

Annalisa Federici

Modernist Fiction and the French *Nouveau Roman*: Transnational Connections

Abstract I: This essay focuses on a comparative study of Modernist fiction and the French *Nouveau Roman*. Not only do these literary phenomena display some common features allowing us to regard them as manifestations of the same cultural climate, but the *Nouveaux Romanciers'* explicit mention of the Modernist novelists as their admired predecessors also seems to legitimise an approach that establishes continuity and reveals interesting transnational connections. Indeed, their relationship can be assessed in terms of reception and assimilation of a model. Such a reading shows some striking analogies between Woolf's and Sarraute's aesthetics on the one hand, and the never-ending quests of Joyce and Butor on the other.

Abstract II: Questo saggio propone uno studio comparativo della narrativa modernista e del *Nouveau Roman* basato su una serie di tratti comuni che permettono di considerare i due fenomeni letterari come manifestazioni di una medesima temperie culturale. Per di più, la menzione esplicita da parte dei *Nouveaux Romanciers* dei romanzieri modernisti come illustri precursori evidenzia interessanti parallelismi, nonché un rapporto di continuità. Tale approccio analizza il loro legame in termini di ricezione e assimilazione di un modello, e si presta ad uno studio incrociato dei sorprendenti punti di contatto tra le ricerche della Woolf e della Sarraute contrapposte a quelle, non meno simili, di Joyce e Butor.

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Anglo-American literary Modernism in all its forms (including fiction, the genre here at issue) is a daringly experimental cultural phenomenon, and one that may be considered as the most emblematic expression of 'modernity'. This seems to be confirmed, for instance, by the fact that the French novel (to take a case in point) of the first decades of the twentieth century shows some of the innovative features characterising Modernist fiction as well, yet formal experimentation and linguistic manipulation are never so extreme as to allow any kind of comparison, especially because such attempts to break with the literary conventions of the past are sporadic and not entirely cut loose from tradition. Even though *Les Faux-monnayeurs* by André Gide (published in 1925, the same year as Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*) is a good example of metafiction in the same way as Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1919-27), which in addition shows a masterly treatment of time and the typical theme of the *Künstlerroman*, and though Valéry Larbaud, Joyce's friend and translator, makes use of the interior monologue in his short novels (almost contemporary with *Ulysses*) *Amants, heureux amants* (1921) and *Mon plus secret conseil* (1923), it is only with the emergence within the literary panorama of the 1950s of the so-called *Nouveaux Romanciers* that begins a period of great innovation of the narrative form which not only is as radical as the one characterising Modernist fiction, but also moves from the same assumptions and manifests itself in analogous ways.

The French *Nouveau Roman*, as the only 'other modernity' capable of standing comparison with the Modernist novel, is not a real movement (at least in the sense that its leading figures, like their English forerunners, neither worked jointly nor signed manifestos) but a convenient label under which such 'new novelists' as Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Jean Ricardou, Claude Simon, Claude Ollier and Robert Pinget (whose works were mainly published by *Les Éditions de Minuit*, hence the alternative name "École de Minuit") came to be grouped. These writers shared common attitudes not only in posing a serious challenge to what they vaguely called the Balzacian novel (in the same way as

the Modernists rejected the conventions of the Victorian novel) but also in following the path of the great innovators of the 1920s and 1930s, whom they recognised as renowned models and predecessors. In Sarraute's words,

What unites us is a common attitude towards traditional literature. It is the conviction of the necessity of a constant transformation of all forms as well as of our complete freedom to choose them; it is the awareness that a real revolution took place in literature in the first three decades of this century, that such great revolutionaries as Proust, Joyce and Kafka opened the way for the modern novel, and that this movement is irreversible (qtd. in Calin 1976: 8)(1).

Proust, after Henry James, examined our inner life under a microscope. He discovered the endless proliferation of sensations, images, memories and feelings never analysed before, which underlie our gestures and intonations. [...] But he observed them at a certain distance after they had run their course, as if they were static and fixed through memory. [...] It is Joyce who set such a microscopic universe in motion. These tenuous sensations become manifest, as they are carried away by the stream of consciousness, through the interior monologue. At every moment an uninterrupted flux of words – whether coupled with actions or not – flows through our consciousness and disappears [...]. Finally, Virginia Woolf captured the flow of instants through the rhythm of her sentences. "Every moment", she said, "is a saturated atom, a combination of thoughts and sensations". Time is a stream of iridescent drops reflecting for every one of us a different image of the world. Our life is an eternal present potentially containing the whole universe (Sarraute 1996: 1650-1651).

Though generally neglected by criticism (2), Modernist fiction and the *Nouveau Roman* undoubtedly display some common features allowing us to regard them as manifestations of the same cultural climate – a mere three decade gap

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separates the literary output of Joyce and Woolf from that of Sarrate and Butor, which are under any other respect quite similar in both theoretical conception and narrative practice – while the *Nouveaux Romanciers*' explicit mention of the Modernist novelists as their admired predecessors seems to legitimise a comparative approach that establishes continuity and intentionally avoids sharp distinctions between, on the one hand, a cultural phenomenon that is emblematic of modernity and, on the other, one prefiguring post-modernity (3). Moreover, in the context of what has been named “change of dominant from modernist to postmodernist writing” (McHale 1986), that is, a change “from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being* – from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological one*” (McHale 1986: 10), emerges one of the peculiar traits of twentieth-century fiction in its totality: the overall presence of questions concerning the intrinsic nature of, as well as the possible ways of knowing, both the outside world and narrative seen as a *world of words* in which such issues undergo a systematic textualization, according to a marked tendency to referentiality and self-referentiality/reflexivity at the same time.

