

“EVERYTHING IN MY BODY [...] IS QUICKNESS AND TRIUMPH”:
CARNIVAL AND THE FEMALE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF’S *THE WAVES*

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*Despite the generalized tendency to consider Virginia Woolf as an odd candidate for a carnivalesque reading, this essay aims to explore the convenience of resorting to the paradigm of carnivalized literature in order to interpret the profound significance of female characters in *The Waves*. Accordingly, two of the central aspects of carnival politics – the destruction of established authority and the validation of otherness and the repressed – will be discussed, inasmuch as they help to understand the ferocious attack Woolf addresses against the tyranny of the fatherly law, as well as her vindication for the validation of the female. In this regard, a disparagement of patriarchal leaders correlates in the novel with the empowerment of female characters. Frequently associated with the earthly and sensorial – and therefore, the lower and abject – women are yet revealed as the agents of the renewal of the anachronous system prevailing in the period. As this article discusses, such renovating action turns out as the hope for the invigoration of waste panorama under the tyranny of the patriarchal order.*

In his analysis of Dostoevsky’s works, Bakhtin observed the transposition into certain literary works of a series of elements directly derived from carnival celebrations. With the Renaissance, most of the medieval traditions were categorically discarded as barbarian, and their sensuous directness categorized as unacceptable by the new refined mentalities. Nonetheless, some of these symbolic meanings and ontological values filtered through art. Among its manifestations, literature constituted a particularly fertile ground for that transference – a process Bakhtin acknowledged as “the carnivalization of literature”:

Carnival itself [...] is not, of course, a literary phenomenon [...]. Carnival has worked out an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms – from language and complex mass actions to individual carnivalistic gestures. This language, in a differentiated and even (as in any language) articulate way, gave

expression to a unified (but complex) carnival sense of the world, permeating all its forms. This language cannot be translated in any full or adequate way into a verbal language, and much less into a language of abstract concepts, but it is amenable to a certain transposition into a language of artistic images that has something in common with its concretely sensuous nature; that is, it can be transposed into the language of literature. We are calling this transposition of carnival into the language of literature the carnivalization of literature. (Bakhtin 1984:122)

Characteristic of carnival is a thorough transformation of ordinary life, as well as the laws and restrictions that govern it. As he observes:

What is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with [noncarnival life] – that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people. (Bakhtin 1984:123)

At the same time as the previous authority is disempowered, “a new mode of interrelationship” between individuals, released from the oppression of hierarchical prohibitions, arises (*ibid.*). This new form of interpersonal relationships or “familiar contact” emerges in parallel to a bold affirmation of the formerly considered as low and despicable, in keeping with that attempt to debase and bring down to earth what was officially considered as sacred. Within the carnival paradigm, thus, otherness and abjection are enthroned and enhanced as the principles leading to a renewed existence.

Through her notion of the Outsiders’ Society, already conceived in 1921 in its nearly homonymous “A society”, Virginia Woolf advocated for the creation of a form of female organization whose major aim was the subversion and defilement of the patriarchal establishment of gender roles. This should be possible by means of the practice of active and conscious non-involvement “as a strategy for hollowing out the gender system, pillar of family, and fatherland” (Gätgens 2001:22). Even though essentially defined as resting on a political basis, the idea underneath Woolf’s conception of the Outsiders’ Society amounted to her construction of a utopia which should act as a counterpart to the masculine state, yet deprived of the latter’s eagerness for violence or domination. On the contrary, while the distinctive livery of the masculine territory had been defined by supremacy and hegemonic zeal, Woolf’s badge was founded on resistance as the operating principle of a female land in which marginality, rather than standing for a conformist attitude towards displacement, responds to a deliberate choice to assert a female space which defies masculine power:

The Society of Outsiders has the same ends as your society – freedom, equality, peace; but [...] it seeks to achieve them by the means that a different sex, a different tradition, a different education, and the different values which result from those differences have placed within our reach [...]. [We], remaining outside, will experiment not with public means in public but with private means in private. (Woolf 1996:234)

Indeed, Woolf aimed to recreate in *The Waves* a collective of “infinitely abject” beings – as Neville, one of the main characters, refers to themselves (2000:84). Their position as outsiders in one sense or another turns out an essential condition for the debunking of prefigured values and precepts. It is precisely the latter condition that simultaneously becomes an indispensable requisite for the coming of a renovated society. It is important to note that Woolf’s earlier plans for her novel included the incorporation of the gross side of existence, whereby to convey the “perpetual crumbling and renewing of life” (Woolf 1986:141-142).

