Virginia Woolf: visual poetics and the politics of visibility*

Ana Gabriela Macedo
Universidade do Minho

In Memoriam:
Virginia Woolf

Many words crowd, and all and each
Unmeaning.
The simplest words in sorrow are the best.
So let us say, she loved the water-
meadows,
the Downs; her books; her friends;
her memories;
The room which was her own.
London by twilight; shops and un-
known people;
Donne's church; the Strand; the
buses and the large
Swell of humanity that passed her by
I remember she told me once that
she, a child,
Trapped evening moths with honey
round a tree
And with a lantern watched their
antic fight.
So she, a poet, caught her special prey
With words of honey and a lamp of wit.
Frugal, austere, fine, proud.
Rich in her contradictions, rich in love,
So did she capture all her moth-like self,
Her fluttered spirit, delicate and soft.
Yet kept a sting beneath the brushing wing
Her blame astringent and her praise
supreme.
How small, how petty seemed the
little men
Measured against her scournful quality.
Some say she lived in an unreal world
Cloud-cuckoo-land. Maybe. She now
has gone
Into the prouder world of immortality
V. S-W. [1]

The task of writing on Virginia Woolf has become an enterprise of awesome proportions. First of all, undeniably Woolf sides now with Shakespeare whenever a canonical woman writer is needed; besides, her engagement in a mapping of a feminist genealogy and poetics, as claimed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), her search for "the woman's sentence" and for a style of writing that should be "adapted to the body", signal the definite transgression of women of the patriarchal "limitations of their

sex", and their entry in a new stage of personal and social responsibility and citizenship: "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (Woolf, 1983: 72).

Thus, Woolf's feminist poetics, or even more so, her feminist vision could be called in the true sense of the kristevian expression, a "future anterior of language" (Kristeva, 1980: 32), rather than the bitter embryo of a bloomian "school of resentment" (Bloom, 1975: 33). Nevertheless, it is hard to find a more complex, polymorphous, at times elusive and even

contradictory figure of a writer and of a woman, and one that has inspired more ample and diversified criticism. But of course that comes with being canonized, or rather it is in the nature of canonicity itself. T.S. Eliot, her contemporary and friend, whom she published in The Hogarth Press when only a promising young writer, called her "the center of the literary life of London" (*in* Noble, 1973: 148); Raymond Williams, an unsuspected intellectual radical, emphasizes her political commitment to the woman's cause, noting that a branch of the Women's Cooperative Guild met regularly in her home,[2] which, he adds, accounts for the degree of "social conscience" which is most often not recognized in the Bloomsbury members.

1. Virginia Woolf, re-canonization and the "celebrity cult"

> Woolf is a fashionable icon nowadays but I do not know how many people actually read her. I do not know how many people have seen a Picasso, not a postcard, the picture. And of those how many, how many slid nothing inbetween themselves and the work, but looked at it honestly and let it speak? Nevertheless, Picasso is a household name if not a household god and Virginia Woolf is a screen queen. (...) Woolf has been too much in the news. There has been so much concentration on Woolf as a feminist and a thinker, that the unique power of her language has still not been given the close critical

> attention that it deserves. When Woolf is read and taught, she needs to be read and taught as a poet; she is not a writer who uses for words things, for her, words are things, incantatory, substantial. (...) Virginia Woolf has a gift of wings (Winterson, 1995: 66, 70, 77).

Amongst the tantalizing variety of books and critical essays both on Woolf's life and work that keep coming out, recent criticism, maybe due to the growing space given to the study of inter art poetics, seems to be particularly oriented to the intersection of the visual world in Woolf's textual production. In parallel to this, a new trend of criticism has developed, along the lines of Postmodernism, considering the multi "re-fashionings" of Woolf within the contemporary visual culture and the impact of the media on her work and her personality.[3]

In a sense we can say that Woolf – "the face that sells more postcards than any other at Britain's National Portrait Gallery", as stated in the back cover of Brenda Silver's *Virginia Woolf: Icon* (1999), has become a celebrity myth or a "star". As Richard Dyer claims: "Stars are as much produced images, constructed personalities as 'characters' are. Thus the value embodied by a star is as it were harder to reject as 'impossible' or 'false' because the star's existence guarantees the existence of the value he/she embodies" (Dyer, 2002: 20).

