Latecomers: Anita Brookner Then and Now

Abstracts

Associate Professor Patricia Juliana Smith
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“I Have Taken the Name of Virginia Woolf in Vain”: A Case for Anita Brookner’s Canonicity.

In A Room of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf theorizes a continuum of women’s literature, works written by women, for women, and read, albeit not exclusively, by women. In particular, she cites Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and George Eliot as her predecessors. Nearly a century later, we can extend this line to include Woolf herself, followed by Elizabeth Bowen, Muriel Spark, and, arguably Anita Brookner, all of whom continue and expand the novel of manners in their explorations the inner lives of women, particularly women who do not necessarily conform to the concept of the feminine ideal.

Brookner is, at the moment, still a much-neglected author, infrequently taught in university courses, and, throughout her literary career, the object of dismissive and at times hostile reviews from critics. She is stereotypically regarded by many as the author of fictions about lonely women with uneventful lives. What such critics fail to understand is that unmarried women are not necessarily lonely nor are they failures who do not succeed at negotiating the traditional marriage plot, that such women are not lacking in agency, or that such characters might even have complex, rich lives outside the realm of traditional romance. Indeed, Brookner deftly deconstructs the romance plot through her fictions.

In Hotel du Lac (1984), her protagonist Edith Hope, a writer who creates such plots for an audience of lonely women, is forced to face the fact that she is not true to the ideals of Virginia Woolf, for she knowingly tells lies about women’s lives. Accordingly, she cries out, “I have taken the of Virginia Woolf in vain.” Brookner, unlike her character, does not present pretty delusions; rather, she presents realities that many of her critics would rather not see.

In this presentation, I will make a case for Brookner’s inclusion in the literary canon by examining her work in relation with her predecessors in Woolf’s continuum, by reviewing the body of criticism of her works, and by questioning the misconceptions that have arisen about her as a novelistic artist over the course of her long career.
Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. She is the author of Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction and the editor/coeditor of several volumes and author of articles on a wide variety of topics, including literature, film, popular and classical music, queer theory, and religious culture. Her current projects include Britannia Waives the Rules: The Permissive Society in 1960s British Literature and Culture, a monograph now in progress, and Elizabeth Bowen: Theory and Thought, coedited with Jessica Gildersleeve.

Professor Peter McPhee
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Anita Brookner, the history of art, and the French Revolution

In 1953 Anita Brookner was awarded a doctorate in Art History from the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. She was then 25 years old. Her brilliance was recognised. In 1967, she became the first woman to hold the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at Cambridge University. She was promoted to Reader at the Courtauld in 1977, where she worked until her retirement in 1988, aged 60. Brookner published her first novel, A Start in Life (1981), at the age of 53. My paper is about her earlier life as a writer, as an art historian. From 1967 she published a series of significant studies - of Watteau, Greuze (her PhD topic), and in particular Jacques-Louis David in 1980 - and the history of art criticism.

Brookner’s art history is erudite in its assured knowledge and brilliant in its expression. It is the epitome of a great tradition in art history, one of the cognoscenti writing about the masters: the parallels with the Leavisite great tradition in English literature are obvious. That is, only some artists are great and only some scholars understand why. These scholars have a particular affinity with the masters and an unparalleled capacity to draw on the intellectual and creative currents that come together in their work. So Brookner shows no hesitation in a truly brilliant survey of the artistic practices and influences alive in the Paris which David came to dominate, and an equally confident capacity to ignore all other influences - economic as much as cultural and political. Her attitudes to the political passions of David, as of Greuze, are haughtily dismissive, almost disbelieving that these brilliant painters could believe such nonsense about equality and social justice. At the same time her writing is so self-assured - and often so incisive and witty - that it is easy to see the mordant novelist waiting to emerge.

