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► **To cite this version:**

Christine Reynier. Theorizing the Modernist Short Story with Woolf (and Agamben) as an Art of Empowering "Poverty". *Journal of The Short Story in English / Les Cahiers de la nouvelle*, 2015. hal-03278028

**HAL Id: hal-03278028**

**<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-03278028>**

Submitted on 5 Jul 2021

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## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

64 | Spring 2015

Special Section: The Modernist Short Story, and Varia

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1573>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2015

ISBN: 978-2-7535-5056-8

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Christine Reynier, « Theorizing the Modernist Short Story with Woolf (and Agamben) as an Art of Empowering “Poverty” », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 64 | Spring 2015, Online since 01 March 2017, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1573>

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# Theorizing the Modernist Short Story with Woolf (and Agamben) as an Art of Empowering “Poverty”

Christine Reynier

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- 1 Although she is a canonical modernist novelist, Woolf appears to some readers, like William Boyd, as a disabled short story writer,<sup>1</sup> which may account for the fact that few book-length studies of her short stories have been published so far.<sup>2</sup> What may be unsettling to some readers—and challenging to others—is that Woolf provides a theory of the short story within her own practice of the genre. Going beyond metafictional games, she provides the means of conceptualizing the modernist short story along lines which are neither those formalist critics will follow nor those the supporters of the Great Divide will defend.<sup>3</sup> When read closely, her short stories point at the way Modernism is deeply indebted to and embedded within Victorian and Edwardian fiction, which leads us to revise some assumptions about Modernism. Building upon my previous work on Virginia Woolf’s short stories, I propose to come back to one of her short stories and suggest, in the light of Agamben’s recent work, some further ways of understanding her conception of the genre, which may illuminate the modernist short story at large as an art of empowering “poverty.”

## Capturing the elusive form of Woolf’s short story

- 2 What is most striking for a reader of Woolf’s short stories is their great variety: they offer tales of love and passion (“Kew Gardens,” “Moments of Being”) as well as tales of failed marriages and adultery (“Lappin and Lapinova,” “The Legacy”); tales of inequality (“A Society”) and tales of violence, rape and wounded selves (the Dalloway stories).<sup>4</sup> They give glimpses of the lives of “mysterious figures” (“An Unwritten Novel” 121), their ephemeral joy at remembering a kiss (as Eleanor does in “Kew Gardens”), their contentment at sleeping under an apple-tree (as Miranda does in “In the Orchard”) or their relief at finding out a supposedly dead friend is alive (“Sympathy”);

a few words are overheard in a garden (“Kew Gardens”) or in the watering place in the story of the same name; silent voices mainly are overheard by an eavesdropping narrator: unprepossessing moments of human experience are highlighted briefly the sooner to dissolve into nothingness.

- 3 If Woolf’s short stories display a great variety of themes, they also resort to a great variety of literary genres, turning from the ghost story in “A Haunted House” to the thriller in “The Mysterious Case of Miss V.,” the journal in “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn,” memoirs in “Memoirs of a Novelist,” the letter in “The Symbol,” the fable in “Solid Objects,” the children’s story in “Nurse Lugton’s Curtain” or “The Widow and the Parrot” and portraits and caricatures in “Portraits” or “The Man who Loved his Kind”.
- 4 A variety of methods can also be found in Woolf’s short stories that now come in a cycle as the Dalloway stories do or in isolated units, as it is the case for all the others; they range from the impressionist style of a reverie on a mark on a wall or a picture in blue and green (“Blue and Green”), from the impressions of a music lover during a concert (“The String Quartet”), of a snail in a flower-bed (“Kew Gardens”) or of a heron flying over a town (“Monday or Tuesday”) to the metafictional reflections of “The Lady in the Looking-Glass.” Such variety makes it difficult to map out and categorise Woolf’s short stories. It also makes them difficult to grasp. They keep eluding the reader, all the more so since they stage “evanescent figures,” dissolving or disintegrating figures that have a hallucinatory quality.
- 5 If Woolf’s short stories are of an essentially elusive nature, it is also because of their ambivalence. They combine a taste for minute detail and for metaphor, as exemplified in “Kew Gardens,” with a taste for secrecy and ellipses, as can be seen in “The Legacy” or “The Mark on the Wall.” They can capture the Victorian world through Porchester Terrace in “Lappin and Lapinova” and the dying Edwardian one in “The Shooting Party” while they are firmly grounded in the world of modernity through their evocation of the changing of gear of the motor omnibuses, the experiments in spiritualism and the traumatic aftermath of the First World war in “Kew Gardens,” for instance.<sup>5</sup> They have rhythm, vivacity and life: they are unquestionably modern and rebellious, in tune with the arts that were developing at the time and the new pace of life, but their exacerbated modernity and taste for experimentation definitely relies on Victorian and Edwardian models. As such, they seem to me significant of the modernist short story at large. All the more so since they flaunt their differences and plurality, their desire to escape all models, all forms of standardization: these “wild outbursts of freedom”<sup>6</sup> are understandably impossible to capture. The reader can only marvel at their multi-faceted nature and value the absence of all fixed meaning. Their very elusiveness makes re-reading a constantly renewed pleasure and experience.
- 6 But how can we think of this great variety of texts as a unique literary genre? Bringing together Woolf’s essays on short story writers and her own short stories, I suggested in my previous work that Woolf defines the short story as an impersonal art of proportion and emotion, setting it within a space characterized by circulation, incompleteness and inconclusiveness, a fundamentally ethical space of encounter, where conversation (in the form of spoken or more often silent words between characters, writer and reader, various genres, modes, texts or art forms) appears to be the form of the encounter as well as the locus of emotion. “Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus” exemplifies the art of conversation Woolf practices and its strong ethical component. I would like to come

