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- 1 Before the publication of Ralf Freedman's *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity* (1980), Dean Baldwin's *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short fiction* (1989) and Dominic Head's chapter on Woolf in *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (1992), Virginia Woolf's short stories were considered by critics to be the marginal part of her canon. Woolf was better known as a novelist, and many critics tended to adopt her own "casually dismissive attitude" (Reynier 2) when referring to her short fictions. In the wake of Nena Skrbic's *Wild Outburst of Freedom: Reading Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (2004), and Kathryn Benzel and Ruth Hoberman's collection of essays *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (2004), Christine Reynier's *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of The Short Story* (2009) reevaluates the importance of a collection of formative experiences in the politics of genre and the ethics of form. Counteracting the common assumption that Woolf's short stories are "mere laboratories leading to the writing of the novels" (13), Christine Reynier leans on close readings but favours a synthetic approach: she looks for critical unity under the apparent generic disparity and shows how Woolf "[wove] her short stories into her novels and essays, thus refusing all distinction between so-called major and minor genres" (15). Reynier never isolates the short fictions from the vast body of Woolf's writing; she uses the author's diaries, letters and essays to retrace the complex history of the stories' composition, publication and reception. Thus, she is able to "reconstruct" (19) Woolf's own definition and theory of the genre as a "paradoxical and fundamentally ethical space" (19). As suggested in the introduction, Reynier's method implies a revision through recontextualisation of the editorial choices and critical discourses (including Woolf's own) that have helped to compose the partial vision scholars and readers have long had of her short stories. It relies on Woolf's writings and own terminology to delineate her conception of the short story form, and offers new analytical tools to help readers and critics reassess the texts' aesthetic, ethical and political value. Rather than resting exclusively upon the successive readings of individual stories, Reynier's study proposes a tour in a "space of encounter" (17), a

“conversation” between texts, author and reader that takes us from Woolf’s essays about the short story to an analysis of her “impersonal art of proportion and emotion” (34) as a democratic “site of resistance” (111).

- 2 In her first chapter, Reynier seeks to trace the outline of Woolf’s theory of the short story through a careful reading of the essays where fragments of definition and reflections about other short story writers are disseminated. In “On Re-Reading Novels” (1922), “The Russian Point of View” (1925), and “An Essay in Criticism” (1925), Woolf confronts short stories from Flaubert, Chekhov, and Hemingway, respectively. Reynier argues that these essays provide the “patient” reader with “broad, flexible guidelines that will help [him] to read the wide range of Woolf’s short stories in a comprehensive way while respecting their diversity” (20). Thus, the short story according to Woolf implies brevity as a kind of “formal purity and perfection” (23). It is an impersonal art of “ungendered anonymity” (24), which, in Woolf’s mind, links it with the new demands of modernism but also with the ideal of universality represented by Greek literature as she understood it. An “art of emotion rather than of thought” (24), the short story according to Woolf is then structured around a “moment of being”, an emotion intensely experienced by characters and readers that becomes the narrative itself and the definition of its effect. Closer to poetry and drama than to the novel, Woolf’s ideal short stories are also hybrid forms implying “cross-fertilisation” as “the necessary condition of beauty and purity” (27).
- 3 Little critical work has focused on Woolf’s conception of genre as a literary, cultural and political practice: in this respect, Reynier’s sensitivity to the ideological implications of a positive poetics of hybridity is thought-provoking. Moreover, as she reconstructs Woolf’s poetics of the short story form, the reader is made aware of the underestimated competence of Woolf as a critic. Reynier shows how the notions of “brevity”, “openness”, “conclusiveness” and “hybridity” are indirectly questioned, transformed and reappropriated by Woolf in order to redefine the short story as an “ethical space” without ever essentializing the form. For the first time, Woolf’s complex conception of the short story finds a place in the history of short story theories (Edgar Allan Poe, Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Eileen Baldeshweiler, Pierre Tibi are mentioned). This is where the profound influence of Russian literature on Woolf’s art – and more particularly of Chekhovian notions of “humanity”, “honesty” and “inconclusiveness” – is illuminated by Reynier’s reading of Levinas, Derek Attridge and Andrew Gibson. Because Woolf envisages her short stories as the impersonal expression of proportion and emotion, she “inscrib[es] herself within the English tradition of sensibility” while favouring, Reynier argues, an “ethics of affect” in the form of an open textual freedom that “welcome[s] the other in its multiple shapes.” (32).
- 4 Whether Woolf’s own short stories match the indirect definition elaborated in the essays is the question Christine Reynier answers in Chapter 2, “Woolf’s Short Stories as a Paradoxical and Dynamic Space”. Here the critic focuses on the “story-telling process” (36) in Woolf’s short fiction, thereby justifying the term “story” while redefining it according to Woolf’s poetics of tension. Again, the aim is not to read the stories individually but to achieve a synthetic vision of Woolf’s narrative, structural and rhetorical transformations of what many critics of the genre have called its intrinsic binarity. While the notion of binarity rests upon a fixed system of oppositions, the tension described here is a fruitful “dialectics of proportion,

