

Virginia Woolf among the philosophers

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1. **T**here are innumerable ways in which the work of Virginia Woolf might be placed in the “company” of philosophers. It might, for example, be positioned in relation to the field of philosophy; or it might be juxtaposed to particular modes of philosophical thought. But if this much is obvious to her readers, it also begs to be reformulated as a question. How does Woolf’s work think? And what is it about her texts that makes this question a possibility? These were among the questions that an international conference, held in partnership with the “Collège International de Philosophie” at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris in March 2012, set out to unravel. To put Woolf’s work in “the company” of philosophers, to deploy the open, relatively imprecise, but deliberately non-hierarchical, determinations suggested by the preposition “among” (the valences of which Rachel Bowlby interrogates in detail) was enough to institute a critical premise that would authorise a plurality of approaches, but also a particular historical take. It allowed us to step back and reappraise the conversations between literary texts and philosophical discourses that have always been present in the critical and philosophical reception of Virginia Woolf’s work. But this problematic also had a more specific object, one that made the occasion unique: to investigate the regime of thought proper to Woolf’s poetics, not so much as an abstract system, but through its processes and their objects. This aim had two elements. First, the conference wanted to give proper recognition to the existing body of critical work dedicated to defining and articulating these questions. In particular, the participants would like emphasise the special place in that tradition occupied by the work of S. P. Rosenbaum, who died in May 2012. He had been enthusiastic about the conference, but sadly his final illness meant he was not able to be present. We would like to express our gratitude to his wife for giving us permission to publish the paper he would have given. Second, the conference sought to rethink Woolf criticism: to reconfigure the recent history of her critical reception, whether in its feminist, political, or historicist manifestations, by bringing philosophy to bear on the modalities and effects of Woolf’s singular poetics.

2. The preposition “among” opens up a critical field that refuses all forms of classification and objectification of the type where the work of literature is either made subordinate to a specific work of philosophy or it is forced to reflect particular philosophical themes. It also counters the idea that the literary work provides the stage or setting for philosophical concepts. Instead “among” points towards an asymmetric field rich in heuristic possibilities. The gamble was that the approach would either bring to light the cross-fertilisation of meanings that occurs when two discourses, the literary and the philosophical, are placed side by side, or that it would illuminate the singular mode of thought that fashions a poetic: bringing into relief how certain philosophical propositions are deployed; and how the modalities of a philosophical discourse both define and limit the field in which it operates. This opens up the possibility of reversing the temporal sequence implied by the term “influence”. Rather than interrogating the conversations Paul Ricoeur, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, or Jacques Rancière have had with Woolf’s work we wanted to ask how Woolf’s texts themselves interrogate the thought of Ricoeur, Blanchot, Deleuze, Rancière. How, in other words, does her work *read* those philosophers today?
3. The field opened up by the preposition “among” is then best conceived in terms of Derrida’s “parages”, as appositional, or, as he suggests:

neither conjunction, nor disjunction, nor equation, nor opposition, only a punctuation marking a pause before the desire for a definite statement or sentence is uttered. A spacing that could be called “parage”.¹
4. Following Derrida, this collection should be read according to a temporality where the desire to read “among” — to interpret between — prolongs the suspension of a pause, resists discrimination between discourses, all the better to lend an ear to a certain porousness in their exchanges, to that zone of indiscernibility indissociable from an idiosyncratic *poïen*. Which is not to exclude the possibility that this *poïen*, while undertaking the work and producing the effects of thought, might not itself fall into the category of philosophical discourse, with all the associations of the conceptual and the universal that it implies. The gain of course is that this blurring of categories itself unsettles our understanding of what philosophy is supposed to be.
5. Such dilemmas lie at the heart of this collection, but the articles themselves explore a diverse range of textual and contextual relationships. Among these, the question of time proved a touchstone, not only with regard to the historical, epistemological, and cultural contexts that shaped the dialogue between philosophy and Woolf’s work, but also because of the innovative ways her texts conceive and write time. It is no surprise that Ricoeur, Blanchot, Deleuze, and Rancière have all been drawn to this aspect of her work. As Rancière’s article in this collection demonstrates, the question is best approached through Woolf’s innovations in narrative form. His suggestion that we should read “the rationality of the novel”,

