

PROUST, WOOLF, AND MODERN FICTION

Virginia Woolf began reading Marcel Proust in 1922. In an essay “On Re-reading Novels,” published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on July 20, 1922, she comments on the development of the novel since Henry James. Already, she notes, “the years have mounted up [since James’s last novels]. We may expect the novel to change and develop as it is explored by the most vigorous minds of a very complex age. What have we not, indeed, to expect from M. Proust alone?”¹ Four months later, Proust died. The “Homage” to him that the *Nouvelle Revue Française* published on January 1, 1923 included a rather bland testimonial from a group of English writers—among them, Woolf, Arnold Bennett, Joseph Conrad, and a number of Bloomsbury figures.² Leo Bersani has commented on the role that Proust’s death played not only in cementing his reputation but also in completing his work since, as Bersani puts it, “for Proust, literature depends on death.”³ Parallels between Woolf’s works of the 1920’s, notably *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu* show how much this recently deceased master of modern fiction meant to Woolf as she was writing her major works. Woolf’s reading of Proust also helped to shape her influential definitions of modern fiction, although his role in her work has been underestimated by critics who tend to emphasize her English-language precursors.⁴

1. “On Re-reading Novels.” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986-), vol. 3, 344. I am grateful to Megan Quigley for her assistance with the research for this paper.

2. “Homage à Marcel Proust, 1871–1922,” *Nouvelle Revue Française* 112 (1 janvier, 1923), 248–9. A translation was printed in the *Times Literary Supplement* of January 4, 1923.

3. Leo Bersani, “Death and Literary Authority.” *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 862.

4. In addition to the works quoted here, Woolf writes briefly of Proust in “The Novels of E. M. Forster,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), vol. 1, 342–51 and in “Notes on D. H. Lawrence,” in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, 352–5. Her most extensive comments on Proust occur in “Phases of Fiction,” in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 56–102. The relationship between Proust and Woolf has been explored in a number of unpublished dissertations. The most comprehensive published essay on the subject is C. J. Mares, “Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter’s Perspective.” *Comparative Literature* 41 (1989): 327–59. Hermione Lee makes a number of

In her diary and letters, Woolf continually meditated on the influence Proust might have on her own fiction. Even before she began reading him, in a letter of January 21, 1922 to E. M. Forster, Woolf wrote of Proust in terms that seem haunting in light of her later suicide: “Everyone is reading Proust. I sit silent and hear their reports. It seems to be a tremendous experience, but I’m shivering on the brink, and waiting to be submerged with a horrid sort of notion that I shall go down and down and down and perhaps never come up again.”⁵ She actually began reading him by early May of that year, when she wrote to Roger Fry,

But Proust so titillates my own desire for expression that I can hardly set out the sentence. Oh if I could write like that! I cry. And at the moment such is the astonishing vibration and saturation and intensification that he procures—there’s something sexual in it—that I feel I *can* write like that and seize my pen and then I *can’t* write like that. Scarcely anyone so stimulates the nerves of language in me: it becomes an obsession.⁶

Woolf continued to read Proust as the various posthumous volumes were published. From 1922 on, she continually compared her own writing to that of Proust, whom she considered “far the greatest modern novelist.”⁷ Throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s she discussed Proust with her friends and acquaintances, including E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, H. G. Wells, Roger Fry, and W. B. Yeats. Although she mentioned Proust occasionally in her essays, she paid far greater attention in her published critical works to contemporary English-language novelists.

Woolf was perhaps more conscious of the question of her literary influences than almost any major novelist, and she developed important theories about influence and tradition. She famously sought to establish a female literary tradition, and wrote that “we think back through our mothers if we are women,” and that women needed to have their own kinds of sentences: “The weight, the pace, the stride of a man’s mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully.”⁸ Woolf had a similar idea about the relationship between English writing and writing by foreign authors.

perceptive comments on Woolf’s reading of Proust in passing in her *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

5. Letter 1210, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975–1980), vol. 2, 499.

6. Letter 1244, 6 May 1922, in *Letters*, vol. 2, 525. At this point, Woolf was reading Proust in the original, but she probably later read C. K. Scott Moncrieff’s translation of at least some volumes.

7. To Vanessa Bell, Letter 1745, 21 April 1927, in *Letters*, vol. 3, 365.

8. *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), 114.

