



My Hundreds of Inches of Skin : an International Portrait Gallery of Virginia Woolf Tattoos.

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MY HUNDREDS OF INCHES OF SKIN

AN INTERNATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY
OF VIRGINIA WOOLF TATTOOS

Référence électronique

Caroline MARIE

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Virginia Woolf-inspired literary tattoos ought to be envisaged as an international portrait gallery that creates a community of fans both reflecting and shaping today's versioning of Woolf as a public figure and the epitome of literature for feminists. It focuses on tattooed portraits to show in what way the predominantly Beresford-inspired motifs shape, recontextualise, and storify the cultural object referred to as Virginia Woolf, collectively making up a significant discourse and narrative. It analyses the way Victorian, ethereal Woolf is figured through the imagery of the saint. It then understands her inked portraits in the light of eighteenth-century miniature and the imagery of family portraits. It finally understands the contemporary mystique of literature this creates in reference to the theory of the two bodies of the King.

KEYWORDS

Virginia Woolf, literary tattoo, portrait, miniature, signature

The popularisation and commodification of Virginia Woolf as not just an artist but a pop figure was first considered worthy of academic attention in Brenda Silver's seminal essay *Virginia Woolf Icon*. In a chapter entitled "Quentin Bell's Biography and Historical Products Inc.: Family Portraits," she discusses the 1970s practice of offering Woolf message T-shirts:

conceived as a form of symbolic exchange, the circulation of the T-shirt and its status as gift served to counter the conventional image of Virginia Woolf constructed by the Bell biography. For whereas the Bell biography pushed the writings and the writer into the realm of 'high culture' where the genius/artist was divorced from politics and the public realm, the exchange of T-shirts by women in the 1970s undid the boundaries between high culture and popular culture, private and public, elite and mass. The result was to rewrite Virginia Woolf's relationship to the public realm, transforming her into a sign or token of an activist community. (Silver, 1999, 148)

In 1999 Silver understood the dissemination of Woolf's image "the T-shirt phenomenon" (117) contributed to in terms of cultural anxiety. She paid attention to its "dual trajectory: on the one hand, the recurrence of the motif and its association with fear; on the other, the ways in which this fear has been and can be rearticulated and reinscribed for new possibilities and pleasure." (27) It seems to me that twenty years later the portrayal of Virginia Woolf, her face in particular, conveys less ambiguously positive cultural values and that this new trend is exemplified most clearly in the recent emergence and flowering of Woolf-inspired literary tattoos. What cultural shifts does this transfer of the Virginia Woolf motif from fabric to skin entail? Is not what is at stake different when women wear her image to cover their skins and when that image is marked inside their skins directly so that it becomes permanently visible on its surface? Not unlike the 1970s T-shirts, Woolf-inspired literary tattoos create a community of fans acting as cultural shapers of Woolf's public figure. Unlike T-shirts, which rely on standardised duplication and short-term consumption and exchange, however, tattoos imply more or less artistic variation, individual appropriation, and long-term bodily inscription. Together, as a *series*, such tattoos read as "mobile works of art" (Chassagnol, 2018, 62) and make up two different types of communities, the more or less worldwide web-connected community of Woolf tattooees on the one hand and, on the other, the group of tattoos themselves that, I argue, may be envisioned as an international portrait gallery of Virginia Woolf's.^[1]

56 out of the 97 tattoos explicitly representing, quoting, or illustrating Virginia Woolf and her works I have gathered from Google searches and social media

1. I would like to thank Brigitte Friant-Kessler and Patrick Hersant for their comments and suggestions when a version of this article was first read during the "Littérature dans la peau" conference at the Musée d'art et d'histoire Paul Eluard.

such as Pinterest and Instagram^[2] so far, are portraits (see table below). In this essay, I will focus on those portraits to show how the Portrait Gallery of Virginia Woolf tattoos, the Beresford-inspired variations in particular, reflect and shape our reception, or rather our construction, of that unique literary and cultural item that is Virginia Woolf, biographical woman, writer, icon, and legend.

Virginia Woolf Icon read Woolf's face in relation to two sets of contradictory values, the beauty/monster dichotomy theorised in reference to the mythical figure of Medusa, and the silence/speech opposition in reference to that of the Sphinx. Twenty years later, Woolf tattoos renegotiate those cultural tensions in a way specific to the medium. Tattoos on the female body question the feminine beauty canon along similar beauty/monster dichotomies, as illustrated in self-explanatory article titles such as: "Revolt Bodies: The Monster beauty of tattooed women" (Braunberger, 2000), or: "(Monstrous) Beauty (Myths): The Commodification of Women's Bodies and the Potential for Tattooed Subversion" (Craighead, 2011).^[3] Since, as far I observed, Woolf-inspired tattoos are sported by women exclusively, they are a case in point to analyse the way Woolf is now portrayed as an inspirational figurehead rather than a fearsome Gorgon.^[4] When read as mobile jigsaw pieces, Woolf-inspired tattoos sketch a slizzing puzzle portrait of the writer, shedding light on the cultural values and conventions that are projected onto her, sketching a definition of literature as embodied by Woolf today in the process.

Therefore, I will not discuss the psychological, social, or experiential processes that inspire people to have Virginia Woolf drawn onto their bodies.^[5] Not that I find the personal stories that account for the myriad Woolf tattoos I have collected online unworthy of interest; I merely agree with Nikki Sullivan that tattoos cannot be essentialised as "both the external expression of an inner essence," that of the tattooed subject, "and a (potential) source of knowledge, of mastery, and thus of freedom" of their life histories, partly because this would wrongly imply "a reliance on an expression-reception model of communication that assumes that both meaning and identity are decipherable and definable." (Sullivan, 2001, 2; 2; 4) I do not presume to investigate Woolf-inspired tattooees' lives or motives here, nor to read their

2. A "Virginia Woolf" search on the "original literary tattoo blog" www.contrarisewise.org returns no result. My search spanned from April 15 to August 31, 2019.

3. On this topic, also see Atkinson and Riley.

4. On the changing figuration of Virginia Woolf in post-2010 *bande dessinée*, graphic novel, and comics see my article "The Many Faces of Virginia Woolf."

5. Marquis Bey, Catherine Grogard, Margot Mifflin, and Atte Oksanen & Jussi Turtiainen are typical of this hermeneutic approach.

historiated skins as “a cry of the soul which tears the skin” (Grogard, 1994, 16; qtd. Sullivan, 2). Nor do I intend to find out whether they are long-time Woolf aficionados or “a broad spectrum of people who might never have read a word of her writing or even realized that a real woman named Virginia Woolf had lived » (Silver, 1999, 9). Rather, I am interested in the ways literary tattoos (trans)form (Sullivan, 50) iconic Woolf when read as a *corpus*.

I will read tattoos as “affective dramatizations of (inter)subjectivity or (inter)textuality” because it suggests “the image of the body as a map that does not simply reproduce a tracing of interiority, but more importantly performs infinite (dis)connections with other textual bodies that are never separate from itself.” (Sullivan, 7; 8) I will understand them as speech acts as defined by Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech*, in reference to Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*. Although tattoos are not insults, Butler’s definition of insults applies to them. They may be read as “discursive performativity,” since “speech is always in some way out of control,” which makes it possible to “delink the speech act from the subject in some instances” (Butler, 1997, 14; 15; 15). When envisioned as a *collection* or *corpus*, the signification of Woolf-inspired tattoos exceeds the sum total of their individual intentionalities or messages to (re)(con)textualise the author they picture and storify collectively as well as the bodies they ornate individually. They both are shaped by and shape a specific regime of contemporary appropriation and dissemination of what Brenda Silver has called “versionings” of Woolf (26). To echo Woolf’s 1920 diary entry, I choose to ask: what reflections of Woolf are diffracted into “hundreds of inches of skin”^[6] (Woolf, 1980a, 17)?

