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The “Obstinate resistance” of Woolf’s short story

Christine Reynier

- 1 I have often wondered why, although I have regularly gone back to Virginia Woolf's short stories, I still feel I do not know them very well. This is of course no other than the secret charm of Woolf's short stories: they are so hermetic or puzzling that one cannot help re-reading them; they are so varied that one keeps forgetting them; they are so challenging that one feels bound to delve into them again and again. They offer “the obstinate resistance” (Woolf 1988: 158) of the text that Woolf loves in Sir Thomas Browne's writings and that she analyses in her essay “Reading”. The military metaphor of resistance might suggest that once the fortress of the text has been assaulted, it will surrender to the reader. However, the author makes it clear that such is not the case. The reader she depicts in her essay is not meant “to strip a whole page of its sentences and crush their meaning out in one grasp” (158); on the contrary, “the obstinate resistance” of *Urn Burial* “at first trips us and blinds us” (158); so that reading may not be synonymous with deciphering the text which does not yield its meaning easily: “[w]e must stop, go back, try out this way and that, and proceed at a foot's pace” (158). The type of reading Woolf advocates is a difficult, slow, and demanding process comparable to “mounting only a solemn and obstinate donkey instead of going up to town by an electric train” (158). It is the very type of reading Woolf's own short stories require.
- 2 The route the reader must follow when reading Browne and Hackluyt is a long and circuitous one in which his or her “attention wanders. [...] It floats far out at sea. It is soothed almost to sleep” (148).
- 3 What Woolf describes here is what Roland Barthes calls “reading looking up”,¹ letting the reader's imagination go on with the writer's work, letting the reader enter the text through its loopholes. Such creative reading can only be induced by a text “rich, [...], with more than one can grasp at any single reading” (149); and instead of being linear, it consists of “repeated shocks” (152) that come at irregular intervals, like “[t]he little irregular beam of light” that shows the children their way during the moth-hunting scene evoked in the same essay. Reading has thus to do with seeing rather than

meaning, with overcoming blindness and seeing at intervals an "unknown world" (150), a world of magic such as the one the children discover at night with great "excitement" (151) in the story embedded in the essay and which functions as an allegory of reading while enacting, through its apparent unrelatedness to the reflections on the subject, the "obstinate resistance" of the text to reading. Reading therefore also means to have access to the "glory of the moment" (152) in which one experiences the writer's gift and generosity: ² "[o]ne is conscious all the time that Sir Thomas was never paid a penny for his prose. He is free since it is the offering of his own bounty to give us as little or as much as he chooses" (159).

- 4 Woolf's short stories certainly require the type of reading the author evokes in her essay. Confronting the "obstinate resistance" of the text, reading through a series of irregular shocks that call for a "shock-receiving capacity" (Woolf 1981, 83) akin to the writer's, is undoubtedly a demanding process, all the more so since the texts are short and offer little narrative help, and this may account for the relative critical neglect of Woolf's short stories. Yet for those who are ready to play the game and submit themselves to the experience of reading these short stories, they may well find it rewarding. Indeed, if writing is, as Woolf tells us about Thomas Browne, a generous process, an "offering" made by the writer to the reader, it induces a similar "desire to impart" in the reader:

But why beauty should have the effect upon us that it does, the strange serene confidence that it inspires in us, none can say. Most people have tried and perhaps one of the invariable properties of beauty is that it leaves in the mind a desire to impart. Some offering we must make; some act we must dedicate, if only to move across the room and turn the rose in the jar. (159)

- 5 This is at least what all the contributors to this special issue have experienced and the gifts they make are the essays presented here. Some break new ground, some exemplify enduring trends in Woolfian criticism; some are the work of distinguished scholars, others of younger readers. They all shed a different light on Woolf's short stories, which they analyse either in groups or separately, illuminating them and thus bringing to the fore texts that tend to be relegated to the margins of Woolf's work.
- 6 In "Reading", Woolf further shows in a metaphorical way how an English reader, solitary as he or she may be in his or her own private library, necessarily reads a book with the English literary tradition in mind: "If I looked down at my book I could see Keats and Pope behind him, and then Dryden and Sir Thomas Browne—hosts of them merging in the mass of Shakespeare, behind whom, if one peered long enough, some shapes of men in pilgrims' dress emerged, Chaucer perhaps" (142); and the English history as well, thoughts of "the red coats of the invincible.
- 7 British soldiers"(141) and Empire never being far from his or her mind. In other words, Woolf's reader is unavoidably grounded in a specific literary tradition as well as steeped in a specific socio-historical context. Such a conception of reading implicitly suggests that the reading of a text is never fixed and is bound to be renewed with every reader, his or her nationality, his or her sociological or historical background. It indirectly begs for the "cosmopolitan" readings of Woolf's short stories that are offered here and which come from readers scattered all over the world and living in different geographical, cultural, and historical contexts, those of England but also of France, Italy, and Belgium, of the United States and Taiwan—all of them entering at times into a dialogue with each other.