1 J. Derrida, *Parages*, Galilée, 2003, 166.

offers a new perspective on her work, not least because of the subtle modifications his reading makes to the earlier ones of Ricoeur and Blanchot. In his conception of the dissonant temporalities that construct micro-narratives in Woolf's texts, Rancière revisits the effect of the First World War on the modernist mentality, a shock to teleological notions of progress that occurred well before that theorised by Jean-François Lyotard in the aftermath of the Shoah.

6. Rancière's reading also maps out the rich resources mobilised by modernist poetics, which, along with a singular conception of life, included new temporalities that not only blurred old boundaries but also created new forms and structures (albeit in different ways for different artists). In this respect, modernism moved beyond the historical fault-lines defined by theories of tragedy, introducing the heterogeneous into the flux of interpersonal relations. Yet, as Rancière emphasises with regard to Septimus and the numerous tensions *Mrs Dalloway* leaves unresolved, certain aspects of experience remain untouched in Woolf. As a philosophical reader of Woolf, Rancière focuses on Woolf's deployment of a poetic rationality that upsets the temporal logics of narrative, one of the consequences of which is that fiction is re-situated at the borders of philosophy. His interpretation of literature through philosophy puts the resonances and the limitations of the novel's rationality to the test.
7. The question of time — as seen in the variety of temporal forms found in Woolf's texts — also comes to the fore in the articles that focus on the aftermath of the first world war, a war that as Woolf and many of her generation feared, was likely to repeat itself imminently. The work of thinkers as different and as differently situated as Walter Benjamin and Nietzsche resonates here. Thus, just as Benjamin's angel of history sees time backwards, *Jacob's Room* is haunted by a tragic knowledge of the inevitability of what is to come. As Scott McCracken shows, in Woolf's novel the future presents itself in the compact but pregnant form of a bet delayed to "the last possible moment". Countering a tragic prescience, the dream of a time of possibility inherent in the bet both harbours the possible and, according to Benjamin, exposes the present to the lightening flash of divination.
8. The idea of time as a regime of conflicting forces and intensities, as an incessant *agon* between fault-lines and the renewal of becoming, is forcefully illuminated in Isabelle Alfandary's article. She identifies a play of resonances between Nietzsche's *Lebensphilosophie* and Woolf's writing. Each urges an inconclusive exchange between *a life* and *life*: the latter exceeds the former, yet *life* can only be apprehended through *a life*. Each sets up a dialogue with the knowledge of death, offering an intimate welcome to its experience. Yet the relationship between Woolfian poetics and Nietzschean thought takes the form of a paradox: if the poetic working through of life via linguistic form resists conceptualisation, its characteristics and effects are nonetheless fraught with metaphysical and ethical implications. Alfandary finds in the poetics of the instant a renewed encounter with the

“innocence of becoming”, one that allows us to re-engage with what is at stake in our conception of time.

