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► **To cite this version:**

Pauline Macadré. ‘Solving the problem of reality’ in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*. *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*, 2018, Créatures et (ré)confort: l’altérité animale vue par les victoriens, 88, 10.4000/cve.3853 . hal-02015654

**HAL Id: hal-02015654**

**<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-02015654>**

Submitted on 12 Feb 2019

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## Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens

88 Automne | 2018

Comforting Creatures / 57<sup>e</sup> Congrès de la SAES :  
(Re)Construction(s)

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cve/3853>

DOI: 10.4000/cve.3853

ISSN: 2271-6149

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2018

ISSN: 0220-5610

Brought to you by Sorbonne Université



### Electronic reference

Pauline Macadré, « 'Solving the problem of reality' in Virginia Woolf's *Flush* », *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [Online], 88 Automne | 2018, Online since 01 December 2018, connection on 12 February 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cve/3853> ; DOI : 10.4000/cve.3853

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# 'Solving the problem of reality' in Virginia Woolf's *Flush*

Virginia Woolf et le chien *Flush* : « résoudre le problème de la réalité »

Pauline Macadré

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- 1 As the eponymous hero of a playfully conventional biography, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel *Flush* both reflects the Victorian tradition of anthropomorphism and allows for a displaced portrait of the Victorian poetess, so that the novel has been widely analysed as encapsulating the social issues of the mid-nineteenth century in terms of class and gender, by adopting the point of view of a dog to expose the confinement and submission women had to face—in the Victorian period, but also in Woolf's own time. It seems to me that *Flush* may be read as Virginia Woolf's own 'becoming-animal' literally with the Victorians—by using them as an instrument serving her purpose. The author's sometimes contradicting statements about *Flush* hardly betray the impulse behind it: her explanation that it was meant as a 'joke on Lytton' Strachey<sup>1</sup> and her desire to make up for what she feared would be the financial failure of *The Waves*<sup>2</sup> have often been quoted, as well as her dismissal of 'that silly book *Flush*? oh what a waste of time' (*Diary* 4, 153). She seemed to dread its upcoming 'popular success', worrying that reviewers would find it merely 'charming',<sup>3</sup> even 'trivial' and 'minor'.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Woolf's fear that *Flush* was 'too slight and too serious' (*Diary* 4, 134) has framed its reception, causing us to overlook the seriousness of her endeavour as it appears in the somewhat emphatic tone she uses with Sibyl Colefax on 22 October 1933: 'I'm so glad you liked *Flush*. I think it shows great discrimination in you because it was all a matter of hints and shades, and practically no one has seen what I was after, and I was elated to heaven to think that you among the faithful firmly stood—or whatever Milton said' (*Letters* 5, 236). Her statements have nonetheless led to a variety of readings that reveal the puzzling nature of the novel.
- 2 Although disregarded for decades, *Flush* has by now been retrieved and analysed extensively by scholars who focus on its literary quality as a biography, its social and feminist positions, and even its scientific and psychoanalytical implications,<sup>5</sup> all largely viewing the dog *Flush* as an allegory for specifically human concerns. A fairly recent return to the centrality of the dog has moved away from anthropocentrism and shed light

on its implications in our perception of man-animal relationships while exposing the artificiality of imposing any form of hierarchy thereupon.<sup>6</sup> In such regards, *Flush* may be read as a creative literary attempt to merge human and animal agencies, in keeping with what Deleuze and Guattari have called 'becoming-animal', and to reach a new, non-subjective perspective that seems difficult, if not impossible, to categorize. This 'becoming-animal' is not a question of *imitating*, but rather of writing as an animal by allowing *within* the self the animal that both the 'I' and the writing become. Indeed, the writing in *Flush* weaves a highly problematic point of view, entangling that of the human biographer and of the late Victorian dog and enabling a form of 'becoming-Victorian' with the animal. As a modernist reconstruction of Victorian society, the novel is linked to Woolf's own ambiguous relationship to the Victorian tradition she grew up in and the modernity she contributed to; but notwithstanding the critical and feminist stances it enacts, it is also part of an artistic endeavour towards a new literary (re)presentation of the sensorial world that pervades Woolf's fiction, part of a quest towards *l'imperceptible*, *l'indiscernable* and *l'impersonnel*, again in Deleuze and Guattari's words. The modern, post-war perspective of the early 1930s allows Woolf to use *Flush* as the conveyor of modernity—not merely because writing the biography of a dog questions the established societal and literary codes, but also because the de-familiarization of the human world through animal eyes aims at reconfiguring the phenomenological world. Through the use of an animal's perception, halfway between the anthropomorphized dog *Flush* and the writer's—both Elizabeth Barrett Browning's and Virginia Woolf's—own 'becoming-animal' in the process, the text evokes a world as it is *not* perceived by human beings, an intrinsically *other* vision of the external world that would not be contaminated and impeded by the 'stream of consciousness', but infused with raw, unfiltered sensations and primeval instincts. In spite of his being gradually endowed with human understanding, passions and feelings in a form of 'becoming-human', *Flush* retains a powerful instinct which reveals an un-perceived reality of things and unveils urban and natural landscapes as fraught with signs that remain un-deciphered. The gaze *Flush* is made to cast upon our world offers a rare insight into its reality and into the possibility and limitations of representation, in a paradoxical attempt to elude the inescapable filter of human perception and the rigidity of words.

