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Woolf’s The Waves between Self and Other

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Introduction

The main thesis that will be defended here is that René Girard’s mimetic theory proves to be a helpful tool to isolate and clarify some crucial features of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) that either puzzle the critics or have not yet been given much attention to. I should stress that it is not my goal to merely “apply” Girard’s mimetic theory to Woolf’s most experimental novel. That would be an undertaking of little interest. What I hope to do is to show is that some conundrums of *The Waves* really “beg” for a Girardian reading even if they also point to other riddles that mimetic theory cannot solve.

So, for instance, I will relate the frequent occurrence in the novel of words like “imitate”, “copy”, “follow” to the paradoxical psychology of the “voices” (the main characters). The six “voices” are torn between self and other because they cannot help imitate one another even or especially if they want to be themselves. This puzzling paradox profits from a Girardian reading even if the merely psychological research that is present in *The Waves*, in my view at least, only provides a foothold for more “existential” questions. Woolf is a typically modernist author in the sense that she believes that the novel is not only a particularly fitted medium to lay bare some interesting aspects of human psychology, a means to practise “research into what people want” (Johnsen 2003, 134), but also to ask “the wider questions” which, as she writes in ‘Women and fiction’, “the [women] poet tries to solve – of our destiny and the meaning of life.”¹

That this genuine modernist search for the “meaning of life” is present does not mean that a concluding answer will be found. In Woolf’s struggle one hears Bernard’s struggle echoed. Bernard is one of the main “voices” in *The Waves*, the would-be novelist: “I have made up thousands of stories; I have filled innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when I have

¹ Quoted in Woolf 2000, xix
found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer. But I have never yet found that story. And I begin to ask, Are there stories?” (143)

In a recent essay Milan Kundera, the well-known author of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, wrote that Girard’s Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque is “the best that I have ever read on the art of the novel”. Girard is however more a kind of anthropologist than a literary critic. It is to his mimetic anthropology (that Girard developed through comparing Proust with other great modern literary authors) that I will refer when analyzing the remarkable inter-textual resonances between The Waves and Marcel Proust’s La Recherche (especially À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur) in chapter two. Deepening the insights of chapter two I will relate Woolf’s fictional “research into what people want” to her extra-literary investigation of the rising fascism in her time. I will also try to show how this investigation is related to more typically feminist questions. It will become clear, I hope, why Woolf puts so much emphasis on Mussolini’s misogyny in A Room of One’s Own.

Finally I will study the paradox that this typically modernist novel written by an adamant atheist is full of religious metaphors. The religious metaphors are related, I think, to The Waves’ portrayal of modern humans as beings torn between self and other. The strange brand of mysticism that is present in the novel also has a tragic colour. The Waves is a tragic novel, but I hope to show that it is also a much more humorous and humane book than it might seem at first sight.

2 Kundera 2000, 121 (“le meilleur que j’ai jamais lu sur l’art du roman”).
The main method of this thesis will be close (comparative) reading. Girard himself has always proposed his anthropological ideas through close reading, in an effort to be as faithful as possible to the studied texts. Here I want to do nothing else.
The wavering Subject between Self and Other

In modernist texts—it is a story we know by heart—traditional character dissolved.

H. Porter Abbot

Fictional representation is at the centre of Woolf’s practice of research into what people want. Any attempt at a global reading of Woolf must start here.

William A. Johnsen

One of the greatest challenges of trying to add to Woolf scholarship is to elucidate the riddle of subjectivity in Virginia Woolf’s masterpieces, a conundrum that is most intensely foregrounded in The Waves. “Many critics seem to agree that subjectivity, for Woolf, is no simple matter, but they disagree on the significance, expression and forms of its intricacies.” (Lucenti 1998, 34) In her introduction to The Waves Kate Flint argues that the subject’s “sense of the self” is “assailed from within and without: from the chaos of the world outside, and by the mixture of fluids within.” (Woolf 2000, xxvii) In Flint’s reading the “danger” thus comes from the chaotic movement of the objects surrounding the self and some mysterious liquid movement (?) within the self. However intriguing, this view remains confined to the subject–object dichotomy that is often prevalent in literary criticism (the “axe du vouloir” in Greimas’ actantial model, for example, is divided in subject and object). Here I will argue—drawing on René Girard’s mimetic theory—that any attempt at solving the riddle of

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3 Abbott 1993, 393
4 Johnsen 2003, 134
5 In his interpretation of The Waves Graham the central problem is that the “Creature-as-subject [is] contained within the World-as-object, against which it has to struggle and to loose.” (Graham 1983, 331)
subjectivity in Woolf’s masterpieces—and especially in her novel that focuses most on the enigma of subjectivity, *The Waves*—entails breaking out of the subject–object dichotomy (first person/third person) by including the second person as the person who inspires “our” desires and whose desires we inspire.  

I will first briefly present the primary hypothesis of this chapter, namely that the personae in the novel are torn between Self and Other in a way that can be very accurately described with René Girard’s literary-anthropological tools. Since many Woolfian critics have tried to describe, analyse and explain the identity-problems in purely linguistic terms, this chapter’s second part will be devoted to the correlation between subjectivity and language in the *The Waves*. In the third part I will examine if “Percival’s power” (Percival is a mysterious central persona the six “voices” in the novel turn around, like satellites around a planet) is really linguistic. This chapter’s closing part will be devoted to the question of authenticity in *The Waves*. I will not introduce Girard’s ideas on psychological mimesis at length in a separated section. I will try to introduce them through close reading of *The Waves*.

**Between Self and Other**

*The Waves* is certainly one of Woolf’s greatest achievements as poet and psychologist, to use the two terms with which she described the modernist author she admired most, Marcel Proust. Before focussing on the poetical qualities of *The Waves*, Woolf’s prose poem *par excellence*, I will draw attention to the novel as a “psychological novel”. I put the term between quotation marks since *The Waves* is not a psychological novel in the usual sense. *The Waves* is not interested in the psychology of its characters—as a conventional psychological

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6 In this chapter this person will be called “the Other” following Girard (not Lacan, nor Levinas).
7 See Shore 1979, 235. See also Chapter Two on Woolf and Proust
novel is—for the simple reason that Woolf’s most experimental novel has no characters! The Waves is informed, I think, by the intuition that “the real psychological fact is not to be found at the centre of the individual but is the relationship between two [or more] persons.” (Oughourlian 2007, 59) This turns the Self into something as seemingly contradictory as the term “identity”, which at once denotes distinctiveness and absolute sameness.

As will hopefully become clear in this chapter and beyond, in The Waves the sense of self is constantly assailed, but not, I think, because of a mysterious mixture of fluids within (water, blood ?) nor through the chaotic movement of objects in the world outside. Woolfian subjectivity is threatened since the subject is perpetually torn between Self and Other (between “I” and “you”). Therefore the voices in the novel are not individuals but rather “interdividuals” (to use a neologism by René Girard). When Neville meets Bernard on one occasion he contemplates the situation in the following manner:

How curiously one is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend. … How painful to be recalled, to be mitigated, to have one’s self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another. As [Bernard] approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody – with whom? – with Bernard? Yes, it is Bernard and it is to Bernard that I shall put the question, Who am I? (61)

Paradoxically (and comically!) it is the Other who has to answer the question ‘Who am I?’.

This is as true for Neville as it is for Bernard. Even for activities that seem to define his character (as story-telling, for instance) Bernard is said to “need the stimulus of other people”.

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8 After the publication of the novel Woolf observed that The Times was enthusiastic about her characters while her intention was not to have any (Woolf 1977-84, Diary of 8 October 1931).

9 My translation from the French: « Le véritable fait psychologique ne se situe pas au coeur de l’individu, mais est le rapport même entre deux [ou plusieurs] personnes. » (Italics in the original text) Jean-Michel Oughourlian is a French neurologist and psychologist who works in the same vein as René Girard. He co-authored Des Choses Cachées Depuis la Fondation du Monde (Girard, 1978)

10 See book three of Des Choses Cachées Depuis la Fondation du Monde (Girard, 1978) : « psychologie interdividuelle ». 
This manifest dependency on others makes him doubt his own self. “To be myself, Bernard notes, I need the illumination of other people’s eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self.” (87) As Livingston wrote in his critical reconstruction of Girard’s theory of psychological mimesis: “[The uncertain] subject’s essential problem is that of coming up with an answer to the question, “Who am I?” As no solution may be had by peering into the abyss of solitude, it is imagined that the response is to be found in the eyes of the others.” (Livingstone 1992, 6)

Subjectivity and language

The problem of subjectivity in Woolf’s novels and in The Waves in particular is often understood as a purely linguistic problem. If it were mere linguistic peculiarities that threaten Woolfian subjectivity then this chapter’s thesis would be greatly challenged, not to say to be rejected. In her important article on the collapse of individual autonomy in The Waves Lucenti attempts to elucidate the riddle of subjectivity as follows: “Since pronouns are inherently open to repossession, they threaten any form of subjectivity which depends upon well-defined boundaries. If "I" can be "you" from one moment to the next, then who can say, with authority, that "I" am one thing and not another? Ontology and epistemology fall through the breach opened by any subject in language.” (Lucenti 1998, 35) Lucenti is not alone in proposing that the crisis of subjectivity in The Waves can be satisfactorily clarified through recourse to linguistic categories. Speaking about Rhoda, one of the six voices in the novel, Stewart points to “linguistically based subjectivity and its traumas” that is so “prevalent both in poststructuralist theory at large and in the particular bearings of its feminist (or at least gender-oriented) investigations.” (Stewart 1987, 422) Vandivere suggests that Woolf skilfully endeavours “to empty language of its ability to gesture to something outside of itself and then correlate[s] this linguistic incapacity with our inability to construct subjectivity.” (Vandivere
The flux of the waves in the title would then refer to the “linguistic flux and instability” (Vandivere 1996, 22) that mimics the problematic constructions of the self. “Wavering configurations of language betoken “wavering” ontological constructions, especially constructions of the self.” (Vandivere 1996, 222)

A careful reading of *The Waves* suggests, however, that the “inability to construct subjectivity” does not so much depend on linguistic incapacities as on the presence and influence of (an)other human being(s). To back her thesis Vandivere points to a sentence uttered by Louis that is to be found in a scene that, in reality, humorously plays down the importance of language in Louis’s true predicaments. Vandivere writes: “In *The Waves*, this concern with the relationship between the grammatical and the ontological emerges most clearly when Louis claims “I know my cases and my genders; I could know everything in the world if I wished.” ”(Vandivere 1996, 222) Vandivere then elaborates on this sentence to make her point (linguistic construction as subject formation), based on Louis’s assertion “that knowing cases and genders would enable him to know the world.” (Vandivere 1996, 223) Louis’s knowledge is stressed, I think, to make a humorous contrast, a very evident humorous contrast that—as far as I know—no critic of the novel has yet alluded to. In this particular scene at the beginning of the novel Louis is in the classroom. Although he knows his lessons by heart and is “the best scholar in the school” (38) and indeed knows “his genders and his cases” (38), he will not conjugate his verbs before having heard Bernard so that he can imitate his accent. “‘I will not conjugate the verb,’ said Louis, ‘until Bernard has said it. My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent. I will wait and copy Bernard. He is English. They are all English.’” (13)

Louis, whose father is a banker in Brisbane, is particularly preoccupied with Englishness. Yet, this boy “with a colonial accent” (38) who will become a very successful businessman later in
the novel is not crushed by a traditional empire, nor does his obsession with the “right”

English stem from the pre-eminence of language in subject-formation in *The Waves*. At the
end of this short episode we learn that it is not about conjugating English, but—comically—
Latin verbs! “I will now try to imitate Bernard softly lisping Latin.” (14) The total lack of
rational and “legitimate” grounds for Louis’s behaviour is obvious. The most intelligent
scholar (who knows his genders and his cases by heart) will not conjugate *Latin* verbs better
by imitating an English accent. This scene’s conspicuous humour points to some “power” in
the novel that is greater than language: psychological mimesis. “I will now try to imitate
Bernard softly lisping Latin.” (14)

I do not want to deny the close connection between subjectivity and language in Woolf’s
masterpieces in general and in *The Waves* in particular. I only want to stress that in the novel
there is *something even more basic than language*. This is frequently made very humorously
clear, but this humour is in general strangely overlooked by *The Waves*’ critics. So, for
example, one could ask if it is really some “linguistic instability” that triggers the collapse of
individuality (to allude to Lucenti’s reading) in Woolf’s most experimental novel. Let us have
a look at the scene in *The Waves* that best seems to corroborate this argument (the scene from
which Lucenti borrowed the title of her article). The male children are in the playing-field and
listen to Bernard telling stories. Neville enjoys it: “Let Bernard begin. Let him burble on,
telling us stories, while we lie recumbent. Let him describe what we have all seen so that it
becomes a sequence. Bernard says there is always a story. I am a story. Louis is a story. …
Bernard is a dangling wire, loose but seductive. Yes, for when he talks, when he makes his
foolish comparisons, a lightness comes over one.” (27)
The children want Bernard to tell them stories (even if he is burbling and making foolish comparisons) so that their perceptions become structured in a sequence. The children need a plot. They hope Bernard will provide them with some ontological construction and, indeed, above all a construction of the self. “I am a story. Louis is a story”. (27). As Neville remarks later on: “We are all phrases in Bernard’s story, things he writes down in his notebook under A or under B.” (51) What is more, Bernard’s constructions seem actually “wavering” (Vandivere 1996, 222) since all of a sudden he proves to be unable to finish his stories, to come to a closure.

It is from this scene in the playing-field that, as I already noted, Lucenti borrows the term she uses to denote the exact moment when the subject disintegrates in The Waves, i.e. “the appalling moment” (which is also the title of her article). “In The Waves, an "appalling moment" is one in which individual autonomy collapses in the face of a completely unnamable, unfathomable absence.” (Lucenti 1998, 39) Neville describes it as follows: “The appalling moment has come when Bernard’s power fails him and there is no longer any sequence and he sags and twiddles a bit of string and falls silent, gasping as if about to burst into tears. Among the tortures and devastations of life is this then – our friends are not able to finish their stories.” (28) “Bernard’s power” suddenly fails him, which devastates the hearer. But is this “torture” caused by some linguistic inability?

Neville and the “little boys” (27) are not the only hearers. Percival—some clumsy and unintelligent schoolboy everyone imitates—is also lying on the grass. All enjoy Bernard’s talk until Percival—who is told to be unable to read (34)—appears to be bored. Immediately all the others feel bored too. The sudden and complete reversal of the hearers’ appreciation is surprising when we know that just before the pupils were still enjoying Bernard’s story very
much. Even the great cricket-players, the “little boys”, were said to “like this better than cricket.” (27).

