

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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“I MUST NOT SETTLE INTO A FIGURE”:
 FRENCH PORTRAITS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF
 IN THE SHADOW OF PROUST AND JOYCE

ANNALISA FEDERICI
 Università degli Studi della Tuscia

This essay analyses two significant and often interrelated aspects of Virginia Woolf's reception in France throughout the 1920s and 1930s: its being essentially mediated by the connections that Bloomsbury maintained with Paris, and the fact that it was overshadowed by the fame of Proust and Joyce, who occupied pride of place on the French intellectual scene. Such comparison significantly contributed to the delineation of Woolf's public image abroad and seems to justify the author's unease about the circulation of a stereotypical portrait of herself, which would hinder her personal investigation into the fictional form.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, reception, France, Marcel Proust, James Joyce.

This essay analyses two significant and often interrelated aspects of Virginia Woolf's reception in France throughout the 1920s and 1930s: its being essentially mediated by the connections that Bloomsbury maintained with Paris mainly starting from the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1910, and the fact that it was overshadowed by the fame of Marcel Proust and, chiefly, by the genius of James Joyce, who occupied pride of place on the French intellectual scene, constantly remaining a standpoint for comparison. Ever since Jacques-Émile Blanche's 1927 interview for the periodical *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* – the first French article devoted to her – Woolf was 'textually' and 'visually' received in France. Literary and art critics, as well as practitioners of the visual arts, were equally responsible for the circulation of both her writing and her iconic image mainly through reviews and essays often sketched as verbal portraits or accompanied by pictures. Such dual reception is hardly surprising, considering that Paris was an important centre for the diffusion of Bloomsbury literary and visual aesthetics and its values of intimacy, friendship and pursue of aesthetic emotions¹. As Mary Ann Caws and Sarah Bird Wright have pointed out, the

¹ It is noteworthy that several scholars have drawn analogies between Bloomsbury artists and art critics, who undoubtedly had the merit of introducing visual experimentalism to Britain by adopting less groundbreaking techniques than the European *avant-gardes*, and the moderate experimentation propounded by *La Nouvelle Revue Française* and the men of letters gravitating towards it between the wars, especially André Gide and Jacques Rivière. On the similarities and the differences between the two intellectual communities, see for ex-

intellectual exchange between England and France at the time was both visual and verbal, “both public and private, including endless conversation, frequent performances for small and larger groups, published criticism, and two-way translation and travel”². Originated from these cultural contacts, Woolf’s presence from the mid-1920s onwards is such that, in Pierre-Éric Villeneuve’s words, “the work of Virginia Woolf remains a milestone on the French literary scene”³. It is well known that members of the Bloomsbury Group such as Clive Bell, Roger Fry and Lytton Strachey maintained fruitful communication with French intellectuals, and the connection culminated in their participation in the famous *Entretiens de Pontigny* in both 1923 and 1925⁴. As a critic and painter, Fry in particular was responsible for the sustained and intimate relations of the group as a whole with French art, literature and thought. It is precisely in the context of such exchanges that the acquaintance between Woolf and Charles Mauron – a translator, writer and close friend of Fry – originated. Mauron and Fry first met in 1919 and maintained contacts, until the latter’s death in 1934, to exchange ideas on aesthetics and philosophy, as well as to share a common interest in both visual and verbal arts. Moreover, Fry painted Mauron’s portrait,

ample D. Steel, *Les Strachey, Bloomsbury, Gide et le groupe de La Nouvelle Revue Française*, “Bulletin des Amis d’André Gide”, 22, 1989, 84, pp. 401-429. Furthermore, in their compelling analysis of the multiple connections between the Bloomsbury group and the French intellectual scene, Caws and Wright define *La Nouvelle Revue Française* as “the closest French entity corresponding to Bloomsbury during the era before and after World War I” (M.A. Caws – S.B. Wright, *Bloomsbury and France: Art and Friends*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, p. 8). They also remark that “Bloomsbury, of course, was less cohesive and had no journal, but its members shared with Gide, Copeau, and other French intellectuals a belief in permanent aesthetic values that transcended a particular trend. Gide was in fact often regarded as the French equivalent of the Bloomsbury intellectual”. *Ibidem*.

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³ P.-É. Villeneuve, *Virginia Woolf among Writers and Critics: The French Intellectual Scene*, in *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, M.A. Caws – N. Luckhurst ed., Continuum, London 2002, p. 19. Villeneuve’s chapter in this invaluable collection (an expanded version of the previously published P.-É. Villeneuve, *Virginia Woolf and the French Reader: An Overview*, “South Carolina Review”, 29, 1996, 1, pp. 109-121) is actually one of the few studies on the subject, which has received scant attention by scholars. In his essay Villeneuve laments that “over the years few critics have expressed interest in the relationship between Woolf and French culture and there have been no serious studies of the critical reception of her work in France despite Woolf’s influence as a novelist via translation, her importance to French feminism and the imprint she made on other aspects of cultural life there” (Id., *Virginia Woolf among Writers and Critics*, p. 19). As far as I am aware, the situation has not changed much since then, the impact on the French intellectual scene remaining a quite neglected area of Woolf studies. Possible exceptions are represented by other contributions to the same volume: M.A. Caws, *A Virginia Woolf, with a French Twist*, pp. 60-67; F. Pellán, *Translating Virginia Woolf into French*, pp. 54-59; C. Rodier, *The French Reception of Woolf: An État Présent of Études Woolfiennes*, pp. 39-53.

