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Modernism Misunderstood: Anna Banti Translates Virginia Woolf¹

To Ester Nicole

IN THE ABUNDANT OUTPUT of Italian translations that have progressively turned Virginia Woolf into a cultural icon in the land of Dante, the first authorized translation of *Jacob's Room* by Anna Banti deserves particular attention. It offers an interesting angle from which to explore the relationship between two writers who, although they share various literary concerns, have never been the objects of a systematic comparative study.² Yet it also invites us to reflect upon the role and effects of translation by exposing the asymmetry in linguistic and cultural exchanges. The problematic connection of languages and cultural identities that takes shape in the interaction between Woolf and Banti acquires further significance since in this case the exploration of translation as cultural communication and transfer also entails the question of gender, making translation issues inseparable from those of female agency and identity politics.

Banti's 1950 Italian rendition of *Jacob's Room* as *La camera di Giacobbe*, republished in 1980 with only a change in the title (*La camera di Jacob*) and the addition of an introduction by Banti,³ occupies a privileged space in the rich sequence of projects aimed at importing Woolf into Italian culture. As the first translation of a work by Woolf accomplished by a renowned Italian literary author, *La camera di Jacob* can be examined in light of those endorsements, resistances, and betrayals that literary relations generate in their precarious balance between identity and difference, and that in this case delineate a tug of war between Banti's desire to

¹ I am grateful to the two anonymous referees, as well as to the many listeners and readers of various versions of this work, presented at conferences and circulated on several occasions, from its initial version for the 1996 UCLA Center for the Study of Women Conference, to the 1997 MLA Convention in Toronto, and the 2000 MLA Convention in Washington DC (panel on "Virginia Woolf and Translation").

² Occasional comments on the presence of Virginia Woolf in Banti's poetics, mostly fostered by Banti's own essays on Woolf, can be found in Nozzoli 87-88, 93-94; Biagini, *Anna Banti* 25, 88, 103; Biagini, *L'opera di Anna Banti* 29, 78, 97, 105, 159, 163-64, in addition to the more extensive discussion of Banti's *Artemisia* and Woolf's *Orlando* by Maria Carla Papini in Biagini, *L'opera* 119-34.

³ The first 1980 edition of Banti's translation (in the Mondadori series "Medusa") included a postface (pp. 267-78), which becomes an introduction in the "Oscar Mondadori" series reprinted in the same year. See Kirkpatrick 353; Desideri 115.

domesticate Woolf in order to coopt her in the target culture, and the inevitable estrangement thus produced in Woolf's own literary and linguistic identity. Furthermore, in the portrait of Woolf as the object of Banti's translation we can discover a great deal of Banti's own portrait—aspects of Banti's poetics and personality that not only reinforce but also enrich and problematize her gendered discursive practice. Banti's still largely neglected role as a literary translator, and in particular as a translator of Woolf, should hence be considered as important as her endeavors in the domain of fiction and essay writing. The translation of *Jacob's Room* can help us appreciate the subversive implications of Banti's choice of Woolf as a model to be transposed into the Italian literary corpus; yet, paradoxically, it also underscores the limits of Banti's literary and feminist activity in comparison to her English counterpart.

The discontinuities between Woolf's and Banti's respective aesthetics turn out to be even more fertile and intriguing than the apparent relation of simple filiation or sisterhood that may tempt us to privilege unilaterally the image of Banti as a feminist innovator following in the footsteps of the author of *Jacob's Room*. Indeed, it is precisely in light of those divergences that we can investigate the theoretical problems of translation arising from this peculiar literary case.

1. The strange case of Anna Banti and Virginia Woolf

The relevance of Woolf to Banti's oeuvre emerges more clearly once we examine *La camera di Giacobbe* in conjunction with Banti's various critical interventions regarding Woolf's works. I propose to treat those interventions as an "epitext"⁴ of Banti's translation of Woolf's novel that is essential to our appreciation of the premises and effects of that apparently isolated operation of linguistic and cultural recoding. Within this framework, I will articulate my discussion of the Woolf-Banti connection around three main points: *what* does Banti translate of Woolf? (not only which text, but also, more specifically, what elements of Woolf's aesthetics and social vision are privileged, retained, and transposed in Banti's rendition, and what is left out); *why* does Banti translate Woolf? (whether those reasons are explicitly stated or only retrospectively understandable through circumstantial evidence and a comparative analysis of the two authors); and *how* does Banti translate Woolf? (what are the modalities that regulate Banti's approach to linguistic and cultural boundary-crossing, and what implications do they generate for the specifically female form of discourse that Banti claims to prioritize in her literary production, as well as in Woolf's).⁵

⁴ Within the wider context of the "paratext," defined by Genette as all the liminal material of a book different from the actual text but connected to it, and mediating between the text and the outward world, "epitext" designates a specific category of paratextual devices, namely, discursive elements external to the book that foster readers' opinions about the book itself, such as author's statements in correspondence or journals, media reviews, interviews, or spontaneous authorial comments (*Paratexts* 1-4; 344-46).

⁵ These issues are, of course, based upon the questions employed by Sartre to define the production of literature as a form of social commitment and individual responsibility—namely, "what is writing?", "why write?", and "for whom does one write?" (Sartre 1, 32, 61).

Compared to other fictional works translated by Banti—Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Austen's *Catharine*, and Fournier's *Le Grand Meulnes*—*Jacob's Room* is certainly far more experimental and noncanonical. As Banti declares in her introduction to the 1980 translation, Woolf's novel—allegedly still scarcely known abroad—appeals to her precisely for its unconventional literary technique: after an apparently very simple and linear beginning, “the writer's eyes are suddenly propelled, second after second, towards the whole visible world” (“gli occhi della scrittrice scattano, di secondo in secondo, su tutto il mondo visibile,” “Introduzione” 5), upon an “infinity of essential tiny things” (“una infinità di piccole cose essenziali,” 5). The author “would like to be each and every one in every place and time” (“la scrittrice vorrebbe essere tutti e ognuno in ogni luogo e tempo,” 12), an interpretation of reality that Banti compares to a gleaming mirror reduced to countless fragments by the violence of a stone. Banti not only emphasizes the innovative quality of Woolf's plot and narrative strategies, but she also understands that *Jacob's Room* acts no less radically upon our reading conventions, undermining univocal interpretations through shifting points of view and conflicting opinions. Banti aptly equates the reader's task to that of a collaborator (8) actively engaged in recognizing an image, a speech, a scene that is reflected and isolated in each mirror splinter, and in recomposing the whole. She thus detects what has been more recently defined as “the observer's *situatedness*” in *Jacob's Room*, which depends on a knowledge that “is not relative to each individual but to certain perspectives and relationships” (Caughie 69).

That Woolf's writing is not merely a self-indulgent stylistic exercise but, rather, an exploration of new narrative strategies answering specific existential needs emerges more clearly from Banti's 1952 essay “Umanità della Woolf,” which considers *Jacob's Room* in terms of Woolf's overall production. Here defined as an “enchancing experiment” (“esperimento incantevole,” 67), *Jacob's Room* represents for Banti the prelude to the triumph of time and the rhythmic narrative flow of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Banti likens the “glittering and impalpable texture” (“tessuto scintillante e impalpabile,” 67) of Woolf's literary technique to a sort of literary miracle that, with the exception of *Orlando*, will not repeat itself in Woolf's later fiction. It is the musical pulse of her prose that allows Woolf to capture the discrete fluidity of daily existence, the story of a minute or of a lifetime, without subconscious abstractions (“Umanità” 68). In the most intimate and ephemeral situations—neither comic nor tragic, and without a final catastrophe—in the confessions, fears, and pleas muffled by the noise of modern life, Banti locates Woolf's sense of reality, which for Banti is also a sense of “umanità,” a profound sensitivity to human occurrences. Woolf succeeds in conveying life as a simultaneity of emotional states, presented with the simplicity and the sympathy of a poet who approaches novel writing concealing her intervention behind a harmony of subtleties, echoes, and correspondences.

