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Unsubstantial Territories: Nomadic Subjectivity as Criticism of Psychoanalysis in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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Abstract

This essay looks at subjectivity in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* employing a psychoanalytic approach and using the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Woolf's relation to the theories of her contemporary Sigmund Freud was unclear. Psychoanalytic scholarship on Woolf's writings, nevertheless, established itself in 1980's as a dominant scholarly topic and has been growing since. However, the rigidity and medicalizing discourse of psychoanalysis make it poorly compatible with Woolf's feminist, anti-individualist writing. This essay is a reading of *The Waves*, in which psychoanalytic theory is infused with a Deleuzo-Guattarian approach. The theories of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and especially his concept of the Other, together with Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity, are used as relevant tools for thinking about subjectivity in the context of *The Waves*.

The resultant reading is a criticism of psychoanalysis. In this reading, two characters are looked at in detail: Percival and Bernard. Percival emerges as the Lacanian Other, who, situated at the central nexus of power, symbolises the tyrannies of individuality and masculinity. Simultaneously, Percival is detached from the metaphysical world of the novel. His death marks a shift from oppressive individuality towards nomadic subjectivity. For Bernard, nomadic subjectivity is a flight from the dead and stagnating centre towards periphery, where new ethics can be negotiated. The essay concludes with the implications of such reading: the affirmation of nomadic subjectivity makes the Deleuzo-Guattarian approach more relevant in the context of Woolf, whereas psychoanalytic striving towards structure, dualism, and focus on pathology are rejected as incompatible with her texts.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; *The Waves*; Jacques Lacan; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; Rosi Braidotti; psychoanalysis; subjectivity; nomadic subjectivity

Both Virginia Woolf and Sigmund Freud are synonymous with the modernist destabilisation of tradition. Woolf wanted to break away from realism through her experimentation with narrative, and Freud's psychoanalysis questioned the centrality of consciousness in the human psyche. The connection between Woolf and Freud runs deeper: Virginia Woolf and her husband Leonard were crucial in dissemination of psychoanalytic works in English via their publishing house Hogarth Press, setting out to release an 'International Psycho-Analytical Library' in 1924 (Minow-Pinkney, "Psychoanalytic Approaches" 60). The Woolfs thus helped establish the global readership of the psychoanalytic theory. It is uncertain, however, to what extent Virginia Woolf's writing was influenced by psychoanalysis. On the one hand, in her diary, she agreed with at least some of Freud's theory, even though finding it depressive: "Freud is upsetting: reducing one to whirlpool; & I daresay truly" (250). She also compared the experience of writing *To the Lighthouse* to psychoanalytic catharsis, working through the obsessive thoughts about her mother through reliving the repressed feelings ("A Sketch of the Past" 80-81). On the other hand, she found it inappropriate to reduce people to 'cases' of psychoanalytic study (Högberg 31). She criticised English fiction writers influenced by psychoanalysis, who employed psychoanalytic theories and concepts in their works for their reductionist-scientific approach to psyche (Minow-Pinkney, "Psychoanalytic Approaches" 62). Instead, she was convinced that the writer's task is to convey the complexity of life. Regardless of Woolf's somewhat ambivalent relation to Freud, psychoanalysis has been a prominent theoretical vantage point for the critics of Virginia Woolf's texts.

Until 1960's, criticism of Woolf's texts was limited to "formalist" assessments of her experimental modernist style (Snaith 3). The subsequent "advent of literary theory," as well as the publication of (auto-) biographical material on the writer, saw a surge in Virginia Woolf studies, primarily in connection to her feminism (Snaith 3;

McNees 5). Both the publication of Woolf's diaries and letters, as well as the advance of feminist theory, contributed to the increase in psychoanalytic readings of Woolf from 1980's onwards (Jouve 245; Minow-Pinkney, "Psychoanalytic Approaches" 65). On the one hand, Woolf's texts were seen by feminists as tools for ridding psychoanalysis of phallocentrism¹ and male bias (Minow-Pinkney, "Psychoanalytic Approaches" 65). On the other hand, the biographical writings provided rich material for psychoanalysts interested in Woolf's mental health (Jouve 245; Minow-Pinkney, "Psychoanalytic Approaches" 63). Psychoanalysis thereby, even the feminist modifications thereof, used the language of pathology in the interpretation of Woolf's writings, including her fiction. The aim of this essay is to focus on the similarity between Woolf's and psychoanalytic take on subjectivity, while taking a step back from the psychoanalytic focus on pathology, and a step further from the, arguably, unsuccessful feminist psychoanalyst goal of ridding the theory from the male bias. Woolf sought a new approach towards subjectivity; her fiction is a "quest for 'life itself,'" a search for the "real" life that "escapes" individual human consciousness, a life that can hardly be described through literary conventions of the realist novel (McNees 3). Her conviction was that realist literary conventions confine subjectivity into a "room," that is "bright" with clarity of a system of rules, but at the same time "narrow" and limiting ("Modern Fiction" 191). In a similar vein, psychoanalysis problematized the centrality of consciousness in subjectivity with its discovery of the crucial role of unconscious processes in individual psyche (Freud, *SE* 13: 171). Psychoanalysis then discovered the world outside the "bright and narrow room" of human consciousness.