They catch the phrases as they bubble. … And then we all feel Percival lying heavy among us. His curious guffaw seems to sanction our laughter. But now he has rolled himself over in the long grass. He is, I think, chewing a stalk between his teeth. He feels bored; I too feel bored. Bernard at once perceives that we are bored. (27)

At first Percival seems to “sanction”, to approve the children’s laughter and enjoyment but as soon as the demigod feels bored all the others feel bored too. The complete reversal of the audience’s appreciation for Bernard’s storytelling is not linked to some sudden flaw in Bernard’s stories (the object), nor to some independent, capricious change in the hearer (the subject). The change is linked to Percival. Everything Percival does and feels proves to be extremely contagious. So, in the school’s chapel Percival’s gestures are observed with great awe. When he happens to flick his hand to the back of his neck the other children cannot resist imitating him: “Dalton, Jones, Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the back of their necks likewise.” (25) Percival is revered and has a drove of followers: “Look now, how everybody follows Percival. … Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants.” (25)

Should it surprise us that when Percival, The Waves’ role-model par excellence, is bored his “faithful servants” (25) suddenly feel bored too? It is not a linguistic problem but the lack of an interested audience, the lack of a mimetic stimulus, that causes Bernard’s power to fail him. As Bernard says elsewhere about story-telling: “The truth is that I need the stimulus of other people”. (59) When Bernard becomes aware of his audience’s loss of interest then his “power” fails him and the appalling moment has come:
[Percival] feels bored; I too feel bored. Bernard at once perceives that we are bored. I detect a certain effort, an extravagance in his phrase, as if he said “Look!” but Percival says “No”. For he is always the first to detect insincerity; and is brutal in the extreme. The sentence tails off feebly. Yes, the appalling moment has come when Bernard’s power fails him. (28)

As I wrote above, the cricket players liked Bernard’s stories better than cricket and Bernard was said to be “seductive” (27) but now his power suddenly and completely fails him. The literate Bernard is overpowered by the illiterate Percival. Louis echoes Neville’s remark about Bernard’s power failing him when after Neville’s monologue he observes: “I despise dabblers in imagery – I resent the power of Percival intensely” (28)

**The power of Percival**

The collapse of individual autonomy, “the appalling moment”, is triggered by Percival overpowering Bernard. Now, what is Percival’s power? One would be tempted to start looking for and enumerating Percival’s many qualities. Yet, one of the greatest humoristic contrasts in *The Waves* (the novel is full of humoristic contrasts!) is the gap between the incredible power Percival exerts on others and his (lack of) human qualities. He is definitely not intelligent, he speaks in a slovenly accent and behaves clumsily. We even learn that he cannot read. (34) The six speakers, in contrast, are much more intelligent, erudite and gifted: “I am so much his superior”, Louis notes. “[Percival] is heavy, he walks clumsily down the field, through the long grass, to where the great elm trees stand.”, Louis observes and immediately after this he adds: “His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander.” (26) How is that possible? What magic turns a clumsy, heavy and unintelligent boy into a magnificent mediaeval commander?
In order to answer the question it is important not to isolate the person of Percival too much, even if he plays an important role in the novel. Right above the last quoted passage Bernard made an observation about the schoolmasters. They also seem to have their own ‘Percival’: Dr. Crane. “Now [Dr. Crane] lurches back to his seat like a drunken sailor. It is an action that all the other masters will try to imitate; but, being flimsy, being floppy, wearing grey trousers, they will only succeed in making themselves ridiculous.” (26) Compare this to Neville’s (already partially quoted) description of the schoolboys imitating Percival: “[Percival] flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime. Dalton, Jones Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the back of their neck likewise. But they do not succeed.” (25) The analogy between the pupils and the masters is evident: the schoolboys imitate Percival but do not succeed in being like him; the masters likewise imitate Dr. Crane, but they do not succeed in being like him either. Bernard adds (about the masters): “Their antics seem pitiable in my eyes.” (26) It is difficult not to taste the humorous flavour in those words, since we know that Bernard is involved in exactly the same kind of ‘antics’—going so far as calling Percival “a God” (102). Bernard’s perspicacity about the farcical nature of the master’s behaviour is amazingly great, as great as his blindness with regards to his own idealising of Percival.

Woolf evidently seems to mock essentialist understandings of social intricacies. Julia Briggs introduces the term ‘hero-worship’ to speak of Percival. (Briggs 2000, 78) Yet, if Percival is regarded as a hero it is not for his qualities as a leader: it is for arbitrary, ‘mimetic’ reasons. The children do not follow Percival because he is a hero. Percival is regarded as a hero because everyone follows him. His “power” is not an essence but a purely mimetic construct.
Contrary to Percival, Dr. Crane is the headmaster, the *primus inter pares*. His colleagues’ admiration for him is still ordered by established (yet dying) social conventions, by some form of “Degree” (to refer to the technical term Girard uses in his book on Shakespeare).\(^{11}\) The schoolmasters look up to someone with a doctoral degree. The imitative veneration of the next generation (the children) is not channelled by some traditional hierarchy. The novel therefore sometimes looks like a meditation on the traditional hierarchies’ disappearance—exemplified by the allusions to the end of the British empire (see Briggs 2000, 78)—and the nevertheless persisting imitative mode of social interaction.

How is it possible that a stupid, clumsy an illiterate schoolboy becomes a kind of demigod with “faithful servants” (25) religiously following him? Percival’s sheer lack of intellectual qualities and the hyper-intellectual pupils’ sheer admiration converging on him reminds us of a paradox that is typical in Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, as interpreted by Girard: “Marcel remarks that he is always drawn to that which seems ‘the most contrary to [his] extreme and painful sensibility and intellectuality’ ” (Girard 1966, 248). Why do the children imitate the schoolboy who is most indifferent to their intellectual talents? Why does Neville speak about Percival as if he were a god (34) and does Bernard call him “a God” (102)?

Throughout the novel Percival’s cold indifference and unresponsiveness is stressed. In the chapel the pupils imitating him seem to be intrigued by Percival’s “oddly inexpressive eyes” and his “pagan indifference” (25). According to Girard the (real or imagined) *indifference* that one ascribes to the model of desire “always appears as the exterior aspect of a desire of oneself” (Girard 1966, 106). The model seems to desire his own being. The admirer unconsciously imitates the model’s desire for him/herself (which in turn may feed the model’s

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11 Girard 1991. The term “Degree” is borrowed from *Troilus and Cressida* and used by Girard throughout the book.
self-admiration and indifference). “The indifferent person always seems to possess that radiance which we all seek. He seems to live in a closed circuit, enjoying his own being, in a state of happiness which nothing can disturb. He is God.” (Girard 1966, 107). The children in the novel are attracted by Percival in the same way Proust’s character [Swann] “is drawn to vulgar people, who are incapable of appreciating his social position, his culture and refined distinction.” (Girard 1966, 283)

I have stressed Percival’s utter lack of human qualities. To this one could object that at least one special quality is attributed to Percival. In the episode of the “appalling moment” commented upon at length above I quoted Neville saying: “[Percival] is always the first to detect insincerity; and is brutal in the extreme.” (28) Neville interprets Bernard’s hesitation and his impossibility to continue his story-telling as some form of objective insincerity that the illiterate and brutal Percival would detect before all others. Percival would therefore at least possess some kind of powerful intuition with which he can swiftly analyse another’s mental state. This amazing quality would not only contradict what I said about Percival’s sheer lack of human qualities. It would also challenge the above given interpretation that the “appalling moment” is triggered by an arbitrary mimetic phenomenon (I use the word “mimetic” in the sense Girard gives to this word).

The best way to show that the pre-science or immediate knowledge Neville credits Percival with is an illusion caused by the mimetic phenomenon, is to compare the episode to an episode in *La Recherche* that also involves an audience and the narrators’ changing appreciation for what is going on.12

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12 There will be more on the relation between *The Waves* and *La Recherche* in the next chapter.
The little Marcel is disappointed by the Berma’s interpretation of Racine’s *Phèdre*. Yet his admiration for the actress’s performance is first triggered by the audience’s applauds. “Enfin éclata mon premier sentiment d’admiration : il fut provoqué par les applaudissements frénétiques des spectateurs.” (Proust 1988b, 21-22) The crowd seems to have the same immediate knowledge of the actress’s qualities as Percival of Bernard’s insincerity. The vulgar “parterre” is first to detect the Berma’s merits, outsmarting the literate Marcel: “On découvre un trait génial du jeu de la Berma […] sur le coup par les acclamations du parterre. » (Proust 1988b, 22) Yet *La Recherche* being a novel and its own exegesis, the arbitrariness of the mimetic phenomenon is explicitly commented upon:

Mais cette connaissance immédiate de la foule étant mêlée à cent autres toutes erronées, les applaudissements tombaient le plus souvent à faux, sans compter qu’ils étaient mécaniquement soulevés par la force des applaudissements antérieurs, comme dans une tempête une fois que la mer a été suffisamment remuée elle continue à grossir, même si le vent ne s’accroît plus. N’importe, au fur et à mesure que j’applaudissais, il me semblait que la Berma avait mieux joué. (Proust 1988b, 22)

However arbitrary, this eminently mimetic phenomenon has a real effect on Marcel’s appreciation for the Berma’s performance. It alters his perception of reality. The Proustian narrator compares the circular, mimetic phenomenon (whereby applause is “mechanically” triggered by … applause) to swelling sea-water after a storm. One wave triggers and intensifies another wave. I will further comment on the remarkable parallels between *The Waves* and *La Recherche* in the next chapter.

Since the power of Percival has nothing to do with some intrinsic grandeur, his name, referring to an old tradition of Arthurian heroes, seems ironic (even if his namesake is a little clumsy). Since we only get to see him through the eyes of the speaking voices in the novel we
do not know if Percival is his real name or his epithet. Part of the humour in Woolf’s novels, I think, is that modern mimetic phenomena are read through the lens of old values and powers, as if the latter were still very present. At the beginning of Mrs Dalloway, there is an illuminating example of this that may help our understanding of The Waves. Mrs. Dalloway is buying flowers for her feast when she observes how everyone is suddenly looking at a motor car that is passing. It is rumoured that some important personality is passing. “Everyone looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang of.” (MD 18). Since the blinds of the car are drawn nobody knows who is within, but there is no doubt that “greatness was passing” (MD 19). “The same breath of veneration whether for the Queen, Prince or Prime Minister nobody knew.” (MD 19) The narrator reflects upon the people’s thought “of the heavenly life divinely bestowed upon kings; of the equerries and deep curtsies.”, all traditional, medieval things. Yet, do we have to conclude that Woolf is painting the portrait of English “selves” still amalgamated with those traditions? Without warning the focus of the crowd’s attention changes again: “Suddenly Mrs Coates looked up in the sky. The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd […] making letters in the sky! Every one looked up.” (MD 23) All the divine grandeur the motor car was supposed to hide is completely forgotten: “… (and the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it)” (MD 24).

It is no wonder that traditional character dissolves in the masterpieces in which traditions to court are disappearing. Jane Marcus has rightly pointed out the way in which in The Waves Percival’s fall anticipates the end of empire, as Julia Briggs rightly notes (Briggs 2000, 78).

**Modern psychological mimesis and authenticity**

Next to the many descriptions of mimetic phenomena such key-words as “copy”, “imitate”, “follow” appear regularly in the novel. The theme of imitation in The Waves has however not
yet received much critical attention. What is the reason for this lack of interest? Maybe it has something to do with the fact that originality and authenticity are important imperatives in literary art and criticism. Imitation, on the contrary, is part of what Paul Valéry famously called “le Moi Inférieur” or what Heidegger condescendingly termed “Das Man”.

In *The Waves* the six extremely sensitive, artistic and sensible (!) voices often let us know (in their monologues) that they are rank imitators, that they are neither authentic, nor fully autonomous. Each voice however conceals this dependency on others to the other voices. How are psychological mimesis, authenticity and personal autonomy linked in the novel?

In *Violence and Modernism* William A. Johnsen makes a fine observation about (modern) fictional texts that—as we will see—is eminently applicable to *The Waves*: “When the Enlightenment rationalised divinity for man’s sake, there was no further excusing any deficiency of human autonomy. Yet fictional texts show this promise of autonomy unfulfilled, to each alone.” (Johnsen 2003, 3) The characters in *The Waves* are often extremely lucid about their own situation, their own lack of autonomy, but they keep believing wholeheartedly in the quasi-divine autonomy, the pure authenticity of the Others surrounding them. So Rhoda is perfectly aware that she is unauthentic, she knows she cannot but imitate the Others and yet the authenticity she unmistakably lacks is typically attributed to her peers:

> That is my face, said Rhoda, in the looking-glass behind Susan’s shoulder – that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces. … They laugh really ; they get angry really ; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it. See now with what extraordinary certainty Jinny pulls on her stockings, simply to play tennis. That I admire. … They both despise me for copying what they do. (31)

A while before Jinny also looked at herself in the small looking-glass:
My lips are too wide, and my eyes are too close together; I show my gums too much when I laugh.

Susan’s head, with its fell look, with its grass-green eyes which poets will love, Bernard said, because they fall upon close white stitching, put mine out; even Rhoda’s face, mooning, vacant, is completed, like those white petals she used to swim in her bowl. (30)

In the eyes of Jinny, Rhoda’s face is ‘completed’, in Rhoda’s own eyes she has no face. How are we to make sense of these different views? Why does everyone see the Other as more ‘complete’, more ‘real’ and herself as the only person excluded from ‘authenticity’? “In light of Rhoda’s endless assertions that she is less real than anyone else, one of the deepest ironies of the novel is Bernard’s belief that Rhoda and Louis are ‘the authentics’”. (Lucenti 1998, 35)

If we read the phrase “I have no face. Other people have faces.” through mimetic theory, as a typically modern metaphysical illusion, more obscure passages will make sense. Let us have a look at Bernard’s first day at boys’ school. He feels uneasy, fearful about the gaze of the ‘onlookers’ and starts telling stories to himself to avoid crying:

Everybody knows that I am going to school, going to school for the first time. “That boy is going to school for the first time”, says the housemaid, cleaning the steps. I must not cry. I must behold them indifferently. Now the awful portals of the station gape; “the moon-faced clock regards me”. I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of housemaids, the stare of clocks, staring faces, indifferent faces, or I shall cry. (21)

Then Bernard perceives the other pupils, his friends Louis and Neville who are going to boys’ school for the first time too. Seen through Bernard’s eyes they look at ease, self-confident:

“There is Louis, there is Neville, in long coats, carrying handbags, by the booking-office. They are composed.” (21) The second ‘persona’ speaking immediately after Bernard is Louis and he observes: Here is Bernard. He is composed; he is easy. He swings his bag as he walks. I will follow Bernard, because he is not afraid. (21) The reader knows from the previous lines
that Bernard is everything but easy or composed, he is having a hard time repressing tears.