- 3 *Flush* is a pet who experiences unconditional love and devotion towards his mistress, a self-sacrificing figure which keeps to her room, both comforting her and jealously protecting her from Robert Browning's courtship. This projection of human feelings onto *Flush* reaches its peak during the episodes of the looking-glass, which may be read, in the light of Lacan's mirror-stage theory, as a defining moment in the constitution of the self. The displacement of such a typically human experience onto *Flush* corresponds to a form of 'becoming-human', so that by placing *Flush* in front of the mirror, Woolf invites the reader to look into it alongside Elizabeth Barrett and recognize our *human* self in the animal, while reflecting on the 'problem of reality':

Then she would make him stand with her in front of the looking-glass and ask him why he barked and trembled. Was not the little brown dog opposite himself? But what is 'oneself'? Is it the thing people see? Or is it the thing one is? So *Flush* pondered that question too, and, unable to solve the problem of reality, pressed closer to Miss Barrett and kissed her 'expressively'. *That* was real at any rate. (*Flush* 32)

- 4 *Flush* is no ordinary dog because he is arguably no longer a dog at all, but something *other*. By going through the looking-glass and trespassing the frontier between animal and

human, *Flush* has become a 'thing', unable to reconcile appearances and identity, *Gestalt* and quintessence, and it is the unresolved tension between the human and the animal which thwarts what might otherwise be pure perception and prevents him from grasping the *real*. Indeed, invested with all too human emotions by Elizabeth as much as by the biographical effort, *Flush*'s sensible world remains trapped in the prism of the human look and only through direct touch, by 'kissing her "expressively"', can he recover something 'real'.

- 5 While the inscription of *Flush*'s interiority in the novel is a modernist experiment and a fictional construct, Virginia Woolf's first diary entry on *Flush* (dating from as early as 16 August 1931) states a serious purpose, perhaps the real justification for the novel: 'It is a good idea I think to write biographies; to make them use my powers of *representation reality accuracy*; & to use my novels simply to express the general, the poetic. *Flush* is serving this purpose' (*Diary* 4, 40, my emphasis). In writing *Flush*, Virginia Woolf offered a doubly displaced representation of reality, so that one is not merely faced with a historically distanced and critical recollection of the Victorian era, but also with a reconfiguration of the world enabled by the distance between *human* and *animal* worlds. This 'widest gulf' (*Flush* 19) which has been interpreted as meaningful in terms of 'human-animal' relationships (by Craig Smith and Derek Ryan), is also representative of the irreducible, unsolvable gap that severs us, humans, from our environment, and prevents us from accessing a 'reality' which is 'more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life [...] We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it' (Woolf 1926, 269). As a dog, *Flush* both breaks and bridges that gap.
- 6 The first description of Elizabeth Barrett's room (*Flush* 13–17) has often been read as a confined space enclosed in a Victorian house that both shelters women from outside harm and guards the patriarchal domination society imposed over them. However, when one focuses on the means of rendering *Flush*'s experience, it appears that the innocence of his perception is spoilt and its immediacy is set in sharp contrast with the space he enters. As it were, Elizabeth's bedroom appears as the locus of artifice, imitation, and simulacrum, as if the human world in general—and perhaps the world of language and poetry too—were already removed, away from direct contact with the *real* world. While the narration clearly points towards the artificiality of fictional reconstruction of the description through the use of modality, *Flush*'s spontaneous experience is still worth considering, as it is made up of myriads of sensations in which smell and touch take over sight and become fused in a metaphor calling upon taste ('the general stew') thus destabilising the traditional human categorization of the five senses and the overwhelming importance of vision, which is reduced to a mere 'glance'.<sup>7</sup> It is even striking that *Flush* should achieve a form of vision only through 'much sniffing and pawing'. If he is 'more destabilized by what he smel[ls] than by what he s[ees]', the reader might be destabilized by such a picture, where human beings, their bodies, clothes, even occupations, are merely elements listed among others, and the dog's lack of (mis-)reading of the signs reveals the instability of the 'thing', of everyday objects which are at first unrecognizable and inherently plural, only gradually taking shape as if rising to the surface after having undergone a *sea-change*:

