



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET  
INST FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

ENGELSKA

Who is Percival?

Intertextuality, Monologism and Heteroglossia

in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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C-Essay

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June 2012

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**Abstract**

The essay “Who is Percival?” discusses the complex questions which arise from the obvious contradictions between the ideals of the hero Percival in Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves* and the political opinions which Woolf herself expressed in some of her other texts.

The author acts as an invisible narrator; the reader cannot be sure of her point of view. The insecurity forces the reader to take an active part in the interpretation of the voices of the six friends, whose soliloquies, in which they describe their different views on life and their common friend Percival, form the text. The reader becomes an active part in the dialogue between ideas, texts, ideals and thoughts.

Applying M. M. Bakhtin’s terms monologism, heteroglossia and dialogism together with Woolf’s and Bakhtin’s theories about the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, I use intertextuality as a method to interpret *The Waves* by focusing on the contradictory heroes Percival and Bernard.

My thesis, which I develop by comparing different texts of Woolf and by intertextual and postmodern critics (Bakhtin, Clements, Caughie), is that the hero Percival, who embodies monologic, static, out-of-date ideals, is bound to die. The future belongs to the inconsistent, anxious and self-conscious hero Bernard. His fragmentary phrases describe a changing reality of contradictory views which form the basis for an interacting community and for the development of each individual person.

I also suggest that the similarities between Woolf’s and Bakhtin’s views on Tolstoy’s and Dostoevsky’s heroes could be a result of connections between the Bloomsbury Group and the Bakhtin Circle.

**Table of contents**

Introduction	3
Chapter One: Intertextuality, heteroglossia and monologism	6
Chapter Two: Percival as idealized hero is bound to die	9
Chapter Three: Bernard as unheroic hero conquers death	18
Conclusion	27
Bibliography	29

## Introduction

Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* was published by Hogarth Press in 1931. The author remains at the same time invisible and omniscient throughout the work; the plot is brought forward by the soliloquies of the six main characters Susan, Bernard, Rhoda, Jinny, Neville and Louis. The characters remember their childhood and youth and their friend Percival, who dies in an accident in India, where he is representing the British Empire.

The text is divided by nine interludes, which describe nature at different times and in different moods; the breaking of the waves against the shore is a common feature in all the interludes. The thoughts and memories of the six characters mingle with each other, creating a feeling of one-ness; at the same time all characters stress their individualities and how different they are from their friends. Thus, there is a focus on the relations between the individual and the community throughout the novel.

The six friends are, in fact, very different: Susan is the earthbound woman, who seeks her fulfillment in farming and motherhood. Rhoda is the sensible outsider, who dreams of different, exotic countries, uses Shelley's poetry as an important reference but who is wounded by life itself. Bernard has a social ability which enables him to socialize with everybody and to make up stories about all and everything. Jinny is enjoying her bodily experiences and the beauty of life. Neville is a poet and a lover, who is devoted to the man he loves, even if his relationships never last long. Louis is the businessman, who sees the world in the perspective of ancient poetry and beauty, and who is always aware of his outsider position, since he is from Australia and since he has not studied at college. The seventh friend, Percival, whom all love, has no voice of his own in the text; the reader gets to know him through the idealizing descriptions made by the main characters. The last part of the novel consists of Bernard's thoughts, which he tells to an acquaintance, and in which he summarizes

the experiences of the six friends and at the same time questions the goal of his life: to form a whole and consistent story of the fragments which he has retold.

In this essay, I am going to investigate the characters of Bernard and Percival with regard to Mikhail M. Bakhtin's views on monologism, heteroglossia and the role of the hero in the modern novel. My main thesis is that the text develops a contrast between two types of heroes, represented by Percival and Bernard, thus inviting the reader to reflect on the romantic idealization of the type of hero which in Woolf's text is bound to die. The self-confident hero Percival is a romantic construct, embodying old, Victorian ideals, whereas Bernard, with all his questioning and anxiety, is a self-conscious, modern hero.

I will also reflect on possible connections between literary theory as it is expressed by Bakhtin and the way in which Woolf uses the invisible author and the elusive narration in *The Waves*; I suggest that Bakhtin and Woolf may have participated in the same literary discourse in the 1920s. Even if I have not found any studies which investigate possible connections between the Bloomsbury Group and the Bakhtin circle, I think there are a lot of common thoughts and topics which indicate that there could have been contacts of some kind.