The concept of representation is a fundamental concern for such novelists as Joyce, Woolf, Sarrate and Butor – who defines fiction as “one of the essential constituents of our apprehension of reality” (Butor 1960: 7) – and this emerges from their theoretical reflections as well as their narrative practice. Rejecting the outdated notion of the novel as *mimesis*, they conceived fictional writing as a highly self-conscious, detailed analysis of both the inner and the outer world, of consciousness (hence the use of the interior monologue, or what Sarrate named *sous-conversation* (4)) as well as reality (whose depiction is never completely abandoned, as can be seen, for instance, from the overabundance of details that is typical of Joyce and Butor), thus revealing “the ontological status of all literary fiction: its quasi-referentiality, its indeterminacy, its existence as words and world” (Waugh 1984: 101). Metafiction – that Patricia Waugh defines as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an

artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 1984: 2), identifying it as emblematic of the twentieth century – is an appropriate term to refer to Modernist fiction as well as to the French new novel, especially because its ambiguous ontological status is for the authors in question a major issue: "metafictional writers [...] are self-consciously anxious to assert that, although literary fiction is only a verbal reality, it constructs through language an imaginative world that has, within its own terms, full referential status as an alternative to the world in which we live. [...] Metafiction lays bare the linguistic basis of the 'alternative worlds' constructed in literary fictions" (Waugh 1984: 100).

Both the Modernist novel and the *Nouveau Roman* can be seen as responses to a strong need to redefine fiction as a form of representation of reality: the rejection of the narrative norms of the past (epitomized by Victorian or Balzacian realism, in terms of which, they felt, the novel as genre was still viewed and assessed) derives not from a mere desire for novelty, but from a general awareness that such norms are totally inadequate in codifying a new way of experiencing reality itself. In this respect, Woolf's and Sarraute's remarks sound strikingly similar:

We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale – the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages – has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present. Every day we find ourselves doing, saying, or thinking things that would have been impossible to our fathers. [...] No age can have been more rich than ours in writers determined to give expression to the differences which separate them from the past and not to the resemblances which connect them with it. [...] So then our contemporaries afflict us because they have ceased to believe. The most sincere of them will only tell us what it is that happens to himself. They cannot make a world, because they are not free of other human beings. They cannot tell stories

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because they do not believe that stories are true. They cannot generalize. They depend on their senses and emotions, whose testimony is trustworthy, rather than on their intellects, whose message is obscure. And they have perforce to deny themselves the use of some of the most powerful and some of the most exquisite of the weapons of their craft (Woolf 1966: 157-160).

The quest which drives the novelist to attach himself to a subject matter that is new, unknown and that puts up resistance arouses his curiosity, his passion and stimulates his effort. It forces him to relentlessly abandon the conventions and habits which interpose between this new topic and himself, preventing him from reaching it. It compels him to lay aside exhausted and useless forms in order to create lively ones, and to forge new, powerful tools. [...] Such an incessant movement from what is known to what is unknown, from what has already been expressed to what has never been expressed before, determines – not only for literature but also for any other form of art – a condition of perpetual evolution (Sarraute 1996: 1647-1648).

At a three decade distance, these writers questioned the idea of the novel as storytelling or as objective narration of a succession of fictional events, on the assumption that such notion imposes a false order on reality and creates an illusion of the intelligibility, coherence and meaningfulness of the world surrounding us. On the contrary, the 'new realism' they advocated reflects what they perceived to be the fundamentally chaotic, transient, fragmentary nature of both inner and outer reality through the adoption of forms and structures which are discontinuous (Woolf), erratic (Sarraute) and deliberately ambiguous (Butor), often (and this is especially the case with Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou) in order to demonstrate that fiction is constituted instead primarily by writing itself, which produces rather than copies reality. Of course they never dispensed with narrativity – let us consider its profusion in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or in Butor's *L'Emploi du temps* and *Degrés* – but rather problematized it and brought forward the constructedness of fiction as well

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as the compositional process itself, in order to question the idea that stories would simply recount events that are ontologically prior to the act of narration.

This, on the one hand, brings to the fore that shift in focus from content to form and language which is notoriously the most representative feature of Modernist fiction and which is also typical of the *Nouveau Roman*, while, on the other, presupposes a high degree of self-reflexivity that, as already mentioned, equally characterises both. Such issues appear to be closely connected: not only does the form/content distinction often become redundant, but this seems to be the case exactly because "self-elucidation [...] implies that what is brought into play in fiction is not only the object of representation but also the means of representation. The poetics of fiction become engaged in the reading of fiction and are incorporated into its 'subject matter'" (Jefferson 1980: 17). As criticism has almost unanimously pointed out, beyond the aforementioned rejection of plot and omniscient narration, of an exact chronological order as well as of a solid portrayal of fictional characters (which in a way anticipated the new novelists' frequent claim that the characters of the new fiction should exist simply in the anonymous form of the personal pronoun), the actual innovation introduced by Modernist authors was the fact of devoting particular attention to formal experimentation as well as regarding form not merely as a means for handling the content, but in a sense *the* content itself. The *Nouveaux Romanciers* share similar concerns, and Butor's words in this regard are a case in point:

Therefore, formal elaboration in fiction is of primary importance. [...] It seems evident that, since form is a matter of choice [...], new forms reveal the choice of new contents [...]. Conversely, different ways of conceiving reality correspond to different narrative forms. Now it is clear that the world in which we live is in a state of endless transformation. Traditional narrative techniques cannot integrate every new relationship consequently arising. [...] Formal invention in fiction, far from being opposed to realism as naive critics often suppose, is a condition *sine qua non* for an even more emphatic realism. [...]

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The theme or subject matter, as we have already seen, cannot be separated from the way in which it is presented, from the form through which it is expressed. New situations, a new awareness of what the status of fiction is and what kind of relationship it has with reality correspond to new themes and forms on whatever level – language, style, technique, composition, structure. On the other hand, the search for new forms, revealing new subject matters, also reveals new relationships (Butor 1960: 8-11).