Up the funnel of the staircase came warm whiffs of joints roasting, of fowls basting, of soups simmering—ravishing almost as food itself to nostrils used to the meagre savour of Kerenhappock's penurious frys and hashes. Mixing with the smell of food were further smells—smells of cedarwood and sandalwood and mahogany; scents of

male bodies and female bodies; of men servants and maid servants; of coats and trousers; of crinolines and mantles; of curtains of tapestry, of curtains of plush; of coal dust and fog; of wine and cigars. Each room as he passed it—dining-room, drawing-room, library, bedroom—wafted out its own contribution to the general stew; while, as he set down first one paw and then another, each was caressed and retained by the sensuality of rich pile carpets closing amorously over it.

Miss Barrett's bedroom—for such it was—must by all accounts have been dark. . . . At first Flush could distinguish nothing in the pale greenish gloom but five white globes glimmering mysteriously in mid-air. But again it was the smell of the room that overpowered him . . .

Very slowly, very dimly, with much sniffing and pawing, Flush by degrees distinguished the outlines of several articles of furniture. That huge object by the window was perhaps a wardrobe. Next to it stood, conceivably, a chest of drawers. In the middle of the room *swam up to the surface* what seemed to be a table with a ring round it; and then the vague amorphous shapes of armchair and table *emerged*. But *everything was disguised*. . . . *Nothing in the room was itself; everything was something else*.

(*Flush* 14–17, my emphases)

- 7 This general confusion ushers in Flush's difficulty in *naming* things, which reflects his inability to define the contours of his surroundings, almost as if he had entered an impressionistic painting: 'At first he saw nothing but the bedroom and its furniture, but that alone was surprising enough. To identify, distinguish and call by their right names all the different articles he saw there was confusing enough' (*Flush* 20). The blurring of boundaries is echoed as Flush is stolen and imprisoned in Whitechapel until his mistress agrees to pay a ransom. The safe haven of immutable civilization that is engraved in the very walls of Wimpole Street is contrasted with the rotten and filthy floors, the 'ruined sheds in which human beings lived herded together above herds of cows' (*Flush* 52), where the distinction between human and animal vanishes, which most likely accounts for the unbearable distress felt by Elizabeth Barrett when she envisions her dog in such an environment. The depictions of the two areas have been read in terms of urban geography and its relation to social characterisations. But if Flush remains immune to human concerns in terms of class, gender or justice, his experience offers an *animal* counterpoint to his mistress's, so that the sentence: 'But for Flush things were very different' (*Flush* 54) ought to be read literally. Not only does his experience differ greatly from ours, but things appear to him in their intrinsic difference, offering disquieting similarities with his first visit of Elizabeth's room in terms of obscurity and confusion:

Flush was going through the most terrible experience of his life. He was bewildered in the extreme. . . . He found himself in complete darkness. He found himself in chilliness and dampness. As his giddiness left him he made out a few shapes in a low dark room—broken chairs, a tumbled mattress. Then he was seized and tied tightly by the leg to some obstacle. Something sprawled on the floor—whether beast or human being, he could not tell. . . . Now he could see that the floor was crowded with animals of different kinds. Dogs tore and worried a festering bone that they had got between them. Their ribs stood out from their coats—they were half famished, dirty, diseased, uncombed, unbrushed; yet all of them, Flush could see, were dogs of the highest breeding, chained dogs, footmen's dogs, like himself. (*Flush* 54–55)

- 8 Flush's traumatic ordeal is further complicated by the monstrous vision of scrawny dogs almost turned inside out with their ribs almost literally sticking out—shedding a worrying light on the festering bone they're tearing at. In his bewilderment, he proves again unable to distinguish, name and grasp his immediate surroundings—in

Whitechapel, not unlike at Wimpole Street, 'one thing merged into another' (*Flush* 58). However, the threat of death enhances this impression—his memories fade, all forms dissolve, and are replaced by a 'featureless face', a figure reduced to a name, a signifier without a signified: 'All *Flush*'s past life and its many scenes . . . had faded like snowflakes dissolved in a cauldron. If he still held to hope, it was to something nameless and formless; the featureless face of someone he still called "Miss Barrett.'" (*Flush* 65)