back to this specific short story and analyse it in a different but complementary light, with the help of Agamben's work. "Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus" will come out as providing a theory of the short story as an empowering art of poverty which reverberates through Woolf's own short stories and those of her contemporaries.

## Woolf's short story as an art of "poverty"

- 7 "Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus" is an early short story which was probably written at the end of 1906, soon after Woolf's return from Greece, but remained unpublished until 1987.<sup>7</sup> It is a very biting criticism of education in Cambridge and men's privileges. Set on the slopes of Mount Pentelicus, it deals with a group of young English men travelling in Greece and coming face to face with a monk. Although the monk appears at the very end of the narrative, he is, to my mind, central to the understanding of the short story.

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## "Poverty" as bareness

- 8 A "great brown form" (67), dressed very plainly, the monk has clearly renounced all material possessions and comes out as a figure of poverty. As such, he first serves as a foil to the pretentiousness of the young English students straight out of Harrow and Cambridge, and becomes the vehicle of the satire of their elitism, their spite and their fake vision of Greece. Indeed, the narrative mainly consists of a dialogue between these English students who, for most of them, admire Plato and Sophocles and are disappointed with the modern Greeks, whom they call "barbarians," and consider they are themselves the true heirs of the Ancient Greeks. One of them, though, disagrees and explains that what they call the Greeks is but a utopian construction referring to "all that we do not know and [...] all that we dream and desire" (66). And the narrator suggests in-between the lines that when the young men talk of the Ancient Greeks as "fix[ing] their minds upon the beautiful and the good" (65), they are not talking about the Ancient Greeks but about G.E. Moore's ethics. Towards the end of the narrative, they are confronted with a monk, an impressive but simple figure who addresses them all in plain words which, by contrast with their haughty attitude, sound like words of openness and generosity, signs of a truly ethical disposition. In a youthful and vengeful text, Woolf exposes and derides the academic world to which she has not been given access, a theme she will develop in *A Room of One's Own*.
- 9 The figure of the monk is somewhat unexpected in the work of a writer who has had no religious education and has no religious faith; it consequently tends to strike the reader as ironic. However, what Woolf insists on in the short story is not at all the religious belief of the monk, but his simplicity: his plain brown gown, evocative of the Franciscan Friars Minor's outfit, his plain words, at odds with the young Englishmen's endless discourse which, by contrast, sounds empty and meaningless, and his humble way of life (he is gathering dry wood). The monk's poverty, here defined as simplicity, bareness and humbleness, stands out as a positive value.
- 10 The monk's choice of a life deprived of all material possessions first reads as a criticism of the society the writer herself was living in, a materialist and capitalist society. The figure of the monk may thus be seen as articulating within the short story the

economic and political criticism Woolf would phrase in later essays such as “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” where Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells are famously taken to task for their materialism, a form of writing which, according to Woolf, amounts to condoning capitalism.

