

## Echoes of Beethoven: Eliot and Woolf in the 1930s

There is a curious and persistent sense in which Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) and T S Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1936-42) seem to resemble one another. Woolf famously describes *The Waves* as her 'prose-poem' and this poetic novel seems to share a great deal with Eliot's late work: a preoccupation with the fluidity and circularity of time and consciousness, a meditative, ethereal quality, and a mythic vision that derives from an ancient discourse of the four elements: air, water, earth and fire. Perhaps many of these qualities can be connected with an idea of music and a consciousness more aural than visual. Woolf describes *The Waves* as her mystical, eyeless book and it is this movement from external vision to an interiority of experience that Eliot attempts to capture in *Four Quartets*. The poem moves between land and sea as between a visible world and an inner, unheard music. There is something of this opposition too in Woolf's declaration that she "is writing to a rhythm, not to a plot". The former evokes sound and a sense of recurrence, the latter a spatialised conception of time that spans the linearity between two points.

Late in the nineteenth century Henri Bergson used music as a metaphor to describe the flow of consciousness. Bergson's work is one of the underpinning philosophies of modernism. But beyond this quite general idea of consciousness as inner music, there are more specific synchronicities between Eliot and Woolf that bear consideration. Woolf's early interest in Beethoven is seen in her story 'The String Quartet' (1921) – which Eliot singled out for praise at the time of its publication. In 1927, the year of Beethoven's death centenary, Woolf recorded that she was working on *The Waves* listening to the composer on the phonograph and her references to Beethoven increase over the next three years.<sup>1</sup> By the 1930s, both Woolf and Eliot write of the influence of Beethoven's late string quartets on *The Waves* and *Four Quartets* respectively. In a diary entry of December 1930, Woolf reflects that the form of Bernard's final speech at the close of the novel is suggested to her by a Beethoven quartet. Eliot too, in a 1931 letter to Stephen Spender, expresses his desire to capture the feeling of Beethoven's late quartets in his own verse. Writing specifically of Opus 132, Eliot observes in this late work a 'heavenly' joy and a 'peace' beyond human suffering. Eliot's envisaged poetic is similarly a search for a transfigured emotion. Feeling Beethoven is the musico-poetic intention that precedes and shapes *Four Quartets*, which Eliot began work on in 1934.

The year of Beethoven's death centenary also saw the publication in London of a study of the composer by J M W Sullivan, titled *Beethoven His Spiritual Development*. Sullivan focuses particularly on the late quartets and the critic Gerald Levin suggests that the book likely influenced Woolf's contrapuntal musical style in *The Waves*. A similar argument regarding Eliot's *Quartets* is made by Herbert Howarth, who notes that Sullivan's book was discussed in *The Criterion* in 1928 as

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Levin, "The Musical Style of "The Waves", *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 13. 3 (1983), 165.

a rare example of an effective literary approach to music.<sup>2</sup> Yet the parallels between *The Waves* and *Four Quartets* have received little attention. Both literary works are deliberately experimental, attempting a new kind of writing consciously inspired by Beethoven's experimental late quartets. Sullivan himself suggests these quartets as the greatest of Beethoven's music. Composed between 1825-6, in the last two years of the composer's life, they represent not only the chronological but also the spiritual culmination of Beethoven's journey. Sullivan draws particular attention to the mystical quality of the great three – the quartet in A minor (Opus 132), B flat major (Opus 130), and C sharp minor (Opus 131). In these, he describes Beethoven as exploring “new regions of consciousness”.<sup>3</sup> This is an exploration that begins with the Ninth Symphony of 1824 and continues in the late quartets. In these late works, Sullivan notes, we find the “revelation of existence as seen from the vantage point of a higher consciousness.”<sup>4</sup> Such a consciousness inevitably carries with it an intimation of mortality – shared by Beethoven's late music and these two late works of literary modernism.

In *The Waves* and *Four Quartets*, a preoccupation with the universal implies a death of the personal – at least in the way the personal is usually understood. In ‘The Dry Salvages’ Eliot writes, ‘The river is within us, the sea is all about us... The sea has many voices, /... The sea howl / And the sea yelp, are different voices / Often together heard’. In both poem and novel, music is connected with the sea, effecting a dissolution and expansion, a process of loss that signals the richest gain. Eliot, drawing on *The Tempest*, writes famously of the transmutation of personal emotion into something rich and strange. In these late works, this is a metamorphosis by music, as personality and action lose their definition in the rhythm of recurrence. In ‘Little Gidding’ Eliot reflects, “We are born with the dead: / See, they return, and bring us with them. “ It is the music of a life that includes and extends beyond death; an existence that surpasses the bounds of the individual personality. To express this greater consciousness is, for Eliot and Woolf, the purpose of art. In ‘A Sketch of the Past’, written shortly before her suicide, Woolf writes, “Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mess that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words, we are the music...” It is a similar sentiment we find in Eliot's *Quartets* when he describes “music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music...”

