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BLOOMSBURY BETWEEN ÉLITE
AND MASS CULTURE
A Selective Introduction

Between élite and mass culture

Of similar social background and sharing a progressive political faith and a sheer contempt for the conventions of their age, the artists, writers and intellectuals of the Bloomsbury Group represented a new way of living and working that marked a definitive break with the Victorian tradition and paved the way for modernity in English culture. The Group had fluid boundaries: its members included Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, Lytton Strachey, Desmond and Molly MacCarthy, John Maynard Keynes, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Adrian Stephen, Thoby Stephen, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, but David Garnett, Lidia Lopokova, Vita Sackville-West and Dora Carrington at least were “key associates” (Rosner 4). Furthermore, some members of the Group itself were convinced it had come to an end with the First World War, whilst others distinguished between the Old Bloomsbury before the war and the Later Bloomsbury that flourished in the 1920s and 30s.

Inspired by the “tremendous intellectual (also emotional) influence” (L. Woolf, *Old Bloomsbury* 141-45) of G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903), the Bloomsbury Group identified faith in goodness as inherent in human nature, the condemnation of utilitarianism and belief in the absolute value of human relationships and the aesthetic experience as the premises on which to base a modern ethics. Following these principles, in Cambridge some of them joined the meetings of the “Apostles” and in London all opted for voluntary exile from Kensington, the district

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of the wealthy classes, and moved to the streets and squares between London University and the British Museum.

In 1905, this "high Bohemia," according to the felicitous definition with which Wyndham Lewis expressed the widespread resentment towards the avant-garde between the two wars (48), met at 46 Gordon Square, home to the brothers Thoby and Adrian Stephen and their sisters, Virginia, future wife of Leonard Woolf, and Vanessa, who married Clive Bell in 1907. The house, whose decoration and furnishings expressed a "new domesticity" (Reed 150), hosted a modern *civilization of conversation* in which debates on philosophy, economics, politics, literature, the figurative arts and amorous relationships turned Bloomsbury into the headquarters of experimentalism.

In 1910 "human character changed" (V. Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 321): England buried King Edward VII before such a panoply of monarchs that in retrospect the event appeared to herald the "curious drama" of liberal England (Dangerfield 13) and the funeral of the unjust and imperialist Europe of the 19th century (Stansky 3-4). Social unrest, unemployment, independence movements and the clash over women's suffrage had endangered the solidity of state institutions and George V was the "respectable monarch" Englishmen had never cared for: alien to the public and private conduct of his father, the new king did not conform to the image that "the industrialized world had left of an ancient divinity" (Dangerfield 38-39). The passage of Halley's comet, sighted by Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith as he returned from France to attend the king's funeral, multiplied the presentiments of doom or the prophecies of revolution.

Amidst these political and social upheavals, Roger Fry inaugurated *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, an exhibition extraordinary for the quality and quantity of the works on display devoted to the artists active in France between 1880 and 1910. It caused a cultural earthquake: for Vanessa Bell, the exhibition was an encouragement "to feel for oneself" (V. Bell 130); for Fry, the post-impressionists had found in form an equivalent of life without representing it (*Post-Impressionism* 82); and for Clive Bell from then onwards viewers should no longer ask what a painting represented, but "what does it make us feel" (Harrison,

English Art and Modernism 64). Virginia Woolf, who was working on *The Voyage Out* (1915), her first novel, found confirmation of her diffidence towards the realistic interpretation of the English novel that she later repudiated in the famous manifestos of modernist fiction; E. M. Forster published *Howards End*.

