Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism

Volume 13
Issue 1 *Winter*

Article 8

4-2020

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Štular, Nina Katarina (2020) "The Mosaic of Aesthetics: The Manifestation of Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's Theories in The Waves," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol13/iss1/8

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The Mosaic of Aesthetics

The Manifestation of Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's Aesthetic Theories in The Waves

Nina Katarina Štular

In Roger Fry's "An Essay in Aesthetics," published in 1909, he explores the question of what art truly is. A year after the paper's publication, Fry met Clive Bell on a train and they struck a conversation about aesthetics that marked the beginning of Fry's life-long friendship with the Bloomsbury group—a group that gave home to many influential modernist thinkers and writers. The aesthetic theory that Fry explains in "An Essay in Aesthetics" influenced Bell's *Art*, published in 1914, which in turn affected Fry's *Vision and Design*, published in 1920, in which Fry fully elaborates his aesthetic theory. Bell's sister-in-law, Virginia Woolf, closely followed the evolution of visual art of her time and was familiar with Bell's and Fry's work in art criticism. In her most poetic and experimental novel, *The Waves*, Bell's and Fry's influences emerge in Woolf's innovative organization, as plot disappears, giving way to the distinctive artistry of her prose. Her nine sections, each beginning with an italicized description of the shore, trace the visual changes in the shore from pre-dawn to post-sunset. These descriptive interludes prepare for six friends' choral monologue, which give her work an aesthetic value and contribute to the "mosaic" that Woolf envisioned for *The Waves* (*Letters* 3:298). Analyzing how Woolf's language and form correspond with Fry's and Bell's aesthetic elements reveals *The*

Waves as a powerful vessel of aesthetics that places the ultimate purpose of aesthetic experience on the creation of timelessness amidst the temporary.

In order to discuss the aesthetics of *The Waves*, we must first examine the aesthetic theories of Bell and Fry. Fry argues that in order to have aesthetic value, a work of art must evoke an aesthetic experience by transporting its observer from the everyday to an "imaginative life" (18). In everyday life, emotions play an evolutionary role of prompting people to react properly to stimuli. "Imaginative life" (18), on the other hand, enables a person to experience emotions without having to respond to them; paintings, music, and novels elicit anxiety, excitement, anger, or joy for the sake of the emotional experience itself. Fry's definition of art in "An Essay in Aesthetics" allows for this vast spectrum of emotions that constitutes a proper aesthetic experience as he names art "an expression and a stimulus of this imaginative life, which is separated from actual life by the absence of responsive action" (20). Both the visual arts and literature fulfill Fry's conditions for the aesthetic experience as they allow the consumer to retreat to a private world where emotions are experienced in their purest form.

Fry and Bell agree that emotions are necessary for the aesthetic experience, but they also defend the existence of a more formal set of requisites that each work of art possesses and can be consciously acknowledged by reason. In "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," Bell claims that to have an aesthetic experience from observing "a combination of forms;" (26) he needs to recognize an objective quality in the work of art, or "perceive intellectually the rightness and necessity of the combination" (26). He believes that a precise balance of artistic elements or "a combination of lines and colours" (12) can bring him aesthetical pleasure and that this "significant form" (11) is the common denominator for all the works of art that move him aesthetically. Fry, on the other hand, names "order" (29) and "variety" (29) as the two qualities necessary for an aesthetic experience: the former ensures that the observer is not overwhelmed by stimuli and the latter that the observer is not bored by their lack. Both Bell and Fry distinguish a set of elements that visual artists use to evoke aesthetic feelings for the sake of either balancing order and variety, or achieving "significant form" (11).