What is then the reason for these symmetrically contradicting passages? “Pour entendre le sens d’un auteur il faut accorder tous les passages contraires”, Blaise Pascal notably wrote in his Pensées (“To understand the meaning of an author, we must make all the contrary passages agree” 684). Louis is wrong about Bernard and Bernard is wrong about Louis. If Louis misinterprets Bernard’s state of mind it is because the latter puts on a mask of indifference: Bernard looks composed, but he is not composed. He does everything that is in his might to behold the Others indifferently, he painfully strives to keep his awful secret hidden. To appreciate what is going on here one should return to Johnsen’s brilliant analysis of the unfulfilled ‘promise of autonomy’: “Fictional texts show the promise of autonomy unfulfilled, to each alone; to mask this private shame, all pretend to possess the sufficiency each lacks. Each must copy the apparent originality of others, without giving himself away as a rank imitator.” (Johnsen 2003, 3; my emphasis)

According to Girard this odd illusion is imputable to the modern ‘glad tidings’: ‘God is dead’, it is up to man to take his place, but the promise of metaphysical autonomy—as the promise of the snake to Adam and Eve in the biblical story of the Fall—turns out to be false. “Each individual discovers in the solitude of his own consciousness that the promise [of autonomy] is false but no one is able to universalize his experience.” (Girard 1965, 57)

The impossibility to universalize, to look beyond one’s individual case is comically visible in The Waves: “I will follow Bernard, because he is not afraid” The farcical side of the illusion should not conceal the suffering caused by this illusion, a suffering that cannot be shared and thus not alleviated. In her introduction to her translation of the novel Marguerite Yourcenar remarked—considering the structure of the novel—that The Waves looks like an essay on human isolation: “Les Vagues se présente comme un essai sur l’isolement humain.”
(Woolf 1974, 9; emphasis in the original). Unsurprisingly, the consciousness of existence in some characters becomes extremely bitter and solitary. “I hate all details of the individual life”, Rhoda says *at a party*. (79) In order to grasp the significance of the “isolement humain”, the universal isolation depicted in the novel, a closer look at Rhoda’s mutterings at that party is indispensable. As in the passages quoted above the protagonist typically feels excluded from the Other’s self-confident and autonomous world: “What then is the knowledge that Jinny has as she dances; the assurance that Susan has as, stopping quietly beneath the lamplight, she draws the white cotton through the eye of her needle? They say, Yes; they say, No; they bring their fists down with a ban on the table. But I doubt: I tremble.” (79)

The other people give the impression to be living more spontaneously, more happily and must surely look down on her. That is what Rhoda thinks, as we will see. When others are talking she imagines them making fun of her (which is probably not true as the reader can tell from the inside-look in the consciousness of the other characters; the contempt seems mainly imagined). As Bernard who had to ‘make phrases’ in order to ‘interpose’ something hard between himself and the Other’s gaze, so Rhoda needs to summon faces and thoughts as an amulet against the imagined scorn coming from them:

Tongues with their whips are upon me. Mobile, incessant, they flicker over me. I must prevaricate and fence them off with lies. What amulet is there against this disaster? What face can I summon to lay cool upon this heat? I think of names on boxes; of mothers from whose wide knees skirts descend; of glades where the many-backed steep hills come down. Hide me, I cry, protect me, for I am the youngest, the most naked of you all. Jinny rides like a gull on the wave, dealing her looks adroitly here and there, saying this, saying that, with truth. But I lie; I prevaricate. (79)
Rhoda feels ‘naked’ and insecure but hides her blatant lack of autonomy, her ‘private shame’ (to use Johnsen’s excellent term) through lying and pretending. She wants to be hidden, to be protected because she thinks she is “the most naked”. In an earlier passage Louis said: “You are all protected. I am naked.” (72) The same imagery reappears several times. At a reunion with the other protagonists Rhoda is afraid to join the Others; she simultaneously envies and proudly despises them (171) and says: “There were lamp-posts and trees that had not yet shed their leaves on the way from the station. The leaves might have hidden me still.” (170) Since the nakedness and the need to be hidden can hardly be understood literally, it seems implausible that it would not have some deeper, ‘existential’ resonance. And maybe even a metaphysical? In what famous piece of world-literature do we have people becoming aware of their ‘nakedness’, their ‘private shame’ and want to hide it, to be protected? The story of the Fall is about pride.

Pride has always been a temptation but in modern times it has become irresistible because it is organized and amplified in an unheard-of way. The modern ‘glad tidings’ are heard by everyone. The more deeply it is engraved in our hearts the more violent is the contrast between this marvellous promise [of metaphysical autonomy, i.e. ‘being like gods’] and the brutal disappointment inflicted by experience. (Girard 1965, 56)

Rhoda’s silent, desperate cry at the party “Hide me, I cry, protect me, for I am the youngest, the most naked of you all” and Louis’s silent utterance “You are all protected. I am naked.” is common to many characters in the novel (even if the words are not always the same) and may well be the expression—as we suggested—of a special existential situation, viz. that “the truth about all men is locked up in the deepest recesses of each individual consciousness.” (Girard 1965, 57) The new technique used by Woolf in this novel, the series of ‘dramatic soliloquies’ (as she termed them) without dialogue is eminently appropriate to the depiction of a fundamental impossibility to communicate (a general suffering). In Rhoda’s case, as in
Edward Munch’s startling painting *The Scream*, the silent cry is out of tune with the immediate context (a banal party in the former case, a sunset in the latter) and so undoubtedly demands a more universal explanation. “Everyone thinks that he alone is condemned to hell, and that is what makes it hell.” (Girard 1965, 57)
“My great adventure is really Proust.”
On “jeunes filles” and little boys.

My great adventure is really Proust. Well – what remains to be written after that?

Virginia Woolf 13

[Woolf placed] Proust first of all among those novelists who are “psychologists”.

Elizabeth M. Shore14

One cannot brood over the problem of Woolfian subjectivity and the paradoxical “psychology” touched upon in the previous chapter without being reminded of Woolf’s enduring and passionate admiration for the oeuvre of Marcel Proust, whom she called “by far the greatest modern novelist”.15 What is more, Woolf placed “Proust first of all among those novelists who are ‘psychologists’”.16 For our purpose it is interesting to note that René Girard once stressed that his idea of psychological mimesis first materialized through comparing Marcel Proust’s La Recherche with masterpieces by some other great European novelists.17 Could it be that it is precisely the paradoxical “psychology” studied in the previous chapter that makes Proust and Woolf akin (from a Girardian perspective), however dissimilar both authors’ literary styles and the thematic content of their prose often is? This is the hypothesis that will be tested in the present chapter.

13 Letters II, 565–566
14 Shore 1979, 235
15 Letters III, 365
16 Shore 1979, 235
17 See, for instance: ‘Interview avec Marie-Louise Martinez’ (Girard, 1994) « Ce qui me frappait dès le départ c’est ce que dans des langues différentes certaines œuvres se ressemblent et en particulier que ces contacts avaient trait au désir. Ce qui me frappait c’était le rapport entre ce que Proust appelle snobisme, ce que nous appelons tous snobisme et ce que Stendhal appelle vanité. »
First I will give a short overview of the critical reflection on Proust’s possible influence on Virginia Woolf’s literary oeuvre and state the position I want to take in the discussion. Then follows a brief historical outline of Woolf’s long-term passion for *La Recherche*, her intriguing “anxiety of influence”\(^\text{18}\) and how this anxiety might have shaped part of her own literary endeavours (backed with data from her letters and diaries). Subsequently I will engage in a close comparative reading of some key passages in *The Waves* and *La Recherche* and point to surprisingly significant affinities between Woolf’s and Proust’s literary “psychology”. In doing so I will try to show how, in my view, Woolf could well have reshaped, changed and condensed crucial Proustian scenes in *The Waves* in a very intelligent and witty manner. As a conclusion Proust’s didacticism will be briefly measured up to the often disregarded theoretical voice in *The Waves*.

**Critical discussion**

As Margaret Tudeau-Clayton observes in the most recent substantial article that touches upon the subject, “critical discussion” of Woolf’s relation to Proust is “restricted in scope” (Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 292). This remark echoes Shore’s statement that “the question of Proust’s influence on the novels of Virginia Woolf has been raised in passing by several of Virginia Woolf’s critics.”\(^\text{19}\) (my italics) One of the most early critical comments on Woolf’s relation to Proust was made in 1932 by Floris Delattre, not surprisingly in a book titled *Le Roman Psychologique de Virginia Woolf*. Delattre briefly draws attention to common thematic concerns and describes Proust as a significant influence on Woolf.\(^\text{20}\) Some years later, in 1938, in her *Studies on the Modern Novel*, Dorothy M. Hoare, suggests *en passant* that “Proust … must have very greatly influenced her work.”\(^\text{21}\) These two critics were writing

\(^{18}\) To use Harold Bloom’s terminology.

\(^{19}\) Shore 1979, 232

\(^{20}\) See Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 318

\(^{21}\) Hoare 1938, 43 ; quoted in Shore 1979, 232
when Woolf was still alive. Later, in his book *The Glass Roof*, James Hafley briefly points to similarities between *Orlando* and Proust’s novel, especially Woolf’s handling of the scheme of water imagery. He concludes that “she ‘imitated’ Proust”. Nevertheless, as Shore rightly comments upon those critics’ views, the “evidence so far adduced” for their thesis “cannot be called convincing”.

Other scholars have argued that Proust’s work had no impact on Woolf’s literary performance at all. Jean Alexander, for instance, suggests that Woolf only “read Proust as escape literature, in the sense that he took her far from her own work.”

As Shore notes, many critics have adopted a position “somewhere between these extremes”. They point to thematic affinities “but suggest that such affinities are probably due to a coincidental similarity of temperament, or to the prevailing climate of European thought in the early twentieth century.” For these critics a vital bond between the two modernist authors does not really exist. In his short article ‘Proust and Virginia Woolf’, Proust-biographer George Duncan Painter refers to shared themes but his paper remains indeed “largely anecdotal in character”. In her article on *Orlando* and Proust Shore tries to show that the moments of vision in *Orlando* “owe their distinctive quality at least in part to the influence of Proust” however “the parallel is not exact in all points”.

Fewer is to be found on purely stylistic similarities. Cheryl Mares has written three pieces on the relationship between literature and painting in Proust and Woolf and how Proust may have influenced Woolf. Mares argues that reading Proust has probably helped Virginia Woolf to...
question “certain assumptions central to Bloomsbury aestheticism and to resist becoming a “victim” of painting, or, to be more precise, of formalism’s potentially sterilizing extremes.” (Mares 1989, 356) In a recent note in the French Magazine Littéraire Julie Wolkenstein observes how different the two authors’ styles really are. Contrary to Proust’s style, Woolf’s is typically elliptical, condensed, polyphonic, full of allusions, resplendent with suggestive repetitions and syncope-rhythms.  

Now, as the differences between the two authors appear to be greater than the similarities that are at best of secondary importance, how is it possible then that quite a few (early) critics have argued that the British novelist has been very greatly influenced by the French modernist? Have they read their sources so superficially? I do not think so. There is, I think, a deep common bond between the two modernist authors. It has, however, little two do with a shared style or even a common repertoire of themes. A first hint at this profound connection is to be got from Woolf’s own autobiographical data. Since Woolf’s diaries, letters and essays have all been recovered and duly edited, today “we have opportunities to improve our comprehension” of her oeuvre that “wasn’t possible in Woolf’s own lifetime.”

The history of an anxious passion

Although Woolf first starts reading Proust only in 1922, the year in which the French author dies, she already mentions him in her diary as early as April 18, 1918, referring to a talk with Roger Fry. Fry would occasionally read quotes from Proust whom he is very enthusiastic about (until he later finds out that Proust had translated Ruskin, whose aestheticism professor

31 Wolkenstein 2004, 54 « l’ellipse, l’allusion, la condensation, la répétition suggestive, le rythme syncopé, et surtout la polyphonie. »
32 Johnsen 2004, 108
33 This historical outline has as its basic sources Shore 1979, Mares 1989 and Tudeau-Clayton 2006.
Fry had, like many other befriended intellectuals, judged to be utterly passé).\textsuperscript{34} Proust quickly became very much \textit{à la mode} in the Bloomsbury circle. However, in January 1922 Woolf’s desire to read Proust is still mixed with a paralysing anxiety. In a letter to E. M. Forster “[Woolf] underscores how anxious apprehension is stronger than desire.”\textsuperscript{35} She compares “the threat of taking on the widely acknowledged contemporary masterpiece as death by drowning” (Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 308) Woolf writes: “Every one is reading Proust. I sit silent and hear their reports. It seems to be a tremendous experience, but I'm shivering on the brink, and waiting to be submerged with a horrid sort of notion that I shall go down and down and down and perhaps never come up again.”\textsuperscript{36} Writing to Fry “in May 1922 she ‘propose[s] to sink’ ‘all day’ into the second volume”. (Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 308) She finally takes the ‘plunge’.\textsuperscript{37} Woolf begins with the second volume, \textit{À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs}.

Wolkenstein comments: “[quand elle] vient de commencer à lire \textit{À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs}, elle résume [dans son journal intime] le mélange d’enthousiasme et d’intimidation que suscitera toujours chez elle l’entreprise proustienne.” (Wolkenstein 2004, 54) Woolf records her feelings about Proust as follows:

Proust so titillates my own desire for expression that I can hardly set out the sentence. Oh if I could write like that! I cry. And at the moment such is the astonishing vibration and saturation and intensification that he procures – theres [sic] something sexual in it – that I feel I can write like that, and seize my pen and then I can’t write like that. Scarcely anyone so stimulates the nerves of language in me: it becomes an obsession.\textsuperscript{38}

“Blocked by the obsession” she does not continue reading Proust over the summer. “[I]t is only in October 1922 that she records in her journal that she ‘now begin[s] Proust’ (October

\textsuperscript{34} Proust did not remain a Rushkin-devotee all his life (see Pieters 2005, 38-46).

\textsuperscript{35} Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 308

\textsuperscript{36} Letters II, 499 - quoted in Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 308

\textsuperscript{37} See Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 308

\textsuperscript{38} Letters II, 525 - quoted in Shore 1979, 233
4). This marks the beginning of the most intense period of the relationship (1922–1927), although she continues to read and refer to Proust, if more sporadically, until 1937.” (Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 309) However anxious she might have been about Proust’s influence, Woolf wrote her real masterpieces after 1922 (*Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, The Waves* etc.). At the end of the most passionate period of the relationship, after finishing *To the Lighthouse*, she immediately begins to meditate on a new book (end of 1926-1927) 39, a novel that initially would be set in France and that she would start drafting in July 1929: *The Waves*. Its “gestation” would be “one of the most prolonged of all Woolf’s novels.” (Flint 1992, xvii) and was, according to Woolf herself, “the first novel in my own style” 41. Having the chronology of her anxious relation to Proust in mind, the conception of the novel comes at an interesting moment. Before meditating and writing *The Waves*, Woolf still perceived Proust’s literary creation as a great threat to her authorial autonomy. 42 After the most intense period of the relationship this tension gradually disappeared. As a result, *The Waves* could, paradoxically, be Woolf’s most “Proustian” novel since she would not fear to let herself be influenced by some aspects of Proust’s literary genius.

