

Broderie Anglaise or “Orlando” embroidered.

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Broderie anglaise is a particular type of embroidery applied to ladies' underwear, mostly. In Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina*, we find Kitty sewing at her broderie anglaise:

“Kitty was firmly persuaded that he was as much a Christian as she, and indeed a far better one; and all that he said about it was simply one of his absurd masculine freaks, just as he would say about her broderie anglaise that good people patch holes, but that she cut them on purpose, and so on.”¹

This is not, however, the prompt for a long dissertation, like the episode of Mrs Ramsay darning a brown sock in *To the Lighthouse* – one of the pages of 19th-century literature most exhaustively analysed, scrutinised and teased over by the literary critics, but I find certain affinities of mood with Tolstoj emerging here and there in the writing of Violet Trefusis. The manifold aspects of reality find consummation in the figure of gentle but restless Anna, who bears within herself the contradictions of a world where the boundary between truth and falsehood is somewhat evanescent. Anna's betrayal in the concrete situation alludes at a loftier level to the potential transgression of a voracious, tyrannical Eros. And Anne is the name that Violet Trefusis chooses to represent herself in *Broderie Anglaise* published by Plon in 1935.

This is the story of a love affair triangle between a famous, cold and unfeminine writer, Alexa Harrowby Quince, and the young and inert Lord John Shorne and Anne Lindell, a fascinating emerging French writer. Alexa and Anne have never met but Anne has been turned into an icon glaring at them from every corner, night and day. Alexa knows the “rival” through Shorne's stories according to which Anne, the *femme fatale*, broke his heart leaving him in the lurch the day before their marriage. It is a great surprise to Alexa, one March afternoon, to find herself *vis à vis* to Anne and to a shocking truth.

Broderie Anglaise can be considered a clever reply to *Orlando* because its remarkable meta-text confutes the *liaison* between Sacha and Orlando. In Violet Trefusis's novel even the choice of names has a symbolic import; an outcome not of chance but rather of scholarly etymological research, as is evidenced by the precise allusions that can be detected to the actual triangle Trefusis-Sackville-West-Woolf.

The name Anna derives from the Hebrew Hannâh, meaning "gracious", and it is the name that Violet Trefusis chooses for herself – a paradigm of femininity, seductiveness and passion, one who harkens to the wind and has a husky voice – as opposed to another type of woman, cerebral, bookish, and thus Virginia Woolf, who is given the name Alexa, which comes from the Greek Alékso, “she who protects”. In fact, both Alexa and Virginia are women who enjoy the power that comes with literary success, and both can therefore occupy a predominant position more as patroness than protégée, but they lack charm, and remain “reporters of emotions”²; they will never be able to understand that: “sensual pleasure could exist in everything-in the way someone lit a cigarette or peeled an apple. Sensual pleasure is an atmosphere, not an incident; a diffused, continuous state; a lens which is added to your vision at birth and which never leaves you until you die”.³ Moreover, Alexa is the diminutive of Alexandra. The character corresponding to Violet Trefusis in *Orlando* is called Sacha, which is the Russian diminutive of Alexandra.

It is also worth looking into the etymology of the name of the character representing Vita Sackville-West, the coward, flighty Lord John Shorne. Let us take a look at the dictionary definitions of the verb to shear: *to have something important taken away from you*. Thus the past participle, shorn, can mean *dispossessed, deprived*. And Vita, both in reality, when she drew away from Violet Trefusis and abandoned any idea of a shared existence, and in fiction, where she is emotionally dependent on her mother, Lady Shorne – a perfect portrait of the real Lady Sackville “A stout lady of about fifty, whose plump face bore the trace of beauty now in decline.

Among features fast disappearing amid the engulfing flesh, an admirable mouth stood out, finely etched and cruel"⁴ is deprived and dispossessed of her true identity and that kind of love that dares not speak its name. The parallel between *Broderie Anglaise* and *Orlando* can in part be traced in the unequal relationship between Alexa and the young Lord Shorne, and between Queen Elizabeth and Orlando; in both 'couples' there is quite a striking difference in age.

