

WHAT IS DEVIATED TRANSCENDENCY? WOOLF'S *THE WAVES* AS A TEXTBOOK CASE

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The Waves, more than any of Virginia Woolf's other novels, conveys the complexities of human experience.

—Kate Flint

Humankind—according to mimetic theory—is not (as Marx thought) *Homo economicus* but rather *homo religiosus*. *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque*, Girard's first essay (1961), evocatively opens with a saying by Max Scheler: "L'homme possède ou un Dieu ou une idole" (Man has either a God or an idol). If we may believe Girard, the Enlightenment profoundly misunderstood human beings because it naively assumed that doing away with "ancient superstitions" would fully liberate them: "denial of God does not eliminate transcendency but diverts it from the *au-delà* to the *en-deçà*" (Girard 1965, 59).

What has all this to do with Virginia Woolf's secular art? René Girard's "transcendance déviée," the diverted or deviated transcendency—which we may also want to term idolatry—is beautifully and transparently depicted in one of Woolf's most enigmatic and experimental novels. In *The Waves*, the portrayal of human desire as *mimetic*, imitated, is so crystal clear that—once noticed—it can hardly be overlooked any longer. Perhaps even more interesting for mimetic theory is the fact that Woolf (just as Proust did before her) brings into play the language of the sacred when rendering the mimetic nature of human longing. Neither of these two aspects of *The Waves* (the obsessively mimetic nature of desire and the use of the religious metaphor) have been fully unraveled by Woolf's critics.

The purpose of this article is to make obvious the value of Virginia Woolf's (poetic) language for mimetic scholars and to show how deviated transcendency can be made visible and (above all) intelligible through great secular literature. The study of literature is vital to the humanities, not for some frivolous, outdated reasons, but because great literature can, sometimes

more effectively than many erudite studies, convey the complexities of human experience.

It would no doubt be unjustifiable to foist Girard's mimetic thesis on Woolf's novel without clear support from the text, but I believe *The Waves* provides such backing. The outline of the present article is as follows. I first argue that the characters in Woolf's novel really are interdividuals rather than individuals, since mimetic desire plays an important role in them. I subsequently focus on a typically metaphysical illusion that goes along with mimetic desire, that is, the apparent self-sufficiency or divine autonomy of the Other. Then I show how the religious metaphor is consistently linked with the first-mentioned issue and that a form of distorted mysticism is to be recognized throughout the novel. Finally I examine how in *The Waves* deviated transcendence is depicted as a road toward Death in exactly the same way as Girard does in his *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque* (1961).

THE INTERDIVIDUAL AND HER MIMETIC DESIRE

Mimetic theory is deeply involved with the problem of selfhood, the paradoxical nature of subjectivity. According to René Girard we are not individuals but interdividuals. The ambiguous nature of the Self is a recurrent theme in Woolf's novels too, and especially in *The Waves*, it seems. As Lisa Marie Lucenti remarks: "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. The most productive theories for reading Woolf are those which allow for a large measure of variation and ambiguity both between and within individual subjects" (1998, 34). The problematic nature of the Self challenges the critic, since the very concept of character is turned into a conundrum, rather than a useful instrument with which to analyze the novel. To speak of separated characters, of individuals (*in-divisus*) with regard to *The Waves* is particularly difficult. So, for example, at the end of the novel Bernard (one of the six "voices" or "characters" whose lives are recounted) states: "I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (Woolf 2000, 212). After the publication of the novel, Woolf observed that the *Times* of London was enthusiastic about her characters while her intention was not to have any! (Woolf 1977–84, Diary of October 8, 1931). In *The Waves*, personality or character is portrayed as being *fluid*, especially through the influence of other characters. 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? (Woolf 2000, 61)

The subject is torn between the self and the Other. The Other has to answer the question “Who am I?” Even for activities that seem to define his character (storytelling, for instance), Bernard is said to “need the stimulus of other people” (59). This manifest dependency on Others makes him doubt his own self. “To be myself, (I note), I need the illumination of other people’s eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self” (87). As Lucenti summarized it (concisely, though a little vaguely): “Each character in *The Waves* can only get to a self through some form of otherness” (1998, 39).

