

THE ANNUAL JOAN GILI MEMORIAL LECTURE



MARTA PESSARRODONA

*Virginia Woolf in the Midlands*

THE ANGLO-CATALAN SOCIETY  
2004

# THE ANNUAL JOAN GILI MEMORIAL LECTURE

MARTA PESSARRODONA

## *Virginia Woolf in the Midlands*

THE ANGLO-CATALAN SOCIETY

2004

© Marta Pessarrodona i Artigas

This edition: The Anglo-Catalan Society

Produced and typeset by Hallamshire Publications Ltd, Porthmadog

This is the sixth in the regular series of lectures convened by The Anglo-Catalan Society, to be delivered at its annual conference, in commemoration of the figure of Joan Lluís Gili i Serra (1907-1998), founder member of the Society and Honorary Life President from 1979. The object of publication is to ensure wider diffusion, in English, for an address to the Society given by a distinguished figure of Catalan letters whose specialism coincides with an aspect of the multiple interests and achievements of Joan Gili, as scholar, bibliophile and translator. This lecture was given by Marta Pessarrodona at Queen Mary College, University of London, on 15 November 2003.

Translation of the text of the lecture and general editing of the publication were the responsibility of Alan Yates. We are grateful to Marta Pessarrodona herself for prompt and sympathetic collaboration. Thanks are also due to Pauline Climpson and Jenny Sayles for effective guidance throughout the editing and production stages.

Grateful acknowledgement is made of sponsorship of The Annual Joan Gili Memorial Lectures provided by the Institut Ramon Llull, and of the grant towards publication costs received from the Fundació Congrés de Cultura Catalana.

## The author

Marta Pessarrodona (Terrassa, Vallès Occidental, 1941) is first and foremost a poet, although she also writes essays, biography, short stories and theatre scripts. She sustains a large output in the press as well as in radio and television broadcasts, and is in demand internationally as a lecturer. Translation is a parallel of creative literature for her. She studied History at Barcelona University (to little avail, she claims), and was lectora in Spanish at Nottingham University (1972-74), then fellow of the Goethe Institute in Berlin in 1984 and 1987. She was curator of the exhibition *El Grup de Bloomsbury* (Barcelona 1986) and coordinator of the Catalan government's Comissió Internacional per a la Difusió de la Cultura Catalana (1987-96). She was awarded the Creu de Sant Jordi in 1997.

Marta Pessarrodona's most recent book of poems is *L'amor a Barcelona* (1998), following the short stories *Ever More. Ficcions* (1994). With Pilar Aymerich she produced a photo-biography of Mercè Rodoreda, published by the Institut Català de la Dona in 2002. For the theatre her *El segle de les dones* had its debut at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in 2003. Recent translations by Marta Pessarrodona include Susan Sontag, *Cap a Amèrica* (2002) and *Davant del dolor dels altres* (2003) as well as Simone de Beauvoir's *La dona trencada* (2002). She has been editor of the collection *Mujeres viajeras* for the publishers Plaza & Janés, where her own translated anthology, with introduction, of essays by Virginia Woolf, *Viajes y viajeros*, appeared in 2002.

She is pleased to be a friend to all her friends, who rate highly her culinary skills, and she plays a civilized game of tennis and golf. Her dogs claim a special place in her affections.

## VIRGINIA WOOLF IN THE MIDLANDS

I must confess that when, last spring, Alan Yates contacted me with the invitation to deliver today's lecture, my first, instinctive impulse welled up from a Judaeo-Christian upbringing and, to myself, I intoned an act of contrition: 'I am not worthy, Lord.' Also, I associated the emotion I felt with another from a few years earlier, when I saw from an aeroplane the famous wall of China. A vision which provided me not only with the real image, the Great Wall, but also with that of a Catalan girl from an inland *comarca* – from a town known as the Catalan Manchester, Terrassa, in the Vallès Occidental, where I was born: an image of me in the dreadful 1940s, at the age of three, at my primary school, with just two classrooms, where I had seen for the first time maps of places as remote, for me, as China. Could I have imagined in the Autumn of 1972 or of 1973, when I attended those years' meetings of The Anglo-Catalan Society, that one day I would be invited to give a talk there and, even more unlikely, to give the Annual Joan Gili Memorial Lecture? You can be sure that the answer is 'no', just as the little girl that I was never imagined either that I would ever be a 'heroine', because the Chinese say, with customary pedantry, that everyone who has set foot on the the Great Wall is a hero, or in my case a heroine, for I have set foot there.