The exhibition was a *succès de scandale*: the public “was thrown into paroxysms of rage and laughter” and the newspapers wrote of it as an off-colour joke whose objective was to poke fun at the logical meaning of *Englishness* (V. Woolf, *Roger Fry* 153-54). For Fry, “the most inveterated and exasperated enemies of the new movement” were among the educated public, who had hitherto supported his career as a *connoisseur* of the Old Masters and who at the Grafton Galleries had “felt instinctively that their special culture was one of their social assets:”

It was felt that one could only appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a certain considerable mass of erudition and given a great deal of time and attention, but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility. One could feel fairly sure that one's maid could not rival one in the former case, but might by a mere haphazard gift of Providence surpass one in the second. (“Retrospect” 192-93)

The exhibition presented the most important exponents of the modernist movement, from Manet to Picasso and Matisse, celebrating them, and particularly Paul Cézanne, as the champions of a new era of history and art history founded on the value of the specific qualities of form, on the end of the hegemony of content and on the aesthetic experience as a new ethics. Similarly, Fry, Bell and the Bloomsbury painters and writers were working to radically revise the practice of art and literature and the criteria of critical judgement, with the aim of overturning “a social rather than an aesthetic prejudice” (193) and establishing “a new world and a new reality” (Stansky 3).

In 1912, by contrast, the *Second Post-Impressionists Exhibition*, curated by Fry and introduced by Bell for the section devoted to English disciples of the modernist movement like the “Bloomsberries” Vanessa Bell, Grant and Fry, was a *succès d'estime*: “Happily,—wrote Bell at the time—there is no need to be defensive. The battle is won” (“The English Group” 9).

Indeed, between 1909 and 1914, writes Claudio Zambianchi in this volume, Roger Fry had worked "to provide a safe guidance for those artists and critics who wanted to make sense of the shocking novelties proposed by modern art" (p.103). Certain that "art and its emotional content was something that an audience could be taught to experience and appreciate" (p. 93), in "An Essay in Aesthetics" (1909) he identified the *expression of emotions* as "a critical category of prime importance when defining the aims of Post-Impressionism, in order to introduce it to a vast audience" (p. 97). This notion, concludes Zambianchi, revealed itself so "effective in justifying works of art that were not meant to be a sheer representation of the external world" as to form the key to discourse on modern art not just in the UK but also in the USA, where the organizers of the Armory Show (1913) were themselves "struggling with problems of definition of the new art, while the art critics reviewing the exhibition had to introduce modern European art to an audience that was barely aware of its existence" (p. 100).

Precisely in the name of the expressive quality of form, between 1913 and 1919 Vanessa Bell, Grant and Fry, with Wyndham Lewis, Edward Wadsworth, Frederick Etchell, Paul Nash and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska created textiles, painted screens and ceramics inspired by European contemporary art with the Omega Workshops, transforming the interiors of middle class homes with fauve shawls, post-impressionist chairs or Cubist gowns, and challenging Edwardian culture and aesthetics with a new way of understanding art and life.

In 1914, Clive Bell published *Art* and invented the formula of *significant form*. This mysterious system of relationships between lines and colours, this shared and distinctive quality of objects that trigger the aesthetic emotion explained Poussin, the stained glass windows of Chartres, Piero della Francesca, Byzantine mosaics, Cézanne, Persian vases but also the experimental stories of Virginia Woolf—*The Mark on the Wall* (1917) and *Blue and Green* (1921)—and the only four abstract paintings by Vanessa Bell. In 1922, Virginia expressed this new awareness of form in *Jacob's Room* and Vanessa, who would never again work with pure abstraction "because, having done it, there seemed nothing

else to do" (Q. Bell 119), recalled this exercise in "technical and conceptual sophistication" in portraits, still lifes, interior paintings and in her craft practice (Watney 100). Some aspects of this temporary conversion can be found in the decoration of Charleston in Sussex, now threatened by its excessive popularity but a quiet refuge for the Group during First World War, "the most disillusioning historical event in the Bloomsbury's own history" (Haule 4).

In 1918, Lytton Strachey obtained an astonishing success with *Eminent Victorians*, for David Garnett "the first explosive 'post-War' book" (Shone 180), and in 1919 Maynard Keynes became "a public man" with his prophetic *The Economic Consequences of Peace*, "a book that influences the world without being in the last a work of art" (V. Woolf, *Diary 2*: 33).

In 1920, Leonard Woolf published *Empire and Commerce in Africa* and Fry *Vision and Design*, a selection of "stimulating and provocative" essays whose success confirmed his influence in the art world (Spalding, *Roger Fry* 232-38).