Those who are acquainted with Girard’s theorizing will immediately recognize the remarkable resonance between the above passages and the way in which mimetic theory understands the problem of selfhood and the primordial place the Other takes in what we call our own identity. The total elucidation of those noteworthy resonances is beyond the scope of this article. My intention here is to focus on one particular aspect (the metaphysical aspect) of what is—according to René Girard—the cause of our “fluid Self” in modern (and postmodern) times: mimetic desire liberated from archaic constraints. Unleashed mimetic desire and the mimetic rivalries (concurrency) generated by it definitely have some positive effects (in the domain of economics, science, and technology, for instance) but it is also responsible for the (post)modern ontological sickness. The famous “fragmented self” arose for ontological reasons (a lasting mimetic crisis) before posing an epistemological problem. As we will see, desire in *The Waves* (as opposed to instinctually determined needs) is not a simple straight line or vector linking the desiring subject with the desired object. Next to the subject and object there is always a third party that we will term the model of desire or the Other here (after Girard). The metaphysical significance of mimetic desire—which will be the main subject of this brief essay, as I have already pointed out—is an important and often neglected aspect of mimetic theory.¹ “*Everything . . . is false, theatrical, and artificial in desire except the immense hunger for the sacred*” (Girard 1965, 79). Human longing is always a gesture toward transcendence. According to Girard, the human “project,” the dynamics of man’s entire personality, is directed either toward God or toward the Other.² In the latter case the Other, our neighbor, is idolized. This idolatry, it seems, is a recurring characteristic in the (six) speakers in Woolf’s enigmatic novel. They give the impression of suffering from a profound lack of personal autonomy and are constantly torn between their own self and the Other, whom they consciously (or unconsciously) attempt to emulate, to imitate.

Let us have a look at Louis at the beginning of the novel. He will not conjugate his verbs in class before having heard Bernard, so that he can imitate Bernard's 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." (Woolf 2000, 13)

There is nothing special, it seems, about this innocent desire to speak like the others. After all Louis is Australian and the others are all English. And yet, a closer look shows that there is more at stake here than a banal desire to overcome a difference in accent. In Louis's comparison of himself with the others, a touch of the fear and self-contempt that is so characteristic of the victims of metaphysical desire is undoubtedly present. Important here is the fact that all so-called rational and legitimate reasons for his conduct are explicitly eliminated. Louis's anxiety seems unjustified since he is the brightest pupil and knows his lesson by heart:

[Bernard and Susan] are flushed. But I am pale; I am neat, and my knickerbockers are drawn together by a belt with a brass snake. I know the lesson by heart. I know more than they will ever know. I know my cases and my genders; I could know everything in the world if I wished. But I do not wish to come to the top and say my lesson. . . . Jinny and Susan, Bernard and Neville bind themselves into a thong with which to lash me. (13)

The absurdity of Louis's seemingly innocent desire and fear becomes perfectly visible when 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). A brilliant pupil will not do a better job of conjugating verbs by imitating an English accent, especially when those verbs are Latin verbs. The total absence of rational or material grounds for his desire, its comical absurdity, makes us wonder what can cause it. What triggers Louis's anxiety and his urge to imitate the Others?

In order to find an answer, special consideration should be given to what is apparently only a detail: the snake-imagery in the quoted passages. In a work to which I will come back later, the Woolfian critic Jane de Gay rightly draws our attention to the many subtle allusions to the biblical story of the Fall in *The Waves*. What motivates Louis appears not to be a simple and seemingly justifiable desire to have, to acquire, the same accent as the others (since it is of no use in the presented context), but—on a more profound level—to *be like* the (godlike) others. "Ye will *be like* gods" is what the snake softly lisps into the

ears of Adam and Eve in the story of the Fall and this (false) promise of being is what makes the object desirable. As Girard writes: “The [desired] object is only a means of reaching the mediator [of desire]. The desire is aimed at the mediator’s being” (1965, 53). Thus, seen through the lens of Girard’s theory we may presume that Louis’s desire for the object (the English accent) is only a means of reaching the Others. What he *really* desires is their “being” (English).