However, the subtext of Banti's overall argument in “Umanità della Woolf” is Woolf's exceptional ingenuity and courage as she continually struggled against family, friends, and cultural and social traditions in order to bestow her poetic gift to women in both her own generation and generations to come. With the aim of exposing to a world that is “a judge and a master” (“giudice e padrone,” 70) the predicament of the woman as the eternal pupil, obliged for too long to

content herself with the crumbs of an occasional education in poor colleges, Woolf, Banti argues, took upon herself the charge of “an expedition in that lunar territory which the female gender has inhabited for millennia” (“una spedizione in quel territorio lunare che, da millenni, il genere femminile abita,” 70).

It is Virginia Woolf as a spokesperson for the issue of women and artistic creation—the Woolf who in *Orlando* succeeds in summoning the chorus of all the female voices deprived of their literary vocation, kept in poverty and ignorance, confined in the prison of madness, and the Woolf of *A Room of One's Own* who can finally proclaim that a woman has written a book (“Umanità” 73)—who leads us to the *why* of Banti’s translation. To investigate the reasons for Woolf’s appeal to Banti is to delve into Banti’s own aesthetic agenda and gender concerns—into her affinities with Woolf, to be sure, but also, interestingly enough, into the contradictions inherent in her reception of the author of *Jacob’s Room*.

Without neglecting the practical explanation that *Orlando*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Flush*, and *Mrs. Dalloway* had already been translated into Italian between 1933 and 1946 (Kirkpatrick 350-52), the choice of *Jacob’s Room*—the turning point in Woolf’s narrative strategy, as Banti herself acknowledges—can also be seen as a symbolic turning point both in Banti’s own juggling with literary form and in her meditation on the thorny and painful issue of feminism in life and art. The Woolf who comes back to life through translation becomes for Banti that very “model of her sex and time” (*Artemisia* 9) that the female protagonist of Banti’s most acclaimed novel, *Artemisia*, written only three years before the translation of *Jacob’s Room*, is also yearning to find: “a respected, noble model . . . with which she could identify completely, under whose name she could fight” (*Artemisia* 99). The innumerable mirror splinters, each reflecting and isolating an image, that Banti’s introduction to *Jacob’s Room* evokes as the objective correlative of Woolf’s interpretation of reality thus seem to substantiate in many ways the formal choices undertaken by Banti herself in *Artemisia*, a text founded upon an equally pervasive poetics of the fragment.

Therefore, whenever Banti upholds the originality of Woolf’s style in *Jacob’s Room*, denying its alleged debt to the male modernist giants Joyce and Proust,⁶ we cannot help but think of Banti’s own lifelong struggle to define herself as a woman and a female artist and to inspire women to attain intellectual and social independence. Banti’s own career as a writer and art historian, and as the wife of the distinguished scholar Roberto Longhi, who was for her both a mentor and a notoriously difficult patriarchal figure, can be seen as an attempt to dispute the claim that “Women can’t write, women can’t paint” (*Lighthouse* 80), a claim which haunts both Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* and Banti’s own female protagonists, who are constantly striving to acquire a place, status, and recognition in life and art.

⁶ Banti refuses to acknowledge the influence of the “Joycean moods” already circulating in the Bloomsbury circle upon *Jacob’s Room*, as well as any connection between Proust’s *La Recherche* and the Woolfian world, in which, according to Banti, the air of the French novelist would probably be unbreathable (“Introduzione” 7). Likewise, although it reiterates the pioneering literary innovations of Joyce’s dangerous experiments, “Umanità della Woolf” insists upon Woolf’s independence from Joyce and underlines the radical difference between the Proustian rhythms and the fluidity of Woolf’s treatment of time from *Jacob’s Room* onwards.

The social and political implications of Woolf's exemplary value in Banti's feminist vision are confirmed in her 1953 essay "Responsabilità della donna intellettuale," where Woolf's concern for the condition of women guides Banti's own appeal to female intellectuals for a commitment to the emancipation of women through their works. As Banti sadly associates the indigence of her country with the ignorance of its people, denouncing with particular vehemence the even more appalling cultural deprivation of Italian women, she champions Woolf as a pioneering voice in favor of a woman's right to a financial autonomy able to guarantee the free development of an artistic vocation. While anything but a "popular" author, this great and seemingly aloof English writer in fact represents for Banti the most sympathetic advocate of women who, twenty years later, in entire Italian provinces, still have the status of servants, or, even in the best possible scenario, remain spiritually illiterate individuals dedicated to nothing more than a literature of silly escapism ("Responsabilità" 92).

Banti similarly praises the "premonitory wisdom" ("sapienza premonitrice," "Testamento" 102) of such texts as *A Room of One's Own* or "On Not Knowing Greek" in her 1963 article "Il testamento di Virginia Woolf." Here Banti counters Woolf's detractors, who exploited her alleged mental illness as a pretext to diminish the poignancy of her social ideas, and emphasizes instead the lucidity and the courage with which Woolf combined her poetic vein with an original and violent polemical tone against the many hindrances to women's intellectual rights. Being above all a woman, the legendary first lady of literature born into an affluent and well-educated family in fact belongs to "that curious proletariat which, as of today has not yet been fully integrated in the prerogatives of civilized man" ("quel curioso proletariato che, a tutt'oggi, non ha ancora ottenuto una completa integrazione nelle prerogative dell'uomo civile," 101). Woolf is condemned to undergo an uncommon sorrow, that of the rich woman who yearns to share her wealth with the poor, knowing, however, that even if she lavished all her material belongings on them she would still be unable to help women access culture. Banti's Woolf understands that the transmission of culture involves a number of initiatives that a single individual cannot undertake as easily as emptying his/her wallet ("la cultura . . . importa una quantità di iniziative che un solo individuo non può prendere con la facilità con cui vuoterebbe il portafogli," 101). And, significantly, she can legitimately claim so out of personal experience: Banti reminds her readers that Woolf would have been happy to give up her own golden cage in exchange for the chance to attend regular schools and university like any silly young man of her age.

We should not be surprised, then, to find a similar statement in the introduction to Banti's 1980 translation of *Jacob's Room*, where, in summarizing the novel as the story of a fatherless, province-born English youngster who succeeds in completing his education at Cambridge despite his modest family background, Banti promptly associates Jacob's "freedom tempered with discipline" ("libertà temperata di disciplina," "Introduzione" 7) with what the Woolf of *A Room of One's Own* would later envy in her male counterparts.

Unquestionably, if our discussion of Banti's reception of Woolf stopped here, Banti could be hailed unconditionally as an insightful and absolutely pioneer-

ing Italian supporter of a controversial English writer who had been confined for too long to the image of a difficult, solitary, elitist, and uncommitted writer, instead of being appreciated for her strong voice in defense of her sex. In fact, however, while Woolf and Banti can be said to share a certain feminist textual politics, there are important discrepancies in their respective conceptions of the novel.

On the one hand, to be sure, it is the “new Woolfian narrative” (“nuova narrativa woolfiana,” “Umanità” 67) from *Jacob's Room* onwards that we recognize in the digressions, the author's unsentimental intrusions and disappearance, the characters' fragmentation, and the blend of objective and subjective time in several of Banti's novels, especially *Artemisia*. Indeed, encouraged by Banti's own remarks in her essays on Woolf, critics have proposed comparisons between *Artemisia* and *Orlando* that underscore their parallel explorations of a complex female universe across different centuries, by means of a sort of atemporal and all-encompassing expansion of the self able to embrace both the author's personality and her female characters (Nozzoli 87-88; Papini in Biagini, *L'opera* 119-34).