Like *Art and Eminent Victorians*, Fry's book was published by Chatto and Windus. These were fairly cheap editions, very different from those of the Hogarth Press, the publishing house founded by the Woolfs in 1917 as an autonomous, undemanding publisher of Virginia's own work and later a fully-fledged press whose pre-eminence was widely acknowledged. In 1919, its catalogue comprised *Kew Gardens* by Virginia, *Prelude* by Katherine Mansfield, *The Critic in Judgement* by John Middleton Murry, *Poems* by T. S. Eliot, *Stories from the Old Testament* by Logan Pearsall Smith, and in 1923, Hope Mirrlees' *Paris: A Poem* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It later published Gorky, Chekhov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Italo Svevo, Rainer Maria Rilke and Sigmund Freud.

The key moment in the production procedures of the Hogarth Press was book design, fundamental to the success of the texts and the authors with the public and often entrusted to the artists of the Group. However, as Ilaria Andreoli writes in this volume, "in the torrent of books and essays on the Bloomsbury artists over the last thirty years or so, scant attention has been paid to their graphic work" (p. 188), although some practices are exceptional

within the contemporary world of the printed book, starting with the free use of materials and techniques, “for the torment of bibliographers and the delight of bibliophiles” (p. 181). These practices, which Andreoli reconstructs in their complex (and not always successful) development, between “amateurism and experimentalism,” demonstrate on the one hand the enduring influence of the Omega Workshops, with which the Hogarth Press shared “a closer relationship of art and industry,” and on the other a new “open, pragmatic, even humoristic approach to book production” (p. 188).

In 1928, the Hogarth Press, which had already published *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Common Reader* and *To The Lighthouse*, was popular with the public and with the market, in the UK and the USA. In the 1940s, Leonard sold the Hogarth Press to Chatto and Windus, with the proviso that it was to keep its name and himself retain the privilege of defining its catalogue, starting with the posthumous editions of Virginia’s works such as *The Death of the Moth* (1942), *A Haunted House* (1944), *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947), and *The Captain’s Deathbed and Other Essays* (1950).

In the late 1920s, “the name of Bloomsbury” was famous in Berlin, Paris and New York (Mortimer 310) and in London it was identified with an avant-garde similar to that advanced sector of the intellectual *haute bourgeoisie* that in 19th-century France had supported the values of the new art (Harrison, “Englishness and Modernism Revisited”). This social and cultural aristocracy, for which England had coined the term *highbrow*, was opposed by a wider public consisting of the new middle class that, thanks to economic growth and the consolidation of educational reforms, now made its appearance on the market for art and literature. This new majority, the *middlebrow*, did not share the values of Modernism and the *mid-taste* in the figurative arts was supported by the Royal Academy, just as the *mid-taste* in literature was catered for by the *book selections* of organizations for the promotion of reading such as the Book Society, established in 1927 and led by the novelist Hugh Walpole. But, as Nicola Wilson shows in this volume, Bloomsbury “sought to work beyond such cultural and geographical confines” (p. 154). Though the docu-

mented public record contains little evidence of the relationship between the Hogarth Press and the Book Society, from its early days the Hogarth Press worked with large commercial publishers to increase the scale and reach of its production. It also published many works that became “bestsellers,” often thanks to the patronage—and the large readership—of the Book Society: letters in the Hogarth Press archive clearly show that, “despite contemporary misgivings about the role and possible effects of the new book club, Leonard and Virginia Woolf were, in common with other publishers of the time, keen to work with the Book Society selection committee,” (p. 162) and that there were tangible connections between Bloomsbury and Belgravia, where the Society was located, “at the heart of royalist London and its powerful symbols of ceremony and Empire” (p. 157).

Thus, a genuine culture war was being fought in England between the two world wars, fed by novelties in communication technology and the mechanization of publishing. Publishing, newspapers and radio had created a new audience and new spaces for the negotiation of values. As converts to wireless, Forster, Keynes, the Woolfs, Clive Bell and Roger Fry were committed to making “their deeply held aesthetic and ethical beliefs” suitable for the times and means of the new medium of mass communication, whose potential for shaping the public sphere was extraordinary (Avery 36).