Chapter One describes the Bakhtian terms of intertextuality, heteroglossia and monologism, which define the method I use to investigate Woolf's text. Chapter Two deals with Percival's monologic character and introduces the thesis that Percival as an idealized hero is bound to die. It describes the ambiguous feelings of the six friends towards Percival and investigates the contradiction between the ideals which Percival embodies and Virginia Woolf's own thoughts, as she has expressed them in other texts. References to literary criticism (Clements, Caughie) which investigates the intermediality in *The Waves* and the role of the reader underline the dialogic concept of the novel.

Chapter Three introduces Bernard as an unheroic hero and describes the interaction between the individual and the community and the struggle between different ideals in terms

of dialogism. I finally raise questions about possible connections between Woolf and Bakhtin.

## Chapter One: Intertextuality, heteroglossia and monologism

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin wrote about literature and philosophy from the 1920s until his death in 1975. From 1913 until 1929, before being sentenced to exile in Kazakhstan, Bakhtin took an active part in the intellectual debate in St Petersburg/Leningrad and in Vitebsk.

In the 1960s, Bakhtin's texts inspired Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes and influenced their definitions of semiotics. Michel Foucault and other postmodernist philosophers have developed Bakhtin's thoughts in their theories about literature, philosophy and sociology (Gutting; McAfee). The concept of 'intertextuality', which is used to summarize these theories, includes the ongoing dialogue between different kinds of utterances in a text, as well as the communication between different literary texts.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, which was published in 1929, Bakhtin introduces the term dialogism. The opposite of dialogism is monologism. Bakhtin expresses these two contradictory points of view by comparing Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's heroes. On the one hand, Tolstoy's heroes represent the stable individuals, who, created and shaped by the author, have the mission to embody important values. Their messages are finished and stand isolated from the ongoing dialogue. They are monologic (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 35). Dostoevsky's heroes, on the other hand, form a stage where they openly can examine themselves, their feelings and reactions, with their introspection and self-consciousness as their most useful tools (92-96).

In Dostoevsky's novels, the reader can no longer rely on the hero to embody a message which the author wants to convey. Instead of acting as a receiver of a monologic message, the reader is supposed to take part in the struggles of the hero, without being sure what the hero, and even less the author, is aiming at. By adopting the perspective developed by Dostoevsky, the author, according to Bakhtin, releases his grip on the monologic unity of text (92-93).

In “Discourse in the Novel”, which he wrote in the 1930s, Bakhtin introduces heteroglossia as a description of the multi-voicedness in texts, where different dialects, sociolects and individual points of view come together in different kinds of utterances. Typical for heteroglossia is that the differences exist beside each other or interact in a dialogue or conflict without any goal to end up in a synthesis in a Hegelian way. What Bakhtin describes as a sign of the modern novel is therefore not a dialectical perspective, but a dialogical approach. In this dialogic view, every utterance is a part of a dialogue, including what was said before as well as the reaction of the receiver. Literature is hence a part of a dialogue between previous and prospective texts. All utterances depend on and are influenced by each other (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* 115).

In a literary text, heteroglossia can be represented in the language and point of view of different characters. Heteroglossia can also be expressed in ideas which develop by interaction, or in allusions to other texts and genres as well as to utterances in other media. In the same way, there can be an ongoing dialogue on different levels, which is not reduced to the common, everyday meaning of ‘dialogue’ of spoken utterances.

In this essay, I will apply the terms intertextuality, monologism, dialogism and heteroglossia to *The Waves* and at the same time compare Bakhtin’s thoughts with Virginia Woolf’s use of structure and allusions in this novel. The concept of heteroglossia is important for the understanding of my thesis, which implies that the idealization of the character Percival leads to a parting with outmoded ideas.

It is, in my opinion, hard *not* to see the concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia realized in Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves*. The whole structure, with the soliloquies of the six characters, together with the invisible author and Bernard’s reflections about the meaning of phrases, stories and writing, embodies the thoughts of heteroglossia and raises questions about



possible contacts between Woolf and Bakhtin, or about their participation in a common literary discourse.

## **Chapter Two: Percival as idealized hero is bound to die**

In this chapter, I will point out how Virginia Woolf's characters throughout the novel at the same time both idealize and undermine the heroism of Percival. The interwoven thoughts of the six characters all express a devoted love for Percival in an idealizing way. The friends describe him as nothing less than a hero, and even as a god, in such an exaggerated way that the reader must consider the possibility that there might be a portion of irony mixed with the praises (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 102).

Percival is the athletic young man, who knows how to fit in at the public school as well as in society. Without questioning and without any intellectual ambitions, he learns what he has to learn and does his duty for the British Empire by going to India. It remains unclear how and why the six friends develop such a close friendship with Percival, and of what this friendship consists, besides what comes from admiration. Percival has other friends as well, and is not as dependent on the six friends as they are on him. For the six friends, Percival has the role of a stable leader, on which they can rely and which they can use as a measure of the beauty and convenience one can wish from life.