Woolf's probably most experimental novel, *The Waves*, provides a relevant context to answer the question that thus emerges: how can psychoanalysis and its criticism be used to explain Woolfian subjectivity? In *The Waves*, published in 1931, Woolf's fictional experiments truly liberate subjectivity from the confines of the consecutively narrated consciousnesses of individual characters. The critics of psychoanalysis Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari celebrate such subjectivity and use it in the development of their own philosophy (Ryan 3). Conversely, a psychoanalytic diagnosis to the novel, such as the one pronounced by Makiko Minow-Pinkney, warns of the danger of indeterminacy inherent in such subjectivity (*Virginia Woolf* 186). Criticism of the psychoanalytic approach informed by the thought of Deleuze and

¹ Phallocentrism refers to arguments about central importance of the male reproductive organ.

Guattari, would then mean taking a step back from the diagnostics of pathology and towards affirmation, and a step further from the perceived danger of giving up identity, towards the acceptance and the anticipation of the unknown. The main argument of such criticism is a reading of *The Waves* where the negative individuating and conservative tendencies of psychoanalysis are addressed and overcome by celebrating a positive, “nomadic” subjectivity.

The structure of the argument is as follows. First, relevant theories where notions of subjectivity in psychoanalysis, feminism, as well as the Deleuzo-Guattarian, and Woolf’s own approaches towards subjectivity, will be introduced. The two relevant theoretical concepts in the context of *The Waves* will also be accounted for in this section. The concept of Other is a cornerstone in psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theories of subjectivity. The Other is the subject’s mirror-image, an abstract imaginary figure and the unattainable object of the subject’s desire, signifying a fundamental and unsatisfiable lack in the subject. The critical concept “nomadic subjectivity” was put forward by Rosi Braidotti, feminist philosopher and a student of Deleuze. Nomadic subjectivity is not limited to an individual subject; it is a process of “becoming-nomad,” a move from the centre to the periphery of any number and any kind of subjects. In the context of the novel these two concepts may be linked to the two characters Percival and Bernard, who illustrate psychoanalytic and Deleuzo-Guattarian theory, respectively. Percival emerges as the Other in the subjectivity of the six characters of the novel, and his removal as the centre of the novel allows Bernard to move “nomadically” towards the periphery. The essay will conclude by discussing the implications of such a reading of *The Waves*. The individualising and pathologising tendencies of psychoanalysis seem to go against Woolf’s feminism and own conceptions of subjectivity. The Deleuzo-Guattarian approach provides a more relevant focus on fluidity and affirmation.

One of the seminal texts of first-wave feminism, Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* from 1929, may be read as a critique of the historical patriarchal subjectivity that had no room for women. Freud’s psychoanalysis, conversely, may be seen to have reinforced historical patriarchy through its marginalisation of female sexuality. According to Elsa Högberg, Woolf questions Freud’s idea that human nature is instinctively aggressive. Rather, Woolf “anticipates later developments in psychoanalytic thought” (Högberg 32). Minow-Pinkney thinks that feminist modifications of Lacan’s theories, particularly those of Julia Kristeva, “rescued

Woolf's modernism for use by feminist politics by radicalizing the interpretation of Woolf's narrative strategies, particularly through the issue of feminine writing posited at the theoretical junction of subjectivity, sexuality and language" ("Psychoanalytic Approaches" 64). From the feminist-psychoanalytic viewpoint, Woolf's identity as a "woman-writer" reinforces her key position in the theories of "feminine writing" and re-writing of patriarchal narrative conventions. However, when looking at the content of Woolf's texts (particularly her novel *The Waves*), such approach sees the "new subjectivity" that Woolf is writing trapped in a "precarious ... dangerous [and] impossible dialectic" of mutual exclusive differences (Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf* 155, 186). While acknowledging Woolf's technique as anti-patriarchal, feminist psychoanalysis is, nevertheless, reluctant to give up the arguably essentially patriarchal dialectical principle of binary oppositions.²

Reliance on dialectics is one of the most important criticisms of psychoanalysis put forward by Deleuze and Guattari, who frequently turn to Woolf and her texts while they develop a radical philosophy of their own. As a way out of dialectics, Deleuze and Guattari propose the concept of "becoming," elaborated below. According to Deleuze and Guattari, Virginia Woolf "made all her life and work a passage, a becoming, all kinds of becomings between ages, sexes, elements and kingdoms" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 294). *The Waves*, they write, is exemplary of becoming, or "multiplicity": "Each [character in the novel] is simultaneously in this multiplicity and at its edge, and crosses over into others" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 290, 294). A Deleuzo-Guattarian approach means moving away from the importance of Woolf's social position as a female writer. According to them, becoming occurs "in-between ... the dualisms," and "that is what Virginia Woolf lived with all her energies, in all of her work, never ceasing to become" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 323). In this sense, they echo Woolf's own argumentation for "man-womanly" or "woman-manly" writing (*A Room of One's Own* 97), writing unconstrained by one's gender, "non-binary" writing.

