

JUSTYNA KOSTKOWSKA

*JACOB'S ROOM AND THE WAVES: VIRGINIA WOOLF'S  
PURSUIT OF MRS. BROWN OR LIFE ITSELF*

"In or about December, 1910, human character changed", Virginia Woolf wrote in 1924, in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown". The earth-breaking event she was referring to was the famous Post-Impressionist exhibition that was held in London from November, 1910 to January, 1911, and included the works of Cezanne, Seurat, Henri, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Picasso. That new wave of French painters emerged in opposition to the Impressionistic mode of painting preceding them, and more specifically, to their view of art as merely a faithful, photographic imitation of life. The traditional principle of painting only what could be seen was rejected, and replaced by the more aesthetic criteria. In place of conformity to appearance, Post-Impressionists introduced principles of structural design and formal harmony, imposing the element of the artist's conscious choice and selection. The result was a subjective, even a subjective, even exaggerated, presentation of the significant. Roger Fry, a cultural theorist and thinker Virginia Woolf admired and was profoundly influenced by, described the Post-Impressionist revolution in the following terms:

These artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities. In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality".<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation might very well be an extract of a critical study of Woolf's own work, it is so descriptive of her novelistic intent and method. The change of human character she referred to inevitably found its expression in other arts: fiction being one of them. The Post-Impressionist revolution was paralleled by the Modernist movement in literature, or in Virginia's terms, the Edwardian writers' following the Georgian. The widening rift between the two is very well

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<sup>1</sup> Fry Roger, *Vision and Design*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1920, p. 7-8.



exemplified by Arnold Bennett's criticism of *Jacob's Room* as failing to create a convincing, life-like character. Woolf's response, the essay *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, has become her manifesto of the new technique. In it, Woolf exposes the deficiencies of the traditional realistic prose, accusing it of being too concerned with the external and the superficial, and paying too much attention to the minute material details. According to Woolf, such factual exactness is inadequate, since it merely produces a diminished, simplified, and ultimately unreal picture of human character, failing to capture its impenetrable depths. Woolf's Mrs. Brown, leaving the train compartment, is almost as mysterious as she was when they were beginning their journey because she escapes the traditional clear-cut judgments based on the external appearance. Our perception of people, Woolf insists, is inherently limited and insufficient to grasp their individual truths, and thus a writer's effort to convey human character fully and truthfully through the description of the external "fabric of things" is bound to fail. A modern novelist's task should therefore be to try to permeate beyond the apparent and the superficial, to attend to the hidden and the obscure. The perceptions of the character will be re-organized according to a different, artistically subjective hierarchy of importance, and will create a new, meaningful structure. This highly structured, and seemingly disorderly picture that emerges is in effect more faithful to life than "photographic realism". To go back to the artistic parallel, the Modernist novelist, like a Post-impressionist painter, creates an illusion of reality which is, paradoxically, closer to representing its nature than a realistic or Impressionist reproduction.

Woolf makes it evident that she is far from providing a prescription for successful writing: to the contrary: she seems overwhelmed by the impenetrability of the subject, the inimitable nature of human character that is almost too intricate to lend itself to a medium as imperfect as words, language and the novelistic technique. Yet, she observes, "all novels.. deal with character, and.. it is to express character... that the form of the novels, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved".<sup>2</sup> Thus, Woolf (like every novelist) finds herself fascinated by Mrs. Brown, her representative specimen of humanity:

and old lady unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.