Therefore, I will not read the “lit tats” in my gallery as primarily *about literature* but rather as *significant discourse and narrative*. Sullivan explains: “my aim, unlike Grogard’s is not to ask what does the tattooed body (as text) *mean*, or what does it tell us, in a universalizing sense, about the ‘human condition’. Rather, I want to explore *how* the subject in/of tattooing exists in contemporary Western culture, what it *does*.” (Sullivan, 2001, 3) In keeping with the museum studies notion that collections and galleries do not merely preserve and exhibit knowledge but actually shape discourses of knowledge, memory, and legitimation (Bennett, 2004; Davison, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Latour, 1995), I will ask what Woolf-inspired ink portraits *do* rather than what they *mean* or, more precisely, not what they *mean individually* but what they *do* as a *bunch*, *collection*, or *portrait gallery*, keeping it in mind that “it is possible to read the tattoo as a picture that tells stories, whilst at the

6. The entry is about “lice psychology” as both Leonard and the maid Lottie had rashes, but not Virginia: “But imagination! By taking thought I can itch at any point of my hundreds of inches of skin. I do it now.” (1980a, 16-17)

same time recognizing that the stories tattooed bodies could be said to tell are never simply stories of/as the truth.” (Sullivan, 185). I will first consider them as self-reflexive expressions of the passing of time and (trans)formation. I will then analyse the way ethereal, ghostly Woolf is versioned through the imagery of the saint. In relation to the model of miniatures, I will articulate Woolf’s ink portraits with family portraits and reliquaries, recontextualising the theory of the two bodies of the King which may be operative to understand the poetics of literary portrait tattoos.

Although I am aware that it has an impact on the narrative they produce for the tattooee, I am not investigating whether they are single tattoos or part of a collection of tattoos. I am, as it were, cutting them out of their psychological, sociological, and iconographic context, in the way illuminated images from medieval manuscripts were, from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century.^[7]

7. “The pioneer in using manuscript illuminations cut out of their contexts, copied and re-engraved to illustrate history was the artist and engraver Joseph Strutt (1749-1802). His *Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England*, published in 1796, arranged details from individual miniatures in manuscripts belonging to the British Museum, ‘grouping them as pleasingly as the nature of the subject would admit’.” (Camille, 1998, 28)

An inventory of my International Portrait Gallery of Woolf Tattoos (April 15, 2019 – August 31, 2019)

Portraits 47	Beresford-inspired head and shoulders 36 (Virginia Stephen, 1902) copy 11 & flowers 5 & flowers, frame & dove & flowers & moon cycle & flowers & candle & leaves 2 & frame 3 & wings or halo – flash tattoos 2 & signature 2 & lighthouse 2 & waves & Frida Kahlo & heart & handwriting & books drowned Virginia divided Virginia
	Double-faced Virginia 4
	Man Ray-inspired head and shoulders (Virginia Woolf 1935) & flowers & leaves Full length Virginia dressed as a man reading & flower
	Freund-inspired head and shoulders (Virginia Woolf 1939)
	Family portrait-inspired Virginia in a black dress head and shoulders
	Drowned Virginia full-length portrait
	Virginia and Colette dancing full length
Portraits & quotes 9 (all Beresford-inspired)	<i>The Waves</i>
	<i>Orlando</i>
	<i>Mrs Dalloway</i> – quote from Shakespeare's Cymbeline "Fear no more/ the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious / winter's rages" & flowers
	<i>Mrs Dalloway</i> — incipit & flowers
	<i>A Room of One's Own</i>
	<i>Three Guineas</i>
	"ANONIMO"
	"ANON"
	drowning Virginia "BROKEN CHARACTERS"
Name & signature 4	Signature 2
	Name 2
Quotes & titles 31	
Woolf through other writers 6	

THE BERESFORD PORTRAIT: TIME (TRANS)FORMS

More than half of the 97 Woolf-inspired tattoos in my collection are portraits. Out of the 56 portraits, 53 are heads and shoulders and 3 full-length figures, 47 are images only, 2 portraits with signatures, and 9 drawings with quotes. Arguably at least 45 copy the photographic portrait of twenty-year old Virginia Stephen in profile taken by George Beresford in 1902 [<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw08081/Virginia-Woolf>], which has unquestionably contributed to “the construction of her star image and made her transformation into *icon* particularly feasible” (Silver, 1999, 18):

This is the photograph that appears on the front cover of the Bell biography and in many of the reviews; it hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London and is reproduced on many of their products,^[8] as well as providing the model for the images of Virginia Woolf seen on most T-shirts, posters, and mugs. Hermione Lee, doing her own reading of the face, speculates that the constant reproduction of this portrait has done as much as anything to perpetuate her ethereal, refined, vulnerable image. (130)

Silver finds that the main difference with portraits of contemporary female writers such as “Edith Wharton or Willa Cather is its appearance in anthologies of beautiful women”^[9] as well as their “direct gaze and business-like stance” while Woolf “look[s] past the camera into the distance, a gaze that in nineteenth-century celebrity photography conveyed ‘an air of weighted seriousness,’ of farsightedness, but might strike some viewers as anachronistic or too detached in a more free-for-all, engaged, environment.” (137) She distinguishes between the gaze of the Sphinx in the most famous of the Beresford photographs of Woolf at twenty and the gaze of Medusa in the series of portraits by Lenare when she was in her late forties [<http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/803062>]. Like Medusa, the 1929 Lenare portraits are monstrous in that in “assuming a frontal position that ‘functions like the ‘I-You’ relation,’ Virginia Woolf not only insists on

8. In 1997 it was “the most popular postcard” among the +/- 400 of the Gallery, the Head of Retailing and publication explained, and had “sold upwards of 25,000 loose cards during the past five years” so that the gallery “developed a small range of other products around the image including a bookmark, paperweight, fridge magnet, greeting card and... mug’ which ‘sold more than 2000 pieces this year [1997] through the gallery alone” (Carr-Archer, 1999; qtd Silver, 1999, 278).

9. The Pre-Raphaelite beauty of the women in the Stephen family was legendary and staged deliberately in family photographs and posed portraits alike (See Silver, 1999, 130). Virginia’s mother, Julia Stephen, née Jackson and former Mrs. Herbert Duckworth, is presented as “Beauty and philanthropist” on the National Portrait Gallery site which shows eight pictures of her, including portraits by her aunt and godmother Julia Margaret Cameron. She sat for Burne-Jones and Watts. <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp17975/julia-prinsep-stephen-nee-jackson-formerly-mrs-duckworth>]

the viewer's presence, drawing her or him into the discursive moment, but demands a dialogue. Virginia Woolf becomes 'fighting words.'" (Marin, 1980, 306, qtd Silver, 1999, 143-44)

I will argue that, far from "anachronistic" and however unified, standardised, and commodified, the tattooed copies of the Beresford portrait Silver associates with the silence of the Sphinx take on Medusa-like force and "become 'fighting words.'" Their potential disruptive power shifts the cultural dichotomies analysed by Silver. The saint/ghost ambiguity is now superimposed over the beauty/monster dichotomy of Medusa's mythical gaze while the silence/speech of the Sphinx dovetails with the blurring of real life and fiction.

The series of tattoos (fig. 1) that more or less artfully copy the young Victorian beauty staged by Beresford emphasize her "uncanny otherworldliness" and produce not so much a "monster" (Silver, 1999, 138; 27) as a ghost. What is inked into skin is a duplicate of a duplicate, meta-aesthetically questioning the very notions of origin and original. If Beresford-inspired tattoos are ink copies of a silver paper image that itself copies and de-realises a real-life female face, itself artfully and deliberately constructed as out of this world, how could they reveal any truth about Woolf herself?

Fig. 1. Some items in my collection of Beresford-inspired Virginia Woolf portraits^[10].

After G.C. Beresford "Virginia Woolf." 1902. National Portrait Gallery
<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw08081/Virginia-Woolf>



Fig. 1a. "My Virginia Woolf Tattoo - YouTube." Google search.

