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Virginia Woolf's Image of the Plunge: Intimations of the Postmodern Imagination

Abstract. The plunge in *Mrs. Dalloway* represents the effect of one individual on the lives of others, radiating out in widening circles from the initial moment of inspiration or influence. In that novel, Woolf suggests that much the same process occurs with the effect of art; the circles widen. As if to underscore and continue this insight born of an image, Michael Cunningham continues the widening circles with his novel *The Hours*, based on *Mrs. Dalloway*, and later made into a movie of the same name. A key aspect of the image of the plunge is that the motion that it initiates has no end. In this sense, it represents a trace of what is to come. The image allows our imagination to encompass the beginnings of what happens next, but not to fully grasp these innumerable ripples in the water. We might take this as a metaphor of the postmodern imagination, heralding a horizon that cannot be grasped. If we set this image of the plunge against a different image that has been proposed for the postmodern imagination by Richard Kearney, a labyrinth of mirrors, we come to a striking conclusion. Summarizing the findings of the poststructuralists, Kearney prognosticates the imminent death of the imagination, arguing that the postmodern artist simply recycles fragments, abandoning any discernible act of creation for a reordering of second-hand images without origin or end. Woolf's alternative image of the plunge repeats the endlessness of the metaphor, but with a crucial difference. That difference is that the plunge suggests the vitality of the imagination, not its imminent demise. Its vitality

Mary Joe Hughes, « Virginia Woolf's Image of the Plunge: Intimations of the Postmodern Imagination », Jean-François Chassay et Bertrand Gervais [éds], *Paroles, textes et images. Formes et pouvoirs de l'imaginaire*, Université du Québec à Montréal, Figura, Centre de recherche sur le texte et l'imaginaire, coll. « Figura », nº 19, vol. 2, p. 123-137.

lies in its ability to conjure up a vision in the minds of readers that suggests, but does not encompass, the interconnectedness of all people and all art, allowing us both to imagine and participate in the web of interplay that stretches out beyond what reason can grasp.

Last summer I attended a world premiere of a musical composition by Stephen Prutsman for piano and string quartet. It was a musical score for the silent film *Sherlock Jr*. (1924), with Buster Keaton. In that film, Keaton plays an employee at the cinema who, among other things, learns from the movies how to get the girl. Thus the score by Stephen Prutsman represents a work of art about a work of film about film. Its combination of exuberance, humour, and charm, weaving together elements of swing, ragtime, the Charleston, and Erik Satie, raises the question of artistic borrowing. What is happening when art comments on earlier art?

One hypothesis is that it signals the end of the artistic imagination, engulfed by a sea of reproducible images. This is the thesis of Richard Kearney, in his *The Wake of Imagination*, where he prognosticates the death of the imagination in postmodernism. He does so with a provocative image. The postmodern imagination, he argues, might be compared with a labyrinth of looking glasses.[1] There is image after image after image, with no original. The post-modern artist simply recycles fragments, abandoning any discernible act of creation for a reordering of second-hand material without origin or end (*WI*, 1-18, 254-255, 288-289, *et passim*). But is originality, and by extension the health of the imagination, necessarily threatened when an artist re-presents earlier work? This is a question that infuses interpretations of the postmodern aesthetic, where artistic borrowing is quite common and we are engulfed by a hail of images potentially threatening distinctions between original and copy.

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[1] Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 17. Further references to this text will be given in parentheses after the quotation, preceded by the abbreviation *WI*.

We might examine this question by comparing Kearney's image of facing mirrors with another image linking artistic creativity to repetitive iterations. This is the image of a plunge into a watery substance, which sets in motion widening ripples in the water, a metaphor that occurs repeatedly in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The plunge represents a descent into the animating principle of life itself, a well-spring of creativity that sets off radiating connections between people, transforming their lives, overflowing all boundaries, and defying death. As if to underscore the significance of this metaphor, Michael Cunningham continues the widening circles of the plunge with his novel *The Hours*, based on *Mrs. Dalloway*, which in a later iteration was made into a movie of the same name. In *The Hours,* the association of the plunge with artistic creativity, itself a life force, is much more explicit. This series of echoes of Woolf's novel, by its very existence, substantiates the idea of the plunge as one by which a creative act enters and transforms the lives of others, generating more life and more art, in a process that has no end.

If we set this image of the plunge against Kearney's facing mirrors, we note that both imply a potentially endless process, but with a crucial difference. That difference is that the plunge suggests the vitality of the imagination, not its imminent demise. Its vitality lies in its powers of transformation and expansion. The ripples of connection created by the plunge underscore in a positive and not depleted sense what links all people and all art, stretching out beyond the horizon in every direction. Which image, then, best represents the imagination in postmodernity?