- 11 Concomitantly, the figure of the monk appears to reflect on the nature of the text in which it features. His choice of a bare life devoid of all superfluity reflects Woolf’s own choice in her essays on short story writers. There, Woolf repeatedly admires the simplicity and bareness of style of Chekhov and Hemingway’s short stories while lamenting Hemingway’s excessive and superfluous dialogue. When, at the end of “Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus,” the monk meets the young Englishmen, he utters one single and simple word, “good evening” (68), thus exemplifying Woolf’s desire for as few words as possible in a short story and especially, as little dialogue as possible:

And probably it is this superfluity of dialogue [in Hemingway’s short stories] which leads to that other fault which is always lying in wait for the writer of short stories: the lack of proportion. A paragraph in excess will make these little craft lopsided and will bring about that blurred effect which, when one is out for clarity and point, so baffles the reader. (*Essays IV*: 455)

- 12 Lack of adornment and artifice, bareness and simplicity go together with beauty in this figure who “had the nose and brow of a Greek statue” (67) and an intense light in his eyes, as is repeatedly made clear (67-68). In that respect, the monk embodies the bareness, power of concentration and intensity the short story should aim at.
- 13 The humble tasks the monk performs, the simple way in which he meets and greets the English students also highlight the simple stuff the short story should be made of: ordinary situations, ordinary characters and ordinary words. The value of the ordinary is emphasised through this figure as well as that of humanness. Woolf thus defines the economy and brevity of the short story in terms of poverty: she borrows from economics a term which usually refers to what is downgraded in the economic world and which consequently carries negative connotations, she retrieves it and turns it into a literary asset.
- 14 Furthermore, for the monk, renouncing material goods goes together with renouncing his own identity: he has no name, he is simply the monk, the very symbol of the narrator’s impersonality Woolf yearns for in a short story. He is also the voice of the past, the inheritor of the Ancient Greeks. But whereas the students think of the Ancient Greeks as philosophers and thinkers, the narrator suggests at the outset of the short story, that the Ancient Greeks are the stone masons and the innumerable slaves who “wore out their lives” (63) on the slopes of Mount Pentelicus, the site of the quarries for the Parthenon, usually only connected with the name of sculptor Phidias who oversaw its construction. Like the stone masons, the slaves and the peasants, the monk belongs to this long line of anonymous figures and is their spokesperson. He is the voice of the humble people. The gown the monk wears may also be said to give the monk a somewhat sexless appearance in keeping with the genderlessness Woolf advocates and wishes Hemingway or D.H. Lawrence had been able to respect, regretting “their display of self-conscious virility” in their short stories (*Essays IV*, 454). The monk thus embodies Woolf’s ideal of an impersonal personality, which is exemplified in her short stories through a narrator who now resorts to the first person plural, “we,” now to the singular “I,” trying not to betray his or her sex.

## An enabling “poverty”

- 15 The monk, who is deeply rooted in time and can connect the past with the present, appears to be the voice of simplicity as well as a timeless mediating voice. His poverty may be material as well as spiritual and intellectual, since he is probably illiterate; however, it is an enabling poverty: “Such a flame as that in the monk’s eye [...] will burn on still in the head of monk or peasant when more ages are passed than the brain can number” (68). His piercing gaze is not evoked as contemplating a form of divine transcendence but simply as a “power which survives trees” (67) and as tracing a “solid and continuous avenue from one end of time to the other” (68). Through the pun on “eye” and “I,” the “clarified” light in his “eye” also suggests that contemplation for Woolf is turned inwards towards the self, in other words towards the human subject (and mundane matters) (67). If with a pinch of salt as it is often the case with Woolf, the monk becomes a figure of the short story writer as humble craftsman, dealing with human experience, an ordinary form of beauty.
- 16 Through the figure of the monk, Woolf turns poverty into a concept which reflects both on the short story and the short story writer. What Woolf calls in her essays proportion, emotion and impersonality is here encompassed by the notion of poverty, usually defined in terms of economic lack, but endowed here with positive overtones and equated with bareness, intensity and anonymity.
- 17 Furthermore, the figure of the monk may well be doubly ironic, not only because it is a miraculous apparition that, like Moses, comes out of a bush, but also because it helps, as we have seen, to satirise the English students; his piercing eye is also the eye of the satirist who can see through these youths and their pretention at knowledge. More exactly, it derides students modeled on Woolf’s own brothers, Thoby and Adrian,<sup>9</sup> who were fascinated by G.E. Moore’s philosophy, a philosophy shaped, in spite of its author, by Moore’s evangelical background, the same background Leslie Stephen had been brought up in, before he rejected it.<sup>10</sup> Choosing the figure of a monk, probably a Franciscan one (hence, a Catholic one), as an image of the writer, is a way for Woolf to assert her difference from her family and friends and her marginal position. Adopting a figure of poverty also means claiming as her own the poor economic condition women in general,<sup>11</sup> and women writers in particular,<sup>12</sup> had long been condemned to. Woolf thus turns the social disability that marginalisation and poverty can be, into a creative ability.<sup>13</sup> However, through the almost sexless figure of the monk, she is careful not to turn poverty into a necessarily gendered quality.
- 18 The short story, usually regarded as the poorer of the literary genres, coming second only after the novel, is here claimed as an art of poverty and as valuable: it is thus placed center stage and given pride of place.