The similarities between *La Recherche* (especially *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*) and *The Waves* (two novels that, if I am not mistaken, have not yet been read comparatively) are, as I will try to show below, more than arresting, but it is not a question of style. In *The Waves* (1931) Woolf’s style profoundly deviates from Proust’s, even more than in her other novels. Tudeau-Clayton rightly notes that Woolf’s sentences in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) “have a Proustian sinuosity”. 43 The same thing holds true for *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In both novels

39 Flint 1992, xviii  
40 See Jones 2007, 5  
41 Quoted in Briggs 2006, 456  
42 Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 311  
43 Tudeau-Clayton 2006, 322
Woolf’s sentences are often typically crammed, meandering and shaped with many commas and semicolons. It is no coincidence that Tudeay-Clayton is reminded of Proust’s style. The French modernist is famous for his sometimes amazingly long and yet startlingly graceful sentences. At times one wonders if or why Proust did not have troubles finishing his half-sheet-long (or longer) sentences. In contrast, in *The Waves* (perhaps with exception of the italicised interludes) the sentences are characteristically short, elliptical and repetitive (suggesting a musical rhythm). Woolf’s new style is already detectable directly after the first interlude, when the voices start speaking, phrasing their perceptions of reality, one after another, using short clauses that stylistically mirror each other (5). These phrases really epitomize the “little language” (107,183, 202, 227) Bernard longs for and Louis hears the other voices speaking: “They speak now without troubling to finish their sentences. They talk a little language such as lovers use.” (117) It is the same “little language” which Bernard, the voice who is most obsessed with textuality, yearns for: “How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement.” (183) Could it be that, Woolf’s search for her own style, in opposition to Proust’s, is mirrored in the gruelling search for the right story and style by Woolf’s would-be author *par excellence*, Bernard? Being a wannabe writer Bernard moreover closely resembles the Proustian narrator Marcel. In any case, the threat of authorial influence is meditated in *The Waves*, not in the lengthy didactic manner of *La Recherche* but in succinct and seemingly unrelated statements. At one point, for instant, Bernard notes about Neville

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44 Marcel’s lengthy cogitations on his admiration for the novelist Bergotte is a good example. A typical passage is the following: « Malheureusement sur presque toutes choses j’ignorais l’opinion [de Bergotte]. Je ne doutais pas qu’elle ne fût entièrement différente des miennes, puisqu’elle descendait d’un monde inconnu vers lequel je cherchais à m’élèver; persuadé que mes pensées eussent paru pure ineptie à cette esprit parfait, j’avais tellement fait table rase de toutes, que quand par hasard il m’arriva d’en rencontrer, dans tel de ses livres, une que j’avais
that he “feverishly [writes] long lines of poetry, in the manner of whomever he admires most at the moment.” (67) This reminds one of Marcel’s admiration for Bergotte. In Du côté de chez Swann the Proustian narrator remarks that he can only savour some of his own phrases when he finds the equivalent in Bergotte.45 When she is still writing Mrs Dalloway (1925) Woolf notices that she cannot “read Proust when I’m correcting, so persuasive is he.”46 Woolf’s susceptibility to this kind of persuasion strangely resembles Rhoda’s mimetic urge to act and speak like the admired others: “I pull on my stockings as I see them pull on theirs. I wait for you to speak and then speak like you.” (98) This type of influence is a constant, even obsessive theme in The Waves, that has not yet received much critical attention. Could it be that the most profound influence Proust exerted on Woolf in The Waves is her continuing, Proust-like (although not stylistically) reflection on the psychology, the meaning and the implications of mimetic influence, in general? A close comparative reading, the kind of reading Woolf herself often recommended47, will make that hypothesis more than probable.

Close reading

According to René Girard, one of the very key passages on human desire and its contradictions in La Recherche is the long episode in which the narrator peeps at the sportily dressed “jeunes filles” making their “tour de digue” at the French coast.48 The Proustian eu moi-même, mon cœur se gonflait comme si un Dieu dans sa bonté me l’avait rendue, l’avait déclarée légitime et belle. … Plus tard, quand je commençai de composer un livre, certaines phrases dont la qualité ne suffit pas pour me décider à le continuer, j’en retrouvai l’équivalent dans Bergotte. Mais ce n’était qu’alors, quand je les lisais dans son œuvre, que je pouvais en jouir.» (Du côté de chez Swann, 94-95) Amusingly, even Marcel’s identification with Bergotte is not unmediated: « J’avais entendu parler de Bergotte pour la première fois par un de mes camarades plus âgé que moi et pour qui j’avais une grande admiration. » (89)

45 See previous footnote.
46 November 18th, 1924
47 As Tudeau-Clayton highlights: “ […] comparative juxtapositions serve ‘to bring out’ a ‘common quality’, as [Woolf] puts it in ‘How Should One Read’, and so to affirm what she calls, in ‘How It Strikes a Contemporary’ (1925), the ‘continuity and calm’ that remain despite the ‘storm’ – the literary and cultural as well as socio-political turbulences that accompany the passage of time.” (2006, 219)
48 Girard 1978, 407 ; Proust 1988, 354-365
narrator yearns to be with the “jeunes filles” and his desire to partake of their lifestyle is expressed as a thirst to absorb their very “being”. As Girard notes: “Proust compares this terrible desire to be the Other with thirst.” and then quotes from the long passage in Les jeunes filles en fleur where the narrator gazes at the girls: “Soif, pareille à celle dont brûle une terre altérée – d’une vie que mon âme, parce qu’elle n’en avait jamais reçu jusqu’ici une seule goutte absorberait d’autant plus avidement, à long traits, dans une plus parfaite imbibition. » (F 360-361) The new lifestyle is made desirable not through its objective qualities nor via some kind of inner, solipsistic revelation but by the sudden appearance of fascinating others, others who are stared at in an almost voyeuristic manner. The group of girls gawped at, “la petite bande désirée.” (P 395) plays a key role in the second volume of La Recherche and beyond (its “leader” is Albertine!). Now, there is a crucial scene at the beginning of The Waves that very closely resembles the Proustian passage. Louis, the Woolfian protagonist who narrates the whole event, is mesmerized by a small group of youngsters moving in front of him, exactly like Marcel. The group’s sex is inversed, but not the observer(s)’s (Neville is also staring). Louis says he is “peeping” at “little boys” who “have gone in a vast team to play cricket”. (34-35) He ardently desires to be part of the fascinating band: “that is what we wish to be, Neville and I”. (34) Like the young girls in A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs the enthralling “little boys” will play a key role in The Waves. Their number one, the “general” is Percival! (34)

I will first compare the « jeunes filles » to the « little boys » and then focus on the most significant similarity between the compared scenes: the Proustian narrator’s desire and the Woolfian voices’ desire.

When one looks at the two spellbinding bands of youngsters, young girls in Proust and little boys in Woolf, one soon notices that they have very much in common. The sporty appearance
of the little boys in \textit{The Waves} deviates from the more intellectual interests of the voices (here Louis and Neville). The same thing holds true for the “jeunes filles” in Proust. The hyper-sensitive and brainy Marcel who ardently observes the girls refers to “une culture physique à laquelle ne s’est pas encore ajoutée celle de l’intelligence.” (F 357) The young girls are not preparing to play cricket (a typically English game) but at least two of the girls seem to play golf. “Une de ces [filles] poussait devant elle, de la main, sa bicyclette; deux autres tenaient des ‘clubs’ de golf. » (F 354) They all have a sporty outfit, a detail the narrator finds fascinating: “leur accoutrement tranchait sur celui des autres jeunes filles de Balbec, parmi lesquelles quelques-unes, il est vrai, se livraient aux sports, mais sans adopter pour cela une tenue spéciale. » (F 354)

Both bands of kids appear to function as a whole. The simultaneity of the bands’ movements impresses Louis: “Peeping from behind a curtain, I note the simultaneity of their movements with delight.” (34) The little Marcel is captivated by the “flottement harmonieux, la translation continue d’une beauté fluide, collective et mobile.” (F 356) He compares the group to “une lumineuse comète”. The “beauté fluide” that gives an impression of great beauty and spontaneity is in reality caused by the young girls imitating each other, exactly like the little boys in Woolf. This is not quite obvious when Marcel observes the young girls for the first time but later it becomes plain. At the end of \textit{À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs} the narrator explains why it is difficult for him to love Andrée, one of the girls. “Elle était trop intellectuelle, trop nerveuse, trop maladive, trop semblable à moi.” (F 503) Marcel wonders why he was misguided at first in his belief that Andrée was so unlike himself, as sporty, healthy and self-assured as the other girls. He attributes his perceptual errors to the fact that Andrée came to resemble the girls she strived to be like. “Ces erreurs […] tiennent souvent, dans le cas d’Andrée en particulier, à ce qu’on prend suffisamment l’aspect, les façons de ce
qu’on n’est pas mais qu’on voudrait être. » (F 503) Using metaphors of contagion the narrator notes how Andrée receives her « health » from the other girls.\(^49\) She is like « un de ces malades qui ne reçoivent leur santé que d’autres, comme les planètes empruntent leur lumière, comme certains corps ne font que laisser passer l’électricité. » (F 504) To a lesser extent, the same thing pertains to Rosemonde and Gisèle. “Andrée, comme Rosemonde et Gisèle, même plus qu’elles, était tout de même une amie d’Albertine, partageant sa vie, imitant ses façons au point que le premier jour je ne les avais pas distinguées d’abord l’une de l’autre. » (P 504)

In The Waves the cricket-playing boys’ prestige also derives from their close friendship with Percival, whom they all imitate, something that is obsessively underlined in the novel. If “all their heads turn simultaneously at the corner by the laurel bushes” (34 ; my italics) it is not because they have been drilled to do that, nor because they benefit from some kind of telepathic intelligence. The boys’ imitation of Percival is hilariously patent in The Waves, even more bluntly than in the case of the “jeunes filles” in La Recherche. “The little boys trooped after him across the playing-field. They blew their noses as he blew his nose”, as Bernard later recalls (92). Blowing one’s nose is a perfect example of an action for which there is no ground whatsoever to be copied; it responds to a very personal need. Percival’s involuntary mimetic influence appears to be so strong that it overthrows reason. In a more caricatured manner he obviously plays the same role for the little boys as Albertine for the “jeunes filles”. “Dès son enfance Albertine avait toujours eu en admiration devant elle quatre ou cinq petites camarades, parmi lesquelles se trouvait Andrée qui lui était si supérieure et le savait (et peut-être cette attraction qu’Albertine exerçait bien involontairement avait-elle été à l’origine, avait-elle servi à la fondation de la petite bande). » (F 495)

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\(^{49}\) Health is a remarkable metaphor in this context. One would expect sickness to be contagious instead of health.
Percival and Albertine

Albertine’s dominance strikingly resembles Percival’s power. Andrée, (like Marcel) has superior qualities. The other girls too are more intelligent, more sensitive and less vulgar than Albertine. Even Albertine’s social rank is far below that of her peers. In the same manner the “boasting boys” (33) are not as uncultivated as the illiterate Percival. On the contrary, they are “the officers of the Natural History Society”. (34) Albertine’s magnetism, like Percival’s cannot be explained by using a traditional, conventional framework. In the disintegrating traditional French and English cultures no standard “heroes” or fixed cultural models are any longer followed and revered. This fact, however, does not put an end to what Proust terms “esprit d’imitation” (F 482).

Ruthlessness

The little boys and the young girls, however well-educated they are, do not excel in gentleness, they all seem quite brutal. The boys’ quasi-military manner of “marching in troops” and their total disregard for other little boys they make “sob in dark passages.” (34) is reminiscent of how the “jeunes filles” behave. According to the Proustian narrator, it is as if they “eussent jugé que la foule environnante était composé d’êtres d’une autre race et dont la souffrance même n’eût pu éveiller en elles un sentiment de solidarité, elles ne paraissaient pas la voir, forçaient les personnes arrêtées à s’écarter ainsi que sur le passage d’une machine qui eût été lâchée et dont il ne fallait pas attendre qu’elle évitât les piétons. » (F 357) At this time Marcel does not yet know the names of the girls and tellingly labels one “la cruelle” and another one “l’impitoyable”. (F 361) In Woolf’s novel the boys’ ruthlessness is no less obvious. In the studied passage (33-34) Louis first enumerates what is so delightful about the boys and then relates their cruelty: “But they also leave butterflies trembling with their wings
pinched off; they throw dirty pocket-handkerchiefs clotted with blood screwed up into corners. They make [other] little boys sob in dark passages. They have big red ears that stand out under their caps. Yet that is what we wish to be, Neville and I.” (34) In the scene in *La Recherche* it is not little boys but a little old man, “[un] petit vieux” (F 358) who is bullied. One of the girls “sauta par-dessus [un] vieillard épouvanté, dont la casquette marine fut effleurée par les pieds agiles, aux grand amusement des autres jeunes filles … « C’pauvre petit vieux, i m’fait d’la peine, il a l’air à moitié crevé », dit l’une de ces filles d’une voix rogommeuse et avec un accent à demi ironique.” (F 358) Likewise later in *The Waves* the young boys scare an old woman, “[a]n old, unsteady woman carrying a bag trots home under the fire-red windows. She is half afraid that they will fall on her and tumble her into the gutter.” (68)

However vulgar and prone to acts of minor delinquency, the “petite bande” is above all presented as something extremely beautiful (cfr. supra) and something accompanied by a very real promise of happiness, “la promesse de bonnes heures à passer ensemble.” (F 356) The bliss is of course set aside for those who are part of the little group. The throng of “jeunes filles” is therefore at once beautiful and nasty. Exactly the same paradox is to be found in Bernard’s opinion of the little boys in *The Waves*: “The horrid little boys, who are also *so beautiful*, who you and Louis, Neville, envy so deeply, have bowled off with their heads all turned the same way.” (35, italics added)

The above set of remarkable parallels between boys and “jeunes filles” is not as arresting as the similarity of the Proustian narrator’s and the Woolfian voices’ desire. In both texts the protagonists stare at a little group of youngsters passing by and immediately wish to adopt their way of life. Marcel hopes to be initiated into a totally new lifestyle. Louis equally looks
forward to some future life in which he will be winning matches and “thundering out songs at
midnight”. (34) What Girard writes about Proust is very appropriate here: “The sudden
prestige which the narrator gives to an unfamiliar way of life always coincides with his
meeting a being who awakens this desire.” The Woolfian protagonist not only desires to
embrace a new way of life, he basically wants to be like the other, even more: to be the
fascinating other. Bernard echoes Louis when he says: “… we will settle among the long
grasses, while they play cricket. Could I be “they” I would choose it; I would buckle on my
pads and stride across the playing-field at the head of the batsmen. Look now, how everybody
follows Percival.” (26) What is described in long pages, sinuous sentences and grandiose
comparisons in La Recherche is often condensed in stunningly explicit and brief formulas in
The Waves, that are however not less beautiful: “Could I be “they” I would choose it.” In
Woolf’s novel the desire to be someone else is also described as something as banal as
wearing clothes. One of the female voices, Rhoda, puts it like this: “As I fold up my frock and
my chemise, said Rhoda, so I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny.” (19) As
noted in the previous chapter, desire in The Waves is not merely subjective (stemming from
the “I”) nor simply objective (coming from the object) but “metaphysical” (coming from the
second person the subject wants to be like).