In *Orlando* we read: "For the Queen was growing old and worn and bent before her time"⁵; and in *Broderie Anglaise*: "Alexa was awkward as lover and incomplete as woman."⁶

Elizabeth seeks physical contact with Orlando, exerting her power, to which the young man must submit: "She pulled him down among the cushions where her women had land her...Orlando rose, half suffocated from the embrace. This, she breathed, is my victory! For the old woman loved him"⁷. In *Broderie Anglaise* the love scene between Alexa and Lord Shorne is described with a touch of irony, but behind the apparently light, tongue-in-cheek tone is an underlying bitterness. The young aristocrat, ardent and self-confident, takes his lover, who is awkward but *fainting with pleasure*, to the room of Charles II, where he means to seduce her; thus, finding herself for the first time in a luxurious bedroom, inviting and extravagantly furnished, she who was accustomed to "that monkish bed, that pale light waiting for something..."⁸

Waiting for what? For Alexa to discover that she is, at last, a woman in every respect. "Alexa became what she had unconsciously wanted to be all her life-a woman, Woman, all women"⁹ – precisely what Virginia Woolf herself would have liked to be and would never be, aware as she was "to lack femininity and to have a frozen sexuality". And it is this very gap that brings about the end of her relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Violet Trefusis deduces as much reading between the lines of *Orlando*, in Woolf's painful lingering over the complex of age-seduction-sex upon which Orlando rings the changes according to the woman he is dealing with: with Sacha it is passion, love, desire; with Queen Elizabeth respect, flattery, duty. Vita\Orlando love with the body, Virginia\Alexa with the mind. Violet has a flair for hitting at the heart of the matter, and showing up the Achilles' heel of her rival.

"Alexa read Ruskin, John read Morand. Alexa admired the wrists and ankles of the Medici Venus, John admired those of the chambermaid"¹⁰.

In a letter to Vita Violet wrote to her: "Are you aware you wrote me a page and a half about the physical endowments of your parlour maid?!"¹¹

Virginia Woolf endures her cerebral disposition but occasionally attempts to rebel against it, like her substitute in *Broderie Anglaise* : "A civil war broke out between her mind and her senses, cutting off all retreat, replacing her multitudinous activities with one lofty preference for the void."¹² So much is borne out by a letter written by Virginia Woolf after meeting Violet Trefusis in London in 1933: "What a seduction! What a voice-lisping, faltering, what warmth, and in her way not mine. How lovely, like a squirrel among buck hares- a red squirrel among brown nuts. We glanced and winked through the leaves..."¹³

According to someone Violet Trefusis's aim was to demythologize Virginia Woolf and I disagree. My opinion is that Violet Trefusis did effectively accomplish a mythification of Virginia Woolf in describing Alexa. By the term myth we generally understand a schematic or simplified image of a person as received by the people, and indeed this is precisely the effect Violet Trefusis achieved, showing Alexa encapsulated in that literary cliché or myth that identified Woolf. Let us take an example: just as Virginia Woolf would never part from her cigarette, so Alexa would never be without her scarf, by virtue of which she remained in contact with humanity: "It served as a cloud to soften her oven-precise features"¹⁴.

An important point to bear in mind is that Violet Trefusis was averse to any sort of intellectual coterie and thus, of course, to any exclusive literary set. Indeed, she may well have set out to paint an ironic picture of the anti-conventionality of the Bloomsbury group, born in reaction to conventions and dull Victorian morality, and subsequently prospering as literary fashion – but of course the members eschewed fashion – and eventually attaining undisputed intellectual leadership, the leadership of an exclusive elite, in the British cultural scene. The demythologization extended to Vita Sackville-West – supposing this was what Violet Trefusis meant to do.

In her characterization of John, and in his relationship with his mother, especially, she suggests that matriarchal power are the really sinister, mystifying elements in the plot of the past “Is John still so afraid of his mother?”¹⁵ Anne questions Alexa.

In any case, *Broderie Anglaise* is not simply as an answer to *Orlando*, but the story being one of an absolute love betrayed, twisted reality, silenced truths.