## “Poverty” as use

- 19 The concept of poverty as redefined by Woolf seems to articulate another important characteristic of the short story. In “Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus,” we see the monk gathering dry wood on the slopes of the mountain, out of his monastery, on grounds belonging to others. This is the form of highest poverty Giorgio Agamben analyses in *The Highest Poverty. Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, focusing on Franciscan monks and

poverty as *usus*. Agamben shows that for the Franciscan monks, the claim of poverty “does not represent an ascetic or mortifying practice to obtain salvation as it did in the monastic tradition, but it is now an inseparable and constitutive part of the ‘apostolic’ or ‘holy’ life, which they profess to practice in perfect joy” (92). Although Woolf does not say which order the monk belongs to, that she should have dressed him in brown rather than the black clerical dress of the Greek Orthodox monks, may be significant of her choice of the Franciscan order of Friars Minor and what is interesting here is that the monk comes to exemplify “poverty as use,” as making use of what belongs to others.

- 20 By resorting to the figure of the monk, Woolf seems to point at her own literary choice: the choice of poverty, of making use of what belongs to others without appropriating it. The figure of the monk enables Woolf to account for her method: divesting herself of her own identity (and possibly, of her own gender), she adopts a posture of poverty which enables her to use the property of other writers and artists, hence, to use various literary genres and other art forms. She enters the territory of Shakespeare in “Phyllis and Rosamond,” of John Ruskin in “Kew Gardens,” of Charles Dickens or Leonard Woolf and uses their property. Two examples will suffice to show how she proceeds.
- 21 In “A Haunted House,” Woolf “uses” Charles Dickens’s title of his cycle of short stories, *The Haunted House* (1859). In this Christmas book, Dickens’s narrator settles in a dark haunted house, “the avoided house”, soon identifies the so-called ghost as a young stable-boy but nevertheless, gathers a whole group of friends so as to chase the ghost and humour the villagers who so readily believe in it. Each friend, that is Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell and other Victorian writers, tells his own story in turn and alternately tries to find the ghost in the clock room, the double room, the picture room, the cupboard, and so on. In these stories, the ghost appears to be now a childhood memory (in Charles Dickens’s “The Ghost in Master B’s Room”), now a traumatic event (in Wilkie Collins’s “The Ghost in the Cupboard Room”), now a dream (in George Augustus Sala’s “The Ghost in the Double Room”) or a ghost named desire (in Hesba Stretton’s “the Ghost in the Clock Room”) or guilt (in Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Ghost in the Garden Room”). The whole cycle aims at deflating with humour and scepticism, the frightening power of gothic ghost stories and emptying ghosts of their supernatural meaning to locate them within the human psyche.<sup>14</sup> Woolf’s “A Haunted House” takes its cue from Dickens but transforms the multiple narrators into an ungendered rainbow-like narrator who is now singular (“I”) now plural (“we”), and who, like Dickens, locates the ghost in the human subconscious mind while endowing it with an evanescent quality, thus privileging openness and indeterminacy. The title chosen by Woolf emphasises this very indeterminacy through the shift from the article “the” to the indeterminate “a,” an article which turns Dickens’s haunted house into any house, everyone’s house, thus locating the ghost into everyone’s consciousness and giving it a universal quality. By using, almost plagiarising Dickens’s title without acknowledging her debt, Woolf takes his own modern parody of gothic ghost stories into the sphere of indeterminacy, the very hallmark of modernism.
- 22 My second example will be “The Duchess and the Jeweller,” a short story which is, according to David Bradshaw, Woolf’s “most controversial piece of work, largely inexcusable” because of “its offensive subject matter” (xxx). Only Hermione Lee seems to have defended it, claiming that in this story, “Woolf separates herself off from the habitual, half-conscious anti-Semitism of her circle. She spells out her complicity in