Of course, within the carnivalesque parameters around which the narrative revolves, the presence of the earthly, literally down-bringing element becomes paramount. Self-described as “close to the earth, with green-grass eyes” (Woolf 2000:22) that “look close to the ground and see insects in the grass” (*ibid.*:7), Susan possesses the lower-stratum quality that characterizes carnival imagery. Moreover, in her earthliness, she becomes a kind of hybrid creature which gradually turns into the most physical manifestation of Nature itself, thus evolving into the embodiment of an earthly Great Mother. A similar figure had appeared some years before in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where a vagrant woman sang a “bubbling” song flowing from a “muddy [...] hole in her mouth” (Woolf 1992:88-89). Nonetheless, whereas this association was merely allusive, in *The Waves* Susan herself confirms her identity as an earthbound figure:

At this hour, this still early hour, I think I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees; mine are the flocks of birds, and this young hare who leaps, at the last moment when I step almost on him. Mine is the heron that stretches its vast wings lazily; and the cow that creaks as it pushes one foot before another munching; and the wild, swooping swallow; and the faint red in the sky, and the green when the red fades; the silence and the bell; the call of the man fetching cart-horses from the fields – all are mine.

I cannot be divided, or kept apart. I was sent to school; I was sent to Switzerland to finish my education. I hate linoleum; I hate fir trees and mountains. Let me now fling myself on this flat ground under a pale sky where the clouds pace slowly. The cart grows gradually larger as it comes along the road. The sheep gather in the middle of the field. The birds gather in the middle of the road – they need not fly yet. The wood smoke rises. (Woolf 2000:53-54)

Through her words, we find a confirmation of her self-recognition as an earthly womb. This is so on the basis of her inner duality as both a life-giver – “I am the field, [...] the trees” (*ibid.*:53) – and a resting abode in death – “let me now fling myself on this flat ground” (54). Thereby, Susan becomes the site for the simultaneous encounter of the ontological poles of life and death, from whence everything arises and where everything is called to converge at death. In consonance with this, Susan’s ground-fixed body cracks open “making of [her] own body a hollow” (96) to yield the life of her children, for whom she conforms the protective cradle where the new-borns are to be lulled:

Sleep, I say, desiring sleep to fall like a blanket of down and cover these weak limbs; demanding that life shall sheathe its claws and gird its lightning and pass by, making of my own body a hollow, a warm shelter for my child to sleep in. (*ibid.*)

Her proximity to the ground, both physically and functionally, indissolubly link her to the lower stratum. She is representative of the corporeality which is at the core of carnival and the aesthetics of the grotesque. Her womblike nature, coupled with the maternal, becomes therefore a celebration of a female body constantly repressed by patriarchal authority. At the same time, in keeping with the demeaning process associated with Bakhtin's public market-place, Susan also admits a similar form of downturn connected with her regenerative function – "I shall be debased and hide-bound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity" (73). After this, she is enhanced by virtue of the richness of her reproductive power: "I shall be lifted higher than any of you on the backs of the seasons. I shall possess more than Jinny, more than Rhoda, by the time I die" (*ibid.*).

Hence, in tune with this spatial contiguity, the Earth-Mother figure in the novel turns into the site for the debasement of the social landscape. Thus, through her connection with the physical lower stratum, Susan's earth-like function of burial and destruction – whereby a literal process of bringing down to earth is accomplished – is dovetailed with the inversion resulting from the descent of the conventionally superior. Thus, consistently with her alter ego, Susan exerts an authentic burial of Madame Carlo, the unpleasant groaning teacher whom she has previously dwindled to an insignificant stone: "This shiny pebble is Madame Carlo, and I will bury her deep because of her fawning and ingratiating manners, because of the sixpence she gave me for keeping my knuckles flat when I played my scales. I buried her sixpence" (24). This metaphorical interment of the ill-tempered lady is just the precedent to a whole, symbolical act of burying a school stamped with the indelible mark of "the oily portraits" of its old patriarchal foundations:

I would bury the whole school: the gymnasium; the classroom; the dining-room that always smells of meat; and the chapel. I would bury the red-brown tiles and the oily portraits of old men – benefactors, founders of schools. There are some trees I like; the cherry tree with lumps of clear gum on the bark; and one view from the attic towards some far hills. Save for these, I would bury it all as I bury these ugly stones that are always scattered about this briny coast, with its piers and its trippers. (*ibid.*)