- 9 The traumatic experience of *Flush* in Whitechapel becomes a turning point which alters his way of being in the world: 'Flush woke from a trance that had veiled his eyes and once more realized the truth' (*Flush* 57). It is as if the opaque screen that had arisen between him and reality had been ripped open, allowing him to *see*, for the first time—and this 'moment of vision' takes the form of an epiphany. The illusion upheld by Elizabeth Barrett's room is exposed and the blinding idols in which he had come to believe over the course of his 'human education' have crumbled by the time he returns there:

Now as he lay on cushions once more, cold water was the only thing that seemed to have any substance, any reality. He drank continually. The old gods of the bedroom—the bookcase, the wardrobe, the busts—seemed to have lost their substance. This room was no longer the whole world . . . (*Flush* 67)

- 10 The emphasis on natural elements ('cold water') as the only thing retaining substance and reality may be analysed along the lines of Agamben's work on 'the Open' (Agamben 65–101), which refers to the way Jakob von Uexküll's research on the animals' relationship to their *Umwelt* influenced Heidegger's philosophical reflection and his definition of the ambiguous ontological status of animals. Animals are 'poor in the world' (*weltarm*), unable to grasp, conceive, or perceive their environment as such, and only capable of interaction with specific elements, 'carriers of significance', in Uexküll's words, 'disinhibitors' in Heidegger's. This interaction is characterised by the animal's being entirely taken in or absorbed in its 'disinhibiting ring' because the very ability to apprehend something as something is withheld from it. This translates in a form of suspension: the ontological status of the animal environment is *offen* (open) but not *offenbar* (disconcealed, revealed; literally: openable). *Flush*'s ambiguous status as *pet* and his treatment as *subject* turn him into a literary agent, almost a secret agent benefiting from an infiltrated, yet privileged position granting the reader access to a world 'not ours'. Indeed, it seems that *Flush*'s inbetweenness places him in an environment both *offen* and *offenbar*, enabling him to experience both the intense openness which is linked to his instincts, and the ability to escape opacity—and to experience a form of revelation.

- 11 From his very early age of puppyhood, during a walk with his first owner Miss Mitford, *Flush* plunges into an olfactory world reminiscent of Wordsworthian or Lawrentian nature, in which he is unrestrictedly absorbed:

The cool globes of dew or rain broke in showers of iridescent spray about his nose; the earth, *here* hard, *here* soft, *here* hot, *here* cold, stung, teased and tickled the soft pads of his feet. Then what a variety of smells interwoven in subtlest combination thrilled his nostrils; strong smells of earth, sweet smells of flowers; nameless smells of leaf and bramble; sour smells as they crossed the road; pungent smells as they entered bean-fields. But suddenly down the wind came tearing a smell sharper, stronger, more lacerating than any—a smell that ripped across his brain stirring a thousand instincts, releasing a million memories—the smell of hare, the smell of fox. Off he flashed like a fish drawn in a rush through water further and further. *He forgot his mistress; he forgot all human kind.* He heard dark men cry 'Span! Span!' He heard whips crack. He raced; he rushed. (*Flush* 11)

- 12 The repetition of the deictic 'here' and the use of semi-colons in lieu of coordination reinforces the spontaneity of the young dog's sensations and his ability to have direct, unimpaired access to his immediate surroundings. Likewise, these sensations trigger violent reactions inherited from ancestral traditions, as if primeval instincts were inscribed within his body, in his very flesh. Elsewhere, phrases like 'the whole pomp of London . . . burst on his astonished eyes' (*Flush* 20) and 'the whole battery of a London street . . . assaulted his nostrils' (*Flush* 21) again show how sensations are not felt but imposed on Flush. The previous quotation goes on: 'At last he stopped bewildered; the incantation faded; very slowly, wagging his tail sheepishly, he trotted back across the fields to where Miss Mitford stood shouting "Flush! Flush! Flush!" and waving her umbrella' (*Flush* 11). The unconscious memory is set so deep in Flush that the sole vision of an umbrella recalls these pre-historic memories, in the manner of a primitive Proust's madeleine:

Then with all her poet's imagination Miss Barrett could not divine what Wilson's wet umbrella meant to Flush; what memories it recalled, of forests and parrots and wild trumpeting elephants; nor did she know, when Mr Kenyon stumbled over the bell-pull, that Flush heard dark men cursing in the mountains; the cry, 'Span! Span!' rang in his ears, and it was in some muffled, ancestral rage that he bit him. (*Flush* 26)

