

Translating Virginia Woolf

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Oriana Palusci (ed.)

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ELEONORA FEDERICI

Translating Feminist Discourses in Virginia Woolf's "Anon"

Introduction

My essay takes into consideration a less known and unfinished piece of writing by Virginia Woolf, "Anon", where the author outlines from a feminist perspective a different literary canon, a 'dismantled' idea of tradition and a proposal for new genres. I agree with Noemi Black's definition of Virginia Woolf's feminism as political,¹ and my aim is to demonstrate how feminist discourses 'ante litteram' are 'translated' in "Anon". This fragmented text offers an interesting angle on Woolf's role as a 'translator' of women's rights and as a new kind of foresighted literary critic.

In 1979 the review *Twentieth-Century Literature* dedicated a monographic issue to Woolf's later production: "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" and the unfinished "Anon" and "The Reader". The editor of the issue assembled material from Woolf's notebook entitled "Notes for Reading at Random" and the drafts of Woolf's last uncompleted texts. Brenda Silvers' *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks* has also given access to the writer's extensive notes which were the preparatory work for her literary reviews and that clarify some of the passages in these last manuscripts.² In this volume she has demonstrated how Woolf was an 'uncommon reader' and how her work as a reviewer was literally built up through a vast repertoire of notes resulting from her research and comparisons among authors and texts. Sil-

1 Naomi Black, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 10.

2 Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983.

ver was able to reconstruct a narrative sequence of the material and she found three versions of “Anon” and six of “The Reader”. The interpretation of these texts has also been made easier by the author’s references in her *Diaries*, which emphasised her own idea of history and culture which could not be included in periods and categorizations.

Virginia Woolf, literary reviewer and essayist

‘The greatest art has always been communal, the expression – in highly individualized ways no doubt – of common aspirations and ideals’.³ These words demonstrate how the relation between writers and their public was a major concern for Woolf. This idea is reflected both in her novels and essays where the intellectual’s role in society is a central issue. The last two decades have witnessed an increasing interest in Virginia Woolf’s role as a professional reviewer, critic and intellectual of the interwar period.⁴ Reading Woolf’s essays is a useful way to deconstruct the idea of the modernist elitist by which the author is sur-

3 Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, New York and London, Harcourt Brace, 1976, p. 173.

4 Eleanor McNees, *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, Mountfield, East Sussex, Helm Information, 1994; Beth Carole Rosenberg, *Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson: Common Readers*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1995; Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf and the Common Ground*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996; Juliet Dusinberre, *Virginia Woolf’s Renaissance: Women Readers or Common Readers?* Iowa City, Iowa University Press, 1997; Leila Brosnan, *Reading Virginia Woolf’s Essays and Journalism*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1997; Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino eds, *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1997; Sally Greene, *Virginia Woolf: Reading the Renaissance*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 1999; Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2000; Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf’s Essays: Sketching the Past*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2000; Melba Cuddy Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; Anne E. Fernald, *Virginia Woolf Feminism and Reading*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006; Katerina Kousantoni, *Virginia Woolf’s Common Reader*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009.

rounded while, at the same time, recovering her fundamental position as a precursor of women essayists of the twentieth century. At the beginning of her career as a literary reviewer, not being part of the educated scholars coming out of Oxford and Cambridge and unable to feel at ease in a literary tradition of fathers, Woolf felt in a contradictory position as a literary critic. As an outcast of the educational system Woolf was fully aware of her 'outsider' position both as a reviewer and a scholar, but her self-knowledge and learning offered her an open perspective on the literary tradition and a non-canonical critical basis on which to build her ideas. Woolf filled her creative, but also her non-fictional texts, with feminist ideas and issues. Feminist discourses are translated into Woolf's critical production where she discussed important issues such as education, the university system, the central relation between economic possibilities and literary results, the differences between classes in the production of culture and a more democratic system of learning.

The relation between the eminent Victorian biographer Leslie Stephen and his daughter was a contradictory one; she felt a deep distance between her position as a critic and her father's place among literary scholars. Woolf felt a doubleness of both inheritance and exclusion from the literary canon; like her father, she thought literature should be interpreted in its historical, cultural and social context and she perpetuated his idea that books should be read within a picture of the society in which they were written and published. However, differently from her father, she dismantled the centrality of the essayist. In "The Decay of Essay Writing" she outlined how the author's voice was just one out of many on a subject, 'an expression of personal opinion'.⁵ The important issue was, not so much which personal opinion came out from the writer's essay, but how he was able to convince his readers. The essayist should be a magician of words, a crafted rhetorician. Woolf achieved this with practice; her voice as an essayist changed its tone over time, more uncertain and masked under an impartial voice in the first writings, more aware of her position as a well known writer in the mature ones. Virginia Woolf wrote many kinds of