The whole issue is exhilarating, and, in my view, closely intertwined. At large it concerns the soft terrain of the relations between high art and popular and mass culture, a crucial distinction within the modernist canon, but whose borderlines have long since become more and more blurred, as Walter Benjamin's theses remind us. Andreas Huyssen discusses this polemics in a remarkable essay entitled "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other", noting that the modernist "masculinist mystique" (Huyssen, 1986: 198) and its fear of the "feminization of culture" (*idem*, 194) ultimately meant "the universalizing ascription of femininity to mass culture (which) always depended

on the very real exclusion of women from high culture and its institutions" (*idem*, 205-6). And Woolf, the modernist and the feminist, is unremittingly part of it. On one hand, for example, she succeeded to enter the magazine *Vogue's* "Hall of Fame", basically masculine then, on the other hand this implied writing and posing for *Vogue* (alongside the TLS ...), thus trespassing the tight fences between high art and popular culture, as I will discuss further on. Even if this *flirtation* with popular culture, as one may call it, is less taxing in our days, it is the task of literary criticism to uncover it and thus demystify its polarity. Hence the importance of studying Woolf as a popular myth.

Brenda Silver argues that there are two possible ways of looking at the phenomenon of Woolf's "re-canonization", "the fact that so many people today see the film or television versions of Woolf's works before they experience (if they ever do) the versions she wrote or published" (Silver, 1999: 213). First, she argues, we can read/see these adaptations of Woolf's texts as "more than an activity of literary criticism", for they themselves become "originals" in their own right, constructing assertions about the writer (*ibidem*). Adaptations, as Silver argues, are "re-fashionings" or "re-dressings" of *other texts* (the true "originals", the ones that lie behind the new ones), to be globally understood as "performances" existing in an intertextual relation with the former text, as a product of a particular encoding: historical, geographical, cultural, etc. (*idem*, 12), much in the same way as a translation exists in relation to the original or source text. However, in a second move, one cannot help seeing that the adaptation itself easily assumes the status of "original", being read or seen *against* (instead of) its archetypal "version".

Briefly, Sally Potter's film version of *Orlando*, has become *Orlando* itself. A *post-version* of Woolf's feminist utopia, necessarily framed by our contemporary vision of the subject (possibly as an extension of the earlier text, or as a metonymy informed by post-structuralism and post-modernism).

An identical situation is that of the box-office hit, *The Hours* (2002), itself an adaptation of Michael Cunningham's postmodern, queer *Mrs. Dalloway* (1998). This is, I believe, a curious case of archival legitimization, since, as it is well known, *The Hours* was the originally intended title of Woolf's book. Thus the performed version assumes the perfunctory role of *mise en abyme* regarding the source text, using that privilege to further subvert, actualize and explore to the limit the pre-announced transgressions: be it *Orlando's* sexual politics, transgenderism, power politics, ecology, pacifism, etc.

On the other hand, one has to contend, Virginia Woolf would soon become fertile ground for "cannibalism", a target to be easily marketed (sometimes to dangerous extremes, such as Woolf the "postfeminist"...) and made easy for consumption. She has become the unquestionable embodiment of an irreverent ideology (-ies), and thus seemingly appropriated to support the private view enacted by each new version or adaptation. »

2. Virginia Woolf and Photography

In a previous essay on Woolf I have discussed this issue of Woolf's re-canonization *via* the contemporary film industry. I want to talk today about her ambiguous rapport with photography, and the *politics of visibility* that is at stake here.