On the other hand, the Woolfian winding narrative and temporal flux are only one pole of Banti's fiction, the other one being her adhesion to verisimilitude as the foundation of her feminist revision of the historical novel. Unlike the new Woolf who begins her voyage out of the realistic word towards a more symbolic writing, towards traces and silence, rethinking human life in poetic terms, Banti still needs the fiction of realism, which she reshapes to give voice to female characters excluded by the official truth of history. If *Orlando* is significant to Banti, it is because, *although* it dissolves the model of the historical novel in “pure elements of line and color” (“elementi puri di contorno, di colore”), it retains the “exemplary and moral intention” (“intenzione esemplare, morale,” “Umanità” 70) of that literary genre, that is, an objective faithfulness to facts, things, human life. Hence it becomes for Banti the historical novel *par excellence* (70), an exemplary representative of the principles she upholds in Manzoni: a passion for history in its highest sense, that is, simultaneously moral and poetic (“Manzoni” 59), and so an “eternal wager” upon that which in history “left no other trace but an unsaid word among many useless words” (“l'eterna scommessa su quel che non ha lasciato altra traccia che una parola non detta fra tante parole inutili,” 58).

Far from contingent, this remark can be seen to synthesize Banti's overall approach to Woolf. Informed by a literary commitment to social and political issues, Woolf's works appear to Banti as steady and brilliant reference points for the value system of the 1950s (“Umanità” 66). Despite her resistance to the rigorously neorealist agenda of those years (Biagini, *Anna* 85), Banti sees a possibility for reconciliation between what for her is neorealism's photographic approach to reality and the poetics of the historical novel precisely through the notion of verisimilitude, which is able to underscore the eternal element shared by human actions (“quanto di eterno accomuna le azioni umane,” “Manzoni” 59) in events that have occurred either one century or a moment ago.⁷ Demystifying the cliché

⁷ As we can also infer from her essay “Neorealismo nel cinema italiano,” Banti deems the most successful achievements of neorealist cinema (such as Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* and *Paisà*, and De Sica's *Sciuscià*) to be their guiltless representation of facts and faces, their emphasis on authentic

of an author difficult to read and shut up in an ivory tower, Banti wants to rehabilitate Woolf within that ideological framework by emphasizing that her main concerns are “life, reality, truth” (“La vita, la realtà, la verità,” “Umanità” 67)—terms which, beyond individual and generational discrepancies, should be brought back to a univocal meaning, so as to unify all the authentic artists in their name (67).⁸ Woolf, in other words, becomes the emblem of this continuity between past history and present chronicles as instances of objective or plausible truth, of that verisimilitude which Manzoni had defined as “a truth seen by the mind forever, or, more precisely, irrevocably” (“un vero veduto dalla mente per sempre, o, per parlar con più precisione, irrevocabilmente,” “Manzoni” 58). And thus, for Banti, the importance of the experimental side of Woolf’s art fades away.

These considerations of reception and influence are particularly significant to *how* Banti translates Woolf. If translation is the true way of reading a text, as Italo

suffering, and their ability to appeal to a general public (“Neorealismo” 100). By praising objectivity and universality of feeling against artificially created sentimental effects (100), Banti’s interpretation of neorealism seems to retain mainly the idea of a spontaneous and unmediated depiction of experience, without addressing the role of technique and form in that particular kind of representation. Thus, Banti praises *Roma, città aperta* for being a title with no ulterior motive (“titolo senza secondi fini,” 92), and sees the movie as an equally honest account of simple Italian facts in which the chronicle of overwhelmed individuals is tied to the human themes of fear, sorrow, and hate, with very little embellishment and a sincerity that fosters identification. An authentic neorealist work, according to Banti, offers not so much an analytical and cold report as emotional participation in everyday reality, indignation against violence, a plea in favor of the weak and oppressed (94). While she addresses the ethical and political message of neorealism, Banti does not linger enough on the aesthetic conventions producing that message. Thus she fails to highlight the experimental side of neorealism, for instance a certain kind of expressionistic deformation that often calls attention to the filter of representation instead of reinforcing its alleged objectivity, and that also differentiates neorealism from the impersonality of nineteenth-century realism. In her essay “Romanzo e romanzo storico,” where she illustrates her position with respect to the neorealist fiction of her time, Banti seems to be subtler in her discussion of neorealist literary conventions. She acknowledges more explicitly that the neorealist narrative mode, despite its distrust of artifice, is subject to the toughest rules, that its mechanical and impartial rendition derives from a self-imposed, rigorous discipline (“Romanzo” 41). Facts—Banti observes—are only apparently *not chosen*, and what characterizes neorealist writing is not just simplicity, but rather the hallucination of simplicity (“scrittura allucinata di semplicità,” 42). Nevertheless, the aim of Banti’s remarks does not seem to be that of highlighting the formal innovations that distinguish neorealism from earlier and more traditional instances of mimetic and socially committed literature. Rather, she concludes her essay by foregrounding the debt of neorealist fiction to the historical novel, and by rehabilitating the latter as the redeemer of the “almost brutal objectivity” (“oggettività quasi brutale,” 42) of much of the literature of her time. It is this very penchant for a referential, communicable, and ethically-oriented literary discourse that propels Banti’s appraisal of Virginia Woolf’s fiction.

⁸ Here Banti celebrates Woolf not so much for her ability to break with the realist canon as for her compatibility with it. Thus, as she comments on Woolf’s commitment to the essence of life, reality and truth, Banti wonders to what extent the sincerity of Woolf’s approach differs from that of a realist or neorealist author (“ci si chiede in che cosa, questa così sincera dichiarazione, differisca dai proclami di un realista o neorealista, come oggi si dice,” “Umanità” 67). Curiously, Banti’s argument recalls Eric Auerbach’s view of Woolf’s and Joyce’s fiction in *Mimesis*. On the one hand, Auerbach recognizes that the objective narration of facts associated with the realist representation of reality has been replaced by the “reflection in the consciousness of the *dramatis personae*” (*Mimesis* 534). On the other hand, however, confronted with this radical change in narrative technique, he is ultimately interested in preserving continuity with the aims of realism—surrendering ourselves to the wealth and depth of life “without prejudice” (552)—rather than acknowledging a major turning point in the evolution of literature. Woolf’s and Joyce’s formal innovations, despite their overwhelming effects upon our traditional perception of reality, foster Auerbach’s final hope for an imminent “unification and simplification” (553) prevailing upon the complexity and fragmentation emerging from those authors’ representation of the external world.

Calvino reminds us (1827), what specific interpretive choices does Banti make given the aesthetic and cultural premises of her critical works, and how does she apply them to Woolf's text? What reading of Woolf is at stake in Banti's *La camera di Giacobbe*, what kind of feminist textual politics does Woolf's Italian translator elaborate out of her avowed English model, and how does she practice it in her own literary transposing?

2. Trans-latio: *carrying across, carrying away*

Le traducteur est un écrivain d'une singulière originalité, précisément là où il paraît n'en revendiquer aucune. Il est le maître secret de la différence des langages, non pas pour l'abolir, mais pour l'utiliser, afin d'éveiller, dans la sienne, par les changements violents ou subtils qu'il lui apporte, une présence de ce qu'il y a de différent, originellement, dans l'original. (Blanchot, "Traduire" 71)

Written in 1971, Blanchot's words already underline what more recently has become the dominant theoretical standpoint in translation studies, namely, the assumption that the translated text is an autonomous form of communication that provides information through its *difference* from the original. We should therefore investigate what Banti does to become, in her turn, a secret master of linguistic difference, and what Banti's allegedly autonomous process of signification entails with respect to Woolf's, both on the level of literary creativity and in terms of translation practice as a writing activity specifically connected to her female and feminist consciousness. It is intriguing in this respect to consider Woolf's and Banti's respective positions on translation, and, in particular, to analyze how each of them copes with the question of difference in the act of translating.

Virginia Woolf's reflection upon and practice of translation can be said to function as an occasion to explore and foster that foreign element which, be it embedded in language or in Woolf's own self-perception, seems to be an integral part of her own approach to reality and representation. Woolf, indeed, shows an understanding of difference as openness to linguistic, literary, and cultural otherness, and links it to translation as attention to and exploration of the asymmetries in cross-cultural communication that go hand in hand with recoding and appropriation.