Brookner’s decision to focus on her fiction came at a significant time in new approaches to the origins of the French Revolution, and to the history of art, reflected in a brilliant, almost self-mocking review she did of Thomas E. Crow’s Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris, in the TLS in 1985. The debate was also emblematic of a pivotal time in wider historical
understandings of the relationship between culture and society, of a shift from heroic studies of the great intellectuals and artists of pre-revolutionary France to a closer analysis of the emergence of ‘public opinion’ and the relationship between producers and consumers of creative work.

Peter McPhee was appointed to a Personal Chair in History at The University of Melbourne in 1993. He has published widely on the history of modern France, most recently *Living the French Revolution 1789-1799* (London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); *Robespierre: a Revolutionary Life* (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012); and *Liberty or Death: the French Revolution* (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016). He was appointed to the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at The University of Melbourne in October 2003 and was the University’s first Provost in 2007-09, with particular responsibility for the design and implementation of the University’s new curriculum structures. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (1997) and the Academy of Social Sciences (2003). He was awarded a Centenary Medal for services to education in 2003 and became a Member of the Order of Australia in 2012.

Professor Jennifer Milam
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*Revisiting the ‘Greuze Girl’: Brookner and Rococo Art*

Jean-Baptiste Greuze was one of the most radical artists of the mid-eighteenth century. Ambitious and highly lauded by art critics as a painter of the *drame bourgeois*, Greuze never received official recognition as a history painter from the Academy. His fame as an artist is largely connected to his scenes of everyday life - attempts to challenge the hierarchy of genres and to captivate Salon audiences with subject matter that average people could understand. Following his disgrace in the Academy, the ‘Greuze Girl’ - emotive heads of nubile young women - became the bread and butter of his career. This paper revisits the ‘Greuze Girl’ in honour of Brookner’s contribution to the study of Rococo art, specifically her early research on Greuze that continues to be the most informative survey of his life and work. I consider how Brookner conceptualised the ‘Greuze Girl’ within the artist’s career and in relation to aesthetic tastes of the period, and follow this discussion a look at how the ‘Greuze Girl’ is situated within current understanding of Rococo art and the *goût moderne*.

Jennifer Milam is Professor of Art History and Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of Sydney. She has published articles on art, gardens and aesthetic ideas during the Enlightenment in journals such as *The Art Bulletin, Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes, Art History, Burlington Magazine, Eighteenth-Century Studies and Eighteenth-
Century Fiction. Her books include studies of Rococo art and architecture, the French painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and a co-edited volume on women artists and patrons in eighteenth-century Europe.

Professor Eileen Williams-Wanquet  
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*Intertextuality as philosophical metacomment in Anita Brookner’s ironical novel, A Start in Life (1981)*

Anita Brookner’s autobiographical fiction, *A Start in Life* (1981), contains the main themes and characters that were to be developed in her next twenty-three novels, all more or less variations on a theme.

The ironically named Ruth Weiss, in the absence of strong parental figures, has been educated through literature. She has thus fashioned her self after the virtuous heroines of Dickens, Flaubert, Tolstoi, Grimm and Andersen, as well as those of Mills & Boon romances, in the hope of a “happy end.” This body of varied texts, all set in the tradition of the “classic realist text” and more generally of the romance quest plot, transmits similar moral rules though its poetic justice that rewards virtue with love and social integration - virtue being defined mainly by the Christian notions of rationality, selflessness, passivity and innocence.

But, the heroine’s expectations are repeatedly thwarted in superb ironical reversals, as “real life” reverses traditional poetic justice and rewards the opposite type of character with love and happiness, vice becoming virtue, as virtue is incompatible with the Darwinian life-giving qualities that lead to happiness. Ruth thus begins to reinterpret the moral lessons of literature, but too late, as she is already forty.