bigotry and offensiveness by way of self-accusation and social critique [...]” (680, qtd. in Bradshaw xxxi). My contention is that this short story, written in 1932 and published in 1938,<sup>15</sup> only makes sense when read along with Leonard Woolf’s “Three Jews,” first published in 1917 by the Hogarth Press with Virginia’s “The Mark on the Wall.” In his short story, Leonard Woolf stages three characters who are apparently very different: a narrator who does not care much for his Jewishness, a second one who is indifferent to his faith while he recognises he still belongs to Palestine, and a third one, a grave-keeper, who is Jewish to the backbone but refuses his son’s marriage, not on the grounds that the girl he married is a Christian believer, but that she is a servant. This story illustrates the difficulties of getting rid of one’s Jewishness even when it has become a meaningless religion and set of traditions. It mainly points at the Jews’ dilemma, their being torn between England and Palestine, their sense of belonging and not belonging, their being both insiders and outsiders. The second character is, for instance, both able to see the other Jews as an Englishman of the time does, through stereotypical physical features, that is, from a distance and as an outsider; at the same time, he can recognise the narrator is a Jew and discuss Jewishness with him as an insider. Similarly, the grave-keeper is as class-conscious as any Englishman could be while being a Jew. The characters are shown to conform to stereotypes while evading them. Leonard Woolf exemplifies in this semi-autobiographical story the duality and dilemma Jewish people like him experienced.

- 23 As for Virginia Woolf, she stages a Jewish character, the richest jeweller in England. One of the sentences which have been said to be the most offensive in her story, beyond the character’s name, is the description of his nose, “like an elephant’s trunk” (78). This is in fact a quotation from Leonard’s story in which he also emphasises the stereotypical nose of the Jews (7). What Virginia is interested in in this story, is the duality of her character, how this successful jeweller often “dismantles” and becomes again the poor boy in a back alley that he was in his youth. She stages the same duality as Leonard does, exposing the man’s vulnerability under the cliché. Leonard Woolf describes three Jews who seem to fit the cliché, with their dark hair, long noses and loose arms, and unveils the Englishman under the Jew. Indeed, the narrator goes to Kew Gardens on the first Spring Sunday, has tea under the apple-blossom, where the second character joins him; the grave-keeper refuses his son’s marriage not because he married a Christian woman but out of class-consciousness and prejudice. Leonard and Virginia Woolf stage the same duality in their characters, how they both fit and evade clichés. In those two comparable ways, the two writers dismantle the clichés and point at their emptiness and offensiveness.
- 24 In a reflection on what it means to be a Jew, especially when there is no more faith, Leonard Woolf shows how Jewishness is both connected to history and Palestine and is also in the gaze of the other, in the other’s perception of physical difference, a perception shaped by prejudice that has been instrumental in constructing stereotypes. The insidiousness of stereotypes is suggested since it is shown to shape even the Jewish characters’ own perception of themselves. Similarly in Virginia Woolf’s story, the jeweller has come to fit the stereotype of the rich shrewd money-loving Jew or more exactly, has become a prisoner of the stereotype. Both Leonard and Virginia Woolf point at the dilemma of their Jewish characters: how they struggle between on the one hand, their inherited Jewishness, complicated by the superimposed stereotypical perception the others have of their Jewishness (and have led them to have of themselves), and on the other hand, their Englishness (their love of Spring, flowers, tea:

another set of stereotypes; their class-consciousness), their humaneness and vulnerability. Through this controversial example, we see how Virginia enters Leonard's territory, uses his text or "property," highlighting and extending its meaning. The concept of poverty as "use" suggests another way of reading what might also be analyzed in terms of intertextuality, haunting, spectrality or inhabiting the other's texts.