Now a note in which sadness and joy combine. Very shortly after the death of the writer Joan Perucho (1920-2003), just before I set off on my journey here, I recalled with a mixture of pain and affection that it was precisely Perucho who introduced me to Joan Gili and his wife. I don't know whether Elizabeth, who I am pleased to see with us today, will remember this. It was during the summer of 1967, I think, on the beach of Sant Salvador, in front of the house of Pau Casals, nowadays the museum dedicated to the great musician. Curiously, this was just a few days before I set off for my first stay in this city, London, which I always think of as mine, a place to which I do not return, but rather always come, or go. Both Joan Gili and Joan Perucho now live on in those of us who loved them and who, as they surely did, see life as an alternation of suffering and dancing, *dol i dansa*, according to the poet Josep Carner.

After this prelude, with its hints of the note struck in clandestine gatherings held during the Franco years, I want to explain straight away the title and content of my

talk today. First, the echo of Louis Malle's title for *Vania at 42nd Street* – released in 1994, a year before the death of the great French director – is deliberate: it is a film I admire very much, which I have found and, I think, always will find richly engaging. My title is also linked to a small discovery I made recently (about which I shall say something towards the end of my lecture) as well as to the neat coincidence of reading in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 20 May 2003 an article eloquently entitled 'Orlando to Catalonia'. The piece in question is a review of the book edited by Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst, *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe* (London and New York, Continuum, 2002). It is a book which I, understandably, took immediate steps to acquire, although its appearance did not surprise me since, some time before, I had agreed to be interviewed by Jacqueline A. Hurtley, lecturer in English at the University of Barcelona. The interview helped to shape a text signed by her – published in the volume just referred to – which I did not see until publication, which was not submitted to me for inspection, and which, I can tell you now, is riddled with errors, even though the essentials, as I see them, are not lost. Incidentally I disagree with Hurtley's value judgement regarding the very first penetration of Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) into the Iberian Peninsula, thanks to the 1930 translation by C.A. Jordana (Barcelona 1893–Buenos Aires 1958) of Woolf's fourth novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, originally published in 1925. Hurtley gets entangled in a lot of what I consider to be redundant philological disquisitions, suitable no doubt for padding a good few class hours, of scant interest to the 'common reader', but oblivious of the fact that Jordana achieves what every conscientious translator aspires to, that is, to convey the voice of the original author/ess. To my mind, Jordana successfully does this, however *dated*, a product of its times, his version now seems. Which translator would nowadays think of calling Big Ben *el Gros Ben*, for example, or of turning Peter Walsh, one of the main characters, into Pere Walsh? I disagree also with her opinion about the second of Virginia Woolf's novels to be translated into Catalan, while the Civil (that is, Uncivil) War was raging, incidentally. I refer to *Flush* (1933) in the 1938 translation by Roser Cardús. Put quite simply, Hurtley finds that it is good and I do not. I shall not go into details now, because it would be a distraction, with me being led, like Hurtley herself, away from what a title promises to deliver, and my title today is 'Virginia Woolf in the Midlands'. I will not proceed without remarking, however, that Hurtley, among so many linguistic disquisitions, forgets to inform all and sundry that Virginia Woolf took her place in the Catalan literary panorama before she entered the Castilian one, by no means a negligible fact.