During her numerous visits to the National Gallery, she comes to realise that art is more in phase with “real life,” and that religious paintings, like those of the Flemish Primitives, hold many terrible lessons. She thus revises her doctoral dissertation entitled “Vice and Virtue in Balzac’s Novels” understanding that Balzac is also more in touch with real life, as his virtuous characters are rewarded only in Paradise, like the eponymous heroine of *Eugénie Grandet* (the hypertext to the novel), whom she ironically comes to resemble.

This parody of romance, presenting a heroine judged to be out of touch with the twentieth century, offers a philosophical metacomment through its challenge to the Christian rationalism of Western liberal humanism underpinning the body of texts that have instituted her, and thus illustrates the twilight of the world-view of Modernity and calls *a contrario* for a new paradigm.
Eileen Williams-Wanquet is Professor of English literature at the University of La Réunion (France). She is the author of a monograph on the novels of Anita Brookner: *Art and Life in the Novels of Anita Brookner* (Peter Lang, 2004) and the editor of collections of articles on re-writing and repetition. She has specialised in contemporary English literature, focusing mainly on re-writing, literature and politics, the challenge to History, the “turn to ethics,” the paradigm shift between “Modernity” and “Postmodernity,” “postrealism,” the emergence of a new type of type of hero different from the autonomous Cartesian humanist subject … She has published several articles on contemporary British fiction in French, American and German journals, notably on the novels of Marina Warner, Michèle Roberts, Penelope Lively, Jeannette Winterson, Lindsey Collen, Jean Rhys, and Emma Tennant.

**Associate Professor Laurence Petit**  
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*Framing Terror: Illness and Art in Anita Brookner’s ‘Look at Me’*

Anita Brookner’s 1983 novel *Look at Me* recounts the story of Frances Hinton, a short-story writer who is the reference librarian of a medical institute specializing in problems of human behavior. Frances’s task consists in archiving reproductions of artwork depicting doctors, patients, and diseases through the ages - a veritable “encyclopaedia of illness and death,” as she puts it. As Frances becomes involved with the Institute’s research doctors, the novel itself develops into a veritable narrative of illness and death, whereby the pictorial images come to be metaphors for Frances’s mental and physical disintegration. The metaphorical death that ensues creates the conditions for a therapeutic writing retreat as Frances embarks on her lifetime project - writing an autobiographical novel centered on the medical institute and its occupants, in other words writing the very novel that we have been reading throughout. Drawing from Julia Kristeva, Marianne Hirsch, and Frances Restuccia, this paper explores the relationship between the visual and verbal representations of illness that in-form the novel, as images and words, by trying to figure and contain the random, chaotic, and erratic nature of illness, come to be seen as metaphorical frames against terror, from an ontological as well as a historicized perspective.


Associate Professor Lei Zhang
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Female Aging and Its Revelations: A Slow and Yet Decided Metamorphosis in Anita Brookner’s ‘Visitors’

So far, despite the overwhelming emphasis on such issues as race, gender and class in fiction, critical attention to aging, especially gendered aging, is still highly insufficient. Interestingly, such a topic is fully examined in Anita Brookner’s 1997 novel Visitors, which charts the life of Dorothea May, a seventy-year-old widow before, during and after the entry of an unexpected young visitor into her solitary life. This article attempts to investigate the potential revolutionariness of Dorothea’s slow and yet decided metamorphosis in spite of (or because of) her aging, which is subtly shown in her silent and yet brave gesture of “stoicism” and “keeping up appearances”, her active meaning-seeking in seemingly prosaic activities, and most importantly, her struggling and ultimately self-redemptive interaction with the alien “intruder” in her own house.

Lei Zhang is an Associate Professor of English Literature in School of Foreign Languages, China University of Political Science and Law. He received his Ph.D. From School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University in 2011. His research interests include contemporary women’s fiction (especially fiction by Anita Brookner and Alice Munro), and the interdisciplinary study of classical music and literature. He has published numerous articles and several monographs in his native China, and has also published a few peer-reviewed articles in the UK and USA. His recent book review of Virginia Woolf and Music has been accepted for publication in Music & Letters, and his monograph on Anita Brookner is to be published in 2017. He is a visiting scholar to such prestigious universities as University of Cambridge (UK) and University of Auckland (New Zealand) on research funds from the Beijing Municipality and CSC (China Scholarship Council).