- 13 However, Flush's engulfment in an unfamiliar world akin to a virgin land from which man is inevitably separated is made obvious as he accompanies Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning to Italy where

the darkness opened; light poured over him; he found himself alive, awake, bewildered, standing on reddish tiles in a vast bare room flooded with sunshine. He ran hither and thither smelling and touching. There was no carpet and no fireplace. There were no sofas, no armchairs, no bookcases, no busts. Pungent and unfamiliar smells tickled his nostrils and made him sneeze. The light, infinitely sharp and clear, dazzled his eyes. (*Flush* 72-73)

- 14 The sheer sunlight allows for a renewal of sensations; it appears as blinding yet reveals things in their bare reality, freed from patterns of interpretation and of representation—things appear as they are, shedding their duplicity, and Flush is eventually able to apprehend something as something:

For at Casa Guidi the rooms were bare. All those draped objects of his cloistered and secluded days had vanished. The bed was a bed; the wash-stand was a wash-stand. Everything was itself and not another thing. The drawing-room was large and sprinkled with a few old carved chairs of ebony. Over the fire hung a mirror with two cupids to hold the lights. (*Flush* 79)

- 15 The depiction of objects ushers in tautologies as if language had lost its power to describe; the looking-glass is no longer a reflexive *trompe-l'œil*—we are given an insight into something both open and unconcealed.
- 16 These excerpts also convey the idea that the animal world does *not* revolve around humankind. Indeed, despite the human qualities Flush is endowed with, a reversal still occurs which highlights the human beings' *otherness* and reduces their/our language to enigmatic, somehow inadequate, chatters and scribbles, unable to grasp reality.
- 17 While there exists 'an aristocracy of dogs' (*Flush* 7), 'human society' is fraught with 'chaos and confusion' as there is no 'jurisdiction upon the breed of man' (*Flush* 7-8), a humorous remark when one considers Victorian society. As he first encounters Miss Barrett, free indirect speech gives us access to Flush's puzzled thoughts: 'Was there *something alive* in



the room with him? Was there something on the sofa?' (*Flush* 18, my emphasis). Not only are human beings presented as mere live things (or, arguably, more specifically *women* thus objectified), human voices are compared to natural elements making wordless sounds akin to water flowing, or birds crying and flying, and their tone becomes more meaningful than the actual words:

The talk went on; but it did not flow and ripple as talk usually flowed and rippled. It leapt and jerked. It stopped and leapt again. (*Flush* 38)

[S]ome new sound came into their voices—now they made a grotesque chattering; now they skimmed over him like birds flying widely; now they cooed and clucked, as if they were two birds settled in a nest; and then Miss Barrett's voice, rising again, went soaring and circling in the air; and then Mr. Browning's voice barked out its sharp, harsh clapper of laughter; and then there was only a murmur, a quiet humming sound as the two voices joined together. (*Flush* 40–41)

18 In the same manner, written language—and Elizabeth Barrett's poetry and correspondence—become undecipherable signs: 'There were many pages, closely covered, darkly blotted, scattered with strange little abrupt hieroglyphs' (*Flush* 36). The language inscribed *on* the world is not the language *of* the world but appears as layers of abstruse, impenetrable inscriptions derived from an ancestral, remote civilisation, inscriptions that *Flush* is unable to read and understand—thus denying the reader access to it: 'But what did they mean—the little words that Miss Barrett wrote?' (*Flush* 36). As hieroglyphs, the words also become figurative, yet their enigmatic quality prevents them from representing the world accurately, at least from the adopted point of view of a dog, as if they distorted it instead of translating it. Woolf's choice of representing the Victorians through animal eyes does show the overwhelming patriarchal power and the way it translates in the invading presence of domestic objects and furniture. But it also allows for a meta-textual reflection on the ambiguous power of language and its limitations in Victorian literature—through Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'hieroglyphic' writing—ushering in what the modernists felt as a need to renew, or retrieve, the meaning of words.