5 Virginia Woolf, "The Decay of Essay Writing", in David Bradshaw ed., *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 6.

essays: essayistic criticism, essayistic memoir, essayistic travel writing, essayistic biography, and fictional essay.⁶ Since for her the essay should not be written in a scientific expository prose but in a personal style, her criticism was considered, for its hybridity, “impressionist” and “amateur” by modernist writers and critics. Not only is this not true but the whole range of her essays on authors and literary works provides a wide repertoire on the notions of ‘writer’ and ‘reader’ as ‘accomplices’ that sounds quite up-to-date and prescient. In “How Should One Read a Book?” for example, Woolf envisioned a symbiotic relationship between author and reader. The relationship is so tight that the reader should ‘become’ the writer and ‘be his fellow worker’.⁷ The literary critic is for her a mediating figure between authors and readers, an interpreter of the writer’s ideas for his audience, a translator of thoughts. Woolf was creating a new modality of writing literary criticism, a hybrid literary genre that possessed the art of creative writing and the scholarly analysis of the essay.

Furthermore, Woolf was deeply interested in retracing a genealogy of female writers. Like her friend T. S. Eliot, Woolf believed in the importance of tradition for the emergence of the individual talent but she was able to see the difficulty for women writers to be able to prove it. She acutely perceived not only the gap between male and female authors but also the differences between male readers and female readers confronted with a different relation to literature and education.

The issues implicit in a problematization of textual reception in different epochs and the awareness of a gendered position as writers and readers brought Woolf to discuss the inadequacy of language and the complexities of the reading process. While creating a new modality of essay writing and totally reshaping the form of the novel, Woolf envisaged the importance of the texture of language, of the bits and pieces through which writers create their narrative world and readers interpret it. Woolf struggled with patriarchal language and she chal-

6 Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino eds, *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, p. 15.

7 Virginia Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?”, in Stuart N. Clarke ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. V 1929-1932, London, Chatto & Windus, 2009, p. 573.

lenged it with her use of absences, ellipses, unfinished sentences and uncompleted thoughts.⁸ Language forged by men was unsuitable for women,⁹ and she outlined the necessity of recovering a different language made of silences, a ‘feminine language’ that decades later would be discussed by French Feminism theorists, the so-called *écriture féminine*.¹⁰ This ‘feminine language’ is retraceable in her essays. Woolf adapted, moulded and shaped language through a gender perspective creating challenging associations between words and refusing to categorize thoughts into ‘boxes’. In an emblematic essay entitled “Craftmanship” Woolf went further and affirmed: ‘Words do not live in dictionaries, they live in the mind’.¹¹ We know that for the author, ‘language was an artificial convention’, ‘inadequate to its experience’, ‘an impure medium’, ‘slow and deluding, [...] rigid’.¹² She used another language, ‘composed of small broken words, brief or unfinished sentences, cries, calls, songs, silences, and even sights and gesture, [...] brief, colloquial, intimate’.¹³ Woolf stressed the polysemy of words and the fact that any term hides layers of meanings: ‘Words are full of echoes, of memories, of associations’.¹⁴

8 Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Language of Patriarchy*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987.

9 Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

10 See Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986; Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together”, *Sign* 6 (1980), pp. 69-79; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984.

11 Judith Allen, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Language*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 9.

12 Nora Eisenberg, “Virginia Woolf’s Last Words on Words: *Between the Acts* and ‘Anon’”, in Jane Marcus ed., *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981, p. 253.

13 Nora Eisenberg, “Virginia Woolf’s Last Words on Words”, p. 254.

14 Virginia Woolf, “Craftmanship”, in Leonard Woolf ed., *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1942, p. 203.

“Anon”

Two impersonal, anonymous figures are at the centre of Woolf’s literary history: “Anon” and the “Reader”. Anonymity, common language, androgyny and impersonality have been linked together by various scholars investigating Woolf’s production.¹⁵ Certainly the androgynous vision of the singer Anon synthesizes at the end of Woolf’s career her idea on the uncertain border between femininity and masculinity. Anon already appeared in *A Room of One’s Own* as a female artist singing the songs of people. In this last writing, Anon is the metaphor for her final discussion on the English canon.