⁴ Pontigny was a twelfth-century Cistercian abbey near Auxerre, south-east of Paris, where eminent intellectuals from France and England gathered every summer for ten-day meetings, or *décades*, on a particular subject. Fry and Strachey took part in some of these sessions, as did Charles Mauron and André Gide. Other remarkable events concerning Woolf alone, besides the achievements of her Bloomsbury friends, testify to the author’s growing recognition in France, first and foremost her being awarded the prestigious *Fémmina Vie Heureuse* prize in 1928 for *To the Lighthouse*. Moreover, in 1935 Woolf, invited by her friend E.M. Forster, was involved in the *Congrès des Écrivains* which took place in London, where she was introduced to Clara Malraux, the future translator of *A Room of One’s Own*.

invited him to one of the intellectual gatherings at Pontigny (1925), and secured various commissions for him to translate the work of several British authors, among whom E.M. Forster. Being fluent in French, he also translated Mauron's books *Aesthetics and Psychology* and *The Nature of Beauty in Art and Literature* for the Hogarth Press, which attests that "particularly in the early decades of this century, there was a keen excitement about such linguistic exchanges"⁵. Mauron, who was called "Bloomsbury's man in France"⁶, occupies pride of place in Woolf's French connections because of his pioneering publication of the central section of *To the Lighthouse*, translated as *Le Temps Passe*. The excerpt came out in the Winter 1926 issue of the journal *Commerce*, that is a few months before the novel was published by the Hogarth Press (March 1927)⁷. The choice of this periodical, directed by Paul Valéry together with Léon-Paul Fargue and Valéry Larbaud, two among the greatest admirers of Joyce's genius, is particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, its aesthetic project "aimed to define a modern classicism"⁸, not dissimilar from the critical agenda of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, seems to be in line with Woolf's subsequent identification as a moderately experimental writer. On the other hand, Woolf's appearance in the review just a couple of years after a few fragments from *Ulysses* were published in a French translation by Larbaud and Auguste Morel (1924) undoubtedly sustained a confrontation between the two. Furthermore, Mauron – who later translated *Orlando* and *Flush*⁹ – was also invited

⁵ M.A. Caws – S.B. Wright, *Bloomsbury and France: Art and Friends*, p. 351.

⁶ Quoted in M.A. Caws, *A Virginia Woolf, with a French Twist*, p. 60.

⁷ For a comparison between the two texts see J.M. Haule, "Le Temps passe" and the Original Typescript: an Early Version of the "Time Passes" Section of *To the Lighthouse*, "Twentieth Century Literature", 29, 1983, 3, pp. 267-311. Haule considers Mauron's translation as standing "between the Holograph and the published editions [British and American] as a kind of intermediary text" (*ibid.*, p. 270), while Hussey and Shillingsburg count Woolf's typescript of *Time Passes* sent to Mauron as the second extant variant text of the central section of *To the Lighthouse* and Mauron's *Le Temps Passe* as the third (see M. Hussey – P. Shillingsburg, *The Composition, Revision, Printing and Publications of To the Lighthouse*, available at <http://www.woolfonline.com/?node=content/contextual/transcriptions&project=1&parent=45&taxa=47&content=6955&pos=2&search=hussey>, last accessed January 30, 2019). For a recent and illuminating study of various states of the text between Woolf's early drafts and simultaneous first editions of the novel's central section, along with the typescript which Woolf provided for Mauron's translation, see J. Goldman, *Translation, Secondary Rendering, and Textual Genesis; "Sharp-edged furniture", "Thorns" and "Charms": "Time Passes" between "Le Temps Passe" and "Time Passes"*, in *Trans-Woolf: Thinking Across Borders*, C. Davison – A.-M. Smith Di Biasio ed., Morlacchi Editore, Perugia 2017 (European Modernism, 2), pp. 97-117. For a stylistic comparison between Woolf's original and Mauron's translation, see C. Patey, *Gita al faro in abiti francesi. Virginia Woolf, Charles Mauron e "Commerce"*, in *I modernismi delle riviste. Tra Europa e Stati Uniti*, C. Patey – E. Esposito ed., Ledizioni, Milano 2017, pp. 153-166, which much relies on the now classical essay of G. Macchia, *I tempi di "Commerce"*, in *Il paradiso della ragione. Studi letterari sulla Francia*, Laterza, Bari 1964, pp. 430-440.

⁸ A.-R. Hermetet, *Modern Classicism: "La Nouvelle Revue Française" (1909-43) and "Commerce" (1924-32)*, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume III, Europe 1880-1940*, P. Brooker – S. Bru – A. Thacker – C. Weikop ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 117.