I will use an intertextual approach to show how Woolf uses the character Percival to create insecurity and force the reader to question the perspective and ideals of the main characters. My thesis is that Percival, in the perspective of Virginia Woolf, is at the same time a romantic hero, who alludes to the spirit of Percy Bysshe Shelley and thereby inspires the six friends in a romantic way, and an old-fashioned, out-of-date hero, which symbolizes the declining, monologic society of the British Empire.

With the terms introduced by Bakhtin, Percival can be described as a monologic character. Like Tolstoy's monologic heroes, he embodies certain ideals, and he does not change. Not only is he physically attractive and strong, he is also the sort of problem-solver which Great Britain needs in times of uproar in the colonies. In a vision, Bernard sees how

Percival brings a cart back on track: “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 indeed he is--a God” (102).

Knowing the difference between a Tolstoy and a Dostoevsky hero, and being aware of Woolf’s own political views, critical of the Empire and the patriarchy, it is hard not to read this passage as an expression of satire. In the same way, it is quite obvious that the six friends project all their wishes and illusions on Percival, in a way that underlines his monologic, unchanging character.

By parting from the farewell party which is held before Percival goes to India, the six friends put their feelings for Percival into words. Jinny talks about “love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again” (109). In her romantic love for Percival, Rhoda sees “seas and jungles; the howling of jackals and moonlight falling upon some high peak where the eagle soars” (109). Neville sees happiness “and the quiet of ordinary things” (109). Susan sees the ordinary week-days. Bernard sees the future, which they are capable to form themselves, out of chaos: “We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. [...] We are creators. [...] We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road” (109-110).

Louis expresses the experience of a common creation, shaped around Percival: “Now once more, said Louis, as we are about to part, having paid our bill, the circle in our blood, broken so often, so sharply, for we are so different, closes in a ring. Something is made”

(109). There is a sense of unity, a harmony of different voices, in which Percival forms the center.

The ideals, which are embodied by or projected to Percival, are to a great extent similar to the Victorian virtues, which at the time the novel was published were questioned by some groups in British society. Rudyard Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden* from 1899 describes ideals similar to Percival's, including duty, consistency and devotion to the imperialistic cause. The role of the British Empire was, in this context, to help people and countries in need of civilization: "Take up the White Man's burden, Send forth the best ye breed, Go bind your sons to exile, To serve your captives' need."

The beloved friend dies since the great force which he is expected to rule, his horse, which might be seen as a symbol for the colonialism of the British Empire, stumbles and falls under him. The love and admiration for the hero, and the hero's own naivety and lack of questioning of the role he is expected to play, put him in a situation where he is thrown off and crushed by forces which he cannot master.

Much of the criticism of Victorian and colonial monologism emanated from the Bloomsbury group and the Hogarth Press, where Virginia Woolf had a leading role together with her husband Leonard Woolf. Leonard Woolf, who himself had served the Empire in Ceylon, used his political influence to urge the British Government to stop ruling with violence and to hand over power to native governments in the colonies (L. Woolf 223-226).

In *The Waves* there are in fact other, ambiguous feelings, mingled with the devotion to the hero. Early in the novel, Neville expresses his mixed feelings for Percival: "He takes my devotion; he accepts my tremulous, no doubt abject offering, mixed with contempt as it is for his mind. For he cannot read" (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 34). It is not Percival's mind Neville and his friends, most of them intellectuals, admire, but rather his body and his self-confident appearance: "Here is Percival, said Bernard, smoothing his hair, not from vanity (he does not

look in the glass), but to propitiate the god of decency. He is conventional; he is a hero" (92). Louis shows a similar ambiguity: "His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. [...] My heart turns rough; it abrades my side like a file with two edges: one, that I adore his magnificence; the other I despise his slovenly accents--I who am so much his superior--and am jealous" (26-27).

This ambiguity is already obvious in the name itself. Percival is the name of the well-known medieval hero, who is searching for the globelike Grail, which contains a higher meaning. At the same time, Percival is a very British hero; in a Victorian version of the medieval legend (*Idylls of the King*), written by Tennyson, the knights around King Arthur's round table are in fact embodying the virtues of the Victorian age.<sup>1</sup>

By using the name of Percival, Woolf gives readers enough allusions to make them question the heroic ideals of the godlike friend. The name itself embodies the ambivalence between the hero, who is beloved because of the hope and the beauty he represents, and the illusionary, deceiving projection which promises easy answers to complex question on the one hand, and the political exploitation of the young people's striving to be heroes on the other hand.