Because the most important artistic elements that evoke aesthetic emotions often influence the work most subtly, Fry and Bell have difficulty in phrasing and formalizing experienced sensations and recognized properties in works of art. In Woolf's biography of Roger Fry, she summarizes his

attempts to verbalize the subjectively-felt properties that underline visual art: "It was to take him many years and much drudgery before he forged himself a language that wound itself into the heart of sensation" (106). According to Woolf, the medium that enables him to translate emotional experience to a reason-driven verbal formulation is the "pressure of meaning behind him" (106). Fry's driving purpose, which is to discover the properties of true art, shows in the clarity and care with which he chooses terms and draws conclusions. Similarly, the emotion that drives artists to express themselves subtly permeates their work—it can be communicated through the unique pattern of brushstrokes and ways of applying paint or drawing lines in visual arts, or through specific combinations of syntax, the sound of certain words, and types of phrases in prose. This underlying property of rhythm, defined by its driving purpose, serves as an artist's unique signature. Fry describes rhythm as "the record of a gesture" that "is modified by the artist's feeling" (33), whereas Bell, in "The Metaphysical Hypothesis," gives it an even greater importance; he claims that a subject holds no particular value to the aestheticism of a painting or a novel, but that only feelings which the authors succeed in conveying can have the power to influence an observer's perception of the work.

Bell's claims about the inherent insignificance of artistic subjects manifest themselves most fully in Woolf's *The Waves*. The novel recounts the lives of quite ordinary middle-class men and women who do nothing more exciting than to go to school, write, raise children, attend parties, and work. Instead of giving precise, detailed, and chronological reports of their lives, Woolf gives full emphasis to the artistic elements that she uses to capture the six main characters' expression of emotions, mind-patterns, and their perception of themselves, each other, and the world. It is not the novel's descriptive quality or exciting plot that primarily gives significance to *The Waves,* but rather its artistic qualities, as in the rhythm of her distinctive prose. In a letter to Ethel Smith, Woolf reveals that she is aware of the risks of "writing to a rhythm and not the plot" as she admits: "though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw to the reader" (*Letters* 4:204). Instead of losing her readers, however, she earns their admiration as her unique rhythm contributes to their aesthetic experience.

Just as the finest painters draw inspiration for their lines from the forms of nature, the rhythm of *The Waves* follows the natural course of thoughts

that enter consciousness in waves. In her diary, Woolf marks this novel as "a series of dramatic soliloquies" and sees a challenge in maintaining the quality of the rhythm or keeping the soliloquies "running homogeneously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves" (*Diary* 3:312). The novel explores the lives of six friends from childhood onwards, who share one cohesive experience of life despite their separate ways of pursuing happiness and the unique challenges that they each face. In his final soliloquy, Bernard summarizes the affinity that his friends display by smoothly sailing from one mind to another's: "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" (368). Their use of maritime vocabulary in their description of life further reflects the plurality of their quintessence: in his feelings of alienation, Louis wishes to be protected by the "waves of the ordinary" (240). When their friend Percival dies, Neville feels as if he has received a blow from "the sails of the world" (280), and Jinny marks the plunge into London's nightlife as a "cool tide of darkness" that "breaks its waters" (298). By breaking the soliloquies with poetic interludes that describe a single day at the sea-shore in all its aesthetic glory, Woolf conveys wave upon wave of rhythmic units that through the rise and fall of the tension pulsate in an intricate pattern.

Alongside rhythm, the cohesion or unity of a work subtly adds to the quality of aesthetic experience. To achieve unity, an artist seeks connections between all the elements of the picture and attempts to balance and link the composition as "each successive element is felt to have a fundamental and harmonious relation with that which preceded it" (Fry 33). Likewise, prose loses artistic élan if its subjects do not interact cohesively. Woolf achieves unity in *The Waves* by constantly connecting scenes, motifs, and her characters' thoughts to one another and to the greater course of the novel, with the waves themselves serving as the unifying image. Bernard, Louis, Susan, Neville, Jinny, and Rhoda live vastly different lives, yet their thoughts often wander to the motifs of the sea's course as they all struggle to accept their lives and make peace with Percival's death. Woolf deliberately interconnects all the parts of the novel by keeping "the sound of the sea and the birds, dawn and garden subconsciously present, doing their work underground" (*Diary* 4: 11). By introducing the interludes, Woolf juxtaposes the progression of the day with the main characters' development and thus positions nature's progress parallel to the dynamics of a human life. Whereas the first interlude