⁹ It is noteworthy that, from the pioneering attempt of *Le Temps Passe* onwards, other Woolf's works were gradually translated into French: *Orlando* and *Flush*, once again by Mauron, in 1931 and in 1935 respectively; *Mrs Dalloway*, with an introduction by André Maurois, and *To the Lighthouse* in 1929; *Night and Day* in 1933; *The Waves*, thanks to Marguerite Yourcenar, in 1937; *The Years* in 1938; *Jacob's Room* in 1942; *Between the Acts* in 1945; *The Voyage Out* in 1948; *A Room of One's Own* in 1951; *Moments of Being* and *Three Guineas* in

by Fry to give series of lectures on aesthetics, philosophy and French literature in England, one of which was chaired by Woolf. Virginia had the highest regard for Mauron as both a translator and an intellectual; in replying to his letters, that gave her encouragement, she expressed high praise and great respect for his opinion: “partly because you are French, – and also because you are so fine a thinker – I feel I could learn more from you about writing than from any English critic”¹⁰, she wrote him on 28 April 1940.

However, Mauron was not the only French intellectual Woolf met or corresponded with at that time. During a trip to Normandy in July 1927, she was introduced to the portrait painter and man of letters Jacques-Émile Blanche, who accompanied the account of his interview for the magazine *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* with a translation of Woolf’s short story *Kew Gardens* (by Georgette Camille) and of a few extracts from *To the Lighthouse*, interspersed in italics throughout his literary portrait¹¹. In this article, which has the merit of having introduced the English writer to French culture, Blanche reports Woolf’s words while also vividly depicting her person and manner of speaking, as might be expected from a painter. Such verbal sketch doubles the iconic Beresford portrait accompanying the piece:

How beautiful she is, the daughter of the very beautiful Mrs Ramsay! Her beauty is delicate and fragile; her face constantly moving just like her unsteady hands, with which she touches her forehead and her tangled hair, whose colour is between blond and grey. Her eyes, black and blue, are like haematite; her mouth is small, like a coloured spot, and a bit contracted, as if she were about to smile, or to cry¹².

It seems evident that, despite Woolf’s fear of seeing her public image harden into a stereotypical figure, which she would later express apropos Floris Delattre’s publication of a monograph devoted to her, in Blanche’s *entretien*, as Nicola Luckhurst and Alice Staveley have pointed out, “the anticipation of her passage into French culture comes with all the trappings of a celebrity promotion Woolf does her best to deflect. [...] So Woolf passes into European culture simultaneously as text and image, her art literally following her double

1977. See also, on this point, G. Brassard, *Woolf in Translation*, in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, J. Berman ed., Wiley, London 2016, pp. 441-452.

¹⁰ Quoted in M.A. Caws – S.B. Wright, *Bloomsbury and France: Art and Friends*, p. 281.

¹¹ Woolf, a translator herself and publisher of translated works at the Hogarth Press, seems to have been quite sensitive to Blanche transposing her works into another language, as she wrote in a letter of thanks following the interview (20 August 1927): “it would not be easy for me to tell you what pleasure your appreciation of my work gives me. I should have thought there was so much that was barbarous and offensive to a French ear – for which, as I told you, I have the highest respect – in what I do that I am surprised as well as gratified. However, as I read your article, I feel that I owe much, in every way, to your own imagination, which has the advantage not only of being French, but of being a painter’s. [...] I can’t help feeling a little guilty that you should have spent your time translating words of mine. They read much better to me in French than in English, and again I feel deeply grateful to you for trying to convey my words to French readers” (quoted in G.-P. Collet, *Jacques-Émile Blanche and Virginia Woolf*, “Comparative Literature”, 17, 1965, 1, pp. 74-75).

¹² J.-É. Blanche, *Entretien avec Virginia Woolf*, “Les Nouvelles Littéraires”, 252, 1927, pp. 1-2. Throughout the present essay, all translations from French are my own.

figuration – in picture and in print – as artist"¹³. While continuing the tradition of finding analogies with the art of painting in Woolf's work, started by critics praising her Impressionist style, Blanche mostly draws parallels with Bloomsbury's Post-Impressionist aesthetics:

The touches of colour here and there are of such a lightness, but also of such incredible precision and density, that they construct the picture, delineate it within an invisible contour. The Impressionist painters proceeded in just this manner. But you would purse your lips, Madam, if I described you as an Impressionist. One is more up-to-date than that in Bloomsbury. It is only by chance, perhaps, that you are a writer. [...] *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* are the work of a painter¹⁴.

The interviewer repeatedly highlights visual elements and further qualifies Woolf as both painter and poet, as an intellectual outstanding in her originality:

This poet, this painter, who is attentive to the "sad quotidian", is the most amusing talker, full of scintillating humour and fun, just like Laforgue. [...] Your revolution in the art of narration does not involve the suppression of the conventional role of the author, who is the omniscient, all-seeing God. There remains the novelty and the originality of the "tempo", as Charles du Bos would say, and the fact that you are a painter¹⁵.