10. All screenshots by Caroline Marie.

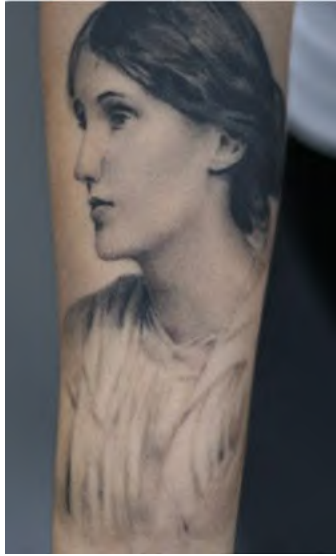


Fig. 1b. laslecturasdemrdauidmre.blogspot.com.es. "Tatuaje de Virginia Woolf." *Pinterest*.



Fig. 1c. "Vrginia (sic) Woolf foi uma (sic) escritoria inglesa..." *Google search*.



Fig. 1d. Tattoosbycarmie. "Kind of blurry pics. All healed just a little flaky." *Instagram*.



Fig. 1e. Tiny Love. "Hello here is my new tattoo of Virginia Woolf." *Twitter*.



Fig. 1f. Lauralutrae. "Virginia dans toute sa splendeur. Et de 2, merci à #coco_vagina !" *Instagram*.



Fig. 1g. Chadia_ash_L'Atelier des Moires. « Portait de Virginia Woolf pour la fabuleuse @novembre_tattoo. » *Instagram*.



Fig. 1h. Pete_b_tattoos. "Did some more on this women's (sic) lib sleeve today. Here's a finished Virginia Woolf..." *Instagram*.



Fig. 1i. Nick Matthews Tattoos. "Portrait of Virginia Woolf 'For Most of History, anonymous was a woman'#" *Google search*.



Fig. 1j. "By Tattoo A Piece. Done in Seoul. <http://ttoo.co/p/29671>." *Inked-app.com*



Fig. 1k. Virginia Lopes (@&hells_tat). "Virginia Woolf também da Mari. Mulheres incríveis para essa mulher maravilhosa ♥." *Imgrumtag*.



Fig. 11. No title. *Imgrumtag*.

What they might be understood to do is point to the fact that Woolf's face is always already a duplicate in the process of being transferred to other surfaces and that it functions as a cultural shifter, a space of appropriation, (self-) projection, and (trans)formation.

As it gets transferred onto skin, Virginia Woolf's portrait conveys both more or less fixed stereotypes and their potential subversive force. 14 out of the 45 Beresford-inspired tattoos emphasize her youthful appearance, signalled by the white lace dress in the original portrait, with additional flowers or leaves redundantly asserting her innocence. These stereotypical vegetal markers of femininity do not so much depict Woolf the fully-fledged writer as Virginia Stephen, a figure of potential self-definition and self-assertion, herself a work in progress, a face to be written on and defined by life and experience, "(trans) formed" through a process of "(un)becoming" (Sullivan, 2001, 50; 113). This is paradoxical, since all 9 portraits inked alongside quotes from Woolf's works are Beresford-inspired.

Tattoos inscribe temporality into skin in a paradoxical gesture of control and acceptance of the body's mortality: "There is an inherent dichotomy in the experience of having a tattoo. The tattoo is a permanent emblem that is marked on a transitory entity. The body will change, but the tattoo's

placement and iconography will remain the same. Of course, as the body ages and decays so will the tattoo.” (Kosut, 2000, 97) It makes sense, then, that the arm piece by Dwam (fig. 2a) should associate the Beresford portrait, flowers and thorns evocative of beautiful yet potentially dangerous nature and the passing of time, and the lines from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* Mrs Dalloway reads “in the book spread open” while reflecting on “[t]his late age of the world’s experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears”: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun / Nor the furious winter’s rages.” (Woolf, 2000a, 6; 7) In comparable manner, the tattoo by Ligia Castro (fig. 2b) on her friend Carol’s thigh combines the delicate delineation of Woolf in her light dress, a bunch of oversized flowers in the lower right corner, and seven moon phases in the upper left. The Moon is another stereotypical marker of femininity which may also refer to Woolf’s tragic death and the notion of fate.

Fig. 2. Beresford-inspired Woolf tattoos with flowers and leaves.

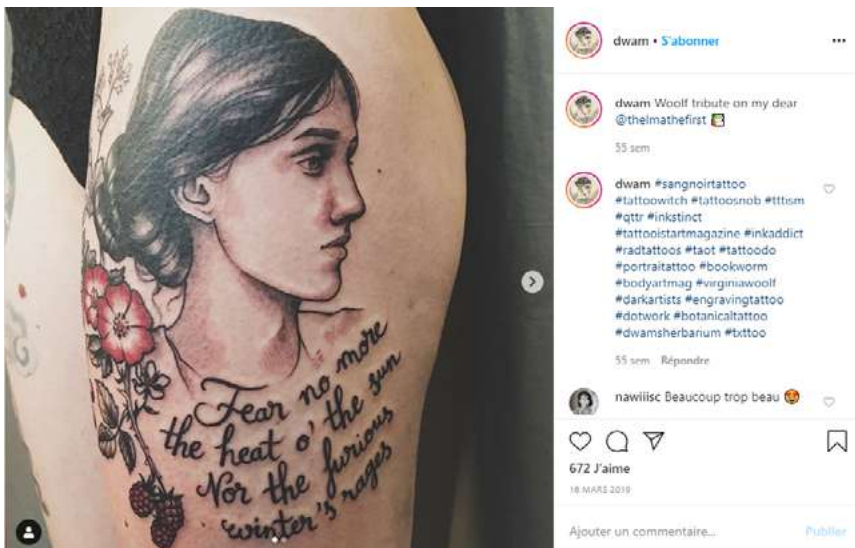


Fig. 2a. Dwam. “Woolf tribute on my dear @thelmathefirst.” Instagram.



Fig. 2b. Ligiacastrattoo. “Esboço do trampo da Virginia Woolf pra best @carol_sekhmet.” *Gorzavel*.



Fig. 2c. Deewhitetattoo. “Small portrait of Virginia Woolf for Lily! (Hair detail done with a single needle).” *Instagram*.



Fig. 2d. Sanmantattoo. "Tatuajes feministas solo en SanMan Tattoo Parlor!!!" Instagram.



Fig. 2e. Alex. "Happy birthday to Virginia Woolf." Saveig.



Virginia Woolf for Elia. #linework #virginiawoolf

Fig. 2f. Camilla Geiger. "Virginia Wolf for Elia." *Pikord*.



Fig. 2g. No title. *Mystalk*.

Paradoxically, if the tattooed portraits of Woolf depict her as arrested in time, forever in flower, her youthful face also epitomises becoming, the instability of the self — being Virginia Stephen/becoming Woolf —, and the fact that “Time Passes,” to quote the title of the second section in *To the Lighthouse*.

Even the three instances of ink portraits copied after the 1937 Man Ray series that show a respectable-looking middle-aged Woolf — one of which made the *Time* cover on April, 12th [<http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19370412,00.html>] — frame her face within cherry blossom or leaf patterns (figs. 2c; 2d). One inner lower arm piece is particularly interesting in that it combines the Beresford and the Man Ray (fig. 2e). Although Woolf looks middle-aged, her puffy bun and dreamy attitude as she reads come from the Beresford while her torso, which emerges out of a huge water lily flower, is dressed in a manly way that accentuates the austerity of the clothes in the Man Ray portrait, the tie blouse and jacket now a shirt and bowtie with waistcoat and jacket. This tattoo is a rare contemporary instance of the monstrous male/female dichotomy Silver associates with the Lenare portrait. On the whole, botanical motifs, which might at first sight seem unsuited to the representation of a mature woman, illustrate how deeply Woolf is culturally associated with conventional figurations of the feminine as well as this notion of growth and (trans)formation that is so prominent in Woolf-inspired tattoos and, arguably, essential to tattooing itself.