Obviously, the six friends really do love Percival, and regard him as a symbol of the most important values in their lives. Rhoda, who mixes quotes from Shelley's poems with her own thoughts, "I will wander down it and pick flowers, green cowbind and the moonlight-coloured May, wild roses and ivy serpentine. [...] I will gather my flowers and present them-- Oh! to whom?" (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 41), alluding to Shelley's poem *The Question*, underlines the romantic worldview which is not only her own, but also a part of the upbringing of all the characters. Percy Bysshe Shelley is certainly also a Percival, whose

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<sup>1</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites, who were a part of the Victorian society they criticized, and who Virginia Woolf did not consider as modern enough, idealized the medieval knights (Willis 6-7).

texts, which are full of feelings, social engagement, moral aspects and an idealization of beauty, form an important part of the common British consciousness.

The contradiction between romantic ideals and political ambiguity makes the reader uneasy in a way that forces him or her to question the aims of the author. There is a point in Virginia Woolf's withdrawal as an author from the text. Only by making her own views and opinions invisible, can she let the dialogue live on its own records. Thus, the dialogue between the unheroic hero Bernard and his friends does not necessarily function as a tool for the author to canalize her thesis, but as an invitation to the reader to take part in the ongoing dialogue.

The reader is forced to question why Virginia Woolf describes Percival as a hero, if she does not agree with the glorification of the ideals he embodies. In her introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Waves*, Kate Flint approaches this contradiction between Woolf's political views and the idealization of the hero:

More problematic is the portrayal of Percival, an absent centre, who fascinates the other characters with his physical, masculine beauty and aura, but who is never allowed a voice. As a potential figurehead of the British Empire, he would seem an obvious target for Woolf's dislike of unquestioning militarism and male self-confidence. And yet the sense of waste and loss which his early death brings to all six characters can be linked to the premature death of Woolf's much loved elder brother Thoby. (Flint, xxxv)

There is an interesting passage in Quentin Bell's biography about Virginia Woolf, where Bell describes how Virginia tries to envision who her brother Thoby, who died in 1906, really was and speculates about how his life could have turned out:

In a manuscript written at the end of her life she wonders what he might have become. “Mr Justice Stephen...with several books to his credit...”. She begins to draw the picture of a successful Stephen, typical of his country and class and then, almost correcting herself, she decides that he was not that: there was something melancholy and original about him, the ordinary ambitions of life would not have mattered much to him. (Bell 112)

These sentences might give a clue to the difference between Percival and the other friends: Percival is “typical of his country and class”, devoted to “the ordinary ambitions of life”, whereas the six friends all have “something melancholy and original” about them, which leads them to other values in life.

It is not unusual, that authors and interpreters claim that the portrait of Percival is a portrait of Virginia Woolf’s brother Toby. The quotation above adds something new to this interpretation. Most likely, Woolf was well aware of the feelings of love and pride which surrounded young boys like her brother. These feelings were at the same time private and political; the beloved sons and brothers were the maintainers of the British Empire. How was it possible to feel and deal with that love and pride and at the same time realize that the Empire had to vanish, since it in fact was a destructive force in the world?

In *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf is very explicit about the role of the “daughters of educated men”. Woolf argues for the right of women who have been denied education and political influence to refuse to take part in the efforts to stop the disastrous developments which are all caused by educated men. Similarly, the women in *The Waves* seem indifferent to the struggle of the Empire to handle the superiority over the colonies. To take part in such struggle is the duty of men like Percival.

On the other hand, there is an ambiguity in the lack of interest, since women's admiration of heroic and patriotic men like Percival might prolong the process of parting from an imperialistic identity. Woolf describes this kind of admiration in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), where she polemicizes against the way in which "women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (45). Mentioning Napoleon and Mussolini as examples, she claims that it would be impossible for supermen to exist and impose their inferiority on others, if they would cease to be idealized. There is an obvious contradiction between the love and idealization of Percival, as it is expressed in *The Waves*, and Virginia Woolf's own point of view in her political statements.

There is an interesting link between *Three Guineas* and *The Waves*. In *Three Guineas*, there are some references to the same pictures of childhood which Woolf uses in *The Waves*: the elm trees, the rooks, the nursery rhymes and the waves. These references could be read as the author's own comment on the political meaning of the private memories used in *The Waves*:

As a woman my country is the whole world. And if, when reason has said its say, still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give to England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world. (V. Woolf, *Three Guineas* 313)

The irrational love of the hero, as it is expressed in *The Waves*, might be a part of the love of England; the love of youth, self-confidence and beauty could thus be compared with



the love of the nature which, interwoven with our feeling, forms what we call our home. These feelings tend to make us unaware of the thin line between private and political issues, and expose us to the exploitation of our feelings for nationalistic aims. The obvious unawareness of the six friends regarding their heroization of youth, beauty and patriotism evokes the reader's awareness.

