

The Waves

V. Woolf

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Supposedly it was William James who coined the term 'stream of consciousness' trying to formulate the experience we have of our own thoughts streaming through us, only partly subject to our control. Virginia Woolf is the prime example of someone trying to exploit this in a literary way, and the book under review is her outstanding experiment. An experiment is an experiment, in other ways an attempt, and most attempts, like most organisms, are doomed. As an experiment I would judge it a failure, in the sense that it is more or less unreadable. It dispenses altogether with plot, hence there is no development, nothing really seems to happen. We are privy to the conscia, as manifested by their streams of unstructured thoughts of six different persons, three male, three female, during different periods of their lives. Almost nothing happens and the six conscia are almost impossible to tell apart. While reading your own mind invariably wanders, as there is nothing on which to get purchase, and you consequently do not remember what you have read. There maybe a certain beauty to that, because it also holds for your own thoughts as they stream through you. Most of them get no hold, there is little opportunity to stay the flow and reflect upon it. It is like scenery that pass by as you look through a train window, almost nothing of it remains in your mind, except possibly some general idea. Yet you would not like to be without it, most experiences you have are enjoyable although they leave no lasting mark on your memory. In short they are valuable for their own sake, they do not need the justification of being applicable to the future. And as such it is tempting to claim that they provide the basic essence of life, life in its mysterious immediacy, in which everything is not too insignificant not to exude the mystic of life and existence.

Virginia Woolf supposedly struggled with the novel for a long time and made many rewritings including a major overhaul. This indicates that she had not only a vision but a rather specific vision involving a demanding selection process. What did she want to convey? The words that tumble down on the page, only to be absorbed by its paper, as so many rain drops, have not been put down randomly as in a dadaistic experiment. She has taken the task very seriously and very earnestly. Now what could have been her intention?

She could have tried to put down the stream of words that flip through your mind with great accuracy. She may have tried to observe her own thought process as they actually manifest themselves in order to paint them down with words. But is that desirable, is it even possible? We note at the end of the novel the plaintive "*Heaven be praised*" I said "*we need not whip this prose into poetry. The little language is enough.*" . Or a bit further on finishing a paragraph. *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.* Is the stream of consciousness phrased in prose or poetry, or maybe some other language small or not? Obviously she has whipped her text and tried to make it into poetry, pure poetry in the sense that the form takes precedence over content. It is not so much an attempt at a factual rendering of the process, but a

poetic interpretation, or rather delivery. And indeed the prose is forced into a rhythm, not the purposeful one that prose normally takes to advance an argument or push a plot, but the languid one of the waves lapping against the shore (hence the title?). Thus I suspect that the piece may work beautifully when read out aloud, not silently alone; just as poetry should ideally be declaimed or even sung as songs, or a play performed on the stage by real people pronouncing the lines. There is a distinction after all between prose and poetry, Collingwood reminds us, and while prose speaks to reason, and thus is best savored in solitude, song and plays are to be enjoyed communally, being not foremost expressions of reason but of emotions. True, they can be read and studied in solitary reading as well, being subjected to reason, but then not as living texts expressing themselves but reduced to mere things, specimen to be subjected to scrutiny to see how they work, by taking them apart.

It is an experiment, and as most experiments most useful in suggesting alternate experiments. The reading of the novel is tedious, and in my case only possible by reading short snatches while traveling on subways during a recent housing hunt in Stockholm. Yet the idea of doing a similar experiment myself is very tempting. In fact, as I have noted in previous reviews¹, it has always been a childhood dream. It must have been quite fun for her to try her hands on doing something so utterly different from the traditional and hence conventional. This is of course the joy of novelty, whose most insistent and sustained expression may be found in fashion, and thus when applied too indiscriminately in art renders the latter into mere fashion. One may compare it to an earlier experiment, namely the one by Proust, to see how and why it really fails. There is great beauty in the language of Proust, and indeed much of it engenders the gentle lapping of waves as one metaphor follows another. But while you read Proust, with pleasure and anticipation, or at least I do, many other readers supposedly experience but a tedium similar to the one I have just described; Woolf engenders nothing more insistent than exasperation. What is the difference? In Proust there is after all a plot, and the waves of words that come to you, serve some ulterior purpose, imbued by underlying thoughts that engage you. In Woolf there seem to be no underlying thoughts, and if there are, they do not make themselves apparent but reside silently like codes, only to come alive by careful scrutiny. But as I noted above, scrutinizing a text is very different from being swept away by it. Scrutiny can only be applied to a text on the autopsy table. And in many cases why take the trouble? If you are going to take such an attitude why not apply it to something worthwhile, say to unlock the secrets of nature or to explore a piece of evasive mathematics seemingly eluding your efforts, not to the mere product of idle human construction. Enjoying art, Collingwood teaches us, is a matter of eavesdropping. However sincere her efforts, I gained very little from eavesdropping on her, certainly only so much as to be inspired to write this review.

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¹ Most notably in the recent review of Mrs Dalloway in Reviews XIIIb