Interestingly, in *The Waves*, the desire *to be* another is often introduced as something as banal as, for example, wearing clothes. So Rhoda says before going to bed: “As I fold up my frock and my chemise . . . I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny” (Woolf 2000, 19). In another passage, Louis and Neville are observing the “boasting boys” who go in a vast team to play cricket, sing in chorus, and all turn their heads simultaneously. They are “horrid little boys” and “yet that is what we wish to be, Neville and I” (34). Louis wants to become the Other and still be himself:

I watch them go with envy. Peeping from behind a curtain, I note the simultaneity of their movements with delight. If my legs were reinforced by theirs, how they would run! (34)

In this passage also, there is a hint at the metaphysical significance of Louis’s desires, their quasi-religious aspect, the blatant caricature of the *imitatio Christi*: “If I could follow, if I could be with them, I would sacrifice all I know” (34).

“I HAVE NO FACE. OTHER PEOPLE HAVE FACES.”

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” (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 of being unauthentic herself; she knows that 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. . . . Both despise me for copying what they do." (Woolf 2000, 31)

A while before, Jinny had also looked at herself in the small looking glass:

And 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 oneself 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 authentic'" (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, the 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 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. (Woolf 2000, 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," said Louis. "He 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 anything but easy or composed; he is having a hard time repressing tears. What, then, is the reason for these symmetrically contradictory 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; emphasis mine)

According to Girard, this odd illusion is imputable to the modern “glad tidings”: “God is dead”; it is up to humankind to take his place, but the promise of metaphysical autonomy—like 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 of universalizing, of looking 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 cannot be 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” (in 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 (Woolf 2000, 79). In order to grasp the metaphysical 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 Others’ 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 bang on the table. But I doubt: I tremble; . . . (79)

The other people give the impression of 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 into the consciousness of the other characters; the contempt seems mainly imagined). As Bernard had to “make phrases” in order to “interpose” something hard between himself and the Others’ gaze, so Rhoda needs to summon faces and thoughts as an amulet against the imagined scorn coming from the Others:

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 resonance? In what famous piece of world literature do we have people becoming aware of their “nakedness,” their “private shame” and wanting to hide it, to be protected? The story of the Fall is about the sin of 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, that is, “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," are 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, 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 Edvard 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).

THE RELIGIOUS METAPHOR: "PERCIVAL TAKES MY DEVOTION . . . HE ACCEPTS MY OFFERING"

The oddest individual in the novel, called Percival, is a character we only get to see through the eyes of the six main protagonists. We do not know if Percival is his real name or his epithet. He is a schoolmate of the six children and everyone gathers around him. "Look now, how everybody follows Percival. . . . Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants," says Louis (Woolf 2000, 26). Percival's movements are observed with great awe and are imitated. But the other children are not Percival; they do not succeed in being like him:

But look—[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 likewise. But they do not succeed. (25)

In an article on Woolf and history, Julia Briggs introduces the term hero-worship in speaking of Percival (2000, 78). That term is excellent, but it does not say everything. Percival is certainly considered as a hero, but given all we know about him he is no hero. He is not intelligent; he speaks in a slovenly accent and behaves clumsily. We even learn that he cannot read (Woolf 2000, 34). The six speakers, in contrast, are much more intelligent and gifted: "I am so much his superior," Bernard notes. "He is heavy. He walks clumsily down the field, through the long grass, to where the great elm trees stand," Bernard observes, but goes on to say, "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 medieval commander? In order to grasp

this, we should not isolate the person of Percival too much, even if he plays an important role in the novel. Right before the last-quoted passage, Bernard made an observation about the schoolmasters. They seem to have their own Percival:

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)