In the fall of 1929, for example, Roger Fry gave a series of talks for BBC Radio entitled *The Meaning of Pictures*: aired weekly, these radio broadcasts guided listeners through a comprehensive understanding of some significant works of art, selected as “case studies” and used to test the theoretical principles of Fry’s formalist doctrine. As Salvatore Bizzarro writes in this volume, “Fry’s effort was very remarkable” (p. 213), especially considering that, in the late 1920s, he tried to revise the very foundations of his criticism, starting from the relationship between form and content, so important at the time of the battle over Post-Impressionism. Switching on their radio, writes Bizzarro, the public learned “the art of being a spectator,” (p. 226) thanks to the mediation of the critic, whose notions, if they did not succeed in driving listeners to “take the next omnibus to the

National Gallery, there to gratify the desire for seeing that has been so miraculously stimulated" (V. Woolf, *Roger Fry* 228), certainly elicited "the sense of communion [...] that is primarily a communication between human beings" (p. 226), in the truest spirit of Bloomsbury.

In the meantime, articles, reviews of and by members of the Group, literary portraits and photographs appeared in major newspapers and magazines. For *Vogue*, Clive Bell explained modern art in "easily consumable bites" (Garrity 42) with such success that he was included in the magazine's "Hall of Fame" as "one of the pre-eminent art and cultural critics in Europe" (Hall 48). Virginia Woolf was photographed in an ill-fitting Victorian dress with an irresistible "backward-looking" effect that "a twenty-first-century woman novelist might have turned [...] to her advantage, using it to preview a forthcoming novel" (Spalding, *Virginia Woolf* 125). In 1924, a picture of the Woolfs' living room at 52 Tavistock Square, decorated by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, was published as a "period room" of the present day (14). The decoration, like the house, was destroyed by the bombings of 1940: this timely photograph now preserves its only surviving fragment as "a fragile reminder of a different age, a different way of life" (15).

The consequences of this public exposure were, on the one hand, the renewal of political and cultural communication and on the other the identification of the Group with a *lifestyle*, perceived by the British public either as a stronghold of culture and civilization against barbarism or as the despicable epitome of modernist intellectual elitism. "Bloomsbury" became a moniker for a group of cultural figures who spent a lot of time at the BBC (Whitehead 121), in the editorial offices of glossy magazines or the studios of fashionable photographers. For Mary Butts, a modernist writer and early biographer of the Group, "civilization [was] their business" (44).

A preposterous history

In private, however, for Bloomsbury there was no room "for comfort or support, certainly not [for] applause:" from 1920, its

members cultivated friendship, sharing and the irony of serious entertainment in the Memoir Club. The intimate nature of these meetings is illustrated by Vanessa Bell's famous painting of 1943:

[...] seated in a circle are Desmond MacCarthy, Molly MacCarthy, Quentin Bell, Forster, David Garnett, Vanessa Bell in a hat, Duncan Grant, Leonard Woolf, Maynard Keynes, Lydia Keynes. And on the wall are Bloomsbury portraits of the three deceased members, Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry. Desmond MacCarthy, appropriately, is reading a paper. (Haule 6)

Whilst for the public Bloomsbury had just been born, the Group was already looking to its past and telling its history through private readings of autobiographical texts whose influence on the public life and work of each of its members has been studied only in part (Rosenbaum, *The Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club* 80-153). At the Memoir Club, every conversation began with the phrase "Before the War," which for Bloomsbury had "an added poignancy, a wistful regret, while never running over into nostalgia, served as some kind of touchstone by which to measure the quality of life afterwards" (Shone 203).

In 1928, Molly MacCarthy announced the last meeting of the Club, to hear Virginia Woolf—who had just finished *Orlando* and started *A Room of One's Own*—reading a text on the Group's beginnings. "What was supposed to signal the end of the Club, however, seems to have resuscitated it" (Haule 8): the meetings continued more or less regularly until the mid-1960s, though for the public the meaning of Bloomsbury was either being lost or had in fact always been ambiguous.