Consequently, she defines character as a medium through which life, immense and inaccessible to truthful representation, can be accessed. A specimen of life in the form of a human being presents itself before the novelist and says: "My name is Brown. Catch me if you can". The task is difficult, it

<sup>2</sup> "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" in: *The Captain's Bed and Other Essays*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950, 102.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 119.



demands skill and insight as well as a mastery of the novelistic craft, but it is not unattainable. This essay will investigate ways in which Virginia Woolf joined generations of writers in that on-going pursuit. I will examine two of her novels which are her most daring experiments in character and which provide an explicit illustration of her method. Paying special attention to such elements of the genre as narration, point of view, symbol and imagery, all highly functional in depicting the character, I will attempt to prove that Woolf was, despite Bennett's criticism, successful in achieving her intent as a novelist. By deliberately skewing and dislocating the traditional formal elements of the novel, she was able to find a suitable for to convey the modern sense of the complexity, disorder, and ultimate mystery lying behind the flux of human existence. It is this theme that both *Jacob's Room* and *The Waves* set out to express.

*Jacob's Room*, even though coming so early in Woolf's career, can be described as in some ways more daring of the two, since it is more direct as a revolutionary and experimental undertaking. By "direct" I mean its unconventionally metafictional narration, through which Woolf states her novelistic intentions, discusses the problems she encounters, and shares with the reader the immense difficulty of "writing life" and "catching" Mr. Flanders.

Perhaps the most drastic departure from the traditional concept of the novel in *Jacob's Room* is Woolf's abandonment of the omniscient narrator. A reader used to the luxury of being able to enter the character's mind is bound to find the novel very unsatisfying. The narrator openly admits the incompleteness and uncertainty of her vision, the inappropriateness of the novelistic convention to convey reality:

It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that it goes hurling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons. This, they say, is what we live by-this unseizable force (JR. p. 156)<sup>4</sup>

To create a similar effect, she often confronts us with a series of questions, necessarily rhetorical, but alerting us to the issue of the impossibility of full omniscience:

But how far was he a mere bumkin? How far was Jacob Flanders at the age of twenty-six a stupid fellow? It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, not yet entirely what is done. (JR. p. 154).

Consequently, Woolf's narrator guesses rather than states, presumes rather than knows, and our desire for insight and certainty is never fulfilled. We are forced to rely exclusively on the external, the material, the perceivable:

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations from: *Jacob's Room*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.



The light drenched Jacob from head to toe. You could see the pattern on his trousers; the old thorns on his stick; his shoe laces: bare hands; and face.

It was as if a stone were ground to dust; as if white sparks flew from a livid whetstone, which was his spine; as if the switchback railway, having swooped to the depths, fell, fel, fell. This was in his face.

Whether we known what was in his mind is another question. (JB, p. 94).

Details of appearance, gesture, fleeting face expressions are the only solid evidence we have to form our opinions and judgements about who Jacob really is. The claim that we can get to know another human being in any way other than just superficially is false and arrogant. Reading the narrator's comments about Jacob, we constantly stumble over words like "perhaps", "possibly", "no doubt", "maybe", "might", "surely", "certainly", which repeatedly shatters our traditional expectations of finally learning some concrete facts about Jacob's thoughts and motives:

One's aunts have been to Rome; and everyone has an uncle who was last heard of-poor man--in Rangoon. He will never come back any more. But it is the governesses who start the Greek myth... The point is, however, that we have been brought up in an illusion.

Just as we are comfortably slipping into the illusion of being able to read Jacob's thoughts, the final comment settles us back into the ever-present uncertainty. In this way we are constantly reminded that the narrator knows almost as little about her character as we do. Because Jacob belongs to life, not to fiction, it is by such narrative means that he can keep his life-like quality-otherwise he becomes falsified, artificial, "fictional".

In the absence of an authoritative narrative voice, unable to rely on the narrator's infallibility, we must revert to other sources in search for a better knowledge of Jacob. Glimpses of his character are offered to us through the other characters' eyes. It is not coincidental that the novel is peopled with characters-all of them serving as extensions of the removed and distanced narrator. The novel introduces over 160 characters (one of the critics took pains to count them), many of them, as Mrs. Norman and Miss Julia Hedge, "the feminist", appearing only once, for very brief periods. The purpose of this method is to provide an outside view of the character, so that the reader may see, or at least have the illusion of seeing the subject solely through the eyes of the people in the book. The encounter with Mrs. Norman is in a sense a miniature model of the whole novel: the lady (or the author) finds herself confronted by a mysterious fellow-traveller, and she tries to deduce his essence from the only evidence that she has at her disposal: his appearance, behaviour, newspapers he is reading:

[she] stealthily looked over the edge to decide the question of safety by the infallible test of appearance... She looked to see what he was reading-the *Daily Telegraph*.