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine a representative sampling of postmodernist works of art in order to test the validity of these metaphors, we can nonetheless examine the internal evidence offered in each case for the images in question. A comparison of the two, in the separate contexts in which they appear, will demonstrate that while neither is without difficulties, the plunge offers a better metaphor for the phenomenon of artistic borrowing than does the labyrinth of mirrors, yielding hope for the continuing vigour of the artistic imagination, even in postmodernity.

The first point of comparison is a critical one. Whereas the image of the plunge appears in a work of literature, Kearney's image of facing mirrors emerges from a work of philosophical synthesis. Therein lies a crucial aspect of its usefulness. Kearney's image represents a visual symbol of philosophic thought, especially in its structuralist, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist manifestations, for these are the strands of thinking that gave rise to his image of a labyrinth of mirrors (*WI*, 251). Thus an examination of Kearney's argument allows us to interrogate the applicability of postmodern theory to art of the corresponding period. Does the first offer an explanation of the other, or does art represent an independent strand of postmodernism, an alternative way of thinking? This seems an especially pertinent question, since deconstruction and poststructuralism call into question all foundations and all origins. How, then, can theory serve as a foundational explanation for art?

In *The Wake of Imagination,* Kearney's image of facing mirrors emerges as the third part of his division of the history of the philosophy of the imagination into three "ideal types" or "epistemic structures." (*WI*, 17-18.) He makes the case that the role of the imagination in postmodernism repeats neither of the earlier Western models of artistic inspiration. Instead of seeking either to represent the creativity of God (a traditional ideal) or to express the artist's original vision (a modern ideal), the postmodern artistic imagination merely echoes earlier images without origin or end (*WI*, 11). He bases this idea on the work of Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida, each examined in order to extract a theory of the postmodern imagination (*WI*, 251-295).

In the broadest sense, then, the image of facing mirrors represents a useful distillation of the implications of structuralist to poststructuralist thought for the imagination. In particular, this repeating figure illustrates three key ideas. There is a stream of simulation without origin or end. There is no discernible difference between original and copy. And finally, there is no discernible origin of this stream of images in the imagination of the artist. All three points lead to Kearney's conclusion that the postmodern imagination is dead or in danger of imminent death, eclipsed by increasingly facile replication. The artist merely recycles images he or she did not originate, a mere "player" in a game of signs (*WI*, 13). There is no originality, in short, either in the mind of God, as in the traditional ideal, nor in the mind of the artist, as in the modern ideal. By evoking an endless stream of images in *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney emphasizes the visual arts, though he does employ narrative examples as well (*WI*, 299-358).

Though it is clear from his conclusion, as well as from his subsequent work, that Kearney himself holds out hope for the imagination in spite of the doom-saying implications of the theory on which he bases his argument, nonetheless his tone in *The Wake of Imagination* is apocalyptic. "In our postmodern era of apocalypse both the poetry and philosophy of the human imagination would seem to have reached their end." (*WI*, 295.) "The history of the Western philosophy of images is brought to its end. Not in the sense of being completed, but of being displaced into *another* order of representation–the postmodern order of perpetual allusion." (*WI*, 292.)

As Kearney makes clear, this apocalyptic strain arises directly from the theory itself, which regards the idea of the human subject as an autonomous source of meaning as an outdated illusion (*WI*, 251). The subject is shaped by structures beyond his or her control, and the author is dead, engulfed by an unending process of deferred signification. Philosophy, in the sense of a belief in the metaphysics of presence, or transcendental signifier, is at an end. And finally, without the conviction of a pre-existing truth, the distinction between reality and representation collapses. All these strains in postmodern thought suggest endpoints: the end of the human subject as an author of meaning, the end of the distinction between reality and simulation, and the end of the idea, fundamental to the prior history of philosophy, of a pre-existing truth.

But there is something inherently contradictory in a body of theory that makes apocalyptic pronouncements while recognizing that the era of definitive pronouncements–in the sense of affirming a pre-existing truth or transcendental signifier–is at an end. The same contradiction emerges in Kearney's image of a labyrinth of mirrors. It illustrates endlessness, but at the same time supposedly suggests an imminent death. This is to equate what is necessarily a medial, indeterminate position (between facing mirrors) with something quite determinate: death. Though Kearney does acknowledge that the history of the imagination is brought to its end, "not in the sense of being completed, but of being displaced into another order of representation—the postmodern order of perpetual allusion," (*WI*, 251) he persists in the language of apocalypse, largely because his theoretical sources take that line.[2]

Yet what actually appears to be at an end here is not the imagination, but definitive philosophic pronouncements about its nature. Notice that Kearney refers to "the Western philosophy of images" (*WI*, 251) as being brought to an end. By this account, it is not necessarily the *imagination* that has come to an end, but "the [...] Western *philosophy* of images." (*WI*, 251.)