In *The Georgian Literary Scene* (1935), for example, Franck Swinnerton described the Group as a gathering of "ill-mannered dilettanti:" excessively influential in political and cultural life thanks to their class privilege, the "Bloomsberries" were actually only interested in establishing a "dictatorship of brains," whose sworn enemy was Democracy (163-66). These attacks were "severe swingeings" that wounded the Group "as a robin affects a rinocheros—except in the depths of the nights" (V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 240): was it not true that Leonard was "a very

active Socialist," Virginia wrote in support of women's rights, Forster of the liberal cause and Keynes was "a leading figure" in the Labour government (van O'Connor 51)? In 1937, however, these accusations must have been distressing: not only had they all supported the event at the Royal Albert Hall for the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, but on 20 July 1937, Julian, Vanessa and Clive Bell's son, had died driving an ambulance for Spanish Medical Aid. In 1938, Virginia helped to fund the exhibition of Picasso's *Guernica*, with over sixty preparatory paintings, sketches and studies for the composition at the New Burlington Galleries (Spalding, *Virginia Woolf* 155).

At the same time, a new generation of art critics like R. H. Wilensky, Adrian Stokes and Herbert Read favoured a new season of the artistic avant-garde that, critical of the interests of Bloomsbury, had declared the outdatedness of the "formalised naturalism" of Post-Impressionism to the advantage of Surrealism and abstract art. In 1934, Read published *Art and Industry*, a volume designed by Herbert Bayer and dedicated to Walter Gropius and Laslo Moholy-Nagy, and sponsored the first exhibition by Unit One, which achieved a *succès de scandale* second only to the exhibitions at the Grafton Galleries: "art for art's sake, Pure Form, went by the board totally," wrote Anthony Blunt retrospectively, and this young generation of artists and intellectuals was determined to replace Fry and Bell with Marx and Engels (164).

So, in 1934, Clive Bell published a new book, *Enjoying Pictures*, to offer a (disinterested) approach to the experience of art thanks to a new critical method, descriptive rather than normative, hierarchical and non-exclusive: in the midst of the "battle of brows," writes Antonella Trotta in this volume, Bell was ready to say that "nevertheless, even from an impure interest in art something is gained" (p. 207), and aimed to show it to many an open-minded gentleman who look at paintings as they read a book. Recalling the pleasure and dismay with which he had followed Fry at a marching pace around museums and galleries, Bell devoted to this ordinary visitor a guided tour, offering an accessible definition of "How to look at pictures:" he was now ready to assert that there is no reason why the average member

of the public should not enjoy art as “just good things amongst the other good things of life” (p. 207), partly in response to their own preferences, idiosyncrasies, predilections, prejudices, literary and philosophical inclinations. For Bell and the sensitive and gifted minority, “art does work miracles”, but for others it is fair to assume that it gives a “fillip” to common experience (p. 209).

“Bloomsbury was the most constructive and creative influence on English taste between the Wars,” wrote Stephen Spender at the time; he owed his career in part to the Hogarth Press and his visits to 52 Tavistock Square, but for his generation, “unable to withdraw into exquisite tale-telling and beautiful scenery” and “terribly involved in events and oppressed by them,” (402) the Group seemed like the image of “a luminous grotto made of crystal leaves colored agate or jade” (395), simultaneously fascinating and repellent, and above all posthumous.

In 1947, in Cambridge, the Finnish writer Irma Rantavaara was so disconcerted by the contradictory judgements that she heard in lectures on the Group by her professors that she attempted to describe them in “Bloomsbury atmosphere,” the most interesting chapter of *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury* (1953), a historiographical effort in the context of the “New Critical era.” By this time Bloomsbury “belonged to myth” and the myth presented:

[...] the ironic Mr. Strachey tittering over some stupidity, the ‘illuminated’ Mr. Fry turning his X-ray eyes on a French painting, the stiff and elegant Mrs. Woolf writing and rewriting her luminous sentences, and all of them, with their innumerable friends laughing and talking, ever so intelligently. This is not quite the way it was either, but it offers a pleasant image for the historian to analyze. (van O’Connor 51)

So, in *Punch*, R. G. G. Prince concluded that, if the Group had wished to overturn the institutions of the family, politics, culture to the cry—shrill as the voice of Lytton Strachey—of “preposterous,” “absurd,” “ridiculous” (van O’Connor 50), the only revolution it had ever achieved was that “the arts may be killed by kindness.” In the 1950s, for young writers and artists Bloomsbury was “a great wall of orthodoxy blocking [their] way,” albeit “a more civilized orthodoxy than the one it supplanted,” as evidenced by the consolidated success of the programmes broad-

cast on the third channel of the BBC, the quality and quantity of books borrowed in public libraries and the number of visitors to London museums (51), in whose rooms the portraits of members of the Group appeared to the eyes of visitors as icons of “un altro tempo” (Vergine).