Indeed, the womb-like ambivalence implied in the above example by the removal and passage down entailed by her interring action, along with the renovating dimension of the ritual carnival destruction that becomes inherent to Susan, remains all throughout the progress of the character's portrayal. Interestingly, on the recollection of her life at old age, Susan confirms the materiality of her surroundings – "I possess all I see" (107). She also emphasizes the regenerative potential of her "productive years" (*ibid.*):

I have made ponds in which goldfish hide under the broad-leaved lilies. I have netted over strawberry beds and lettuce beds, and stitched the pears and the plums into white bags to keep them safe from the wasps. I have seen my sons and daughters, once netted over like fruit in their cots, break the meshes and walk with me, taller than I am, casting shadows on the grass.

I am fenced in, planted here like one of my own trees. (*ibid.*)

Nonetheless, as is fitting to her carnivalistic dual function, both as life-provider and death-bringer, Susan proves evidence of the twofold nature of her uterine quality:

I also make wreaths of white flowers, twisting silver-leaved plants among them for the dead, attaching my card with sorrow for the dead shepherd, with sympathy for the wife of the dead carter; and sit by the beds of dying women, who murmur their last terrors, who clutch my hand; frequenting rooms intolerable except to one born as I was and early acquainted with the farmyard and the dung-heap and the hens straying in and out, and the mother with two rooms and growing children. I have seen the windows run with heat, I have smelt the sink. (108)

Cryptically implying the dual ambivalence of carnival imagery, the picture of Susan lulling her little baby in her lap becomes associated with the future death of the child, "whose weak limbs" (73) are to be covered and buried into the earthly hollow. Hence, at the same time as the rocking cradle, Susan's body becomes evocative of the resting grave: "I shall lie like a field bearing crops in rotation; in the summer heat will dance over me; in the winter I shall be cracked with the cold [...] heat and cold will follow each other" (*ibid.*). Such notion of the female as the quintessential source of regeneration of a world in need for renewal is additionally extended in the character of Jinny. If Susan incarnates the ambivalent system of destruction and regeneration that is typical of carnival, Jinny heralds the celebration of triumphant dance whereby the victory over repression is performed. Certainly, her success in the game she plays as a child serves as the alibi whereby the carnivalistic triumph over any attempts for fixity and encapsulation of reality within a pre-configured order is proclaimed:

Everything in my body seems thinned out with running and triumph. My blood must be bright red, whipped up, slapping against my ribs. My soles tingle, as if wire rings opened and shut in my feet. I see every blade of grass very clear. But the pulse drums so in my forehead, behind my eyes, that everything dances – the net, the grass; your faces leap like butterflies; the trees seem to jump up and down. There is nothing staid, nothing settled, in this universe. All is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph. (24-25)

Even though the narrator does not aim to establish any models of behaviour in *The Waves*, often read as a manifesto for social and political decentralization,¹

1. Marie-Luise Gätgens points out some of the chief clues of the novel which, according to her, lead to a reading of the novel as a harsh critique of fascism and patriarchal leaders (2001:22). Likewise,

it is the sexually uninhibited Jinny who is appointed as the incarnation of the dance for renewal. As Di Battista points out:

Jinny celebrates these carnal ecstasies of love, and so, when the drop of time falls, it merely fills her body with that fluid, Dionysian rhythm through which life endlessly recreates itself. (1980:179)

Accordingly, in her perpetual dance, which vindicates the unrestricted flow of carnal desires, Jinny's own body allegorizes the ritual celebration of what Jane Harrison had defined as a carrying-out-the-death (Harrison 1913:80). Through this dance, whatever is old and decayed is disposed of so as to enable the incoming of the new and flourishing. Thus, incarnating the destructive fire that is to remove the waste, Jinny turns through her dancing into the renovating flames:

I leap like one of those flames that run between the cracks of the earth; I move, I dance; I never cease to move and to dance. I move like the leaf that moved in the hedge as a child and frightened me. I dance over these streaked, these impersonal, distempered walls with their yellow skirting as firelight dances over teapots. (Woolf 2000:22)

In this sense, like the death-bringing Susan – whose womb/tomblike nature gave her the power to remove the old – Jinny accomplishes a similar task by continuing Susan's devouring action. Yet, it is not by burying, but by means of the destructive effect of fire that Jinny personifies the utter annihilation of the surrounding waste. Her triumphant dance epitomizes the consuming flames that are to enable prosperity.