Psychoanalysis in general, conversely, tends to create binaries instead, and Freud in particular did just that when he established his "conscious-unconscious

² Dialectics, in the philosophy of Hegel, refers to the binary division of the world phenomena into sets of opposites, whose confrontation and mutual synthesis propel historical progress (Buchanan). While the notion of progress was generally rejected by poststructuralists, Lacan eagerly employs Hegelian master/slave dialectic in his theory of the subject.

dualism machine” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 331).³ He argued that unconscious processes are more numerous and more crucial in the human psyche than the conscious ones (Freud, *SE* 13: 170). Freud therefore established a clear binary conscious/unconscious, where the unconscious is the more massive and the more powerful term. This binary is equal to the binary reason/passion, since the ego, as the conscious agent of the psyche is seen in opposition to the unconscious id, the seat of instincts and desires, that the ego seeks to control and repress (Freud, *SE* 19: 25). The ego is therefore the subject’s connection to society and culture and the primary mechanism of individuation. According to Freud, the ego is synonymous with the individual’s body (*SE* 19: 26). Subsequently, the ego plays the main role in identification and assuming a stable identity. The subject first identifies with the parents as a result of the resolution of the Oedipus complex,⁴ but also with other “ideal-figures” later on in the subject’s life, all of which lead to a formation of a presumably stable identity (*SE* 22: 62). All-in-all, while Freud’s theory of subjectivity focused on the repression of animal instincts as a process of acculturation, Lacan’s later modification of it announced a total enslavement of the subject by culture and language.

As far as Lacanian subject is concerned, to quote Woolf, “there could be no doubt of his sex” (*Orlando* 5). It is definitively a “he,” as evidenced by Lacan’s use of masculine pronouns when describing him. Not only is Lacanian subjectivity exclusively masculine, it is a further exacerbation the Freudian dualism “conscious/unconscious.” For Lacan, the subject is built upon his relation to the Other first seen by an infant developed enough to distinguish its own reflection in the mirror (2-3). This development marks the child’s accession into and subjugation by the symbolic order (language). The Other is an imaginary figure, situated in the threshold of speech, or the signifier and the signified, or the unconscious (Lacan 343). The presence of the Other necessitates the “dialectic of desire,” where the signifier holds the “master position” (Lacan 337). Since, according to Lacan, all desire is unconscious, and since the unconscious functions as “the discourse of the Other ... man’s desire” is therefore “the desire of the Other” (344-345). The subject cannot know his desire, he can only experience need as an expression of a fundamental lack within the subject himself

³ One interpretation of the philosophers’ use of “machine” in this context is their attempt to stress the real, material effect that concepts produce. “Something is produced: the effects of the machine, not mere metaphors.” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 2)

⁴ An infant’s sexual desire towards the parent of opposite sex. The successful resolution of the Oedipus complex results in the child’s identification with the parent of the same sex.

(Lacan 349). Since the Other possesses that which the subject is lacking, the desire *of* the Other becomes also the desire *for* the Other. Since desire is synonymous with lack, the lack is located within the Other himself, making desire an infinite cycle of desiring the lack. Lacan likens the Other to a godlike figure: “I can only prove to the Other that he exists, not, of course with the proofs for the existence of God ... but by loving him” (350). Just as the love of God is a better proof of his existence than any empirical proof, the love of the Other makes him “real.” The pity of the subject’s existence burdened by the lack of the unknown makes the unconscious, or death, or unbirth, both the place of origin of and the preferred destination for the subject: “‘I’ am from the place where a voice is heard clamouring ‘the universe is a defect in the purity of Non-Being’” (Lacan 351). Desire in Lacanian sense is therefore driven by the lack of the unattainable; it is a desire that can never be satisfied. This desire is detached from the subject, by virtue of the desire’s origin in abstract language. Language “speaks us” according to Lacan. We are no subjects, at least not consciously. In short, situated in the margin between the signifier and the signified, the Other holds absolute power over the subject, and produces desire-as-lack in the subject.

One of Deleuze and Guattari’s intentions was to abandon this notion of a negative desire. Yet again, they quote Woolf, when they conceive of a subjectivity where every “complaint and grievance, unsatisfied desire, defence or pleading, everything that roots each of us (everybody) in ourselves” is eliminated (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 326). For them, subjectivity is not introspective, anchored in an individual self, but is directed outwards. Desire is not a lack; rather it is a productive force, whose “product is real” and material, like a work of art or a book (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 26). Not only do they aim at uprooting subjectivity from the self and freeing it from desire-as-lack, their argumentation also seeks to subvert the dialectic that seems to pervade psychoanalysis. As already mentioned, Deleuze and Guattari are interested in “becoming,” and for them it is necessarily “becoming-minoritarian”; there is no “becoming-majoritarian,” like “becoming-man,” since majoritarianism, or *being* at the centre, implies stasis, whereas “becoming” is necessarily a dynamic process (*A Thousand Plateaus* 339). Since man is a universal standard majority stagnating in the centre, the first step for man is “becoming-woman.” It does not entail, of course, that Deleuze and Guattari see all biological males changing sex; rather they see a flight of majoritarian masculinity into “microfemininity” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 321). To escape the dialectic, *both* the majority and minority need

to become-minoritarian. Becoming, thus, is not a fluctuation between terms in a dialectic, but a move from the centre to the periphery.