Taking a romantic viewpoint with the main focus on emotions as both driving force in human relations and key to interpret them, Violet Trefusis gives a nod to Madame de Staël, who opened the way to the psychological introspection of all characters in the modern sense – taking account of the inner urges and social limits, of that part of the feelings that is all too often sacrificed on the altar of propriety, and thus taking account of those Pascalian reasons of the heart of which reason knows nothing.

The love story between Anne and the young Lord Shorne is a modern – and for Violet Trefusis autobiographical – transposition of the Germanic legend of the love of the nymph Hulda and knight Albrecht; the young writer had seen a theatrical version of the legend given in Munich in 1911, during her stay in the city to attend Art School and learn German.

Anne\Violet enchants John\Vita but is abandoned and, like all thwarted sirens, is doomed to die. Lord Shorne, like Ulysses, is captivated by the charms of an exceptional woman who could lead him out of his universe – marriage, conventions, “normality” – but he shakes off the bonds, fleeing from her back to the reassuring world of the commonplace, while the abandoned lover is locked in silence and death of the heart. And yet, “silence, too, is generated by emotion” wrote G. van der Leeuw : “The *favete linguis* (keep silent) originally held to be magical, intended to subdue the power of the adverse word, becomes positive expression of the unsayable, language of the inexpressible.”¹⁶

Violet Trefusis grasps the essence of that *je ne sais quoi*, easier to feel than to know, which is none other than anticipation of the romantic sensibility that Keats would give expression to in his profoundest verses: “heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter”.¹⁷

In her novels, and not only in *Broderie Anglaise*, there is a synaesthesia in a fundamental union of visual, aural and tactile impressions; probably she had fallen under the spell of Baudelaire, who wrote “les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se respondent”.¹⁸

It is by no means easy to interpret; indeed, I believe it can affect certain judgements, as in the case of whom define her superficially as an aesthete, forgetting that the true aesthete tends to prefer pleasures which, being of the spirit, are most independent of circumstances and most in the power of the individual. Thus nymph, siren and muse are variants of one dichotomy : the woman in possession of exceptional abilities which are admired but at the same time feared. Anne\Violet’s gift is also her curse, for she is a very special woman, destined to sit on the top of a tree and smile while the rest – “the intolerably human part of me” – agonizes over the unhappiness caused by the stupidity and the misery of the world.

This attitude actually became a point of strength for Violet Trefusis, who transformed her inner isolation – “I wonder if people could ever see life from my point of you, I suppose not because they just don’t want to see life.”¹⁹ – into an eruptive force: irony, wit and sarcasm. Sarcastic writing is a bit like the art of juggling-keeping the various situations going like several balls in the air. Her irony is neither dogmatic nor authoritarian, it does not set up stakes to burn its victims, it does not connote fear but, rather, awareness of strength; it is associated with sexuality, renewal, abundance, the new and the future. And, above all, laughter is an inner, not outer, substantial form, which seriousness cannot substitute the truths revealed through laughter, if not by diminishing and misrepresenting them. In other words, irony is the arm of freedom, but it is also a subliminal form of criticism.

Thus, the parallel for *Broderie Anglaise* is not so much *Orlando* from the stylistic point of view, but rather Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, where time –whether inner or outer – remains time that has been lost; thus it is bound up with the past, but at the same time it is something towards which the present gravitates. And it is only through memory that moments in the past associated with particular sensations can be experienced once again. Violet Trefusis’s treatment of time in the novel is circular or rather cyclic, I would say. Although writing for her could seem like a piece of blotting paper which absorbs her obsessions she is able to express acute sensitivity to the yearnings of the human spirit.

She strikes you not only with her remarkable depth but also with the fact that she is fascinated by ruling passions. Passion! her mark, her *Streben*: “Be wicked, be brave, be drunk, be reckless, be dissolute, be despotic, be an anarchist, be a religious fanatic, be a suffragette, be anything you like, but live the gamut of human experiences: build, destroy, build up again!”²⁰

She is a *Sturmer und Dranger* with a tremendous ‘double-sight’ concealed by ethereal lightness.

