I would like to thank Marie for reminding us how dialogical Virginia Woolf’s imagination and literary identity may be. More specifically, I would like to thank Marie for reminding us that Virginia Woolf’s modernity / modernism is always dialogical and that such dialogism may be both complicit and agonistic.

Reading A Room of One’s Own against Sketches of Cambridge, one realizes of course that the complicity is more complex and runs deeper than one might think. If only because of the ventriloquism already present in Leslie Stephen’s text and the far from stable relation it entertains with a certain kind of tradition. Stephen’s sketches are steeped in the refined and subtle tradition of satire and irreverence one finds in the whole English tradition of essay-writing from Addison to Beerbohm. It is the same irreverence Woolf will practice throughout her whole career as an essayist and one which she celebrates in “Montaigne”. That irreverence has to do of course, with one’s capacity to take one’s distance from the monumentality of culture and the sham of class rituals, classe rituals that are so strategic to the Cambridge paraphernalia.

In that sense, one may argue that Woolf writes in 1929 very much in the vein that was her father’s in 1865 when he poked fun at the devotion of undergraduates for rowing and at the mores of a society that survives as pure ritual. Incidentally, Stephen and Woolf both intuited here a cultural logic that Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Granger would define as the “invention of tradition” many years later in their essay.

You might object of course, that the ethos of irreverence (to adapt Linda Hutcheon’s expression in Irony’s Edge) is far from being the same whether one writes as a don, educated at Cambridge and a Fellow of that seat of ideological power, or, on the contrary, as a woman who is not even allowed to trespass. One remembers of course, one of the founding scenes of Woolf’s essay and of her feminine poetics, in which we see a beadle forcing her / her persona back onto the gravel path, while she trespasses and steps on the college lawn. And the objection could not be overlooked.

Women have no place in Cambridge. And we know how productive Woolf’s self-definition as an uneducated girl was in her self-fashioning as a writer cum intellectual trespasser. Yet, even her complex personae — all the Maries and pseudonyms she hides behind — cannot conceal the fact that her position, in the topography of power is far more complex than that opening fiction would suggest.

In order to expose the binarisms of patriarchy, her fiction encrypts them in an allegorical reading of space, that constructs those oppositions in the very movement that displaces them. Virginia Woolf, as Frédéric Regard reminds us, “écrit sous X”, in order to adopt a generic posture that
emancipates her from the shackles and strictures of biographical determinisms and relocates her in a utopian world of fiction. A world of fiction in which the writer becomes not only androgynous — as the final thesis of the essay insists — but generic, and in which fiction offers leverage for political change. Thus “Weaving Victorian persistence into the fabric of modernity” — to quote Marie Laniel’s concluding words — also implies displacing identity onto the level of fiction. It implies fictionalizing one’s identity as she was to do as well throughout her essays, in “Evening Over Sussex: reflections in a motocar”, published posthumously in 1942, in “The Sun and the Fish”, published one year before A Room of One’s Own, or even as early as 1909 in “Impression at Bayreuth”. Entering in a dialogue with one’s inheritance implies that the feminine vision in the making be able to reconfigure that legacy, as Marie very aptly showed; it implies, I would also argue that it dislocate it.

Criticism has very efficiently argued that one way for Woolf of dislocating that legacy was in her capacity to open new lines of flight. This is for instance the central argument of Frédéric Regard’s essay on A Room of One’s Own, in La Force du féminin. For him, in Woolf, the movement of modernity meets the energy of phenomenological transport. The phenomenological poetics of Woolf becomes thus not only the very channel of literary modernity. It subverts the topography of patriarchal power, by introducing a form of fanciful agitation (see p. 63 of his essay).

As we know, that critical combination of phenomenology and repoliticized poetics was already central to Mrs Dalloway. Clarissa and her daughter Elizabeth are two images of the flâneuse. They both follow what Louis Marin would later define as “des allées traversières” (1992). By allowing themselves to drift, to get carried along, they allow sensation in conjunction with movement to open what Marin would define as a “pratique-fiction utopie” in the last section of the first chapter of Lectures traversières.

On the contrary, Peter Walsh — for all his subversive androgyny — remains a stalker as Susan Squier has shown. He still needs to harness his fantasy to the figure of a young woman turned object of desire, whom he will follow along the London streets to unleash his imagining possible alternative lives.

In A Room of One’s Own, the polymorphous persona of the narrator and her musings acquire a form of political criticity that has not escaped the attention of critics either, for whom Woolf’s phenomenology should be claimed for a political and gendered reading of hegemony.