She even hesitated to take Conrad as a model because he was Polish-born.⁹ She sometimes suggested that the fact of Proust's writing in French militated against his serving as a model for her own work. Woolf had published *Jacob's Room* in late 1922 and, after a period of some depression, had returned to work on *Mrs. Dalloway*, when, on February 10, 1923, she wrote in her diary, "I wonder if this next lap will be influenced by Proust? I think his French language, tradition, &c, prevents that: yet his command of every resource is so extravagant that one can hardly fail to profit, & must not flinch, through cowardice."¹⁰ Nonetheless, it seems to me that Proust served as an important model for Woolf's own fiction, and that one of his functions for her was to counter-balance the influence of Woolf's own most famous English-language contemporary, James Joyce. Much has been made in Woolf criticism of Woolf's antagonism toward and anxiety about the influence of Joyce. She compares Joyce unfavorably to Proust in a letter to Fry of Oct. 3, 1922. "My great adventure," she writes, "is really Proust." Although she is only reading the first volume, she compares it to a "miracle" and asks:

How, at last, has someone solidified what has always escaped—and made it too into this beautiful and perfectly enduring substance? One has to put the book down and gasp. The pleasure becomes physical—like sun and wine and grapes and perfect serenity and intense vitality combined. Far otherwise is it with *Ulysses*; to which I bind myself like a martyr to a stake, and have thank God, now finished—My martyrdom is over.¹¹

A diary entry documents her rejection of Joyce:

I finished *Ulysses*, & think it a mis-fire. Genius it has I think; but of the inferior water. The book is diffuse. It is brackish. It is pre-tentious. It is underbred, not only in the obvious sense, but in the literary sense. A first rate writer, I mean, respects writing too much to be tricky; startling; doing stunts. I'm reminded all the time of some callow board school boy . . . full of wits & powers, but so self-conscious & egotistical that he loses his head, becomes extravagant, mannered, uproarious, ill at ease, makes kindly people feel sorry for him, & stern ones merely annoyed; & one hopes he'll grow out of it; but as Joyce is 40 this scarcely seems likely.¹²

9. "Character in Fiction," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986-), vol. 3, 427.

10. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977-1984) vol. 2, 234.

11. *Letters*, vol. 2, 565-6.

12. Diary entry of 6 September 1922, *Diary*, vol. 2, 199.

Although she almost immediately begins to reconsider her assessment, Woolf's generally negative view of *Ulysses* persists, as does her central objection to its lack of decorum. The class element in her assessment is clear, as she tends to associate Joyce with "underbreeding" and Proust with the aristocracy. Her distaste for Joyce's "indecenty" contrasts with her avowed sexual titillation at Proust's prose.¹³ Another motivation for her preference for Proust has to do precisely with his death. He may be the acknowledged greatest modern novelist, but, being dead, he can no longer provide direct competition for Woolf herself.

The opposition between Joyce and Proust in Woolf's musings resembles a similar opposition in one of her most famous critical works, *A Room of One's Own*, between Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen. There she writes that Jane Austen managed successfully to come up with a woman's sentence, whereas Brontë unsuccessfully attempted to write like a man. She comments on a biographer's account of Austen's writing her book in the common sitting-room and hiding it from the servants or visitors: "Without boasting or giving pain to the opposite sex, one may say that *Pride and Prejudice* is a good book. At any rate, one would not have been ashamed to have been caught in the act of writing *Pride and Prejudice*" (101). She goes on to observe that, despite these conditions, Austen wrote "without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote" (101–2). In contrast, she finds that Brontë lets her anger with her lot as a woman interfere with the quality of her writing:

One might say . . . that the woman who wrote those pages [of *Jane Eyre*] had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted? (104–5).

This opposition between the decorous, impersonal writing of Austen, and the angry, deformed writing of Brontë seems to replay the distinction between Proust and Joyce that Woolf had drawn earlier in her career. Proust, like Austen, writes solid, enduring prose, making out of personal experience "a beautiful and perfectly enduring substance" (*Letters*, vol. 2, 566). Joyce seems a male version of Brontë, letting his genius interfere with his talent, allowing

13. "Modern Novels," in *Essays*, vol. 3, 34.

personal feeling, extravagance, and ego to deform his work.¹⁴ Indeed, Woolf explicitly wrote in *The Common Reader* that Austen's *Persuasion* made her the "forerunner of Henry James and of Proust."¹⁵ We see here, as in her essay "On Re-reading novels," an attempt to establish a modern tradition in the novel, running now all the way from Austen through James to Proust, which excludes some novelists of acknowledged genius like Brontë and Joyce.