Eliza Gładkowska
University of Warmia and Mazury

Space and identity in the early novels of Anita Brookner
This paper aims at analyzing the role of literary space in portraying the liminal condition of the protagonists in Anita Brookner’s early novels (Start in Life, Providence, Look at Me, Hotel du Lac, Family and Friends). The locations described by Brookner conform to the following categories: family houses, rented flats, public spaces and hotels. The characterizations of these spaces are functional in the novels for they correspond to different areas of protagonists’ existence. Consequently, the depictions of family houses demonstrate the position of the character within their family, the rented flats portray their intimate life, while public spaces and hotels reveal the social position of a given person. Although each type of space refers to a particular aspect of life, it seems that every location of Brooknerian protagonist is characterized by some liminal qualities. These features signify the dubious position and inability of the character to fit in and fully transgress into the phase which could be accepted by society. Thus, as divergent the space may seem, after the precise scrutiny it transpires that each spatial category is characterized with liminal attributes such as paradox, opposition, seclusion, and vagueness. In many aspects, Brookner’s construction of literary space resembles Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, which further exposes protagonists’ struggles with their identity on many levels of their existence.

Eliza Gładkowska, a PhD student at the Department of English Philology of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland. Her main research fields include intertextuality, liminality, and the relationship between literature and visual arts in modernist and contemporary British literature. She is a member of Katherine Mansfield Society. Eliza Gładkowska has actively participated in many interdisciplinary conferences devoted to the notion of memory, liminality, and citizenship. She is the author of the following articles “Insidious Tales and Grim(m) Realities in Anita Brookner’s Novels” (2016) and “Reverse potential of liminality in Hotel du Lac by Anita Brookner” (2016).

Fleur Vidament
Université du Maine

**Heroines and rivals in the novels of Anita Brookner**

Anita Brookner is a Booker Prize-winning English author who dedicated her entire career to writing about the construction of identity in a world stuck in obsolete Victorian values. Most of her work focuses on women, and in this paper I will focus in particular on the dichotomies used by Brookner to divide her female characters into two contradictory categories: the “heroines”, who conform themselves to Brookner’s depiction of Great Britain where men hold
all the power, and the “rivals”, who are depicted as more modern and independent.

In conforming to Victorian values, Brookner presents the heroines as trapped in a world that rejects them while they remain stuck in their own femininity. They feel compelled to conform to a patriarchal society. By contrast, the “rivals” are the complete opposite of their heroine counterparts, and, by dissenting from patriarchal society, they are able to liberate themselves from its constraints. Thus, in Brookner's fictional world, these characters emphasise the traditionally oppositional stereotypes of the Victorian wife and the prostitute, who are therefore defined either by conformity or by dissent. Given this dichotomy, I would like to explore the themes of social and biological determinism in Brookner’s work, and how the author predetermines her character’s lives and attitudes in her novels from the very beginning of their lives. I would also like to focus on Brookner’s aims in depicting the modern women as divergent characters in her novels, embodying dissent as opposed to conformity to received norms.

**Fleur Vidament** is a sixth-year PhD student at the Université du Maine (Le Mans, France). She has been working as an ATER at the Université d’Angers for three years. Fleur participated in a series of international seminars as well as in a colloquium at the University of Sheffield while working there as a French lectrice. She was invited to the 55th Annual Congress of the SAES by the SAGEF (Société Anglophone sur le Genre et les Femmes) and participated in two interdisciplinary days organised as part of the GEDI project (Genre et Discrimination) at the Université du Maine. Fleur has published an article entitled “Le féminin dans les romans d’Anita Brookner” in TraverSCE No. 13.