

## INTRODUCTION

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This collection of essays focuses mainly on the early days of the Bloomsbury Group and on its long-lasting significance to the work of Virginia Woolf. It has grown out of a Conference held on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2005 at the Faculty of Letters, University of Porto, Portugal. The Conference was the first Woolfian event ever to be organised within the scope of the University's Institute of English Studies and it aimed to commemorate the centenary of that first Thursday Meeting at nr. 46, Gordon Square, which marks the beginning of the Bloomsbury Group. It also celebrated the centenary of Virginia Woolf's literary career and that of her only visit to Porto. The Conference was intended both for Woolf/Bloomsbury scholars and for the common reader interested in this literary, artistic and social phenomenon of the first decades of the twentieth century.

The presence of a considerable diversity of researchers and academics, from the United States of America, from Russia and from Portugal, had promised from the very beginning a fine compass of voices and the event turned out to do full justice to its initial inspiration. As a result, the editors considered that the publication of yet another collection of essays on Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group was thoroughly justified. Besides, each of the contributors took care to incorporate, to her or his paper written for the Conference, the product of recent research, thus opening up novel approaches to Woolf and Bloomsbury studies or consolidating established perspectives. The essays read at the Conference were then further enriched by new research material and details for publication purposes.

While a good number of the contributions to *Virginia Woolf: Three Centenary Celebrations* deal with the early years of Virginia Woolf's literary life, they nevertheless comprise a very wide and suggestive range of approaches to the issues in question. The essays are not limited to Bloomsbury's early years. They embrace the whole scope of Woolf's life, from her first reminiscences on her mother's lap to the closing words of her posthumously published novel, which, prophetically, opened up the way to the longevity of her work, giving the word to readers and critics. And... "they spoke".

The emotional, psychological, social and literary importance of the geographic shift, from Kensington to Bloomsbury, carried out by the Stephen siblings after their father's death, and the decisive repercussions this event had in Virginia Woolf's (then Stephen's) writing orientation constitute the basic theme

of the enlightening introductory essay by Maria Di Battista (Princeton University, U.S.A.). "The Sybil of the Drawing Room: Virginia Woolf in Old Bloomsbury", which launched the Conference, persuasively shows how "Woolf, whose literary personality and prospects are predominantly identified with a room of her own, began her professional life as a writer equally absorbed with the life of the drawing room. [...] [W]ithout the training she received and the human dramas and behaviours she observed there, her fiction, however exalted in its visionary musings and lyrical transports, would have been humanly barren".

Taking as a starting point Woolf's early diaries and essays, Natalya Reinhold (Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow) contends that such writings are more self-revealing than anything found in the author's later texts and that they signal the underlying significance of "the Other", one of Woolf's links to Modernity. In "'A Wonderful Compass of Voices': From a Passionate Apprenticeship towards Full-scale Writing", the essayist reveals her conviction that "Woolf is distinguished from a typical modernist writer by her focusing as much on the socio-cultural implications of depersonalising a writer's identity as on the formal technique of de-explicating the author in the narrative". Reinhold argues that Woolf's writing apprenticeship "developed along two main lines. One was connected with literary artefacts of the past, the other was a challenging issue of giving voice to those ambitions which had not been given any definite literary form by [...] present or previous generations".

In "Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being" Ana Clara Birrento (University of Évora, Portugal) chooses to read autobiography as a map of possibilities of the self and as a narrative created by the writer and recreated by each reader. Privileging in her exploration Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" as a means to uncover "the narrative strategies used by the author to tell herself, to construct her identity and power, giving voice and authority to herself as a discursive formation", Birrento views "the process of rewriting the self" as "a selective and imaginative construction of who we have been and who we are", a process that leaves to the critics the task of exploring what is obscured and of bringing to light Woolf's self, a self "who has no existence prior to the text and who does not coalesce with the creator".

In "'Happily I'm Bloomsbury': Virginia's Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury's Virginia", Maria Cândida Zamith (University of Porto, Portugal) surveys Woolf's life and doings in 1905, "the year of her coming of age". Remembering the distance between the late Victorian Hyde Park Gate atmosphere and a blossoming Gordon Square avant-garde, the essay emphasizes how both worlds could be

perceived to co-exist in the writer's inner self and, at the same time, how the parallels between Woolf's life and her writings are detectable right from her early fiction, actually forecasting all the literary strategies later followed by the author. The creation of the undefinable Bloomsbury Group, its genesis and composition are reminded in Zamith's informative essay. Woolf's visit to Porto on 5th April 1905 aboard the *Anselm* (whose picture provides the cover to this book) fostered the third motive to organise the Conference.

The influence of French art and culture on Bloomsbury at its origins is explored by Christine Froula (Northwestern University, U.S.A.), in "On French and British Freedoms: Early Bloomsbury and the Brothels of Modernity". Froula denounces Clive Bell's male discourse in his 1923 pamphlet "On British Freedom" and compares it to the Stephen sisters' understanding of their new freedoms through a creative dialogue with "France" and the French ways, the sisters' Bloomsbury emerging "dialectically not just from the differences between French and British freedoms but from the gender differences *within* them". In a vigorously argued essay, Froula insists on the importance of both sisters' agency as artists and women and shows that "what makes Woolf an author [...] no adequate understanding of modernism can ignore – is not that she wrote from within modernism's brothels but that she emerged from her minotauromachy, wounded but victorious, to write with such vision and power from outside them".