19 In the novel nevertheless, *Flush*'s inability to read 'human language' is compensated for by an uncanny instinct which allows him to 'read signs that nobody else could even see' (*Flush* 35). His reinforced ability to understand differently enables him to observe strange metamorphoses that occur when there is, seemingly, no one to see it. His experience of time passing is recorded as light and shadow passing upon the busts of poets in Elizabeth's room: 'Autumn deepened into winter and the first fogs jaundiced the air. . . . [N]othing could be seen in the room but the pale busts glimmering wanly on the tops of the wardrobes' (*Flush* 24); 'And remorselessly the days went on. The wind blew out the blind. The sun whitened the busts' (*Flush* 37). But far from being locked in Plato's cave, *Flush* perceives the secret guarded by 'things':

Yet everything was different. The very movement of the blind as it drew in and out seemed to *Flush* like a signal. And as the lights and shadows passed over the busts they too seemed to be hinting and beckoning. Everything in the room seemed to be aware of change; to be prepared for some event. And yet all was silent; all was concealed. (*Flush* 69)

20 Again, before the birth of the Brownings' baby, *Flush* appears as oddly clear-sighted in his inarticulateness: 'The signs of change, as he read them, . . . signified, much more mysteriously, expectance' (*Flush* 82). *Flush* is therefore able to read and interpret the signs like an oracle, even though, ironically enough, the mystery of pregnancy is solved through the very word 'expectance'.

- 21 The reader of *Flush* is made to witness a reconfiguration of perception and a realignment of the senses giving paramount importance to smell. However, if *Flush* proved unable to *name* things correctly upon entering Miss Barrett's room, his mistress, and Virginia Woolf herself, in turn seem at a loss to find words that would aptly translate their confrontation to beauty, while *Flush*'s pure sensation of smell escapes the need for language:

[Mrs Browning] could not find words enough in the whole of the English language to express what she felt. . . —the beauty of the Apennines brought words to birth in such numbers that they positively crushed each other out of existence. . . It was the human scene that stirred him, not beauty. Beauty, so it seems at least, had to be crystallised into a green or violet powder and puffed by some celestial syringe down the fringed channels that lay behind his nostrils before it touched *Flush*'s senses; and then it issued not in words, but in a silent rapture. Where Mrs. Browning saw, he smelt; where she wrote, he snuffed. (*Flush* 85)

- 22 Our, and any, articulate language proves too limited to convey either *smells* or the complex weaving of sensations that makes up animal experience. The problematic literary trope of the inadequacy of language to the real is explicitly 'confessed' and denounced in the following pages which are worth quoting at length:

there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that *Flush* mostly lived. Love was chiefly smell; form and colour were smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science were smell. To him religion itself was smell. To describe his simplest experience with the daily chop or biscuit is beyond our power. . . *Flush* wandered off into the streets of Florence to enjoy the rapture of smell. He threaded his path through main streets and back streets, through squares and alleys, by smell. He nosed his way from smell to smell; the rough, the smooth, the dark, the golden. . . he ran in and out, always with his nose to the ground, drinking in the essence; or with his nose in the air vibrating with the aroma. He slept in this hot patch of sun—how sun made the stone reek! he sought that tunnel of shade—how acid shade made the stone smell! He devoured whole bunches of ripe grapes largely because of their purple smell; he chewed and spat out whatever tough relic of goat or macaroni the Italian housewife had thrown from the balcony—goat and macaroni were raucous smells, crimson smells. He followed the swooning sweetness of incense into the violet intricacies of dark cathedrals; and, sniffing, tried to lap the gold on the window-stained tomb. Nor was his sense of touch much less acute. He knew Florence in its marmoreal smoothness and in its gritty and cobbled roughness. Hoary folds of drapery, smooth fingers and feet of stone received the lick of his tongue, the quiver of his shivering snout. Upon the infinitely sensitive pads of his feet he took the clear stamp of proud Latin inscriptions. In short, he knew Florence as no human being has ever known it; as Ruskin never knew it or George Eliot either. He knew it as only the dumb know. Not a single one of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words. (*Flush* 86–87)

- 23 The confession paradoxically, though unsurprisingly, triggers an accumulation of tentative literary compensations, poetic images and synecdoches still drawing on synaesthesia. This excess of language aims, and ultimately fails, to cover up a kind of 'lack' inherent in language. In fact, the very acknowledgement of such a limitation conveys both the hollowness of the language and its ability to point towards a hidden signification which eludes us, to reveal obscurely something that shall remain concealed and unattainable. The words both *stand for* and *betray* a different form of reality—the *real*?—which escapes our grasp, categories, definitions. This avowal is also a sign that, by

writing *through* Flush, the writer seeks to retrieve this inaccessible world, thus embarking the reader on a quest for that other reality.