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[2] This is not the place to tease out the ambiguities in the theory on which he bases his argument, except to say that more than one conclusion *might* be derived from some aspects of it. There is certainly an apocalyptic strain in this material, with its prognostications of the "death of the author", the "demise of man" and so forth, which Kearney chooses to emphasize rather than that aspect of the theory that eludes definitive pronouncements.

If this is the case, then in the absence of theoretical foundations for evaluating the arts, shouldn't we attend to ways of thinking that only the arts can embody?

Another potential problem with the facing mirror analogy is Kearney's treatment of undecidability. In the introduction, he presents the postmodern imagination as following neither of the two earlier models of artistic inspiration, the mind of God or the mind of the artist. Furthermore, he argues, the import of postmodern allusions is itself undecidable (*WI*, 11). Having laid out this neither/nor beginning, Kearney then presents the role of the postmodern imagination *not* as occupying some indeterminate middle ground, some medial space, but as in danger of "imminent death." (*WI*, 299.) In short, if there is no discernible *origin* of the imaginative vision of the artist, or if that vision is itself undecidable, then it is dead, or in danger of death. When we cannot discern imagination from reality, he argues, "This very undecidability lends weight to the deepening suspicion that we may well be assisting at a wake of imagination." (*WI*, 3.)

Kearney has performed an enormous service in distilling the implications of a wide range of theory and raised important and provocative questions about the health of the imagination in an era of reproducibility. And he has correctly recognized that the postmodern imagination follows neither of the two earlier models, but falls in some indeterminate middle category. But what his synthesis ultimately reveals is a potential contradiction in his theoretical sources, between questioning definitive pronouncements on the one hand and prognosticating the apocalypse on the other.[3]

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[3] It should be said here that in his later work Kearney has acknowledged that "the crisis of the post-modern image has not always led [...] to declarations of the "death of the imagination", but charts an intermediary course between "the extremes of sovereign subjectivity and anonymous linguistic systems." See Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-modern* (New York: Fordham University

In contrast to Kearney's image of facing mirrors, the plunge appears not in a work of philosophy but a novel. On the very first page of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the image is repeated twice, first as Clarissa plunges into London to buy the flowers for her party and again as she recalls an earlier, delighted plunge into the open air at Bourton when she was a girl.[4] Both the memory and her present, exuberant immersion in the life of the city are accompanied, almost immediately, by a reference to creation. "For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh." (*MD*, 4.) Clarissa creates as she probes the ecstatic depths of her experience. So, it would appear, did Virginia Woolf, who wrote that she had "plunged" in writing her book "deep into the richest strata of my mind. I can write & write & write now: the happiest feeling in the world."[5] And, like her character, Woolf also felt called upon, when writing fiction, "to create the whole thing afresh for myself each time." (*MD*, *ix*.) The plunge, then, was already present before the first page of the novel, where in a certain sense the character renews the author's creative impulse, as if rippling out from a pre-existing motion beneath the surface.[6]

Furthermore, Clarissa responds to this embrace of life, by helping to re-create such moments of echoing intensity through her parties. For her, parties are "an offering; to combine, to

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Press, 1998), 185-210, especially 185, 187. I want to add here that I am deeply indebted to Kearney's work as a whole.

[4] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1925), 3. Further references to this text will be given in parentheses after the quotation, preceded by the abbreviation *MD*.

[5] Quoted in the foreword to *Mrs. Dalloway* by Maureen Howard, *ix*.

[6] For a more extensive treatment of this theme in *Mrs. Dalloway*, see my article titled "The Plunge in *Mrs. Dalloway* and the Book To Come," *The New Arcadia Review* 2 (2004), available from http://www.bc.edu/publications/newarcadia/archives/2/.

create; but to whom?" (*MD*, 122.) Perhaps this is why she felt called upon

> when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to perhaps... (*MD*, 37.)

It is as if she must re-concentrate her already dispersed being[7] in order to make this offering, an act that suggests that the divine vitality that she loves nonetheless requires renewal. This vitality appears to be an uncircumscribed presence, vast and deep beneath the surface of things, but nonetheless subject to her influence, her creations.

