's part makes the book a modernist work, incorporating the ambiguity and departure from tradition which, among other things, characterize modern art. By eliminating a conventional narrative voice and placing the job of narration in the hands, or rather the minds, of her characters Bernard, Susan, Neville, Jinny, Rhoda, and Louis; Woolf links the emotional and the descriptive in a way which surpasses even the attempts of the post-impressionists and expressionists in this area. Unlike Stephen Crane, to use a literary example of an expressionist, whose impersonal narrator in *The Open Boat*, albeit rooted in the correspondent's views, is still no more inside the boat than the reader and thus free to impose his own judgments of emotion upon the characters, Woolf works from within her characters' own minds, setting down on paper only what they themselves choose to report. This includes the thoughts and images which an outside narrator might easily weed out as too cryptic and non-plot-oriented for a traditional novel. Woolf, in other words, goes a step beyond Crane and eliminates the middleman between the characters' emotions and the reader's experience of them.

To make an artistic comparison, she rejects the way Gauguin

arbitrarily chose red for the field in "The Vision After the Sermon" or Matisse chose to interpret his portrait of a woman as green-striped, and instead moves toward the way in which Franz Marc's paintings such as "Yellow Cow", "Does in the Forest II", or "The Fate of Animals" tried to express the animals' own experience of their world. Marc succeeds in making the viewer of his paintings feel he or she is understanding the cow's own joy, the does' connection to nature, and the horror of all animals in these canvases, respectively, rather than Marc's own judgments about his subject matter. Woolf's modernist narrative structure achieves the same thing by eliminating extraneous impersonal narration and judgment and thus allowing the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of its characters to resonate more fully.

A prime example of increased opportunities for meaning due to Woolf's chosen structure centers around Bernard and his function in the novel in terms of modernism. When he "sum[s] up... the meaning of [his] life" (Woolf 238) in the novel's final section, his reflections seem to indicate a notion of self which reminds one of a cubist painting, a notion reinforced by the fragmented narrative structure of the novel as a whole. Moreover, his final rejection of his lifelong phrase-making is reinforced by the sudden use of nearly normal narration in the final summing-up section. In essence, the narrative structure of *The Waves* parallels not only Bernard's developing cubist sense of self, but also his quest for a sense of where he fits in the larger scheme of things throughout his life, and for the true story in which to use his saved-up phrases, simultaneously creating opportunities for enhanced meaning and requiring the reader to contribute his or her own powers of interpretation, in accordance with the true modernist vision.

Throughout *The Waves* and throughout his life, Bernard searches for a sense of connection and order in the world, as well

as for a sense of his own place within that order, something he attempts largely by making phrases. "I must open the little trap-door," he says, "and let out those linked phrases in which I run together whatever happens so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another" (49). He also searches for a sense of self, something which, from his perspective, has much to do with his process of phrase-making. He begins to describe it as follows:

I only come into existence when the plumber, or the horse-dealers, or whoever it may be, says something which sets me alight. Then how lovely the smoke of my phrase is, rising and falling... upon red lobsters and yellow fruit, wreathing them into one beauty... Thus my character is in part made of the stimulus which other people provide, and is not mine. (133)

By the end of the novel, when he describes his life to an old school fellow in the section which breaks from the fragmented thought-narration and employs the closest thing to traditional narration which the reader ever gets from any of the characters, Bernard has further developed this idea of others shaping one's character, or indeed one's whole self, to the point where he says,

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. (276)

He is aware that it takes all six together to come closest to a real "self", as evident when he remembers their last dinner-meeting together and says, "We saw for a moment laid out amongst us the body of a human being whom we have failed to be, but, at the same time, cannot forget" (277).

Thus Bernard's real "self" is shaped by the other five characters, and thus those six people's "selves" combine to create a real "whole"; not only a whole human being, but a whole collective understanding of the outside world, the perfect example occurring in Bernard's two descriptions of the flower on the table at Percival's farewell dinner. While that scene is in progress, after Percival arrives at the dinner, he says,

There is a red carnation in that vase. 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. (127)

Much later in the novel, when reflecting back on that scene while spending an evening with his five friends, he says, "The flower, the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table when we dined together with Percival is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives" (229). Here Bernard expands his conception of the self to apply to the rest of the world as well; it becomes apparent that, from his point of view, a true understanding of the "many-faceted flower" (229) requires all those present to contribute their perspectives, just as the self does.

Also apparent from these descriptions is a great deal of cubism, a form of modernism which began to ask, as it developed at the hands of Picasso and Braque, "Why should one be constricted to a single viewpoint in painting a figure? Why not try to make the canvas a synthesis of different views?" (Bowness 109). Picasso "broke away from what he could see and painted instead what he *knew* must exist. Thus emerged the simultaneous vision of the cubists" (110), a technique visible in such paintings as "Girl Before a Mirror," where the viewer can see the girl's face both in profile and from the front at the same moment. Cubism is also characterized by the fragmentation of objects into their geometrical components, as visible for instance in "Three Musicians," which, though oil on canvas, appears almost like angular paper shapes cut and pasted on a background to vaguely suggest three people.

These characteristics are clearly present in Bernard's flowers. The red carnation, as he describes it, does not create a picture of a typical realistic carnation in the reader's mind, but rather a collection of fragmented geometric shapes and colors overlapping to form an object which can be seen from all directions at once. The six (or seven) characters understand this object as the carnation's real nature rather than its real appearance, a phenomenon entirely in synch with the main ideas of cubist painting. Thus by association we see the cubism present not only in the flower description but also in Bernard's whole conception of his "self," since the many fragmented thoughts, perspectives, and descriptions he sees overlapping to create him form a whole which no more conforms to traditional ideas of what makes something "realistic" than the carnation does, or than Picasso's angular "Demoiselles d'Avignon" do.