- 25 The concept of poverty seems to be more encompassing since, still according to Agamben, poverty as "use" is a form of *abdicatio iuris*. For the Franciscans, *abdicatio iuris* is the "abdication of every right [...], that is, the possibility of human existence beyond the law" (110). They "never tire of confirming [...]," Agamben writes, "the lawfulness [...], of making use of goods without having any right to them" (110). They have the simple *de facto* use of these goods. "Poverty" for them, is defined both as *abdicatio iuris* and as "the claim of use against the right of ownership" (125). If using the things of others is a form of trespassing and occupying a territory which is beyond the law, in Woolf's short story, poverty as use becomes a way to account for this literary genre's transgressive nature: its constant trespassing of the laws or conventions regulating the short story genre (what Benzel and Hoberman<sup>16</sup> have analyzed in their collection of essays as "ambitious and self-conscious attempts to challenge generic boundaries, undercutting traditional differences between short fiction and the novel, between experimental and popular fiction, between fiction and nonfiction" [2]), but also its trespassing of the boundaries of various art forms (cinema, photography, sculpture, etc.).<sup>17</sup>
- 26 In his analysis of poverty as "use," Agamben points out that the concept of "use" is usually defined negatively in opposition to law. He claims that the concept of use could instead be thought as being synonymous with *habitus* (140). Indeed, if you think of use in opposition to law, you "break with the monastic tradition that privileged the establishment of *habitus* and (with an obvious reference to the Aristotelian doctrine of use as *energeia*) seem to conceive the life of the Friars Minor as a series of acts that are never constituted in a habit or custom—that is, a form of life" (140). The Highest Poverty is, according to him, based on use, *usus* here no longer meaning "the pure and simple renunciation of the law, but that which establishes this renunciation as a form and a way of life" (142). With use, what is usually permitted only in case of extreme necessity becomes a habit, a right of using (114). In other words, "the Friars Minor work a reversal and at the same time an absolutization of the state of exception [...] What for others is normal thus becomes the exception for them; what for others is an exception becomes for them a form of life" (115). Agamben's conclusion seems to me particularly relevant in Woolf's case. "Poverty," using the territory of the other and trespassing (a word Woolf will adopt with great alacrity in *A Room of One's Own*) becomes a way of being, a way of writing.<sup>18</sup>
- 27 It could be objected that this form of poverty, poverty as use, is not specific to the short story and can be found in Woolf's fiction at large. However, what is particularly interesting in "Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus" is that the figure of the monk brings together two forms of poverty, poverty as use and poverty as bareness, which is specific to the short story. There, the concept of poverty, as defined by Agamben, becomes fully operative. It comes to encapsulate both the formal attempts of Woolf's short story at bareness, conciseness or "proportion," its empowering impersonality and its joint attempts at intertextuality, interarticity, intergenericity or intermediality.

Furthermore, the figure of the monk as a figure of poverty appears to be a way to connect the theory of the short story and its praxis. In that respect, Woolf's short stories can be said to be an art of "poverty."

## The concept of "poverty" reconsidered: Woolf vs. Agamben

- 28 Poverty as "use" is a concept that raises questions: indeed, we may wonder whether using the property of others is ethical or not. Use may well rhyme with abuse. Using the other's property may be synonymous with colonising it, appropriating it or expropriating the other. In Woolf's case, we have seen that her use of Dickens's or Leonard Woolf's short stories ends up in highlighting their meaning, taking their scope further and their attempts at modernity forward: her use of their ideas transmutes them, renews them and makes them live on. Using the territory of the others, for Woolf, is not exactly a form of sharing but a way of being with the other or more exactly, of being with and against the other since the author can both feel with the other, expose their vulnerability and claim redress, as in "The Duchess and the Jeweller" or "The Shooting Party," but also parody the other, as in "Ode Written Partly in Prose..." and satirise the other, as in "The Shooting Party" or "Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus." For Woolf, use seems to be a way of being "together and apart," as one of her short stories suggests.
- 29 Woolf's desire to use territories that have already been used rather than colonise new ones may also read as a recycling move as well as a political anti-imperialist stance. The writer as humble user of the material of others is thus on the one hand deprived of authority and authorship (but also inevitably and ambiguously, empowered by use) and, on the other hand, placed within tradition, the nineteenth-century tradition of craftsmen William Morris (and ironically enough, Arnold Bennett<sup>19</sup>) defended,<sup>20</sup> rather than against it. Literature itself comes out as a common ground<sup>21</sup> or more exactly as a "common pool" from which each writer can draw in turn, as is suggested in "The Fascination of the Pool" (226). If the idea of literature as a common pool suggests that using the property of others is nothing else than using common property and ultimately defends a socialist ideal, using the property of others is mainly synonymous with abdicating the law, as Agamben explains, and adopting perhaps an anarchist position, at least a marginal one, which goes together with the position of the poor that Woolf defends here.<sup>22</sup> Poverty in the end, both as bareness and as use, encompasses the "poverty" or bareness of the "poor," "minor" literary genre of the short story as well as the position of the short story writer and claims them as valuable. With this concept, Woolf provides a theory of the short story within her own praxis, a method that tells us much about her own conception of theory as woven within her own practice of the short story rather than divorced from it, which is in keeping with her whole outlook on literature as displaying circulation rather than hierarchy.
- 30 "Mount Pentelicus" was written in 1906, at a time when Joyce was completing *Dubliners* (except for "The Dead"), five years before May Sinclair published her first uncanny ghost story,<sup>23</sup> thirteen years before Dorothy Richardson published her first open-ended enigmatic short story,<sup>24</sup> at a time when Katherine Mansfield was just beginning to try her hand at writing and when neither Joyce nor Woolf herself had written any novel. However, in that early story, she captures one of the main tenets of what would be