Proust, like Austen and indeed like Shakespeare, signifies for Woolf an art that converts the extremes of personal experience, whether male or female, into an enduring, impersonal substance. Woolf endorses Coleridge's view that "a great mind is androgynous."¹⁶ She illustrates this claim by reference to Shakespeare. For her, it means "that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (148). She complains that Galsworthy, Kipling, Milton, Ben Jonson, Wordsworth, and Tolstoy were all too male, while praising the androgyny of Keats, Sterne, Cowper, Lamb, and Coleridge. "In our time," she concludes, "Proust was wholly androgynous, if not perhaps a little too much of a woman. But that failing is too rare for one to complain of it, since without some mixture of the kind the intellect seems to predominate and the other faculties of the mind harden and become barren" (156). She advises all writers to be "man-womanly" or "woman-manly," and even though Leopold Bloom, the hero of *Ulysses*, was described by Joyce as a "womanly man," Woolf clearly finds Joyce himself too much of a man.¹⁷ It is rather Proust, author of those famous passages on "the men-women, descendants of those of the inhabitants of Sodom who were spared by the fire of heaven," whom Woolf has in mind.¹⁸ Nonetheless, she complains of Proust that "it remains obvious, even in the writing of Proust, that a man is

14. Woolf did not however, take Austen to be the "niminy piminy spinster" that many of her critics and some "Janeites" did and do. She commented, to the contrary, on Austen's coarseness. On Woolf's use of Austen as a model, see Katie Trumpener, "The Virago Jane Austen" in *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, ed. Deidre Lynch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 140–65. Similarly, although she takes Proust to be more decorous a model than Joyce, and although her claim that he was "perhaps a little too much of a woman" suggests the image of Proust as spinster, she must have recognized the "coarseness" of some of his subject matter, and I believe that that was one reason for her admiration of him. For an account of Woolf's modernism as a turn away from Jane Austen and towards Conrad as model, see Mark Wollaeger, "The Woolfs in the Jungle: Intertextuality, Sexuality, and the Emergence of Female Modernism in *The Voyage Out*, *The Village in the Jungle*, and *Heart of Darkness*," *MLQ* 64 (2003): 33–69.

15. "Jane Austen," in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, 153.

16. *A Room of One's Own*, 148.

17. *A Room of One's Own*, 148; James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler et al. (New York: Random House, 1986), 403.

18. *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1935), vol. 2, 3.

terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of women, as a woman in her knowledge of men” (125).

What, then, does Woolf find in Proust that makes him for her “the greatest modern novelist,” and what in particular does she find in him that she cannot find in Joyce? Androgyny is obviously, for Woolf, a general quality of character, but there must be an element in her embrace of Proust that relates to his frank depiction of homosexuality. Woolf’s novels portray love between women, notably in *To the Lighthouse* in Lily Briscoe’s love for Mrs. Ramsay and, more erotically, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the memory of a youthful kiss between Clarissa and Sally Seton informs Clarissa’s day. She remembers it, in one of her Proustian flights of recollection, as “the most exquisite moment of her whole life.”¹⁹ *A Room of One’s Own* gives as a central example of the new relationship of women to fiction the possibility of writing such a sentence as “Chloe liked Olivia” (123). These relatively chaste examples of lesbian love clearly differ greatly from, for example, Proust’s depiction of Mlle. Vinteuil and her lover in *Du côté de chez Swann*, but Woolf clearly knows what she is saying when she calls Proust a “little too much of a woman,” and her conception of his androgyny seems connected to his representation of homosexuality.

On the level of literary form, it seems to me that Woolf must have admired the shape of Proust’s sentences. If he was a little too much of a woman, this may in fact have justified her use of his writing as a model for her own long sentences. If we compare Woolf’s first distinctly modern novel, *Jacob’s Room* (published in October, 1922, but mainly complete before she began reading Proust in May, 1922) and her next, *Mrs. Dalloway*, one of the notable differences is that the sentences grow longer. Woolf also develops the tendency, found occasionally in Proust, to include multiple perspectives within a single sentence, so that, for example, a single sentence in her later novel *To the Lighthouse* will incorporate the perspectives of a mother, her son, his father, and a guest at the family’s summer home. One of Woolf’s greatest accomplishments was to make such changes of perspective flow within a single sentence and remain quite comprehensible, which is one reason her writing has tended to be labelled “impressionist” and distinguished from the more “Cubist” writing of some other modern novelists. Needless perhaps to say, my tracing of Woolf’s evaluations of Proust is not intended to suggest that Woolf lacked originality or genius in her own right. Rather, it seems that her particular genius was drawn to Proust as a potential precursor, and partly as a result of that necessary struggle with one’s precursors that underlies all literary creation and that in the modern period seems even more intense with regard to one’s contemporaries or near-contemporaries.