Indeed, from her discussion of "the difference of language" (*Common Reader* 244) that prevents the English from accessing the genuine kernel of Russian literature, their writers' authentic manners, "the idiosyncrasies of their characters" (244), to her inability to access the peculiarities of Spanish, which she laments in one of her letters to Victoria Ocampo (Laurence 1), or, again, from her well-known concern for the ignorance of Greek, to hearing birds singing in Greek during her second mental breakdown (*Moments* 162), Woolf reveals her sensitivity to the appeal of linguistic plurality and spatial dislocation and her awareness of the unavoidable lack of equivalence at stake in cultural exchanges. Foreignness in her writings signals the presence of that wider notion of "otherness" inscribed in her own self, as a woman, as a non-conventional writer, and as an individual with a deranged psyche. In the Woolfian world, marked by difference, translation embodies a contradictory form of dialogue with alterity that at once promises and problematizes a smooth process of signification.

In her essay "The Russian Point of View," for instance, after observing how all that English and American literature have in common does not assure mutual understanding, Woolf calls attention to the even greater cleavage separating texts belonging to distinct linguistic traditions. Indicting critics of Russian masterpieces for conveying their ideas without ever having "read a word of Russian, or seen Russia, or even heard the language spoken by natives" (*Common Reader* 244), Woolf equates a reading of Tolstoi or Dostoevsky in English translation to a "crude and coarsened version" (244) of the original—in both style and sense. An authentic reality has been handed down to us in a distorted and self-conscious way, one which, albeit "very powerful and very impressive" (244), betrays its alien nature and alienating effects on the audience. Confronted with the linguistic barrier, our aspiration to fully understand a text belonging to a different culture must ultimately come to terms with and respect its intrinsic foreignness: "the mind takes its bias from the place of its birth, and no doubt, when it strikes upon a literature so alien as the Russian, flies off at a tangent far from the truth" (256).

This literary and cultural distance entailed by linguistic disparity and only partially overcome by the work of translation is also the gist of "On Not Knowing Greek," in which Woolf highlights how, despite our efforts to become acquainted with that language, "between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition" (*Common Reader* 39), so that we cannot go beyond a "slight resemblance to the real meaning of Greek" (39). It is once again through a paradoxical double movement—a simultaneous proximity and distance—that Woolf describes our relationship with the cultural other. We are drawn back to the Greeks because "the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there" (44), a foundational moment in literature and language that later stages of civilization have manipulated. But if it is only in Sophocles that "the nightingale whose song echoes through English literature" (45) can be heard "singing in her own Greek tongue" (45), Woolf observes that what for us is the "immortality" of that tongue still cannot tell us how it sounded in its own context. Although Sophocles' nightingale sings in the grove "and we imagine the twisted branches and the purple violets" (55), the vision that takes shape in our mind "is only an image of the reality, not reality itself" (55), precisely because language is at once a source of glamour and of misunderstanding. And, to be sure, while we "can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English" (55), to read Greek in translations is useless, insofar as translators, according to Woolf, can only "offer a vague equivalent" (56) of Greek expressions. Their life and their authentic effects are tainted by the "echoes and associations" (56) emanating from the translator's cultural background, and from the history inscribed in the target language.⁹

⁹ Woolf's consideration for cultural difference and the effects of linguistic peculiarities is also central to her essay "The Perfect Language," where her praise of W.R. Paton's English translation of *The Greek Anthology* for the Loeb Classical Library does not in fact minimize what for Woolf is the uniqueness of Greek language and aesthetics. No translation "is going to reproduce the bloom and scent, the natural poise and sequence, all that we feel before we understand the meaning, of the original words" (*Essays* 2, 115). A full appreciation of Greek language, of its intrinsic essence and effects, can only come from being born a Greek. At the same time, however, the inevitable distance and difference between the Greeks and ourselves makes us more appreciative and curious about the specificity of their culture and notion of beauty, about "their extreme unlikeness" (116) to anything else.

The unavoidable misreading to which Woolf is so sensitive in her approach to literary and cultural otherness through translation, however, is all the more interesting if we concentrate on the deeper mechanism that Woolf envisages to be at the roots of interlingual and cross-cultural transactions: "When we read . . . few words cut on a tombstone, a stanza in a chorus . . . are we not reading . . . into Greek poetry not what they have but what we lack?" (54-55). Woolf here suggests that the receiver and mediator of a text written in another language is never immune to a projection of his/her own self and desires onto his/her object of investigation. In our reading, and, *a fortiori*, our translation of a foreign document we are not only always already separated from an original that is by definition lost in the very act of accessing it. There also comes into play the emotional investment that influences our approach to cultural difference: for Woolf, Greek is "the language that has us most in bondage; the desire for that which perpetually lures us back" (55). And, curiously, despite this ethical caveat that seems to discard the myth of cultural reciprocity, Woolf herself, as we know, is lured back to the Greek linguistic and literary world not only as a reader but also as a translator.¹⁰

What is at stake in Woolf's translation of *Agamemnon* within the framework of her wider attraction to Greek literature, and what does it reveal about her treatment of foreignness? Emily Dalgarno argues that by translating from the Greeks Woolf learns new forms of representation of the visible, whereby "the visible is one segment of the larger invisible world that is seen by the gods and intermittently by the mad" (7). This vision beyond the conventional boundaries of reality is achieved, according to Dalgarno, by transcending a practice of translation as mere communication of the sense of the original text (30), and, rather, by recodifying the semiotic conventions of the target language so as to foreground the instability and the divergence of meaning. The new perspective that Woolf thus attains allows her to innovate her narrative technique, transcending nineteenth-century standards in favor of greater experimentation. And, to be sure, what we could call her approach to translation as a textual practice of difference has powerful implications for her representation of the self—and of the female self in particular—as much as for her action upon literary form. Indeed, for a woman writer who, for reasons of gender, was denied the regular university education available to her male counterparts and largely consisting of the classics, the decision to study and translate Greek literature was an act of cultural appropriation and an assertion of intellectual authority and authorship against an unsympathetic and violent establishment that relegated female subjects to the position of outsiders.¹¹ We might argue, in fact, that Woolf borrowed and adapted from the linguistic and cultural "other" the principles to destabilize her own intellectual milieu by introducing new modes of seeing and writing about reality and about her status as a female subject and artist.

¹⁰ Woolf, in addition to learning Greek, also commits herself to the study of Russian (*A Writer's Diary* 29).

¹¹ For additional evidence of Woolf's approach to the Greeks as a form of female participation and a response to the gender implications of the British contemporary debates on the value of "knowing Greek," see Dalgarno 40-43. For the role of Greece in Woolf's fiction see also Fowler 217-42.

In her 1983 essay "Del tradurre," Anna Banti seems at first to share Woolf's cautiousness about any facile equivalence between an original and its transposition in a foreign language. Drawing attention to the well-known linguistic affinity between the Italian "to translate" ("tradurre") and "to betray" ("tradire") ("Del tradurre" 3), Banti raises questions about the legitimacy of translation *tout court*. However, despite this initial apparent sensitivity for the implications of linguistic and cultural difference, her overall argument does not reach the sophistication of Woolf's own. It rather remains at the level of that normative approach to translation as a form of equivalence, insofar as it does not transcend the basic question of the literary value of the original, and of the grammatical accuracy of its transformation in the target language.