This move can also be looked at outside of the dualist categories of gender. According to Rosi Braidotti, becoming is “a crossing or a trajectory; nothing happens at the center ... but at the periphery there roam the youthful gangs of the new nomads” (36). Braidotti, when conceiving of becoming-nomad, or nomadic subjectivity, does not refer to literal non-sedentary peoples. The reason for her focusing on the “nomadic” aspect of becoming, instead of “becoming-woman,” while acknowledging “masculinity [as] antithetical to the process of becoming,” is her intention to situate becoming “beyond gender,” and link it to “larger, less sex-specific concerns” (Braidotti 38-41). More precisely, she sees the “process of transformation of negative into positive passions,” leading to “[a]ffirmation,” as the crucial mechanism in nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti 165). In other words, she is more concerned with the ethical domain of becoming than “becoming-woman,” which can be easily misread as having identitarian connotation in a feminist context. Instead of a unified and detached individual subject trapped in dialectics and striving for identity, nomadic subjectivity strives towards “nomadic difference [as] a productive asymmetry,” driven by “desire for qualitative transformations, for flows and shifts of multiple desires” (Braidotti 41). Acknowledging the fundamental asymmetry of difference, Braidotti’s nomadic thought sees it as a driving force in producing ever more difference, never identity or sameness. Lastly, becoming-nomad has a temporal aspect: it is a “moment in the chain of being that passes on,” which is, arguably, relevant in the context of Woolf with her prioritising of a rich and intensive moment of “being” over consecutive narrative plot (Braidotti 163). All-in-all, nomadic subjectivity, or becoming-nomad, is a flight from the stagnating and oppressive centre towards the minoritarian periphery and the new ethics of affirmation.

The Waves, one of Woolf’s most important novels, seems to provide ample material both for a psychoanalytic interpretation and a Deleuzo-Guattarian analysis. Psychoanalysis sees the novel within “a precarious dialectic between identity and its loss ... an unsettling and unsettlable alternation” (Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf* 155). However, the most “unsettling” element of the novel is, arguably, its centre, Percival, who symbolises Lacanian Other in the novel’s “subjectivity,” whereas he, despite providing structure and solidity to the novel, stands for patriarchy and produces desire-as-lack. The Deleuzo-Guattarian approach sees the removal of Percival as the

centre from the novel as a way out of the dialectic, especially for Bernard, who, after Percival's death, sees life as "both solidity and intangibility intermingling" (Ryan 183). Bernard can be described in terms of shared nomadic subjectivity, where the boundaries between self and other are blurred. The removal of Percival as the Other from the novel facilitates Bernard's becoming-nomad and his movement to the periphery of "in-between."

Percival is the character in the centre of the novel, giving the novel unity, solidity, and strongly affecting the other characters. Percival is a force of attraction that draws Bernard, Jinny, Louis, Neville, Rhoda and Susan, from whose soliloquies the novel is made up, towards himself, and gathers them around himself: "he is like a stone fallen into a pond, round which minnows swarm. Like minnows, we who had been shooting this way, that way, all shot round him when he came," says Rhoda (Woolf, *The Waves* 75). Percival's attraction therefore brings order to the primordial chaos. His force of gravity is further evidenced by the history of the creation of the novel. In the initial stages of writing, Woolf intended to title her novel *The Moths* (Parsons, *The Waves* vi). Although the title changed, Percival's function as the light attracting "the moths"—the other six characters—remained. "He is conventional; he is a hero" (Woolf, *The Waves* 68); he inspires admiration in all of his peers. Neville sees "no solidity ... without Percival" (Woolf, *The Waves* 68). In Bernard's eyes, the six, "who yelped like jackals biting at each other's heels now assume the sober and confident air of soldiers in the presence of their captain" (Woolf, *The Waves* 68). The image of a superior "captain" or a leader, commanding inferior "soldiers" is closely tied to Percival's masculinity. He is introduced in the novel as a luminous and attractive schoolboy, sitting "upright among the smaller fry" (Woolf, *The Waves* 19). Wherever he walks, "everybody follows Percival" (Woolf, *The Waves* 20). All the boys want to be him: "Dalton, Jones, Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the backs of their necks" the same way Percival does, but "do not succeed" (Woolf, *The Waves* 19). It is worth stressing that the boys do not merely *identify* with Percival in a Freudian sense; rather, they actively *mimic* him in a sense of Lacanian "mirror-image." Percival is therefore a paragon of masculinity. His masculinity, however, is destructive.

Together with exerting a force of attraction and creating a state of solidity, Percival's presence has negative effects. For instance, Louis, whose "shattered mind is pieced together," by Percival's presence, "resents" this very "power of Percival" (Woolf, *The Waves* 21). Louis senses as if the six are "bound by the tremendous power

of some inner compulsion,” and that Percival “destroys ... the hint at some better order” when he leaves them, “Yet it is Percival [Louis] need[s]; for it is Percival who inspires poetry” (Woolf, *The Waves* 21). Louis is the first to realise the destructive effects of Percival’s attraction. The character to suffer the most from its effects, however, is Neville, who “falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime” with Percival (Woolf, *The Waves* 19). Neville realises that his love is truly hopeless:

I shall send him poems and he will perhaps reply with a picture post card. But it is for that that I love him. I shall propose meeting — under a clock, by some Cross; and shall wait, and he will not come. It is for that that I love him. (Woolf, *The Waves* 32)

Neville is conscious that his desire towards Percival can never be satisfied. His desire is akin to Lacanian desire-as-lack for the Other. The reason Neville desires Percival is exactly the fact that the desire cannot be satisfied, but Neville is greatly aware of it, in contrast to the Lacanian subject. Percival might “perhaps” reply to some of Neville’s letters, but he will never meet Neville “under a clock, by some Cross.” Neville’s desire towards Percival is fuelled by Percival’s masculinity, which is simultaneously ordering and oppressive, here hinted at by the symbols of ordered time (“clock”) and Christianity (“Cross”). Louis confirms the negativity of Percival’s masculinity, when he, together with Neville, “wish[es] to be” part of “the majestic order” of masculinity, over which Percival presides, while aware that such masculinity “leave[s] butterflies trembling with their wings pinched off” and “make[s] little boys sob in dark passages” (Woolf, *The Waves* 25). Louis and Neville’s desire is therefore a desire towards Percival’s central position, a desire for power.