The observer desires to be the other and at the same time remain himself. The other is a an
extension of the self which the Proustian narrator equates with (a promise of) happiness: “[…]
la vie de ces jeunes filles m’offrait ce prolongement, cette multiplication possible de soi-
même, qui est le bonheur.” (F 360) Louis, the Woolfian voice, also desires a very literal
“multiplication” of himself when he says: “If my legs were reinforced by theirs, how they
would run!” (34) Here again, a passage in Proust that could have been part of an existentialist

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51 Girard 1965, 53
philosopher’s ponderings are translated in a luminously short, vivid and not less revealing exclamation in Woolf’s novel.

One could say, without exaggerating, that the best commentary on the studied passage in *La Recherche* where the narrator first meets the “jeunes filles” (and his relation with them in the rest of the novel) is to be found in *The Waves*. The author of *The Waves* not only revealingly condenses Proustian psychological insights, she also seems to work like a literary critic who strives to make explicit what is implicit or half-explicit in the literary work of art that is under examination. It reminds one of a caricaturist’ technique of thickening, exaggerating significant details so that they become more overt. So, for instance, Marcel’s desire and his gawping at the girls evidently has a voyeuristic quality. In Woolf’s novel this aspect is a little exaggerated and thus made perfectly and even comically clear. Louis is not simply looking at the boasting boys who are preparing to play cricket, he is “peeping from behind a curtain” (34) Of course, there is no sensible reason at all to steal a look from behind a curtain since the boys are always with him at school, in the open, fully visibly.

Another thing that Woolf makes more perfectly plain is the covertly sexual, even latent homosexual aspects of the fascination. (35) In *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* the little Marcel is enthralled by a female group of youngsters but it would not change anything essential to the scene if Albertine, Andrée etc. were named Albert, André etc. The proof is that the scene in Woolf looks perfectly plausible. It is credible since the fascination is not sexual *at first* and often never becomes really sexual at all. According to Girard, who does not use the word “latency”, mimetic fascination for a model of the same sex can in some cases—especially when the admired model becomes a rival in erotic affaires—become so strong that it drags the sexual instinct in its direction: that is, in the direction of the model of the same sex. (1965, 47;
1978, 441) For Girard it is not the sexual instinct but the identification with the adored model that comes first. Girard’s view seems rather pertinent in Neville’s case. Neville is Percival greatest worshipper. After the passage studied here he dreams about Percival lying “naked, tumbled, hot, on his bed.” (35). Yet before he mentions his sexual attraction Neville expresses his “mystical” devotion toward Percival: “Percival has gone now [and the little boys after him] He takes my devotion; he accepts my tremulous, no doubt abject offering.” (34) The tremulous worship of the model precedes the sexual reveries.

The religious quality of the voyeur’s desire is bluntly, even violently visible in the condensed passage in The Waves, more so than in La Recherche where it is nevertheless clearly suggested. Marcel’s hope to be part of those who “[font] ‘bande à part’” (F 359) seems so unlikely as if « devant quelque frise antique ou quelque fresque figurant un cortège, j’avais cru possible, moi spectateur, de prendre place, aimé d’elles, entre les divines processionnaires. » (F 361) Louis says about the little boys: “If I could follow, if I could be with them, I would sacrifice all I know.” (34) It is impossible, I think, to simulate the language of religious discipleship or, more specifically, the imitatio Christi more closely. If the word “them” were replaced with “Christ”, for instance, this phrase could figure in a Christian saint’s hagiography as the motto that recapitulates his/her life. The religious vocabulary in Woolf and Proust cannot, however, emanate from a realistic description of the envied/adored others. 52 The Proustian “divines processionnaires” do not speak divine words. Like Percival who speaks in “slovenly accents” (27) they use “[des] termes d’argot si voyous et criés si fort.” (F 359) Like the nasty little boys the “jeunes filles” are everything but models of saintly virtues : « dans aucune de mes suppositions figurait celle qu’elles eussent pu être vertueuses. » (P 359) The religious metaphors definitely do not realistically portray the young

52 For Proust and religious imagery see: Chaudier Stéphane, La Cathédrale profane: Proust et le langage religieux (Genève et Paris: Champion, 2004).
girls, nor the little boys. They are part of what Girard has called—commenting on Proust’s use of religious symbolism—a “realism of desire”. (1965, 82)

The metaphors realistically describe the desires’ transfiguration of reality, the illusion of the adored human being’s divine autonomy. If one wants to make sense of the religious imagery it is important to contrast the metaphors to everything that contradicts them, to everything that denotes the adored beings’ mere indifference for the other—as exemplified by Percival’s “oddly inexpressive eyes” and his “pagan indifference” (25)—or even their plain vulgarity. As I already mentioned in the previous chapter, for Girard the (real or imagined) indifference that one ascribes to the model of desire “always appears as the exterior aspect of a desire of oneself” (Girard 1966, 106). The model seems to desire his own being, a (real or imagined) desire the admirer unconsciously imitates (a desire which in turn may feed the model’s self-admiration). “The indifferent person always seems to possess that radiant self-mastery which we all seek. He seems to live in a closed circuit, enjoying his own being, in a state of happiness which nothing can disturb. He is God.” (Girard 1966, 107). This familiar mirage is lucidly debunked in La Recherche, according to Girard. (1978, 500). So the Proustian narrator wildest hopes will come true when he has a relationship with Albertine and, oddly and shockingly enough, he wants to rid himself of her “as soon as he thinks she is faithful to him” (Girard 1965, 165). As soon as Albertine no longer seems to live in a closed circuit, happily enjoying her own being, but shows a stable interest in the narrator, his desire for her pops off. Marcel can no longer model his desire to the real/imagined desire Albertine has for herself. Throughout La Recherche the Proustian narrator is attracted to those persons who give the impression to be “narcissists” in the sense Freud used this word in Zur Einführung des Narzissimus. Yet, according to Girard, La Recherche does not believe in the thing Freud called narcissism. Inspired by and commenting on Proust’s masterpiece Girard observes that
the “narcissism” ascribed to enviable others is an illusion. (see Girard 1978, 480-498).

Debunking the mirage of narcissism is central to The Waves too, I believe. In the previous chapter I have already tried to show how the different voices reciprocally imagine the others to be perfectly self-sufficient, a property they all lack themselves. The illusion of divine self-sufficiency humorously discredited by this glaring contradiction and made visible by Woolf’s use of “dramatic soliloquies” is made as evident in La Recherche in a different manner, especially through the surprising inconsistencies in Marcel’s relationship with Albertine.

Referring to the passage in À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs studied here Girard shows how a series of metaphors Freud uses to describe narcissist persons (child, animal, criminal and humorist) are to be found in the episode. In La Recherche, however, these metaphors do not convey the higher self-consciousness that one would expect to accompany radiant self-mastery but instead merely infantilize and animalize the “narcissist” other and moreover associate him with violence that expulses, that of crime and of the mob’s laugh, as Girard keenly remarks. (Girard 1978, 499) Hence the narrator compares the “jeunes filles” who laugh at the old man they pester, to a flock of birds, “une bande de mouettes” and refers to “leur esprit d’oiseaux.” (354). Now, this type of metaphor and the way Proust uses it certainly indicates the girls’ lack of concern for the other humans at Balbec, their apathy, but no independent personality or any kind of real narcissist self-sufficiency. A bird’s mind does not immediately evoke a towering degree of self-conscience, anymore than a little boy “who cannot read.” (34) The Woolfian little boys who always sing in chorus, by the way, mirror the birds in The Waves who also sing “in chorus” (6, 224). Woolf’s description of the pestering little boys (see above) visibly also contains the other above mentioned metaphors that can be found in Proust’s depiction of the “jeunes filles”, metaphors that rather de-humanize its objects rather than turning them in happy narcissists.
Together with the religious images the de-humanizing metaphors all point to the paradox that the epitome of the spiritual is eventually sought in “a blind wall of stupidity” (Girard 1965, 285). So, Neville who piously wants to offer his being to Percival says, after expressing his fervent zeal: “Yet I could not live with him and suffer his stupidity. He will coarsen and snore.” (35, italics added) Similarly Louis honestly relates the little boys’ coarseness and then adds: “Yet that is what we wish to be, Neville and I.” (34, italics added). In both cases the “yet” looks like a perfect application of the well-known Proustian axiom that “les “quoique” sont toujours des “parce que” méconnus” (F 10). It is paradoxically because Neville could not suffer Percival’s stupidity and baseness that he is so attracted by him. It is right after the above quoted remark that Neville goes on to imagine Percival lying naked on his bed. (35) In his case “the very essence of what is sexually desirable is to be found in spiritual and moral insufficiency, in all the vices which, where it not for the desire, would make it intolerable to be around the desired person.” (Girard 1965, 285). In the same manner in La Recherche “Albertine’s health and plumpness excite [Marcel’s] desire but this is not on account of any Rabelaisian sensuality. As always in double mediation the apparent materialism hides an inverse spiritualism.” (Girard 1965, 284)

The Waves improves our understanding of intriguing aspects of Proust’s novel, but it also works the other way around. Some mysterious aspects of The Waves become intelligible in didactic passages of La Recherche. One of the major problems of The Waves is the apparently unbridgeable difference of character between voices who are supposed to be one. As Woolf wrote to G. L. Dickinson after the publication of the novel: “… in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one.” Yet,

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53 Letters, IV, to G. L. Dickinson, 27 October 1931, 397
how can Rhoda and Bernard, for instance, be one? Bernard is the hyper-sociable scribe who is always in need of an audience. Rhoda, on the contrary, is so scared of her peer’s society that when invited by the other voices she is “taking cover now behind a waiter, now behind some ornamental pillar, so as to put off as long as possible the shock of recognition.” (90) Later Bernard explicitly evokes “to serve as opposite to myself the figure of Rhoda, always so furtive, always with fear in her eyes, always seeking some pillar in the desert, to find which she had gone [sic]; she had killed herself.” (216) Now, how can a people-addicted man like Bernard whose “being only glitters when all its facets are exposed to many people.” (141) be one with or at least be difficult to distinguish from a hyper-solitary, a hermit-like woman who anxiously flees to the desert? A comment by Proust made at the beginning of the passage analyzed above might well enlighten us about the essential link between Rhoda and Bernard, a link more elemental than their apparent differences: “Chez le solitaire la claustration même absolue et durant jusqu’à la fin de la vie a souvent pour principe un amour déréglé de la foule qui l’emporte tellement sur tout autre sentiment que, ne pouvant obtenir, quand il sort, l’admiration de la concierge, des passants, du cocher arrêté, il préfère n’être jamais vu d’eux, et pour cela renoncer à toute activité qui rendrait nécessaire de sortir. » (F 355) Compare this to what Bernard, the sociable man, says: « I only come into existence when the plumber, or the horse-dealer, or whoever it may be, says something which sets me alight.” (100) Rhoda believes she is only capable of making an impression on other people in her (day-) dreams. Her (day-)dreams clearly reveal how badly she is affected by “un amour déréglé de la foule”: “I imagine these nameless, these immaculate people, watching me from behind bushes. I leap high to excite their admiration. At night, in bed, I excite their complete wonders. I often die pierced with arrows to win their tears. If they should say, or I should see from a label on their boxes, that they were in Scarborough last holidays, the whole town runs gold, the whole
pavement is illuminated.” (31) As Proust writes: “L’amour – par consequent la crainte de la foule [est] un des plus puissant mobiles chez tous les hommes.” (355)

**Conclusion**

As I suggested above, one of the most lucid, humorous and incisive theoretical commentaries on a pivotal scene in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* may well be found in Woolf’s *The Waves*. Woolf seems to have reworked, condensed, highlighted and commented this Proustian scene that lays bare some major contradictions of human desire in the modern world. I do not think that Woolf’s novel is less “didactic” or “theoretical”, as *La Recherche*. As Flint rightly argues: “… no authorial comment or interpretation is offered [in The Waves], but, in many ways, one may read the novel as Woolf’s investigation of her own patterns of thought, particularly when faced with the problem of understanding the nature of identity.” (Woolf 1992, ix) In listening to the (psycho-) theoretical voice in *The Waves* one merely heeds Woolf’s brother-in-law’s observation that “In her novels she is thinking.” (Bell 1974 Vol. 2, 144) Doing so one also resists what Girard has termed the “belief in the ultimately inconsequential nature of all works of art as far as real knowledge is concerned.” (Girard 1978, ix) In *The Waves* Woolf seems to develop her thoughts on psychological matters, especially the paradoxical “nature of identity”. There are also other problems that seem to preoccupy her and that are steadily and theoretically ruminated in the novel. In a groundbreaking article in 1992 Jane Marcus was the first to suggest that a critique of fascism is at work in *The Waves*. It is partly in Proust’s *La Recherche*, I will propose, that Woolf finds a fitting socio-psychological basis for her theory on the spread of fascism and the psycho-social conditions that made it possible. This theory is suggested in “Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid” and alluded to in other non-novelistic writings as *A Room of One’s Own* and

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*Three Guineas* but nowhere so completely and—one is tempted to say—“systematically” laid out as in *The Waves*. As McIntire argues, explicitly referring to *The Waves*, “the effects of Woolf’s anti-fascist sentiment in her fiction still remain under-explored.” (McIntire 2005, 43)

That will be the subject of the next chapter.
“Hitler is bread by slaves.”
Mimetic theory and fascism in *The Waves*.

Jane Marcus was the first to propose that a fascist critique was at work in *The Waves*. I would argue, though, that the effects of Woolf’s anti-fascist sentiment in her fiction still remain underexplored.

**Gabrielle McIntire**


**Simone Weil**

Woolf [saw] the connection between racism and sexism in imperialism.

**William A. Johnsen**

As suggested in the previous chapter, here I will defend the thesis that the kind of socio-psychological and especially “mimetic” insights (in the girardian sense) Woolf found through observation, introspection and, I think, through her reading of Proust, are crucial for her theory on the psycho-social origins and spread of fascism. Woolf’s enduring interest in fascism is well-charted. I will first give a (very) brief historical introduction to her intellectual wrestling with the problem (“A watershed mark”). Then I will try to reconstruct some aspects of Woolf’s psycho-social “theory” of fascism in *The Waves* and how it is linked to modern misogyny.

**A watershed mark**

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55 McIntire 2005, 43
56 Weil 1966, 22-23
57 Johnsen 2003, 116
McIntire writes: “when The Waves was published, England and Europe were retrospectively at what historians like A.J.P. Taylor have called a “watershed” mark between the two World Wars (Lee ix). Mussolini had gained power in Italy in 1922, by the late 1920s fascist societies were springing up in England as well, and in 1933 Hitler was appointed Chancellor in Germany.” (McIntire 2005, 30) Virginia Woolf saw the wave of fascism rising. The spread of fascism in Europe frightened and fascinated her. It is was in 1927, the year that—as I already noted—marked the end of the most intense period of her passionate/anxious relationship with Proust, that Virginia took a trip to Mussolini’s Italy.  