Thus, the irrational and unreflected ideals play an important part in *The Waves*, together with expressed as well as unexpressed thoughts and feelings. At the same time, the hero Percival is surrounded by a puzzling muteness. The theme of the six different voices which all surround the same mute center is evoked by the reference to the picture of Beethoven, which Bernard bought after Percival's death (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 195). It can be read as an allusion to the 'Grosse Fuge' of Beethoven, where different voices develop a theme with answers, countersubjects and counterpoints, in a way which also is reminiscent of the composition of *The Waves*.

In her essay "Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*", Elicia Clements indicates that the structure of *The Waves* follows the music of Beethoven's Opus 130 and 133 (Grosse Fuge), and that Woolf has made a composition in words which alludes very closely to this music.

However, Clements does not only underline the unity in the diversity of the six different voices. She describes "a parallel pattern of a 'silent' seventh movement", which could represent Percival. Clements interprets the voicelessness of Percival as a sign of subversion: "Woolf's novel answers tradition by never giving this conventionally heroic figure a 'voice' (he has no soliloquy), suggesting a subversion of the British colonial enterprise. Thus, Woolf's silencing of Percival correspondingly marks convention, yet resists it" (165-166).

This kind of subversion is strongly reminiscent of Woolf's suggestion in *Three Guineas* to "the educated men's daughter" to use indifference as a political tool. It would mean that

Woolf is well aware of the convention of patriotism and colonialism, but that she decides to undermine it by making its political implications invisible in the soliloquies of the six friends. The contradictions force the reader to listen to the silent voice of the unspoken.

Pamela L. Caughie compares Woolf's fiction with the fiction of Kafka and Beckett, where the struggle with the text puts a light on the reader him- or herself and "the reader thus becomes a function of the text, not just an identity in relation to it" (Caughie 184). In *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* Caughie has an interesting approach to the role of the reader. She underlines the fact that Woolf in her own literary criticism avoids the proposing of any authorities when it comes to how the reader should interpret the text. It is the reader's own struggle with the text, and the question arising from a conscious reading which makes the text, and the reading of critics, interesting (189). Contradictions can, as well as unexpected changes in the narrative, force the reader to question his or her own understanding of literature. Caughie refers to Wittgenstein as she states: "A postmodern reading based on pragmatic motives does not seek to resolve conflict or to reach consensus but to go on in the face of conflict and in the absence of consensus" (189).

The picture of Percival forces the reader to face the feelings and questions raised by the concept of idealizing heroism.

### **Chapter Three: Bernard as unheroic hero conquers death**

In this chapter, I intend to show that Bernard is the real hero of the novel. Percival could be said to be the picture of one possible future of Virginia's dead brother Thoby. Bernard could be a picture of another future. Through his collecting of fragments and telling of stories, Bernard is in a process of a constant reflection on life and its meaning, while Percival is content with his passive fulfilling of the expectations of others. Bernard tries to formulate his own meaning and to write his own story. Percival and Bernard represent two different life perspectives, which young, well educated people might choose.

Bernard, like all his five friends, acts like the medieval Percival, searching for the Grail, which is described as the globe, the symbol of community and meaning: "Let us hold it for one moment, said Jinny; love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again" (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 109). In Bernard's soliloquy in the last chapter the finding of the Grail by fulfilling one's own goals, however, proves to be an illusion. Bernard, who during his whole life has collected phrases and stories as his way of subjugating not only the word but also the world, realizes that he never will be able to form his words to a whole that describes real life in a way that can be understood by other people: "The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed. This, for the moment, seems to be my life. [...] But unfortunately, what I see (this globe, full of figures) you do not see" (183).

In a last scene, his notebook falls under the table, like litter, and Bernard sighs: "I have done with phrases" (227). This is a negation of what has filled his life with meaning; it describes the failure of his mission in life. And still, throughout the novel, Bernard is the one who sums up and comments. His stories and phrases form the space in which the other characters' stories are invited to participate. He is the true author, and by failing to record one

consistent story, he forms the heteroglossia which, in accordance to Bakhtin's thoughts on Dostoevsky, might be the only possible way of telling a story that does not diminish life itself.

Virginia Woolf knew the work of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy very well, since she, together with S. S. Koteliansky, translated and published some of their books at Hogarth Press. *The Waves* was published in 1931; Virginia Woolf worked at it from 1927. In 1925, Woolf published the essay *The Russian Point of View*, where she compares Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's novels. She points out the powerful clarity and sharpness of Tolstoy's novels, but also the urge of the reader to look away, since the perfectness and pleasure suddenly threaten to make life meaningless.