Woolf's face, especially as captured by Beresford, thus becomes a prototypical, sometimes even stereotypical, iconographic motif integrated into new webs of signification through instances of inter-iconic hybridation that may be only loosely semiotically related to their source. The young girl in flower's face becomes a motif with a life of its own. Its reduplication engenders a genealogy of tattoo patterns that popularise, normalise, and cross-pollinate Woolf with today's familiar or fashionable motifs as well as the idiosyncratic style of tattoo artists until she looks like a Frida Kahlo beauty with huge exotic flowers in her hair on a tattoo by a Spanish artist (fig. 2f) or a young Japanese girl in a kimono inside a half-wreath of cherry tree blossoms by a Polish one (fig. 2g). Note that the cherry blossom is associated with both Beresford- and Man Ray-inspired tattoos. One may wonder, may these patterns still be considered literary tattoos or have they transformed Woolf into a meaningless commodity? Has her face become an immediately identifiable but meaningless pattern in a dematerialised tattoo pattern catalogue?

Fig. 3 Variations on Saint Virginia



Fig. 3a. Paula Maggio. "Where will you put your Virginia Woolf tattoo?" *Blogging Woolf*. Tuesday 8 March 2011.



Fig. 3b. Lenarey.art. "Virginia Woolf." *Instagram*.



Fig. 3c. Who.says.ni. "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. Early birthday present for one of my dearest friends." *Instagram*.



Fig. 3d. Boquitadebratz. "Virginia Woolf ♥ otra mujer fuerte y valiente para @camila.garzo n.391." *Instagram*.

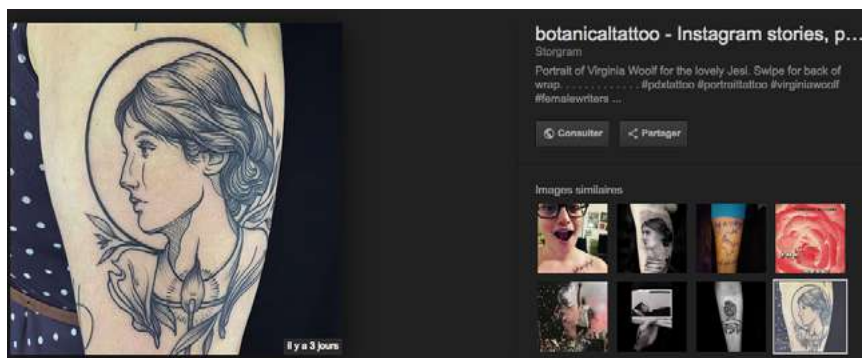


Fig. 3e. Botanical tattoo. "Portrait of Virginia Woolf for the lovely Jesi." Instagram stories. *Storgram*.

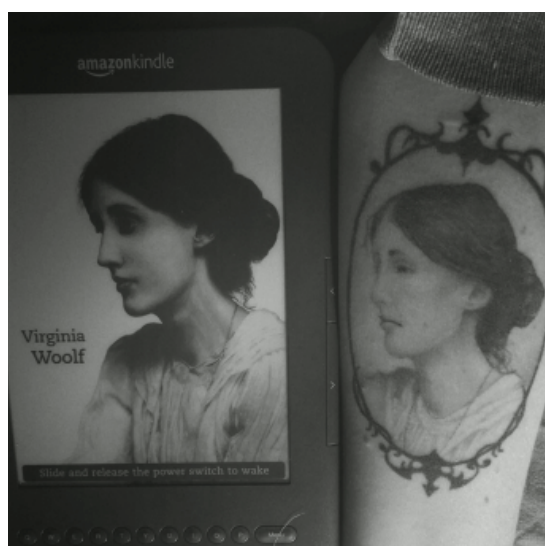


Fig. 3f. Learnbyart. "And then I got a portrait of Virginia Woolf..."
Learnbyart.wordpress.com



Fig. 3g. Virginiawoolftimeless. "Virginia by tattoo artist @ashleighbayontattoos." *Instagram*.



Fig. 3h^[11]. Woolfbites. "Virginia Woolf calf tattoo." *Tumblr*.

11. 3h's caption underlines such fetishisation of the Victorian: «some more frame work, Vita, and Oscar Wilde soon to be on their way!» [Sackville West, whom Woolf had an affair with], and Oscar Wilde soon to be on their way!]

A CULTURAL SHIFTER: THE GHOST, THE SAINT

My hypothesis is that the very standardisation of inked Woolf conveys cultural meaning, not in spite of its half-artistic half-mechanical reproduction, but because of it, as illustrated in two very simple tattoos. The first, a temporary one, was circulated for the 2010 International Virginia Woolf Society Conference “Back to Bloomsbury” (fig. 3a). Above the Beresford intricate bun, two wings circle the word “Bloomsbury,” pointing to Woolf’s sacred status today. A later flash tattoo shows two wreaths of flowers instead of the original wings, but a half-circle of short lines suggests a halo (fig. 3b). The cultural phenomenon Brenda Silver calls *Virginia Woolf Icon* in reference to the mythical feminine figures of Medusa and the Sphinx has turned into a *religious* icon today. The writer who was nicknamed “the High Priestess of Bloomsbury” by her detractors in her lifetime now is graphically canonised. The imagery of the saint, a popular tattoo motif, is now superimposed over the ghostly face of the Beresford portrait.

It is noteworthy that in my gallery the two highly-detailed blackworks that are not mere outlined head and shoulders portraits but include part of the torso as well, read as religious icons (figs. 3c; 3d). As already observed on the Beresford- and Man Ray-inspired head and shoulders portraits, the saint’s body is visualised in reference to growth and the botanical. Both show Virginia’s virginal dress turning into a stole of flowers, combining the imagery of the embroidered clothes of religious statuary and the image of Ophelia into a life/death dichotomy. Virginia’s monstrous, canonised body — a much-discussed cultural issue — is at once natural and abstract, disembodied and associated with fertility and the cycle of life, birth, growth, death, and rebirth. It speaks of metamorphosis in the present moment while emphasizing stereotypical visual markers of the Victorian.

An arm piece (fig. 3e) offers a versioning of Saint Virginia that is culturally meaningful in that it combines the visual markers of the feminine and the religious: the wreath of leaves and flowers below her face turns into the circle of a halo above it. A lit candle under her neck signals her canonisation as well as the tattooee’s faith in her legend.

Alongside the two Victorian-looking Allegory of Spring-inspired tattoos, three others highlight the Victorian aesthetics of the Beresford photograph (figs. 3f; 3g; 3h). It seems highly paradoxical, even contradictory, perhaps, that Virginia Woolf, who resolutely sought to define herself against her Victorian upbringing and the Edwardian society she lived in, leaving the stifling family home at 22 Hyde Park Gate in Kensington to settle in Bloomsbury with her siblings and friends, inventing Bohemia and “[k]illing the Angel in the House

[as] part of the occupation of a woman writer”^[12] (Woolf, 1966, 286), should be so consistently figured on skin as an ethereal Victorian beauty. Are we to conclude that Woolf tattooees neither know nor understand anything about her historical and literary importance or impact and brainlessly consume her pop portrait while any other silly old female face would do just as well? Shall we wisely ignore their fashionable iconographic Mumble Jumble, thinking, like Helen discussing Richard Dalloway’s kiss with Rachel in Woolf’s first novel: “Oh, well [...] [s/]he was a silly creature, and if I were you, I’d *think no more about it*” (Woolf, 2000b, 79)?

On the contrary, envisioning them as a gallery makes it clear that there is nothing jejune in those tattooed appropriations of Virginia Woolf’s face, although there might be instances of miskonwowing, misreading, or misunderstanding on the part of some of the tattooees individually — a track this essay chooses not to follow. What is of interest in my *corpus* as *collection* is the way those tattooed portraits construct Woolf as a timeless icon and an icon of time, a “matron saint” (Silver, 1999, 129) and, at the same time, a next of kin. My theory is that the imageries of the ghost, the eternal feminine, and the saint articulate with that of the family portrait in a way that is best understood in reference to the aesthetic and cultural model of the miniature fashionable in eighteenth-century England.