Furthermore, characteristic of this *entretien* is also the co-presence of another exemplary modernist – Proust, whose figure looms large over the conversation. The comparison is introduced for the first time by Blanche; before meeting Woolf, he imagines possible questions and topics for the interview: "what will we talk about? Is there a key to her novel? Are characters real? Like those of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*? In Proust there is only one key for all keyholes"¹⁶. Quite surprisingly, it is the author herself who later takes up Proust, who had been Blanche's friend, as subject for conversation. In fact, the insistence with which Woolf directs the talk towards her French contemporary, while the interviewer asks about her own writing, tends to obscure discussion of her work:

One would like to discuss her work with her, but she asks about Marcel Proust and talks about French literature; she enjoys nothing more than reading our authors and incidentally creates a very flattering picture of our country. "What was Proust like in his youth? Tell me, tell me. How did he make an entry into high society? Society must have understood little of what he wrote?" [...] There remained many questions which I wished to ask Mrs Woolf about her writing methods. But she pressed me to tell her more about Marcel Proust, about French matters¹⁷.

¹³ N. Luckhurst – A. Staveley, *European Reception Studies*, in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, A. Snaith ed., Palgrave Macmillan, London 2007, p. 238.

¹⁴ J.-É. Blanche, *Entretien avec Virginia Woolf*, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Significantly, the author of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is not the only extraneous presence in the conversation. While discussing the fragmentary aspect of the *Time Passes* section of *To the Lighthouse*, Blanche makes reference to another frequent standpoint for comparison when it comes to judging Woolf's modernist experimentation, that is James Joyce, whose style was widely perceived to be much more obscure and cryptic: "what happens between this first part and the second? Nine short pieces make up this second part, entitled *Time Passes*. These pieces remind one of Joyce. Less difficult, but just as disconcerting if you are not accustomed to Mrs Woolf's way of thinking"¹⁸. In light of these considerations, it is particularly remarkable that in a later article devoted to *Orlando*, published under the title of *Un Nouveau Roman de Virginia Woolf* in the same journal *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (February 1929), Blanche does not share the opinion of those critics who had spoken of Proust's influence on Woolf¹⁹. On the contrary, to his mind she remains fundamentally English, her style being deeply rooted in the great English classics, and manifesting a genuine and acute perception of female psychology: "Virginia Woolf is English to the marrow; whatever they say of her devotion to Proust, it remains, in my opinion, her own creation: feminine psychology which is indebted to nothing whatsoever. Her language has indeed its roots in the classics of her native country"²⁰. Nevertheless, this article – featuring again one of Woolf's iconic pictures and a few translated passages merging with the critical commentary – represents on the whole a particularly illustrative French portrait of our British writer, shaped by a contemporary critic highlighting her outstanding position within the literary tradition, as well as the importance of translation issues in transnational cultural exchanges.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Such critical opinion is still very much diffused among contemporary scholars. See on this point E.M. Shore, *Virginia Woolf, Proust, and Orlando*, "Comparative Literature", 31, 1979, 3, pp. 232-245; D.R. Leonard, *Proust and Woolf, Ruskin and Roger Fry: Modernist Visual Dynamics*, "Comparative Literature Studies", 18, 1981, 3, pp. 333-343; C.J. Mares, *Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective*, "Comparative Literature", 41, 1989, 4, pp. 327-359; E. McArthur, *Following Swann's Way: To the Lighthouse*, "Comparative Literature", 56, 2004, 4, pp. 331-346; P. Lewis, *Proust, Woolf, and Modern Fiction*, "Romanic Review", 99, 2008, 1-2, pp. 77-86; Y. Rojas, *Proustian Reminiscence in To the Lighthouse*, "Studies in the Novel", 41, 2009, 4, pp. 451-467.

²⁰ J.-É. Blanche, *Un Nouveau Roman de Virginia Woolf*, "Les Nouvelles Littéraires", 331, 1929, p. 9. Though not particularly enthusiastic, this article occasioned a letter that Woolf sent to Blanche on 8 March 1929, in which she expressed again her gratitude and great admiration for French criticism: "a friend of mine has just sent me a copy of your article on *Orlando*. It is more than good of you to have written it. I think this is the only, or among the three only intelligent reviews I have had, and bears out my theory that the French carry a much sharper pen in their hands than we do" (quoted in G.-P. Collet, *Jacques-Émile Blanche and Virginia Woolf*, p. 77). A couple of years later Woolf wrote again to Blanche to show her own appreciation for his praise of *The Waves*: "I am delighted to hear from you again, and particularly glad that you liked *The Waves*. [...] It is very good indeed of you to interest yourself once more in my books. I always feel that I owe a great deal of the interest that the French take in my work to you. A professor Delattre has actually written a book on me!" (*ibid.*, p. 78). As Collet has pointed out, "short as their correspondence was, it represents an episode of the literary relationship between the two countries that deserves our attention. [...] Blanche was responsible for the diffusion of her books in France. He paved the way for the recognition of her genius by some of the most perspicacious critics: Edmond Jaloux, Charles Du Bos, André Maurois, Louis Gillet, and a few others" (*ibid.*, p. 80).