In 1949, Leonard Woolf commissioned Raymond Mortimer—“second generation Bloomsbury” writer, essayist, already author of the monograph *Duncan Grant* (1946) and of essays on Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey—to write a biography of the Group for the American audience. The book was never published, but two decades earlier Mortimer himself had already composed a well-received account of the Group, thanks in part to the use of a *preposterous* literary fiction: projecting the Group into the correct distance of the near future of the 1960s he had described its character (and predicted its success) quoting from an imaginary “seventh volume of Sir Raymond Mortimer’s trustworthy if academic *Studies in Twentieth Century Culture* (Hogarth Press, 1960)” (310).

In fact, by the end of the sixties Bloomsbury had become a cultural icon, since its values, subject to a complex process of rediscovery and reinvention that mirrored the changing values of posterity, were seen as foreshadowing the experiences of the counterculture. “[It is] not preposterous that the past should be altered by the present, as much as the present is directed by the past,” wrote T. S. Eliot (15), and today the Group is a major presence in the cultural industry.

The gardens and squares where they lived are home to more libraries, museums, and educational establishments than any other part of London, young people flock to the area’s inspiring cultural enterprises and tourists walk through streets seeking the blue plaques that commemorate Bloomsbury celebrities. In this book, Francesca Manes Rossi, Alessandra Allini and Riccardo Macchioni consider the potential for adopting a territorial report in the context of this intellectual district. Within this perspective, a territorial report may play a dual role, as a tool for accountability and legitimacy demonstrating to all stakeholders what has been achieved and as a basis for planning new strategies and activities involving the whole community.

“Democratic Highbrow”

An exclusive and elitist coterie or an intellectual avant-garde inspired by an authentically democratic vocation? The history of the reception of Bloomsbury runs within the perimeter traced by these questions and the opposition between these divergent points of view defines the terms of the critical debate over the Group, which became particularly heated from the 1960s onwards and to which Flora de Giovanni devotes the opening chapter of this volume. Tellingly entitled “Citizens of the Bloomsbury Nation”, the essay traces the fortunes of the Group, culminating in the definitive consecration of its members (above all Virginia Woolf) as true cultural icons of our time. Above all, it aims to shed light on a series of crucial questions in Bloomsbury criticism, without attempting a definitive answer but with the objective of offering the reader the tools to navigate this extremely rich and complex web of judgements and proposed interpretations. Though in the statements of some of its members the assertion of the primacy of the individual and his autonomy led to the rejection of the existence of a group proper, capable of identifying itself in a “common theory, system, or principles” (L. Woolf), yet, de Giovanni notes, “paradoxically, it is precisely the recognition of the sovereignty of the individual which binds Bloomsbury together” (p. 30). The reflection on the nature and identity of Bloomsbury takes on particular importance in the light of the controversial and complex relationship linking this experience with the world of mass culture. Unavoidable, in this context, is the reference to the positions expressed by Melba Cuddy-Keane (2003), to whom we owe the felicitous oxymoron “democratic highbrow”—not coincidentally borrowed explicitly for the title of this volume. The expression, observes de Giovanni, reinterprets “the connection between highbrow intellectual values and mass audience” (p. 32) from a new perspective and in doing so calls into question an established critical paradigm postulating the radical incompatibility of modernist experimentation with the conventions and forms of expression of mass culture. Cuddy-Keane’s study belongs to a recent critical tradition, carefully reconstructed by de Giovanni, which in the past twenty years has favoured research into the relations between

Bloomsbury, the cultural industry and the new media. The final pages of the essay are thus devoted to the presence of Bloomsbury in the cultural industry, and the author stresses that members of the group made a crucial contribution to their own canonization as "celebrities." They exploited the new means of communication not only as a way to disseminate their texts and ideas, but also as an instrument of self-promotion and to convey their own identity as artists and intellectuals whose eccentric and unconventional lifestyle "was advertised as a marketable commodity" (p. 33).