It’s just a trap, a sexy hook to lead you into the twisting and intriguing tunnels of the story. She was an outsider in her time and she was punished for her manifestation of passion: “I ache with the sense of appalling unfairness”²¹ she had written to Vita Sackville-West. Let me quote by Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*: Violet Trefusis *sliced like a knife through everything at the same time was outside. Looking on.*

She wrote rich, vivid prose with a narrative technique that makes deft use of breaks in linear chronology. She spoke four languages, wrote perfect French and was captivated by the language, to the point of deciding to use it to write her texts, fascinated by the richness of its vocabulary, its numerous idioms, the force and musicality of the words.

Therefore her prose is characterised by a constant awareness of the language that is her medium. She makes frequent use of personification and figurative language which often creates a very evocative atmosphere. Her narrative technique, too, is extremely original. The narrative is no longer purely personal. She is wholly herself; what she attempted, she executed, she achieved, she created her own genre. To some extent she is a modernist writer. According to Kingstone: “The Modernist novel is interested in recovering the unique experience of the individual by exploring and recreating an inner world.”²²

First of all, the omniscient narrator as moral and spiritual guide disappeared to be replaced by the direct or indirect presentation of characters’ thoughts, feelings and memories. Secondly, many modernist novels no longer followed a linear plot. The idea of progress which lay behind the novel’s linear plot structure gave way to the idea of duration, of freezing and examining what Virginia Woolf called *moments of being*.

We do not experience the world moment by moment but in a continuous way. Crucial to this idea of duration is memory; our consciousness of the present is already memory. The persistence of the past in the present shows that in a vital sense the moment is never over. Nothing is less than the present moment, if you understand by that the indivisible limit which divides the past from the future. Practically, we perceive only the past!

“Every moment is the centre and meeting place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed”²³ as Violet Trefusis wrote in her second French novel *Eco*.

The writer sometimes adopts multiple points of view. In doing so she questions both the narrator’s authority and the idea of realism. The narrator cannot be fully trusted. What she does not say is as important as what she does say. Often her stories are not told in a linear way, but include flashbacks and time-shifts. An example of this is the *Écho* metaphor, whose meaning is never made explicit. According to Trollope a good novel should be both sensational and realistic; according to Trefusis, between realism and idealism there is a natural conflict.

As I see it, it is the conflict that completes both.

In my opinion her type of modernism lies in the gaps and silences which appear in some books (*Tandem, The Hook in the heart*) indicating things which cannot be said or represented.

Time, Duration and Consciousness.

The English novel emerged from a middle-class milieu, and throughout the 19th century focused on social realities; thus, the existence of classes did not constitute a simple matter of fact but, rather, a necessary range of elements serving to construct the narrative. The writer consequently had a system of values to draw upon which was a common heritage, and could approach the plot as a puppeteer or onlooker. But the certitude of a common heritage of values, of a shared sense of what matters in human actions, eventually crumbled away, and the effects were to be felt throughout the 20th century.

It was a common tendency among the writers of the 20th century to approach reality as something rather bizarre, something lurking in everyday trifles. Joyce applied the term *epiphany* to the sudden insight that a perfectly ordinary incident, object or situation holds emblematic significance.

The problem facing the modern writer is to make her principle for selection of material and her sense of values convincing for the reader, and indeed the new concepts of time inspired by William James's theory of the "specious present", which held that the present does not exist otherwise than a ceaseless flow from the no longer into the not yet, from memory to expectation; that in the light of Henry Bergson's idea of time seen not as a series of points following one upon another in chronological sequence, but as flow and duration it is no longer possible to conceive of time as a series of equal moments, as in the traditional novel, where the protagonist goes through a series of situations in chronological sequence.

If a person is the sum of all her emotional experiences, and this sum is a constant, pregnant presence in her consciousness – is, indeed, her very consciousness – then it is pointless to lead a fictional character through a series of revelatory experiences. To bring light to bear on the whole story of the person and her potentialities it will suffice to make a close study of her personality, and this study can begin at any moment of her existence. This is so because in consciousness the past is felt as present, and there is no reason why the novelist traversing memories should interrupt the narrative flow.

In 1935 Violet Trefusis adopted this approach to write in French *Broderie Anglaise*.