corresponds to childhood as the birds' distanced and subdued "blank melody" (180) corresponds to a child's eager anticipation of adulthood, the third interlude indicates adulthood with its full share of challenges and joys as it describes "birds that had sung erratically and spasmodically," displaying maturity as their song includes fear, "apprehension of pain, and joy" (225). Through equating nature to the lives of friends, binding them with shared feelings and associative themes, Woolf achieves aesthetic unity in *The Waves*.

In their quest for "significant form," visual artists face the challenge of balancing relations of light and shade by choosing which parts of their composition to highlight with light and which to hide in the shade (Bell 11). In *The Waves*, Woolf's decision not to give voice to Percival but to leave him mysteriously undefined acts as the counterbalance to the revealed thoughts of the six main characters. The absence of Percival's narrative and later his physical absence in death distinguish him from the others and highlight his importance. The six friends orient themselves with regards to him as they "assume the sober and confident air of soldiers in the presence of their captain" (260) and disassemble in his absence: "without Percival there is no solidity. We are silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background" (259). He is the bright figure of the composition to which all eyes turn, the one who attracts his friends as light attracts moths, the one who unites and completes them: "sitting together now we love each other and believe in our own endurance" (260). Percival "inspires poetry" (202); he represents honor and nobility—timeless principles that enable him to create a "swelling and splendid moment" (276) to which everyone wants to hold on. He inspires his friends to believe that they are significant, that they "can add to the treasury of moments" (276), that they can forge their own destiny: "We too, . . . stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road" (276–77). In amplifying his friends' experience of the momentary, Percival embodies the changing power of aesthetic experience that inspires people to strive towards timeless ideals of good in their own lives.

A work with properties of "significant form" necessarily intensifies a moment by manipulating the artistic element of mass (Bell 11). In order for mass to manifest itself through painting, an observer must simply process the visual cues of the composition in front of them. Prose, however, requires the reader first to create a mental image of the text's substance and then to process it. Because of an extra step in the course of perception, prose with

the power to induce aesthetic experience packs itself as fully as possible with mass. In *The Waves,* Woolf wishes to "saturate every atom" and "give the moment whole; whatever it includes" (*Diary* 3:116). By stripping *The Waves* bare of unnecessary information, she has created prose that is tangible and exciting to the senses but at the same time maintains the concept of the "ghostliness of matter's primary properties" (156). Ann Banfield, a scholar of modernism, introduces this concept in her study of Woolf's engagement with the philosophical and aesthetic ideas of her contemporaries. Banfield refers to the epistemological reality of matter, describing it as being rooted in the awareness of the physical world in which particles interact on the levels of their own microcosms. Just as all mass in the physical world interacts by creating wave-like disturbances of their surroundings, Woolf's "phantom waves" (*Diary* 3:236) represent the connecting medium of the unreal world of *The Waves*, binding it into an artistic whole with such vastly different entities of the novel as Bernard's soliloquies, worms in the land, and circles of light cast by mirror. The unreal mass saturating *The Waves* gains a real propensity to influence the reader's aesthetic experience of reading as Woolf sculpts it into well-balanced compositions.