Taking note of socks (loose), of tie (shabby), she once more reached his face. She dwelt upon his mouth. The lips were shut. The eyes bent down, since he was reading. All was firm, youthful, indifferent, unconscious-as for knocking one down! No, no, no! (p. 30)



The conclusions she draws are rash and contradictory: she first sees Jacob as potentially dangerous, then harmless and clumsy, but she is not entirely convinced of either. The "infallible test of appearance" has a very ironical ring. Yet that is all there is to rely on, her (and the author's) time and means are very limited: soon the will stop, the war will break out, and Jacob will disappear, unidentified, in the crowd of other young fallen men. And so, significantly, Mrs. Norman leaves the scene, with a half-begun question on her lips, the question she shares with the narrator as well as the reader: "Who..". She does leave us, however, with a hint of an answer, or, rather, an intimation of its inherent and meaningful absence: "Nobody sees one as he is, let alone an elderly lady sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole-they see all sorts of things-they see themselves..." (p. 30).

In this way the multiple characters in *Jacob's Room* serve as extensions of the removed and distanced narrator, who herself is very similar to them in her fragmentary knowledge. Thus there exists no discrepancy between the characters' and the narrator's point of view, the narrative figure becomes one of the "real life" "people, the world of the novel resembling that much closer the "real" world. The effect of life's natural obscurity and confusion is enhanced by the fact that our perspective, instead of being traditionally located in the narrator or the major protagonist, is constantly and rapidly shifting. The point of view of Mrs. Flanders, seemingly valuable because of her close relation to Jacob, is immediately followed by Charles Steele's and infant Jacob's. Significantly for the theme, all of them are given just as much credibility. Thus Jacob emerges from these accounts as deliberately oblique and ephemeral, exactly as he (and anyone) would be in reality.

Another element of the author's method that brings out the concept of life's and, consequently, the characters' fluid and unknowable nature is Woolf's use of imagery and symbol. Certain elements of the novel's setting recur repeatedly throughout the work and become significant for the theme. Such objects as the sheep's jaw Jacob cannot part with, the fallen tree in the forest, the butterflies he catches, and the one moth among them (important because it was caught on the night the tree had fallen) all create the atmosphere of death, foreshadowing the novel's ending. The most important of those symbolic elements are Jacob's successive rooms-places which contain some evidence of Jacob's factual identity: his personal possessions, letters, books, clothes, his slippers, his chair:

Jacob's room had a round table and two low chairs, there were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; cards from societies with little raised crescent, coats of arms, and initials; notes and pipes; on the table lay paper ruled with a red margin-an essay, no doubt- "Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?" (p. 39).

This could very well be a description taken out of a realist novel. However, none of these details contributes an insight into Jacob himself. Significantly, he is always absent, impossible to define, refusing to be identified on the basis of the material, the external. It is his ghost, rather than his real self that inhabits the



room: "Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there." (p. 39). Finally, it is just those external, material possessions that are left of him in his last room. Lost among them, holding his shoes in her hand, Mrs. Flanders sums up life's inherent quality: "Such confusion everywhere!" (p. 176).

*Jacob's Room*, with its revolutionary form being a product of the author's intent, was one of the first fruits of Virginia Woolf's quest for the new novelistic form to capture life's compelling content. It was followed by such distinguished achievements as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. However, it was in *The Waves* that we find Woolf's ultimate expression of life's flux and its complexity.