In other words, Banti seems not so much concerned with cross-cultural communication as an exploration of difference. In "Del tradurre" translation emerges more as a popularizing operation aimed at compensating for the inadequate foreign-language proficiency of the large audience.¹² It is within this framework that Banti tackles the issue of the translator's responsibility towards the foreign text, the unacceptable incompetence of most women who undertake such a task, and the need for more specialization and sensitivity to linguistic differences and to writers' personal styles. The numerous Italian translations of Proust's *La Recherche*, for instance, suggest to Banti that in all probability most of them have produced "an altered and inauthentic Proust" ("un Proust alterato e non autentico," "Del tradurre" 4), deprived of its original convoluted sentence construction and rhythm, and lexically impoverished. Confronted with this lack of linguistic and cultural reciprocity that threatens the possibility of equivalence, Banti concludes by speculating on the need to abstain from translating altogether, especially in the case of highly experimental texts like Joyce's *Ulysses*, since literary avant-garde is for her not exportable (5). Banti does not contemplate the possibility of pushing the translator's native language beyond its codified limits by bending its conventions in order to decenter and alter the translator's domestic context. Like Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb, who, according to Woolf, was not ready to risk anything in his translations from Greek (*Letters* 2.221), Banti does not associate the practice of translation with the daring exposure to linguistic defamiliarization that Woolf contemplates. Banti's argument lacks awareness of and curiosity about the projection of the translator's desires and intentions in the text. Her overall notion of translation as mainly popularization, therefore, does not consider the possibility of inaugurating a new aesthetics and ethics by promoting values and practices other than those ratified by her domestic institution, and thereby exploiting the disruptive and transgressive potential of trans-

¹² "Perché, infine, in che cosa consiste l'operazione del tradurre se non in un fatto popolare o meglio in una fatica destinata a chi non può muoversi con le proprie gambe su un terreno impervio?" ("Del tradurre" 3; "Because, ultimately, what does translation consist of other than a popular operation, or, better, an effort in favor of those who cannot move their own legs on an inaccessible terrain?"). Banti also endorses the idea of translation as popularization in "Il testamento di Virginia Woolf," through the equivalence of "tradurre" and "divulgare" (104). And it is precisely as a performer of this popularizing task that Banti feels the duty and the responsibility to say and write accurate things about Woolf beyond the prejudices that in her view had tainted her reputation for a long time. The issue that remains to be discussed, as we will see, is what exactly Banti privileges of Woolf's profile through her translation in her desire to rehabilitate her.

lation to raise narrative and gender issues that conflict with the dominant identity-formation process.

By concentrating on the problem of how to make a literal translation, and by questioning the possibility of identity or analogy between the original and its translation in the case of unconventional works like those of early twentieth-century avant-garde and high modernist writers, “Del tradurre” seems to disavow the very standards of Banti’s own previous translating activity. Indeed, with *Jacob’s Room* Banti had chosen a work that her essay would deem non exportable across languages. And, in fact, although Banti extols the peculiar novelty of Woolf’s writing—what she had referred to as her wave of poetry and humanity (“Umanità” 74)—she fails to reproduce it in her translation, thus confirming with her own practice the shortcomings she recognizes in most literary translations. *La camera di Giacobbe* provides yet another instance of “the difficulty of capturing [Woolf’s] narrative style” in translation (Laurence 1). The rhapsodic quality of *Jacob’s Room*, the rhythm created by repetitions, the complex use of punctuation, with its interruptions and resumptions in the original sentences, are often lost in Banti’s rendition, which as a whole turns out to be more static, formal, and conceptual.

At times, for instance, Banti opts for a more technical and referential word choice than Woolf’s, a choice that makes her overall translation more dated and less evocative than the original: “undergraduates” (*Jacob’s* 33) becomes “matricolini” (*Giacobbe* 58), a term that designates only first-year university students, and that, furthermore, is far less common in Italian than its equivalent “matricole”; “joke” (*Jacob’s* 71) turns into “il lazzo” (*Giacobbe* 115), which sounds rather pompous in contemporary Italian; likewise, “They turned out the lights” (*Jacob’s* 116) is rather clumsily rendered as “Girarono la chiavetta della luce” (*Giacobbe* 183), an expression that, contrary to the more generic English original, depicts a particular kind of power switch no longer in use. Banti does not seem ready to abandon a mainly explanatory, hence overtly interpretive, approach to Woolf’s text, as in the phrase “And then, doffing one’s own headpiece, how strange to assume for a moment some one’s—any one’s—” (*Jacob’s* 69), which she transforms in a way that conveys only one possible meaning among the many contained in this very visual and metaphoric English expression: “E poi, deponendo la propria personalità, come sarebbe strano prendere per un istante quella di un altro, di qualunque altro” (*Giacobbe* 112; “And then, depositing one’s personality, how strange it would be to take on for an instant somebody else’s, anybody else’s”). Similarly, “for, wherever I seat myself, I die in exile” (*Jacob’s* 69) is converted into “Perché mentre siedo e son io, muoio di nostalgia” (*Giacobbe* 112; “Because, while I sit and I am myself, I die of nostalgia”).¹³ Banti often provides a more formal Italian

¹³ Among the numerous other examples of word choices reinforcing Banti’s more conceptual and less imaginative approach, we can cite the translation of “particles” (*Jacob’s* 98) as “molecole” [“molecules”] (*Giacobbe* 158); “cloisters” (*Jacob’s* 82) as “collegi” [“colleges”] (*Giacobbe* 132); “find his tongue” (*Jacob’s* 71) as “si avvezzi a parlare” [“get used to speaking”] (*Giacobbe* 115); “roused himself from his mattress on the floor” (*Jacob’s* 64) as “sorgendo dal giaciglio sull’ammattionato” [“rising from his pallet on the brick floor”] (*Giacobbe* 104). More curiously, Banti modifies Woolf’s reference to “the fourth undergraduate” (*Jacob’s* 33) by translating it as “quinto studente” (*Giacobbe* 58; my emphasis). We could interpret this choice as an attempt to “correct” Woolf, privileging an accurate depiction of the objective situation emerging from the novel over the vision that Woolf gives of it. However, if technical precision and objectivity are essential to Banti, why does she elsewhere omit a

equivalent in an attempt to attain concreteness and technical precision, resulting in a faithfulness to the object being represented rather than to Woolf's own lexical choices and narrative perspective, and entailing the loss of the oral and colloquial quality of Woolf's English. Thus, "Then, consider the effect of sex—how between man and woman it hangs wavy, tremulous" (*Jacob's* 73) Banti translates as "E poi, si considerino gli effetti del sesso diverso, diversità che fra uomo e donna resta sospesa, mutevole, tremula" (*Giacobbe* 118; "And then, let one consider the effects of sexual difference, a difference that, between man and woman, remains suspended, mutable, tremulous"). Here Woolf suggests the discrepancies between male and female sensitivities without introducing any specific reference to diversity. Banti, on the other hand, adds the adjective "diverso" and magnifies its effect through the linguistic and conceptual repetition of "diverso, diversità." Banti's choice of this apposition where Woolf opts for a simple "how" endows the Italian sentence with a solemnity that overcharges the smoothness and freshness of Woolf's prose.

On other occasions, however, Banti curiously eliminates repetitions that in Woolf's texts play an evident structural role, as in the case of the following paragraph:

The boy Curnow had only just time to swing himself up by the toe of his boot. *The boy Curnow*, sitting in the middle of the back seat looked at his aunt.

Mrs. Pascoe *stood at the gate* looking after them; *stood at the gate* till the trap was round the corner; *stood at the gate*, looking now to the right, now to the left; then went back to her cottage. (*Jacob's* 55; my emphasis)

In this case, Banti seems more concerned with tidying up the style of her Italian translation, polishing the text according to the stylistic standards of the target language, rather than with tuning in to the strategies underlying Woolf's own literary sensitivity. Banti, indeed, could be said to approach Woolf's iterative expressions as a problem to be corrected:

Il garzone Curnow ebbe appena il tempo di saltar su, sulla punta dei piedi. *Sedette* in mezzo al sedile più basso e guardò sua zia.

Mrs. Pascoe *rimase al cancello* a guardar loro dietro: *ci stette* finché ebbero voltato l'angolo. *Ci restò*, guardando a destra e a sinistra. Poi rientrò in casa. (*Giacobbe* 92; my emphasis)

(The boy Curnow had just time to jump on, by the tip of his toe. He sat in the middle of the lower seat and looked at his aunt.

Mrs. Pascoe remained at the gate looking after them; she stood there until they turned round the corner; she stayed there, looking to the right and to the left. Then went back to her home.)

