

A DYNAMIC CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, "THE WAVES" (A FRAGMENT)

Cristina PRELIPCEANU*

Introduction

The present analysis is a tentative application of the methodological principles for an analysis of the literary text expounded by T. Slama-Cazacu¹, formulated on the basis of her "contextual-dynamic" approach in linguistics and psycholinguistics².

We are going to briefly outline here the general principles of this approach.

The afore-mentioned approach starts from the model of communication, into which the literary text can also be integrated (a model which has **context** as one of its fundamental components³).

Applied to the literary text, this approach insists on considering all the three components of communication, the 'triad of communication' (cf. also K.Uitti⁴); **the emitter** (the writer), **the message** (the work), and **the receiver** (the reader), spotlighting the interlinks between them as essential for the correct understanding of the literary work. The **message** will be decoded by the **receiver** through an act of **reception** which is not merely an act of **perception**, but also a complex act of **interpretation**.

This kind of approach gives **the context** the major importance it actually has, by considering its various levels: the historical and personal context in which the literary work was created, the general work of the writer, the fragment into which any stylistic fact has to be integrated and interpreted, the historical and personal context of the receiver, etc.

The approach also consists of a **dynamic** analysis, viz. the correlations between the components of the communication act, the reference to the historical, psychological and social evolution during the creation of the work, the constant swing from 'part' to the 'whole' and back.

This interpretation implies both a reference to the form **and** to the content of the literary text, the two aspects being systematically blended and illuminating each other.

In what follows, we are proposing this tentative interpretation of a fragment of the novel **The Waves** (see Appendix) also as a possibility to reveal new aspects in the work of Virginia Woolf, an author for whom art alone can impose order on the flux of lives lived in time ("How fast the stream flows from January to December! ... We float, we float ..."); with her, the act of creation is an equivalent of the mystic's intuition and transience is the very stuff of her work.

1 The external context

According to the above-mentioned approach, we made use in our interpretation of the novel, of several data about the **writer**, the context of her work and the reception by the readers. In this respect, a valuable document has been provided by V. Woolf's **Diary** (published in 1953).

1.1 The emitter

The novelist was born in London in 1882 (the same year as James Joyce). Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a well-known biographer and man-of-letters

* Lecturer of English, Department of Germanic Languages, A.S.E. Bucharest

¹ T. Slama-Cazacu - *Sur les rapports entre la stylistique et la psycholinguistique*, Revue roumaine de linguistique, no.4, 1967, p. 309-330

- *Introduction to psycholinguistics*, 1973, II A, Chapter 2, The Hague, Mouton

- *Analiza dinamic-contextuală a operei literare* (The dynamic-contextual analysis of literary work), in *Modalități de interpretare a textului literar* (Modalities of interpretation of literary text), in *Limbă și literatură*, seria II, 1981, comunicări 1-2, București, Societatea de Științe Filologice, p. 38-42

² T. Slama-Cazacu - *Language et contexte*, 1961, The Hague, Mouton .

- *Introduction to psycholinguistics*, 1973, The Hague, Mouton

³ T. Slama-Cazacu - *Language et contexte*, 1961, The Hague, Mouton, and other works

⁴ Uitti, Karl *Context in language and literature*, Romance Philology 18, no.3, 1965, p. 300-315.

himself. Virginia was educated at home, by reading in her father's library and conversing with his distinguished friends, eminent writers of the time.

V. Woolf had several brothers and sisters, of whom her brother Thoby (who died young) and her sister Vanessa certainly influenced her in the creation of *The Waves*. The family used to spend their holidays in Cornwall, a county imbued with legends about King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, reflected in the novel in the creation of the character Percival.

V. Woolf had a good command of French, and also studied Greek and Russian. She was a friend of T. S. Eliot and Henry James. The latter initiated her into the psychological principles put forward by his brother William James.

After the death of her father, V. Woolf moved to London and lived in the famous Bloomsbury district. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf and they started the Hogarth Press. Their home near the British Museum became the centre of the so-called 'Bloomsbury Group' which included many famous novelists of the time.