TATTOOS AS MINIATURES INKED INTO SKIN: THE LOGIC OF RELICS

Miniatures are small-scale portraits originally painted on vellum and later on ivory mounted into richly ornamented jewels or boxes. Such “portrait-objects,”^[13] Marcia Pointon explains, are “a continuation of the

12. Woolf wrote that: “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (1966, 286) in a paper she read to the Women’s Service League in 1931. In this talk, she also struggles to “tell the truth about [her] own experiences as a body” (288). “The Angel in the House” is the title of a narrative poem depicting the Victorian feminine ideal by Coventry Patmore.

13. Pointon’s theory regarding the spiritual value of portraits in Protestant societies sheds a thought-provoking light on the fact that more than half of Woolf-inspired tattoos are portraits: “Reliquaries commonly encase — sometimes offering to view behind crystal or glass — a body part of material fragment that stands as a surrogate for a presence at once mystical and phenomenological. Portrait images as such have little or no place in reliquaries. Yet there is evidence for a congruence between the mode of operation of the reliquary and that of the portrait-object. In Protestant cultures, perhaps precisely on account of the elimination of official shrines, the secular reliquary functioned in devotional ways that are self-consciously analogous to religious reliquaries. Portraits and hair were commonly given equal importance in such constructions, which include hidden elements, secret compartments, and ‘windows.’” (61)

Renaissance and seventeenth-century practice of accumulating medals and creating imagistic family trees.” (Pointon, 2001, 48) They are “mark[s] of private loyalty” usually to “male kin”^[14]: “women of quality are known to have worn miniatures of their husbands; these were not hidden but placed facing outward as part of their apparel.” (53; 53; 51) There are many resonances between miniatures and “cameo tattoos,” a sub-genre much-discussed on the internet which transfers portraits back onto skin, the original surface on which miniatures were painted. In both cases, the body functions as a private site of public display of what is redolent of one of the oldest indexical functions of tattoos, that is to say to materialise control and ownership, either economic (slaves or prostitutes), political (prisoners), or sentimental (lovers or next of kin).

Miniatures might actualise the owner’s allegiance to her family or king, as illustrated in pieces of jewellery “containing portraits of Charles I and Charles II and sometimes also locks of their hair; these artifacts are quasi-reliquaries” (Pointon, 2001, 49; 56). More to the point for my argument, they may express literary allegiance: the inventory of George and Olive Craster’s miniatures mentions “a Cornelian Socrates’s head” while the Wallace collection owns “a small box made in Dresden about 1775 of cornelian inlaid with gold” containing “a secret slide, which, when drawn out, reveals the portraits of Voltaire (on one side) and of his mistress, Émilie, marquise de Châtelet (on the other), painted on ivory.” (56; 61) That miniatures could feature philosophers and writers as well as husbands and kings points to the intimate, sensual rapport with literature they mediated. Men of letters too were “worn as a kind of talisman.” (60) This ties in with Silver’s remark that in the 1970s Woolf message T-shirts “carried on the strong tradition of the political button within the women’s movement from the nineteenth century on, which often featured images of leaders such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone.” (Silver, 1999, 145) Indeed, Susan B. Anthony T-shirts were circulated alongside Woolf T-shirts. In this light, tattoos appear to carry to the fore the sensual connexion of miniatures, buttons, or T-shirts materialising faith in a wide scope of thinkers, intellectuals, and activists from Socrates to Voltaire, from Anthony to Woolf.

Pointon underlines that “[t]he importance of keepsakes lay” “not only in the image they offered of a loved one but also in the fact that they were transportable. Such objects were endowed discursively with well-nigh magical properties, endorsing their proximity to relics.” (67) As images

14. Pointon defines miniature as “a site for the inscription of sexual difference”: “the condition of the miniature as portrait-object is gendered; women might publicly display on their persons men’s images, but men might not act reciprocally without loss of masculinity. Men owned and cherished but did not normally publicly display portrait miniatures.” (59)

interfused deep inside skin, the faces of Virginia Woolf, icon and saint, those “mobile works of art,” actualise the fantasy of carnal possession and appropriation of the Other toyed with by print T-shirts and miniatures, those “ambulant portraits” (Chassagnol, 2018, 62; Pointon, 2001, 501). If miniatures “generate[d], in eighteenth-century England, a mass of affective imagery narrating contemplative moments, often with erotic implications, in which solitary young men and women gaze at miniatures,” it could be argued that tactility and “material eroticism” (Pointon, 63; 54) are as permanent as tattoos themselves. After all, those inked portraits are bound to be admired and caressed when their wearers are.

In this light, the oval frames circling the family portrait-styled copies of the Beresford photograph are not simple markers of nostalgia, either as memorabilia or Victoriana, even though they may operate as such too. They are not so much *memento moris* as spaces of negotiation between the self and the Other. The frame graphically suggests (trans)formation, as the copy of a copy is transferred onto skin, self-consciously materialising complex interaction, separation, and connexion of the tattooee to Woolf.

THE THEORY OF THE KING’S TWO BODIES: A POETICS OF TATTOOED PORTRAITS

It could be considered, then, that the “theory of the king’s two bodies” (63) Marcia Pointon conjures up to define the values of miniatures in eighteenth-century England applies to writers as well as monarchs, and to tattoos as well as miniatures, arguably even more so since the “reliquaries” are enshrined into skin. This notion was first theorised in the 1950s by Ernst Kantorowicz in *The King’s Two Bodies. A Study on Medieval Political Theology*. He explains that the king has two bodies, the body natural, which has physical attributes and is mortal, and the king’s other body, the body politic, which symbolises his divine right to rule and achieves the continuity of the monarchy. As pieces of jewellery, miniature portraits likewise produced continuity as they were owned by women and “bequeathed as heirloom or as gift,” carrying “narratives of continuity and signif[ying] the transvaluation of the material into abstract qualities such as history or spirituality.” (Pointon, 2001, 56) The global portrait gallery of ambulant Virginia Woolf’s, I would like to suggest, likewise conveys continuity but of a different nature, one that has to do with literature. It embodies the possibility of feminine literature and an alternative history of literature, in other words the type of alternative literary lineage or “visual family tree” (49), Woolf envisioned and called for in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929):

For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure. Lamb, Browne, Thackeray, Newman, Sterne, Dickens, De Quincey — whoever it may be — never helped a woman yet, though she may have learnt a few tricks of them and adapted them to her use. The weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully. The ape is too distant to be sedulous. (Woolf, 1993, 69)

The enumeration of canonical male writers presents them as impossible ancestors whose inability to bequeath anything to women writers defines women writers as free of any male legacy dramatiser. It is noteworthy that this anti-lineage is expressed through body imagery, as though the incompatibility were biologic, genetic even, as suggested in the humorous yet violent image of the male writer as “ape.”

For Virginia Woolf, writing is of the body. Tattooed Woolf portraits “achieve the ultimate rapprochement between flesh and text” (Chassagnol, 2018, 67). Together with the bodies of the tattooees, they embody the continuity not of monarchy through the king's body politic but of literature through Woolf's face. Her imaginary daughters and yet her daughters in the flesh actualise the possibility of Woolf's revolutionary literary notion of “thinking back through our mothers.” The jewel she bequeaths them is literature or, more precisely, the possibility of a self-generated literature that is not unlike the self-(trans)formed body of the tattooee, a poetics and a politics. The Sphinx Silver associated with the Beresford portrait no longer mutters mysterious messages; on the contrary, the portrait gallery of Beresford-inspired tattoos proclaims: “Virginia Woolf is dead. Long live Virginia Woolf!” which is another way of saying: “Literature is dead. Long live women's lit!”