The position at the centre implies hegemony and domination. Percival’s power, when seen in connection to his masculinity is therefore that of patriarchal oppression, which is essentially the object of Woolf’s critique. Percival’s name might symbolise a “piercing of the veil ... male’s penetration of the hymen,” or the corruptive phallic power that puts an end to the state of purity (Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf* 177). While Minow-Pinkney sees the “sharpness,” or “pointiness” of his corruptive power, a Deleuzo-Guattarian approach sees as crucial his location in the “central Point” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 341). That point is where creation of “certain distinctive opposition[s]” and “organizing binary distributions within the binary machines” occur. (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 341). Not only is Percival capable of creating distinct oppositions between characters (such as the oppositions between him and Louis, between him and Neville, mentioned earlier; the opposition between him

and Bernard will be described further on), Percival's "dualism-machine" of destructive masculinity produces real, material, negative consequences in the context of the novel. According to Deleuze and Guattari, by being situated in the centre, "[m]an constitutes himself as a gigantic memory," opposing minor memories, minor histories and minor subjectivities (*A Thousand Plateaus* 341). Similarly, "[Percival] is allied with the Latin phrases on memorial brasses," and henceforth the Empire and its history, starting from its centre in classical Rome and progressing towards its centre in modern industrialised London (Woolf, *The Waves* 19). The Empire's history recounts the glory of men in their conquest and imperial expansion, and their subordination of minor peoples that meant production of more subjects of the Empire. Minor subjectivities are seen by the Empire as an obstacle to the imperial project. Therefore, the subject of the British Empire, Percival, is inclined to solve "the Oriental problem" with his noble "standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him" (Woolf, *The Waves* 75). In this sense, he echoes Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*: "the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man [that] constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization" (*SE* 21: 121). Percival, therefore, despite representing the height of (patriarchal) civilization, is also the primary obstacle for the realisation of that civilization.

Percival's detachment is another of his likenesses with the Other. "He sees nothing; he hears nothing. He is remote from us all in a pagan universe," filled with "pagan indifference"; he says nothing throughout the novel except a single "No," that he utters in reply to Bernard's "effort" at making poetry; Percival thereby expresses the masculine rational negation of art and creativity (Woolf, *The Waves* 19, 21). Therefore, while being a symbol of orderly progress, Percival is situated in the "pagan" place, associated with stagnation and indifference towards the arts. Not only is Percival himself "conventional" (Woolf, *The Waves* 68), the conventional way he is described in the novel ("He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily ... He must be in some cab ... He rides on") may connect him to Woolf's criticism of the rules of the narrative (Woolf, *The Waves* 19, 66, 75). The most "conventional" description of Percival is made by Bernard, shortly before Percival's death. The sentence, as if cut out of a realist novel, oddly stands out against the background of the affective and poetic language of *The Waves*. It is uttered by Bernard, and is described as "truth" and "facts":

The handsome young man in the grey suit, whose reserve contrasted so strangely with the loquacity of the others, now brushed the crumbs from

his waistcoat and, with a characteristic gesture at once commanding and benign, made a sign to the waiter, who came instantly and returned a moment later with the bill discreetly folded upon a plate (Woolf, *The Waves* 80).

The ironic intention of this description is revealed upon turning to Woolf's criticism of realism: "Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide" ("Modern Fiction" 188). In Woolf's view, realism is no longer capable of describing modern "life" or convey any "truth" about the new modernist world. Arguably then, one of Woolf's fictional experiments is inserting a realist character into her own modernist novel. Consequently, this character is completely detached from the experimental metaphysics of *The Waves*. Percival then, arguably, is Woolf's covert critique of the authority of realism, seen by her as blocking creativity and artistic experiments. Percival's detachment is connected to his divinity as a possible explanation of his power. He would not only make "an admirable churchwarden" (Woolf, *The Waves* 19), but a perfect Emperor even, the human representative of the divine power on earth. Or, perhaps even God himself? "The multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were – what he indeed is – a god" (Woolf, *The Waves* 75). His divinity coincides with his position as the Other: he is "the Edenic identity of the signifier and signified ... the possibility of their coincidence" (Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf* 177). The source of Percival's divine powers then, arguably, lies in the origins of the world, in the unquestioned divine order of things, "uncorrupted" by original sin; he is a patriarchal deity of the world of infinite stability and order. Percival's divinity is the Other's divinity, however, rendering his "Omnipotence" only "a phantom" (Lacan 344); his divinity cannot protect him from accidental death.