It is a well known fact that Woolf took and developed her own photos as early as 1898 (Letters 1: 15). Despite the fact that this topic is recurrent since her earlier writings, it is only recently that critical attention has been drawn to it.[4]

Many plausible reasons can be pointed here, the most obvious one being the secondary status traditionally attributed to photography as an art, *vis-à-vis* painting, for example; the other one concerns Woolf's own ambiguous and often scornful attitude towards photography, as "imperfect and superficial", as she claims in *Three Guineas* (Woolf, 1979: 164). It is the latter which

interests me most here. Woolf's knowledge of Photography and the process of photo developing emerges clearly in a striking essay from 1919, which is intended as a review of Joseph Hergesheimer's book *Gold and Iron*. The first long paragraph in this essay describes in detail the technical process of developing, only to draw from its imagery and apply it using the same technical jargon to the writing of the author in question. I won't quote at length since it would take too long, but just to give you an idea:

> In developing a photograph first one black patch appears on the greyish film and then another. By degrees the square of the picture defines itself: here is the edge of a wall; here, isolated but unmistakable, the outline of a croquet hoop. One rocks the fluid from side to side, and watches anxiously for an increasing thickening and intricacy, or the film will certainly prove either under exposed or over. Thus with the books of Mr Joseph Hergesheimer (Woolf, 1994: 109), (see Woolf's *Essays* I, 1919).

Another crucial factor to have in mind in this context is a biographical circumstance: Virginia Woolf's great-aunt was Julia Margaret Cameron, the reputed Victorian photographer, who started a career at the age of 50! Virginia was deeply attached to the legacy she received from her aunt and throughout her life together with her sister Vanessa Bell, they reproduced the allegoric settings and the atmosphere of Julia Cameron's photographs in their own shots (see particularly Vanessa Bell's "Family Albums"). Woolf devotes an essay to Cameron in 1926 (see Woolf's Essays IV, 1926: 375-386), and a play, *Freshwater*, inspired on Cameron's life, which Virginia and Vanessa presented to their friends in 1935.

Diane Gillespie in her study of Woolf and Photography (1993) shows the recurrence and the importance of photography in Woolf's novels, since her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, where the photograph of an idealized dead mother dominates (Gillespie, 1993: 121), or of women photographers, such as Lady Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1979: 89). In

Orlando, the use of photography is made to suit the ironical purposes of the novel, the masking and unmasking, the gender play that constitutes its plot; but, it is particularly in *Three Guineas*, that photography is used most "aggressively" (Gillespie, 1993:136-7), as a means to denounce the war violence and the institutionalization of power.[5]

However, Woolf also resisted photography and its power to fix, to objectify, to rigidly document. As she wrote in *Freshwater*: " A fact is a fact; art is art" (Woolf, 1976: 16), a comment which is intended as ironical, but nevertheless preempts her view that photography does not capture the "truth" of the individual or of consciousness (see the essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), the importance she attributes to character creating, and also the essay "Modern Fiction" (1925), and her criticism to the materialists – Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells, unable to create "character" in fiction). Virginia and Leonard often took photos of family, friends, objects or settings from different angles, as if to reinforce her idea that "anyone perception is incomplete and that only multiple angles of vision can begin to suggest the complete person" (Gillespie, 1993: 132). On the other hand, particularly in her short-stories, she seems to want to show glimpses of her mind at work, of memories or emotions, by means of snapshots, as if words were either too scarce or too excessive. Of course, her interest in Impressionism is not alien to this issue.

As Maggie Humm refers in her study of Woolf, "the Frederick Koch Collection, at Harvard Theatre Library, houses 6 albums, The Monk's House Albums, together with four boxes containing over two hundred additional loose photographs" (Humm, 2000: 219). Given the importance of visual imagery in Woolf's narrative, these albums and photographs constitute an additional visual story that helps us make sense of her aesthetics as well as of her life.

Photographs were often exchanged and even demanded from Woolf to her friends, and they were essential to her sense

of identity, perhaps, as Humm adds, Woolf believed that "photographs could help her to survive those identity destroying moments of her life" (*idem*, 225). In *Three Guineas*, Woolf writes for example: "Let us then leave it to the poets to tell us what the dream is: and fix our eyes upon the photograph again: the fact" (Woolf, 1979: 163).