- 24 Ultimately, in spite of the numerous references to Flush's immediate and unmediated sensations, he—and both writer and reader through him—remains at a distance from the real world, cut off by his very *humanity*:

But though it would be pleasant for the biographer to infer that Flush's life in late middle age was an orgy of pleasure transcending all description; to maintain that while the baby day by day picked up a new word and thus removed sensation a little further beyond reach, Flush was fated to remain for ever in a Paradise where essences exist in their utmost purity, and the naked soul of things presses on the naked nerve—it would not be true. Flush lived in no such Paradise. The spirit, ranging from star to star, the bird whose furthest flight over polar snows or tropical forests never brings it within sight of human houses and their curling wood-smoke, may, for anything we know, enjoy such immunity, such integrity of bliss. But Flush had lain upon human knees and heard men's voices. His flesh was veined with human passions; he knew all grades of jealousy, anger and despair. (*Flush* 88)

- 25 Flush is exiled from the 'Paradise' of unaltered, pure sensation, barred access to the 'naked soul of things' as if the fall into human knowledge forbade the possibility of direct experience, which is compared to the baby's unfortunate, gradual fall into language, described as a loss of objective reality. But rather than a limitation, the projection of human emotions onto Flush can also be seen as questioning the animal's absolute *otherness* as a fundamental characteristic of philosophical tradition, therefore foreshadowing Derrida's 'thinking of animals' and 'thinking animals' (Berger and Segarra), by opening the possibility of a 'language-less' animal thought and the need for an 'idiomatic language' (*animot*) that would articulate 'the absence of the name and of the word'.<sup>8</sup>

- 26 Although this apparently points towards a conclusion on the failure of language when it comes to the representation of reality, a final twist saves Flush—the dog and the novel—from being, indeed, a 'waste of time'. Towards the end of his life and around the same time as the baby's evolution into an articulate being, Flush is yet again confronted with his own image in the mirror, right after Robert Browning had to shave his flea-infested coat:

What am I now? he thought, gazing into the glass. And the glass replied with the brutal sincerity of glasses, 'You are nothing'. He was nobody. Certainly, he was no longer a cocker spaniel. But as he gazed, his ears bald now, and uncurled, seemed to twitch. It was as if the potent spirits of truth and laughter were whispering in them. To be nothing—is that not, after all, the most satisfactory state in the whole world? (*Flush* 89)

- 27 Upon looking at his reflection and no longer recognizing himself, deprived of his spaniel coat which he wore as a coat of arms and which partly defined his identity, Flush's despair turns to satisfaction at being 'nothing' and 'nobody'. Eventually, this present-yet-absent state, this not-Being-in-the-world could be read as one step further towards the description of what Virginia Woolf called, in the words of Bernard from *The Waves*, 'the world seen without a self', a world that escapes the screen of the human eye/I and where the unobserved and uncanny nature of things can be unveiled. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the end of the novel should be, with the dog's death in Italy, a scene that almost reads like an *ekphrasis*, a chiaroscuro still-life painting where the

blinding light again unveils a world that is 'more real' than reality: the thing as it is when we are not there, and when even *Flush* is no longer there.

The whole square was brilliant with awnings and stalls and bright umbrellas. The market women were sitting beside baskets of fruit; pigeons were fluttering, bells were pealing, whips were cracking. The many-coloured mongrels of Florence were running in and out sniffing and pawing. . . . A brown jar of red and yellow flowers cast a shadow beside it. Above them a statue, holding his right arm outstretched, deepened the shade to violet. . . .

The sun burnt deliciously through the lily leaves, and through the green and white umbrella. (*Flush* 103)

- 28 Much like the sun, Virginia Woolf's *Flush* 'burns deliciously through', breaching the veil of words towards the reality that lies beyond. Very far from merely being a trivial joke indeed, *Flush* appears as yet another complex modernist experiment. Bearing in mind the ambiguous meaning of 'with', connoting both proximity and instrumentalisation, the novel has achieved a form of 'becoming-animal' with the Victorians, as it sought to recapture the Victorian spirit which still haunted Virginia Woolf while using their displaced perspective to retrieve the reality of the world which haunts her writing.