I would like to argue that another kind of reconfiguration or displacement is also at work in Woolf’s reading of the Victorians, one that pits their legacy and the memory of their take on imagination and fancy against a more modern, more strident kind of influence.

That strident influence has to do with the modern culture of the mass media and of the new circulation of images and is to be found in a passage very rarely noticed by critics — actually, as far as
I am aware, a passage that has never been commented on by critics — in which Woolf’s persona is confronted with an “in your face” instance of patriarchal hegemony.

After she returns to London from Cambridge, you remember that she visits the British Library to try and understand men’s anger against women, an anger that has to do with their positivist analysis of women as a species. Nonplussed, she leaves the Library — the second seat of intellectual power we encounter after Cambridge — and feeling hungry has lunch in a small restaurant:

But why, I asked myself, having returned the books, why, I repeated, standing under the colonnade among the pigeons and the prehistoric canoes, why are they angry? And, asking myself this question, I strolled off to find a place for luncheon. What is the real nature of what I call for the moment their anger? I asked.

Here was a puzzle that would last all the time that it takes to be served with food in a small restaurant somewhere near the British Museum. Some previous luncher had left the lunch edition of the evening paper on a chair, and, waiting to be served, I began idly reading the headlines. A ribbon of very large letters ran across the page. Somebody had made a big score in South Africa. Lesser ribbons announced that Sir Austen Chamberlain was at Geneva. A meat axe with human hair on it had been found in a cellar. Mr justice ---- commented in the Divorce Courts upon the Shamelessness of Women. Sprinkled about the paper were other pieces of news. A film actress had been lowered from a peak in California and hung suspended in mid-air. The weather was going to be foggy. The most transient visitor to this planet, I thought, who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware, even from this scattered testimony, that England is under the rule of a patriarchy. Nobody in their senses could fail to detect the dominance of the professor. His was the power and the money and the influence. He was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor. He was the Foreign Secretary and the judge. He was the cricketer; he owned the racehorses and the yachts. He was the director of the company that pays two hundred per cent to its shareholders. He left millions to charities and colleges that were ruled by himself. He suspended the film actress in mid-air. He will decide if the hair on the meat axe is human; he it is who will acquit or convict the murderer, and hang him, or let him go free. With the exception of the fog he seemed to control everything. Yet he was angry.

Woolf’s persona comes face to face with hegemony at work and her indictment is as direct as the visual manipulation of the front page is indirect. Turning her back on the world of privileged and pampered knowledge, she plunges in the world of modernity, rendered here through montage: the restaurant scene being juxtaposed with the British Library scene and the front page evincing the visual short-circuit strategy of modern journalism and news editing. The same montage technique was also central, at the same moment, to John Dos Passos’ Manhattan Transfer and, the Dadaism of the likes of Kurt Schwitters or John Hartfield.

She proceeds with the new disrupted language of modern media as she does with the inherited language of Victorian poetry. She reclaims it for her own gendered, political agenda and lays bare the implicit ideological economy that underlies it. She exposes the complicity of the new, budding culture industry of the Hollywood dream factory with judicial, political and financial power. She was of course to develop the same argument in Three Guineas nine years later. We know, from her 1926 essay on cinema how suspicious she was of the new hypnotic power of cinema on the passive spectator. It is the same suspicion felt by Benjamin.

To the hypnotic power of the new mass media, she opposed the typically avant-garde praxis of reading against the image. The avant-garde capacity to disclose the apparently seamless logic of the montage.
Like Bertolt Brecht in his War Diaries, she undoes the ideological montage that governs the new modern mass media. Georges Didi-Huberman’s commentary of Brecht’s Diaries in his introductory volume to L’œil de l’histoire seems to apply here beautifully. As Didi-Huberman argues about Brecht’s critical take on montage, Woolf takes up the technique in order to “remonter à la source du montage”. And what she sees as instrumental to that new pernicious strategy of containment has to do with the massification of culture, the deceptively dislocated juxtaposition of culture and politics, the deceptive autonomy of the cultural realm from the realm of political power.

At this stage in her career, this is yet but an intuition. She was to build and expand on it later, in Thee Guineas, when she drops the mask of subtle irreverence and no longer writes under X, but as herself, an angry woman.

The “écriture-lecture” defined by Kristeva as offering the necessary leverage to unhinge the complacency of culture thus applies both to the new economy of signs she finds herself immersed in and to her literary legacy. In both cases, reading / writing as a (modernist) woman implies she reconfigure, dislocate, but also “remonte” the naturalized language of domination. In that sense, she writes as an avant-gardist as much as a modernist, thus reconfiguring the aesthetic map further.

Cited texts:
— Woolf, Virginia, A Room of One’s Own, 1929.