impersonality and emotion" (36) that always implies movement and dynamism. In the stories analyzed in this section, Reynier detects a "constant pull and counter-pull between continuity and discontinuity, between totality and fragmentation" (49). Her analysis of Woolf's paradoxical use of the "paradigmatic moment", of unframed narratives and closure effects may appear to depend upon well-known strategic sites of the genre. Yet, in the same way as Woolf liked to rejuvenate conventional definitions, Reynier revisits those sites to delineate Woolf's own poetics of the genre while offering new insights into the author's debt to the German Romantic fragment – both an "autonomous form and a part of a whole" (56) – and into the Benjaminian "mosaic-effect" of the Woolfian short story.

- 5 The following three chapters define Woolf's stories as structurally and discursively dependent upon "the form of conversation, a dialogic fictional space, a space of debate, plurality, tolerance and openness, a space of generic hybridity and impurity, a democratic and ethical space" (146-47). Chapter 3 starts by redefining the "other" that the "self" encounters in the Woolfian short story, and the conversation that then takes place. Basing her argument on Derek Attridge's conception of the other as the "new with an irreducible singularity" and on the broad Latin sense of the term "conversation" as "the act of living with", "having dealings with others" (61), Christine Reynier first explores how characters are related to each other in a number of Woolf's short stories. She suggests that in those stories love and hate, sympathy and exclusion, happiness and suffering are emotions framed within a moment whose emotional intensity raises the ethical implications of intersubjective relationships. In each story "spoken conversation interacts with silent conversation" (67), and this intertwining of dialogue and the unspoken becomes "the paradigm of human intercourse and its complexity" (69). Connecting the different stories she examines in a fruitful metacritical gesture, Reynier subtly analyzes the different forms of "responsiveness to the other" (69) and the varying connections between the characters, thus providing a synthetic vision of apparently disconnected texts. The chapter ends with a brilliant analysis of "A Dialogue Upon Mount Pentelicus", a metafictional and satirical story about the inadequacy of conventional dialogue which provides the reader with Woolf's own theory of conversation as a democratic, political, ethical and aesthetic space, in between drama and poetry, where voices – neither exactly spoken nor written – are exchanged and where dissent is possible. As Reynier shows, this space is equated by Woolf with Greek art and with her own art of the short story.
- 6 In Chapter 4, this definition of conversation is extended to the "encounter between creator and reader" (90) as Reynier examines the metafictional mechanism at work in Woolf's stories and how it implies a collaborative process and an experience of alterity at another level.  
 In "The Shooting Party", "The Unwritten Novel", "The Searchlight", "A Haunted House", "The String Quartet", "The Mark on the Wall" and "The Symbol", Woolf's technique of *mise en abyme* is shown to lay bare the process of fictional creation by making "the invisible visible" (98). Triggering off a series of "visions" (92) or "mapping the creator's inner self [...] through a symbolic use of space, colours, elements and objects" (98), the embedded narratives characterizing those stories stage the fundamental ingredients of Woolf's creative process: the "self" as "the subject-matter of creation" (98); "truth", as the for-ever elusive object of the writer's quest; the "visionary nature of fiction" as its "antinomic" fabric (94),