In this very context it is worth remarking that Joan Gili himself is to be counted among the earliest Catalan admirers of Modernist writing in English, including the Bloomsbury dimension. Before his first visit to England in 1933 he had already translated short stories by Katherine Mansfield and L. Friedman. The articles he wrote for the literary page of *La Publicitat*, directed by his brother-in-law, the poet J.V. Foix, are from 1933 and 1934, the year in which Gili settled definitively in London. These include reviews of works by D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, T.S. Eliot and others. No item on Virginia Woolf is documented, as yet, but Gili, with such sensitive literary antennae, must surely have noticed her presence and appreciated her importance. The subject is certainly one which merits some concentrated research, in the Gili archive and in the contemporary Catalan press.

In what follows, because I am essentially and in practical terms a lyric poet, I shall be speaking about my own relationship with the author, with Virginia Woolf, associating her – or trying to – with the Midlands and, more specifically, with the University of Nottingham, my English *alma mater* (consciously, I do not say British), in an exercise which, I hope at least, will prove to be agreeable for you.

From the moment that I decided to be a Catalan poet – as I was born in 1941, you will understand that it was not at all a straightforward matter – hovering over me was what Carles Riba had said about Josep Carner, that is ‘The day Josep Carner learned the English language was a great day for Catalan poetry.’ I need not elaborate on this. The consequence for me was that somehow I had to achieve a command of English, from the position, usual at that time, where all my foreign language education had been in French, something I do not regret. I am a woman as well, as is evident, and from a very young age I had become familiar with Simone de Beauvoir and her *Deuxième sexe* of 1949, not to mention her succulent memoirs, which I will not go into here: the point is that my interest in this writer was such that I keep a hand-written letter from Simone de Beauvoir, dated 1960, in response to one I had sent her. Anyway, when in 1967 the Castilian version of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) was published, I can tell you that it was quite a revelation. I was already acquiring, through means that had to be employed in those days, Argentinian editions of other works of hers, for example *Orlando*, *To the Lighthouse* or *A Writer’s Diary*, the latter given to me by the person who was the printer, rather than publisher, of my first writing. (No better way to end this paragraph than by mentioning the role of the Argentinian *doña* Victoria Ocampo not just in making Virginia Woolf available to the Castilian-speaking world but

also in the aid given to Catalan writers in exile, abroad or in ‘internal’ exile in their homeland, after 1939.)

Cutting a long story short, by 1972 I possessed a rather poor store of English language and a deficient knowledge of the work of Virginia Woolf. I specify this date because it was precisely a year in which Life ordained that I should live dangerously, a year which began with me working still in the Barcelona publishing house of Seix Barral, managing foreign contracts and royalties. Incidentally, ever since my student days my steps had been in the direction of the world of publishing, not academia, until I became what I am now, an independent writer. But, keeping to my point, I left Seix Barral in July of that same year, having already requested from the Hogarth Press in London an inspection copy with option to purchase rights for the Castilian version of a forthcoming biography of Virginia Woolf, written by her nephew Quentin Bell (1910–1996). Anyway, when I arrived in London on July 17, 1972 – not by any means my first visit to that city – I had with me a transistor radio, to be able to listen to British programmes and work on learning all levels of English. Immediately upon arriving at my bed & breakfast I tuned in. It was an interview with a person who, with the passage of time, would become a great friend, Quentin Bell, the author’s nephew and biographer. The first volume of his biography was due in the bookshops within a couple of days of my arrival in London, and a very few days later I was beginning to read it, as part of my personal ‘now or never’ programme for learning English. I think I synthesize things in a poem in prose that I wrote many years later, and which I would like to read to you:

### *Hyde Park Gate*

L’avió m’havia jugat la mala passada de no caure. Uns dies després, un volum robat per algú o altre, a la llibreria de Harrods. Un matí de diumenge. El mes: juliol d’un any fatídic i emfàtic. El trajecte – a peu – Ovington Square/Hyde Park Gate és més que abastable. V.W era una Miss Stephen, va néixer al 27 Hyde Park Gate... Hi ha molts indrets, moltes maneres de néixer.