On the other hand, in her description of Dostoevsky's novels, there is nothing of the clarity found in Tolstoy. Woolf describes, with a metaphor of whirling water, which may remind her readers of the symbol of the waves and which is at the same time the symbol of the soul:

The novels of Dostoevsky are seething whirlpools, gyrating sandstorms, waterspouts which hiss and boil and suck us in. They are composed purely and wholly of the stuff of the soul. Against our wills we are drawn in, whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same time filled with a giddy rapture. [...] But, as we listen, our confusion slowly settles. A rope is flung to us; we catch hold of a soliloquy [...]. (V. Woolf, *The Russian Point of View*)

The line "A rope is flung to us; we catch hold of a soliloquy" can be compared with Neville's soliloquy in *The Waves*: "I will read in the book that is propped against the bottle of Worcester sauce. It contains some forged rings, some perfect statements, a few words, but poetry. You, all of you, ignore it. What the dead poet said, you have

forgotten. And I cannot translate it to you so that its binding power ropes you in, and makes it clear to you that you are aimless” (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 70). The task of the author or translator is the same: to fling a rope to the reader, which helps him to become conscious of something that is important to understand: that he is aimless. The consciousness itself grows more important than a single aim or ideal.

By letting Bernard express inconsistency, doubt and failure, Woolf leads the reader to question the ideals of consistency and success. She turns the focus from the idealizing of a hero by forming a new kind of novel, which is entirely built on heteroglossia. This heteroglossia exists not only in and between the utterances of the main characters, but also in the gap between the view of the protagonist Bernard and the author Woolf. In order to understand this gap, the reader has to participate in the interpretation, and by doing so, he or she takes part in the heteroglossic dialogue.

This view of the hero (which in this case is Bernard, not Percival) corresponds with Bakhtin’s recognition of the dialogue as a main feature of the polyphonic novel: “Thus the new artistic position of the author with regard to the hero in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel is a *fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position*, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 93).

It is clear that the hero - in the eyes with which Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky - is a hero only in the sense of a protagonist, as a main character; the hero himself is unheroic, since the author does not give him the role of the one whose life shall illustrate a single deep meaning. Woolf lets Bernard ponder on the image of the hero and on the contradiction between different sorts of heroes, as he is mourning Percival and the loss of balance in his own life:

Lines and colours almost persuade me that I too can be heroic, I, who make phrases so easily, am so soon seduced, love what comes next, and cannot clench my fist, but vacillate weakly making phrases according to my circumstances. Now, through my own infirmity I recover what he was to me: my opposite. Being naturally truthful, he did not see the point of these exaggerations, and was borne on by a natural sense of the fitting, was indeed a great master of the art of living so that he seems to have lived long, and to have spread calm round him, indifference one might almost say, certainly to his own advancement, save that he had also great compassion. A child playing--a summer evening--doors will open and shut, will keep opening and shutting, through which I see sights that make me weep. For they cannot be imparted. Hence our loneliness; hence our desolation. I turn to that spot in my mind and find it empty. My own infirmities oppress me. There is no longer him to oppose them. (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 118)

The loss of Percival is a loss of the counterpoint, which throws Bernard back to himself and to his own fragmentary efforts. His own infirmity contradicts Percival's consistency. Percival had a natural sense of the fitting and was concerned about his own advancement whereas Bernard's phrases were spinning around without ever reaching any goal. And still, Bernard is a hero since his phrases, with all their contradictions and exaggerations create something new and expand the consciousness of what is important in life, in the same way as the paintings in the National Gallery which he describes (117-118).

In the last sentences of the novel, the unheroic hero rides towards death, even braver than Percival did in India. His last words "O Death" (227) echo St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15, "So also is the resurrection of the dead. [...] it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power (verse 42-43, King James Version); "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (verse 55). This is the final victory of the unheroic hero Bernard; the

victory of the weak, inconsistent and unsuccessful, whose success lies in their searching for truth by an honest and fearless investigation of contradictions. In that sense, Bernard as unheroic hero conquers death.

The same thought is also expressed by Bakhtin in his reflections on a possible Dostoevskyan approach to Tolstoy's *Three Deaths*:

Death in the Tolstoyan interpretation of it is totally absent from Dostoevsky's world.

Dostoevsky would have not depicted the deaths of his heroes, but the crises and turning points in their lives; that is, he would have depicted their lives on the threshold. And his heroes would have remained internally unfinalized (for self-consciousness cannot be finalized from within). Such would have been a polyphonic treatment of the story.

(Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 92-96)

And "the waves broke on the shore" (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 228) and the reader is well aware of his and her own part in the eternal rising and falling and struggling, which never ends. In that sense there is no real ending, since the dialogue of the novel continues within the reader.

By regarding Percival as a missing counterpart, Bernard sees himself more clearly. Bernard's consciousness about his own identity grows as the death of Percival disturbs his balance. He is forced to compare his own ideals with the idealization of the lost friend.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin describes the impacts caused by the assimilation of others' discourses on the identity of the individual. He describes how a person who tries to distance himself from authorities, whose thoughts at first are mingled with the person's own, often does this "by turning persuasive discourse into speaking persons", "by

means of objectification” (79) as a first step. The next step in the process of finding one’s own identity is a conscious struggle with different discourses:

The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual’s coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse. (79)

This quotation can, on the one hand, be used as a description of the struggle of the six friends in *The Waves* to find their own identities out of the intertwining discourse of their community. On the other hand, it can be read as a description of the common striving of the six friends in general, and Bernard in particular, “to liberate himself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification” (79), that is, the need to turn the old ideal into an idealized god named ‘Percival’ in order to free oneself from it by letting it die and be mourned.

After the death of Percival, Bernard decides: “Now then is my chance to find out what is of great importance, and I must be careful, and tell no lies” (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 116). Rhoda feels “alone in a hostile world” (120), full of ugliness, hate, indifference and pain. For Louis, Percival’s death is equivalent to the deaths of others: “he died in Egypt; he died in Greece; all deaths are one death” (129). He denies himself comfort, since he feels the weight of the world on his shoulders. In Louis’ imagination, Susan, the content, earthbound and competent woman, says to Bernard, whom she has always loved: “My ruined life, my wasted life” (176). All of the six friends have to cope with their lost illusions, and try to face reality, without blinkers. Linked together by their history and friendship, they still have to cope as



individuals with their loss and their personal lives. Even if the reader only gets to know their thoughts and not their actual speech, it is clear that they try to maintain a dialogue, respecting the individual approaches.

This maintaining of the dialogue could, in the words of Bakhtin, be called a “genuine dialogic relationship” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 98). The concept of the dialogue is described by Bakhtin in a way which is highly relevant to Woolf's way of writing. Bakhtin stresses, that: “The idea *lives* not in one person's *isolated* individual consciousness – if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of *others*” (98). Bakhtin also underlines, that the idea as promoted by Dostoevsky does not belong to one single person, but is in fact, just like the word itself, “a *live event*, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses” (98).

The six friends represent different ideas, creating live events between consciousnesses. And even the monologic state of Percival's character is an idea, whose nature is dialogic, and therefore invites the friends, together with the reader, to take part in the dialogue on the ideas which he represents. In Bernard's soliloquies there is, in fact, an ongoing “dialogic interaction” between different ideas of his time, for example about the Victorian ideal in a modern time, where the ‘colonial question’ no longer can be solved with violence.

The intertextual and intermedial references remind the reader of the literary dialogues in which both texts and readers take part:

[...] For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky [...] (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 192)

I rose and walked away--I, I, I; not Byron, Shelley, Dostoevsky, but I, Bernard. [...] I went, swinging my stick, into a shop, and bought--not that I love music--a picture of Beethoven in a silver frame. Not that I love music, but because the whole of life, its masters, its adventurers, then appeared in long ranks of magnificent human beings behind me; and I was the inheritor; I, the continuer; I, the person miraculously appointed to carry it on. (195)

Throughout the whole novel, Bernard struggles to find a balance between his own self and the stories of his friends. He tends to exaggerate his own role as the one who, by collecting stories and phrases, will sum up the truth. At the same time, he is afraid of losing his own identity when, left on his own, there are no dialogues to take part in (59).

Read as a Bildungsroman, the novel describes how Bernard learns not to invent stories which claim to explain the meaning of life, but to let the dialogic fragments remain fragments of a common, developing and changing truth. In this sense, he finally, by facing death, finds his role and his identity in the mission to “carry it on” (195). The ongoing dialogue, which survives the deaths of the individuals, is carried on by people who take its fragments seriously.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The allusion to Dostoevsky, as quoted above, fits well into the frame of this essay: “For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky” (V. Woolf, *The Waves* 192). Bernard as a hero in a book by Dostoevsky: this indeed could be an allusion to Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*: “Dostoevsky possessed an extraordinary gift for hearing the dialogue of his epoch, or more precisely, for hearing his epoch as a great dialogue, for detecting in it not only individual voices, but precisely and predominantly the dialogic relationship among voices, their dialogic interaction” (100). In 1931, as *The Waves* was published, there were many threats developing in Europe, which led to a questioning of old ideals and to anxiety regarding the role of the individual in a society with escalating conflicts. The British Empire was, somewhat reluctantly, searching a way to hand over power to the colonies, in order to avoid bloodshed. The situation in Italy and Germany was alarming. The Great Depression was a catastrophe for individuals as well as for societies. It was getting harder for authors, philosophers and other intellectuals in different countries to maintain their connections. The intellectuals in the Soviet Union, among them M. M. Bakhtin, lost their contact with the rest of Europe at the beginning of the Stalin era in 1924. Still, there might have been some contacts between the Bloomsbury Group, in which Virginia Woolf was a central member, and M. M. Bakhtin, or the Russian circle which embraced and