The whole action takes place in one afternoon during which Alexa's picture of John Shorne undergoes a revolutionary change, as a result of a tea-time visit from the *femme fatale* Anne who first loved and betrayed John years before. Violet Trefusis proceeds in a Proustian manner: reality is examined focusing on what appears; then, through the protagonists, Alexa and Anne, revelatory signs of its deeper essence begin to emerge. Ultimately, in a ceaseless play of links and reversals, the accomplished design takes shape.

The heart of the matter emerges from the shades through a gradual sharpening focus, picking out the points of particular significance and leaving what appears irrelevant in the background. Are we, then, to see Violet Trefusis as an exponent of the 20th-century English novel? She is more clearly a European writer, with a profoundly romantic and modern sensibility. Indeed, she is decidedly cosmopolitan – from the Greek *kosmos*, earth, and *polites*, citizen – a citizen of the world with a natural bent to absorb all the knowledge possible, thanks not only to her intellectual verve and proverbial "quick eye" but also by virtue of her curiosity, that sterling and indispensable support of artists. Her thirst for knowledge drove her to open up her cultural horizons, rejecting all narrowness and provincialism – while Virginia Woolf, being of a more sedentary disposition, wrote only about England – and her passion for travel led her to a progressive assimilation of the values of completely different cultures which she often reworked in her writings, bringing her own original, thought-provoking vision to bear on them.

A writer of restless spirit, endowed with devastating wit born of acute sarcasm, but tempered by *delightful, tumble-down, old places*. For Violet Trefusis true beauty was always with a latent melancholy, with the *faible coeur* of Pascal: "Human-beings are creatures vacillating between infinity and nothingness who try to divert themselves from their own miseries."²⁴ Here, I believe, the verb 'divert' is to be understood as divert from the self, or in other words all occupations serve solely to make time run. For example, love shows up human vanity since it distracts and, in a sense, consumes, devours, confounds the spirit and eludes reason, but she writes not of love but of passion, the absolute, the awareness that human life is but an instant in the immensity of Living and must be lived to the full, not wasted, and in this respect her papers containing over five hundred letters are eloquent evidence.

She sees time as the beast that devours life, to be broken and bent in writing to a rhythm, a cadence in which the writer mimes the gestures of life. As Edwin Muir pointed out, "obviously a writer can write about life: it is the only subject he really knows, after all."²⁵

And yet, one might object that life in novels is often depicted in ways that diverge from reality. But, again, the pleasure of fiction also derives from the possibility for readers of spectators to identify with the characters thanks to the empathic mechanism set to work in the creation of the characters, while at the same time the awareness that it is, after all, fiction protects us from the often grim consequences they face. Thus, it is a pleasure associated with a dichotomy: the pleasure of alienation and the pleasure of detachment. Or in other words, pleasure and impulse.

Every word has a twofold: the impulse can be unthinking, but it can also be a genuine, immediate spiritual stirring. Can we, then, say that writing is born of impulse? The stronger it is, the greater effect it will have, especially when as in the case of Violet Trefusis, the consciousness of the writer frames and illuminates the events, endowing them with coordination. Thus consciousness becomes the field of action, where faculties, expectations and impulses contend to harmonise or clash in the composition of a state of mind.

There is no absolute knowledge; existence is a ceaseless, illusory shifting of perspectives.

For Nietzsche, and for Trefusis, the senses do not lie, it is reason that falsifies realities. It is as if she said: “If we rationalise impulses, can we still call the result feeling? I don’t think so! The spirit of life, of writing is that which keeps reason and feeling apart.”

And she would be right.

I am of the persuasion that both Woolf and Trefusis communicate directly with the reader’s consciousness and teach us that a limited viewpoint leads to makeshift and expedients, thereby stifling the true demands and vitality our own spirit requires. In other words, the reader’s viewpoint must be detached from that of the writer who, far from being a mere story teller, must be able to provide the reader with clues to excite perceptions without imposing her own presence.

May I ask you for a match?