The analogy between the pupils and the masters is evident: the schoolboys imitate Percival but do not succeed in being like him; likewise, the masters imitate Dr. Crane, but they do not succeed in being like him either. And Bernard adds (about the masters), “Their antics seem pitiable in my eyes.” It is difficult not to taste the humorous flavor in those words, since we know that Bernard is involved in exactly the same kind of “antics.” Bernard’s perspicacity about the farcical nature of the masters’ behavior is amazingly great, as great as his blindness with regard to his own idealizing of Percival. Woolf is evidently mocking essentialist understandings of social intricacies. If Percival is regarded as a hero it is not for his qualities as a leader: it is for arbitrary, mimetic reasons. Later in the novel we learn that Percival goes to India. Bernard pictures how he would be doing there. He imagines how the wheel of a native bullock-cart gets stuck in a rut and “at once innumerable natives in loin-cloths swarm round it, chattering excitedly. But they do nothing” (102). And then, suddenly, Percival arrives:

But now behold, Percival advances; Percival rides a flea-bitten mare, and wears a sun-helmet. 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 he indeed is—a God. (102)

The humor and the ridicule in the above passage is evident: “the Oriental problem is solved.” The contrast between Bernard’s expectations and what actually happens in the novel is immense: in reality Percival falls from his horse in a clumsy accident and dies. Jane Marcus has rightly pointed out the way in which Percival’s fall anticipates the end of empire, and with it the end of white mythologies—as Julia Briggs notes (2000, 78). There is definitely a certain critique of British imperialism (*Britannia rules the waves!*) in the novel. The uncritical idolizing of some male, Western heroes will no doubt be part of the reason for the derision. And yet, there is also something else: an element that goes along with the idolizing, an element that is consistently explored in

the novel but that generally gets little or no attention from the critics. That element is what I call (after Girard) “the metaphysical significance” of the idolizing. Bernard imagines the native crowd to cluster around Percival “as if he were—what indeed he is—a God.”

The idea of a transcendency deviated in the direction of the human throws light on Proust’s poetics, Girard once stated (1961, 80). The same thing can undoubtedly be said of the poetics of a prominent aficionado of Proust: Virginia Woolf. Neville’s passion for Percival is especially strong and Woolf’s depiction of it consistently has a religious color. His “absurd and violent passion” (2000, 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). The aspiration to be absorbed, to disappear into the substance of an Other, implies an overwhelming revulsion for one’s own substance. Neville’s state of being toward 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. It is “mad idolatry to make the service greater than the god,” says Hector in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (act 2, scene 2, lines 56–57). Ironically, 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 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, 9)

In a brilliant 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, 135–136)

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 cross heaves on his waistcoat. The words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them. I gibe and mock at this sad religion." (Woolf 2000, 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's 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 hardly 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 mimetic suggestion of the chaplain only to fall unawares under the mimetic spell of a fellow student. (Bailie 1997, 136–137)

Bailie then quotes a passage from *The Waves* that is to be found just after the passage quoted above. I have already cited a part of this episode; 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 inexpressive 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.” (Woolf 2000, 25)

Vertical transcendency is rejected, only to be replaced by deviated transcendency. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard borrows an abstract formula from Louis Ferrero’s *Désepoirs* 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*” (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 happy with 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 cosmetic that protects our idols from the bites thinking keeps for us, nasty thinkers that we are!)³ (1843, 473)

“I need someone. . . . to whom the pitch of absurdity is sublime, and a shoe-string adorable,” Neville admits (Woolf 2000, 37). In his study of the modern novel, Girard found the essence of what is desirable in modern times in “spiritual and moral insufficiency,” in everything that—were it not for the desire—would paradoxically make it intolerable to be around the desired person.