José Luís Araújo Lima (University of Porto, Portugal) singles out *Mrs. Dalloway* and brings forward some very cogent arguments about the book's particular textual strategies that lead the reader to gradually acquire an insight he or she does not share with the narrator's or the characters' because he or she was allowed to question the illusion of reality. "'For there they were': *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway" takes the reader along a journey of questioning discoveries that help understand the diversity of interpretations of the main character's self and, consequently, the diversity of selves who may be contained in one only person. In this novel, where "Clarissa is lost in Mrs. Dalloway", Woolf's textual strategies encourage the reader to build a point of view of his/her own while pondering on the "inner dialogue between two persons who are one".

Marilyn Schwinn-Smith (Five Colleges, U.S.A.) takes the reader through a fascinating and neglected field: the close relationship between Bloomsbury and the Russian authors and émigrés, choosing as example the translations

undertaken by Jane Harrison and others. "Bears in Bloomsbury: Jane Ellen Harrison and the Russians" recreates the political and social circumstances that brought Russian literature to the attention of the British elite, including the Hogarth Press and its founders. After the 1917 October revolution many émigrés – "Russia abroad" – chose London as their new home, and the intellectuals among them were soon made welcome by their English peers. The essay "brings together a number of diverse threads: the close-knit nature of the British literary community, the comparable intimacy among Russians abroad, and Bloomsbury's fascination with an exotic notion of Russia".

Marilyn Slutzky Zucker (University of Stony Brook, U.S.A.) focuses her attention on Woolf's heterogeneous experience of reality and her skill to treat words as living things that convey the multiplicity and ambiguity of lived experience, in the context of contemporary Physics theories, particularly Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. In "Woolf's Revisionist Poetics and the Materiality of Language", Zucker stresses "the readily detectable relation of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle to Woolf's work" and also the writer's "comfort with the Einsteinian notion that energy and matter are versions of one another". To the purpose she takes examples from *To The Lighthouse*, concluding that Woolf "constructed in literary language ambiguous, contingent yet meaningful analogues of the way the new physicists understood our world to work".

Drawing on the Levinasian concept of alterity, Lígia Silva (Instituto de Literatura Comparada Margarida Losa, University of Porto, Portugal) compares Woolf's novel *The Waves* and *O Jogo da Liberdade da Alma* (*The Game of the Freedom of the Soul*), by the Portuguese author Gabriela Llansol. In "Virginia Woolf and Gabriela Llansol – 'Sweeping the thick leaves of habit'" she demonstrates that in both texts the experience of writing cannot be separated from the dissolution of identity, but "while in V. Woolf the dissolution of identity involves a negative feeling of the loss of Self and is a consequence of an obsession with the fugacity of things and its consequent instability, with G.Llansol the dissolution is synonymous with liberation and affirmation of difference".

This collection of essays comes full circle with Luísa Flora's (University of Lisbon, Portugal) analysis, in "'The Desolate Ruins of My Old Squares': Woolf out of Bloomsbury and into the Future", of the writer's "gradual estrangement

from a consideration of politics as outside the realm of aesthetic experiment” as “part of her fight against any totalitarian narrative”. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf brings together out of the debris of a collapsing culture a composite text that moves into the future. When patriarchy seems exhausted, both gender and genre boundaries have to be overflowed and literary tradition is both very much alive and very much cliché. When no stable narratives any longer seem possible, out of the threat of chaos a new, fragmented open-ended fiction emerges.

While the central theme of the conference - celebrating Virginia Woolf and the hundredth anniversary of Bloomsbury-related events – emerges more or less explicitly from the bulk of the essays now collected, each one has its own specificity, each helps build a whole that may be seen as covering the hours of a full day, going from dawn to twilight. Following a pattern that evokes *Mrs Dalloway*'s one-day sequence interspersed with enlightening flashbacks, it also makes the bridge to the eclectic eternal one-day-long *Between the Acts* with its medley of literary, social and human conflicts and situations, brought to a close at the threshold of the future.

Throughout the journey of the conference, the diversity of approaches this book presents stimulated lively discussions with fruitful involvement both from the floor, where common readers, students and colleagues all showed their interest and played an active part in the debates, and from the researchers and academics who contributed with their papers. Each contributor to *Virginia Woolf: Three Centenary Celebrations* is solely responsible for her or his essay. The editors did their best to conform to each author's options and opinions while trying to ensure that the volume's consistency and unity as a book remained faithful to the occasion. Even though we could not expect to recapture the spirited atmosphere of that 16<sup>th</sup> March 2005 in Porto, we trust the book will enable all the participants to look back with enjoyment. Those who were not present will hopefully consider this volume a worthwhile opportunity for an always thought-provoking (re)reading of Virginia Woolf.

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Maria Cândida Zamith and Luísa Flora