From *Jacob's Room* to *Between the Acts*, V. Woolf continued to experiment with the form of the novel, minimizing the importance of facts, events and character analysis in order to concentrate on the moment by moment experience of living. A thoughtful and penetrating critic, she also published a collection of essays, *The Common Reader*.

The writer died tragically, by drowning herself during a mental breakdown brought on by the horrors of the Second World War.

1.2 The context of the age

V. Woolf asserted herself at a time of **change** in the philosophical and literary artistic thinking. 'On or about December 1910 human nature changed'. When the writer made this pronouncement at Cambridge in 1924 she over-stated a fact in order to shock her audience and made them recognize that although human nature may not change, men's notions of their nature do and such a change happened in the first decade of the twentieth century. December 1910 was the date of the first London exhibition of Post-Impressionist paintings. It proclaimed that Impressionism was dead. There were also other signs of this change in man's idea of himself, visible in literature: Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, the plays of B. Shaw, Chekhov's short stories, Dostoyevsky's novels. In Vienna, Freud had already laid the foundations of psycho-analysis and he and Jung had

already lectured in the United States. H. Bergson and his theory of duration were on the way.

All these instances emphasized the individual human being, the individual sensibility, the individual reaction. The shift was reinforced by the outcomes of the First World War, which discredited so many institutions.

1.3 The personality of the writer

The biography of the writer and her work helps us define the character of her deep sensitivity, her meditative vocation. A vivid mind obsessed with the creation of a new narrative technique, closely linked with a "vision" of life, fascinated and frightened by the passage of time, by life viewed as 'a constant tide and ebb', 'something very stable, or very unstable'.

1.4 The context of the novel 'The Waves'

1.4.1 The general context of her works

V. Woolf's works belong to the literature of memory, the flow of consciousness, the psychological analysis of inner duration. The novels of her maturity - *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* - give expression to the writer's attempt to establish a harmony between 'artistic imagination and reality', as the writer's mission is to discover reality, to gather it and to communicate it to the others.

V. Woolf's work abounds in symbols, leitmotifs, recurrent images, musicality. Among them the symbol of **the waves** is nearly omnipresent in her work.

1.4.2 The social-historical and personal context of 'The Waves'. The novel *The Waves* was published in 1931, being the fruit of a long period of creation. The 20s were the years of rebuilding after the First World War, years of economic prosperity for Britain. The memory of the war, the consciousness of the fragility of life were still dominant.

The idea of the book occurred to the author while she was at her residence in Rodmell, in Sussex, a village in which the houses look like ships. The first title of the book was *The Moth*, later on changed into *The Waves*. The book was meant as a dramatic poem.

In writing the book, the author left aside everything she considered superfluous, inert, preserving only "the moment" viewed as a blend of ideas and sensations, the voice of the sea.

1.5 The reception of V. Woolf's work.

In general, V. Woolf's work is considered difficult; some critics considered it rather limited and slightly artificial, excessively psychological, of lifeless refinement.

1.5.1 The reception of 'The Waves'. The book enjoyed a good reception in spite of the fact that the author considered it "unintelligible".

Petru Cretia, the translator of the novel into Romanian, considered the book dense and baffling.

2 The dynamic-contextual analysis of „The Waves”

The structure of the book offers a context which makes possible to interpret each chapter, different passages or fragments and to understand the whole book. The structure is partly explicit, and partly implicit (key associations, key words, opposite associations, the general dynamics).

2.1 The primary explicit structure: the title, the context, the graphical signs, the letter types, the structure of the soliloquies, the distribution of the interludes.

2.2 The implicit structure: As all the main motifs of the novel can be found in Bernard's final soliloquy the analysis will approach a fragment of it, trying to prove how it integrates into the wider context of the novel.

2.2.1 The structure of the fragment. The external context (epoch, family, the time of the creation, the writer's personality, the whole work) together with the context of **The Waves** are reflected in each sentence or figure of speech.