Another, related difference between *Jacob’s Room* and *Mrs. Dalloway* involves the role of memory. The various scenes from Jacob Flanders’ life are presented largely as fragments, in accordance with an aesthetic that Woolf

19. *Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Morris Beja (Oxford: Shakespeare Head, 1996), 28.

shares with T. S. Eliot, and the effect of the novel depends very much on the near-absence of the perspective of Jacob himself, the absence of a unifying consciousness. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, by contrast, and even more notably in *To the Lighthouse*, the theme of memory tends to structure the entire novels around the action of the remembering consciousness, as when Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and later in the novel Sally Seton, each recollect their earlier lives together at the country house Bourton before the war. The kiss with Sally Seton seems a typical example of Woolf's idea of "Moments of Being."²⁰ In her autobiographical essay, "A Sketch of the Past," written in 1939–1940, she develops the idea of moments of being and contrasts them with moments of non-being: "a great part of every day is not lived consciously."²¹ During moments of non-being, one is "embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool" (70). The moments of being that she recollects all come from her childhood: her sudden desire not to fight with her brother Thoby; her recognition of the beauty of a flower bed; and her vision of an apple tree as somehow obscurely connected with the suicide of a family acquaintance. These three moments are far from as happy as the "*moments bienheureux*" created by Proust's involuntary memory. Of course, the actual experiences that Woolf describes and remembers precede her reading of Proust, and her conception of moments of being might have been influenced by Wordsworth's "spots of time" as well, but it seems to me that the special attention she gives to these moments is related to her reading of Proust. Certainly, the philosophy she develops out of her experiences of these moments resembles Proust's: Although the moments themselves may contain a shock or a blow, they also promise "a revelation of some order; . . . a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. . . . From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" (72). Although Woolf quickly goes on to deny that there is a God, her sentiments here are clearly somewhat religious. They differ perhaps from Proust's mainly in the emphasis on the relationship to humanity as a whole experienced in the moments of being, although Proust's own conception of involuntary memory is by no means as individualistic as one might assume.

Woolf's conception of personal identity also shares much with Proust's. Sometimes this can be seen where no direct influence could be traced. In one of her best-known manifestoes, the essay "Modern Novels" of 1919, later revised as "Modern Fiction," Woolf wrote that "The mind, exposed to the ordinary

20. The theme of lesbianism and that of memory come together in Woolf's story, "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins have no points'" (1928), which she described to Vita Sackville-West as "a nice little story about Sapphism." Letter 1781, 8? July 1927, in *Letters*, vol. 3, 397.

21. "A Sketch of the Past" in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 70.

course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”²² This notion of life as a “semi-transparent envelope” appears in another form in Proust, who writes of the “*transparente enveloppe*” of another person’s identity which we fill with our own impressions.²³ In Scott Moncrieff’s translation, “Even in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole, which is identical for everyone, and need only be turned up like a page in an account-book or the record of a will; our social personality is created by the thoughts of other people . . . In the end [the notions we have of other people] come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks, to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice that these seem to be no more than a transparent envelope, so that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is our own ideas of him which we recognize and to which we listen.”²⁴ The difference between these two quotations, so typical respectively of Woolf and of Proust, lies perhaps in Woolf’s emphasis on how a myriad impressions forms each of our own consciousnesses and Proust’s complementary emphasis on how our image of others is composed so much out of our own desires. In the quotation from Woolf, it is we ourselves who are the semi-transparent envelopes; in Proust, it is another (here Swann). But in either case we find the typical emphasis on the way that subjective impressions shape reality, on the notion of the individual as merely a container for such impressions, and on the role of consciousness in forging unity out of the resulting flux. These are themes developed out of Pater and aestheticism, but in Woolf and Proust they seem clearly linked to a modernist aesthetic.