The aspects delineated so far paved the way for future reception. In most French reviews and critical appraisals – either favourable, such as Jean-Jacques Mayoux's (1928, 1930), André Maurois's (1929) and Floris Delattre's (1931, 1932), or hostile, as those by Paul Dottin (1930), Gabriel Marcel (1932) and Louis Gillet (1929) – Proust remains, along with Joyce, a standpoint for comparison, thus deeply influencing the portrait of Woolf drawn by French intellectuals. This, on the one hand, further demonstrates that her work was of great interest to leading writers, critics and translators in France, while on the other seems to explain the fact that she became increasingly wary of being typecast abroad. Mayoux's review of *To the Lighthouse* for the *Revue Anglo-Américaine* (June 1928), entitled *Sur un Livre de Virginia Woolf*, praises the novelist and "the delicate beauty of her art [...] a work so full and so luminous that one is tempted to appreciate it for itself and to explain it by means of itself"²¹. In spite of this claim and the general tone of warm approval, the comparison with such contemporaries as Proust and Joyce seems to be unavoidable. Following a prevalent critical opinion, Mayoux judges Woolf's formal innovation, if measured against her fellow modernists' experimentalism, as moderate and characterised by a gentle touch, which is identified throughout the piece as typically feminine: "Virginia Woolf reminds one of Joyce and Proust, of Giraudoux and Duhamel. Her fictional method is in some ways close to all the recent techniques, but it is dominated by her sensibility and grace, which are unique"²². According to another recurring motif, which would become almost commonplace among scholars, her work is defined as "essentially a lyrical novel"²³. Woolf's visual technique spontaneously renders the psychological sphere and her lyrical touch is likened to the stroke of a painter: "*To the Lighthouse* is a long contemplation, a harmonious unwinding of images and emotions, of sentiments and thoughts in an interior world as sweetly luminous as a painting by Vermeer"²⁴. Perhaps because Woolf was regularly associated with Bloomsbury's Post-Impressionist aesthetics, propounded by Clive Bell and Roger Fry raving mad about Cézanne, the parallel with the art of painting is reformulated towards the end of the essay, where the critic remarks:

I have compared her with Vermeer; but Vermeer is too straightforward; it is rather of Cézanne that she should remind us, Cézanne taking his forms from Nature, and imposing his form upon them, making them enter into a purely personal composition. She follows the movements, the rhythms of life; she transcribes them with an intense reality; but she integrates them into the movement and the rhythm of her thoughts and thus assigns new values to them beyond their original value, and makes symbols of them²⁵.

²¹ J.-J. Mayoux, *Sur un Livre de Virginia Woolf*, "Revue Anglo-Américaine", 5, 1928, pp. 424-438. Quoted in R. Majumdar – A. McLaurin ed., *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, London and New York 2003, p. 214.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

Through an analogy with the visual arts, Mayoux praises Woolf's merging of realism and symbolism, of solidity and transiency, of objective form and subjective vision. Furthermore, he is particularly perceptive in asserting that Woolf's narrative method consists in creating a sort of osmosis between the inner and the outer world or "telling from the inside", where "nothing is purely objective, altogether outside the characters"²⁶. Such indirect style is quite distant, in his opinion, from our plunging into the characters' minds which is typical of Joyce's interior monologue: "it holds us at a distance from those interior lives which it allows us to see only across a transparency; instead of, as in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, our being thrown into the very centre of a consciousness which we see teeming around us, monstrously"²⁷.

The comparison with other eminent figures on the coeval intellectual scene became a hallmark in many French discussions of Woolf's work. For instance, in a fair-minded review titled *À Propos d'Orlando de Virginia Woolf*, which appeared in the literary magazine *Europe*, Mayoux makes reference to the Bergsonian notion of time in the novel²⁸. In a later essay entitled *Le Roman de l'Espace et du Temps: Virginia Woolf*, published in the *Revue Anglo-Américaine* (April 1930), the discerning critic delves more deeply into Woolf's focus on inner life: "she is entirely dedicated to spiritual things, to understanding and expressing profound realities, which are at the same time intimate and universal. [...] Virginia Woolf's major concerns are life and the soul, and she is courageous enough not to shrink from highly charged words"²⁹. The attention paid to the depths of human character determines again a comparison with Proust's art:

The German critic Curtius points out, as characteristic of Proust, a similar feeling of the way in which of all values, physical and moral, are relative to distance (which is by this very description almost identified with time). [...] What particularly distinguished Virginia Woolf's approach is the importance she gives to the non-rectified perspective, to its bizarre errors, the even-handed justice of its ironies, the unique impartiality of its indifference, and the artistic value of this momentary triumph of appearance [...] ³⁰.