and the “active” reader with whom the creator establishes an endless conversation. Itself a “moment of being” involving recognition and bewilderment, defamiliarisation and Barthesian pleasure, this conversation is an ethical act of welcoming the other. Again, Reynier’s argument relies on a close reading of the texts’ metaphors, syntax, rhythm and punctuation while she connects each story with Woolf’s choices as formulated in her novels or in some of her most famous critical essays. Reynier thus gradually delineates a fictional territory where characters, readers and texts become participants in a “gigantic conversation” that offers the possibility of a “responsible” exchange doing justice to the “alterity, singularity and inventiveness of the literary work” (109).

- 7 In “Woolf’s Short Story as a Site of Resistance”, Reynier’s explores the way in which “the political, the ethical and the aesthetic are closely intertwined in Woolf’s short stories” (111). In the wake of studies by Toril Moi, Rachel Bowlby and Frédéric Regard on Woolf and on Modernism, Reynier addresses the difficult question of Woolf’s autonomous art versus its political commitment. That she tries to solve this “apparent contradiction” (112) through short stories that have mostly been read as formal, high modernist experiments lacking any political dimension proves her ambition. Her success in this matter is one of the numerous added values of her work. Showing that “A Society” is the only Woolfian story which reads like an “openly committed manifesto” (123), Reynier demonstrates how many others are indirect denunciations of – or, more exactly, unspoken conversations about – the repressive silences imposed by Edwardian society. In “A Woman’s College from the Outside”, “The Legacy” and “The Shooting Party”, Reynier shows how Woolf uses the silences inscribed in the narrative to critique and to resist the repressive power of such institutions as marriage, class, religion and imperialism. In the short stories staging the confrontation between men and women, the strategy of indirection displayed in the dialogues and the gaps in the female characters’ speeches suggest a form of political “protest” (121). That this protest should be mostly silent and indirect does not diminish its symbolic efficiency: silence is not equated here with passivity or censorship. Rather, it is “re-appropriated” (124) and claimed as a “poetical tool” (125). As such, Reynier suggests, it should therefore be considered alongside other poetic forms of resistance to monologic authoritarian discourse, such as polyphony and generic hybridisation. Just as the pool in “The Fascination of the Pool” is inhabited by “voices of all times, ages, genders and social conditions” (131), the Woolfian short story gives its readers access to the “countless voices of the others” and to other literary genres, thus opening its unstable frontiers in a hospitable and democratic way.
- 8 Deeply informed and thought-provoking, Christine Reynier’s *Virginia Woolf’s Ethics of the Short Story* offers original synthetic reading of Woolf’s short fiction while illuminating often unexplored, very complex stories such as “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martin” and “A Dialogue Upon Mount Pentelicus”. In a very challenging and fruitful way, the book lends its own form to the “mosaic effect” explored in Chapter 2: each story mentioned and examined is a fragment of a whole and should be understood as both a fragment and as a whole. Reynier’s critical study is one that enlightens by contextualizing and connecting. For the specialist of short story theories, this work helpfully reinscribes Woolf in the literary tradition she is indebted to and helps redefine; it also offers a reflection on the possible, if not necessary, revision of key concepts in the study of the genre – brevity, fragmentation, the unsaid, inconclusion,

indirection, genre-blurring — while suggesting new answers to the old question of the short story's position in the hierarchy of genres. Reynier's thorough knowledge of the author and of the modernist context proposes new conceptual frames with which to approach Woolf's short stories and, I would argue, her essays and novels. In this respect, it proves to be a precious tool for both scholars and students. It is the work of a passionate specialist who manages to share with us, and enlighten, the "difficulty" of Woolf's short stories and "their inexhaustible gift to the reader" (148).