9. Mark Hussey turns to Woolf’s late work, but finds again in *Between the Acts* the same fear of failure that haunts the temporality of *Jacob’s Room*. Hussey’s reading focuses on the pockets of silence that hollow out Woolf’s imaginative spaces, but the work of memorialisation he attributes to them transcends their mute melancholia. In Woolf’s conversion of the abyss into a temporal resource, we are reminded of the philosophical kernel in the questions Woolf asks, for example, “What is the value of a philosophy that has no power over life?”² J. Hillis Miller’s use of anachronism allows yet another perspective on time. He compares the temporalities of the narrative voices in *The Waves* to an artificial memory, where the intensities of experience and their linguistic expression are always already stored. This then serves as a trope through which the impersonal and the other in the novel’s narrative voices can be read. The role of the imaginary is key here, not just in Woolf and the philosophical resonances of her work, but also in Miller’s own critical performance.
10. An alternative approach is suggested by the historical readings that follow. Several articles offer new genealogies of the rich variety of exchanges between Woolf and the philosophers of the time. S. P. Rosenbaum and Ann Banfield draw on the wealth of their research to offer new accounts of the encounters between the Bloomsbury group, with Woolf at its heart, and the Cambridge philosophers who influenced it. As they make clear, philosophy was an insistent, but “invisible presence” in her life, incarnated at various times in her father, Henry Sidgwick, G. E. Moore, and Bertrand Russell among others, and mediated through actual encounters, conversations, and reading. For Woolf, philosophy was central to both her conception of modernity and to debates about the modern. Banfield and Rosenbaum outline the complex impact philosophical ideas had on the shape of Woolf’s thought. Banfield explores the different aesthetic and political meanings of “labour” and “leisure” in the early twentieth century, asking how they relate to Woolf’s poetic of the “moment” and her own deconstruction of the binaries of passivity and activity, production and reception.
11. While equally concerned with the contemporary context, Christine Froula also reminds us of Woolf’s abiding distrust of all tendencies towards reification in early twentieth-century thought. As a counter to this, Froula suggests an alternative set of resonances, between *Mrs Dalloway* and the *Essays* of Montaigne. She suggests that the two works meet at the point where a mode of writing meets a philosophy of interiority: a process that is best described as a fluid mutual becoming rather than the juxtaposition of two separate things. Froula’s article reads the new aesthetic paradigm introduced by “character-drawing”, the form of interiority characteristic of

2 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 5*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, New York, Harcourt, 1985, 340.

Montaigne's essays, as a new writing of the self. Yet although multiple echoes of Montaigne's work can be found in *Mrs Dalloway*, the two writers have very different discursive modes. In Woolf's text interiority is rendered as much through a fluid movement between voices as through character.

12. Rachel Bowlby also pays close attention to the intertextual resonances of *Modern Fiction*. She examines the complex web of voices and echoes, historical and contemporary, through which the essay apprehends "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day". Woolf's essay is alive with echoes that extend from Locke to Moore and from Baudelaire to Freud, lengthening its reach back through time as well as reanimating the diverse discourses, philosophical, literary, psychoanalytic, which are their concern. *Modern Fiction* engages in an exploration that is as much aesthetic as speculative of the various forms, modes, and registers life takes. Its labile rhetoric performs the object it chooses to address.
13. It becomes clear that the aesthetic questions posed by Woolf's texts arise at the point where they intersect with philosophical questions, if only because literary criticism has always combined these two strands. As various as the articles in this collection are, they all emphasise the performative force intrinsic to her poetic. Edna Rosenthal's article shows how Woolf's aesthetic preoccupations deviate from the Aristotelian tradition, being closer to a post-Aristotelian aesthetic philosophy that recognises emotion and affect. Rosenthal gathers these various inscriptions of affect under the title of the "modern sublime", tracing the shift from the Aristotelian *mythos* to *ethos*, which reaches its highest point in Woolf's characterisation. Positioning Woolf's poetic at the centre rather than at the margin of the critical tradition thus allows us to grasp the radical redefinition of the sublime that emerges in *Mrs Dalloway*, and through that text to Woolf's "art of fiction" itself.
14. The question of perception provides a second critical focus in this collection. Several articles point to the originality of Woolf's project, which provides the opportunity for a rethinking of its relationship to various philosophical traditions. Echoing G. E. Moore, some, such as Rosenbaum's reading, follow the dualist approach proper to an idealist tradition, emphasising the relationship between consciousness and the object perceived. Elements of this tradition surface in the figure of the philosopher, as represented by Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, and in the narrative forms deployed by Woolf in *The Waves*. Rancière's article offers an alternative approach, seeking to cancel this dualism by emphasising the intensities that lie at the heart of the sensorium and which are key to our understanding of time and its rhythms. Mark Hussey and Naomi Toth show the extent to which the field of thought is interrogated through the prism of perception in Woolf's texts, where it exceeds it in the first intensity of its vibrations: "the very jar on the nerves"; or, when it is the locus of mute affect, in "thoughts without words". Setting up a dialogue between the phenomenology (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) and Lily Briscoe's artistic quest

