



VIRGINIA WOOLF

and the Migrations of Language

Emily Dalgarno

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VIRGINIA WOODHULL AND THE
MIGRATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE



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*In memory of
Imre Gyula Izsák
Astronomer
(1929–65)*

Preface

Throughout this work I have continued to ask how the richness and historical depth of Woolf's language become apparent in the context of translation. Woolf's expressed desire to transform the English language always seemed to me a measure of her ambition and stature as a writer, and a goal scarcely to be imagined. A study of her vocabulary shows that she gave us relatively few new words.¹ How then did transformation come about? After "On Not Knowing Greek" her thoughts on translation are scattered throughout her fiction, essays, and diaries. Although her response to works of Russian fiction and to Proust shaped her writing practice significantly, there is no further essay on translation, perhaps because the language of the Victorian translator of Greek was no longer suitable, and others were not yet in circulation. Like the German Hellenists of her generation she learned that the translation of classical texts can be used to mount challenges to the ideology of national governments. Reading Proust with Vita Sackville-West suggested to Woolf that the language of gender comes into existence on the borders of consciousness, at the moment of awakening. Such a study enhances our sense of her language as responding to its history, and hospitable to the rhetorical strategies of other western languages.

The experience of a semester at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis greatly enhanced my understanding of translation and the social and political relationships among languages. My thanks to the Director, Michael J. Pretina, who arranged seminars with other fellows, and glimpses of the culture of Marseilles that widened the scope of my study, to include not only my chapter on Proust, but also work on Assia Djebar.

I particularly wish to thank the Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf, for permission both to cite short extracts from her work and to quote from holograph material in several

¹ Rowena Fowler, "Virginia Woolf: Lexicographer," *English Language Notes* 39 (2002), 54-70.

collections. For permission to read Woolf's notes on Tolstoy, I thank the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. The curator of the Smith College Museum of Art has graciously given permission to print the image of Woolf that appears on the jacket. My thanks to the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, the New York Public Library, for permission to cite Woolf's reading notes, and to the British Library for permission to cite a passage from "The Hours" holograph. My thanks to Albin Michel of Paris for permission to cite several of the works of Assia Djebar.

My thanks to the editors of *Modern Fiction Studies* for permission to reprint an earlier version of chapter three; and to the editors of *YES* (2006) for permission to reprint an earlier version of chapter five.

I acknowledge with deep gratitude the criticism and encouragement of colleagues and friends who were resident at the Camargo Foundation in 2004, especially Robert Aldrich. Among my colleagues in the US who read individual chapters special thanks to: Irlene Francois, Laura Korobkin, Jeffrey Mehlman, Robin Feuer Miller, Stephen Scully, and especially Mark Hussey and David Wagenkecht. Thanks also to many supportive friends: Julia Bader, Gillian Cooper-Driver, Anne Gaposchkin, Arthur Kaledin, Louis Kampf, Jane Lilienfeld, Alan Spitzer, Holly Zaitchik, my cousin the late Jean Vetter, Andrew Izsák, and Kim Wright.

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Abbreviations

Works by Virginia Woolf: I have used the Hogarth Press "Definitive Collected Edition" of Woolf's fiction except when otherwise noted.

APA	<i>A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897–1909</i> , ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990)
BA	<i>Between the Acts</i>
CDB	<i>The Captain's Death Bed</i> , ed. Leonard Woolf (1950)
CSF	<i>The Complete Shorter Fiction</i> , ed. Susan Dick (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985)
D	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf</i> , vols. 1–v, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977–84)
DM	<i>The Death of the Moth</i> (1947)
E	<i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i> , vols. 1–IV, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986–94); vol. v, ed. Stuart N. Clarke (2009)
Hol W	<i>The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts</i> , ed. J. W. Graham (1976)
JR	<i>Jacob's Room</i>
L	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf</i> , vols. 1–VI, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975–80)
M	<i>The Moment and Other Essays</i> , ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947)
MB	<i>Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings</i> , ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich [1976], 1985)
MD	<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>
ND	<i>Night and Day</i>
O	<i>Orlando</i>
RO	<i>A Room of One's Own / Three Guineas</i> , ed. Michèle Barrett (London: Penguin, 1993)

<i>TG</i>	<i>Three Guineas</i>
<i>TL</i>	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>
<i>TP</i>	<i>The Pargiters</i> , ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977)
<i>VO</i>	<i>The Voyage Out</i>
<i>W</i>	<i>The Waves</i>
<i>Y</i>	<i>The Years</i>

Woolf's holograph notes in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature are referenced by reel numbers.