The novel is very experimental even in its appearance. The author herself described it as a play-poem rather than a novel. The almost complete abandonment of the figure of the traditional narrator (except for the brief introductions of the speakers) in favour of the dramatic soliloquies of the six characters is itself very important for the theme, because in the absence of the narrative mediation we are directly immersed in the protagonists' experience. The fleeting impressions of other characters and the external world around them are extremely personal, often sensory and subjective, yet very convincing in their selectiveness of realistic detail. Already the very first pages of the book evidence the intensity of experience the book is saturated with:

'Look at the spider's web on the corner of the balcony,' said Bernard. 'It has beads of water on it, drops of white light,'

'The leaves are gathered round the window-like pointed ears,' said Susan.

'The birds'eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves,' said Neville.

'The stalks are covered with harsh, short hairs,' said Jinny, 'and drops of water have stuck to them.'

'A caterpillar is curled in a green ring,' said Susan, 'notched with blunt feet'. (W, p. 6)<sup>5</sup>

These first, short and fragmentary monologues set the pattern to the structure of the whole book. The interchanging soliloquies become longer as the six protagonists grow older, paralleling their increasing self-awareness and self-reflectiveness. We progress from the characters' childhood perceptions through their adolescence to maturity and old age in an almost unbroken succession: as it happens in reality, where people age unnoticeably, but continually. Woolf talks about the intent behind such method in the following fragment of her diaries: "A mind thinking. They might be islands of light-islands in the stream that I am trying to convey: life itself going on. The current of the moths flying strongly this way. A lamp and flower pot in the centre." (D, May 28th 1929). The interior monologue technique enables us to witness the thoughts and emotions they experience, both in relation to themselves as well as to the others. Thus the soliloquies provide multiple

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from: *The Waves*. London: Grafton Books, 1987.



mirrors in which the six are reflected. The effect is, paradoxically, that of at least partial objectivity among the subjectivity, and thus an optimal compilation of the internal and the external point of view. In this way the narrative method of *The Waves* is superior to the strictly external and withdrawn technique of *Jacob's Room* in the use of symbol and imagery. The novel's crucial symbols are present in the interludes, our only guiding posts among the maze of the characters' experience. The interludes contain de-personalized descriptions of the same scene: a beach house surrounded by trees and a garden, at different times of day. Contrary to the remainder of the novel, saturated with human experience, the beach scene is completely devoid of human presence. It presents the external, objective passage of time, measured by the movement of the sun of the horizon, the sunrise, noon, and sunset corresponding to the subsequent phases of the protagonists' lives. The interludes' primary image is that of waves forming and crashing on the shore. The images of the sea and the waves are significantly, opening and closing the book, and they recur repeatedly in the individual soliloquies, creating a nearly explicit correspondence. They provide the ultimate metaphor for the flux of life the novel is striving to render. The characters' lives are like separate, fluctuating waves, parts of the same unencompassable expanse of the sea of life, governed by its eternal rhythm of rise and fall, birth and death. It is in these terms that the characters in the book should be viewed.

Susan, Jinny, Rhoda, Neville, Louis and Bernard, different and individual in their sensibility, become one composite identity, since they share the common basics of the human existence: its flux and impenetrable meaning. Their primary concern throughout their lives is to order and find significance behind the chaotic and the absurd. Louis' obsession with permanence can be seen in his recurring desire to "assemble a few words and forge round us a hammered ring of beaten steel". Neville talks about his neatness and meticulousness as a weapon against the absurd:

I am as neat as a cat in my habits. We must oppose the waste and deformity of the world, its crowds eddying round and round disordered and trampling. One must slip paper-knives, even, exactly through the pages of novels, and tie up packets of letters neatly with green silk, and brush up the cinders with a heart broom. Everything must be done to rebuke the horror of deformity. (*W*, p. 121).

This theme finds its best expression in the case of Bernard, who as a writer, is striving to capture the complexity of what happens to him in words. His problems are similar, if not identical to the difficulties that the novelist writing *The Waves* encounters. Bernard's final soliloquy, his effort to "sum up", contains his recognition of the necessary selectiveness and incompleteness of the vision:

The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while



a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers. Faces recur, faces and faces-they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble-Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to deatch one separately, or to give the effect of the whole. (*W*, p. 173).