DISTORTED MYSTICISM: “THE LIVING BELIEF NOW IS IN HUMAN BEINGS”

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? 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.⁴ 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 models. 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” (119–20), Percival is not a Christ-like figure: his death in a clumsy accident, when his horse trips over a molehill, is more reminiscent of his bumbling Arthurian namesake, and his death is final, leaving a void that the friends never manage to fill. (de Gay 2006)

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 caricature of Holy Thursday and Good Friday described above? In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard proposed that great novelists, whether atheists (like Proust) or Christians (like 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” (Woolf 2000, 102). In a 1936 letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf reflects on French peasant faith in West’s *St. Joan of Arc*⁵ in the following manner:

They believed where we can’t. 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 one anyhow. . . . Perhaps I mean, belief is

almost unconscious. And the living belief now is in human beings. (Woolf 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 work on the novel (the chapter I have quoted most here): "Men become gods in the eyes of each other" (1965). 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. I 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 points out, Woolf's novel contains many obvious allusions to Dante's *Inferno*, which Woolf carefully and slowly reread 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). When observing the underground, the tube station, where "everything desirable meets," Jinny says:

I am no longer part of the procession. Millions descend those stairs in a terrible descent. Great wheels churn inexorably urging them downwards. Millions have died. Percival died. I still move. I still live. (Woolf 2000, 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). She does not follow a "banner" into hell (*Inferno*, Canto 3, 52–57), but the banners of "this world" (Woolf 2000, 149). "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 method 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 pocket handkerchiefs" (175). Many protagonists in

The Waves seem to have their own trick to fight 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, I should make a last point 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 curious 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” (Woolf 1977–84, vol. 3, Diary of October 30, 1926, 114). It is curious for quite the opposite reason: the authors do not really analyze 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 starts 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 Teresa of Avila” (Havard-Williams and 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 of 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 same 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 Teresa 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 Avila recommended to her readers in her *Road to Perfection* (a little book she was asked to write): “All the pieces of advice given to you in this book have only one goal: that of bringing you to cling entirely to God, to hand over your will to the Creator and detach yourself from creatures” (Avila 1961, 191).⁶

O DEATH!

Percival’s clumsy and meaningless death opens up a vacuum that 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 that 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 (Woolf 2000, 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 imitate him, the children do not succeed in being like him. A spiritual gap separates Percival from the others gathering around him. “He is remote from us all in a pagan universe,” Neville observes (25). René Girard would speak of “external mediation” as characterizing the early chapters of the novel. After Percival’s death, the novelistic world of *The Waves* collapses into “internal mediation”; it loses its center. 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 off 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:

For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; 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. (Woolf 2000, 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” (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*” (1998, 39). There is Percival’s death, Rhoda’s suicide, and finally, 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 transcendence. 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 realized” (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 (September 15, 1926) containing “sensations which, when verbalized, formed the immediate basis for *The Waves*” (Woolf 2000, 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 sceptics can easily regard the 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*.

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 (Woolf 2000, 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. First, 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. Woolf pauses to reflect: “Pause. But why am I feeling this?” She 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 detectable 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 I noted at the beginning of this article, (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 Virginia's desire (the children) but the person she envies comes first: Vanessa. Sibling sparring and lifelong rivalries were 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 the fact 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 this, one should turn to a prominent specialist in matters of despair: Søren Kierkegaard. True despair—according to Kierkegaard—is not despair over *something* but despair over *oneself*. The one who (truly) despairs wants to get rid of himself. In his *Sygdommen til Døden* (*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” (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). It ends, ironically, with... Death (228).

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 [that is, 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 the last words of the novel:

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 couched 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 “holy 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 its author’s own suicide.⁷