The same influence, interestingly enough, prevails and perhaps even intensifies after death. "Did it matter," Clarissa muses as she delightedly plunges into the life of the city,

> that she must inevitably cease completely; [...] or did it not become consoling to believe that

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[7] "But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her had, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter–even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her skepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps–perhaps." (*MD*, 152-153).

> death ended absolutely? But that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home [...] part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best [...] but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (*MD*, 9.)

This suggests that there is a mysterious presence, an ebb and flow in which every being plays a part–in life by making ripples, or potentially doing so, and in death by being subsumed entirely into the whole. In life as in death, then, one's own being can affect the whole, contributing to its ongoing regenerative process.

This last point helps explain the way that Clarissa, lover of life, is identified in the novel with Septimus, the mad poet who plunges to his death the day of her party. Both of them feel the terror, beauty, and intensity of life, (*MD*, 8, 66, 139, 141-143, 167-168, 184) and make offerings (*MD*, 122, 149). Both echo the words of Shakespeare, and especially the dirge in *Cymbeline,*

> Fear no more the heat o' the sun
> Nor the furious winter's rages
> (*MD*, 9, 30, 139.)

For Septimus, shell-shocked and beset by fiery visions, "fear no more" may represent the attractions of death. For Clarissa, the dirge signifies "courage and endurance," which led, she thinks as she plunges into London, to the renewal of life after the War (*MD*, 9-10). This restoration of life after the ravages of war signifies a kind of rebirth, which Clarissa joins and furthers by "making it up, building it round, ... creating it every moment afresh." (*MD*, 4.)[8] Septimus, by contrast, wholly joins this animating presence by plunging to his death. Despite these profound differences between Septimus and Clarissa, each character in a different way plunges into the very heart of life, their tributes in some ways the expression of a revelation (*MD*, 184, 186). "Fear no more the heat of the sun," Clarissa thinks with sympathy as she learns of Septimus's suicide in the middle of her party, yet paradoxically his death confirms her in her love of life, her treasuring of its radiant moments (*MD*, 186). Thus death renews the love of life, which inspires creation.

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[8] It is significant that Imogen, over whose body the dirge "Fear no

In his 1998 novel *The Hours*, based on *Mrs. Dalloway*, Michael Cunningham probes depths in Woolf's novel and suggests wider and wider ripples, the two basic motions suggested by the plunge.[9] He probes depths by taking up what is a relatively minor theme in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the sustaining power of literature in the lives of the characters, and develops its role in overcoming death through ongoing creation.[10] Woolf's characters read and recite Shakespeare; his character, Laura Brown, reads *Mrs. Dalloway*. Lingering over her reading of Clarissa Dalloway's desire to create life as she plunges into it, Laura, who is on the verge of suicide, overcomes that urge in order to resume her role as a wife and mother, creating a "world" for her husband and child.[11] By the end of the novel we realize that this child grows up to become another poet and writer, Richard Worthington Brown, whose writings tap

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more" was sung, did not really die, and at the end of the play makes a seemingly miraculous return. Here too is a kind of rebirth, or at least a restoration of life.

[9] Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).

[10] For a more extensive treatment of this topic in relation to *Mrs. Dalloway,* see Mary Joe Hughes, "Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Postmodern Artistic Re-presentation," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45:4 (June 2004).

[11] Cunnigham, *op. cit.*, 42.

into the radiant depths of life, affecting others, though like Septimus, he eventually plunges to his death.

Here we have the second motion of the plunge, the expanding ripples in the water, for Cunningham is clearly delineating in his work a process of literary generativity that outlasts death. His novel begins with the death of Virginia Woolf, yet derives its life from the novel that Woolf had written, just as Laura recovers her life, owing partly to the same source, and helps to create a life for another writer to be. Just as the animating power of one individual's life radiates out to others in a movement suggested by the plunge, so does the animating power of literature, thereby nourishing through fiction the creation of more life. Shakespeare flows into the lives of the author and characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*, all in turn flowing into *The Hours*, and into the lives of readers, some of whom will become writers themselves. Death both underscores the precious nature of this mysterious passage, and is overcome in ongoing creation.[12]

It is worth noting here that when Cunningham extends Woolf's idea of the plunge in two directions by probing further depths in the original and by expanding its reach, he is in effect accomplishing what Walter Benjamin wrote about the act of literary translation. The translator, Benjamin asserted, must "expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language."[13] Benjamin, of course, is writing about translation and not artistic renewal or re-presentation, but one might argue that re-presenting a literary classic *is* a form of translation. By probing the depths of the original, the writer/translator renews and even extends its meaning, giving utterance to what is left partly unsaid. Benjamin actually employed the word *stürzt*, from the verb *stürzen*, which has been translated as 'plunge', in referring to Hölderlin's translations from Sophocles. In these works, he wrote, "meaning *plunges* from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language."[14]

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[12] For informing my treatment of the themes of death and literature I owe a general debt to J. Hillis Miller, "Mrs. Dalloway: Repetition as the Raising of the Dead," in *Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1988), 79-101.