Even though the linguistic invention that is so peculiar to literary Modernism seems to be absent in the works of the new novelists, and though Joyce's verbal fireworks have substantially remained an unparalleled phenomenon, in both cases the language of fiction comes to the fore as the object as well as the means of representation; its validity is constantly questioned (but never denied) since – as twentieth-century writers often lament – its simple relationship to the world, that of naming and describing, no longer seems to apply transparently and words appear to separate themselves from their respective referents, whereas its fragmentation often reflects the fragmentary nature of both inner and outer reality as the novelist perceives it.

As I hope it is clear from this brief overview, the French *Nouveau Roman* derives and often emphasises most of the experimental traits characterising English fiction in the first decades of the twentieth century, showing a constant evolution of the narrative form that is due to the emergence of new ways of experiencing reality. This comparative approach helps to shed light on the parallelism existing between these distinct, and at the same time very similar attempts at a radical innovation of fictional norms, but we should not forget that their close connection can be also assessed in terms of reception and assimilation of a model. Such a reading reveals some striking analogies between, on the one hand, the aesthetics of Woolf and that of Sarraute, which are mainly focused on the relationship between sensation and language, and on the other hand the

never-ending quests of Joyce and Butor, both aimed at creating fictional worlds that could rival the one we live in.

Sarraute, Woolf and the “anxiety of influence”

As one critic has recently pointed out, “from the famous ‘Entretien avec Virginia Woolf’ [...] conducted by Jacques-Émile Blanche for the literary journal *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* in August 1927 to the intertextual character of Edward Dalloway in Julia Kristeva’s contemporary de Beauvoirian saga *Les Samouraïs* [...], the work of Virginia Woolf remains a milestone on the French literary scene” (Villeneuve 2002: 19) (5). Though partly overshadowed by the genius of Joyce, who in the 1920s and 1930s monopolised the attention of the writers and critics at the core of the Parisian intellectual scene, Woolf’s oeuvre had a significant impact – mainly fostered by the appearance of the first French translations of her novels and of the pioneering monograph *Le Roman psychologique de Virginia Woolf* by Floris Delattre (1932), as well as by the relationship that Bloomsbury maintained with Paris from the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1910 onwards (6) – on the thought and literary production of a generation of writers who emerged a decade after her death. Among these, Nathalie Sarraute holds a significant, but often uncertain, position: if in some essays and *entretiens* she explicitly mentions Woolf among her models and precursors or does not hesitate to express her own admiration for the great achievements of her art (7), on other occasions her attitude is not devoid of contradictions. Whenever Sarraute refuses to admit the existence of any kind of similarity between her own style or sensibility and that of Virginia Woolf, the latter represents “a deep source of fascination and influence hidden and dealt with in the most complex registers of ambivalence” (Villeneuve 2002: 29).

In this regard, it seems interesting to quote some of Sarraute’s remarks during an interview entitled “Virginia Woolf ou la visionnaire du ‘maintenant’”, in which the French writer first concedes to her supposed model the usual merit of playing

a key role in the process of radical transformation of twentieth century fiction (in which, of course, she took part herself), but then declines, showing a certain amount of ill-concealed “anxiety of influence”, any comparison with her own style and compositional process:

For me she [Virginia Woolf] has always been, along with Proust and Joyce, one of the great writers who have opened the way to modern literature, to contemporary fiction. Like Proust, Joyce and Kafka, she contributed to the transformation of the modern novel, to that shift in focus from plot and character to the art of fiction itself. I believe the substance of Virginia Woolf's novels is the flow of time. Her style, through a particular rhythm and fluidity, immediately conveys to the reader a sense of the flow of instants. Every moment, she said, is a saturated atom, a combination of thoughts and sensations. Time is for her a stream of tiny drops reflecting a different image of the world for each of us. [...] People have talked about our “similarities”, about the influence of Virginia Woolf on what I have written. I think our sensibilities are really totally unlike each other. In Virginia Woolf's novels, the entire universe, swept along by time, flows through the consciousnesses of the characters, who are passive, as if carried hither and thither by the ceaseless current of moments. In my works, characters are always in a state of hyperactivity: a dramatic action unfolds on the level of their “tropisms”, these rapid movements slipping on the frontiers of consciousness. And that produces a completely different stylistic rhythm (Villemour 1961: 3) (8).

Despite such strenuous defence of the originality of her own creative vein, Sarraute's words implicitly bring to the fore the aims and beliefs she shared with Woolf: both writers almost exclusively focus their attention on the depiction of the inner world – which Sarraute defines as “the stuff of fiction par excellence” (Villemour 1961) (9), recalling Woolf's claim that “for the moderns [...] the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (Woolf 1966: 108) – on the

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vibration of thoughts, fleeting sensations and unspoken words, on the anonymous, pre-linguistic inner movements of the psyche that the French author names "tropisms":

These movements, of which we are hardly cognisant, slip through us on the frontiers of consciousness in the form of indefinable, extremely rapid sensations. They hide behind our gestures, beneath the words we speak and the feelings we manifest, all of which we are aware of experiencing, and able to define. They seemed, and still seem to me, to constitute the secret source of our existence in what might be called its nascent state (Sarraute 1956: II).

By praising the fluidity and rhythmic quality of Woolf's writing, Sarraute recalls the transient, evanescent, amorphous nature of what her fiction tries to capture – "a substance as anonymous as blood, a magma without name or contours" (Sarraute 1956: 74) – through an idiosyncratic style and use of language that, in spite of her claims, is for both of them fluent and at the same time discontinuous, ever-flowing but also fragmented by a peculiar overabundance of dashes, ellipses, juxtapositions of images, paratactic structures. As the following extracts show, the visual impact of such formal devices is as striking as the similarities concerning their use:

It seems as if the whole world were flowing and curving – on the earth the trees, in the sky the clouds. I look up, through the trees, into the sky. [...] If that blue could stay for ever; if that hole could remain for ever; if this moment could stay for ever. But Bernard goes on talking. Up they bubble – images. "Like a camel", ... "a vulture". The camel is a vulture; the vulture a camel; for Bernard is a dangling wire, loose, but seductive (Woolf 1931: 27).