in *To the Lighthouse*, Toth addresses the *mise en abyme* of creation as a form of speculation about perception. Paradoxically, this speculation concerns that which at first escapes perception but then returns to trouble thought. The kinship between philosophical and literary discourse is defined first through perception as the first condition for the possibility of knowledge, and second as apprehended through its relationship to the invisible. Thus, Toth's article focuses on the immediacy that Lily Briscoe seeks, which, in the thrall of an invisibility that relates to an absence, cannot be defined by phenomenological concepts, as these are too indebted to a reflexive mastery and a philosophy of presence. In this way, literary discourse troubles the metaphysical assumptions that lie beneath philosophical discourse.

15. Such issues take us away from epistemology back to aesthetics and the question of how thought comes to inhabit the image: how sensory experience and the life of the mind intersect in visual artistic modes. As Elena Gualtieri explains, certain forms of the gaze have the capacity to destroy our sense of what is perceptible and the concepts to which it gives form. The result is what Gualtieri calls "the thoughtless image", a congealed, opaque, mimetic vehicle for the deathly forms of alienation and normative predicates that prevail for both subjects and objects. She opposes this to the "thoughtful image", as elaborated by Rancière, whose (this time aesthetic) dimension rests on its indeterminacy, characteristics of which she finds in the photographs inserted into the text of *Orlando*. The contamination between the visual and the textual, the play with fictitious resemblances, the visible as evidence of sexual ambivalence, the parody of genealogical mimesis, all are so many games of ambivalence which lend to the image its power of thought and a new political efficacy — even to the point where the differences between the "thoughtless" and the "thoughtful" image become blurred.
16. The question of subjectivity also emerges as key to the collection, whether with reference to consciousness or to the wider frame of intersubjectivity. David Sherman's article returns the discussion to the critical reception of the philosophical connotations of Woolf's texts. He suggests we move beyond the echoes of Kant found in her work to explore instead the power of "alarm" that occurs when the subject attempts to grasp itself as object. As the forms of otherness that surround it interfere, this alarm presses on that which limits the subject attempting to transcend it. This alarm provides the aesthetic impulse for a phenomenology of the self that ties philosophy and literature together. The many moments of vertiginous introspection found in Woolf's texts, her scattered, allegorising *mises en abyme*, are just so many manifestations of the singular aesthetic Sherman terms "self-alarm".
17. As Sherman demonstrates, the various modes of this power of alarm, and the various responses it elicits, affect the scene of intersubjectivity. His insights throws an interesting light on some of the other articles in the col-

lection. These evoke a number of Woolf's formulations about the relationship between self and other in order to explore the more radical question of how Woolf's poetic invites us to think about different modes of transcending the self, for example via Clarissa Dalloway's "odd affinities"³. As Douglas Mao reminds us, the history of the invocation of these formulations in literary criticism has always been inflected by philosophy, to the point where Woolf's texts unsettle the very binaries that sustain the concepts of "the self", "the other", "the subject", and "the object". Thus, when she elaborates on the limitlessness of the self, or the modes in which experience survives beyond the self, or when she invokes what we might call the transpersonal, she destabilises the differences between the experience of the self and the force of an immanent life, creating slippages in the meanings these terms carry. Mao examines the implications of the phrase, the "unseen part of us", which reflects and opens out the realm of phenomenal experience. Tracing its circulation in Woolf's essays and *Mrs Dalloway*, he shows how she uses it not to embrace, but to evade Victorian metaphysics. Set against or "among" the thought of her contemporaries, the phrase stands out as an example of the originality of Woolf's thought, where the invisible acts as a resource for those traces of transindividuality that lie at the heart of an immanent life. The "unseen" is then not so much the spectral as that which connects all living beings.