Tattooed Virginia Woolfs do not merely signal bookworms to a like-minded community, quote, or mean literature, they *do* something to literature, they *speak* literature, (trans)forming Woolf into the face and flesh of literature. In this context, the cultural meaning of the three hagiographic tattoos that dramatiser Woolf's suicide exceeds the biographical fascination with her death (fig. 4). A large backpiece (fig. 4a) shows her as Greek goddess illuminated by rays of light that transcend the dark landscape. An arm piece (fig. 4b) shows her Beresford-inspired head standing out of water above the caption “broken characters,” playing on the polysemy of the word, referring to psychological traits, fictional *personae*, as well as the materiality of the tattoo. A small silhouette arm piece (fig. 4c) combines the representation of her death, her sacred dimension conveyed by the organically realistic heart that mirrors the conventional religious iconography of the sacred heart in Western art, and her literary status as a prophet or mediator between god and women illustrated by the bird that Woolf so famously heard speaking in Greek: she is literature's sacred body. She triumphs as words, “Unvanquished / Unyielding” (fig. 4i).

Fig. 4 The Theory of the King's two bodies

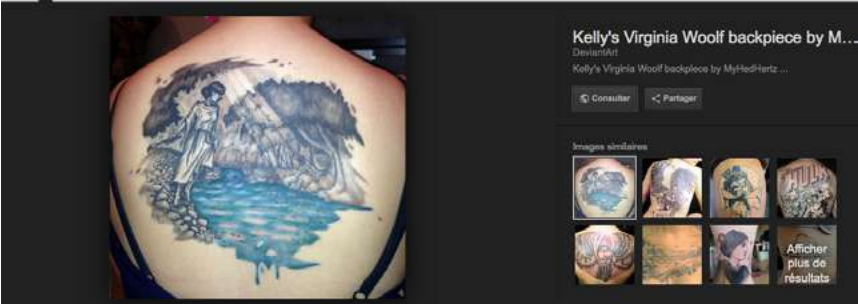


Fig. 4a. "Kelly's Virginia Woolf backpiece by MyHerdHertz..." Google search.



Fig. 4b. Lixi_sickandnormal. "Tiny portrait of Virginia Woolf for dearest @nitram_ayal_yer." Instagram.



Fig. 4c. Sr.loki.studio. "No hay necesidad de apresurarse..." *Instagram*.



Fig. 4d. Raulbussot. "Virginia-Woolf-Web." *www.bussot.com*



Fig. 4e. Ayako666. "Merci Maude!" *Instagram*.



Fig. 4f. No title. *Google search*.

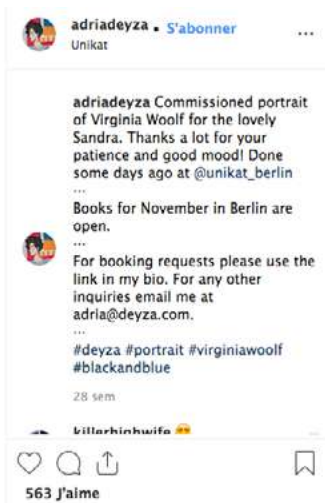


Fig. 4g. Adriadeyza. "Commissioned portrait of Virginia Woolf for the lovely Sandra..." *Instagram*.

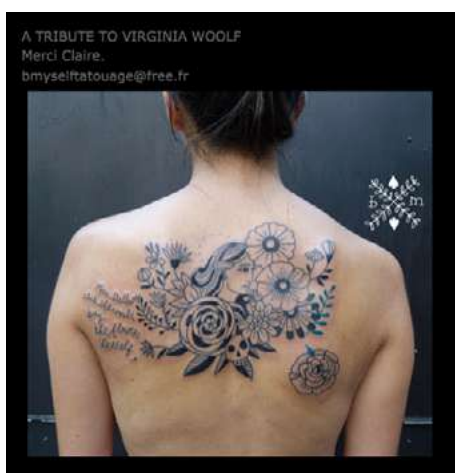


Fig. 4h. Beatricemyself. "A tribute to Virginia Woolf. Merci Claire." *Beatricemyself.blogspot.com*

by @tiny.toad 1 month ago



Fig. 4i. @tiny.toad. "Virginia Woolf for Ado from when I was in Oakland, done at @funktowntattoo." *Insta.tikvid.net*



Fig. 4j. "Fiz minha primeira tautagem, aí está." *Livroecafe.com*



Fig. 4k. Eyekandi_ink. "Author Virginia Woolf, I got to tattoo this at the #fuelthearts2019 convention in Maine and on Saturday won 1st place medium black and grey..." Instagram.

This complex figuration of Woolf is in line with the Romantic conception of the author, embodying "a new deal between life and discourse that support one another" ("une donne qui semble nouvelle entre la vie et le discours, qui s'étayent l'un l'autre" Brunn, 2001, 25). This confusion between the biographical and the textual, according to Alain Brunn, defines today's author's mythology: "The authorial mythology is changing indeed because the interaction between the biographical and the textual seems to be more systematic and become the work itself" ("La mythologie auctoriale change en effet, parce que le rapport du biographique et du textuel semble se systématiser pour constituer l'œuvre elle-même" 25).

Woolf, whose posthumous reception was shaped by her husband's edition of her published and unpublished works, including her diary, and her nephew Quentin Bell's biography, appears an all too perfect example of the confusion between literature and life. Helen Dudar, who denounced her "cult" as early as 1982, explains that she became the "Marilyn Monroe of American Academia, genius transformed into icon and industry through the special circumstances of her life and work" (32). Indeed many tattoos superimpose Virginia's face, life, and works in what may be read as a contemporary, secularised version

of the king's two bodies, an "auctorial mythology" resting on the blurring of the two bodies of historical Virginia and published Woolf — all of them Beresford-inspired.

Two tattoos combine Virginia's face with a lighthouse (figs. 4d; 4e), in reference to her most autobiographical novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The May 14th 1925 diary entry makes it clear that Mrs and Mr Ramsay were inspired by her own parents:

I'm now all on the strain with desire to stop journalism & get on to *To the Lighthouse*. This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; and mothers; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in—life, death &c. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel*— (Woolf, 1982, 18-19)

Another delineates her dark brewing profile behind blue waves (fig. 4g) that bring to mind the title of her experimental novel *The Waves* (1931) as well as her suicide in the River Ouse in 1942. A backpiece (fig. 4h) inscribes the first sentence of *Mrs Dalloway* alongside a mature Virginia-like Clarissa inside a bunch of flowers: "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." This illustrates the ordinary confusion between author and character, one that is brought to the fore with each new Woolf biofiction.

These biography-inspired tattoos hardly qualify as miniatures. The Greek goddess impersonation, one out of the two lighthouse portraits, and the *Mrs Dalloway incipit* are spectacular backpieces. They dramatise the interaction between the author's life and the literature her name stands for. What they express in pictorial form, I believe, is the power of that connexion: "if the biographical becomes a relic, what auctorial mythology is rooted in, it is probably because it lays at the crossroads between mystery and text, embodies the author's work, and figures its power" ("Si le biographique devient aussi relique, fondement de la mythologie auctoriale, c'est sans doute qu'il se trouve à l'intersection du mystère et de l'œuvre, qu'il incarne l'œuvre et devient figuration de son pouvoir" Brunn, 2001, 26). They also maximise appropriation and identification.

Of the two tattoos that combine Woolf's face and name (figs. 4f; 4j), the more complex epitomises this interweaving of the writer as a person, *persona*, and author, her works, and the fetishizing of her face into what I will call a *literary mystique*. It showcases the Beresford portrait within a frame combining flowers, a dove, and the words Virginia Woolf — even though it ought to be Stephen. It intertwines Woolf's many cultural identities: the icon, with the ubiquitous Beresford portrait, the girl in flower, with the standardised flower imagery of virginity, death and rebirth, the saint, with the allegorical

representation of the soul as the dove or Holy Spirit above her forehead, and the author, with the letters spelling out her name while pointing to her texts and the very gesture of writing.