Percival's death is the key event in the novel. Although the "play-poem" (the way Woolf herself occasionally referred to *The Waves*) lacks "dramatic impetus" (Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf* 172), some degree of dramatization is sustained in the descriptive vignettes of a progression from sunrise to sunset between the chapters. Percival's death occurs at the absolute centre; having occupied the central *space* throughout the novel, Percival dies at the *temporal* centre of the novel, at its culmination. His life progresses with the day, and at noon, when "[t]he sun had risen to its full height," he dies (Woolf, *The Waves* 82). Despite his detachment from the world of the novel, Percival's death comes as an immense shock to the characters. Neville feels that his "past is cut from" him; Bernard is filled with "stark emotions";

Rhoda feels as if “all palpable forms of life have failed” her (Woolf, *The Waves* 84-88). At the same time, however, Percival’s death signals the end of the detrimental power of his divine individuality, and its effects on the characters. Woolf muses on the connection between individualism and divinity in her unfinished memoir:

Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself (“A Sketch of the Past” 72).

In her criticism of individualism, Woolf both expresses disinterest in individual authorship and rejects creationism by the symbol of individualism, a monotheistic God, in favour of the “work” itself, or indeed “life” itself. Percival’s divinity, infinity and omnipotence are therefore cancelled out by Woolf through his accidental death. At the same time, his removal can allow the characters to focus on the more important – “the truth ... the thing itself.” The removal of the transcendent and detached individual, Percival, might be compared to a hypothetical removal of the Other from subjectivity; Percival’s death marks therefore a shift from the solidity and structure that he provided, to fluidity and serendipity of nomadic subjectivity.

Despite Lacan’s claims that the Other “does not exist,” at least not outside the individual subject (351), Percival’s resemblances to the Other allow for their hypothetical equivalence. Neither of them speaks, while both possess immense power towards coercion, verging on divine omnipotence. Both of them occupy the “Master” position in the master/slave dialectic, which is also the position of absolute centre. Both exert a force of gravity towards themselves through desire-as-lack. The main difference between the two is that Percival can be and is removed by Woolf, while Lacanian psychoanalysis rests on his notion of the Other. The removal of Percival from the novel then, arguably, shows what effects the removal of the Other has on desire and subjectivity, in line with the thought of Deleuze and Guattari. In this sense, Bernard provides a relevant focus.

Percival’s death coincides with the birth of Bernard’s son; Bernard finds himself “at the zenith of an experience” (Woolf, *The Waves* 86). He realises his own position at the centre of the actualisation of his masculinity, having fulfilled one of masculinity’s primary goals. Because of the tremendous effect Percival’s power had on Bernard, he experiences anxiety that no life is possible without that power. However, he is reassured upon his noticing that “the machine” of life “still works” in the same “rhythm” (Woolf, *The Waves* 85). Bernard also notices a change in the flow of desire,

no longer directed towards Percival as the centre: “He sat there in the centre. Now I go to that spot no longer. The place is empty” (Woolf, *The Waves* 85). Without the pull towards the centre, Bernard realises that he can “find out what is of great importance” (Woolf, *The Waves* 85), namely, new ways of living without Percival’s oppressive power. Without the flow of desire directed toward the centre, Bernard realises Percival’s nature as his “opposite,” which does not mean however, that Bernard assumes Percival’s place in the centre, as the stronger term in a dialectic; that place remains “empty” (Woolf, *The Waves* 87). Bernard becomes aware of his “own infirmities,” when Percival, the Other, is no longer a frame of reference for the self (Woolf, *The Waves* 87). The solidity, structure and universalism that Percival provided are no more: “Chaos, detail return” (Woolf, *The Waves* 86). While still shocked by Percival’s death, Bernard begins to realise the ways of life without him.

However, even before Percival’s death, the shared collective subjectivity of the six provides moments of productive desire, unlike Percival’s desire-as-lack. Their common nomadic subjectivity is seen by Bernard as “a red carnation ... many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves — a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution” (Woolf, *The Waves* 70). In it, different desires and both negative and positive passions flow freely. For instance, prior to meeting with Bernard, a meeting that would grow into an argument, Neville feels that it is

painful to be recalled, to be mitigated, to have one’s self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another. As he 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, *The Waves* 46)

The hurt that Neville experiences belongs to his ego, whose aim, psychoanalytically, is continuity and clear boundaries. According to Braidotti, negative feelings inevitably emerge in the process of becoming-nomad. She calls it “the ethical nausea that marks the intrinsically negative nature of one’s passions.” To proceed with the actualisation of becoming, it is necessary to commit “the ethical act” of transforming negative into positive passions, of negation into affirmation. The ultimate goal is “relinquishing” the “ego” in favour of an ethical “interrelational self” (Braidotti 165). Neville and Bernard’s argument can serve an illustration of such process. While the conflict is, arguably, instigated by the clash of their separate egotistic interests, the subject matter of their argument is exactly the notion of the self. In a truly nomadic fashion, Neville and Bernard negotiate the role of different selves in their shared subjectivity. A famous