On a personal level, Woolf reacted aggressively to professional photography. She was photographed by three contemporary well-known photographers: G. C. Beresford, an Englishman, Man Ray, an American; and Gisèle Freund, a German woman living in France. She refused to be photographed by Cecil Beaton, who nevertheless published her picture in his "Book of Beauty". On the episode she writes in her Letters: "I was furious at being in Beaton's book" (*Letters* IV, p. 258). In a letter to Ethel Smyth, (June 7th, 1938), Woolf also complains about the fact that the TLS, on 4th June 1938, had published a photograph of her taken by Lenare in January 1929:

> The Times photograph – damn them. They rang up and asked for me. Were given the stock reply. "Mrs. W. doesn't want her photograph published" – whereupon they go to a shop and buy the Lady in the Literary Supplement who gave me a shock. No I don't think she's a beauty: but her nose looks sharp eno' to cut hay with. Why shd. I reflect "what a beautiful woman I am? I'm not, and never think so (this is true) (*Letters* VI, 3395, p.235).

3. Woolf's Face

What about Woolf's physiognomy, in particular, her face? What was it that each new photographer or painter tried to capture in their different visions and portraits of Woolf? Why is she "the face that sells more postcards at the National Portrait Gallery?"

"When viewers turn to photographs to discover the authentic Woolf and/or her social meanings, then, they reveal

themselves in the process", as claimed by Brenda Silver (*idem*, 137), evoking Roland Barthes's notes on photography in *Camera Lucida*: the viewer's cultural, historical or political involvement with a photo, and that fortuitous, episodic contingency with which the photo itself grasps/attracts/ seduces the viewer.[6]

The fascination exerted by Woolf's face, her becoming a cult figure as a modernist or even more so, a feminist icon, hence her becoming a popular "image-sign", started in the 1970's when the first T-shirt with her face was printed (by the "Historical Products Inc. T-shirt", featuring the consecrated Beresford profile), and with postcards and posters widely advertising it. »

As Brenda Silver remarks, it was during the period between the appearance of this first T-shirt in 1973 and after Hermione Lee's biography in 1996 that the responses to and the degrees of identification with her iconicity most proliferated and diverged (Silver,1999: 129). By 1982, the year of Woolf's centenary, she was already a cult figure, in both realms, the academic world and the media culture. Woolf saw then her aura as a canonic female writer being reclaimed as "icon for the intellectual class" (*idem*, 143), on a par with her ever growing popularity within the visual culture. (*vide* David Levine's image). It is this multiplicity of selves as fixed by the photographer's eye and the according responses they ask from the viewer that we will be looking into briefly.

Woolf's visibility grew in the mid 1920s, both as a novelist and as an image in magazines such as *Vogue London* and *Vanity Fair's* Hall of Fame. However, one of her earliest and most mediatically reproduced photos (in mugs, T-shirts, posters), dates from 1902, and was taken by G. C. Beresford, when Woolf was twenty. It hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London and is in the cover of Quentin Bell's biography. Hermione Lee's account of this portrait makes clear the origin of the mythification of Virginia Woolf as a fragile, ethereal, aristocratic beauty. In Lee's words:

> The sensual, down-curved lips, the large sad gazing eyes, the dark lashes and strong eyebrows, the lovely straight nose and delicate curve of the chin, the long elegant neck, the high cheekbones, the soft, loosely-coiled bun, the pretty ear-lobe, and the aetherial lacy dress were to be crucial items in the making and maintaining of the Virgin Virginia legend (Lee, 1996: 246).

This photo was largely responsible for the conservative wing of the cult that ensued of a "fragile, apolitical, neurasthenic Woolf", (Silver, 146), a frozen icon, which has been reproduced *ad infinitum* to our days, (see for example Nicole Kidman's interpretation of Woolf in the film *The Hours*), which, in my opinion, was not as such represented in Cunningham's book.

The Lenare studio photos, taken in 1929, are among the most often reproduced for early advertisements and reviews of Woolf's works. The Man Ray's photos, taken in the 30s, the most famous of which appeared in the cover of *Time* in 1937, picture an elegant, severe, distant and "ascetic" (a term used by the photographer) Woolf. It is the image of the "authoress", "neither the feminine nor the feministic game, someone we must recognize as a special instance of her sex", as Diana Trilling states in "Virginia Woolf's Special Realm", her review of two collections of Woolf's essays, from 1948 (Trilling, 1948: 1); these photos are in all different from the more sensitive and sympathetic photos taken around the same time by the German expatriate photographer living in France, Gisèle Freund. These photos were taken in 1939, in Woolf's Sussex home, when she was fifty-eight. The image reproduced directly mirrors the photographer's empathy with her model, and her perceptive words regarding Woolf as "frail and luminous, the embodiment of her prose. (...) Her face, as if bathed in inner light, reflected both a visionary's sensibility and great sincerity" (Freund, 1974: 130-1 (pp.129-37)).