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Pitilessly, the lazy, unctuous vowels stretch, wallow and sprawl all over him ... The holidaaays ... the short final consonant brings a brief respite, and then it'll start up again ... the suhhn ... the seeea ... the stale-smelling liquid that they disgorge splashes over him ... (Sarraute 1968: 39).

However – as shown by their conception of literary creation as verbal transposition (and thus external manifestation) of thoughts and perceptions, as well as by their idea of language as surface manifestation of a deep, psychological reality – their aesthetics is not entirely inwardly-focused, but rather founded on a dichotomy or mutual tension between such antithetic elements as consciousness and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, unity and fragmentation.

Virginia Woolf, whose aim was to “achieve a symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the mind’s passage through the world; achieve in the end some kind of whole made of shivering fragments” (qtd. in Bell 1987: 138) (10), conceived her own writing process as a both inward and outward movement, as a recording of the “myriad impressions” (11) that reality produces on our flowing consciousness, but also as the projection of a nucleus of thoughts and sensations (that is, the revelation of inestimable value deriving from what she names a “moment of being”) on to reality itself. Her major accomplishment is the creation of a narrative form that brings the transcendent into the actual through the verbalization of rare moments of insight, in which a deep meaning suddenly originates from the reception of impulses from the outside world and then becomes manifest, real, concrete only through language:

And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by

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putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me (Woolf 1989: 81).

For Nathalie Sarraute, language is, properly speaking, the sole component of her fictional world: not only do anonymous voices (in the form of dialogues and interior monologues) occupy the place traditionally assigned to narration, but words, whether spoken or unspoken, are conceived as the objective correlative of almost imperceptible psychological processes, the surface manifestation of deep sensations which, thanks to an upward movement that she names *jaillissement* or *aboutissement* (12), emerge and become indivisible from language itself. The dichotomy depth/surface informs her own conception of the compositional process, which is aimed, as it is for Woolf, at searching the true reality behind (but one should say below) appearances, at unveiling what is unknown, invisible, “that thing which bears no name, which must be transformed into language” (qtd. in Angremy 1995: 38). For both writers literary creation involves a certain ‘permeability’ of the self, a sort of osmosis between the inner and the outer world, whereas language plays a crucial role as the medium of composition seen as “transmuting process” (Olivier Bell and McNeillie 1982: 102), or verbal equivalent of a reality (thoughts, perceptions, mere impressions) which is primarily non-verbal.

Furthermore, the analogies that link Woolf and Sarraute go far beyond the close connection existing between life and art, between their sensibility on the one hand, and their particular way of conceiving narrative on the other, but also extend to certain aspects of their literary production as well as to shared formal features and stylistic devices. In this regard, it seems interesting to draw a comparison between such texts as Woolf's *Moments of Being* and Sarraute's *Enfance*, which not only are characterised by a peculiar mixture of

autobiography, memoir-writing and narrative self-reflexivity, but can also be interpreted as metanarrative commentaries concerning the origins as well as the basic principles (the relationship linking sensory perception, memory and writing, the latter seen as fundamental for shaping personal identity) of each author's aesthetics and compositional process. Moreover, if on the one hand Woolf's short stories (13) and Sarraute's brief texts published in the collection *Tropismes* reveal a common attempt to create experimental sketches through which such issues as representation, perception and the relationship between consciousness and reality could be dealt with (14), on the other hand it is the texture itself of their longer narratives that manifests a similar way of devising a discontinuous and erratic succession of events through simple juxtapositions of images. In this respect, for instance, Woolf's novel *The Waves*, which is almost exclusively constructed out of a sequence of dramatic monologues, can be seen as anticipating the fictional universe of Sarraute's *Les Fruits d'or* and *Entre la vie et la mort*, that is entirely made of voices soliloquising or dialogising with other voices. In all three, moreover, almost nothing happens, while the subjective dimension of inner life is brought to the fore through the representation of the psychological processes unfolding in the minds of ethereal (in the case of Sarraute even anonymous) characters, in a style that is fluid, rhythmic (due to the abundance of repetitions and cross-references), but also discontinuous:

"I see the beetle", said Susan. "It is black, I see; it is green, I see; I am tied down with single words. But you wander off; you slip away; you rise up higher, with words and words in phrases" (Woolf 1931: 11).

I need to sense... I don't quite know what it is... it's something like what you feel in the presence of the first blade of grass that timidly sends up a shoot... a crocus that is still closed... it is such a perfume that they spread, but it is not a perfume, not even a smell, it has no name [...]... every particle of me is imbued with it (Sarraute 1963: 153).

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And it is precisely in terms of stylistic analogies, as well as of a shared need to adapt fiction to their peculiar vision of life, that the relationship between Nathalie Sarraute and Virginia Woolf can be assessed, and that the former's attempt to dissociate herself from the latter seems quite strange.

Challenging the model: Butor and Joyce

The reception of James Joyce in France is a complex phenomenon starting in the 1920s with the author's own settlement in Paris and direct involvement in the creation of a sort of personal myth, by which he came to occupy a central position among the French literary élite. Thanks to his acquaintance with the booksellers and publishers Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach, as well as their renowned circles (gravitating towards their prestigious firms, La Maison des Amis des Livres and Shakespeare and Company respectively), Joyce came into contact with such intellectuals as Valery Larbaud, Eugene Jolas, Léon-Paul Fargue, Philippe Soupault, André Gide, Paul Valéry, who became not only friends and supporters, but also critics and translators of his works. To both admirers and detractors, Joyce's name was soon synonymous with daring formal experimentation and masterful use of the interior monologue, the epitome of the "revolution of the word" advocated by such avant-garde journals as Jolas's *transition*. As Slote remarks, "the story of Joyce's influence on the scenes of French literature [...] begins with Valery Larbaud", who soon "replaced Pound as the primary 'impresario' for *Ulysses*" (Slote 2004: 362). Favourably impressed by some of the episodes at that time serialised in the *Little Review*, Larbaud introduced Joyce's genius to the Parisian intellectual scene with a lecture at La Maison des Amis des Livres in December 1921 (an expanded version of which appeared in the prestigious *Nouvelle Revue Française*), drawing the attention of the reading public to the stylistic innovations of Joyce's masterpiece and its use of the stream of consciousness, its overall unity and complex structural organisation, as well as the

Homeric correspondences, thus paving the way for the long-awaited volume publication by Shakespeare and Company in February 1922.