While she was conceiving what she called a ‘Common History Book’ Woolf was writing *Between the Acts*, a representation of England’s literary history and tradition.¹⁶ It is certainly true that Woolf’s last works share various issues: the search for a new genealogy of English writers, the marginal figure of the singer/playwright, the centrality of women’s voices, the importance of the common man in history and literature. “Anon” involves a rethinking of English culture and values; her presentation of the different epochs invites the reader to use a critical lens to look back at the past. Woolf’s main idea was to visualize the importance of oral tradition and story-tellers’ role within English literature, and women were important agents because they had always been the guardians of a vernacular tradition of story-telling and singing.

“Anon” starts with a reference to G. M. Trevelyan’s *History of England* (1926) where pre-historic Britain is portrayed as a forest full

15 See, among others, Maria DiBattista, *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009; Makiko Minow Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*, New York, The Harvester Press, 1987; Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf’s Essays: Sketching the Past*, p. 47; Lisa Low, “Refusing to Hit Back: Virginia Woolf and the Impersonality Question”, in Rosenberg and Dubino, pp. 257-74.

16 See Brenda Silver ed., *Virginia Woolf Issue, Twentieth Century Literature*, 25:3/4 (1979); Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1996.

of singing birds. It is the picture of a pastoral ideal and the remembrance of a time where the desire to sing was powerful. The lead singer is the audience, working together with the bard. In this text Woolf describes the changes occurred from this archaic culture to the modern age and the printing press. Anon was the receptacle of culture and literature, a minstrel who sang traditional oral stories and, after the printing press, his/her singing remained fixed in books. Anon was an androgynous ballad singer, sometimes man, sometimes woman, 'the common voice singing out of doors'.¹⁷ Woolf evokes all the singers, preachers, playwrights whose voice was the main instrument of knowledge and the transmission of tradition. The art of Anon was deeply embedded in common life and this heritage was passed to the Elizabethan dramatist. In the Elizabethan age Anon lived in the playhouse, but the playwright was then replaced by the writer, the audience was replaced by the reader. Anon's songs were forever lost in books and so the common experience s/he shared with people. In her final sentence of "Anon", Woolf reiterates the importance of the reader in the writing practice. It is not by chance that her last unfinished essay is addressed to the 'reader' and "The Reader" begins with a recollection of Lady Anne Clifford's diary and her own relation to the practice of reading. Reading and readers clearly occupy a central space in Woolf's literary criticism and revision of the canon. In "How Should One Read a Book?" Woolf anticipates the notion of the reader as a maker of significance through the act of reading that will become central in the post-structuralist debate decades later. In the last unfinished essay "The Reader" Woolf depicted literary history as a 'continuum',¹⁸ foresaw the idea of a dialogic relationship between authors and readers and recognized an historical, cultural and gendered 'location' of the reader.

17 Brenda Silver, ed., *Virginia Woolf Issue*, p. 382.

18 Beth Carole Rosenberg, "Virginia Woolf's Postmodern Literary History", *MLN* 115:5 (2000), p. 1120.

The Italian translation

In “The Russian Point of View” Woolf acknowledges the losses of translation, a practice compared to a mutilation, an earthquake, an accident. Translation is a practical but also a metaphorical act. In translation readers gain access to a writer whose ‘sound, weight, and accent of the words’ is altered and of whom ‘a crude and coarsened version of the sense’¹⁹ of his original work remains in the translated version. Woolf never discussed the translations of her own works, certainly she clearly perceived an alteration of the ST in the TT while she was reading English translations of foreign texts.

Recently, Giovanni Luciani edited an Italian translation of “Anon” and “The Reader” under the title *Anon. Saggio sul pubblico anonimo della letteratura inglese*.²⁰ The Italian title explains what the essay is about focusing on the anonymity of the public but does not refer to the story-teller. Through this choice the translator links the important notion of anonymity to the reading public, but loses some connections with the anonymous singer. The title of the Italian translation highlights the most completed essay, “Anon”, and avoids the translation of the hypothetical original title(s), “Reading at Random” or “Turning the Page”. However, the “Notes for Reading at Random” have been translated as appendix with the title “Appunti per *Anon*”.

In the Italian translation there is not a comment on the translation but a long Preface discussing the major themes of the work. The translator adds some information on the author at the time of the publication and other extra-textual references that help the reader to decipher the fragmented text. The ambiguities of the original text are clarified also by some footnotes that add some explanatory information. Alluded or quoted authors that are not all well-known to an Italian reader and some biographical and bibliographical references are inserted in order to outline Woolf’s path towards the creation of her own history

19 Virginia Woolf, “The Russian Point of View”, in *The Common Reader*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1962, p. 220.