Modernism, the posture of the writer as using his predecessors' texts, the writer's reliance on intertextuality and tradition but gives a different appraisal of tradition than the one that will prevail from 1919 onwards with T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." She mainly captures, through the figure of poverty she creates, the main characteristics of the modernist short story: its bareness, impersonality and intensity which bring it closer to poetry and drama than to the novel while pointing at what the modernist novel, divorced from narrativity and steeped in the ordinary, will be. In other words, the concept of poverty as redefined by Woolf brings together the main characteristics of the modernist short story while turning this humble genre into an emblem of modernist writing, which necessarily throws another light on Modernism, long defined as elitist.

- 31 Woolf's theory could easily be extended beyond her own praxis to her own contemporaries. Indeed, many modernist short stories could be analysed along Woolf's precepts: poverty as bareness may well be another name for Joyce's "scrupulous meanness," his "ascetic prose style" (Hunter 50). It is interesting that both Woolf and Joyce should resort to concepts with religious connotations, the monk or the epiphany, and redefine them with a secular intent. Poverty as use could also help to conceptualise Joyce's intertextual method in *Dubliners*<sup>25</sup> or Mansfield's close connections with Chekhov that were sometimes interpreted as plagiarism,<sup>26</sup> and more generally, the modernists' relations with their predecessors in terms of connection rather than break from them. Poverty as bareness is finally a way to let the reader go on with the short story and speculate about its meaning, as Mansfield, for instance, also suggests when she remarks that "What the writer does is not so much to solve the question but to put the question."<sup>27</sup> Woolf thus provides the means of conceptualizing the modernist short story.

## Woolf vs. Benjamin

- 32 Poverty is a concept that Walter Benjamin will more famously take up nearly thirty years later in his 1933 essay on "Experience and Poverty." There, he first seems to lament the loss in experience the First World War meant and the loss of value experience underwent at the time. But he then proceeds to show that this loss turned out to be a liberating force and form of poverty that became the very condition of creation and modernity. Renouncing experience became the condition of renewal. Freeing oneself from experience enabled man to foreground and value his own external and internal poverty. In a similar way, Woolf advocates through the figure of the monk a form of renunciation of the experience the short story may have acquired throughout the nineteenth century, a form of renunciation that liberates the short story from its burden of conventions and turns it into a "poor" bare genre, divested of all superfluous trappings. However, just as Benjamin qualifies his ideas and writes that the loss of experience is not synonymous with a *tabula rasa* philosophy, Woolf connects the short story with tradition, through poverty as "use."
- 33 If Woolf and Benjamin resort to the same concept, their ways part when the concept is brought to bear on the short story. Indeed, Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay on the storyteller, defines the short story as the very opposite of the oral epic tale since, according to him, it does not allow for the superimposition of various layers of narrative and repeated narrations. If the oral tale is presented as connected with

memory, tradition and atemporality, consequently and implicitly, the short story appears for Benjamin as the product of modernity and its fast pace, the outcome of a period when “man does not value what cannot be shortened,” in the words of poet Paul Valéry.<sup>28</sup>

- 34 Woolf, like Benjamin, grants the short story a fast pace: by acknowledging in terms of poverty its bareness, she implicitly presents the short story as keeping with the pace of modernity, the accelerated rhythm of modern life, but also the accelerated rhythm of production in the capitalist society she criticises, the accelerated rhythm of publication and circulation of the little magazines in which the short stories appear. But, unlike Benjamin, Woolf concomitantly conceives of the short story as the creation of a storyteller who is both an anonymous craftsman and the connecting link with the literature of the past, similar to Benjamin’s teller of oral tales. In the end, by bringing together what Benjamin will separate, Woolf comes to define the short story as a genre which is the joint outcome of tradition and modernity. For Woolf, the concept of poverty brings together the two contradictory components of the short story and turns the genre into a space of tension, a paradoxical and dynamic space. It also appears as a powerful concept that is found, when tested out, to match up with those of more famous theorists. Poverty redefined by Woolf enables us to think of the modernist short story not as a disabled art practiced by disabled writers, but as an art of empowering “poverty.”