Back home she read the dictator’s speeches. She thrice refers to him as an example of misogyny in A Room of One’s Own (1929) and in 1933 her own Hoggarth press translated and published the official text of Mussolini’s The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism. The English translation of the pamphlet turned into a bestseller. In the early 1930’s Woolf became a member of an anti-fascist league. Later she continues to meditate on fascism in “Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid”, Three Guineas and other writings. She firmly believed in an intellectual battle against fascism. “We are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience”, she writes at the end of Three Guineas. As Woolf saw it, this battle was especially suited for women, since they were not allowed to fight fascism with arms: “there is another way of fighting for freedom without arms; we can fight with the mind. We can make ideas that will help the young Englishman who is fighting up in the sky to defeat the enemy.” (1967, 173) There is no doubt that one of her preferred battlefields was literature, her literature. As some Woolfian critics have recently argued, Virginia’s struggle with fascism resonates in a most special manner in her literary writings, especially in The Waves (Marcus 1992; Pawlowski 2001; McIntire 2005)
“Hitler is bread by slaves”

It is not my intention to analyse the rise of fascism during the two world-wars, neither to present the phenomenon in all its intimidating complexity. The only thing I want to do here is to show how Woolf may have found and developed some “Proustian” answers to the puzzling questions that haunted her while contemplating the disturbing “social madness” that fuelled the rise of fascism. To isolate those Proustian answers René Girard’s reading of Proust will be helpful.

In a brief text entitled “Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid” Woolf asks the question what breads “Hitlers”. Her striking answer is: “Hitlers are bread by slaves” (174).60 Yet; where do the slaves come from, in a modern world that has (at least officially) abolished obvious forms of slavery? One of the most shocking realities one has to face when weighing up the terrible ravages caused by fascism in the middle of the twentieth century is that so many well-educated persons, great intellectuals, artists, but also many “ordinary” people were shamelessly involved in positive evil. The question is not why one “bad guy” like Hitler did so much evil, but why so many people slavishly went along with him and why so many others never had the will-power to stop the dictator. An isolated Hitler would remain a poor mad guy one should feel sorry for. Yet, when so many people start believing in him and follow him, he becomes a real danger. The dictator’s own belief in his dodgy ideas will be reinforced since he now sees them reflected in the eyes of his followers.

I think The Waves can help us understand where the “slaves” who breed Hitlers come from. In The Waves the six hyper-sensitive and intelligent personae are drawn into a slavish group mystique around the figure of Percival. Percival would remain a pitiable, clumsy and poorly talented (old) schoolboy without the quasi-religious admiration and the slavish following that

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60 Also quoted in McIntire 2005
turns him into an idol. Ironically the persona are slavishly following and adoring Percival at the exact moment they believe they are freeing, i.e. emancipating themselves from a crumbling English social order. This socio-psychological paradox that is often stressed in *The Waves* might indeed be interesting for our understanding of the same paradox regarding the rise of fascism. In *The Waves* the slavish following is not recognized, it is robed in romantic clichés. It seems that it is exactly this blindness that makes “slavery” possible in the modern world. At the end of a semi-mystical reunion with Percival Bernard proudly asserts his perfect self-reliance. He praises himself and his friends for being creators instead of slaves or sheep following a master:

> We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road.” (Woolf 2000, 157)

The romantic clichés uttered by Bernard echo Mussolini’s fascist discourse that is full of references to free will, creativity and the subjugation of nature and the world. “[B]y the exercise of his free will, man can and must create his own world. …[By his work] man subjugates nature and creates the human world.”, Mussolini wrote in *The Doctrine of Facism* translated by Woolf’s Hogggarth Press. It is ironic that in *The Waves* a similar discourse is put in the mouth of a slave (Bernard). The apparently creative and conquering Bernard proudly refuses to be a sheep or a slave following a master. It is true that he has emancipated himself from the official masters “wearing crosses with white ties.” (15) Bernard decries the old authoritative models, the ancient exempla. He wants to be free, to go forward on the road of progress and add his contribution to the creation of history.
It is nevertheless not a little ironic that Bernard loudly proclaims his own creativity and freedom precisely at the semi-religious meeting with his sheepishly followed master Percival, his old schoolmate, his peer. One remembers that previously Bernard had called his old schoolmate “a God”. (102) Bernard does this in a context that, interestingly, is gorged with “nativist and racialist ideologies”, to use Laura Doyle’s words. (Doyle 1996, 338) Bernard imagines how somewhere in India the wheel of a bullock-cart is stuck in a rut. The problem is not very hard to solve, it seems, yet the many natives swarming around it are totally incapable of putting things in order. In a remark full of racialist overtones Bernard assumes that “there are strange sour smells” (102) and pictures his western hero Percival to settle the case in less than five minutes: “By applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him, the bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes. The Oriental problem is solved. He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were—what indeed he is—a God.” (102)

In her article on The Waves Doyle notes that Woolf “stresses the pagan aspects of Percival” and that the “modernist-era interest in folk figures like Percival is a culmination of the nativist and racialist ideologies that we saw emerging in early Romanticism (a trajectory traced by both Leon Poliakov in The Aryan Myth and Martin Bernal in Black Athena, in different ways).” (Doyle 1996, 338) All this strangely recalls fascist and especially Nazi mythology. It is not surprising, although still a little unsettling, that Doyle refers to Romanticism to situate the neo-“pagan”, nativist and racialist mythology that surrounds the figure of Percival. Bernard’s view of himself as some kind of artistic creator (as he is sheepishly following his semi-divine master) also seems to be a typically “romantic” illusion of the kind René Girard has been debunking in his first essay Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque.
In her famous essay *Fascinating Fascism* Susan Sontag remarks that “[fascist] ideals are vivid and moving to many people … because their content is a romantic ideal to which many continue to be attached.”

Sonntag writes:

... it is generally thought that National Socialism stands only for brutishness and terror. But this is not true. National Socialism -more broadly, fascism - also stands for an ideal or rather ideals that are persistent today under other banners: the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community, the repudiation of the intellect, the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders).

It is striking that all the above “softer” features Sonntag associates to fascism are to be found in *The Waves* and are always linked to Percival or the little boys. What about the ideal of life as art? Bernard conceives of his own life as a piece of art for which he still has to find the right literary form to express it. Bernard’s obsession with form makes him think he can be “heroic” but it is clear that what he most needs is a personification of the art of living, his great mimetic model: Percival, who, through his calm indifference, is a great master of that art.

I remember [Percival’s] beauty. “Look, where he comes,” I said. ‘Lines and colours almost persuade me that I too can be heroic, I, who make phrases so easily, am so soon seduced, love what comes next, and cannot clench my fist, but vacillate weakly making phrases according to my circumstances. Now through my own infirmity I recover what he was to me: my opposite. ... [Percival] was indeed a great master of the art of living so that he seems to have lived long, and to have spread calm round him, indifference one might almost say. (118)

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61 Quoted in Schnapp 1996, 235

62 Quoted in Schnapp 1996, 235
What about the cult of beauty? It is again explicitly linked with Percival or the little boys. In the following quote Neville exults in the beauty he associates with the little boys. Neville then mistakes one of the boys for Percival, since the boy is imitating Percival in a quite perfect manner:

All they do is beautiful. There are cruets behind them and ornaments; their rooms are full of oars and oleographs but they have turned all to beauty. That boat passes under the bridge. Another comes. Then another. That is Percival, lounging on the cushions, monolithic, in giant repose. No, it is only one of his satellites, imitating his monolithic, his giant repose. (60-61)

In the second paragraph I have already quoted many passages that very clearly stress what Sonntag calls “the fetishism of courage”. I am referring to the quotes where the little boys “bravely” do all the (sometimes brutal) things the “voices” do not have the bravery to do. On one occasion Neville deplores his lack of “courage” and “bodily grace”, the aspects he finds in Percival and his gang: “I shall never have what I want, for I lack bodily grace and the courage that comes with it.” (97) Like the more intellectual Proustian girls who desire to be infected with Albertine’s healthiness and bodily grace, Neville wants to be infected with the boys’ courage and bodily grace. The obsession with healthiness, bodily grace and courage has by the way, correctly been associated with a fascistic atmosphere.

The meetings with Percival in which the voices hope to create something “that will join the innumerable congregations of past time” (110) recall what Sonntag terms “the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community” and “the family of man”. Finally the intelligent and sensitive male voices’ slavish infatuation with their most brainless peer, Percival, and the little boys’ mere stupidity offers an excellent example of what Sonntag calls “the repudiation of the intellect.” It is interesting for our purpose that Sonntag links all the named aspects to some romantic ideal to which many remain attached.
In his very first book, *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque*, a work on the modern novel, René Girard, endeavours to show how the modern world is full of romantic illusions (that are however not always innocent as the adjective “romantic” sometimes seems to imply). For Girard the modern world is a world in which old hierarchical structures are slowly or rapidly disintegrating, which is in itself an extraordinarily positive evolution since it makes increasing personal freedom possible. The irony stressed throughout *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque* is nevertheless that humans often seem quite unable to bear the “burden” of freedom. As the American philosopher Stephen Gardner once summarized Girard’s view on the matter: “As modern equality subverts the old orthodoxies, human beings tend to seek their gods in each other, as models of “freedom”. And so there arises a “master-slave” psychology from the impact of equality, legitimized by romanticism.” (Gardner 2003, 2)

I think that the stunning paradox of a rising “master-slave” psychology in a world in which there is more and more equality and freedom is crucial to Woolf’s understanding of the rise of fascism. Girard is a helpful author to deepen this intuition. In his very first essay he traced the paradoxical historical movement towards more slavery among equals. Beneath the romantic make-up and the loud slogans advertising freedom a new form of slavery is slowly but surely spreading in the modern world. One of the archetypal authors in which the above mentioned historical movement towards more slavery is exemplified and revealed, according to Girard, is Proust: “The consciousness which filters the light of *La Recherche* and gives to it its specifically Proustian quality is almost always the consciousness of a slave.” (Girard 1965, 170)

For our purpose it will prove necessary to present Girard’s ideas on the subject in some more detail. To sketch this history towards more “slavery” Girard goes back to *Don Quichotte*, the first great novel of modern times. Girard wonders why the free-born country gentleman *Don
Quichotte (who has much free time) so willingly forsakes his freedom: instead of choosing the objects of his own desire he slavishly imitates the goals idolized fictional heroes have set for themselves. “Don Quichotte has surrendered to Amadis the individual’s fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire—Amadis must choose for him.” (Girard 1965, 1) According to Girard in most novels this surrender of one’s personal freedom to some model of desire is not visible. “In most works of fiction, the characters have desires which are simpler than Don Quichote’s. There is no mediator [i.e. model of desire], there is only the subject and the object. … [In those works of fiction] desire is always spontaneous.” (Girard 1965, 2) For Girard the novelistic works of genius do reveal the mimetic slavery beneath the “romantic lies.” while many other novels only replicate the romantic lies.

The evolution from the world of Don Quichotte to the worlds of Proust and Dostoyevsky is one towards more and more equality. It is an evolution towards worlds in which old hierarchies are collapsing. It is an evolution towards worlds in which there are more and more “peers” with “father and mother figures largely absent” as McIntire describes the childhood sections of The Waves (McIntire 2005, 31). In those early sections “the children become surrogate linguistic parents for each other”, that is: they are each others’ most important linguistic models (McIntire 2005, 31). Don Quichotte also speaks like his mimetic model(s), but, for evident reasons, Don Quichotte and his literary model(s) are no equals. The same thing is true for Don Quichotte and Sancho Panza. “Don Quichotte and Sancho are always close to each other physically, but the social and intellectual distance which separates them remains insuperable. The valet never desires what his master desires. … As for the imaginary island, it is from Don Quichotte himself that Sancho is counting on receiving it, as the faithful vassal holds everything in the name of his lord. The mediation of Sancho is therefore external
mediation. No rivalry with the mediator is possible. The harmony between the two companions is never seriously troubled.” (Girard 1965, 9) “External mediation” means that a social or spiritual gap separates the imitator and the model. For Girard modernity is a slow development from external to internal mediation. Internal mediation signifies that model and imitator are peers. Here the clear distinction between model and imitator gradually looses its significance. They both imitate each others’ desires. Peers who have a desire in common can become best friends if they can share the object they both desire (a passion for literature, great landscapes, wine…). They can nevertheless also very easily become rivals competing for the same object (a partner etc.). In the beginning of The Waves it seems “external mediation”, the school system with its official hierarchy et. is still quite strong (although crumbling). Yet at the end of the novel there is a strong movement towards “internal mediation”.

The perpetual struggle and Mussolini’s misogyny

A world with more and more “internal mediation” is a world that becomes ever more competitive: “[T]he increasing equality—the approach of the mediator [of desire] in our terms—does not give rise to harmony but to an even keener rivalry. Although this rivalry is the source of considerable material benefits, it also leads to even more considerable spiritual sufferings, for nothing material can appease it.” (Girard 1965, 136-137) The (envious) sufferings related to the growing competition creates large groups of disgruntled people who would do anything to alleviate those sufferings. One method would be to violently re-introduce inequality. In A Room of One’s own Virginia Woolf beautifully links the perpetual competition in modern life with a loss of self-confidence that results in a desire to (re-)introduce inequality, especially inequality between man and women. The background is one of endless competition, as in the modern generation Bernard observes in The Waves: “this generation, this doom-encircled population, shuffling each other in endless competition along
the street.” (73) It is a world that resembles Mussolini’s conception of life: “[Fascism] conceives of life as a struggle in which it behooves a man to win for himself a really worthy place, first of all by fitting himself (physically, morally, intellectually) to become the implement required for winning it.” (Mussolini 2007, 31) So, according to Woolf:

Life for both sexes—and I looked at them, shouldering their way along the pavement—is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to one self. By feeling that one has some innate superiority—it may be wealth, or rank, a straight nose, or the portrait of a grandfather by Romney—for there is no end to the pathetic devices of the human imagination—over other people. (Woolf 1957, 34-35)

The slave’s desire to dominate, to enslave the other in order to recover one’s self-confidence in a world that should be one of equals is typically fascist in Woolf’s eyes: “Let us try to drag up into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down. It is the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave.” (Woolf 1967, 174) It is not a coincidence that Woolf thrice stresses Mussolini’s misogyny in A Room of One’s own: “Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge.” (1957, 36) For man to win a worthy place in the perpetual struggle, he has to conceive of women as being inferior.