As a widely debated literary phenomenon that in the 1920s and 1930s is the subject of countless reviews, articles, critical commentaries and translations – among which worthy of mention is the French version *Ulysse*, published in 1929 after many years of efforts and disputes between the translators Auguste Morel, Stuart Gilbert and Larbaud himself – Joyce's oeuvre becomes a real source of inspiration and overt influence mainly with the emergence of the *Nouveau Roman*, for whose exponents, but especially for Michel Butor, Joyce represents, as mentioned earlier, a distinguished model and precursor (15). Furthermore, the new novelists' attempt to confer legitimacy on their project by appealing to the precedent of Joycean Modernism shows that the peculiarity of his literary achievement "sets his texts apart from most other modernist works while it relates them to our own cultural moment" (Attridge 1995: 14). In such a perspective, the relationship between Joyce and Butor can be assessed not only in terms of overt influence, shared purposes and common aesthetic values, but also as a *fil rouge* that links the boldest experiments of modernity to our postmodern era, a standpoint from which it is nowadays possible to recognise, retrospectively, that "something like post-modernism does indeed exist as a *stylistic feature* of some number of literary texts" (Dettmar 1996: 12-13), and that "the most 'untimely' modernist texts, *Ulysses* foremost among them, always contain the germ of their own postmodernity, and effectively outline the critique of their own fictive enterprise" (Dettmar 1996: 48) (16).

It is indeed the acute awareness of a common way of conceiving certain aspects of the narrative form – first and foremost the central importance of language, seen as both the means and the object of representation – that, since the beginning of his own career, has led Butor to manifest his great admiration for Joyce, and then to avow the significant impact he has always had on his

narrative production, for which Joyce's impressive literary accomplishment represents a source of influence that is stimulating and inhibitory at the same time:

Joyce's literary production has greatly impressed me, in every sense of the term. It has had a profound effect on me, it has left its mark on me, and the same is true for the way in which Joyce creates his texts by means of schemata. For instance, as far as *Ulysses* is concerned, the *Odyssey* framework and the Homeric correspondences (but these are just a few examples among many others): well, this has exerted a decisive influence over me. As regards *Finnegans Wake*, it is evident that such a book has left a mark on me, and that, in order for this mark to be not so evident, for a long time I have refrained from any kind of verbal manipulation. Precisely, so as to be influenced by major issues only. But all the books that I have written in the last few years bear the mark of *Finnegans Wake*. [...] Therefore, Joyce has encouraged me to do a lot of things, has given me many ideas, has taught me so much. But, for a long time, he has also prevented me from doing certain things. And so that problem of the orthographic manipulation: no, I couldn't do it, Joyce had gone too far... (qtd. in Santschi 1982: 117-118).

Unsurprisingly, in his essay *Petite croisière préliminaire à une reconnaissance de l'archipel Joyce*, Butor praises the distinguishing features of Joyce's writing – the great complexity of his narrative style, the linguistic invention and verbal manipulation by which formal aspects become *the* content, the use of the interior monologue as direct representation of the characters' psychological processes, the coexistence of order and chaos, as well as a certain semantic density involving active participation on the part of the reader – which can be more or less explicitly found (except for some deliberate neglects) in his own narrative production of the 1950s:

It has been claimed that the main character in *Ulysses* is language, and this is absolutely true. Little by little, as one penetrates deep into the book, this “means” acquires an independence that is more and more remarkable. Each episode has its own style, its musical tone, its stylistic devices, which are determined by its subject matter as well as its place within the overall framework. [...] By using the interior monologue technique, he [Joyce] wants to analyse in detail the inner world of his characters (Butor 1960: 201-203).

Such an unprecedented use of language gives the book [*Finnegans Wake*] an aspect of almost absolute impenetrability and yet, little by little, those swarming pages finally become clearer. Joyce adds to the English language, which serves as a basis, countless provincialisms and misspellings; he multiplies neologisms and dialect terms; he groups words together and contracts them, thus obtaining an incredible density of expression. [...] He carries to extremes his techniques of verbal counterpoint, piling up through such distortions many different meanings at the same time. [...] The endless variation of superimpositions and dislocations gives the author the possibility to change as he likes the clarity or obscurity of his means of expression. [...] It is typical of the very essence of his work that it can be read and understood only gradually. Beyond such a chaotic appearance, everyone can enter its complex organisation by their own means. Given a certain passage, the literal meaning one can initially find in it, is not necessarily the same (Butor 1960: 209-210) (17).

Indeed, in the context of a supposed continuity between Modernist fiction and the *Nouveau Roman*, Butor’s extensive and heterogeneous literary output seems to be characterised by the same inclusiveness and experimental realism that distinguish Joyce’s oeuvre. Both writers conceive the narrative form as a separate world of words, as a highly self-reflexive epistemological framework in which it is possible to investigate the relationship between consciousness and reality, text and (both

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inner and outer) world, by paying particular attention to such fundamental issues as language, structural organisation and formal experimentation. Not only for Butor, but also “for Joyce, language was the primary mode of apprehension of reality” (French 1982: 239), in the same way as the notion of representation is central to their aesthetic ideals. Butor’s claim that fiction is “the phenomenological domain par excellence, the field par excellence in which it is possible to study how reality manifests itself” (Butor 1960: 8) applies to his own choice of a central character’s gradual process of apprehension of the world surrounding him as a framework for his major novels, but also to their shared attempt to textualize mental processes, as well as depict reality as it appears to consciousness through endless accumulations of facts and ‘naturalistic’ details.