“May I ask you for a match?”²⁶ Alexa asks her “rival”, and “match” can also be interpreted in the antagonistic sense. And it is, indeed, a literary match that Violet Trefusis engages in with Virginia Woolf – a match with points of contact and contrast. To begin with, both writers set the dialectic of the action narrated on the plane of a searching elaboration of relationships. The order they construct transforms *chronos* into *kairos*, existence into life, into essence, time in the fullness of times. With the implosion of sense everything can be anything else, and we are everything and everything else is also ourselves. It is the moment in which individual consciousness reaches out to the greatest extent, since it absorbs the world into itself, and at the same time it is less self precisely because it is dispersed in the world. Proust said that between the *petite sensation* and the accomplished work there is an abyss to be filled, and the writer must venture into the meanders of human consciousness to reach the heart. Here let me offer my own theory based on probing research and study.

I believe that the seed of *Orlando* was in fact planted by Violet Trefusis in 1919, nine years before Woolf’s book eventually came out. From the Woolf-Sackville-West papers it is evident that Virginia, preparing to write the *romancé* biography of Vita, embarked upon research but with the sole assistance of the protagonist who, at her own discretion, provided the information required of her. This also included *Challenge*, the book Vita had written with Violet, which helped Woolf delineate the character of Sacha. We cannot rule out the possibility that Vita also showed her Violet’s letters to which I have found various references in *Orlando*. The first is to the “gipsies” introduced by Woolf with the princess Sacha. “The gypsies with whom it is obvious that she must have been in secret communication before the revolution, seem to have looked upon her as one of themselves”. A number of Violet Trefusis’s letters contain references to gypsies: “Gypsies were standing in front of their little booths trying to entice the *jeunesse dorée* to have their fortunes told; a haze of confetti hung over the whole scene. An old fat man in evening dress, a cigar puffing out of his mouth (for all the world, like the Jew in Petrushka!) was lurching about with two pretty fisher girls on either arm. And O! the wonderful Southern night with its velvety sky, and immense stars!”²⁷; urging Vita to run off with her, she writes: “Come, my gipsy, I’ll be waiting for you at the cross-road!”²⁸ Moreover, Violet Trefusis learnt and used a secret language namely *zincali*, the language of the Hungarian gypsies, because she felt she was a gipsy “in a world of landed gentry.”²⁹

A letter of 9 August 1919 lends some support to my theory. In the June of that year Violet Trefusis wrote this letter on a train bound for London. She was fired by the idea of a subject that could become a novel as a “tribute” to her undying love for Vita.

The title was: *Evolution à travers les ages:*

Roman: she insists on Julian becoming a gladiator.

Moyen Age: She forces Julian to enter ‘les lices’ at least once a week on her behalf, one of her handkerchiefs (heavily scented) tied round his sleeve, as a gage d’amour.

Renaissance: She wants Julian to cut out Bayard at any price...

Dixhuitième: She contrives that he should fight innumerable duels to defend her honour.

1914: She says she will have nothing further to do with him unless he brings down a Zeppelin.

1915: She is determined he shall capture a U-boat.

1916: A...is the least tribute he can lay at her feet.

1917: After all, why shouldn't he bomb Berlin?

1918: ...or the Kaiser?

1919: Surely Julian will try to fly the Atlantic?³⁰

Can it be just a coincidence? Maybe yes but I have found a new evidence in *Battledore and Shuttlecock*, the unpublished manuscript that Violet Trefusis wrote in 1920. The name of the protagonist is Sacha, a young, cruel and beautiful girl. Con is her lover. Like Orlando, Con has never been in love with someone before; he speaks in French with Sacha and he is heartbroken when the "fox" lets him down without even a word.

According to my documents Violet Trefusis sent the manuscript to one person only: Vita Sackville-West because she had written it to persuade Vita to escape with her.

It is interesting to note that plot, names, descriptions used by Virginia Woolf are the same of Violet Trefusis's; particularly if we consider that *Battledore and Shuttlecock* has been written almost eight years before *Orlando*, Woolf's most successful book. If it is not a coincidence, as I am inclined to believe, Virginia Woolf is 'indebted' to Violet Trefusis who enjoyed less acclaim in England than in France.

Since 1973 when Nigel Nicolson published his *Portrait of Marriage*, a revised account of his mother's great amorous adventure, the name of Violet Trefusis has been associated with frivolity, rebelliousness and eccentricity, variously defined as "Vita Sackville-West's lover"; "Alice Keppel's daughter;" Sacha from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*" as if Violet Trefusis had only lived as "the other": the dark side of someone else.