writer's self can be both an inspirational destination for another writer, but also an insulting accusation of impersonation and lack of own genuine style. Bernard feels therefore like Byron when he is inspired, and Neville reiterates his pride in his own "genuine" self in his refusing to impersonate Catullus, whom he admires. Bernard however, seems to begin to embrace a multiplicity of selves; he finds constriction in just one self "strange" (Woolf, *The Waves* 48-49). Such multiplicity is connected to a productive desire akin inspiration, that makes Bernard inquire about Neville's poems (Woolf, *The Waves* 47). In Bernard, this desire, arguably, is fuelled by his own poetic self that he recognizes in Neville, but which Neville cannot recognize himself, with his "distrust" towards both his own and Bernard's "inspiration" (Woolf, *The Waves* 47). Their desire leads them over the "bridge" to Bernard's room to find privacy together with "red serge curtains drawn" and "walls around them," where they can "regain their territory" (Woolf, *The Waves* 47). This territory is a creative space shielded from the conservative influence of Percival, that robs Neville from his inspiration. It is also an act of subversion of Percival's oppressive masculinity. If, according to Braidotti, becoming-nomad "means that one learns to reinvent oneself, and one desires the self as a process of transformation," then Bernard can be said to have found this self outside his own individuality and in Neville, in a truly nomadic spirit (41). However, at that moment, a true transformation might only be hinted at, with Percival - the Other as the "hooded sinister figure of love" managing to infiltrate their territory (Woolf, *The Waves* 50). Without him, Bernard's movement towards the periphery is initiated.

As Bernard moves further away from the centre, he does not only experience multiplication of his self, but also its dissolution. The reinvention of the self is preceded by the feeling of its loss, which is not unproblematic, and leads to questions. How can one get by without a "self," something so fundamental? How can one be a subject without a self?

[H]ow describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red – even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How describe or say anything in articulate words again? – save that it fades, save that it undergoes a gradual transformation, becomes, even in the course of one short walk, habitual – this scene also. (Woolf, *The Waves* 162)

The self that, through Bernard, Woolf is referring to here may be seen as the ego. The ego translates the perceived into "words," even colours: "Blue, red." The wall of symbols that the ego builds between the self and the world "hides with thickness instead

of letting the light through,” instead of allowing for a dynamic change. There are no “articulate words” to describe dynamic change, it “fades ... undergoes a gradual transformation,” inevitably becomes “habitual” and static. Woolf develops her criticism of the ego further in “Modern Fiction”: “Is it due to the method that we feel neither jovial nor magnanimous, but centred in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond?” (191). If the ego “tremors” with “susceptibility” and has agency to “create” a fictional experience, but simultaneously confines this experience into a single person, is there a way “outside” or “beyond” the ego? Must one always “go through the antics of the individual” (Woolf, *The Waves* 126)? In the nomadic sense, the prerequisite for the dynamic “reinvention” of self is “the decentring and opening up of individual ego” (Braidotti 167). The ego, as the force of individuation and rationalization is closed in on the subject, assuming the central position in subjectivity. Nomadic subjectivity is a way “outside” the ego. As Bernard moves toward the periphery, his ego as the conscious agent of gendered individual subjectivity wanes:

For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda – so strange is the contact of one with another. (Woolf, *The Waves* 158)

Bernard’s becoming-nomad is “in-between” genders (Braidotti 39). He is amused by the “strange” contact with others, the contact that each time questions the limits of self and other. Bernard’s ego, striving to make him a singular, knowing, gendered subject ultimately fails: he does not know which individual or which gender he is anymore. According to Braidotti, a “confrontation of a limit of experience” (Percival’s death, that brought Bernard to the limit, “the zenith of an experience” (Woolf, *The Waves* 86), and made him question the possibility of his further survival) marks “the transformation of the subject’s relation to knowledge and to itself as a knowing subject. [The subject becomes] something else” (316). Bernard’s nomadic subjectivity is a movement towards the unknown, and the condition for such movement is overcoming both the anxiety of the unknown and the feeling of loss that the dissolution of the ego entails.

Bernard’s most definitive move towards transcending the ego is his affirmation of his own body. While shaving, Bernard suddenly realises the habituality of that action. “Shave, shave, shave... Go on shaving,” he says to himself “ironically,” “congratulat[ing]” his “hands ... for keeping at it” (Woolf, *The Waves* 104). The semi-conscious action of shaving hints at the bodily agency. Taking into account the temporal

aspect of nomadic subjectivity, it is not the ego, but habitual actions, “repetition and orchestrated returns” that bring about “the coherence and the unity of the self” with regards to one’s body (Braidotti 163). Simultaneously, the increasing bodily agency means that the body has reached a mature state. It is probably this kind of thinking that leads Bernard to a grave, “dramatic” conclusion: “I have lost my youth” (Woolf, *The Waves* 104). At the same time, Bernard realizes the nature of that thought and its source in the ego, and disconnects it from his body, transforming the lamentation of the ego into one of his most important insights of nomadic affirmation. Bernard realises that it is not an imaginary ego that is the agent of subjectivity, but his own physical body, when it records time and creates a moment. First, time accumulates on “the roof of the soul” into a “drop”; and when the drop falls, a moment is created:

This drop falling has nothing to do with losing *my* youth. This drop falling is time tapering to a point ... These are the true cycles, these are the true events ... I see to the bare bottom. I see what habit covers. (*The Waves* 104, italics added)