On a larger scale, the entire narrative structure of *The Waves* can also be described in the same terms as Bernard's "self": many fragmented thoughts, perspectives, and descriptions overlapping to create a whole. The fragmentation of the novel into sections, paragraphs, and sentences describing everything from six perspec-

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tives at once echoes everything going on with the cubist carnation. Just as the carnation is complete when all of the views of the people observing it are taken into account, Woolf's storyline is most fully realized when the perspectives of all its characters are combined. In the absence of formal narration, all six perspectives are necessary to describe the situations in the novel most completely, giving the reader a multifaceted, multiperspectival, and therefore more thoroughly "realistic" idea of everything occurring. The whole book, then, can be said to exhibit a sort of cubism which reinforces the validity of Bernard's conception of his "self."

The reader is left to decipher why this parallel occurs, as well as the even more significant coincidence of Bernard's rejection of his "phrases" with his, and the book's, sudden departure from cubist structure in the final section of the novel. The following is one possible interpretation.

If the reader looks at Bernard not as merely a participant in the cubist narrative structure of *The Waves*, but rather as its protagonist, and keeps in mind his self-proclaimed role as phrase-maker and storyteller, it seems not entirely improbable that the whole novel is really just Bernard telling his life story within the context of his five best friends' life stories, using their voices as well as his own to present the reader with the most complete and "real" picture possible, as discussed in relation to cubism. This would help explain how he is able to list some of his friends' personal symbols at the novel's end ("the growl of the boot-boy making love to the tweeny among the gooseberry bushes; the clothes blown out hard on the line; the dead man in the gutter; the apple tree, stark in the moonlight . . ." [Woolf 241]), not to mention account for the overall uniformity in the language and style of the characters' thoughts throughout the book.

More importantly, this ties into the shift from cubist to traditional narration. If the cubist structure of *The Waves* is viewed as the product of Bernard's phrase-making, which is inextricably connected with his "self", then the rejection of the fragmented narration in favor of a narrative style more typical of the non-experimental, non-modernist novel suddenly makes much more sense, as it thus becomes related to Bernard's process of reevaluating his life-long phrase-making and the conception of "self" which those phrases help to produce, rather than to any arbitrary and confusing choice on Virginia Woolf's part.

Bernard spends his life, as previously mentioned, trying to create order through fragmenting the events of his life into "phrases

that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground" (238), phrases "to be used when [he] ha[s] found the one true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer" (187). By the time middle age arrives, he begins to question the validity of this lifelong defining pursuit, saying, "I have never yet found that story. And I begin to ask, Are there stories?" (187). Finally he rejects the phrase-making altogether, significantly enough right at the beginning of the traditional-narration section, which marks the "rejection" of cubist narration. He tells his school fellow, "to give you my life I must tell you a story- and there are so many, and so many- stories of childhood, stories of school, love, marriage, death, and so on; and none of them are true" (238). Keeping with the idea of Bernard fragmenting himself into his friends and telling stories throughout *The Waves*, this comment implies that the entire novel is "untrue."

From this the reader can piece together an explanation of Bernard's dilemma. It appears that the root of his troubles lies in the inherent fragmentation which permeates his "self," his phrases, and the narrative structure of the novel as a whole. His attempts to strip things down and use them to order his life and the world ultimately fail him, because the universe is too vastly beyond his control to submit to the phrases and to the attempts to create order. Instead it moves on unaffected by him in any way, and once he recognizes this fact, nothing remains but to let go of the ineffectual phrases and submit to the chaotic forces at work around him. "And time," he says, as an epiphany of sorts hits him when he is middle-aged, " . . . lets fall its drop . . . Time falls . . . These are the true cycles, these are the true events" (184).

Thus, Bernard's phrases fall apart, his conception of his "self" falls apart, and he feels himself finally "without illusion" (285) and therefore unable to stay in the world any longer. Once he lets go of his cubist ideas and "converts", as it were, to the traditional narration occurring throughout the novel, whenever greater forces such as sun and sea are being described, then there is nothing left except to die; and "The waves [break] on the shore" (297), a sort of cosmic affirmation that Bernard could not have done otherwise but to submit to the greater forces around him.

The reader must ask, Does this mean Virginia Woolf herself is rejecting cubism as a literary technique? For my own part I would have to say no. After all, she is not the one narrating- Bernard is. Thus the "rejection" of cubism along with the phrases come from his mind, not hers. From Woolf's own perspective as the author of this extremely unique novel, I would think the cubist techniques

employed in its writing could only appear successful, since they force the reader to delve deeply into Bernard's situation, as well as those of all the characters, and to construct his or her own personal understanding of exactly what is occurring and what meaning comes with it. Thus the use of cubism within *The Waves* on Woolf's part adds that additional dimension that modernists strive for, creating a framework which the reader can- and must- manipulate to extract

a greater and deeper degree of meaning than would be possible from a wholly traditional novel. Woolf's cubist structure and description reinforce the ideas Bernard develops, helping lead the reader to an appreciation of the novel's themes while still giving him or her the satisfaction of creating the ultimate meaning for him- or herself in a way surpassing all previous incarnations of modernism.

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