One finding of my painstaking research is that until 1972, the year of her death, Violet Trefusis occupied a prominent position in the cultural panorama of Europe, particularly in France and Italy. Her books (ten) found recognition both in France and in England; her artistic skills were well-known, and she patronized several young writers including F. Segan. She created a cosmopolitan "salon" in Saint Loup de Naud and in Florence, making a great contribution to exportation of the Italian and French culture and products. During the Second World War she worked for France Libre on behalf of the De Gaulle Government and in 1950 she was awarded with *Légion d'honneur*. In Italy she became *Commendatore della Repubblica italiana* for her literary merits.

In the mid 80's following upon the success of Nicolson's narrowly-focused book, a number of Violet Trefusis's literary works were re-published in England and America. Some of her novels written in French were translated into English for the first time. Unfortunately, the translations were somewhat inaccurate and conveyed little of Trefusis' characteristic style. It is clear to me that the aim of the publications was not on behalf of Violet Trefusis. In fact the books were not provided accompanied with proper introductions based on careful study of the texts, in some cases totally travestying the intentions and spirit of the writer, the main interest always being to read her works through Sackville-West's lens.

I have already made various references to *Challenge*, which is the story of the passionate, troubled and ill-fated love of two cousins, Julian (Vita) and Eve (Violet). Julian is a Byronic type of young Englishman who aspires to become president of Herakleion, the Greek island where the novel is set. With cunning strategy he succeeds in goading the inhabitants to rebel and seize power, but in doing so he sacrifices the love of Eve, who, devastated by his abandonment, drowns herself in the sea. The story was written by Vita Sackville-West but inspired and corrected by Violet Trefusis in March 1919. In *Challenge* we can recognize the style of Violet Trefusis in the creation of Eve:

"Eve was very charming. When she was not sulky, she could be very amusing. Her imitations were proverbial. Julian observed the warm roundness of her throat and arms, the little mouche at the corner of her mouth, her little graceful hands, and white skin that here and there, in the shadows, gleamed faintly gold; the pervading sensuousness that glowed from her like the warmth of a slumbering fire. A dusky voice, a gipsy among voices! the purple ripeness of a plum; the curve of a Southern cheek; the heart of red wine..."³¹

Virginia Woolf had read *Challenge* in fact, in *Orlando* Eve/Violet becomes Sacha: “The extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person... The stranger's name, he found, was the Princess Marousha Stanilovska Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovitch. For as he looked the thickness of his blood melted; the ice turned to wine in his veins; he heard the waters flowing and the birds singing; Sasha, as he called her for short, and because it was the name of a white Russian fox he had had as a boy--a creature soft as snow, but with teeth of steel...”³²

Violet Trefusis’s reaction to seeing herself encapsulated in Sacha was one of admirable self-irony. In *Broderie Anglaise* her discreet but severe response came from the mouth of Anne Lindell:

“The character of the woman is wrong psychologically. She’s much too complicated-why make her into an intriguer, someone false and treacherous?”³³

In other words, Virginia Woolf had been also guilty of superficiality, writing about Violet Trefusis on the basis of Sackville-West’s false version of their love affair. A reversal of what had happened, a blackening of her name. Nor did it suffice for Violet Trefusis to move Alexa to pay a handsome compliment to Anne: “If your books are like your conversation, I’m sure your fame is well deserved”³⁴; of Vita, Virginia Woolf said: “she has a pen of brass and no particular originality of mind. She never breaks fresh ground. She picks up what the tide rolls at her feet”³⁵ and in fact at her feet Sackville-West picked up literary success after the publication of *Orlando*. Besides, she picked up her alleged membership of the Bloomsbury group, which she actually took a distance from, calling it *Gloomsbury*, for it was the intellectuals of the group who kept her at a distance, judging her too boring and conventionally aristocratic. And yet it was thanks to Virginia Woolf if Sackville-West held an official place among the English women writers. Descartes’ observation fits the case perfectly, love can cause more harm than hate.