As shown in *Ulysses* (and carried to extremes in *Finnegans Wake*), Joyce’s aim was to create a complex mental model or “mimesis of consciousness” (Riquelme 1983: 151). Through a systematic representation of streams of thoughts, perceptions, memories and inner voices, Joyce’s *hypermnestic machine* (18) “seems to mimic the operation of a human mind by developing a textual and intertextual memory accessible to both characters’ and readers’ minds” (Rickard 1999: 14). In such emblematic an extract as the following one, for example, from the thoughts and visual perceptions combining in Bloom’s mind arises, almost by chance, an involuntary memory of the past:

Mr Bloom stood at the corner, his eyes wandering over the multicoloured hoardings. Cantrell and Cochrane’s Ginger Ale (Aromatic). Clery’s summer sale. No, he’s going on straight. Hello. *Leah* tonight: Mrs Bandman Palmer. Like to see her in that again. *Hamlet* she played last night. Male impersonator. Perhaps he was a woman. Why Ophelia committed suicide? Poor papa! How he used to talk about Kate Bateman in that! Outside the Adelphi in London waited all the afternoon to get in. Year before I was born that was: sixtyfive. [...] Every word is so deep, Leopold. Poor papa! Poor man! I’m glad I didn’t go into the room to look at his face. That day! O

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dear! O dear! Ffoo! Well, perhaps it was the best for him. Mr Bloom went round the corner and passed the drooping nags of the hazard. No use thinking of it any more. Nosebag time. Wish I hadn't met that M'Coy fellow (Joyce 1992: 93).

Not only does the regular alternation (or even merging) of third-person narration and interior monologue try to represent the complex relationship between mind and world, while narrative itself displays the workings of a textual memory by means of repetitions, quotations and a constant reworking of its own material, but the fictional universe also addresses some of the major issues of contemporary psychology. Therefore, "Ulysses functions", writes Rickard, "as a site of struggle or tension between competing philosophical and psychological conceptions of the nature of human subjectivity and the role of memory within that subjectivity or selfhood. *Ulysses* – shaped both by the dominant philosophical and psychological discourses of its own time and by older models of mind or self – enacts or works through the struggle between these often incompatible models rather than presenting one version or model of subjectivity" (Rickard 1999: 3).

As regards Butor, similar concerns are at the root of his own conception of fiction as both "a response to a certain state of consciousness" (Butor 1960: 10-11) and "a means of interpreting reality" (qtd. in Charbonnier 1967: 78), as an instrument of analysis of the acts of consciousness through which reality can be experienced but also of the outside world, whose 'presence' is deeply felt by the reader, hence the attempt to reproduce the complex mechanisms of thought, memory and perception without diminishing the importance of realistic details nonetheless. For both authors such an ideological framework presupposes an encyclopaedic aim, a desire for inclusiveness that obviously requires a scrupulous mental elaboration, a proliferation of patterns and ordering principles, and a structural rigour achieved through outlines giving internal cohesion to a never-ending accumulation of facts and details. In this regard, one should not be

surprised at Butor's fascination for "the way in which Joyce creates his texts by means of schemata" (qtd. in Santschi 1982: 117), or at his own declaration: "I begin to write a novel only after I have been studying its general design for some months, only when I am in possession of a series of plans whose efficacy – as far as the expression of what initially attracted my attention is concerned – I think is finally sufficient" (Butor 1960: 273). From a stylistic point of view, moreover, both writers share an inexhaustible need for experimentation – not only on a semantic and syntactic level, but also as regards the merging of different genres, and of narrativity as well as metanarrativity – and accurate formal elaboration as means of investigating what they perceive to be an extremely complex reality.

Given the debt that Butor acknowledged to Joyce, and the manifold analogies mainly regarding their way of conceiving fiction, it is easy to notice that their narrative production reveals, despite some stylistic peculiarities, a number of recurring features. Both *Ulysses* and *L'Emploi du temps*, for instance, manifest a fundamental concern for the problematics of representation: such novels enact a central character's process of apprehension of a reality which is elusive and extremely chaotic, as well as of a past that is obscure and difficult to retrieve – either spontaneously, as in *Ulysses*'s displaying of the workings of involuntary memory, or through a conscious attempt to fill in the gap that separates it from the present moment by a metafictional act of writing, as in *L'Emploi du temps*:

It is already June 1st, and [...] I should have hastened to come back, search for and write down what survives in my memories of the last moments of November, so as not to make this seven month gap enlarge, this gap that I have maintained ever since I began this narrative, this too large a gap that I hoped to reduce quickly, and that I must compress more and more as I go on, and that, day after day, somehow thickens and becomes more opaque (Butor 1956: 129).

Furthermore, these works show the perfect balance between narrative proliferation and structural rigour that is one of the greatest accomplishments of both authors: the enormous expansion of a simple plot, the profusion of facts and the overabundance of details break the linearity of narrative, but at the same time are part of an overall design whose unity is maintained through repetitions, internal cross-references, recurrent themes and motifs. An analogous spatio-temporal organisation of a narrative which is open and closed at the same time can be found in *La Modification*, the sole novel by Butor that makes use of the interior monologue technique (though in the quite unusual form of the second person) and also the one that is most similar to Joyce's masterpiece, considering the choice of the main character's stream of consciousness as unique component of the fictional universe. However, whereas in *Ulysses* the juxtaposition of interior monologue and third-person narration maintains the perspective both internal and external to the character's mind, in *La Modification* the textualization of mental processes becomes pervasive and in a certain way 'incorporates' reality (in the forms of perceived present, remembered past and imagined future), showing how consciousness works through associations, or the way in which spontaneous memories are determined by sensory perceptions:

Pineapple rock, lemon platt, butter scotch. A sugarsticky girl shovelling scoopfuls of creams for a christian brother. Some school treat. Bad for their tummies. Lozenge and comfit manufacturer to His Majesty the King. God. Save. Our. Sitting on his throne, sucking red jujubes white. A sombre Y. M. C. A. young man, watchful among the warm sweet fumes of Graham Lemon's, placed a throwaway in a hand of Mr Bloom. Heart to heart talks. Bloo... Me? No. Blood of the Lamb. His slow feet walked him riverward, reading. Are you saved? All are washed in the blood of the lamb. God wants blood victim (Joyce 1992: 190).