- 8 In several articles, Woolf's short story is analysed not as experimental ground for her novels as has too often been done, but as a form of many commitments, whether ethical or political, feminist or historical. Elke D'hoker, in an exploration of imagination in some of Woolf's short stories, shows that, although it has rarely been used so far, ethical criticism is particularly relevant to Woolf's writings. She thus asks new questions and follows a new trend that I also illustrated in a recent article, "Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story". Reading "Holborn Viaduct"—a hardly ever mentioned sketch—"The Man Who Loved His Kind", and "Solid Objects", and basing his analysis on Adorno, Charles Sumner provides a most challenging analysis of Woolf's use of literary beauty as a powerful socio-critical form of commitment. Kate Henderson offers an extremely perceptive and innovative analysis of Woolf's writing and reading praxis in "The Duchess and the Jeweller" and shows that this short story, so often analysed as an anti-Semitic one, deals in fact with the consumers' practices that are the readers' of *Harper's Bazaar* in which it was initially published.
- 9 Anne Besnault-Levita offers a rigorous and most stimulating reading of "The Introduction" and "Together and Apart", two of the Mrs Dalloway's Party short story cycle, in terms of conversation and in the light of pragmatics and feminist narratology. Drawing on Woolf's own experience and on the historical exclusion of women from university, Ann McClellan examines five short stories trying to appraise Woolf's solutions to the problem of women's education. Her cultural studies and feminist methodologies offer a good example of a type of reading that has been prominent in Woolfian criticism and which is here applied to Woolf's short stories. In a challenging reading of "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn", Leena Kore-Schroder takes us away from a feminist reading of the short story to questions of land and ownership in the Middle Ages, unearthing unexpected connections between Rosamond Merridew and a major historian of the time, and delineating in the end in perfectly new terms the type of history in which Woolf grounds her characters.
- 10 The second set of articles, which offers genetic readings and readings based on philosophy or scientific theories, also takes us beyond experimentalism. Comparing first 1919 edition of *Kew Gardens* with the typescript and reading the short story in the light of the early diaries and Deleuze, Oliver Taylor comes up with a stimulating and challenging analysis of Woolf's imagination as nomadic while Frank Stevenson, who focuses on Woolf's aesthetics of disproportion and discontinuity, offers a reading of "Kew Gardens" in the light of both informative and chaos-complexity theory and especially, of Michel Serres's writings, which renews our understanding of the short story. In an innovative genetic analysis of the different draft versions of "The Searchlight", Laura Marcus shows that the telescope scene lies at the center of a network of connections both with Woolf's art and life and argues that it is central to Woolf's understanding of memory, to her self-representations and above all, to her "scene-making". As for Teresa Prudente, she renews the reading of Woolf's short stories by looking at them through the lens of Ricoeur's concept of duration.
- 11 Finally, interart analogies are examined in the last three papers which focus on music, painting, cinema, and Woolf's short story. Illustrating Woolf's saying that "All great writers are great colorists, just as they are musicians into the bargain" ("Walter Sickert"), Liliane Louvel goes on with her exploration of the sister arts and in a fine analysis of painting and writing in Woolf's short stories, redefines the visual as a critical tool with which to open "the eye of the text" while Emilie Crapoulet, in an

attempt to understand the relation between language and music, gives an innovative reading of "The String Quartet" as an assessment of the power of music and an exploration of the way in which it makes meaning. While one of the first critics to have written on Woolf, Winifred Holtby, remarked on the cinematic qualities of Woolf's short stories, few critics have followed suit.³ This is what Abbie Garrington begins to explore in her analysis of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" which draws a parallel between this text and "The Cabinet of Dr Caligari", a film Woolf analyses in her essay "The Cinema".

- 12 Because Woolf's short stories offer an "obstinate resistance" to reading, they keep haunting the reader and lend themselves to endless renewable readings, as the essays presented here testify. It is true that quite a number of articles have been devoted to individual short stories but they are scattered in various journals, except for those collected by Benzel and Hoberman in *Trespassing Boundaries. Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction*, "the first collection of essays to be published that is devoted solely to Woolf's shorter fiction" (Benzel and Hoberman XV) and a most valuable addition to the only two full-length studies of Woolf's short stories published so far, Baldwin's *Virginia Woolf. A Study of the Short Fiction* and Skrbic's *Wild Outbursts of Freedom. Reading Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction*. In such a context, this special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English*, the second collection only of essays to be published that is devoted solely to Woolf's short stories, is particularly welcome.

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NOTES

1. Barthes writes about "lire en levant la tête" (Barthes 33).
 2. On this subject, see (Reynier 2007b).
 3. See especially chapter VI: "Cinematograph" (Holtby 116-136).
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Professor of British Literature at the University of Montpellier III. She founded the Société d'Etudes Woolfiennes in 1996 and chaired it until 2004. She has published extensively on Woolf as well as on other major modernist writers, edited books and journals on Woolf (*Virginia Woolf. Le pur et l'impur*, eds. C. Bernard & C. Reynier, Rennes: P. U. R., 2002; *Insights into the Legacy of Bloomsbury. With Unpublished Essays and Memoirs by Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf*, ed. with an introduction by C. Reynier, *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* 62, octobre 2005), taken part in *The British Companion to the Short Story* project and published in the *V. Woolf Miscellany*; she has also written a monograph on Jeanette Winterson. She is currently completing a full-length study of Woolf's short stories.