The doors of Bloomsbury haven’t been opened to Violet Trefusis, of course, but I do not think it mattered much to her, being – as we have seen – of a cosmopolitan disposition, British by birth, French by heart, Spanish by soul. Her life was tempestuous, certainly, but there was one sin of which she was never guilty: she was never boring, never disloyal, never conventional. “I want to dash my glove in the face of Convention”³⁶ she once declared.

During the period of the *Bloomsbury fashion* there were ‘unofficial’ and informal intellectual meetings in Violet’s studio at the top of the house in 16 Grosvenor Street in London.

The young Sitwells, Rebecca West and G.E.Moore were some of the *habitués* there. No doubt Violet Trefusis was more interested in opening her mind than labelling it. Of one thing she was certain: “I have been put into the world to write novels”³⁷; indeed, as Rosalind says in *As You Like It*: “Make the doors upon a woman's wit, and it will out at the casement; shut that, and 'twill out at the key-hole; stop that, 'twill fly with the smoke out at the chimney.”³⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ L.Tolsoj, *Anna Karenina*, chapter 19, Part 5, Penguin Books Ltd, London, 2008.

² V.Trefusis, *Broderie Anglaise* Plon, Paris, 1935. (the reference is the new English translation by Tiziana Masucci)

³ *Ibidem*

⁴ *Ibidem*

⁵ V.Woolf, *Orlando*, Hogarth Press,London, 1928.

⁶ V.Trefusis, *Broderie Anglaise*.

⁷ V.Woolf, *Ibidem*.

⁸ V. Trefusis, *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ V. Keppel to Vita Sackville-West (Letter from Appley Hall, Ryde, Isle of Wight, of 20th September 1918)

¹² V. Trefusis, *Ibidem*.

¹³ V.Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1932-1935*, edited by N.Nicolson and J.Trautmann, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, London, 1979.

¹⁴ V.Trefusis, *Ibidem*.

- ¹⁵ V.Trefusis, *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁶ G.van der Leeuw, *Religion and Manifestation*, Harper&Row, New York, 1963, II.
- ¹⁷ Keats, John. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004.
- ¹⁸ Baudelaire, Charles. *Les fleurs du mal*. LIII, *L'invitation au voyage*, Paris : Librio, 2004.
- ¹⁹ Violet Trefusis to Vita Sackville-West (Letter from Dower House, Sonning on Thames, 7th May, 1920)
- ²⁰ Violet Keppel to Vita Sackville-West (Letter from London, 25th October, 1918)
- ²¹ Violet Keppel to Vita Sackville-West (Letter from London, 29th March, 1921)
- ²² W.Kingstone, *The English Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.
- ²³ V.Trefusis, *Écho*, Plon, Paris, 1931. (translated by Tiziana Masucci)
- ²⁴ B.Pascal, *Pensée*, Munchen Bremer Press, Berlin, 1930, sec.72-73.
- ²⁵ E.Muir, *The Structure of Novel*, The Hogart Press, London, 1963.
- ²⁶ V.Trefusis, *Broderie Anglaise*.
- ²⁷ Violet Keppel to Vita Sackville-West (Letter from Golf Hotel, St Jean de Luz, June 1919)
- ²⁸ *Ibidem* (Letter written in a train to London, 15th September, 1918)
- ²⁹ *Ibidem*
- ³⁰ *Ibidem* (Letter from London, 9th August, 1919)
- ³¹ V.Sackville-West, *Challenge*, George H. Doran Company, New York, 1923.
- ³² V.Woolf, *Orlando*,
- ³³ V. Trefusis, *Broderie Anglaise*
- ³⁴ *Ibidem*
- ³⁵ V.Woolf, *A Change of Perspective*, edited by N.Nicolson and J.Trautmann, Hogarth Press, London, 1977,
- ³⁶ V. Trefusis to Vita Sackville-West (Letter from Possingworth Manor, Sussex, 9th September, 1919)
- ³⁷ V. Trefusis. *Don't Look Round*, Hutchinson & Co, London, 1952.
- ³⁸ W.Shakespeare, *As you like it*, IV, I, Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1968.

Author's Note:

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