In memory of
Imre Gyula Izsák
Astronomer
(1929–65)

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The migrations of language: introduction

The need to change the structure of the English sentence in order better to meet the requirements of women writers is a constant theme in the work of Virginia Woolf.¹ She wrote during a period when the goals of translation were undergoing fundamental changes that enlarged and facilitated that project. The British translator who was compelled to observe the ethnocentric standards of Greek translation in the university evolved within a few decades into a figure whose aim, in response to the demands of colonial readers, was to mediate between cultures. It is the argument of this book that although Woolf read translations to acquaint herself with the diverse cultures of the world, as a writer she quickly learned to use translation as a means to resist the tendency of the dominant language to control meaning, the first step to remodeling semantics and syntax. My work is oriented towards the classic essays on translation by Roman Jakobson and Walter Benjamin, and several works by Jacques Derrida that link translation to larger questions of nationality and otherness. When read together with Woolf's essays and the scenes of translation in her novels they reveal the scope of her attempts to redesign the sentence and to recreate the dominant language.

Throughout her career Woolf moved with ease among her roles as writer and as reader, translator, and publisher of foreign texts. Over the twenty or so years that she studied Greek she translated a number of texts, notably *Agamemnon*, undertaken while she was drafting *Mrs. Dalloway*. Like others of her class she read French, although unlike Lytton Strachey and Vita Sackville-West she was not bilingual. She and Leonard studied Russian briefly, and her numerous essays on Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, together with the work of the Hogarth Press, helped to develop a British readership for Russian fiction. Two notebooks are filled with her exercises as

¹ In "Life Sentences" Molly McQuade surveys passages from *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's short stories, and the essay "Craftsmanship" which detail her vision of a new sentence. *Woolf Studies Annual* 14 (2008), 53–67.

she studied Italian. She evolved a position in which she might use a translation to read an entire work quickly and grasp it as a whole, while retaining her student's understanding of the structure and limits of the original language. Although she both deplored and supported the need for translation, she was clearly someone for whom foreign languages redrew the map of the world.

Woolf began her study of foreign languages in a university program. She was enrolled in the University of London King's College Ladies' Department from 1897 to 1901. There from the ages of fifteen to nineteen, she "reached degree-level standard in some of her studies" of history, Greek, Latin, and German.² From 1897 to 1900 she studied Greek with Professor George Warr, Professor of Classical Literature at King's.³ But her grasp of Greek grammar was slim, if we are to believe the account, written in 1903, of her subsequent lessons with Janet Case: "Then there was our grammar. Many teachers have tried to break me in to that – but with only a passing success. Miss Case went to the root of the evil; she saw that my foundations were rotten – procured a Grammar, & bade me start with the very first exercise – upon the proper use of the article – which I had hitherto used with the greatest impropriety" (*APA*: 183). Whereas Woolf responded "with literary delight" to a line, Miss Case kept the emphasis on grammar and the teaching of morality. Perhaps in this early exchange with the instructor she came to love we can see Woolf composing an image of herself studying Greek at home as an outsider and a critic of institutionalized learning that was somewhat at odds with her actual experience. In other words, the image of Woolf as self-taught that appears in many biographies accepts at face value the picture of herself that she carefully cultivated, for instance in this letter of 1932 to a would-be biographer. Warning him not to confuse her life with the positions she took as a novelist and in *A Room of One's Own*, she offered this disavowal: "Partly for reasons of health I was never at any school or college" (*L5*: 91). Hermione Lee has explored the various functions of the letters and the diary, and concluded that both are "full of exaggeration and invention."⁴ For my purposes the King's College records and the early diary ground the theory of the subject in an image of her education that Woolf was at pains to construct for her readers.

² Christine Kenyon Jones and Anna Snaith, "Tilting at Universities: Woolf at King's College London," *Woolf Studies Annual* 16 (2010), 4. The article reproduces the College records of registrations, syllabi, and class lists.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), chapter one, "Biography," pp. 3–20.

Woolf's early tuition insured that somewhat later, when she read Sophocles and Aeschylus in translation, she responded to language as a student trained in a particular pedagogical theory. Reading *Agamemnon*, she commented on "the immeasurable difference between the text & the translation" (DI: 184). Her own translation of *Agamemnon*, based largely on the bilingual text of A. W. Verrall (1904), shows her attention to individual words that she retranslated in the margins of the Greek text. It is an approach that reveals her dependence on a now outdated model that envisions the adequate substitution of one word for another, and a translator whose task is to follow certain abstract rules. At the same time her interest in the semiotics of prophecy, the sense that language speaks Cassandra, demonstrates an emphasis on the signifying powers of language, as in her translation of this line from the chorus: "To this sign thou art prayed to let the event accord."⁵ In my view there she might have remained, invisible in the margins of someone else's translation, were it not for a redefinition of translation as cultural process as well as product, an approach that makes it possible now to study its effect on her writing practice.