20 Virginia Woolf, *Anon. Saggio sul pubblico anonimo della letteratura inglese*, a cura di Giovanni Luciani, Catanzaro, Abramo editore, 2001.

of English literature. The translator's interpretation of the text has clearly been carried out thanks to other documentary sources, especially Woolf's *Diaries*, letters and reviews as a literary critic dealing with issues which are central also in this text. All this material has been used by the translator as a "glue" to keep together the reading of such fragmentary and uncompleted texts. The recent discussion on the ethics of translation and the necessity of a serious documentary work behind the practice of translation become central for this textual typology. Information retrieval and documentation skills make possible the decision-making process of the translator in cases of fragmentary and uncompleted texts. The visibility of the translator in the text through a critical apparatus becomes a sign of his own interpretation of the text and of his own position as a decision-maker and rewriter of the text. The work of the translator here is similar to that of the editor of the works but, quite surprisingly, if we consider Silver's footnotes inserted in her edition of the text at the end of the 1970s we can immediately see that they are not translated into Italian. The translator uses the paratextual space demonstrating how the interpretation of such a disconnected text is highly individual and how the reading proposed to the reader is a subjective one. At a first glance the main difference between these footnotes is connected to Silver's feminist reading of Woolf's discourses. Even if Luciani acknowledges Woolf's interest for gender issues and her primary position as a woman intellectual in the first half of the twentieth century, his reading is more focalized on an analysis of the major themes and the strict relation between author, text and context in the interwar period. So, since any reader is located and possesses his own cultural background and 'intertextual baggage'²¹ through which he interprets the text, it is clear that references like the following one: 'Semiramus – more on Aspasia – witches and fairies: women of genius, forgotten writers', can be of primary importance for a feminist reading of Woolf, but can be left unexplained in the Italian translation.

Translating a text like "Anon" means to take into consideration different elements: the role of textual typology, of textual components

21 Eleonora Federici, "The Translator's Intertextual Baggage", in Susan Bassnett ed., *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 43:2 (2007), pp.147-160.

and of themes. First of all, it is a hybrid genre made up of uncompleted texts, a written text born from random thoughts. Secondly, it is necessary to interpret the text thinking about the context when it was written and the information given by the author. Thirdly, the text is composed of different speech styles, voices and registers the author utilizes in order to give a plural perspective on the issues through her personal and well-studied narrative rhythm. A crucial issue is Woolf's style, always a challenge for translators. Therefore, the notions of 'non-linearity', 'dissolution of the subject' or 'openness of discourses' which are of primary importance in her novels are central also here. Fourthly, the essay is an emblem of Woolf's engagement as a literary critic and her message should be translated as accurately as possible. Woolf's notes tell us a lot about the principal themes she wanted to develop. These references make clear who were the figures of intellectuals Woolf considered crucial in the development of the English canon; some of them like Francis Bacon or Latimer are not common figures in a canonical history of English literature, others like Anne Cliffords or Lady Ann Bacon, are not even well-known authors and have always been absent from the English literary canon.

Moreover, there are various linguistic and cultural elements the translator has to take into account: cultural-bound words and archaisms, the description of objects used in the past or idyllic or of imaginary landscapes, the insertion of poems, literary allusions or quotations and the recognition of keywords. All these elements must be connected to biographical and socio-cultural data in order to keep all the connotations implicit in the ST.

Conclusions

Woolf's production as a literary reviewer and essayist clarifies some issues about the writer's new modality of writing critical works. Her idea of the centrality of oral culture foresaw what Walter J. Ong would affirm decades later in *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), that is to say, the different relation of culture

to history in ‘the literate mind and the oral past’.²² Woolf clearly possessed an anthropological mind and her assertion on the magical properties of words visible in the writer’s capacity to cast a spell on the reader recalls Malinowski’s portrayal of the magic power of words in oral cultures.

Her ideas on anonymity, common language and androgyny reveal Woolf’s position as a writer and intellectual deeply involved in the role of art in society and in feminist questions. Discussing topics like the inadequacy of language, the complexities of the reading process, the dismantling of the ‘I’ of the critic, the necessity of a new method based on different educational premises Woolf envisaged the importance of the texture of language and the ‘located’ and personal interpretative approach of readers. Feminist discourses on women’s education, position in society and absence from the literary canon are reiterated in all her texts but her later writings offer an interesting angle on her role as a ‘translator’ of women’s rights and place in the literary canon. The anonymous and androgynous cantor in “Anon” well symbolizes Woolf’s feminist discourses.

22 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*, London, Methuen, 1982, p. 5.