At the end of the first chapter I put emphasis on the fact that the six personae in The Waves are struggling with their self-confidence. Before developing Woolf’s idea that the danger of loosing one’s self-confidence in the modern world of endless competition is related to
misogyny and fascism, it is good to have a look at the “perpetual struggle” and the fight for superiority in *The Waves*. Neville is at the second reunion with his old friends. He feels sorrow because in the meantime Percival has died. The peers *without master* start competing for pre-eminence. Neville is looking for his “credentials” that prove his “superiority”:

‘Now sitting side by side,’ said Neville, ‘at this narrow table, now before the first emotion is worn smooth, what do we feel? Honestly now, openly and directly as befits old friends meeting with difficulty, what do we feel on meeting? Sorrow. The door will not open; he will not come. And we are laden. Being now all of us middle-aged, loads are on us. Let us put down our loads. What have you made of life, we ask, and I? You, Bernard; you, Susan; you, Jinny; and Rhoda and Louis? The lists have been posted on the doors. Before we break these rolls, and help ourselves to fish and salad, I feel in my private pocket and find my credentials—what I carry to prove my superiority. I have passed. I have papers in my private pocket that prove it. (162)

Yet, in a world of peers there are no longer fixed “superiorities”. Superiority has become an object of intense competition. There is always someone else who seems to rob us of our own superiority. In Neville’s case it is Susan:

But your eyes, Susan, full of turnips and cornfields, disturb me. These papers in my private pocket—the clamour that proves that I have passed—make a faint sound like that of a man clapping in an empty field to scare away rooks. Now it has died down altogether, under Susan’s stare (the clapping, the reverberation that I have made), and I hear only the wind sweeping over the ploughed land and some bird singing—perhaps some intoxicated lark. Has the waiter heard of me, or those furtive everlasting couples, now loitering, now holding back and looking at the trees which are not yet dark enough to shelter their prostrate bodies? No; the sound of clapping has failed. (162)

Neville’s self-confidence, his believe in his own superiority is vanishing, like the sound of the clapping that has died down altogether.
‘What then remains, when I cannot pull out my papers and make you believe by reading aloud my credentials that I have passed? What remains is what Susan brings to light under the acid of her green eyes, her crystal, pear-shaped eyes. There is always somebody, when we come together, and the edges of meeting are still sharp, who refuses to be submerged; whose identity therefore one wishes to make crouch beneath one’s own. For me now, it is Susan. I talk to impress Susan. Listen to me, Susan. (162-163)

Neville want Susan’s identity to crouch beneath his own, he wants to be superior. Without a special hierarchy that could fix his male superiority Neville desperately has to try to impress the other(s). He needs Susan’s admiration, he has to beg for it. The same is true for Louis in a very similar context: “I beg you also to notice my cane and my waistcoat. I have inherited a desk of solid mahogany in a room hung with maps. Our steamers have won an enviable reputation for their cabins replete with luxury. We supply swimming-baths and gymnasiums. I wear a white waistcoat now and consult a little book before I make an engagement.” (168).

“This is”, Louis continues “the arch and ironical manner in which I hope to distract you from my shivering, my tender, and infinitely young and unprotected soul. For I am always the youngest; the most naïvely surprised; the one who runs in advance in apprehension and sympathy with discomfort or ridicule—should there be a smut on a nose, or a button undone. I suffer for all humiliations.” (168)

Louis desperately tries to hide his existential nakedness, his “infinitely young and unprotected soul”. The best commentary on this text is Woolf’s phrase in A Room of One’s Own that “[w]ithout self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle.” (35) It is interesting that Louis uses the word soul to refer to his nakedness. The religious overtones of his predicaments are obvious. Contrary to the French saint Thérèse de Lisieux who famously rejoiced in being like
a little child and even a “little nothing” (“un petit néant”) in the arms of her divine Father, Louis desperately wants to hide his “unprotected soul”.

Neville also refers to his “unprotected fibre”, his nakedness as he thinks about Suzan: “I do not want to hurt you; only to refresh and furbish up my own belief in myself that failed at your entry. [...] I took the print of life not outwardly, but inwardly upon the raw, the white, the unprotected fibre. I am clouded and bruised with the print of minds and faces and things so subtle that they have smell, colour, texture, substance, but no name. I am merely “Neville” to you, who see the narrow limits of my life and the line it cannot pass.” (163)

In his Girard-inspired philosophical essay Het rijk van de schaarste Hans Achterhuis remarks that a modern form of misogyny arises because of the struggle between the sexes. He shows how the romantic thinker par excellence, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, very well describes the struggle between the sexes (at the moment they are becoming ever more equal) and reacts with what Achterhuis sees as a typically modern type of sexism. Achterhuis does this after he stressed the pre-totalitarian features in Rousseau’s thinking. Because of the modern importance of the idea of equality and the slow crumbling of old (religious and social) hierarchies women risk becoming equals to men. Rousseau’s solution in Émile ou l’éducation, is to learn girls to remain in a position of inferiority through education.

It is the same loss of confidence (that is on the rise in the modern struggle) that advises Mussolini’s misogyny and that make the voices in The Waves want to become part of the great one body they hope to form with Percival. In her work on totalitarianism Hannah Arendt famously stressed that the ideal precondition for a totalitarian state is a situation in which

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63 1988, 162-167
there is nothing between the state and a collection of very isolated individuals. In The Waves the old English institutions (education, the family etc.) are disintegrating and the voices live in a terrible kind of isolation. As I have already quoted Marguerite Yourcenar was absolutely right to refer to the novel as an “essay on human isolation.” (Woolf 1974, 9)

I did not say anything about the most evident problem related to the high-speed rise of fascism in Woolf’s day: what is the motor behind the social contagion? One may remember, to give only one historical example, that some months before the German Anschluss of Austria not a few Austrians were still very much against fascism. This, however, expeditiously changed shortly before and during the Anschluss. Masses were enthusiastically welcoming Nazis marching in troops into their country. All that of course happened after Woolf had written The Waves but it should be clear by now that the novel marvellously helps to understand why the fascistic wave was able to drown so many people. Few novels are so clear about the sovereign power of psychological mimesis than The Waves.
“O Death.”

The religious metaphors and the road towards Death in *The Waves*.

From the time she began thinking about her new work [*The Waves*], Woolf started to record her aim of writing ‘something mystic, spiritual’.

Kate Flint


Charles Baudelaire

[Percival] takes my devotion; he accepts my tremulous, no doubt abject offering, mixed with contempt as it is for his mind. For he cannot read.

Neville in *The Waves*

At the time Woolf was already drafting *The Waves*, at the beginning of the year 1928, she heard that her friend T.S. Eliot had converted to Christianity. In a letter to her sister Vanessa she expressed her complete shock:

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.

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64 (Woolf 2000, xvi)
65 (Baudelaire 1961, 1925)
66 (Woolf 2000, 34)
67 Quoted in Schwarz 2001, 11
Both her parents were adamant atheists and Woolf herself once claimed that “certainly and emphatically there is no God.” (1976, 72) However resolutely atheist Woolf might have been, one could hardly find a modern novel that is more strikingly stresses the profoundly religious nature of much of human life than *The Waves*. If her fiction is the medium in which her thought finds its best expression than one may think that Woolf’s vision on religion was more elaborate and complex than her allergic reaction to Eliot’s conversion might suggest. In *The Waves* one does not find a character “sitting by the fire and believing in God” but many voices who believe one of their peers is God.

**The religious metaphor: “Percival takes my devotion ... He accepts my offering.”**

The idea of a transcendency deviated in the direction of the human throws light on Proust’s poetics, Girard once stated. The same thing is true, I think, of the poetics of a prominent aficionado of Proust: Virginia Woolf, especially for her most poetical novel, *The Waves*. Neville’s passion for Percival is especially strong and Woolf’s depiction of it consistently has a religious colour. His “absurd and violent passion” (37) is compared to the need he has to offer his being to a god. At one point, when he is listening to Bernard’s stories, he feels his “own solitude”. But then,

> […] suddenly descended upon me the obscure, the mystic sense of adoration, of completeness that triumphed over chaos. Nobody saw my poised and intent figure as I stood at the open door. Nobody guessed the need I had to offer my being to one god; and perish and disappear. (37)

In a previous monologue Neville said: “[Percival] takes my devotion; he accepts my tremulous, no doubt abject offering, mixed with contempt as it is for his mind. For he cannot read.” (34). Later in the novel, after Percival’s death, Rhoda goes to Greenwich to perform a peculiar religious ritual. “I will make a pilgrimage. I will go to Greenwich.”  (124)
Now I will relinquish; now I will let loose. Now I will at last free the checked, the jerked-back desire to be spent, to be consumed. We will gallop together over desert hills where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire. Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth, I throw my violets, my offering to Percival.

(124)

The aspiration to be absorbed, to be “spent” and—as it is very clear in Neville’s case, to disappear into the substance of an Other implies an overwhelming revulsion for one’s own substance. Neville’s state of being towards Percival is described as devotion. And yet, does his god deserve his devotion? Percival is not the creator of the universe, he cannot even read. The comical undertone is evident. Neville’s devotion, the ‘deviated transcendency’ depicted here is a blatant caricature of religious zeal toward God. “‘t is mad idolatry to make the service greater than the god” a Shakespearian character (Hector) says in Troilus and Cressida.

Ironically, Rhoda is not a religious person and Neville profoundly hates religion. As Bernard reports: “Neville, at school, in the dim chapel, raged at the sight of the doctor’s crucifix.” (143) He is truly an ‘emancipated person’ since he does not live in the ‘fear’ of some God, and yet he trembles before Percival, a silly schoolboy who cannot even read. He is on his knees before one of his peers, who—through his eyes—looks more magnificent and fearful than the most Jansenist god ever invented. Neville is at the same time the least religious and the most religious character in the novel. Who could better comment on this paradoxical state of affairs than René Girard?

There is great irony in the fact that the modern process of stamping out religion produces countless caricatures of it. We are often told that our problems are due to our inability to shake off our religious tradition but this is not true. They are rooted in the debacle of that tradition, which is necessarily followed by the reappearance in modern garb of more ancient and ferocious divinities rooted in the mimetic process. (Girard 1996, 10)
In a fascinating article on our modern psychological predicaments Gil Bailie also focuses on this strange paradox and refers to a particular scene in *The Waves* that evocatively takes place in the chapel of the boys boarding school where the male characters in Woolf’s novel are students:

At chapel, the school’s headmaster functions as chaplain. During one particular service, one of the boys, Neville, seated before the headmaster robed for his religious duties, begins to feel what Rousseau must have felt when he wrote that “until I was put under a master I did not so much as know what it was to want my own way.” (Bailie 1997, 136)

Bailie subsequently quotes from *The Waves*:

“The brute menaces my liberty,” said Neville, “when he prays. Unwarmed by imagination, his words fall cold on my head like paving-stones, while the gilt crosses heaves on his waistcoat. The words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them. I gibe and mock at this sad religion.” (25)

Neville calls the chaplain ‘a brute’. This is probably only a subjective impression since the other perspectives on the situation (Bernard’s and Louis’ monologues) give a far more positive account of the religious service. As Gil Bailie argues it is true, no doubt, that the words of authority are often corrupted by those who speak them, but—as Bailie also notes—mocking all authority is barely an intelligent way to rectify this regrettable, if predictable fact. Bailie then stresses the irony of Neville’s emancipation from the Christian religion. No sooner does he declare his independence than he falls under the mimetic spell of a fellow student:

Virginia Woolf’s eye for the problematic at hand is keen indeed, for it was the headmaster’s “sad religion” which was the flash point for Neville’s assertion of autonomy. However Neville might have chaffed at the authority of the headmaster as headmaster, it was as Christian chaplain and in the Christian chapel that the idea of deference toward him became unacceptable. It is no coincidence. […]
Neville renounces the mediation of the Christian tradition and the admittedly clay vessels from which its wine is often poured, invoking by implication his autonomy and individuality. Virginia Woolf was too careful an observer of mimetic effects, whose ravages she suffered intensely, to let her readers be taken in by the empty romantic slogans espoused by her characters. No sooner does Neville declare his independence than he seeks out the mimetic inspiration of someone in his immediate social environment. [...] Neville proudly emancipates himself from the spell of the mimetic suggestion of the chaplain only to fall unawares under the mimetic spell of a fellow student. (Bailie 1997, 136)

Bailie then quotes a passage from *The Waves* that is to be found just bellow the previous passage quoted above. I already cited a part of this episode earlier; here I quote the text more fully (Neville is speaking in the chapel):

“Now I will lean sideways as if to scratch my thigh. So I shall see Percival. There he sits, upright among the smaller fry. He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily. His blue, and oddly inexpresseive eyes, are fixed with pagan indifference upon the pillar opposite… He sees nothing; he hears nothing. He is remote from us all in a pagan universe. But look – he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime. Dalton, Jones, Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the back of their necks likewise. But they do not succeed.” (25)

Vertical transcendency is only rejected to be replaced by deviated transcendency. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* Girard borrowed an abstract formula from Louis Ferrero’s *Désépoirs* to explain this: “Passion is the change of address of a force awakened by Christianity and originated toward God.” And he adds: “Denial of God does not eliminate transcendency but diverts it from the *au-delà* to the *en-deça.*” (Girard 1965, 59) Besides the allusions to the religious element a most striking characteristic of the pupils’ passion for Percival is its obvious silliness. If Woolf would admittedly not embrace ‘vertical transcendency’ it seems she is not mild for the caricatures that replaced it either. The pupils are unable to repress their admiration for the way in which an obtuse and clumsy schoolmate flicks his hand to the back...
of his neck. An insignificant gesture is seen as the pinnacle of beauty. In his Consoling Maxims on Love Charles Baudelaire notably affirmed that stupidity is often the adornment of modern beauty. Stupidity, he suggest, protects our idols’ prestige from our reasoning capacities, from our good sense:

La bêtise est souvent l’ornement de la beauté. … c’est un cosmétique divin qui préserve nos idoles des morsures que la pensée garde pour nous, vilains savants que nous sommes! (Stupidity is often the adornment of beauty. … it’s a divine cosmetics that protects our idols from the bites thinking keeps for us, nasty thinkers that we are!”).

“I need someone to whom the pitch of absurdity is sublime, and a shoe-string adorable.”, Neville admits (37). In his study on the modern novel, Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque, Girard found the essence of what is desirable in modern times in ‘spiritual and moral insufficiency’, in everything which—were it not for the desire—would paradoxically make it intolerable to be around the desired person. So Neville stresses his burning and strongly “religious” passion for Percival and at the same time admits: “Yet I could not live with him and suffer his stupidity. He will coarsen and snore.” (34)

Is it legitimate to contrast the mimetic desires and peculiar religious struggles of the protagonists in The Waves to the particulars of Christian faith as Gil Bailie suggested? In a recent article Jane de Gay convincingly argues that there is a pervasive discussion with Christianity in The Waves and that it has not been given much attention yet. According to this scholar the ‘models of spiritual identity’ in Woolf’s novel were sketched in dialogue with, and often in contradistinction to, Biblical and Christian ones. Strikingly she reads Percival in contrast to “Christ-like figures”: 
Woolf’s allusion to the Last Supper is a dinner party held for Percival, a friend of the six speakers, on his departure for India, where he dies in an accident. Although Bernard describes the party as an act of ‘communion’ (103) and ‘something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time’ (119-120), Percival is not a Christ-like figure: his death in a clumsy accident, when his horse trips over a mole-hill, is more reminiscent of his bumbling Arthurian name-sake, and his death is final, leaving a void which the friends never manage to fill. (de Gay 2006, 122)

The Christian narrative of redemption does not work in the novel and is not adopted, that is indubitably true. But how are we to understand the above described ‘caricature’ of Holy Thursday and Good Friday? In Deceit, Desire and the Novel Girard proposed that great novelists, whether atheists (as Proust) or Christians (as Dostoyevsky) tend to portray ‘deviated transcendency’ as a patent caricature of ‘vertical transcendency’. Heaven is emptied, but the gods have not disappeared, they fall on earth and are more ridiculous than ever. As we saw, Bernard called Percival, his schoolmate, “a God” (102). In a 1936 letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf reflects on French peasant faith in West’s St. Joan of Arcū8 in the following manner:

They believed where we cant. Or rather, our belief is hardly perceptible to us, but will be to those who write our lives in 600 years. … I agree, we do believe, not in God though: not anyhow. … Perhaps I mean, belief is almost unconscious. And the living belief now is in human beings.