Translation cannot be confined to the substitution of one word or one text for another. Woolf's work as a translator of Greek is clearly the second of Roman Jakobson's three kinds of translation, which he labeled "1) Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. 2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. 3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems."⁶ Although intralingual translation often involves circumlocution, the unit of translation from one language to another is larger, so that "messages in one language" are substituted for messages in another. Since the overall problem concerns "equivalence in difference," the translator is forced to become an interpreter of that difference, and the subject of translation cannot be confined for long within formal criteria.⁷ In Woolf's work inter- and intralingual questions of translation often intersect in the same passage, at the point where the ambiguity and contradictions of history have made the sign untranslatable, as for instance in *Orlando*, where the gypsies cannot translate the word *beauty*, because in their culture the concept does not exist.

⁵ I discuss the matter more fully in *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 70.

⁶ Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," *On Translation*, ed. Reuben Brower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 233.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Translation, argues André Lefevere, is the sign of openness both to another literature and to transformation, “depending on where the guardians of the dominant poetics, the dominant ideology stand. No wonder, therefore, that there have been attempts to regulate translation, to make sure it does not exert any subversive influence on the native system, to use it to integrate what is foreign by naturalizing it first.”⁸ Woolf’s major essay on translation, “On Not Knowing Greek,” refers to the decades-long controversy about the teaching of Greek in British schools and universities. Although she avoids taking sides, the title itself is drawn from Arnold’s play on “knowing” in “Literature and Science” (1885). Her essay engages Arnold’s criticism in “On Translating Homer” (1861) of a translation of the *Iliad* by another classical scholar, Francis Newman, whose career was oriented towards the needs of students and common readers. Although Arnold criticized the archaic diction of Newman’s *Iliad*, his larger aim was to defend an academic elite that could impose its standards on readers outside the university. In her essay Woolf silently inhabited Arnold’s position while aligning her values with Newman’s.

In fact what is missing from such debates are the political and economic conditions in which translations are produced and consumed. Perhaps owing to her position outside the university Woolf was able to shift the debate from Arnold’s assertions about the proper language of translation to ask, by whom are translations produced and used? That is, she broadened Arnold’s emphasis on the interlingual aspects of translation by introducing into the discussion her experience of the history of struggle and contradiction in British education. Since the 1980s the study of translation practices has focused on questions about translation as a cultural process, and its connections with literary criticism, philosophy, and other disciplines. Woolf’s emphasis in “On Not Knowing Greek” on Greek climate and social customs suggests that by 1925 she had begun to entertain some of these larger questions, as she came to recognize the ethnocentric limits of purely linguistic criteria.

Nor did Woolf’s challenge to the “guardians of the dominant poetics” stop with her mimicry of Matthew Arnold. She used the role of translator to position herself in national controversies. When she cited a line about love from Shelley’s translation of the *Symposium*, so controversial that it remained unpublished during his lifetime, she freed herself to refer to a

⁸ André Lefevere, “Why Waste our Time on Rewrites?: The Trouble with Interpretation and the Role of Rewriting in an Alternative Paradigm,” *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*, ed. Theo Hermans (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), 237.

division within the national language about discussion of homosexuality, as if translation were about crossing social borders as well. Derrida argues that translation often has such an effect on the native language: "Babelization does not wait for the multiplicity of languages. The identity of a language can only affirm itself as identity to itself by opening itself to the hospitality of a difference from itself or of a difference with itself."⁹ In *Aporias* Derrida redefines this philosophical term as crossing a border into what is not permitted or not possible. It lies at the heart of translation, since one type of aporia separates nations, languages, and cultures; another "domains of discourse," to which he added a third, the separation between concepts or terms.¹⁰ As soon as a line is drawn, whether a threshold, an edge, "or the approach of the other," aporia manifests itself as a division of the self. In Woolf's essay Shelley's translation of the *Symposium* marks a well-defended border within the domain of the English language. In this essay and in *Orlando* Woolf treated the public silence about same-sex love (outside the courts that is) as a problem of untranslatability, that is as a struggle too recent and intense yet to be named in the dominant language. Whereas Jakobson's linguistic definition of the intralingual may be a neutral circumlocution, in Woolf's essay intralingual translation becomes an occasion to demonstrate a position of openness in a national controversy.

Woolf's figure of Antigone, when read in the context of the European redesign of classical studies, poses a challenge to Fascism precisely at the intersection of intra- and interlingual translation. Following the excavations of Greek sites in the early twentieth century German scholars broadened the field of classics to include archeology. *Altertumswissenschaft*, as it was called when imported into British universities, made possible the professional study of the classics by women. In writing *Three Guineas* Woolf rejected the temptation to turn *Antigone* into propaganda, choosing instead to structure her essay along the lines of the scene in which Antigone confronts Creon, as an occasion to resist the public language by challenging old vocabularies. In so doing the female subject, while forced to speak a dominant language not of its making, seeks to avoid ventriloquism. The image of the brother's grave as the site of a mourning cry that combines grief for the dead with resentment of his social privileges illustrates the social contradictions of Antigone's position. In *Three Guineas* translation marks the place where the socially disempowered subject encounters a history that

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

she cannot read. The radio brings together the “ancient cry” that is heard in *Antigone* and *Three Guineas* with the problems of representation and translation that are associated with female mourning. Just as German scholars used classical texts to interrogate Fascist ideology, interlingual translation is the starting point for Woolf’s intralingual challenge.