Balance of masses, however, only plays its full role in the creation of aesthetic experience if it is paired with an adequate perspective. In *The Waves,* the perspective of narration and the variety of narrative perspectives significantly contribute to the aesthetic emotions that the novel evokes. While Woolf ensures the variety of narrative perspectives by engaging with multiple narrators, the power of perspective implicating narration manifests itself most explicitly in the third interlude. What begins as a panoramic view of the ocean with its "thin swift waves," illuminated by the light of the risen sun, continues to traverse the scenery as it moves from one subject to another (*Waves* 225). The observer shifts from the perspective of a girl who "drove a straight pathway over the waves" to a flock of birds "swerving high over the elm tree, singing together as they chased each other, escaping, pursuing, pecking" (226). Then the focus moves to a single snail shell, only to continue its exploration of the scenery across the garden as it momentarily lands the reader's imaginative eye on a single reflective rain drop "with a whole house bent in it" (226), a microcosm in itself. A whole synesthetic experience manifests itself as visual cues intermingle with smells and textures: "matter oozed" from the rotten fruit and "yellow excretions were exuded by slugs" (226). The narrative turbulence of the passage radiates praise of the aesthetic

experience in describing a "phantom flower" that a looking glass projects on the wall, a "phantom flower" that nevertheless is "part of the flower" (226), just as the imaginary world of aesthetics is an important part of the real world. Through the poetic truths relayed in the interlude, Woolf reiterates the epistemological reality of aesthetic experience—namely that, while aesthetics may require some flexibility of changing perspective, they reveal themselves to anyone who dares to seek a carefully balanced combination of artistic elements.

The Waves provide Woolf with a further aesthetic challenge. Daring to observe reality in an unconventional way plays just as important a role in the aesthetic potential of color as it does in the intermixing of perceptions. Evolutionarily, colors signal danger or presence of nutritious substance in fruit, but in order for color to contribute to an aesthetic experience, those who create and those who consume art must surpass the everyday pragmatic perception of color. As Banfield asserts in *The Phantom Table*, "the painter learns, contra naturam, to not see what common sense sees" when observing colors (264). By combining them daringly and unconventionally, a visual artist looks past utility of colors to the underlying rhythm, balance of mass, and unity. In the very beginning of *The Waves*, the children explore these artistic perspectives by ceasing to see the actual objects and their functions and, instead, focusing on the aesthetic experience that colors promise. As the children embrace the "imaginative life" (Fry 18) of the aesthetic vision, reality becomes irrelevant, so "a slab of pale yellow . . . spreading away until it meets a purple stripe" and "a crimson tassel . . . twisted with gold threads" (*Waves* 180) are valued for their inherent quality. Because of the associations that colors have with emotions and the purity of the aesthetic experience that colors help bring to their perceiver, Woolf carefully positions adjectives of color to create a composition with the aptitude to induce aesthetic experience.

Color, mass, and shape are basic elements of visible material substance; it is utterly impossible to imagine the existence of a visible, colorless, massless, and shapeless anything. Evoking sensations of shape through prose, however, takes effort to achieve and, if applied correctly, serves as a remarkable tool of aesthetics. In *The Waves*, Woolf repeatedly uses the shape of rings that matches the cyclical nature of the underlying, wave-like rhythm and historically symbolizes perfection and divinity. In Bernard's opening line, the ring that he observes "quivers and hangs in a loop of light" (180) and marks his childhood understanding of aesthetic beauty in nature.

In all six main characters' youth, a ring symbolizes their friendship, the connection that they share; it holds the "tremendous power of some inner compulsion" (201) that Louis wishes to make permanent and to "forge in a ring of steel" (201). But Percival "destroys it, as he blunders off," foretelling his own death, which metaphorically breaks up the ring of friends (201). Their lives still intertwine and converge through Bernard's stories, which he views as successive rings, each "passing through another" (275). When they meet years after Percival's death, they once again link unity and intensity of the moment with the shape of the ring: "there was no past, no future; merely the moment in its ring of light, and our bodies; and the inevitable climax, the ecstasy" (351). Rings imply focus and intensity but also an underlying quality of the experience of life as "the being grows rings, like a tree" (373). By continually associating the shape of a ring with an aesthetic experience, unity, permanence, and perfection, Woolf gives the element of shape an important role in the composition of *The Waves*.