EPILOGUE

At first a novel by Virginia Woolf might seem an odd subject for a periodical on religious matters. Both her parents were adamantly agnostic and she herself once claimed that “certainly and emphatically there is no God” (976, 72). However, few authors have been more perspicacious about the profoundly religious nature of much of modern life. *The Waves* is very much aware of the following paradox that Girard once noted: “Promethean philosophy sees in the Christian religion only a humanism which is still too timid for complete self-assertion. The [great] novelists, regardless of whether they are Christians, see in the so-called modern humanism a subterranean metaphysics which is incapable of recognizing its own nature” (1965, 159). According to Girard, authors like Proust and Dostoyevsky also see this. While Proust and Woolf remained agnostic, Dostoyevsky and Girard embraced the Christian religion. Girard’s term for the “living belief that is now in human beings” is not incidentally “deviated transcendency.” It is deviated since it misses its real goal. At the beginning of this article, I noted that human longing is always a gesture toward transcendency. Evidently—if that is the case—it will be frustrated when it is diverted, deviated from its real target: true Transcendency. In this sense the theological implications of Girard’s mimetic theory are the same as Saint Augustine’s intuitions about humans as profoundly religious beings, beings “made for God”: “Quia fecisti nos ad Te, inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in Te, Domine” (You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in You)⁸ (*Confessiones*, bk. 1, chap. 1).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Jane de Gay for having made her significant paper available to me. It is included in de Gay (2006). I also wish to say many thanks to Patrick Schockaert (a great admirer and critic of René Girard), who once made me curious about mimetic theory.

NOTES

Colloquium on Violence and Religion “Mimetic Theory and the Imitation of the Divine” Koblenz, Germany Saturday, July 9, 2005

1. In a recent issue of *Anthropoetics*, Clare Sims observes: “It is common practise among his critics and admirers to ignore the theological implications of Girard’s work. . . . In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard introduces the concept of mediated desire within an explicitly religious framework.” In the quotation from Girard’s novel, about the only thing that is authentic in human longing, that is, “the immense hunger for the sacred,” the word “sacred” obviously does not have the same connotation as it has in his later works—where Girard will use the French term “le sacré” for ancient idolatry, that is, the illusory transcendency generated by violent mimesis. Even if the words have changed, the distinction between idolatry (whether ancient or modern) and an authentic, liberating transcendency has been a constant throughout Girard’s whole oeuvre.
2. I use terminology from James Williams’s interview with René Girard at the end of the *Girard Reader* (Williams 1996). Girard’s reference to the human “project” is in reference to Sartre’s philosophical jargon.
3. The quotation in French is taken from Baudelaire (1843). The English translation is my own.
4. The paper by Jane de Gay to which I refer is included in de Gay (2006).
5. An excellent study on the modern renditions of the medieval story of Joan of Arc (with a chapter on Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West and their treatments of the story) has been written by Ann W. Astell (2003).
6. The French translation reads: “Tous les conseils que je vous ai donnés dans ce livre n’ont qu’un but, celui de vous amener à vous livrer complètement au Créateur, à lui remettre votre volonté et à vous détacher des créatures.” The English translation is mine. The saint’s advice is reminiscent of Saint Paul’s warning against idolatry: Paul reprimands “[The ones] who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator” (Rom 1:25).
7. See, among others, Lisa Marie Lucenti (1998).
8. The theological implications of Girard’s theory join Kierkegaard’s in the latter’s famous formula for a state in which there is no inkling of despair. The conclusion to Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death* reads as follows: “[This is] the formula for the state in which there is no despair at all: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula in turn, as has been frequently pointed out, is the definition of faith.” Kierkegaard affirms that a self without despair is willing to be itself. Here again he is extremely close to Girard: “The impulse of the soul toward God is inseparable from a retreat into the Self. Inversely the turning in on itself of pride is inseparable from a movement of panic toward the Other” (Girard 1965, 58). It is that movement of panic that is so forcefully incarnated by the protagonists in *The Waves*. Real humility consists of recognizing one’s true (God-centred) Self without wanting to get rid of it. Consequently, humility

should not be understood as some alien virtue that would contradict the human's most profound longings. On the contrary: as Theresa of Avila famously affirmed: "La humildad es andar en verdad" (Humility is to be in truth). According to Girard, the perfect example of the good use of mimesis is the relationship between the Son and the Father in the Gospels. And as Girard observed, Jesus invites us to imitate Him, as He imitates the Father, humbly and in full trust—as little children do. Here Girard, Saint Augustine, and Kierkegaard would agree, I think, that it is that humble mimesis of Love ("faith") that we are born for; it is the mimesis of Love that will dissolve all despair and will make humankind's joy not simply great, nor even extremely great, but *full*. (John 15:11).

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