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## NOTES

1. 'Flush is only by way of a joke. I was so tired after the Waves, that I lay in the garden and read the Browning love letters, and the figure of their dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life. I wanted to play a joke on Lytton – it was to parody him' (VW to Ottoline Morrell, *Letters* 5, 161–62).
2. 'That reminds me – have you a photograph of Henry? I ask for a special reason, connected with a little escapade by means of which. I hope to stem the ruin we shall suffer from the failure of The Waves. This is the worst publishing season on record. No bookseller dares buy' (VW to Vita Sackville-West, *Letters* 4, 380).
3. 'Flush will be out on Thursday & I shall be very much depressed, I think, by the kind of praise. They'll say its "charming" delicate, ladylike. And it will be popular. . . . And I shall very much dislike the popular success of *Flush*' (*Diary* 4, 181).
4. '[Woolf] worries that reviewers will find *Flush* "charming" – which they did: "A book of irresistible grace and charm," Rose Macaulay wrote; even "a little too charming," said the Christian Science Monitor reviewer. And certainly the danger of the label "ladylike" was that reviewers would dismiss the work as "trivial" or "minor," which they also did' (Caughie 54).
5. For a commentary on the status of *Flush* in academic studies, see Caughie. On the social and moral organisation of London as represented through the 'mutual economic dependence' between Wimpole Street and Whitechapel in *Flush*, exemplifying the tyranny in which women are imprisoned, see Squier 127. On scientific implications and the influence of Darwinian theories, see Dubino. On repressed lesbian sexuality, see Vanita. For psychoanalytical readings, see Goldman.
6. On 'taking the dog seriously', see Ryan, and Smith.
7. In such a world stricken by synaesthesia, the wandering airs carrying smells can be visualised: 'For to *Flush* the whole room still reeked of Mr. Browning's presence. The air dashed past the bookcase, and eddied and curled round the heads of the five pale busts' (*Flush* 39). The smell of memory colours the air, and later emotions are translated into sensations: 'The flowers smelt bitter to him; . . . the dust filled his nostrils with disillusion' (*Flush* 44).
8. 'Accéder à une pensée qui pense autrement l'absence du nom ou du mot, et autrement que comme une privation' (Derrida 74).

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## ABSTRACTS

*Flush*'s main character, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel, can be seen as the epitome of Victorianism, an embodiment of its tradition of anthropomorphism and a displaced portrait of his mistress, but it is also the pretext for a modernist reconstruction of Victorian society, towards a new literary (re)presentation of the sensorial world. No longer neglected by critics and scholars, *Flush* has been widely analysed as encapsulating the social issues of the mid-nineteenth century in terms of class and gender, adopting the point of view of a dog to expose the confinement and submission women had to face—in the Victorian period, but also in Woolf's own time. The Edwardian perspective allows Woolf to use *Flush* as the conveyor of modernity—not merely because writing the biography of a dog questions the established societal and literary codes, but also because the de-familiarization of the world through animal eyes aims at 'solving the problem of reality'. The reader becomes the witness of a reconfiguration of perception as primeval instincts are inscribed within *Flush*'s body, smell takes over eyesight and the novel depicts a world distorted by synaesthesia. Despite the human qualities *Flush* is endowed with, a reversal still occurs which highlights the human beings' *otherness* and reduces their/our language to hieroglyphic, undecipherable signs, unable to grasp reality. The animal's perspective ushers in a tentative description of 'the world seen without a self', a world that escapes the screen of the human eye/I and where the unobserved and uncanny nature of things can be unveiled.

Le personnage principal de *Flush*, l'épagneul d'Elizabeth Barrett Browning, apparaît comme le paragon de l'esprit victorien, en tant qu'il en incarne le traditionnel anthropomorphisme et qu'il offre un portrait décalé de sa maîtresse. Il est en outre un prétexte à une reconstruction moderniste de la société victorienne permettant une nouvelle (re)présentation littéraire du monde sensible. *Flush* a souvent été analysé pour sa représentation sociale du dix-neuvième siècle, l'adoption du point de vue d'un chien dénonçant l'assujettissement des femmes de l'époque et jusqu'au vingtième siècle. Depuis sa perspective édouardienne, Virginia Woolf utilise en outre *Flush* comme vecteur de modernité, non seulement par l'élaboration même de la biographie d'un animal qui remet en question les conventions, mais également parce que la dé-familiarisation du monde au travers du regard animal devient une tentative de « résoudre le problème de la réalité ». Le lecteur devient en effet le témoin d'une reconfiguration de la perception dès lors que les instincts primaires du chien sont ancrés dans sa chair, et que la primauté de l'odorat sur la vue déforme le monde familier. En dépit des traits humains de *Flush*, on assiste à un renversement qui souligne le caractère « autre » des êtres humains et réduit leur/ notre langage à des signes indéchiffrables et inadéquats, incapables de saisir la réalité. La perspective de l'animal ouvre en définitive la possibilité de décrire un monde débarrassé du filtre de la conscience humaine et où la nature étrange des choses pourrait être dévoilée.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** modernisme, biographie, Woolf (Virginia), Barrett Browning (Elizabeth), phénoménologie, ontologie animale, animaux domestiques, études de genre

**Keywords:** modernism, biography, Woolf (Virginia), Barrett Browning (Elizabeth), phenomenology, animal ontology, humanimality, pet ownership, gender studies

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