A prize-winning tattoo the artist uses to advertise her skill^[15] likewise shows Virginia's Beresford-inspired profile emerging out of a pile of books on top of which lies a roll of paper tied tight with a ribbon (fig. 4k). The mechanically reproduced texts and the handwritten text are likewise visually connected with a quill pen being dipped into an ink pot, as if a hand that is not visible on the pattern were about to write. The author's face and her work stand out against a background of handwritten text. If, for Woolf, writing is of the body, "the ultimate rapprochement between flesh and text" (Chassagnol, 2018, 67) is using one's skin as vellum where to synecdochically inscribe scraps of Woolf's complete works. This tattoo stages the mystery of literature: the paper tied with a ribbon and the book covers suggest the exegetic process that leads the reader from the materiality of the text to the transcendence of its hidden meaning. This outside/inside dynamics makes sense in the context of tattoo art imprinted on skin as well as the visibility/invisibility logics suggested by the moving quill that is held by no visible hand, since tattoos themselves may be covered or unveiled and supposedly likewise lead to their wearer's inner truth who, in the process, like kings, acquire two bodies as their skin are turned into live reliquaries.

15. The *instagram* message reads: "Author Virginia Woolf, I got to tattoo this at the #fuelhearts2019 convention in Maine and on Saturday won 1st place medium black & grey as well as 2nd place portrait." And below: "I have some availability at my NYC location, email me to schedule!" (eyekandi_ink, 2019)

Fig. 5 What's in a tattooed name?



Fig. 5a. Woolf_virginia1. “ever foolishly forget: I am never not thinking of You...” *Instagram*.



Fig. 5b. “Virginia Woolf.” *Everytattoo.com*



Fig. 5c. Lillinarox. "Amo le frasi que non si sposterebbero di un millimetre neanche se le traversasse un esercito." *Instagram*.



Fig. 5d. Okiecody. "Another signature tattoo. Virginia Woolf. Thanks Amanda!" *Instagram*.



Fig. 5e. @oniricotattoo. [Anonimo]. Google search.



Fig. 5f. Tanymandala. "This tattoo is based on an essay by Virginia Woolf, who argues the possibility that women writers before a certain time were probably responsible for most of the work signed 'Anon' for anonymous..." Instagram.



Fig. 5g. be.tattoo. “Virginia Woolf and Colette...” *Instagram*.



Fig. 5h. “Memento tattoo Camilla fikk...” *Google search*.

WHAT'S IN A TATTOOED NAME?

Of the 97 Woolf-inspired tattoos in my collection, 6 spell out her name, 3 of them in her handwriting (figs. 5a; 5b; 5c; 5d). These signatures read as metonymic displacements of both the portraits and the works. It could be argued that, just as the tattooed portraits function as image-texts fetishizing Woolf as literature, inked signatures as text-images fetishize literature as Woolf. This mystery of the face/text is best understood in reference to eighteenth-century miniatures. After all, “miniatures [were] being held in ways that are explicitly erotically charged,” which is illustrative of “the ways in which the tactile function of portrait-objects enters affective discourse, and how miniatures are culturally related to, if not analogous to, letter writing.” (Pointon, 2001, 65)

However, such appropriation — a near-synonym of theft — of Woolf’s writing gesture is an impossible fantasy that questions identity in several ways. First, if “handwriting, and especially for the signature, *ductus*, pressure, and movement of the hand are culturally understood as signs reflecting individual identity,” (Neef, 2006, 223) such handwriting mystique is precisely what the tattooist cannot reproduce. For technical reasons, even though the calligraphy is “handmade,” it is “executed by means of a writing machine which standardises writing *ductus* and pressure into a repetitive, consistent perforation of the skin and injection of ink — a writing tool somewhere between typewriter and sewing machine.” (223) It also questions identity in that “the person named by the signature is not identical to the person performing the signature” (223), but neither is the wearer of the tattooed signature identical with the author it denotes, Virginia Woolf. Sonja Neef observes that: “[l]ike a wedding ring, a tattooed name is a lifetime promise and is therefore a favourite motive in tattoo art.” (225) The tattooed writing gesture becomes the *persona* which allows the tattooee’s identity to “(trans)form” through a process of “(un)becoming” (Sullivan, 2001, 50; 113) committed to another’s name, words, and world vision. More interestingly, perhaps, having Woolf’s name or handwriting engraved deep inside one’s skin is a “lifetime promise,” it *does things with words*, after John Austin’s influential theory, it becomes “fighting words.” (Marin, 1980, 306; qtd Silver, 1999, 143-44)

The intimacy between portrait and signature is contextualised by Pointon: “[t]he miniature may [...] stand as a kind of autograph, a suggestion that is supported by evidence that small portraits were, on occasions, used as substitutes for letters of introduction.” (Pointon, 2001, 65-66) Just as miniature portraits could function as texts vouching for the bearer’s qualities, “Woolf lit tats” are performative in that they are embodied talismans and provocations in a more radical way than T-shirts. Silver understands “the wearing of Virginia Woolf’s on one’s chest, like Perseus’s or Athena’s warriors’ apotropaic

protection and defiance: a claiming of Virginia Woolf's powers, including her feminist agency, for oneself. Rather than retreating from the association of Virginia Woolf with fear of the powerful and potentially monstrous female, the T-shirt declares: 'you'd better believe it.'" (Silver, 1999, 146) But what is it onlookers'd better believe? If the inked face and handwriting of Woolf emblemise a complex desire for literature that is both a desire for (self-)(trans) formation and a "desire for an author" ("la manifestation emblématique du désir d'auteur" Brunn, 2001, 26), what literature do they stand for? Woolf bookish tattoos charter out and storify her literary territory made up by the collection of "Everywoman's Virginia Woolf icon"(Silver, 1999, 143) disseminated on common readers' skins, a cartography that is itself a tangle of dichotomies and ambiguities.

Like her copied face, Woolf's signature on others' skins paradoxically points to the absence of the author. Woolf stands for literature produced by a ghost, as epitomised in the tattoo that imprints a Wes Wilson fashion "ANONIMO" onto her bun (fig. 5e). It echoes "Anon," the title of an essay edited and published posthumously by Brenda Silver. In 1940 Woolf more or less completed it as an introductory chapter to "Reading at Random," a "Common History book" (Woolf, 1985, 318) she was intending to publish. "Anon" is about the figure of the artist and the interaction between individual imagination and the community, a question that resonates with literary tattoos as I envision them: "There is little question that from the first Woolf intended to call the opening chapter of her book "Anon," and to explore in it the role of the artist in articulating the emotions embedded in the human psyche and shared, however unconsciously, by the community as a whole." (Silver, 1979, 380) Are the tattooees who commissioned the art and the tattoo artist familiar with this text? The comment posted by Tanymadala (2018) who made the other "ANON" tattoo (fig. 5f), one where anonymity is materialised in the featureless slightly Asian-looking face and the naked body in three quarters back view, makes it clear that she is.

"Anonymous" is also a reference to *A Room of One's Own* and its discussion of the invisibility of women in the history of literature, which becomes a claim for the specificity of feminine writing. When discussing the imaginary character of Shakespeare's sister Judith while "looking at the shelf where there are no plays by women," Woolf remarks that "her work would have gone unsigned" because "[i]t was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even as late as the nineteenth century." (Woolf, 1993, 46) Just as in the next chapter the image of the ape deconstructs the lineage between male and female authors in genetic terms, the observation that: "publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them" (46) ironically points to the DNA of feminine writing

and identity as absence and self-effacement. It is therefore noteworthy that the word “ANONIMO” should be inked in Woolf’s bun, at once the metonymic visual marker of her femininity and upper-middle class, highbrow literary style and the most common organic source of DNA samples. This silent/vocal appropriation/denunciation of women’s anonymity also alludes to the specific historical and political context in which Virginia Woolf, at first excluded from the history of literature and higher education, became part of the curriculum in the 1970’s thanks to American academic feminists until “by the end of 1978, [...] Frank Kermode announced her canonization” (Silver, 1999, 62). It also constructs the body of the tattooee as a site of self-asserting/self-effacing identity, as suggested in the fact that the skin of the back of the inked *persona* is that of the tattooee’s arm.