[The aeroplane had played foul and not crashed. Some days later, a volume stolen by someone or other, from Harrods bookshop. Sunday morning. The month: July of a fateful, emphatic year. The walk, from Ovington Square to Hyde Park Gate, means no great effort. V.W. was

a Miss Stephen, born at 27 Hyde Park Gate... There are many places to be born in, many ways of being born.]

(From *Homenatge a Walter Benjamin*, 1988)

I don't know whether I transmit my mood or my intentions in this poem, but what is certain is that no year is totally good nor totally bad, or such is my experience, and, indeed, this is how it was in that year of 1972. While I was still engrossed in the first volume of the Woolf biography, Salvador Oliva, who was expected to continue for a further year as lector in Spanish at the University of Nottingham, arranged an interview for me with Professor Brian Tate, with a view to my substituting for him in the lectorship. Put succinctly, I became lectora at Nottingham for the academic year 1972–73.

Although I was young, I was not daft. When, in late September, I took up the post and settled into the University of Nottingham (where I was to stay on for the following academic year), if I wanted to be faithful to the humus, beyond my teaching duties, in other words to sustain my keenness for improving my English, then I should have focused on D.H. Lawrence, born in Eastwood – incidentally, the house where he was born was up for sale at that time – and expelled from the University because of his adulterous affair with one of the famous Von Richtofen sisters. Or on Lord Byron, of Newstead Abbey. One can be very stubborn, however, and the first thing I did upon my arrival was to order from the University bookshop, Dillons at that time, the second volume of Quentin Bell's biography, which was delivered punctually, as expected, on October 5 that year.

Classes began, I put a lot into them (I can honestly say), although I don't know what marks would be awarded to my teaching during the two sessions I was there. What I can say is that they are, for me, to this day, the most objectively happy two years of my life. My private reading continued, centred basically on Virginia Woolf. After the biography came the reading of her novels in chronological order, the stories, the essays. She had become my teacher not only of the language but also of English literature. And after her came those around her, the so-called Bloomsbury Group. Thus E.M. Forster, via Lytton Strachey and John Maynard Keynes, as well as the fringes of Bloomsbury, like Katherine Mansfield or Vita Sackville-West. A world in itself.

Vacations spent at home were for reading, and I had become a sort of odd-ball, a notorious eccentric who would bring up the subject of Virginia Woolf in any

conversation more than ten sentences long. (In Catalan we say of such cases that they think they are ‘Napoleon, with one arm tucked inside his jacket’. I have been reminded recently of the curious expression, because until only a few days ago I was going around with a broken arm, in a sling, fixed firmly to my midriff.) In parallel with this, Esher Tusquets, a good friend of mine then as now, the literary director of the Barcelona publishers Lumen, who was going to publish my second book of poems, *Vida privada* (1973), had embarked on a serious project to put out in Castilian the novels of Virginia Woolf, a long overdue undertaking in Spanish publishing. *Pour me faire plaisir*, as she put it, she contracted the biography I have been referring to, which I translated when I was reinstalled in Catalonia, having left behind, with such regret, my beloved University of Nottingham.

To return, though, to the title of this talk, the most normal thing for me to do, to satisfy fully the bee in my bonnet, would have been for me to request a transfer – if this kind of thing were possible, which I doubt – to Birkbeck College, in Bloomsbury, or to the University of Sussex, to which over the years I have become greatly indebted. But Shakespeare’s tempestuous Prospero is surely right when he says ‘Me, poor man, my library was dukedom large enough.’ And in Nottingham, just so, I had my dukedom and my library, a new university library building, a library which thankfully was unlike any to be found in the Spanish universities of that time. A building which was visited by the then librarian of the University of Hull, the greatly admired poet Philip Larkin, to whom I was introduced by my departmental colleague, Christine K. Whitbourn. After mentioning this incident, I shall read another of my prose poems, partly to give you an idea of my feelings at the time:

