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1922-2022: How to Critically Inherit Modernism ? Gender Issues in Anne Carson's Reading of Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*

1922 is no ordinary year in the history of European and Anglo-American Literature. Also known as Modernism's *annus mirabilis*, it is in fact the year in which James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* were published. But 1922 also marked the publication of Paul Valéry's *Charmes*, as well as the completion of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*, Giuseppe Ungaretti's *Il porto sepolto* and Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*, all of which were published almost simultaneously the following year.

Coincidence or circumstance, two concerns seem to be shared by these works: on the one hand, the more or less explicit desire to take an overall view of the traumatic events of the First World War; on the other hand, the desire to enter into a critical dialogue with tradition (of the novel, of poetry, of language) and its exponents. Just as Eliot, in his famous *The Tradition and the Individual Talent*, peremptorily posited that the value of an author can only be established by placing him 'among the dead ones'¹ and comparing him with them, so the heirs of Modernism seem to be aware of the impossibility of simply getting rid of tradition. Conceived as a reservoir of shared images that guarantee to individuals their allegiance to a society, tradition has ceased to be organized as a series of authority figures arranged in a linear and compartmentalized pattern over the centuries, resulting in everyone seemed to have acquired the right to draw from it at will and establish 'a permanent parallelism with the present'². The task of writers and of those who master the fragments of this tradition is no longer to struggle alone against the force of the past, but rather to convey their experience in a form that can connect with other authors and themes scattered across space and time.

In 2017, Anne Carson publishes *The Albertine Workout*. In this lyrical essay, she intends to solve (i.e. to *work out*) the mystery surrounding the character of Albertine,

¹ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Eugene OR, Harvest Books, 1975, p. 80.

² *Ibid.*

as well as to reflect on the way Proust reiterates gender bias in female desire. Carson's use of quotation reinforces both the irony and the seriousness of this aim: 'By shutting her eyes, by losing consciousness, Albertine had stripped off, one after the another, the different human personalities with which she had deceived me ever since the day when I had first made her acquaintance. She was animated now only by the unconscious life of plants, of trees, a life more different from my own, more alien, and yet one that belonged more to me'¹. Mixed with fragments from Barthes, with digressions on Beckett or on Zeno's paradox, the Proustian quotations allow Carson to criticize the basis of the analogy built by the Narrator: 'Plants do not actually sleep. Nor do they lie or even bluff. They do, however, expose their genitalia'². And yet, despite the explicit wish to reread.

The Prisoner in the light of its female protagonist, Carson's text cannot be reduced to an anti-Proustian pamphlet. On the contrary, the author admits that, just as Marcel loved Albertine as an ideal object on which to cast his literary ambitions, so too did she love the Recherche for the intellectual desire it aroused in her. *The Albertine Workout* thus provides us with material to reflect on the relationship that contemporary authors - especially the ones who can be considered 'erudite' - have with their Modernist models.

¹ Anne Carson, *The Albertine Workout*, New York, New Direction, p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 20.