Sullivan's study, *Beethoven His Spiritual Development*, compares the great German composer with the English genius of Shakespeare. But the comparison, Sullivan suggests, holds only for Beethoven's earlier works. In his late quartets the composer is unsurpassed, moving far beyond the struggle of human existence. Opus 131 particularly achieves an artistic culmination and spiritual vision found only by the great mystics. In Woolf's ‘mystical’ novel *The Waves*, much of the experimental quality of the novel may be attributed to the ten italicised,

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert Howarth, ‘Eliot, Beethoven and J. W. N. Sullivan, *Comparative Literature* 9.4 (1957), 328.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Sullivan, *Beethoven: his Spiritual Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1927), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

interspersed passages that describe the natural world. The narrative here is blankly omniscient, counterpoised with the monologues of the novel's six 'characters' (Neville, Louis, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, Bernard). It belongs not to any one person, but becomes instead a universal, impersonal consciousness, recording the rhythms of the sea, the changing light and seasons. Woolf thought of calling these passages "Choruses" or Interludes" (manuscript in NT public library).<sup>5</sup> The term 'chorus' is revealing and gestures to a collective consciousness, an expansion past the narrowly limited self. Melba Cuddy-Keane's discussion of the chorus in *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* emphasises this idea of unity. She suggests that only music, being less defined, is fully inclusive and truly unifying.<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth century, Beethoven's music symbolised liberty and brotherhood. In the 1920s and 30s, competing claims would be made on the composer in the run up to World War II. But for Woolf and Eliot, Beethoven signified above all unity, universal identity, and a sense of the sacred beyond the confines of religion. This perception of unity is precisely the musical experience Woolf ascribes to Beethoven's late quartet. On hearing a Beethoven quartet Woolf has a moment of insight into the form of her novel, deciding to "merge all the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech".<sup>7</sup> In the final summing up of the novel, Bernard ponders, "how describe the world seen without a self?" And he muses on the memory of a circle of friends conversing together. "This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome."<sup>8</sup>

Woolf ostensibly meant to have no characters in *The Waves*. The six individuals in the novel merge into a greater whole, and the human and inhuman are seen in rhythmic unity. The novel's interspersed passages record the changing light from dawn to dusk; the remaining prose follows the lives of its characters from youth to age. Everything that *is* is ultimately merged into the flux of being. In *Four Quartets*, this idea of flux is suggested at the very beginning of the poem, when Eliot quotes from Heraclitus. "The way up and the way down are one and the same." At the conclusion of *The Waves*, Bernard observes "the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again. / And in me too the wave rises." The close of 'Little Gidding' in *Four Quartets* similarly turns to the imagery of river and sea. Eliot describes an unceasing exploration in which ends and beginnings are the same. At the source of the river, he writes, is the sound of human voices, "heard, half-heard, in the stillness / between two waves of the sea". The sea, Eliot has told us, has many voices, often heard together. Paradoxically, the end of the *Quartets* reveals the sea at the source of the river. Both still and moving, the stillness of the sea and the movement of the waves are one and the same. In the final paragraph of Woolf's novel, Bernard describes himself riding a wave like a horse, against the enemy death. Together horse and rider advance until Bernard cries 'Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!' The six italicised words that follow

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<sup>5</sup> Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 153.

<sup>6</sup> Elicia Clements, "Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's "The Waves"", *Narrative* 13. 2 (2005), 162.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931), repr. Wordsworth Classics (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000) p. 204.

conclude the novel: *The waves broke on the shore*. With each wave that breaks arises another; this is the eternal renewal, the eternal flux in which ends and beginnings are the same.

In *The Waves* and *Four Quartets*, the sea is an image of music, and the rhythm of life and death. In novel and poem, the sea's music whispers the seduction of death that is also, paradoxically, an affirmation of the larger life of the consciousness. This intertwined imagery of the sea, music and death also suggests Richard Wagner as another shared artistic influence. Eliot's *Quartets* likely draw not only on Beethoven's late music but also on Wagner's understanding of the composer's late style in his essay 'Beethoven' (1870). The essay memorably compares Beethoven with Columbus, exploring the sea of music to its utmost bounds. In both Eliot and Woolf's experimental works, artistic exploration is also a search for a new life; the death of the self is a metamorphosis in which is born a higher consciousness.