However, when discussing *Orlando* in particular, the reference to Proust is essentially by contrast, owing to a radical difference in tone arising from a dissimilar treatment of time in relation to character's psychology:

Orlando is the portrait of an imagination, the symbolic painting of duration considered as an image store, and of the way in which the past reappears in the present. *Orlando* is in one sense a *Time Regained*, with a radical difference, a difference in

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

²⁸ J.-J. Mayoux, *À Propos d'Orlando de Virginia Woolf*, "Europe", 85, 1930, pp. 117-122.

²⁹ J.-J. Mayoux, *Le Roman de l'Espace et du Temps: Virginia Woolf*, "Revue Anglo-Américaine", 7, 1930, pp. 312-326. Quoted in R. Majumdar – A. McLaurin ed., *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, p. 246.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

tone. The painful tension in Proust's work comes from the anguish which passing time causes him and the importance he attaches to regaining it. [...] It is here that I see the most striking comparison between *Orlando* and *Time Regained*, two very dissimilar works. If Proust insists so much in all his work, on the summoning of an image at sensation's bidding, it is because he feels that in this way all real images arise, both those which come from the biographical past and those from what one might call the poetic past³¹.

While a critic like André Maurois does not fail to compare Woolf's aesthetic choices in depicting her characters' psychology to the efforts made by Impressionist painters to render the light in their *plain air* paintings³², persistent allusions – by this time familiar – to Proust (another Impressionist writer, though not a 'pure' one according to Maurois) and Joyce (an impossible model to follow, in his opinion) were quite frequent among other influential commentators too. In Paul Dottin's not totally appreciative article for the April 1930 issue of the *Revue de France*, titled *Les Sortilèges de Virginia Woolf*, the analogy with Proust serves to discuss the peculiarity of Woolf's work, which can be fully recognised only by a restricted public: "Mrs Woolf is no prophet in her own country: only the admirers of Dorothy Richardson and Marcel Proust appreciate her – those who regard themselves as members of the intelligentsia and whom the ordinary sensible man has dubbed 'highbrows'"³³. Dottin criticises *Mrs Dalloway* for what he sees as a lack of form and feelings, the artificiality of its interior monologue and the abuse of the flashback technique. Similarly, in his opinion *Orlando* appears to be full of anachronisms and to leave "the impression of something incomplete, disappointing and imperfect"³⁴. Even so, the critic argues that "yet Mrs Woolf's novels are worth the trouble involved in understanding them. In the first place, her language is very beautiful, as sober and clear as the thought is complex and obscure [...]. Secondly, Mrs Woolf has talent, a peculiar talent which delights in symbolism and reverie"³⁵. This article shows again that the lyrical and symbolical quality of Woolf's prose is a recurrent element in French critical appraisals of her *oeuvre*, as is the contrast with Joyce's complex and cryptic style: "*Orlando* marks a considerable effort towards clarity, an almost complete renunciation of the Joycean pattern. If she keeps the originality of her form and thought whilst renouncing her taste for fantasmagorias and mirages, Mrs Woolf can write an immortal book"³⁶. Similarly, Gabriel Marcel's unfavourable review of *The Waves* published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (entitled *Les Vagues, par Virginia Woolf*, February 1932) laments the awkward use of six fragmentary interior monologues in the novel, which constantly break off and interrupt each other. In the final section, Bernard's soliloquy abruptly

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-250.

³² Cf. A. Maurois, *Première Rencontre avec Virginia Woolf*, "Les Nouvelles Littéraires", 327, 1929, p. 1.

³³ P. Dottin, *Les Sortilèges de Virginia Woolf*, "Revue de France", 10, 1930, pp. 556-566. Quoted in R. Majumdar – A. McLaurin ed., *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, p. 251.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

reveals his life and personal identity as indistinguishable from those of the other characters, a faulty aspect, in Marcel's view, allowing comparison with Joyce:

Would it not have taken an infinitely more subtle art to direct our attention indirectly, and not in this crudely explicit manner, to this retrospective knowledge? Actually, it appears to me, that Mrs Virginia Woolf's technique, like that of Joyce, (though in a rather different sense) implies a radical misconception of the very conditions of attention, or, what amounts to the same thing, a naive belief in the changeable nature of these conditions³⁷.

Other weaknesses, on the other hand, remind the reviewer of Proust:

What disturbs me in Mrs Woolf's book is the confusion, perhaps a systematic and fully conscious one, which she makes between the purely sensory (something which lies within the range of biography) and the apprehension, in flashes, of a world which would transcend biography. One meets again here the ambiguity, transposed, to be sure, but essentially the same, which is at the heart of Proust's work³⁸.