The task of encompassing life's experience is impossible to achieve without a compromise. Bernard finally sees that separate identities he had been trying to convey are not possible to render and define since they have merged into one, have become a part of one life:

"Who am I? I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda an Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead, we are divided, we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division separating me and them... This difference we ake so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherished, was overcome. (*W*, p. 195).

Thus Bernard (and Woolf?), aware of the inadequacy of language, finally give up trying to schematize life and impose artificial patterns on experience:

My book, stuffed with phrases, has dropped to the floor... What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what names are we to cal death. I do not known... I need a howl; a cry... I have done with phrases. (*W*, p. 199).

This passage has often been interpreted as Bernrd's (and Woolf's) failure and acknowledgement of defeat. Yet in the light of the whole book, this is not what emerges as Woolf's final word. The defeat or victory is irrelevant, what matters is the fight itself, the resistance to the chaotic and the absurd. The final lines recal a symbolic image from *Jacob's Room*: that of a crab imprisoned inside a bucket, which is persistently climbing its walls. Such is the meaning of the closing lines of Bernard's soliloquy, as well as the message of the whole novel: both novels.

As hard and impossible the task of catching Mrs. Brown, Mr. Flanders, Percival, and whoever else it may be, the novelist's duty is to keep trying. Through revolutionary experiments with such elements of the novel as character, narration, point of view, and imagery any symbol, the author of *Jacob's Room* and *The Waves* has put up quite a fight against the unnameable essence of life. In Roger Fry's terms, she has found a form that, being an illision of reality, appears as real as life itself: she has found an artistic equivalent for life. Bernatd's words are undeniably her own personal, creative credo:

"Fight! Fight!" I repeated. It is the effort and the strugglr, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together-this is the daily battle, defeat or vitory, the absorbing pursuit. The trees, scattered, put on order; the thick green of the leaves thinned itself to a dancing light. I netted them under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words. (*W*, p. 182).



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POKÓJ JAKUBA I FALE: VIRGINII WOOLF  
POGOŃ ZA PANIĄ BROWN ALBO SAMO ŻYCIE

## STRESZCZENIE

„Pokój Jakuba” i „Fale” to dwie najbardziej eksperymentalne powieści Virginii Woolf, w których najpełniej uwidacznia się jej ambicja, aby uchwycić istotę i samą esencję rzeczywistości. W swoim słynnym esej „Pan Bennett i Pani Brown” Woolf podważa tradycyjne realistyczne kanony prezentacji postaci (szczegółowy opis zewnętrzny z niekorzyścią dla pogłębionej psychologii) i proponuje współczesnym sobie pisarzom inne metody: przebicie się przez wszystko co zewnętrzne i widoczne gołym okiem i poświęcenie więcej uwagi temu co ukryte i trudne do uchwycenia.

Rezultatem tego podejścia jest zburzenie realistycznego „porządku” i stworzenie struktury narracyjnej, która nie odzwierciedla życia w sposób fotograficzny, lecz jest sama nieuporządkowana i płynna jak ono. „Pokój Jakuba” i „Fale” są właśnie takimi „płynnymi” powieściami, próbami uchwycenia całej złożoności i niewyjaśnionej tajemnicy ludzkiego życia. Jest to w swej istocie niemożliwe do wykonania, co stwierdzają zgodnie narratorzy obu powieści. Zadaniem pisarza jest jednak próbować: eksperymentując z narracją, punktem widzenia i symboliką, Woolf znajduje w „Pokoju Jakuba” i w „Falach” formę artystyczną wyrażającą „nienazywalną” rzeczywistość. Tak jak post-impresjonizm w sztuce, Woolf stworzyła z powieści artystyczny ekwiwalent życia, nie jedynie jego zewnętrzne odzwierciedlenia.

Justyna Kostkowska