Virginia Woolf’s rich and imaginative use of language was partly a result of her keen interest in foreign literatures and languages – mainly Greek and French, but also Russian, German, and Italian. As a translator she naturally addressed herself to contemporary standards of translation within the university, but also to readers like herself. In *Three Guineas* she ranged herself among German scholars who used *Antigone* to critique European politics of the 1930s. *Orlando* outwits the censors with a strategy that focuses on Proust’s untranslatable word. *The Waves* and *The Years* show her looking ahead to the problems of postcolonial society, where translation crosses borders. In this first in-depth study of Woolf and European languages and literatures, Emily Dalgarno opens up a rewarding new way of reading her prose.

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In memory of
Imre Gyula Izsák
Astronomer
(1929–65)
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Throughout this work I have continued to ask how the richness and historical depth of Woolf’s language become apparent in the context of translation. Woolf’s expressed desire to transform the English language always seemed to me a measure of her ambition and stature as a writer, and a goal scarcely to be imagined. A study of her vocabulary shows that she gave us relatively few new words. How then did transformation come about? After “On Not Knowing Greek” her thoughts on translation are scattered throughout her fiction, essays, and diaries. Although her response to works of Russian fiction and to Proust shaped her writing practice significantly, there is no further essay on translation, perhaps because the language of the Victorian translator of Greek was no longer suitable, and others were not yet in circulation. Like the German Hellenists of her generation she learned that the translation of classical texts can be used to mount challenges to the ideology of national governments. Reading Proust with Vita Sackville-West suggested to Woolf that the language of gender comes into existence on the borders of consciousness, at the moment of awakening. Such a study enhances our sense of her language as responding to its history, and hospitable to the rhetorical strategies of other western languages.

The experience of a semester at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis greatly enhanced my understanding of translation and the social and political relationships among languages. My thanks to the Director, Michael J. Pretina, who arranged seminars with other fellows, and glimpses of the culture of Marseilles that widened the scope of my study, to include not only my chapter on Proust, but also work on Assia Djebar.

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Abbreviations

Works by Virginia Woolf: I have used the Hogarth Press “Definitive Collected Edition” of Woolf’s fiction except when otherwise noted.

BA  Between the Acts
CDB  The Captain’s Death Bed, ed. Leonard Woolf (1950)
DM  The Death of the Moth (1947)
JR  Jacob’s Room
MD  Mrs. Dalloway
ND  Night and Day
O  Orlando
List of abbreviations

TG  Three Guineas
TL  To the Lighthouse
VO  The Voyage Out
W   The Waves
Y   The Years

Woolf’s holograph notes in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature are referenced by reel numbers.