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Beyond the window, among the vineyards, under the sky turning darker and darker, the high, yellow-painted tiled roof of a church stands on top of a small village. [...] Two years ago, or even earlier, since it was still summertime, at the end of August, you were sitting in a third-class compartment similar to this one, on this very same seat near the corridor facing the engine, and in front of you was Cécile, that you hardly knew, and that you had just met at the restaurant, coming back from her holidays (Butor 1957: 56).

Although the linguistic invention and narrative fragmentation that are emblematic of Joyce's style cannot be found in Butor's, these works show similar concerns, in the same way as Butor's last novel *Degrés* (once again an account that is not only extremely detailed but also full of intertextual references) exemplifies their shared ideal of fiction as an autotelic world of words, a metanarrative, all-embracing description of a process of gradual understanding of reality through writing itself.

As shown in this study, the narrative production of Virginia Woolf, Nathalie Sarraute, James Joyce and Michel Butor undoubtedly displays a number of recurring features which can be variously interpreted in terms of continuity between Modernist fiction and the French *Nouveau Roman*, of an explicit influence or reception of a model linking together the authors in question, or even as fortuitous similarities among separate attempts at a radical transformation of the novel, in any case revealing, on a both conceptual and formal level, an essentially analogous way of conceiving narrative that is also emblematic of the twentieth century as a whole.

NOTES

(1) Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

(2) As for what I am aware, there isn't any comparative study concerning Modernist fiction and the *Nouveau Roman*. Scholars confine themselves to passing

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reference to Joyce while discussing intertextuality in Butor's novels (as in Lydon 1980, and in De Labriolle 1985) along with some sporadic attempts to connect Woolf's and Sarraute's poetics (cf. on this point Cohn 1964; Noël 1970; Cornwell 1977; Cagnon et Walvoord 1992).

(3) As shown by recent criticism, the boundaries between Modernism and Postmodernism are far from being definite, and their relationship should be assessed in terms of continuity as well as of a radical break. For what concerns Postmodernism, then, we could talk about a "contradictory dependence on and independence from that which temporally preceded it and which literally made it possible. Postmodernism's relation to modernism is, therefore, typically contradictory [...]. It marks neither a simple and radical break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it: it is both and neither" (Hutcheon 1988: 18). Furthermore, no less contradictory is the possibility of considering the *Nouveau Roman* as part of the canon; while Fokkema claims that "it is generally accepted now that the *nouveau roman* can be subsumed under the umbrella term of Postmodernism" (Fokkema 1986: 81), Hutcheon considers the new novelists as "examples of late modernist extremism" (Hutcheon 1988: 52), on the grounds that their aesthetics, though not definitely Postmodern, derives and often emphasizes some of the experimental features of Modernist fiction.

(4) The notion of *sous-conversation* (literally meaning "sub-conversation", or unspoken words) is not clearly defined by Sarraute, but rather emerges by contrast to conversation in the same way as the secret source of our inner life is opposed to the appearances and commonplaces by which it comes to the surface, that is, "our conversations, the personality we seem to have, the characters we seem to be in one another's eyes, the stereotyped things we believe we feel as well as those we discover in other people, and the superficial dramatic action constituted by plot, which is nothing but a conventional code that we apply to life" (Sarraute 1956: IV).

(5) As for what I am aware, this is the only extensive study of the reception of Woolf's oeuvre by a non-English reading public, and thus one of the few that briefly mention the influence it has exerted, among many others, on Sarraute's literary output.

(6) Unsurprisingly, it was Charles Mauron – a Provençal writer, critic and translator, friend of Roger Fry – who in 1926 translated the second section of "Time Passes" for the French review *Commerce*, thus anticipating the publication of *To the Lighthouse* by the Hogarth Press the following year. From this pioneering attempt onwards, other works were gradually translated: *Orlando* and *Flush*, once again by Mauron, in 1931 and in 1935 respectively; *Night and Day* in 1933; *The Waves*, thanks to Marguerite Yourcenar, in 1937; *The Years* in 1938; *Jacob's Room* in 1942; *Between the Acts* in 1945; *The Voyage Out* in 1948; *A Room of One's Own* in 1951; *Moments of Being* and *Three Guineas* in 1977. On the importance of translations for the reception of Virginia Woolf in France see Pellan 2002, and Caws 2002.

(7) In an interview with Simone Benmussa, Sarraute gives voice to her appreciation for *Mrs Dalloway*, whose author is defined "a second Proust": "since the beginning I have always loved, as well as never recanted, a second Proust, who affected me deeply. I have always detested psychoanalysis, and I have never, never believed that what Proust had shown us could in the least be diminished by Freud's discoveries. How deeply I loved Virginia Woolf's works, especially *Mrs Dalloway*, her best novel! I have never changed my mind in this regard" (Benmussa 1987: 44).

(8) This issue, which also features the translation of a passage from *Modern Fiction* entitled "Le Nouvel art romanesque. Texte inédit de Virginia Woolf", was intended as a homage, on the twentieth anniversary of her death, to "one of the greatest writers of the first half of the twentieth century", as one can read in a brief introductory article. Furthermore, it seems interesting to notice that Sarraute's opinion remains the same in another interview of some years later: "sometimes people say that my texts remind them of Virginia Woolf's novels, but I could nearly affirm that our works are quite the opposite. It is true that she makes use of images

– and of very beautiful, poetic images indeed – but the consciousnesses that she describes are open, and the whole world plunges into them. In my texts these are not passive, but always in a state of hyperactivity” (Licari 1985: 11).