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## NOTES

1. "Virginia Woolf was not a particularly accomplished writer of short stories" (Boyd).
2. So far, four monographs (Baldwin, Levy, Reynier, Skrbic) and a collection of essays (Benzel and Hoberman) have been published.
3. Huyssen developed the idea of Modernism as the Great Divide between elitist and popular culture.
4. All short stories by Virginia Woolf quoted in this article are from *Virginia Woolf. The Complete Shorter Fiction* and will be referred to by title and page number.
5. On this subject, see Bradshaw, XXIV. He suggests there is a spiritualist and a man suffering from shell-shock in "Kew Gardens."

6. This is the title Nena Skrbic chose for her book on Woolf's short stories.
7. It was published for the first time in *TLS* (11-17 September 1987): 979.
8. This will extend my previous analysis, which focused on the encounter between the various characters.
9. On that subject, see Dick 297.
10. On that subject, see Noel Annan, especially chapter V.
11. For instance, Victorian married women's property had been absorbed by their husband until the Married Women's Property Law was passed in 1882.
12. Such a figure of poverty appears in Woolf's fiction, especially in *Flush* where Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh is mentioned, the figure of the poet who renounced marriage and wealth in favour of freedom, the freedom to write, and its corollary poverty.
13. Claire Hanson, in her study of short fiction, confirms this when she writes that short fiction tends "toward the expression of that which is marginal or ex-centric to society" (300).
14. As Julia Briggs has argued, after the peak of the ghost stories' popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century, they began to focus upon threats from within rather than beyond the human psyche. Woolf herself wrote an essay in 1921 on Henry James where she praises his ghosts because they "have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts [...]. They have their origin within us" ("Henry James's Ghost Stories" 324).
15. See Dick 314-315.
16. See also Drewery on that subject.
17. There is no space here to develop this, but if we could, we would analyze "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" and its connection to sculpture, "Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus" and its relation to photography or "The Shooting Party" and its debt to cinema, etc.
18. This ties in with my previous conclusions, where conversation came out as being the basis of Woolf's way of writing and ethics, since conversation, as Agamben reminds us, means "conduct, way of life" (104).
19. In *Anna of the Five Towns*, Arnold Bennett clearly yearns for the time when pottery was a craft, a metafictional image of writing as craft. See chapter 8, 114-116.
20. See his *News from Nowhere*.
21. This is the title of Gillian Beer's book in which she argues that in "The Leaning Tower," common land and literature become equal expressions of freedom" (13) and in her fiction, Woolf "works through what is communal: architecture, clouds, cows, street scenes" (96).
22. By defending this, Woolf implicitly suggests that her own short stories are also common ground for future use by other writers or artists, something French Situationist Guy Debord, referring to his strategy of "détournement," adopted as a motto in the 1960s: "Plagiarism is necessary."
23. May Sinclair's "The Intercessor" was published in 1911. Now in *Uncanny Stories*.
24. Dorothy Richardson's "Sunday" was first published in 1919 in *Art and Letters*. Now in *Journey to Paradise*.
25. Adrian Hunter writes: "While *Dubliners* may not be as obviously allusive and referential a text as *Ulysses*, it is important to notice that every story in it contains some reference to another text or texts" (61).
26. Adrian Hunter reminds us that "The question of Mansfield's indebtedness to Chekhov has had a long and at times controversial history, not least because of the accusation, first leveled in 1935, that her story 'The Child-Who-Was-Tired' plagiarized Chekhov's 'Sleepyhead'" (72).
27. Letter to Virginia Woolf, 27 May 1919 (Mansfield 320. Also qtd. in Hunter 72).
28. My translation. Valéry writes: "l'homme ne cultive point ce qui ne peut point s'abréger" (qtd. in Benjamin 731).

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## ABSTRACTS

A partir d'une lecture de "Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus", cet article explore, à la lumière des écrits de Giorgio Agamben, le concept de pauvreté que Virginia Woolf met en œuvre dans cette nouvelle. L'objectif est de montrer que si ce concept de « pauvreté » fait référence à la « pauvreté » ou au dénuement du genre de la nouvelle, il permet aussi de penser, en relation à « l'usage », la nature intertextuelle (et intermédiaire) du texte bref tout en prenant en compte sa composante éthique et politique. Ce concept forgé par Woolf, comparable et comparé ici à celui de Walter Benjamin, permet de lire différemment les nouvelles de l'auteur ainsi que la nouvelle moderniste dans son ensemble et jette un éclairage nouveau sur le modernisme.

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