18. What is at stake here can be viewed from an epistemological perspective, but also from the ethical point of view suggested by Elsa Högberg, who reads Woolf's ethic of non-violence alongside the ideas of Judith Butler. There is of course quite a distance between the seminal work of Moore and Sidgwick (as cited in Rosenbaum's article) and Butler's ethics for the twenty-first century. Moore and Sidgwick were positivist in approach, focusing on moral values and means and ends. Butler writes about intersubjective experience as both vulnerable to violence and as an imperative to responsibility. Following recent critical debates around these issues, Högberg's article reveals how far the poetics of interiority, far from exemplifying modernist solipsism, are in fact fraught with ethical and political implications. Not only because they precipitate a crisis, but because they force the question: should the experience of otherness, as the exposure to what Butler calls "vulnerability", be read as a move against the assertion of an autonomous subjectivity or even as the very condition of ethics itself?
19. Perhaps we need to return to Woolf's own thought at this point, not so much to grasp it in one fell swoop as to trace the subtleties of her language, the intricate ways in which thought is woven into the play of the signifier in her work. Jane Goldman's pursuit of the different valences of the signifiers of animality in Woolf and Jacques Derrida offers an excellent example of such an approach. The blurring of the boundary between human and animal puts new forms and figures into play. The semantic and syntactical hybridisations that result generate minor becomings-animal,

3 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), New York, Harcourt, 1990, 152.

which trouble a normative politics based on the assumptions of anthropological paradigms. The layered readings Goldman's article proposes and then interrogates (for example, Derrida reading Woolf reading Daniel Defoe) expose the elisions, rewritings, and underlying determinations at work both in Woolf's texts and their readings. The signifiers of animality, whether connected to violence or to forms of becoming, are thus extracted from and then woven back into a textual web where the boundaries those signifiers validate or invalidate are constantly interrogated. In a different but related way, Marie-Dominique Garnier's article traces sartorial metaphors from Woolf's poetic thorough Deleuzian theory to the work of Thomas Carlyle. The aesthetic consequences of a crisis in representation, the opening up of identity so that it overflows then exceeds its original limits, institute in a literary matrix what Deleuze and Guattari define through the concepts of "the plane of immanence", "haecceities", and "becomings". This "philosophy of becomings" effectively proves to be an alternative aesthetic regime, because writing itself becomes an expression, a circulation, in the form of the infinite number of small intensities and transformations that make up an immanent life.

20. Thus, it appears more than ever that Woolf's poetics are in dialogue with philosophy in so far as they think (with) language, eliciting endless effects or performative power as event. This dialogue is not imposed from outside, but rather the forms of language themselves are indissociable from the work of thought. All the articles in this collection convincingly demonstrate that language is the elaboration of thought, that it is thought as process, as life, whether through ambiguity, syntactical breaks, the rhythms of speech and writing, or the figural itself. The perpetual crisis of language — which sometimes takes the form of a resistance to language itself, as found in the use of expletives (Isabelle Alfandary) or in the uncertainty of articles, of tenses, of proper nouns (Marie-Dominique Garnier) — is the stage on which metaphysical assumptions are put to the test, even to the point where that crisis resists the conceptual itself. The sentence is sometimes processed as part of a play of uncertainties and sometimes as a statement of intensities, where its grammar or its phonic slippages are inscribed in the material of the language. To this extent it opens itself up to the unpredictable and, in its articulation (as event), enacts the innocence of its becoming.

21. Woolf herself suggests that what we find in the novel is a mode of thought that cannot be separated from the becoming-other of language:

[...] when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste it into a whole system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy, or with the novel, or with both.⁴

4 Virginia Woolf, *The Second Common Reader* [1932], ed. Andrew McNellie, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, 233-234.

22. In the end, it is in Woolf's own words that we find ourselves not only in the company of a (be)coming to philosophy, but also a (be)coming to the novel itself.

Translated by SCOTT McCracken