Cecil Beaton uses Woolf's face in his 1930 *Book of Beauty*, as an icon of "modern beauty" which is "backed up by intelligence", which became indeed a new concept of beauty to be marketed and mythified (Beaton, 1930: 37-38).

The fact that Woolf let herself be photographed for *Vogue* in 1924 by Beck and MacGregor, dressed up in one of her mother's Victorian dresses is in itself striking, being Vogue a woman's fashion magazine, destined to be "a hallway for the rich and famous", as Nicola Luckhurst writes (1998: 4). Despite that, however, and under the editorship of Dorothy Todd, Vogue became also a review of the avant-garde, receiving prestigious personalities of the day, artists, scientists, philosophers, poets (among those Proust, Einstein and Le Corbusier, as well as Leonard Woolf and Maynard Keynes), and very few of those were women anyway. Woolf was nominated for Vogue on the following grounds: "Because she is a publisher with a prose style: because she is the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen and a sister of Vanessa Bell: because she is the author of *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room*: because in the opinion of some of the best judges she is the most brilliant novelist of the young generation: because she also writes admirable criticism: because with her husband she runs the Hogarth Press" (*Vogue*, late May 1924: 49), (*apud* Luckhurst, *ibidem*). >>

But Woolf not only posed for *Vogue*, as she wrote five articles for it in between the years 1924-26, which, despite her claims that she was only doing it for money ("sweeping guineas off the Vogue counter", Woolf's diary 27 June 1925), constitutes an interesting case of blurring of boundaries between high art and popular culture. Again quoting Luckhurst, "Woolf's writing for *Vogue* and the TLS blurs the very boundaries by which high culture defined itself" (*idem*, 6). In fact Vogue then featured simultaneously the chic and the intellectual in an irreverent *mélange* that defied its own time and its covers exhibited modernist graphics, alluding to Brancusi, Modigliani and Picasso. As Luckhurst claims, "the period of Dorothy Todd's editorship figures as a fascinating anomaly in the early history of what has become the multinational magazine industry" (*idem*, 23).

Now, concerning the circumstances in which the photographs by Gisèle Freund were taken, there are

contradictory statements and letters from the model and the photographer. In a letter to her Argentinean friend Victoria Ocampo (26 June 39), editor of the journal "Sur", Woolf complains harshly that the photos had been taken "against (her) will". She writes: "Its quite true – I was annoyed. Over and over again I've refused to be photographed. Twice I had made excuses so as not to sit to Madame Freund. And then you bring her without telling me, and that convinced me that you knew that I didn't want to sit, and were forcing my hand. As indeed you did" (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. VI, 3528, p.342). However, in

August 1938 Gisèle Freund had written a letter to Woolf in a tone that does not in anyway make us foresee that animosity, rather the opposite, it is full of praise and gratitude to Woolf, whom she effusively compliments and asks Woolf if she would like to see these prints.[7] Unfortunately Virginia Woolf never saw these photos, she died before that (28 March 1941). In 1946 Freund returned to London and showed them to Leonard. In her Memoir, *The World in my camera* (1974), Freund gives her own personal account of her memorable meeting with Woolf. She writes: "The sitting lasted two hours. Virginia Woolf submitted to all my demands. She showed me her dresses, and the two of us chose the colors. She asked me to photograph her husband as well, and at the end they posed together, the little dog at their feet. I was very happy, as I left at having been able to add their pictures to my collection" (Freund, 1974: 134).

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf, icon of modernity, feminist icon, the authoress, the female dandy, the flâneuse, ... multiple and irreducible to the one. Evading definition, like the characters of her novels, or her own Mrs. Brown, a true poststructuralist and postmodern subject for that, and yet not.