As Harrison describes them, these rituals constituted a merry celebration of renewal which, buttressed through allegorical dances, was expected after the yearly removal of the old and perished (1927:4). In the formulation of these ritual festivals, Harrison highlights the indissoluble connection between the extreme poles of debasement and victorious celebrations. Likewise, no different is Woolf's paradigm for the renovation she wrestles for. In her construction of a female force capable of debunking life-impeding patriarchal norms, Woolf resorts to Harrison's pattern of carnival festivities. In the midst of this form of ritual dancing, Jinny embodies the centripetal force around which the celebration is carried out. Hence, in resemblance to Harrison's description of these ancient carnivalistic festivals, the very embodiment of a Spring maypole is conveyed by the image of Jinny dancing at the same time as a ribbon spurts and curls around her neck. Moreover, this allegorical maypole additionally preserves its full association with the incoming renewal: "I bind my hair with a white ribbon, so that when I leap across the court the ribbon will stream out in a flash [...] curl round my neck [...]" (*ibid.*:23). Thereby, as in Woolf's admired friend's anthropological writings, an essential form of interconnection is implied between the earth-like Susan and the merry dancer of carnival celebrations. Hence, while reiterating the already mentioned ambivalence of Jinny's ritual performance, the

Berman insists on an interpretation of the same sign (2001:121).

image straightaway reflects Woolf's type of female battle for the sheer destruction of the wasteland provoked by patriarchal oppression:

Take this guinea and with it burn the college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales and incarnadine the willows. And let the daughters of educated men dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let their mothers lean from the upper windows and cry "Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this 'education'!" (Woolf 1996:146)

Indeed, in "A society", Woolf had already claimed for the necessity of aiding forth a female force capable of promoting a renovation of societal values as the vital condition to save them from "perish[ing] beneath the fruits of [men's] unbridled activity" (Woolf 1993:21). Likewise, as early as in 1916, Woolf had begun to conceive of this form of women's initiative that should debunk patriarchal impositions, which she had expressed in a letter to the feminist Margaret Llewellyn Davies:

I become steadily more feminist [...] and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction keeps going a day longer – without some vigorous young woman pulling us [...] and marching through it. (Woolf 1979-1984:76)

Of course, one of the premises at the core of Woolf's society was the elimination of categories ascribed to gender roles. In this sense, particular significance is entailed by the image of Jinny's dance over the allegorical open earth of Susan's body as a defiant aggression of sexual boundaries, as well as the masculine impossibility of conceiving a form of female homosexual bonding. Certainly, by means of this implication of a lesbian relationship between Susan and Jinny, a female, carnally-dimensioned "Sappho" is affirmed in broad opposition to its prescriptively chaste, male-created analogue: "it's well known that Sappho was the somewhat lewd invention of Professor Hobkin" (Woolf 1993:17). Hence, while Annette Oxindine insists upon the lesbian implications of this scene in "A society", the truth is it simultaneously refers us back to a parallel image of Clarissa Dalloway's homosexual relation with Sally, when the former recalls the incendiary nature of her passion – a moment of "rapture, which splits its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! [...] a match burning in a crocus" (Woolf 1992:35). Accordingly, a new encounter between Jinny and Susan during the first meeting at Hampton Court on the characters' middle adulthood is implied, whereby both women merge into a form of homosexual dissolution as they "change bodies and faces" (Woolf 2000:68). Moreover, in tune with this form of unhampered conception and experience of sexuality as inherent to a regenerated world, it is precisely through an implicitly homoerotic fusion of the complementary poles of praise and abuse – as respectively allegorized by Jinny's festive dancing and Susan's earthbound quality – that this hoped-for renewal can be announced.

In conclusion, as has been discussed, through the latent presence of the carnivalesque binomial of triumph/destruction, as embodied by female characters in *The Waves*, Woolf clamours for the imperious need of the annihilation of the suffocating atmosphere of tyranny and repression in a time marked by general oppressiveness. At the same time, the message heralded by the female element is far from sheltering in a fatalistic vision, becoming instead a chant for the victory that glimmers behind the dissolution of the social and ideological barriers that constrain people's freedom.

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