*Christine W.*

La vida s’escolava dolçament... Havíem acabat una partida de snooker? ‘Vaig decidir de no viure...,’ em va dir. Campus de la Universitat de Nottingham, bungalow del club. En un altre context, el meu, el mediterrani, la versió, fins i tot en mans d’un traductor graponer, hauria estat un suïcidi mai no portat a terme. Prop del riu Trent, equivalia a una epilèpsia domada des de la infància. A les antigues colònies britàniques, potser, per a una senyora plena de perles hauria estat la cloenda d’una anècdota: ‘El capatàs el vaig assassinar jo... Començava a resultar un

amant impertinent.' I jo retornaria d'amagat la novel·la de Somerset Maugham que havia robat a la meua mare.

[Life was slipping gently away... Had we been playing snooker? 'I decided not to live...', she told me. University of Nottingham campus, Staff Club bungalow. In another context, mine, Mediterranean, the meaning – even at the hands of a bungling translator – would have been suicide never committed. By the River Trent, it meant epilepsy controlled since childhood. In the former British colonies, perhaps, for a lady draped in pearls it could have been the ending of some tale or other: 'It was me who killed the chargehand... He was becoming a tiresome lover.' And I would secretly put back the Somerset Maugham novel my mother did not know I had borrowed from her.]

(From *Homenatge a Walter Benjamin*, 1988)

So as not to go on for ever, I shall simply remark that paradises are what do not go on for ever and my personal one then which was Nottingham University came to an early and tragic end, since, during my second and last year 1973–74, I was given leave of absence in the final term, because my father was dying, and, as so often happens – Freud discusses the matter – the death of one's father always marks a before and an after in our lives. I am no exception.

Back at home, as it were definitively now, with the phase of expatriate, rather than exile, behind me, I retained my passion for Virginia Woolf – a passion I still have – and today, as is documented in books like the one I mentioned right at the beginning, no-one can say that my contribution to the reception of Virginia Woolf in Spain and in Catalonia is a meagre one. As a final flourish, even though I might sound conceited and even if here in Britain you yourselves might well feel rather tired of the 'Bloomsbury industry', I should like to recall the most important and most complete exhibition, to this day, to be mounted on the subject of what I consider to be the primary intellectual group in British culture, where men and women moved side by side in absolute equality, despite the fact that women did not even have the vote. I refer to the exhibition that I organised, at the behest of and financed by *la Caixa* (the bank with the little star in its logo), put on in Barcelona in September 1986, with the admittedly obvious title of *El Grup de Bloomsbury*. I say this with fully conscious awareness, for example, of what was done in the Tate Gallery's *The Art of Bloomsbury*, shown from 4 November 1999 to 30 January 2000. The exhibition at the Tate was magnificent, but it conformed to the idea of *art* enshrined in its title,

meaning visual and plastic art. In Barcelona, on the other hand, our coverage ranged from oil paintings to furniture, taking in manuscripts and first editions. And in truth that exhibition was a 'single-handed' endeavour of mine, although I must acknowledge help received from some exceptional unpaid 'secretaries', such as Quentin Bell and his wife, Anne Olivier Bell, distinguished for her editorial work on Virginia Woolf's diaries. In the unlikely case of there being doubts about any of this, there is the exhibition catalogue, and also another book bringing together papers read in the seminar series organized in parallel. It is worth remarking that in the seminars I aimed for and achieved a balance between Great Britain and Catalonia. Thus, the view of Keynes presented by his biographer Robert Skidelsky was matched by that of Fabià Estapé; Lyndall Gordon, another biographer of Virginia Woolf, was responded to by José María Valverde; Noel Annan's account lined up with my intervention, etc. The final result was a surprise which, despite all the years that have gone by since then, I am still recovering from. During all the preparations, I thought that it would be a small-scale achievement, a *succès d'estime*, and that some of my friends would say to me 'Well, we knew that you were clued up on the subject.' Nothing of the sort. It was a resounding success, a crowd-puller, and I lost some friends, because we are all human, and success of any kind, alas!, can 'banish' friendship, if I may borrow the expression from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