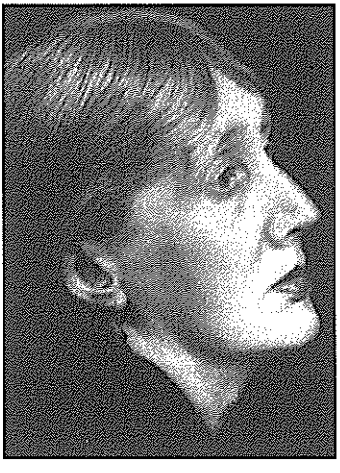
Truly, Virginia Woolf has a "gift of wings". <<

Virginia [Sthphen] Woolf
Photograph by G.C. Beresford

Virginia Woolf
Photograph by Lenare

Virginia Woolf
Photograph by Gisèle Freud

Virginia Woolf
Photograph by Man Ray



>> Virginia Woolf
Photograph by Beck and Macgregor

>> Virginia Woolf
Photograph unknown

NOTAS

* This paper was developed within the project "Literature and Identities", carried by the Instituto de Literatura Comparada Margarida Losa, of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto; ILCML is a Research Unit supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, (POCTI).

The reproduction of the photos is the author's responsability.

[1] Vita Sackville-West (*The Observer*, 6.4.41). This journal was kindly provided by the University of Sussex Special Collections, from the archive of the "Monks's House Papers", Ad 31.

[2] Raymond Williams's article, "The Bloomsbury Fraction" (1980), is a very powerful and challenging one, given Williams's marxist convictions and his elaboration of a theory of cultural materialism. Very much against the grain, then, in this context, Williams treats Bloomsbury as an "enlightened fraction" within the individualism of the bourgeois liberal. Contradicting the largely disseminated image of Bloomsbury as "withdrawn and languid aesthetes" (*idem*, 155), he calls attention to their "political and organizational involvement" (*ibidem*), their "social conscience", namely in the case of Leonard Woolf, through his work for the League of Nations, the Cooperative movement and for the Labour Party. Thus the Bloomsbury "alternative", its "new style" of "civilized individualism", as he calls it, constitutes in his view a "remarkable disconnection" within the ideology of liberal individualism: "in its personal instances and in its public interventions Bloomsbury was as serious, as dedicated and as inventive as this position has ever, in the twentieth century, been" (*idem*, 166-7). >>

[3] Amongst the former it is worth mentioning Jane Goldman's *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf* (1998), essentially seeing her oeuvre under the influence of Post-Impressionism; Emily Dalgarno's Virginia *Woolf and the Visible World* (2001), a study on the centrality of vision in Woolf's writing; Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace, in *Women Artists and Writers: modernist (im)positionings* (1994), devote a chapter to Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell and "The Sister(s') Arts", where they explore the space women occupied within Bloomsbury and the ambivalence with which their professionalism was regarded; Diane Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankin eds., *Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, 1997; to the latter belongs Brenda R. Silver's *Virginia Woolf: Icon* (1999), which, as the title indicates, is a study about Virginia Woolf as a cultural icon; Pamela Coughie, *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2000); P. Coughie had previously edited *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*, in 1991; Diane Gillespie's *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf* (1993); Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Culture* (2002).

[4] See Diane Gillespie's first long essay, "Her Kodak pointed at his head": Virginia Woolf and Photography" (1993); Nicola Lockhurst, "Bloomsbury in Vogue" (1998); Brenda Silver, *in Virginia Woolf: Icon* (1999); Maggie Humm, "Virginia Woolf's Photography and the Monk's House Albums" (2000).

[5] In *Three Guineas*, Woolf refers to photography as the "other method of persuasion left to us (...) the photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses" (1979: 109).

[6] Cf. Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire: notes sur la photographie*, 1980, pp. 42-49. Barthes adds that photography gives access to a whole series of "under-information" about the person or the thing photographed which give the viewer a special pleasure, since it enhances his private knowledge of (and therefore his rapport with) the photographed object. "La photographie a le même rapport à l'Histoire que le biographème à la biographie" (*idem*, 54).

[7] "Tout le monde qui a vu vos photos trouve que ce sont les meuilleres que j'ai jamais faite – mais c'est grâce à vous puisque vous avez une tête admirable" (16 August 193). (Photocopy kindly provided by the University of Sussex Special Collections, the "Monk's House Papers", Box 72).

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