The loss of repetition as pattern also occurs in Banti's treatment of the phonetic effects of Woolf's prose. In a sentence like the following, "The whole *flesh* of his *face* then *fell* into *folds* as *if* props were removed. Yet strip a whole seat of an underground railway carriage of its *heads* and old *Huxtable's head* will *hold* them all" (*Jacob's* 40), Woolf uses abundant alliterations of which, however, no trace is left in Banti's Italian rendition: "Tutta la *carne* del suo *viso* *cadde* allora in *pieghe*, come se ogni sostegno ne fosse rimosso. Del resto, prendete da un sedile della metropolitana una schiera di *teste* e *quella* del vecchio *Huxtable* *si adatterà* a tutte" (*Giacobbe* 68; my emphasis).

whole sentence of Woolf's original text: "She came of a Highland race, famous for its chieftains" (*Jacob's* 54).

Likewise, the effect Woolf creates with the accumulation of the verb “to talk,” used five times in one line, with four consecutively in the gerund form—“Sopwith went on *talking*. *Talking, talking, talking*—as if everything could be *talked* . . .” (*Jacob's* 40; my emphasis)—is lost in Banti's translation. Although she keeps some repetition, Banti alternates the infinitive with the past tense, and ultimately replaces the verb altogether in the final portion of the sentence—“E Sopwith a *parlare*. *Parlava, parlava, parlava* come se tutto potesse *esser detto* . . .” (*Giacobbe* 69; my emphasis)—and the result is a loss of lexical, phonetic, and semantic effects that in Woolf's text create a pattern (both of sound and of concepts), a *leitmotif* with powerful incantatory results.

This flow of prose is often further compromised in the Italian translation whenever Banti changes the structure and length of Woolf's sentences by altering the punctuation. The elusive and unpredictable articulations of Woolf's writing disappear in Banti's rendition, which tends to privilege shorter and measured sentences separated by periods rather than attempting to reproduce the natural flux of Woolf's discursive meditation. A good example can be found in Banti's adjustment of the following passage:

Cowan, Erasmus Cowan, sipped his port alone, or with one rosy little man, whose memory held precisely the same span of time; sipped his port, and told his stories, and without book before him intoned Latin, Virgil and Catullus, as if language were wine upon his lips. Only—sometimes it will come over one—what if the poet strode in? “*This is my image?*” he might ask, pointing to the chubby man, whose brain is, after all, Virgil's representative among us, though the body gluttonize, and as for arms, bees, or even the plough, Cowan takes his trips abroad with a French novel in his pocket, a rug about his knees, and is thankful to be home again in his place, in his line, holding up in his snug little mirror the image of Virgil, all rayed round with good stories of the dons of Trinity and red beams of port. (*Jacob* 41-42)

Banti breaks Woolf's paragraph into more distinct sections by introducing a semicolon after “told his stories” and periods after “span of time” and “representative among us.” The punctuation in the Italian version hence creates more marked pauses that interrupt the rhythm of the English text and, with it, the transmission of what Woolf's narrative voice verbalizes as a single thought expressed in a rather informal and unstructured way:

Cowan, Erasmus Cowan, centellinava il suo porto, solo o in compagnia di un ometto roseo, la cui memoria recava precisamente la stessa misura di tempo. Centellinava il suo porto e raccontava le sue storie; e senza libro, cantava il suo latino, Virgilio e Catullo, come la lingua fosse vino sulle sue labbra. Soltanto—qualche volta accadde di pensarci—cosa succederebbe se il poeta in persona entrasse nella mia stanza? “Questa la mia immagine?” potrebbe domandare indicando il tipo grassoccio il cui cervello è, dopo tutto, ciò che fra noi rappresenta Virgilio. Il corpo è goloso, e quanto alle armi, al miele, all'aratro, si sa che Cowan fa i suoi viaggi all'estero con un romanzo francese in tasca e uno scialle sulle ginocchia, felice di ritrovarsi a casa nel suo angolo, nelle proprie abitudini, conservando nel suo specchiuccio l'immagine di Virgilio, tutta variegata di storielle sui professori del Trinity e dei raggi purpurei del porto. (*Giacobbe* 70-71)

Thus, while recognizing the innovative and transgressive solutions of Woolf's novel, and seeming to endorse them by becoming Woolf's Italian translator, Banti is more reluctant than her English model to abandon a representational stance and more willing to purge language of its anomalies and deviations from ordinary use. As a result, the prose that Woolf had intentionally pushed beyond referentiality with her many verbal and phonetic meanderings is flattened out in Banti's translation, and Banti's textual choices neither substantiate the subver-

siveness that the Italian writer had extolled in Woolf nor recreate the effects and the gist of her expression.

Nevertheless, the expectations that Banti creates and ultimately frustrates in her audience about her reproduction of Woolf's style should not lead us back to a nostalgic attempt to reinstate the by-now-surpassed assumption of translation as textual subordination to the original in terms of faithfulness to a norm. Nor should they limit the dynamics of translation to that hermeneutic motion which George Steiner represents as a fourfold sequence of "trust, . . . penetration, . . . embodiment, . . . and . . . restitution" (319) aimed at a semantic exchange that is—ideally—without loss. Already for Steiner, fidelity in translation "is not literalism," insofar as "no perfect 'double' exists," but, rather, an ethical and economic process that tries to respect a "demand for equity" by restoring "the balance of forces" between the source and the translated text temporarily disrupted by the translator's appropriative act (318). Philip Lewis pushes Steiner's argument even further, claiming that fidelity should transcend the logic of identity or equivalence that binds the translated text to its source in the name of instantaneous intelligibility by discarding any trace of semantic reciprocity. If for Steiner translation is "an act of double-entry" according to which, "both formally and morally, the books must balance" (319), for Lewis translation is a movement of linguistic difference (41). Rather than respecting the *use*-value of language, according to which translation must familiarize the message, fidelity should be reconceptualized as a modality of *abuse*, able to resist the constraints of the target language by seeking "to match the polyvalencies or plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own" (Lewis 41).

In Banti's case, fidelity to Woolf would therefore not imply erasure of Banti's own subjectivity as a translator and as a woman. Rather, it would mean to endorse translation as that "productive difference" (Lewis 41) which can resume and exhibit Woolf's formal transgressions and feminist legacy by twisting and disrupting the expectations of the target language and culture just as her English model had done so successfully in her own *milieu*. Does the shift from "*Giacomo*" to "*Jacob*" in the title of the 1980 edition of Banti's translation signal a greater opening towards the "foreign" element, a more perceptible deviation from Banti's native norms in order to stage, as Lawrence Venuti would say, "an alien reading experience" (*Translator* 20)? Even though the replacement of the title character's Italianized identity with his authentic (foreign) name may suggest a change in Banti's approach, in fact a closer look at the 1980 Italian translation reveals no textual transformations with respect to the 1954 edition.

3. The translation of modernist and feminist poetics: theoretical considerations

While Banti finds a rich reservoir of innovative literary contents, social principles, and formal possibilities in Woolf, she manipulates her model in line with the "translator's invisibility" principle (Venuti, *Translator's* 1): both *La camera di Giacobbe* and *di Jacob* accomplish a stylistic domestication of the high modernist Woolf, who is tamed into the more traditional Bantian rhetoric, favoring readability and easy meaning without allowing Woolf's "verbal texture" to predomi-

nate "over narrative structure" (Cusin 3).

Is this yet another poignant example of one of those "scandals of translation" to which Lawrence Venuti has recently called attention not only to denounce the marginality of translation but also to expose certain questionable positions and practices within its arena? While Venuti recognizes that translation "always communicates an interpretation," that is, it inevitably performs "a work of domestication," he also emphasizes that a good translation must negotiate "linguistic and cultural differences" instead of "erasing the sense of foreignness" of the original text by forcefully assimilating it to the dominant values of the target culture (*Scandals* 5, 6). We could certainly say that Banti's translation of Woolf does not establish the "intercultural collaboration" (6) that for Venuti can guarantee respect for difference. Rather, *La camera di Giacobbe* shows us the power that translation has "in constructing representations of foreign cultures" (Venuti 67).