Hostile reviews generally seem to justify Woolf's concerns about the dissemination of her own image as an author both at home and abroad, but one in particular is a case in point. In his article for *La Revue des Deux Mondes* entitled *L'Orlando de Mme Virginia Woolf* (April 1929), the renowned critic Louis Gillet attacks Woolf's novel, and most of all her failure to acknowledge *Ulysses*'s obvious – in his opinion – influence on it: “in her preface, the author has good reason to cite [...] the large family of English humorists, from whose works her book directly derives: Defoe, Swift, Sterne, De Quincey. But why has she omitted Mr Joyce, the last and one of the greatest of this powerful assembly? This omission is unjust. If *Ulysses* did not exist, Mrs Virginia Woolf would not have to justify having imitated it”³⁹. Gillet interprets Woolf's disregard for Joyce as an evident manifestation of her anxiety of influence concerning a work that she clearly imitated, and whose greatness – equalling its ‘monstrousness’ – cannot be denied: “whatever else one thinks of *Ulysses*, this strange book created a literary event, an attempted *coup d'état*. *Ulysses* attempts to substitute the conventions of the novel – attention to plot, character analysis, descriptions of manners and place – with an entirely new mode of representation. [...] Taking it as a work of art, *Ulysses* is perhaps but a monster”⁴⁰. It is particularly remarkable that Gillet's praise of Joyce's masterpiece was articulated, quite unexpectedly, just a few years after a fiercely negative review written for the same periodical in 1925, where he had dismissed the book as a hollow and tasteless joke⁴¹. However, in this article on *Orlando* – actually “the first place in

³⁷ G. Marcel, *Les Vagues, par Virginia Woolf*, “La Nouvelle Revue Française”, 221, 1932, pp. 303-308. Quoted in R. Majumdar – A. McLaurin ed., *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, p. 297.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ L. Gillet, *L'Orlando de Mme Virginia Woolf*, “La Revue des Deux Mondes”, 53, 1929, p. 230.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁴¹ L. Gillet, *Du Côté de Chez Joyce*, “La Revue des Deux Mondes”, 28, 1925, pp. 686-697.

print where Gillet registered a positive appraisal of *Ulysses*⁴² – his appreciation seems to be chiefly aimed at condemning, by contrast, Woolf's novel. If *Ulysses* is a (now admirable) "monster", *Orlando*, on the other hand, is not so wild and savage:

One sees that it must be difficult to produce a similar book and make it presentable to the world in a manner that is both honest and decent. However, that is exactly what Mrs Virginia Woolf has succeeded in doing. To some extent she has tamed the bear of Mr Joyce, she has educated it, cleaned it, combed it, scented it, and curled its hair. In short, she has pampered it so thoroughly that the mighty animal is left looking like a pampered poodle and is as soft as a lamb⁴³.

Gillet accuses Woolf of domesticating Joyce's 'savage animal' into something delicate, impalpable, evanescent and poetical – in a word, feminine. In her fiction, "everything is always elegant, suggested rather than described, inexplicably evoked in the musical atmosphere typical of a reverie, in which ordinary things turn into poetical motifs"⁴⁴. As the critic adds,

Nothing could be more different from Mr Joyce's style, nothing could be more delicate after such an indigestible mass. [...] And yet it is not doubtful that it is the same art, almost the same processes, skilfully transposed, adapted, modulated, feminised. Mrs Virginia Woolf could never have written her minor masterpiece *To the Lighthouse* if she had not been thinking constantly of *Ulysses*. And seeing the one derive from the other, one cannot help but admire this charming female taste [...]⁴⁵.

Here Gillet asserts a recurrent belief according to which Woolf's formal innovation as a woman writer represents a moderate, attenuated version of the much more audacious novelistic experimentation of her male contemporaries. He bluntly claims that Woolf's talent is essentially derived from her (mostly male) predecessors, and that her work is just a "minor masterpiece" if compared with Joyce's bulky monster-novel, to which she is immensely indebted: "it is easy to see that Mrs Virginia Woolf's works – *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* – show the mark of James Joyce's genius"⁴⁶. As Sam Slote puts it, "according to Gillet's logic, Woolf has written a feminine novel because she is a woman. Gender determines, or engenders, genre"⁴⁷. Nevertheless, it seems noteworthy that, exactly as he had completely changed his mind about Joyce's *oeuvre*, Gillet reformulated his opinion of Woolf in a later review of *Flush* published in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* as *Virginia Woolf et le Conte Philosophique*⁴⁸. In this unprejudiced piece of criticism, Gillet makes passing refer-

⁴² S. Slote, *Gillet lit le Joyce dans la Woolf: Genre in Orlando and Ulysses*, "Journal of Modern Literature", 27, 2004, 4, p. 28.

⁴³ L. Gillet, *L'Orlando de Mme Virginia Woolf*, pp. 220-221.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁴⁷ S. Slote, *Gillet lit le Joyce dans la Woolf*, p. 29.

⁴⁸ L. Gillet, *Virginia Woolf et le Conte Philosophique*, "Les Nouvelles Littéraires", 641, 1935, p. 6.

ence to the humoristic tradition of Sterne and Fielding, but no discriminatory comparison with Joyce or other more or less canonical writers is drawn.