The “youth” did not belong to Bernard in the first place; it was a period of heightened intensity in a collective nomadic subjectivity, of which Bernard is merely a participant. Together with his ego even his humanity is decentred; he is becoming-nomad, feeling “carried round like an insect on top of the earth”; he does not want “to be a man who sits for fifty years on the same spot thinking of his navel” (Woolf, *The Waves* 105). He rather “be harnessed to a cart, a vegetable cart that rattles over the cobbles” (Woolf, *The Waves* 105). By disconnecting his body from the ego, and from the category of human, he realises his movement towards the periphery, driven by a productive desire for something new, a movement over which he has no control; he expresses what Braidotti and Deleuze see as *amor fati* (*Nomadic Theory* 315).⁵ Bernard transforms his negative feelings into an insight, an insight that echoes Woolf’s own: “that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art” (“A Sketch of the Past” 72). Habit is just a “cotton wool” that hides “true cycles,” “true events,” a “drop” forming, “a pattern.” The “drop” forming is synonymous with remembering or realising, whereas “the work of art,” or “the pattern” is the interconnectedness of nomadic subjectivity. Bernard’s nomadic affirmation emerges in the realisation of his “true nature as an affective, interconnected entity,” of “the bodily

⁵ Love of fate (Lat.)

structure of the self” where reason and passion are not opposed to each other, but merged together and synonymous; while at the same time he acknowledges “the process of self-consciousness [as] forever ongoing and therefore incomplete or partial” (Braidotti 311). Therefore, Bernard now asserts: “I do not trouble to finish my sentences, and my actions, usually so uncertain, acquire a mechanical precision” (Woolf, *The Waves* 104). His self, no longer relying on the ego, but on his body, is rid of all uncertainties, while becoming conscious of this self is a never-ending process, never a completed statement.

What can be completed, is the collective “territory” of nomadic subjectivity. For Bernard, this territory is “Marriage, death, travel, friendship; town and country; children and all that; a many-sided substance cut out of this dark; a many-faceted flower” (Woolf, *The Waves* 129). In this territory, “many-sided,” different others meet, “cut out of” the “dark” sameness, and of their social positions in “marriage,” “town and country,” other friendships. According to Braidotti, nomadic subjectivity is “a location, that needs to be constructed together with, that is to say, in the encounter with others” (35). Similarly, the nomadic subjectivity in *The Waves* is a territory that Bernard, Neville, Rhoda, Louis, Jinny and Susan “have made” (Woolf, *The Waves* 129). This territory is free from the solidity, centrality and oppression of the Other, finite: “Let it blaze against the yew trees. One life. There. It is over. Gone out.” (Woolf, *The Waves* 129). This territory is complete; it is not a dialectical battlefield for the position at the centre, where the eternal confrontation of the Self with the Other takes place. Rather, it is a peripheral “unsubstantial territory” where different others “melt into each other with phrases ... are edged with mist,” comprising a shared nomadic subjectivity (Woolf, *The Waves* 8). This territory is unsubstantial, both in terms of being unreal, outside the social reality of oppression, and lacking central substance, without a force of gravity towards that substance. However, nomadic subjectivity does not stop when a territory is complete; “new,” productive “desire[s],” “like the proud horse[s]” drive Bernard, and other nomadic subjects towards new territories (Woolf, *The Waves* 167). Nomadic subjectivity is a never-ending flight from the centre to unsubstantial territories of the periphery.

To conclude, it is worth summing up the criticism of psychoanalysis that nomadic subjectivity provides. Bernard is seen, psychoanalytically, as androgynous, allegedly destined to “a permanent alternation between the formation and dissemination of the self ... This dangerous, impossible dialectic is the existential reality of

androgyny” (Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf* 186). Such permanent fluctuation between the one or the other, self or selfless, man or woman, is seen as neither possible (which shows psychoanalytic tendency towards continuity and stasis) nor safe (since the unknown causes anxiety). Psychoanalysis rests on the conception of the ego, which aims at continuity and order, at the same time immobilising the subject within a single individual. A psychoanalytic interpretation sees in the novel both “inflation” and “dissolution” of the ego at the extremes, either of which, allegedly, leads to the “death of” the “self” (Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf* 168). Nomadic subjectivity is decentring of the ego, thereby allowing for movement and productive encounters with others. Acknowledging the anxiety of the unknown, nomadic subjectivity seeks to overcome it, as well as any other negative passion, through joyful affirmation. As far as gender is concerned, Woolf’s assertion that “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex” is completely incompatible with psychoanalysis, which sees as fatal the destination “in-between” man or woman (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 102-103). In this sense, the psychoanalytic diagnosis of “pathologic androgyny” may be seen as extending from Bernard (who echoes much of Woolf’s own discourse) to the author herself. Nomadic subjectivity, conversely, starts “in-between” genders and is aimed at “beyond gender,” which is in line with Woolf’s utopic view. *The Waves* provides a context for the criticism of psychoanalysis from within. Percival in the novel may be seen as the Other in the nomadic subjectivity of other characters. Taken out of a dialectic and inserted into a multiplicity, the Other is an oppressive force of gravity. The removal of the Other may be then seen as a historical rupture, a move from the melancholic structure towards joyful chaos. Without the Other, others roam freely, unobstructed by his oppressive centralising power. Psychoanalytic concepts, rooted in dialectics, hardly can give an adequate account of the complexity of Woolf’s texts. Even feminist psychoanalysis, loyal to dialectics, does not seem to put forward a wholly adequate interpretation of *The Waves*. Psychoanalysis is quick to pronounce a diagnosis, but does not provide any suggestions for a remedy, at least not in the case of *The Waves*. Nomadic subjectivity, instead of diagnosing pathology seeks affirmation of the fluidity and chaos, in line with Woolf’s own thinking.

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