I am about to conclude this talk, but before I do I wish to speak out once more for Virginia Woolf and, particularly, her connection with Catalonia. To do this I must back-track somewhat and remind you that while the Uncivil War was raging, in 1937, the Institució de les Lletres Catalanes was founded, under the presidency of Josep Pous i Pagès. The Institution held its last meeting on 27 January 1939 – remember that Barcelona fell into the hands of Franco's troops on 26 January of that year, the date also of the death of W.B. Yeats – at the Mas Perxès, close to the border with France, as is recorded in the official minute-book, a document which followed the routes of exile to end up in Chile, and which was handed over to President Pujol by the Catalan colony in that country, in Santiago de Chile, in December 1992, a ceremony at which I was present. This minute-book – pathetic in more than one sense – is now housed in the Catalan National Archive (situated, by the way, in my electoral district), and I have read and re-read it in connection with work upon which I am now engaged, a book to be called *Mercè Rodoreda i el seu temps*. The minute-book contains an entry for meeting number 20 of the Institució de les Lletres Catalanes, at 4.10 pm on Monday 7 March 1938, which

records that: 'The External Relations Section acknowledges receipt of a letter from the English writer Virginia Woolf, in response to a communication addressed to her by the Section, in which she expresses her sympathy and her hope for the triumph of the cause defended by Catalonia.' I have tried to trace this letter, but it has, regrettably, been lost. Nevertheless, I am pleased to put on record its existence, because in a recent meeting of the Anglo-Catalan Society itself someone, giving an otherwise excellent lecture, used the word and the concept of Bloomsbury in order to denote the antithesis of seriousness of purpose. The letter from Virginia Woolf that I have brought to light seems sufficiently eloquent to me, without making any mention of the death of one of Bloomsbury's sons, Julian Bell, killed in the service of the Republican cause on 18 July 1937. If that is not a kind of patent of seriousness...

And finally, a confession...: after all, as I have said, I do come from a Judaeo-Christian background: please do not think that Virginia Woolf is my only obsession, not even my main one. My primary concern is poetry and a great respect for the master-poets, among them Carles Riba who declared that 'The day Josep Carner learned the English language was a great day for Catalan poetry.' As I am still in the process of learning English, you need not make for now any judgements concerning me and my poetic status. My wish is that you will take away from this talk a sense of my happiness in feeling at one with a writer, Virginia Woolf, whom I read and re-read always with great pleasure, and something also of two objectively happy years of my life, two years spent in one of your universities, for which I am sincerely grateful. I like to think, modestly, that I express this in a poem, also from my *Homage to Walter Benjamin*:

*Mrs X*

Sabia que, al cap de poc temps, no recordaria el seu nom.  
*Welcome home*, em deia després de qualsevol període de  
 vacances, bo i parant el Hoover per tal que el brogit no ensordís  
 les seves ben intencionades paraules. M'emocionava. *Thanks*,  
*Mrs...*, per més que sabia que no recordaria el seu nom ni la  
 seva cara. Aquell passadís de facultat universitària, un matí orfe  
 encara d'alumnes, de savis, de rucs amb títols, tan desert com  
 un teatre abans de l'assaig, com una capella mitja hora abans de  
 la missa... Enyoro aquell ritual. Mrs X, sigui tan bona que, on

sigui, transmigri en d'altres dones de la neteja que m'he de trobar...

[I knew that, before too long, I would not remember her name. 'Welcome home,' she would say to me after any vacation, always stopping the Hoover so that the noise would not drown her thoughtful, kind words. I was moved. 'Thanks, Mrs X,' even though I knew I would not remember her name or her face. That corridor in the faculty, one morning still bereft of students, of learned scholars, of asses with several degrees, as deserted as a theatre before the rehearsal, as a chapel half an hour before the mass... I do miss that ritual. Mrs X, please be so kind, wherever you are, to migrate into the souls of other cleaning ladies who might come my way...]