Yet, as the distinction I have suggested between impressionism and cubism indicates, Woolf’s would be a modernism with decorum. Woolf was somewhat “irritated” at having had her second novel, *Night and Day*, described by Katherine Mansfield as “Jane Austen up to date,” that is to say as an essentially traditional novel untouched by modern innovations.²⁵ If Proust, like Austen, seemed more decorous a precursor than Joyce or Brontë, he was, nonetheless, clearly a modern. He paid attention too to those aspects of social life that more “masculine” novelists like Tolstoy might have devalued, notably the giving of parties, a typically female occupation and one that takes up a considerable proportion of Proust’s work, lies at the center of *Mrs. Dalloway*, and plays an important role in *To the Lighthouse*. If the two are our great mod-

22. “Modern Novels,” in *Essays*, vol. 3, 33.

23. *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié et al. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–1989), vol. 1, 19.

24. *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, 15.

25. Diary entry of 28 November 1919, *Diary*, vol. 1, 314.

ern chroniclers of party-going and party-giving, however, they are also great novelists of family life. In the final chapter of his classic study *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach cites two famous scenes from the works of Woolf and of Proust to illustrate the characteristics of what he describes as “the realistic novel of the era between the two great wars,” or what we would call the modernist novel: “multipersonal representation of consciousness, time strata, disintegration of the continuity of exterior events, shifting of the narrative viewpoint.”²⁶ He emphasizes in particular that although Woolf’s method is “multipersonal” and Proust’s “unipersonal,” Proust’s method too has “synthesis as its aim,” so that unipersonal subjectivism overlaps with multipersonal intersubjectivism (536). The two passages that he quotes in support of this account show perhaps how much Woolf and Proust have in common and also where Woolf differs from Proust. In the famous scene in Proust, the narrator recalls himself as a young man waiting for his mother to come and give him a kiss before bed. Although he looks like Abraham taking Isaac off to the sacrifice in an engraving by nozzo Gozzoli, the narrator’s father does not in fact sacrifice him, and instead lets the mother go up to her son’s room to comfort him and read to him. This of course is a crucial moment of self-understanding for the young narrator, who realizes that his illness sets him apart from others. This realization turns the victory into a defeat. In the scene from *To the Lighthouse* with which Auerbach opens the chapter, we also see a mother and son, in this case Mrs. Ramsay, insisting that her son James stay still while she measures a brown stocking she is knitting for the Lighthouse keeper’s boy against James’s leg. Here too, the theme of conflict between fathers and sons is central, since Mr. Ramsay and his acolyte Tansley warn James that the weather the next day will not permit a journey to the lighthouse. The father’s words—“But it won’t be fine”—have the symbolic importance of Abraham sacrificing Isaac.²⁷ But whereas Proust represents his narrator remembering wistfully a scene in which the narrator in a sense triumphs over his father, Woolf gives us a scene, through the eyes both of the little boy and of his mother, in which the trip to the lighthouse will indeed not be made. Both scenes show how the experience of conflict in the family romance is tinged with a mixture of joy and sadness, aggression and guilt. Woolf places somewhat less emphasis than Proust on the act of recollection; Proust describes only his narrator’s emotions directly and then theorizes as to the narrator’s mother’s experience of the event. I do not think that we can make an ethical judgement (as Auerbach seems to want us to do) about whether the “unipersonal” method of Proust, which filters the narrative only through the son’s memory, or the “multipersonal” method of Woolf, which gives us multiple perspectives on events, is more “advanced.” There is an austerity in Proust’s refusal to let us inside the

26. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 546.

27. *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Susan Dick (Oxford: Shakespeare Head, 1992), 8.

mind of the narrator's mother, even as there is a generosity in Woolf's ability to represent the thoughts not only of James and Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay but even of the odious little atheist Tansley. Yet in both writers, I think, we see, as Auerbach suggested, the aim of "synthesizing" experience, a concentration on the power of memory and consciousness to transform such moments of conflict into what Woolf called moments of being, in which we see ourselves as part of a whole world that is itself a work of art. In this respect, Woolf chose her precursor well, for both Proust and Woolf give us a modern novel that is attuned to the conflicting desires and powers that shape the intimate world of childhood. They are both worthy artists in the tradition that Woolf traces back to Austen and James, even as they share some of the genius and anger that she chastises in Brontë and Joyce.

Yale University