

THE TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

With Special Reference To The Time Scheme

T. Fujishima

The so-called novel of the stream of consciousness was once the highlight of the field of world novels. But the audience who clapped their hands clamorously at the *Ulysses* for example kept an embarrassed silence at the *Finnegans Wake*. And most of these novelists seemed to have gone wreck on the dark ocean of consciousness, obscured under human conducts. Among these novelists was Virginia Woolf, a most conscientious writer and critic. The eye of the critic scrutinizes sharpest the works of her own. Their successive changes of technique was the natural result of the severe criticism of her own. It is chiefly by tracing the changes of technique in her novels that this brief essay tries to comprehend the fundamental problems in the novel of the stream of consciousness.

The Voyage Out

The Voyage Out was, so to speak, her voyage out into the world of the novel writer. It might be called a pretty story with an appealing ending. Yet it cannot be said to give the sense of equilibrium to the reader. If it is due to her inexperienced pen the question is settled. But she had already been working as a critic and this obviously was not the case. To see the cause the structure of the story may be examined.

Rachel the heroine, after a voyage of the Atlantic reaches a port of

the South America, where she lives a quiet life of reading and playing the piano with Prof. and Mrs. Ambrose. Soon the season comes and visitors from various parts of the world fill an hotel of this small town. Rachel becomes acquainted with many of them and intimate with two young men. Trips and excursions are planned during their stay. These are occasions when men strip themselves of the clothes of customs quite unconsciously. Two pairs of young men and women reveal thier hearts, whose characters are drawn chiefly through conversation. A rich variety was given to the age and the occupation of the persons staying at the hotel. More details are described by introdudcing the scenes of evening relaxation in some rooms. With two pairs of young people got engaged, the hotel becomes indeed a miniature of the world. Some love scences inserted play high the rhythm of life. And in the end Rachel gets a fever and dies in sorrow. This very brief sketch might suggest the traditional solidity of the structure of the story. Then why the sense of inequilibrium after the reading? To clarify the cause the characters in the story now must be examined.

Let us take Hirst, one of the young tourists. Hirst is a young man who told ladies in self-introduction, "Oh, I got scholarships everywhere. I'm a very distinguished young man."¹ He also said quite abruptly by the roadside after a night of dance, "I see through everything. Life has no more mysteries for me."² Funny fellow! Yet he is not, or cannot afford to be funny. He is the young man who won the respect of Rachel, a very intelligent girl. He is the only young man who can debate with Prof. Ambrose about politics and hold his own. He cannot be meant for a simple queer fellow. The queerness probably comes from his too much seriousness. In the actual world of ours

with the appearance of intelligent graveness, it might have passed for a mere seriousness. But the failure comes from lacking that proper appearance which tells so much in the real world. Woolf, probably unconsciously, describes characters much from within. So their way of thinking, their intelligence, even their emotions are very well understood by the reader. But how they look, how they move, all these images are but very scantily given. We cannot see them. They lack eyes, shoulders, hands, the very substantial body of a man. They are shadows, not human beings with warm blood running within. And in this particular case the traditional solidity of the structure, by contrast with itself, enhanced the weakness, the thinness of the shadow characters. This is most conspicuous in love scenes, which naturally need more reality of images than others. Lovers are like obscured silhouettes on the real and solid setting of stage in the story. The unbalance between the shadow characters and the real stage on which they dance! It is this unbalance which was the inevitable cause of the sense of the inequilibrium. Virginia Woolf, a shrewd critic, must have noticed of it.

Mrs. Dalloway

She had to make choice between the two: either to give her characters real flesh and blood fit for the stage of traditional solidity or to change the stage into a shadowy one to befit the dancers upon it. Her choice was the second, which is shown in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', a brief essay of criticism published in 1924. She argues in it that the tradition of describing the setting minutely and solidly to create the real image of men has ceased to be the tradition. And that we must step into the world of consciousness, describing man from

within. She even goes so far as to say, "Now it seems to me that to go to these men (Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Galsworthy) and ask them to teach how to write a novel—how to create characters that are real— is precisely like going to a bootmaker and asking him how to make a watch³." Strong are these words. And the strength is that of her conviction. That conviction came to have a brilliant proof in *Mrs. Dalloway* after ten years of hard experiments from *The Voyage Out*.

The radical difference of the two works is of course that the former has abandoned the setting of the traditional solidity of the latter. It is in the world of consciousness of Mrs. Dalloway that things happen. Peter Walsh, the old lover of the lady, in dejection, walks along the streets, not of real London, but that in the brain of the lady. Poor war lunatic, Septimus, terror stricken, jumps out of the window to escape from the rigorous hand of a doctor. Still we need not trouble ourselves with bloodshed. True, they are all shadowy characters, lacking clear images. But they are this time to dance on the shadowy stage of consciousness. If they lack round arms with warm blood running within, so much the better. For they are indeed meant for shadows silhouetted on the stream of consciousness of Mrs. Dalloway. Shadows upon the shadowy stage! They dance, trailing after them a faint odour of love and sorrow. It has a strange beauty fresh and unknown hitherto, which, it must be admitted, does credit to Virginia Woolf, the creator. It is undeniable that reality once sunk and drowned in the gap between the dramatic persons and the stage is reborn here in untraditional charm. Woolf might have been contented here. But again her ever hankering desire 'to break every mould and find a fresh form of being, of expression'⁴ was working,

working towards the new mould of *To the Lighthouse*.