Floris Delattre is widely recognised as the author of the first monograph on Woolf published in France, *Le Roman Psychologique de Virginia Woolf* (1932), an extract of which had already appeared in the *Revue Anglo-Américaine* as *La Durée Bergsonienne dans le Roman de Virginia Woolf*⁴⁹. Delattre's study not only paved the way for the future development of Woolfian criticism, but also significantly contributed to the delineation of her public image abroad. These early stages in the creation of what Brenda Silver has more recently called a "Virginia Woolf icon"⁵⁰ were viewed with a mixture of suspicion, anxiety and delight by the author, as evinced in a diary entry for 1932: "two books on Virginia Woolf have just appeared in France and in Germany. This is a danger signal. I must not settle into a figure"⁵¹. Delattre's analysis, mainly focusing on the Bergsonian notion of time and self in Woolf's work, is mainly relevant to our purposes for the analogies drawn between Woolf's focus on individualistic experience as a mode of psychic ontology on the one hand, and Joycean metaphysics or Proustian involuntary memory on the other. Delattre assuredly affirms that Woolf is very much familiar with Proust's *oeuvre*, which she read for the first time in French in 1922, and that a significant role in such growing acquaintance was played by Clive Bell's monograph on *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* entitled *Proust*, published in 1928 by the Hogarth Press. Moreover, both novelists rely on an analogous theory of memory allowing them to reject the traditional notion of personality as univocal and self-contained, in favour of a vision of it as a compound of fleeting states, perceptions and emotions. According to Delattre, in constructing characters as multiple selves entirely out of transient psychological moments, and in reproducing the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms"⁵² falling upon the consciousness, Woolf unequivocally follows Proust's model. Despite the merit of integrating the aesthetic modes of both her male contemporaries in her psychological prose, which Delattre assimilates to French novelistic aesthetics in general and to Proust's visionary sentence in particular, Woolf's work ultimately suffers such comparison and, according to the French critic, "has neither the grandeur nor the architectural solidity of certain works by male authors, nor that balance of the creative faculties which assures endurance"⁵³. It is remarkable that, in spite of the generally appreciative tone of this study, here Woolf's achievement is underrated on the grounds of her supposed inability to shape a monumental work, or to stand comparison with her male contemporaries as to the creation of an immense chronicle of contemporary life and of human nature⁵⁴. Perhaps such commonplace, reminiscent of Charles Tansley's dictum "women can't paint, women can't

⁴⁹ F. Delattre, *La Durée Bergsonienne dans le Roman de Virginia Woolf*, "Revue Anglo-Américaine", 9, 1931, pp. 97-108.

⁵⁰ B. Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999.

⁵¹ A. Olivier Bell – A. McNeillie ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. IV, Penguin, London 1983, p. 85.

⁵² V. Woolf, *Modern Fiction*, in *Collected Essays*, vol. II, L. Woolf ed., Chatto & Windus, London 1966, p. 106.

⁵³ F. Delattre, *Le Roman Psychologique de Virginia Woolf*, Vrin, Paris 1932, p. 255.

⁵⁴ See on this point F. Lenne, *James Joyce et Louis Gillet*, in *Cahier de l'Herne: James Joyce*, J. Aubert – F. Senn ed., L'Herne, Paris 1986, pp. 151-175, which is an interesting analysis of Joyce's reception in France also showing how Woolf's originality was overshadowed by the Joycean revolution of the 1920s and 1930s.

write"⁵⁵ in *To the Lighthouse*, was precisely what Woolf feared about "settling into a figure": hardening into one sort of profile – that of the canonical author – would hinder her flexibility about writing, or prevent her from being on a par with contemporary, acclaimed men of letters who were widely recognised as leading exponents of the modernist novel. It is easy to understand that, in Woolf's comment about the publication of Delattre's monograph quoted above, the mistrust is heightened by the loss of control on one's work occasioned by the 'passage' into another language and culture. Moreover, it foreshadows critical judgements that are still much in vogue nowadays, according to which Woolf is perceived as less experimental an author than Joyce, or as writing in the wake of Proust.

In conclusion, most of the reviews, critical articles and monographs on Woolf published in France throughout the 1920s and 1930s show the growing affirmation of the public image of a distinguished writer whose refined, elegant pose – and prose – not even detractors could fail to recognise. All these verbal sketches foreground a visual element which seems to be invariably related to her person, testifying to her close association with the Post-Impressionist aesthetics of those Bloomsbury artists who were primarily responsible for the dissemination of her image abroad. The recurring traits in these French portraits of Woolf – whether positive, such as her lyricism, symbolism and skilfulness in depicting inner life, or negative, first and foremost her inability to stand on a par with great male geniuses – seem to justify her unease about the circulation of a stereotypical image of herself, which would hinder her personal investigation into the form of the novel. Woolf's fear of "settling into a figure" thus proves to be reasonable in a critical context in which the ethereal quality and delicate beauty of her woman's sentence is often interpreted as impermanence and lack of solidity, and in which her controlled formal experimentation inevitably abides in the shadow of her great contemporaries' achievements.

⁵⁵ V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, The Hogarth Press, London 1927, p. 35.

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