The Waves consists of nine chapters, each chapter being preceded by an interlude, and in the end the writer mentions the waves breaking on the shore as a cycle which closes, perfectly symmetrical. The book consists of the soliloquies of six characters: three women, Jinny, Rhoda, Susan, and three men, Bernard, Louis, Neville, set in the context of nine passages descriptive of the sun's progress over the sea from first light to night. The six characters are united by their love for Percival - their friend and hero. Percival's voice is never heard, he is present only in the others' soliloquies. In the end Bernard meditates on the flow of life trying to get its significance. But the

significance vanishes away and the song of memory starts, the faces of his friends appear and he realizes that he cannot order the stream of his memories, the consciousness flows from moment to moment. How to impose significance on the flux? The whole subject of V. Woolf's novels lies in this question.

2.2.1 Key works: waves, crystal, bubble, globe, symphony, memory, tune, rings, growth, spring of the clock, stream, torrent, to float, to run, to flow.

2.2.2 Hierarchy: key-words and key associations. The main association in the fragment is that suggesting the **flowing: to slip - the stream - the rain running down the windows - the clouds floating across the sky - the days run one after the other.** There are also associations taken from music: the **whole - the music - the symphony - accords/disaccords; the tune - the fiddle - the flute - the trumpet - the drum - the instrument:** which also suggest the idea of time flowing.

2.2.3 Opposite associations: present/past, walls/air, the whole/separate, accord/disaccord, above/below, to be free/to be tied, to put an end to/to continue, opening/closing, inside/outside.

The key-words, the key associations and the opposite associations help us get the **idea** whose details are to be deciphered. Life is viewed as a crystal with multiple faces, but its mystery cannot be caught. Life, the whole, the symphony are built up from these individual faces. The individual, the moment is only a drop, a bubble in the great flow, the great passage.

2.3 A complex, key symbol is that of **the waves.** They are present throughout the book. They can be interpreted at several levels, as symbolizing:

- the flow of time;
- the movement of life and human personality;
- the present moment.

Conclusion

The dynamic contextual analysis of the text selected reveals the fact that the images, the symbols, the meditation on life that can be identified in the fragment are present throughout V. Woolf's literary work. Moreover, they are present not only in her novels, but also in her journal and critical essays giving unity to her work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A.

- WOOLF, Virginia
 1964 *Mrs. Dalloway*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.
 1964 *To the Lighthouse*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.
 1928/1966 *Orlando*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.
 1931/1966 *The Waves*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.
 1966 *Collected Essays*, London, The Hogarth Press
 1941 *Between the Acts*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.
 1965 *A Writer's Diary*, London, The Hogarth Press

B.

- ALLEN, W. *The English Novel*, 1968, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.
 LEGOUIS, E. *A History of English Literature*,
 CAZAMIAN, L. 1967, London, Dent & Sons Ltd.

APPENDIX

VIRGINIA WOOLF:

THE WAVES (an excerpt)

"The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the 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 detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole - again like music. What a symphony with its concord and its discord, and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up! Each played his own tune, fiddle, flute, trumpet, drum or whatever the instrument might be. With Neville, "Let's discuss Hamlet". With Louis, science. With Jinny, love. Then suddenly, in a moment of exasperation, off to Cumberland with a quiet man for a whole week in an inn, with the rain running down the window-panes and nothing but mutton and mutton and again mutton for dinner. Yet that week remains a solid stone in the welter of unrecorded sensation. It was then we played dominoes; then we quarrelled about tough mutton. Then we walked on the fell. And a little girl, peeping round the door, gave me that letter, written on blue paper, in which I learnt that the girl who had made me Byron was to marry a squire. A man in gaiters, a man with a whip, a man who made speeches about fat oxen at dinner - I explained derisively and looked at the racing clouds, and felt my own failure; my desire to be free; to escape; to be bound; to make an end; to continue; to be Louis; to be myself; and walked out in my mackintosh alone, and felt grumpy under the eternal hills and not in the least sublime; and came home and blamed the meat and packed and so back again to the welter, to the torture.

Nevertheless, life is pleasant, life is tolerable. Tuesday follows Monday; then comes Wednesday. The mind grows rings; the identity becomes robust; pain is absorbed in growth. Opening and shutting, shutting and opening, with increasing hum and sturdiness, the haste and fever of youth are drawn into service until the whole being seems to expand in and out like the mainspring of a clock. How fast the stream flows from January to December! We are swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shadow. We float, we float.