At the same time, Percival and Bernard represent traits which Virginia Woolf had in herself from her ancestors, family, upbringing and surrounding society; these are traits which also include the romantic world view of Percy Shelley. In this perspective, it makes sense that in the diary notice from the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 1929, Virginia Woolf calls the project – which was first called “The Moths” and later turned into *The Waves* - an autobiography (V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 141).

This reading sharpens the conflict between the monologic and the dialogic view, since it underlines the fact that the contradiction is present not only in society, but also in the most private and personal experiences of the individuals themselves. In this light, *The Waves* could be read as Virginia Woolf's own recognition of the old and monologic ideals which influenced the context in which she was socialized. At the same time the novel could be said to describe her parting with the monologic ideals, privately and politically as well as artistically, and her way of exploring a heteroglossic perspective.

In this sense, Percival as representative of the monologic ideals is bound to die in order to force the other characters to experience that they, with all their unheroic doubts, anxieties and depressions, are the ones who form the modern, heteroglossic society. Their self-consciousness deepens as there is no longer a hero to soothe their doubts. Instead, they have to follow the authentic paths of their own souls.

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developed his thoughts. Leonard and Virginia Woolf were friends of Prince Mirsky (L. Woolf 23-24), who was a relative of Bakhtin. Mikhail Bakhtin's brother Nikolai, who lived in Paris and Cambridge, was a friend of Ludwig Wittgenstein (Fedajewa 377-390), who, just like Leonard Woolf, was one of the Cambridge Apostles. Despite the political constrictions laid upon the intellectual debate, it is not unlikely that the Woolfs and M. M. Bakhtin took part in the same literary discourse.

It might therefore not be a coincidence, but a good example of intertextuality, that there are such obvious similarities between Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and the theory of heteroglossia and dialogue as it is described by M. M. Bakhtin.

## Conclusion

By using intertextuality in general and the concepts of monologism and heteroglossia in particular, it is possible to reveal the dialogistic differences in point of view between the characters in *The Waves*, especially Bernard and Percival, as well as between the characters and the author. This dialogism extends the possible interpretations of the text. The dialogism in *The Waves* does not only emerge from the soliloquies of the six friends, which together with the interludes form the text, but also from the allusions to, for example, music and medieval heroism, and from the not explicitly expressed, invisible question which arises from the idealization of Percival.

One possible reading is that Percival is not only a beloved superhero who impersonates many important and highly respected values of society together with a romantic worldview, but at the same time a representation of the obsolete ideals of a declining Empire, from which modern individuals have to free themselves. Percival is the incarnation of the “obstinate emotional remains” (V. Woolf, *Three Guineas* 313) which obscure the fact that the global society needs new, democratic ideals and actions instead of the old heroes.

Thus interpreted, the anxiety and conscious questioning of one’s own role in the community would, together with the ability to accept contradictory points of view, be necessary for the development of one’s own identity as well as for the development of an open, dialogic society.

The latter perspective is represented in the novel by the unheroic hero Bernard. The parting with a fixed aim or ideal and the accepting of the concept of an ongoing, struggling dialogue is the only way to conquer Death.

According to the contacts which may have existed between the members of the Bloomsbury Group and the circle around Bakhtin, there is a possibility that Bakhtin’s thoughts actually had some influence on Virginia Woolf. But, assuming that such contacts

existed, it might be even more likely that both Bakhtin and Woolf worked on ideas which were part of a common discourse, developing them in an intertextual way through reading and discussions in the circles to which they belonged, circles which may have been influenced by each other in one or the other way. The concept of intertextuality implies that it is not possible or even interesting to figure out whose thoughts had an impact on whom, since the heteroglossian dialogue is an interweaving process, similar to the process expressed in *The Waves*.

The idea of the polyphonic novel and of the truth, which can only be described by a confusing and contradictory heteroglossia, was, with Bakhtin's expression, a "live event" carried out by authors and philosophers in the increasingly monological society of Europe at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. Virginia Woolf certainly played a central role in this live event.

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