Besides the elements of rhythm, unity, relation of light and shade, mass, perspective, color, and shape that, according to Bell and Fry, compose "significant form" and consequently induce aesthetic experience, an astute art lover may have noticed that both visual and written works have another quality that distinguishes them from reality—reflectiveness. A true work of art enables its observers to see themselves and their emotions reflected on the canvas or in the characters that they read about. Is it not the grief and suffering that millions project on the canvas of Picasso's *Guernica* that brought the work its fame? Do the curves of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* not carry dreams and hopes of all whom its vivid colors and bold brush-strokes move? And do those who experience aesthetic pleasure from observing Michelangelo's *David* not admire Renaissance values that they wish to see in their own lives? Just as observers of art retreat to the privacy of their aesthetic experience, Neville's desire for love, Louis's feelings of alienation, Bernard's never-ending quest for phrases, Susan's struggles with motherhood, Rhoda's anxiety, and Jinny's sensuality allow them to see pieces of themselves and their own lives from a safe distance. By projecting their emotions on to an entity that possesses "significant form" the observers distance themselves from having to react, evaluate, analyze, or make changes (Bell 11). They can simply recognize, feel their emotions, and give in to the admiration of the underlying qualities of the work that triggered their aesthetic experience.

Woolf uses artistic elements, established by Fry and Bell in their theories, not only to shape *The Waves* as a powerful vessel of aesthetics but also to bring the reader to the dramatic revelation of the novel. She extends Fry's and Bell's arguments by defining the ultimate purpose and culmination of aesthetic experience as the creation of timelessness amidst the temporary. In his final soliloquy, Bernard leaves behind his former self by saying that he is "done with phrases" (382) and that he wishes to be alone in the company of pure existence: "Let me sit here forever with bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself" (382). Through forging a connection with the essence of the material world, aesthetic experience manifests itself in Bernard, who has previously turned to others to define himself, and transforms him into a self-sufficient being in harmony with his own identity. His attunement to the core, wave-like rhythm of the novel bears witness to his aesthetic awakening that gradually builds up: "Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and rise again" (383). At the very height of his aesthetic experience, Bernard reaches the state of "imaginative life" (Fry 18), which enables him to make the discovery of the ultimate purpose of aesthetics—"eternal renewal" or the pursuit of permanence despite the reality of transience (*Waves* 383). In light of his aesthetic catharsis he rediscovers his purpose in fighting death, the ultimate adversary of permanence. Bernard embodies art that is "unvanquished and unyielding" and overpowers death by carrying ideas that transcend the short lives of those who create it (383). In the final line of the novel—"The waves broke on the shore" (383)—Woolf summarizes the poetic duality of art that uses the individual artistic elements, each as fleeting and feeble as a single breaking wave, to create an artistic, wave-like assembly of ideas that endure.

A novel so powerful as to induce sensations that evoke aesthetic experience comes as a result of an unconventional art process. Much as Michelangelo described his sculpting as an act of freeing figures from blocks of marble, Woolf, in a letter to Vita Sackville-West, describes her artistic process as the setting free of what is already there: "I believe that the main thing in beginning a novel is to feel, not that you can write it, but that it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can't cross: that it's to be pulled through only in a breathless anguish" (*Letters* 3:529). Such a remarkable and sensuous description of the artistic process that uncannily matches Michelangelo's recount of his sculpting directly links Woolf to the visual arts. *The Waves* indeed proved to be an "anguish" (*Letters* 3:529) for Woolf

to write as she deems it "the most complex and difficult" book that she has ever written (*Diary* 3:298). In her diary, Woolf planned to write *The Waves* as "a tremendous discussion, in which every life shall have its voice—a mosaic" (3:298). As the analysis of the novel from the aesthetic perspective proves, she truly did justice to her analogy as her descriptive interludes and choral monologues, culminating in Bernard's climactic final soliloquy, contribute the tesserae she needed for the great "mosaic" (3:298) of aesthetic creation of *The Waves*.

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