Banti—again probably unwittingly and despite her own declarations of fidelity to Woolf's literary and social perspective—institutes aesthetic canons for Woolf's Italian rendition which, by deviating from those of Woolf's original text, dehistoricize the latter by suppressing its heterogeneity within Italian domestic culture. The modernism of Woolf's fiction could have fostered transgressive discursive strategies in the translator's context, with the potential to create "possibilities for cultural resistance, innovation, and change" (Venuti 8). In fact, however, Banti's translation of *Jacob's Room* creates a cultural identity that mirrors and consolidates the narrative forms and values of the dominant neorealist trend she tries to reconcile with the cult of verisimilitude described in her essays. In other words, Banti produces what Venuti presents as the formation of a domestic subject through self-recognition: the intelligibility of the foreign text depends upon the author's and the reader's narcissistic identification with the cultural norms and strategies that have acquired authority in their own domestic space (Venuti 77).

Yet we know that, paradoxically, Woolf attacks precisely the construction and design through which traditional, realist novelists claim to prove "the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story," while in fact the "essential thing" called "life or spirit, truth or reality . . . has moved off, or on" (*Common Reader* 211). In her seminal essay "Modern Fiction," Woolf's rebellion against the inauthenticity of realist "impeccable probabilities" aims at dismantling the conventional structures of fiction by foregrounding the "myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel"—that the mind receives simultaneously in an ordinary day, like "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" (212). And, indeed, if "Modern Fiction" declares the principles behind Woolf's radical innovations in narrative technique, *Jacob's Room*, published only one year later, can be taken as the immediate application of those principles. "Now what *will* they say about *Jacob*?" (*Diary* 45), Woolf wonders in her diary. "Mad, I suppose: a disconnected rhapsody" (*Diary* 45). Against those critics prone to indict her for poor characterization, Woolf declares that "character is dissipated into shreds now" and acknowledges she does not possess "that 'reality' gift" (*Diary* 56) still upheld in the mainstream literary milieu. What matters to Woolf is a different level of representation: "I insubstantise, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality—its cheapness. But to get further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality?"

(*Diary* 56). This “true reality,” once again, is not that of the realist fiction still cherished by Banti, a fiction which orders life as “a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged”; it is instead “a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (*Common Reader* 212). And this Woolfian reality, “the proper stuff of fiction” (213) exemplified in *Jacob's Room*, can be represented through sensory perceptions and associations rendered in a form that blurs the lines that separate narrative genres such as poem, prose, and play, and that—like the waves that give the title to her later novel—unfolds as “a rhythm and not a plot” (*Letters* 4.204), a technique she continues to recognize as “completely opposed to the tradition of fiction” (204).¹⁴

How could Banti as a translator of Woolf's fiction endorse Woolf's innovative aesthetic agenda and effectively transpose it into her own literary institution? If we follow Venuti's argument, this would be possible through a translation practice aimed at a “simultaneously critical and contingent cultural identity” (*Scandals* 84). This ambivalence—a sign of openness to linguistic and cultural diversity—could implement resistance through the choice of “foreign texts and translation methods that deviate from those that are currently canonical or dominant” (*Scandals* 85) in the target culture. In this respect, Banti's operation is incomplete: although her choice of an unconventional foreign text like *Jacob's Room* reveals an interest in destabilizing her domestic ideology, it is not accompanied by a translation method able to keep the promise of cultural change. Banti's avowed poetics makes us realize that her formal choices are blatantly extraneous to the experimentation that could turn her into a “minoritizing translator” (*Scandals* 23), namely, one who is able to produce a “heterogeneous discourse” (23) that challenges domestic hierarchies, as Woolf does within her own culture. By failing to manifest what Venuti refers to as “the foreignness of the foreign text” (23), *La camera di Giacobbe* domesticates the original by assimilating its double otherness (the otherness of a text that is not only foreign to Italian language and culture but also foreign and minor with respect to the canons of its own English literary and linguistic milieu) to the codes of the target language and culture, instead of problematizing its immediate intelligibility by highlighting its minority elements.

The loss of the minoritizing effect in Banti's translation process becomes all the more significant if we consider that her removal of linguistic and cultural differences has crucial repercussions on the feminist issue that is intertwined with her, and Woolf's, textual politics. Where does Banti stand with respect to the question of gender in translation? If her translation practice does not reflect that ethics of difference which resists and demystifies assimilation to the hegemonic discourse, how can Banti's discursive strategy incorporate and exhibit the difference, the minority status expressed through the gender concerns she claims to share with Woolf? What does it mean to be a feminist translator, and what makes a translation “feminist”?

In her essay “The Politics of Translation,” Gayatri Spivak argues that “it is not bodies of meaning that are transferred in translation” and that, in particular, the

¹⁴ Among the numerous studies of Woolf's modernist technique see, for instance, Da Silva, Ingelbien, Whitworth, and Freedman.

task of the feminist translator “is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency” (177). Although Spivak refers primarily to the translation of non-European women’s texts by mainstream Western female translators, Spivak’s claims about the need to engage with the rhetoricity of the original text so as to preserve and mime its trace of otherness in the translation are pertinent to the relationship between Woolf and her Italian translator. In Spivak’s assertion that the translator must surrender to “the literarity and textuality and sensuality of the writing” (187) in order to prevent “a species of neo-colonialist construction of the non-western scene” (179) we find the very requirement that Banti seems to ignore in her approach to the alterity of Woolf’s own text.

It is all the more intriguing that the relationship between Woolf’s original and Banti’s translation inverts the cultural roles ascribed by Spivak to the writing of female agency in the case of Western feminism and the so-called Third World foreign woman. Spivak shows us how the Western feminist approach can turn out to be as imperialistic as the history of male domination it wants to dismantle whenever it gives non-European texts the right to speak the language of the West through translation. By granting the non-Western, hence supposedly minor, female text an additional voice in the language of the alleged majority, translation runs the risk of subduing the specificity of the original text to a democratic ideal that turns out to be indistinguishable from the law of the strongest if it silences the singularity and identity of the original text in the name of “an undifferentiated women’s story” (Spivak 181). The case of Woolf and Banti makes us realize that Spivak’s remarks on the tug of war between minoritizing and ethnocentric effects in the language of translation as a hallmark of a strong or weak gendered agency transcend a clear-cut Western–non-Western cultural divide. In other words, Spivak’s argument is equally crucial to delineate gaps within an allegedly homogeneous context like Europe: the minority status can be represented by the language of a text belonging to an allegedly majority culture, which is transformed by an author and a language of more limited impact. It is indeed the imaginative rhetoricity of the British Woolf that, in the case of the Italian translation of *Jacob’s Room*, succumbs to what, in Spivak’s argument, corresponds to the “progressive realism of the west” (195). Banti, the spokesperson of an arguably less prominent and less widespread language than English, carries out a politics of translation that, by privileging a form of language primarily conveying referential information through a mimetic mode, obscures the complex modernist textuality in which Woolf inscribes her feminist agency. It does so precisely by reviving, instead of undoing, what for Spivak are the traces of the Western subject as a realist interpreter of culture and history.

If, as Derrida also claims, the debt binding the author and the translator is not simply mutual but also insolvent—insofar as no repayment, hence no return to an original total presence is possible in either direction (176)—the cleavage between Woolf’s literary performance and Banti’s translation politics also has important implications for translation, understood as a mode of expression enfranchised from the restitution of meaning, and for the gendered positions it defines within this framework. Sherry Simon further elaborates along these lines as she discusses the interplay of gender and translation, by observing that “[f]or feminist

translation, fidelity is to be directed toward neither the author nor the reader, but toward the writing project—a project in which both writer and translator participate” (2). This feminist project, which, as Simon specifies, “does not stand above ideology but works through it” (8), should hence be envisioned as a “‘doubly authored’ document” (13) resulting from a negotiation of cultural differences. Taking a gendered position in translation theory, in other words, is tantamount for Simon to practicing translation not as a mere transfer of meaning but as “the continuation of a process of meaning creation” (23-24).