To the Lighthouse

Now there is one obvious fact in the so-called novel of the stream of consciousness: so long as the author follows the stream he cannot get outside into the objective world. Of course there is no readable novel that follows only the stream of consciousness. Still no one can deny the thinness of the objectivity. And though it has the beauty as of gorgeous symphony *Mrs. Dalloway* is not an exception. Now Woolf once accused old masters, and that rightly, of their writing only the outside world of men, ignoring his vast area of consciousness. If she depicts only the inner world, as she did in *Mrs. Dalloway*, which is but another half of human life, she cannot escape from the same accusation. Her ambition this time, was by introducing the objective time element into her novel, to harmonize the two worlds of consciousness and of conducts. This at least was one of the purposes of the time scheme of *To the Lighthouse*.

She directed the spotlight upon two points in the flux of life separated by the interval of twelve years. These two points are a few evening hours of Mrs. Ramsay with her children longing to go to the lighthouse and another few hours of the widowed father and the grown up children running a boat to the lighthouse. She gave more than two hundred pages to the two points and some twenty to the second chapter, which beautifully and symbolically depicts the passage of the years, some twelve years of war and havoc. By drawing in detail the two points with a link of line, Woolf hoped to depict life with a reality of the changeful flux of our real life. But was not the link too thin—only twenty pages of symbolical figures? Was it strong

enough to represent that sense of surprise and vanity which never fail to catch us in the actual retrospect of life?

The Waves

Her next try was *Orlando*. Orlando lives three hundred years, changing his sex from man to woman. This is, as she herself calls, a fantasy which cannot be fairly treated just like other serious novels. Perhaps one of the meanings is that a man trails behind him a history of some centuries, that he is a historical present. But here again, it may be noticed, the time element is emphasized.

It is in the next work *The Waves* that Woolf's technique comes to the climax, the technique of writing both the outside and the inside of the world of consciousness. The form of the novel somewhat resembles that of *The Ring and the Book* by R. Browning. The whole story, if it can be called one, is told by three men and three women in the form of soliloquy. The book is divided into nine unnumbered chapters, each with the heading of brief passages describing the scenes of a day from dawn to sunset. And the divisions of the day correspond to the different stages of life in which the six dramatic persons speak in the story. It is, in appearance, much like a drama rather than a novel. But it is through this strange form that Woolf almost succeeded to break down the barrier between the outside and inside worlds. We will see this by an example. It is from a scene in the chapter four, when the sun 'bared its face and looked straight over the water' and the waves 'swept the beach with steel blue and diamond-tipped water' and 'drew in and out with the energy, the muscularity, of an engine.'⁵

"The door opens, but he does not come," said Neville. "That

is Louis hesitating there. That is his strange mixture of assurance and timidity. He looks at himself in the looking-glass as he comes in: he touches his hair;..."

"There is Susan," said Louis. "She does not see us. She has not dressed, because she despises the futility of London..."⁶

By the repetition of such monologues, the speakers themselves are described and the atmosphere of the room is loomed up. In the early chapters the atmosphere of children's lively conversation is successfully given by the rapid repetition of very short monologue of a children's language. This naturally leads us to the question of time element. As already mentioned the book is divided into nine chapters, which shows characters in different stages of life. Woolf who showed one point in *Mrs. Dalloway*, two points linked with a thin line in *To the Lighthouse*, here shows nine sections of the stream of life. Thus quite naturally *The Waves* gives much more powerful impression of the flux of time which we actually feel in our real life. It seems hardly necessary to add that by the form of monologue she has as much freedom of depicting the inner world of consciousness as before. We may also notice that division with heading passages has the function of binding monologues which might easily go loose and be separated. And that the chapters are not unnumbered shows the ninth being not the last, the whole is but one link in the eternal return, as is also imaged by the constant repetition of the sounds of waves, working as the undertone of the story.

As a matter of fact there are several aspects in the technique of the novel. And broadly divided, the style and the structure can be called the main items. It is her technique of structure with special reference to the time scheme that has been discussed here. Woolf

wrote some three more novels. They are the works that are, like *The Voyage Out*, not to be included in the genre of the novel of the stream of consciousness. In these works Woolf adopted a simpler and perhaps easier method than in *The Waves*, because the difficulty arises when the writer has the ambition of depicting both the world of human conducts and that of consciousness in one work. *The Waves* is one of very few books which meet with the difficulty face to face. It is quite natural, therefore, that it should occupy a peculiar position among the works of Virginia Woolf.

NOTES

1. *The Voyage Out* p.168 Hogarth Press
2. *Ibid.* p.198
3. *The Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*
4. *A Writer's Diary* p.220 Hogarth Press
5. *The Waves* p.78 Hogarth Press
6. *Ibid.* p.85 Hogarth Press