[13] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 81.

Yet, though Benjamin believed in a kind of ultimate truth or language of which all existing languages represent fragments,[15] Woolf, it would seem, did not. In her essay on modern fiction of 1919, she wrote of the "infinite possibilities of the art, [which] remind us that there is no limit to the horizon," as long as there is constant innovation so that "[fiction's] youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured."[16] In other words, the art of fiction is one of limitless possibilities, but it requires renewal. This is exactly the gesture of re-creation enacted by Michael Cunningham, following the implications of the plunge in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

In conclusion, when we compare the two images of facing mirrors and the plunge, our chief concern is the health of the imagination, especially in light of works of art that echo earlier works. Kearney provocatively draws our attention to this problem in postmodernism, especially in light of the ease of reproduction, the so-called "death of the author" and other theoretical concerns. The question at the heart of his metaphor of facing mirrors is what becomes of the *source* of imagination in postmodernity, when the images stretch out limitlessly without origin or end. "Deprived of the concept of *origin*," Kearney writes, "the concept of imagination itself collapses," (*WI*, 253) citing as evidence Andy Warhol's famous response to the fact that Picasso produced 4,000 paintings in his lifetime: "I can do as many in twenty four hours" Warhol wrote, "–four thousand works which will all be the same work and all of them masterpieces."[17] No remark could set the problem in more stark relief. It would seem that if all reproduction is entirely mechanical,[18] then there is no room for the imagination, and Kearney is right to alert us to the danger.

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[14] *Ibid.*, 82-83. "*Die Sophokles-Übersetzungen waren Hölderlins letztes Werk. In ihnen stürzt der Sinn von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht in bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren.*" "*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,*" In: *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. IV/I, S. 21 (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1972).

My thanks to Elizabeth Chadwick for help with the German associations with *stürzen*.

[15] *Ibid.*, 78-83.

[16] "Modern Fiction" [1919] from *The Common Reader* (I), (London and New York, 1925), 184-95. Copyright 1925 by Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.; renewed 1953 by Leornard Woolf; reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., The Hogarth Press, and Leonard Woolf, in *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 125-26.

But is this really the case? Is it the case when *The Hours* rewrites *Mrs. Dalloway*, or Stephen Prutsman celebrates *Sherlock Jr*. by adding a musical score? Is it the case when Handel's *Messiah* is reset to jazz, rock and funk, or John Updike or Tom Stoppard rewrite *Hamlet*? Let us compare Kearney's linear image of a series of distinct and separate but identical *things*–products, if you will–with the equally limitless but nonlinear, multidirectional image of the plunge. Note that in the latter case, there is a continuum, an animating force of which everything is a part. There are no separate and distinct works of art, but instead a cauldron of endlessly proliferating and dying forms, a life force that is nonetheless subject to acts of renewal. Such acts are created by the plunge into the heart of life, which establishes a point of "radiancy." (*MD*, 37.)

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[17] Kearney, *op. cit.*, 254, citing Michael Gibson, *Les Horizons du Possible* (Paris: Éditions du Félin, 1984), 212.

[18] Kearney specifically invokes Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) in *The Wake of Imagination*, 312, 332, 336.

Thus, the source of the imagination in Woolf's metaphor is ambiguous, but it is not entirely in eclipse. This source seems to be located neither solely in the watery medium representing the animating principle of life itself, nor solely in the individual creator, who is both an agent of renewal and a part of the whole. It would seem that this ambiguous source of imagination helps to explain not just postmodern intertextuality, but artistic borrowing in works of *all* periods. Such works arise from a particular moment in the culture, and as such they are indebted to prior work, but in turn they shape that cultural moment; it is a reciprocal process.[19] Whatever the historical period, life and art inspire the imagination, which in turn inspires more art and more life, all flowing together into acts of creation.

Yet Woolf's image *does* prefigure postmodernism in one important sense. In her vision of the plunge, the artist does not emulate God or claim godlike status, creating *di nuovo*, as in Kearney's two earlier categories. Instead, the artist attempts finite offerings of renewal, understanding that there will be others and that the possibilities for art, like the forms of life itself, like text, are limitless.

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[19] I owe this observation to Charles Mee, at http://www.charlesmee.org/html/about.html.