Whereas Woolf was the ideal reader of Greek poetry published in a bilingual tradition, the reader of fiction in a language not well known in England was in a different position. As a publisher, a reviewer, and a would-be translator of Russian she came to understand what it takes to market a translation. When British readers began to read Russian fiction Virginia and Leonard seized the opportunity to publish a number of translations that significantly changed the position of the Hogarth Press. Whereas it had been a small press that published the works of friends, publication of Russian fiction gave it a stake in international modernism. Both made an attempt to learn Russian, and Virginia collaborated with S. S. Koteliarsky in the translation of “Stavrogin’s Confession,” a suppressed chapter of Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*. Her reviews of several translations from Russian, 1917–25, helped to create the British market for work by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Yet as a critic she saw translation of the Russians as a “mutilation”: “When you have changed every word in a sentence from Russian to English, have thereby altered the sense a little, the sound, weight, and accent of the words in relation to each other completely, nothing remains except a crude and coarsened version of the sense. Thus treated, the great Russian writers are like men deprived by an earthquake or a railway accident not only of all their clothes, but also of something subtler and more important – their manners, the idiosyncrasies of their characters” (E4: 174). Although translation had been useful to her as a student of Greek, reading Russian, a language she did not command, put her in the company of those “who have had to depend, blindly and implicitly, upon the work of translators” (E4: 174).

Although Woolf’s interest in Russian fiction eventually waned, her interest in Tolstoy was most in evidence at the end of her career. She wrote of Tolstoy as bringing the universe into view: “even in a translation we feel that we have been set on a mountain-top and had a telescope put into our hands.” Although in her notes she praised him for his ability to engage the readers’ emotion and feeling, while drafting *The Years* she turned to *War and Peace*, with its digressions on history, as a model of the essay-novel that aligns family history with that of the nation. As her diary shows, she was especially drawn to the second Epilogue, where Tolstoy engages the problems of patriotism and the nation, although much of this emphasis

was lost when *The Years* was cut and revised for publication. When Eleanor Pargiter completes the sentence begun by the foreigner Nicholas, Woolf suggests that translation is a sentence completed by another, and that such translation is the condition of historicity. Yet her readers, like Tolstoy's, reacted with incomprehension if not hostility to the mix of fiction with history.

Not only did Woolf not cite lines in Russian, as she had lines in Greek, but her constant comparison of Russian to English texts, although in one sense it domesticates the foreign, in another constantly emphasizes their foreignness. Reading Chekhov she was reminded that whereas in Victorian fiction there is closure – lovers are united – in his stories “the soul is ill; the soul is cured; the soul is not cured. Those are the emphatic points in his stories” (*E4*: 185). The novels of Dostoyevsky “are composed purely and wholly of the stuff of the soul” (*E4*: 186). The quality of meaning “on the far side of language” (*E4*: 45) that drew her to the Greeks was replaced by a spiritual hunger expressed in the language of feeling and soul. The change involves more than vocabulary, for whereas “the far side” refers to the suggestive capacity of the Greek language, the language of the soul reflects more directly on the reader's spiritual hunger. In some sense the Russians led Woolf gradually to see in Proust a writer whose sense of the soul was more available to her, in a language that she could read.¹¹

Since languages do not share the borders of political units, the sense of language as an intellectual domain challenges the linguistic tradition that coincides with the idea of the nation. Woolf's diary records an evening in 1927 spent at Long Barn, when Harold Nicolson maintained that the fact of the British Empire made Australia more important than France. Woolf intervened on the side of growth and change: “Also, I said, recalling the aeroplanes that had flown over us, while the portable wireless played dance music on the terrace, ‘can't you see that nationality is over?’” (*D3*: 145). In 1940, in “The Leaning Tower,” she protested on behalf of the common reader: “literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there” (*M*: 154). Whereas in Nicolson's idealized monolingual culture, imperial geography subordinated linguistic diversity to national identity, literature as “common ground” opens the way to a world in which

¹¹ Pierre-Eric Villeneuve writes of “Woolf's and Proust's common admiration of the Greeks and their exploration of the character's soul in fiction,” “Communities of Desire: Woolf, Proust, and the Reading Process,” *Virginia Woolf and Communities: Selected Papers from the Eighth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jeanette McVicker and Laura Davis (New York: Pace University Press, 1999), 23.