Woolf’s canonisation, then, is literary as well as religious. In a militant gesture, one tattoo shows her dancing with Colette (fig. 5g), enacting and celebrating the end of anonymity for women writers. Both featureless writers may be identified by their signature hair-does, Virginia’s Beresford bun and Colette’s shoulder-length wavy style. The tattooist presents the motif as a Sapphist fantasy not unlike that expressed in cross-dressed reading Woolf (fig. 2e): “Virginia Woolf and Colette, what a powerful couple that wouldn’t have been!♥ Every time someone asks for a queer motif, my little dyke heart is filled with love and happiness!♥ This one custom made for Marie” (be. tattoo, 2019). However, she and the tattooee are most certainly aware of the way Colette rebelled against her husband Willy in order to have her novels published under her own name and no longer under his. Are either Marie or the tattoo artist familiar enough with Woolf’s letters to know that Woolf, who had liked Colette’s memoirs *Mes Apprentissages* (1936) in 1937, also read *Duo* (1934) in 1939? She praised it to her friend composer Ethel Smyth: “And I’m reading Colette, ‘Duo’ [1934]; all about love, and rather too slangy for my vocabulary, but what a born writer! How she waltzes through the dictionary.” (Woolf, 1980b, 341) The tattooed dance, then, may be understood as a haptic equivalent of writing.

Woolf’s face and signature feature alongside a painter’s portrait, that of Frida Kahlo, on an arm (fig. 5h), opening another dialogue between sister artists. Woolf’s handwriting and Kahlo’s red flower headband likewise superimpose the artist and her art through visual emblems. More to the point for this essay, their association suggests that both may have escaped the anonymity that curses female artists on account of their creative yet suffering-ridden lives as well as their striking, self-contradictory names. Frida Kahlo is both cold and hot while Virginia Woolf is at once the virgin and the wolf, proverbial victim and proverbial predator. Their names define them as cultural dichotomies, monstrous oxymora.

Fig. 6 Woolf tattoos that speak literature



Fig. 6a. "Virginia Woolf, une autre femme importante :)." *Google search.*

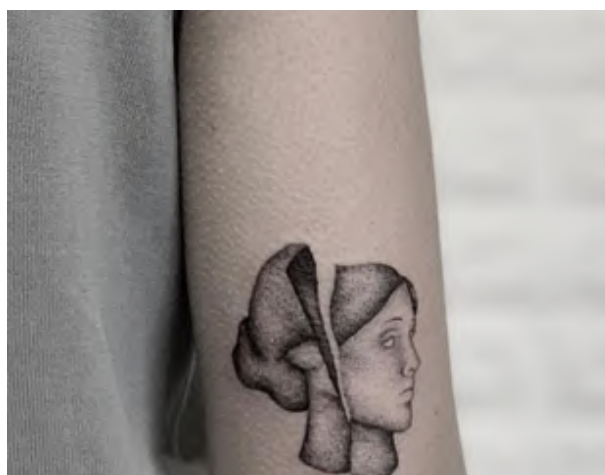


Fig. 6b. @tradethissleep. "Loved loved loved doing this Virginia Woolf for my buddy @dottyjames..." *Pictame.*



Fig. 6c. Elisa.gouvea. "Double portrait of Virginia Woolf." *Instagram*.



Fig. 6d. Ariel.electric. "Double-faced Virginia Woolf." *Instagram*.



Fig. 6e. "Virginia Woolf Tattoos." www.loter.club

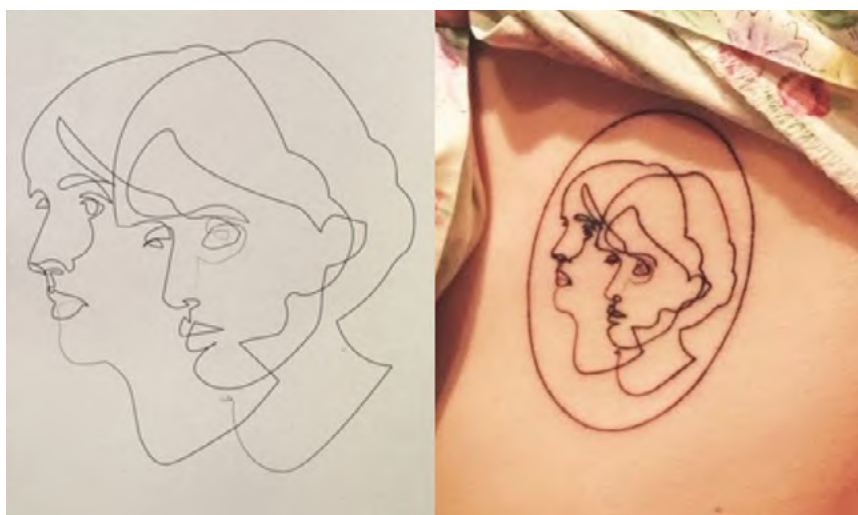


Fig. 6f. Mini Q. "Virginia Woolf as a tattoo beautiful ink work." Mini-q.tumblr.com

What's in Woolf's tattooed name and how does it *speaks* literature, then? As suggested in those tattoos dramatising "an artistic exchange" (Craighead, 2011, 43), Woolf's literature is displacement. In the black Victorian-looking silhouette that delineates Woolf's head and shoulders portrait after one of the 1939 Gisèle Freund photographs (fig. 6a), the suspended gesture of the hand holding the cigarette holder is evocative of the writing gesture. It constructs writing as a conversation that allows for moments of hesitation, contradiction, or silence.

The literature Woolf stands for is a voice that speaks beside itself. Numerous tattoos show either divided Woolf or double-faced Woolf, in a kid-glove, meta-textual version of the king's two bodies: she is a divided cultural construction, a bundle of paradoxes, a presence/absence printed inside another woman's skin, youth/death, especially in the tattoo that morphs from the 1902 Beresford- to the 1939 Gisèle Freund-delineated face (figs. 6b; 6c; 6d; 6e; 6f). For a tattoo, like discourse, "as the act of the speaking body, is always to some extent unknowing about what it performs, [...] it always says something that it does not intend, and [...] it is not the emblem of mastery or control that it sometimes purports to be." (Butler, 1997, 10) She stands for the magic of words refusing to choose between voice and silence but embracing the hesitation, the possibility of a choice between the two. Like tattoos, her writing is a threshold between the self and the world, silence and language. The diffraction of her face on dozens of bodies (trans)forms contemporary Woolf lovers into "[her] hundreds of inches of skin" (Woolf, 1980a, 17), patching up a Woolf anthology, a mobile museum on skins, and a global virtual gallery of their pictures.

Although my Virginia Woolf-inspired tattoos may appear a haphazard concatenation of individual appropriations — which it is, essentially, resulting as it does from half-random half-systematised scavenging from more or less ephemeral snapshot sharing on internet platforms and social networks —, they make up a highly readable and significant versioning of that writer when envisaged from a cultural perspective as an international portrait gallery. As a collection, they allow for a paradoxical reading. On the one hand, they illustrate the way Virginia Woolf is museumified today, fixed into an increasingly monolithic posture, even on live skin. However, that posture is reactivated and re-semiotised as it combines with other visual archetypes through the imageries of the ghost, the saint, the next of kin, and the King. It sketches a transnational literary mystique that "cannot be limited to the domain of the eulogy" (Chassagnol, 2018, 72) even though it may express nostalgic undertones, but on the contrary portrays Woolf as an inspirational figurehead of today's feminism. It underlines the way Woolf has gone on growing under the skins of the daughters of the women who wore Woolf

T-shirts in the 1970s to “mak[e] a spectacle of themselves” (Silver, 1999, 147). The statement: “we are here, we are legion, and we will prevail” (146) is now engraved in skin for life. Such “*peaulogie*” or skin *logos* is a new form of literary appropriation, expression, and production. Those tattoos do not merely make literature part of everyday life but make literature vocal, political as it becomes of the body, a face or a name, an anthology of literature inked into the tattooee’s skin.

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