(9) Emphasising the close connection between sensation and language that is central to her own aesthetics, but also to that of Woolf, Sarraute adds: “what is fiction, if not sensations and perceptions expressed by means of language? There is no novel which is not a psychological novel also” (Villelaur 1961: 3).

(10) As Sheehan reminds us, “her writing articulates not one but two interpretations of experience, as both flux and fragmentation. Life consists of flowing streams of sensation, yet it is also centred in the singular, heterogeneous moment. These two renderings – of vertiginous, wavelike fluidity and atomised, isolated particularity – are [...] covariant properties of experience. Like wave-particle dualism, the two modalities do not cancel each other out but exist in tandem, coextensive of each other” (Sheehan 2002: 128).

(11) Cf. Woolf's famous remarks in *Modern Fiction*: “examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms [...]. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? [...] let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (Woolf 1966: 106-107).

(12) Sarraute describes literary creation as “the movement by which the writer breaks the hard surface of what is visible, makes these new, intact elements arise, assembles them, gives them cohesion, arranges them to create a model that is the literary work itself. The structure of the work, as well as the writer's own style reveal

the nature of such an effort. [...] Most probably, because of this quest, because of this struggle to make visible what is invisible, the literary work, like any work of art, is an instrument of knowledge [...] The sort of reality that a work of art discloses is not of a rational nature. In order to convey it, one should make use of a sensible form. Without such form, communication is impossible, form being precisely the movement by which the invisible reality comes into existence" (Sarraute 1996: 1644-1645).

(13) See especially "Blue and Green", "The Mark on the Wall", "In the Orchard", "Solid Objects" and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" in Kemp 1993.

(14) For instance, in the following extracts taken from *The Mark on the Wall* and *Tropismes* respectively, both authors focus on a sort of osmosis between the inner and the outer world: "it is full of peaceful thoughts, happy thoughts, this tree. I should like to take each one separately – but something is getting in the way... Where was I? What has it all been about? A tree? A river? The Downs? Whitaker's Almanack? The fields of asphodel? I can't remember a thing. Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing... There is a vast upheaval of matter. Someone is standing over me and saying – 'I'm going out to buy a newspaper'" (Kemp 1993: 60). "And he sensed percolating from the kitchen, humble, squalid, time-marking thoughts, marking time on one spot, always on one spot, going round and round in circles, as if they were dizzy but couldn't stop, as if they felt sick but couldn't stop [...] until we are exhausted, until it leaves us out of breath" (Sarraute 1957: 16-17).

(15) This is also mentioned in one of the few critical works dealing with the reception of the Joycean model among the French new novelists: "while Joyce's influence is pervasive for the *nouveaux romanciers*, it is also diffuse. Except for Butor, Joyce is more of an inspiration than an explicit influence; he is one writer, among several, who have helped occasion a new world-picture. [...] Much like Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute points to Joyce as a precursor in her critical writings, but only as one precursor among several. [...] At the 1975 Paris Joyce Symposium, she refused to talk about Joyce except as an inspiration" (Slote 2004:

383-384). On the importance of translations for the circulation of Joyce's works in France cf. O'Neill 2004.

(16) According to Dettmar, the peculiarity of *Ulysses* consists in its uniqueness, in its defying any attempt at categorisation: "while the novel is obviously one of the pillars of Anglo-American literary modernism, its postmodernism is at the same time bursting out all over. The willful narrative consistently overflows its ostensible mythic framework; the language is increasingly ludic as the narrative progresses; [...] *Ulysses* is certainly a modernist classic; but in its playful unwillingness to take itself or its modernist devices too seriously, it is at the same time pregnant with a nascent postmodernism" (Dettmar 1996: 11). Furthermore, it may be interesting to notice that while Hassan identifies *Finnegans Wake* as the first postmodern novel (cf. Hassan 1975), Richardson, who comments on Joyce's works in terms which could also be applied to Butor, writes: "in the realm of the postmodern, the distinction between the real and the unreal is problematized, as are the correlative lines that attempt to separate fiction and nonfiction, history and fabrication, homage and parody, subject and object, self and other, text and world. This extends to the blurring or collapsing of another set of differences in the narration itself between narrator and character, dialogue and monologue, the 'he' and the 'I'. [...] Working with this concept of the postmodern – that of the violation of foundational boundaries, both ontological and narratological – we find that the *Wake* indeed incontrovertibly belongs to this grouping. So, for that matter, do many of the later chapters of *Ulysses* [...]. As has been observed in the past, *Ulysses* is governed by at least two antithetical aesthetics, one quintessentially modernist, the other defying modernist constraints. [...] Part of the material that violates the modernist aesthetic partakes of the postmodern sensibility" (Richardson 2000: 1038-1039).

(17) Both this essay and the one entitled *Esquisse d'un seuil pour Finnegan* (which was also included in the collection *Répertoire I*) are not in the least Butor's sole interventions on the subject matter: in 1966 he took part, together with an international group of scholars, in the first colloquium dedicated entirely to Joyce

(anticipating the first International James Joyce Symposium by one year) sponsored by the Centre Culturel Américain, while two years later he contributed the short piece *Joyce et le roman moderne* to a special issue of the magazine *L'Arc* devoted to Joyce. In 1975 he chaired a session on "Joyce et l'aventure d'aujourd'hui" at the fifth International James Joyce Symposium that was held in Paris, whereas for the celebration of the centenary of Joyce's birth in 1982 by *Le Monde* he composed an essay entitled *La Langue de l'exil*, later included in the collection *Répertoire V*.

(18)For a definition of Joyce's oeuvre as "hypermnesiac machine" see Derrida 1984: 147.

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