(Nicolson 1983, 50; emphasis in the original)

Woolf’s breathtaking formula “the living belief now is in human beings” should not be misinterpreted, I think, as a naive or idealistic reverie on some kind of great fraternity or new humanism. Girard used a very similar formula for the title of the second chapter of his classic on the novel (the chapter from which we have quoted most here): “Men become gods in the eyes of each other.” Far from bringing heaven this idolatry, Girard argues, brings hell. If we keep Woolf’s stunning formula in mind while reading The Waves that should not surprise us.
We have already mentioned the poignant isolation of the protagonists, their suffering and despair and will soon focus on the importance of death in the whole narrative. But there are also less indirect references to hell. As Jane de Gay puts forward, Woolf’s novel contains many obvious allusions to Dante’s *Inferno*, which she carefully and slowly re-read in the original language while drafting *The Waves*. “Significantly, the allusions are limited to the hell of the *Inferno* and do not follow Dante’s journey through purgatory to heaven and his reunion with Beatrice in the wider narrative of the *Divine Comedy*.‖ (de Gay 2006, 123)

When observing the underground, the Tube Station, where “everything desirable meets.” (148) Jinny says:


(148)

Jinny grieves over the lifeless existence of her fellow commuters. But she herself claims to be no part of the ‘procession’. Yet we should not imagine her to be following Dante’s journey “through purgatory to heaven.” Jinny’s infernal vision is rather “temporary and easily covered up by the pleasures of consumerism.” (de Gay 2006, 123) She does not follow a ‘banner’ into hell (*Inferno* III, 52-57), but the banners of “this world” (149) “I will not be afeard. I will powder my face and redden my lips. I will make the angle of my eyebrows sharper than usual. I will rise to the surface, standing erect with the others in Picadilly Circus.” That, at last, is a convincing way of finding a way out of the spiritual predicaments of modern life! Woolf’s obvious cultural critique could not be more at the heart of the matter. How many jolly postmodernists would not affirm today that they have outgrown the ‘typically modernist’ existential problems? Their happily ‘fragmented selves’ are now devoted to the easy pleasures of consumerism—like everyone else, indeed, but so what? They can repeat after Jinny: “We
have triumphed over the abysses of space, with rouge, with powder, with flimsy pocket11 handkerchiefs.” (175) Many protagonists in The Waves seem to have their own ‘trick’ to flight the ‘existential’ predicaments we have briefly outlined so far. Jinny has her rouge, Rhoda summons ‘faces’; Bernard resorts to ‘phrases’... But all those ploys will turn out to be rather ineffective. Rhoda kills herself and Bernard wraps up his last story with an invocation of “unvanquished and unyielding” Death. (228) Before effectively broaching the death-theme, a last thing should be said on the distorted mysticism in The Waves.

In 1954 Essays in Criticism published an intriguing article by Peter and Margaret Havard-Williams: ‘Mystical Experience in Virginia Woolf’s The Waves’. What is queer about the article is not so much its exploration of the rather uncanny subject of ‘mystical experience’ with regard to secular literature—for Woolf herself had once qualified her novel as ‘mystic, spiritual’ (Diary, III, 30 October 1926, p. 114). It is curious for quite the opposite reason: the authors do not really analyse the role of mysticism in The Waves. However, the article should be mentioned here—not only because it is one of the very few major studies on the subject we are exploring now—but especially since it sets off with an interesting observation: “In discussing the mysticism which Virginia Woolf portrays in Rhoda, we cannot help contrasting it with the experience of mystical writers like Theresa of Avila ...” (Havard-Williams 1954, 3) The contrast, the difference between the true mystic writer such as Theresa of Avila and Rhoda is—according to the authors—that “Rhoda is mystic in spite of herself, she is mentally abnormal”. For Peter and Margaret Havard-Williams the trouble in Rhoda and Bernard (and to a lesser extent in all the main characters of the novel) is due to their seminal failure to bridge the gap between ‘the subjective’ and ‘the objective’. What then follows is, strangely, not an exploration of mysticism in The Waves, but a long philosophical consideration on the deplorable separation of the objective and the subjective world. But how could the partition of the philosophical categories of subject and object, an abstract
dichotomy, account for the psychological and spiritual predicaments depicted in the novel? I trust Girard’s mimetic theory to be—at least—particularly helpful to avoid the impasse of the eternal subject-object opposition:

The objective and subjective fallacies, Girard writes, are one and the same; both originate in the image we all have of our own desires. Subjectivisms and objectivisms, romanticisms and realisms … appear to be in opposition but are secretly in agreement to conceal the presence of the mediator [of desire] … They all depend directly or indirectly on the lie of spontaneous desire. They all defend the illusion of autonomy to which modern man is passionately devoted. (Girard 1965, 16)

The main difference between the mysticism depicted in *The Waves* and the spirituality of such authors as Theresa of Avila is easy to summarize for us now, I think: the religious, the ‘mystic’ zeal of the protagonists in *The Waves* is not directed toward a divinity called God, but, oddly enough, toward humans. That is the perfect inversion of what Teresa of Avilla recommended her readers in her *Road to Perfection* (a little book she was asked to write):

“All the advices given to you in this book have only one goal: that of bringing you to hand over your self completely to God, to hand over your will to the Creator and detach yourself from the creatures.” (Avilla 1961, 191)

Percival’s clumsy and meaningless death opens a vacuum which the characters “never quite cover over” (Lucenti 1998, 37). The chapters in the novel—which record the course of the protagonists’ lives—are framed by a sequence of brief italicized ‘interludes’ which describe the passage of a day on a beach and in an empty room. Strikingly, before Percival’s death the sun stands high in the sky. After his death the sun starts sinking lower and at the end we have ‘waves of darkness’ covering everything. (181) The first pages of the novel still have something ‘idyllic’ over them. The mediation of Percival, despite its ludicrousness, provides some solidity, a certain stability to the characters, a seemingly firm ground to stand on. The
pupils follow Percival in a rather happy and enthusiastic atmosphere. We have noted that when they imitated him, the children did not succeed in being like him. A ‘spiritual gap’ separated Percival and the others gathering around him. “He is remote from us all in a pagan universe.” Neville observed. (25) René Girard would speak of ‘external mediation’ to characterize the first chapters of the novel. After Percival’s death the novelistic world of The Waves collapses into ‘internal mediation’, it loses its centre. Petty rivalries, snobbism, scorn, envy… become more important. Especially visible is the gradual loss of all stability in the interludes as in the protagonists lives. The speakers are experiencing some kind of ‘vertigo’, for Rhoda it is the “fall of the edge of the world into nothingness” (31) that becomes more acute toward the end. For Bernard it is his sense of identity that seems to be lost completely:

I changed and changed; was hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoievsky; was for a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly. For many weeks at a time it was my part to stride into rooms and fling gloves and coat on the back of chairs, scowling slightly. I was always going to the bookcase for another sip of the divine specific. (192)

Gil Bailie notes that the characters in The Waves are caught up in the same ‘mimetic crisis’ and “each is slowly exhausting his or her ‘ontological density’ as a result”. (Bailie 1997, 136) There would seem to be no end to the ‘vertigo’, except for Death. Somewhere in her diary Woolf called her novel an ‘elegy’, a funeral song. According to Lisa Marie Lucenti the ‘facelessness’ of death is one of the “phantoms that haunt The Waves”. (Lucenti 1998, 39) There is Percival’s death, Rhoda’s suicide and lastly, Bernard’s own inevitable death. Jinny’s infernal visions—quoted earlier—evoke the inexorable movement toward death palpable throughout the novel: “Millions descend those stairs in a terrible descent. Great wheels churn inexorably urging them downwards. Millions have died.” (148) Death seems to function as a great black hole toward which everything is—sooner or later—drawn. Is that a simple fact to
be noted or is there some broader, even ‘metaphysical’ reason for it to be so? In *Deceit, Desire and the novel* Girard observed that metaphysical desire is animated by a mortal dynamism. It tends toward “disintegration and death”. “To perceive the metaphysical structure of desire is to foresee its catastrophic conclusion.” (Girard 1965, 288) According to Girard the catastrophe should be understood as a kind of “apocalypse”. Interestingly, Jane de Gay detects some unmistakable allusions to the biblical apocalypse in Woolf’s novel. However there is no “creation of a New Jerusalem”, in *The Waves* there is no genuine redemption. From the biblical narrative only the dark side, only Death is withheld. At the very end of the novel, as we will see later on, Bernard charges to face Death, his final enemy, but Death will win, Death is ultimately victorious. “[Death] is the inevitable termination of that ever more effective negation of life and spirit, deviated transcendency. The affirmation of the self ends in the negation of the self. The will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction that is gradually realised.” (Girard 1965, 287) One cannot stress the importance of Death in *The Waves* without acknowledging the significance of ‘self-destruction’ in its protagonists. Rhoda’s urge to get rid of herself, for instance, evidently forebodes her suicide.

In her introduction to *The Waves* Kate Flint quotes a short passage from Woolf’s diary (15 september 1926) containing “sensations which, when verbalized, formed the immediate basis for the Waves”. (xv) Noticeably, one of the most outspoken ‘sensations’ in the brief entry is an unequivocal and thrice repeated death-wish. Referring to Woolf’s diaries should not be rejected out of hand as a ‘biographical fallacy’ since the sceptics can easily regard her diaries as just another kind of ‘fiction’ that may well be compared to other fictional texts, *The Waves* among others. And—as many critics agree—the analogies are more than striking. I quote from Flint’s introduction to *The Waves*:

> It was during the immediate aftermath of completing *To the Lighthouse* that [Virginia Woolf] experienced the sensations which, when verbalized, formed the immediate basis for *The Waves*. 

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Woke up perhaps at 3. Oh its beginning its coming – the horror – physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart – tossing me up. I’m unhappy unhappy! Down – God, I wish I were dead. Pause. But why am I feeling this? Let me watch the wave rise. I watch. Vanessa. Children. Failure. Yes; I detect that. Failure failure. (The wave rises). O they laughed at my taste in green paint! Wave crashes. I wish I were dead! I’ve only a few years to live I hope. I can’t face this horror any more – (this is the wave spreading out over me).

(xv)

“Depression invariably overcame Woolf after finishing a novel.” Kate Flint notes. (xv) But is there nothing more that can be said about the “horror” so glaringly described in the entry? Woolf charts the reasons for her outright despair very closely. Let us have a look at her diagnosing. Firstly, the horror is felt, physically. Then complete unhappiness and a death-wish are spotted. After the feelings, it is up to thinking to continue the investigation: she pauses to reflect: “Pause. But why am I feeling this?” Woolf slowly watches the “wave rise” (“the horror swelling about the heart”). And then, suddenly, the horror’s cause is detected: “Vanessa. Children. Failure.” Woolf’s sister Vanessa had children, but Virginia had no children of her own. She was unmistakably struggling with that. In a later entry from August 1928, some two years later—also quoted by Kate Flint in her introduction to The Waves—Woolf put her desire for children behind her: “Children playing: yes & interrupting me; yes & I have no children of my own; & Nessa has; & yet I don’t want them any more” (xxiv)

Evidently, a frustrated longing for children is detected in the entry from 1926. A salient feature of Woolf’s description of the “horror” is that she does not write: “I have no children, failure”, but “Vanessa. Children. Failure.” As we have noted at the beginning of this paper, (frustrated) desire is not a simple straight line linking the subject with an object of desire. In order to have a desire, rather than an instinctually determined need, a third party: ‘the model of desire’ needs be present. And that is obviously the case here: not the object of her desire
(the children), but the person she envies comes first: Vanessa. Sibling sparring and lifelong rivalries was part of Vanessa’s and Virginia’s sisterhood and friendship. The devastations caused by mimetic rivalry are most important among equals, as Girard often repeats. Yet, what should be remembered here is not the particulars of Woolf’s envious ‘sensations’ charted in the entry, but that these sensations, the obvious and painful mimetic suffering “formed the immediate basis for The Waves”. Interestingly, the same (imagined?) scorn that makes Rhoda suffer in the novel is present in the entry: “O they laughed at my taste in green paint!” The self and the Other are put in a balance and the outcome unmistakably shows that the Other is everything and the self an absolute, an outright failure. “God, I wish I were dead.” In order to understand the extreme self-loathing and the death-wish that goes along with it one should turn to a prominent specialist in matters of despair: Sören Kierkegaard. True despair—according to Kierkegaard—is not to despair over something, but to despair over oneself. The one who (truly) despairs wants to get rid of himself. In his Engdommen til Doden (The Sickness unto Death) he gives a ‘mimetic’ example of an ambitious individual who wants to become ‘Caesar’, but does not get to be Caesar. The philosopher notes: “In a deeper sense it is not his failure to become Caesar that is intolerable; but it is this self that did not become Caesar that is intolerable; or, to put it even more accurately, what is intolerable to him is that he cannot get rid of himself.” (Kierkegaard 1980, 19) This is very close to what Girard writes in Deceit, Desire and The Novel: “The wish to be absorbed into the substance of the Other implies an insuperable revulsion for one’s own substance.” (Girard 1965, 54) Obviously, the urge to get rid of oneself ultimately leads to suicide. Rhoda’s killing of herself is only the final expression of her revulsion for her own substance.

At the end of the novel there is a last, long monologue by Bernard that starts with the promise to “sum up, to explain to you the meaning of my life” (183) and it ends, ironically,
In a contradiction at once more subtle and more blatant than those which have gone before, the [novelistic] hero decides that death is the meaning of life. Henceforth the mediator [i.e. the idolized Other] is identified with the image of death which is always close by and yet always denied. It is that image that fascinates the hero. Death is the supreme goal of desire and a final mirage.

(Girard 1965, 278)

The last enemy that will awaken a final ‘desire’ is Death, the supreme negation of life, the last attracting and repelling obstacle, the ultimate ‘skandalon’. These are Bernard’s very last words:

And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death! (228)

The analogy between deviated and vertical transcendency is surprisingly close. The last words of the novel are a perfect inversion of Saint-Paul’s exclamation: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy sting?” (1 Cor. 15:57) or of the last line of John Donne’s most famous ‘holly sonnet’: “And death shall be no more, death, thou shalt die.” In Woolf’s novel death is the ultimate victor. “The apocalypse would not be complete without a positive side.” Girard writes about the conclusion to Dostoyevsky’s Demons. (Girard 1965, 291) Yet the ‘positive side’ is absent from a novel that—as some critics have suggested—may, in a sense, be read as a herald of her author’s own suicide.
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