What kind of negotiation emerges from the relationship between *Jacob's Room* and *La camera di Giacobbe*? What kind of common ground does their interdiscursivity create? If, on the one hand, the number of years separating Woolf's novel from Banti's translation adds complexity to the feminist circulation of meaning within their discursive network, on the other hand, Banti's declarations about Woolf's social and textual politics seem to assert Banti's intention to identify with the British author, taking Woolf as a much needed model in the development of an Italian feminist social and aesthetic consciousness, hence coopting Woolf by making her interests contemporaneous with Banti's own concerns. In this interplay of original representation and interlinguistic transfer, therefore, there seems to be no dissonance between what Simon presents as “the value and intention of the text in its time and contemporary perceptions” (35). Yet, in fact, while both the author and the translator allegedly commit themselves to foregrounding the role of female subjectivity in the production of meaning, a dissonance emerges in their respective uses of language. This rhetorical dissonance, however, does not allow us to interpret Banti's translation of Woolf as “transgressive reappropriation” (Simon 16) insofar as Banti accomplishes a sort of return to order with respect to the modernist innovative writing strategies of *Jacob's Room* rather than taking a more radical step towards an unorthodox textual practice. Banti's own experience of Woolf's foreignness can be said to manifest an overall poetic incoherence, an inconsistency between theory and practice. As her translation domesticates Woolf from a rhetorical point of view, the British writer's feminist politics embedded in form also inevitably undergoes a sort of colonization in the name of the more conservative realist and neorealist ideology.¹⁵

An engagement with the values and the expressive texture of the original work supposedly creates the condition for female translation as a “testing ground for cultural meaning” (Simon 141), inaugurating cultural practices that emphasize the role of subjectivity in the construction of meaning and endorse an approach

¹⁵ For various aspects of Woolf's feminist politics of form, see Goldman, Marcus, Little, Carpentier, Flint, Blain, among others. Interestingly, our observations on Banti's realist domestication of Woolf and consequent neutralization of much of her feminist impact can be linked to the similar response that Marguerite Yourcenar's French translation of Woolf's *The Waves* has generated among critics. Like Banti's domestication of *Jacob's Room* into the linguistic and literary politics of the 1950s, Yourcenar's excessive “Frenchization” of Woolf has been seen as an acclimatization of *The Waves* not only to the rhetorical standards of the target language but also to the French author's “neo-classical” aesthetics (Shields 314; Cusin 3). While recognizing the Bergsonian quality of Woolf's prose (in line with what Banti also remarks about the English author's rendering of duration and impressions), Yourcenar ends up turning Woolf's states of consciousness into logical sequences, like Banti, often replacing evocative images with more concrete and scientific ones.

to gender differences not so much in essentialist terms but, rather, as an ambivalent and uncertain location, "a positioning in discourse and in history" (141). As a female translator, then, Banti should relinquish rhetorical control of her text, accepting the irreducibility of otherness and the idea of the construction of subjectivity as the result and not as the origin of representational practices, as an ongoing process of differentiation and displacement. In fact, however, she reveals an attachment to women's reality in terms of "humanistic universalism" (Simon 143). When we examine the interdiscursive bond linking Woolf and Banti we are confronted with two female authors who seem to share an intellectual and emotional complicity in their attitude vis-à-vis gender issues. In fact, however, Banti's transformation of Woolf's novel challenges this alleged sisterhood, substantiating both Simon's claim that gender "is not always a relevant factor in translation" (7) and Louise Von Flotow's observation (in *Translation and Gender*) that simplistic assumptions about female solidarity and understanding, even within the allegedly homogenous Western societies, need to be reconsidered through translation: "while on the one hand feminist theories have posited *gender* as a unifying principle that binds all women into a common experience of oppression, the experience of translation has revealed the great diversities of culture and politics that separate women from each other" (86). And it is once again differences in language and in language politics that underscore the cultural heterogeneity inscribing in translation relationships a resistance to sisterhood among female authors based solely on gender.

Banti herself unwittingly offers evidence of what separates her from her British model in a 1981 interview with the significant title "Banti: la mia scrittura è donna ma non per i critici" (Banti: my writing is woman but not for the critics). Commenting on her newly published novel *Un grido lacerante*, the autobiographical story of a young woman's love and self-abnegation for a renowned art historian, Banti remarks that readers like to read stories "that are rather true . . . today we write books that are so . . . so strange . . ." ("che siano piuttosto vere . . . oggi si scrivono dei libri così . . . così strani . . ."; Orengo, "Banti" 2). Although thirty years have passed since her translation of *Jacob's Room*, Banti still clings to a rather traditional vision of the literary artifact as a guarantor of verisimilitude against too radical deviations from the formal and linguistic norms of realism. And yet, in the same 1981 interview, when asked about the book she is holding on her lap, Banti reveals one of the volumes of Woolf's letters, *The Flight of the Mind*. The title of this collection evokes precisely the kind of destabilizing imaginative reading and writing experience made possible by the stream of consciousness technique, the poietic and poetic voyage that, by giving shape to the forms inhabiting Woolf's private mental world, and to a notion of the self as a plurality of subject positions, rescues the female writer from the tyranny of mimeticism, of patriarchy, and of the male sentence.

However, of this creative voyage in literary experimentalism Banti only consumes the effects as a passive reader, without ever flying together with the Woolfian mind away from the more traditional structure of her own novels, and from her extremely controlled prose, which never gives up its rational, historical, and polemical attributes in favor of "merely" lyrical and figurative components (Bigongiari

in Biagini, *L'opera* 5).¹⁶ If we accept Von Flotow's vision of translation as a trope that can give a public voice to women's private language excluded from the dominant patriarchal code, the "specifically female form of discourse" (12) that Banti develops through her translation *La camera di Giacobbe* is not too far from the "nineteenth-century, uncertain form" ("forma ottocentesca, e d'incerta linea"; "Umanità" 66) Banti herself criticizes in Woolf's first two novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*. Perhaps animated by the desire to privilege once again Woolf's concern for that truthfulness which she praises so much in *A Room of One's Own* (Biagini 97), Banti simplifies Woolf but paradoxically renders her less incisive from the standpoint of gender politics.

Unlike the Woolf who argued that for the ideal modern writer "there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy" ("Modern Fiction" 212), this translator of *Jacob's Room* cannot overcome the need to narrate a story—and to do so in the style of Manzoni and Balzac, albeit with some attempts to correct it with the strange twentieth-century suggestions of Woolf, Proust, and Joyce. The possibilities of translation as a practice able to withstand the test and the trial of the foreign will have to wait a long time before becoming reality in the arena of Woolf's Italian renditions. However, the new and revised translations of Woolf's works recently published by Nadia Fusini (1998) have amended most instances of domestication of the English modernist writer that preceded and followed Banti's translation. In this latest and supposedly definitive collection, Fusini has modified Banti's Italian version as *La stanza di Jacob*, significantly associating it with that "stanza tutta per sè" which in Italian designates the Woolfian "room of one's own," the fundamental space of the female writer's emancipation and autonomy. The strange case of Virginia Woolf and Anna Banti closes on this symptomatic connection, ultimately envisaging translation as a process of linguistic, literary, and cultural mediation working in terms of "both a science and a poetics" (Pratt 35), a double articulation aimed at alliances and mutuality as much as at "the purposeful creation of nonequivalence" (Pratt 33).

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¹⁶ Similarly, Cesare Garboli emphasizes the two opposed literary lineages that inform Banti's novelistic technique: on the one hand, a sort of involuntary and spectral "novecentismo" (Biagini, *L'opera* 15), on the other hand, the more blatantly realist trend from Manzoni, Balzac, and Verga through the literature of the 1950s.

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