It is no coincidence, then, that in the interwar period their reputation was also based on their participation in BBC radio broadcasts and their articles in the pages of *Vogue*. The essays by Rossana Bonadei and Gerardo Salvati are devoted to the significance of Bloomsbury's presence on the radio.

In her "In Wireless Conversation. Bloomsbury and the BBC" Bonadei provides a close (and insightful) reading of Virginia Woolf's "Craftmanship," the talk aired on 29 April 1937 as part of the series *Words Fail Me*. As Bonadei stresses, Woolf's appearance on the BBC, though controversial and at times contentious, was a deliberate way of measuring up to the challenge of language and the whole discourse on the art of writing by other means, on new grounds and with a broader and "unknown" audience in mind. It was a challenge aimed at mass readers, at the modern interpreter caught up in the hasty language of the media; an interpreter who, just like the "radio talker," was coming to terms with the elusive nature of words and the precarious, relational and contextual meanings of each speech act. Thus Woolf conceived her collaboration with radio as an opportunity to give new voice and strength to the search for that "Common Ground" made up of language, ideas and imaginaries that famously embodied her poetic/political programme. Dizzily metatextual and constructed as a tribute to "nomadic" words and the many challenges that language poses to writing and reading, "Craftsmanship," as Bonadei argues, shows language in a double act, between performance and essay construction, and examines the new landscapes of mass culture.

Woolf's problematic "conversion" to wireless is further explored by Gerardo Salvati in his "Virginia Woolf, the Dandy and

the BBC.” Starting from the assumption that Woolf’s position on radio “was essentially political to the extent that she was extremely aware of it as a new cultural medium for shaping public opinion” (p. 230), Salvati develops his argument by focusing on “Beau Brummell,” the solo talk broadcast on 20th November 1929 as the second of a three-part series entitled “Miniature Biographies.” Woolf’s humorous and ironic portrait of the famous dandy, he claims, can be interpreted as an attempt on her part to question the widespread critical opinion that identified Bloomsbury with a cultural élite completely detached from the world around them and to trace “a clear perimeter of her artistic vision. A vision that does not include the figure of the dandy, but, on the contrary, includes the figure of the engaged artist” (p. 235). Discussing “Beau Brummel” in the wider context of her literary criticism, Salvati shows that Woolf made use of the radio as a “complementary place where she could explain and discuss her vision of art and literature” (p. 230), fully aware of the democratic potential of the new medium and of the opportunity it offered to share her modernist aesthetic credo with a new and wider audience.

Traditionally conceived as a repository of humanist-liberal values, Forster’s *oeuvre* testifies to his life-long commitment as one the most authoritative intellectuals of interwar and post-war England and bears clear evidence of Bloomsbury’s social and political concerns. Class conflict, democracy and the role of intellectuals in Edwardian England are the issues tackled in his masterpiece *Howards End*, the object of Maria Teresa Chialant’s careful reading in “Poets, Empire-builders and Proles: Class Conflict and England’s Destiny in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*.” Interpreting the novel as an analysis of class relations at the turn of the 20th century, Chialant sheds light on the text’s ambivalences. Based on a set of binary oppositions that coincide with the contrasting worldviews of the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, the narrative seems to attempt to overcome these dichotomies. However, Chialant argues, the values of social harmony and inner equilibrium epitomized in the famous epigraph “only connect...” are somewhat contradicted by the manner in which the events play out. Considered one of the novel’s weakest points in terms of

inner coherence and textual consistency, this contradiction is re-evaluated here as evidence of the text's dialogic and polyphonic aspect. This is a text that, as Chialant claims, by containing the flaws and weaknesses that can be perceived in Forster's own ideological position, "gains rather than loses" (p. 89). A similar critical stance is adopted by Marina Lops in her "'England belonged to them.' Edward Carpenter and Forster's 'Utopia' of Masculine Love in *Maurice*." Starting from Forster's own account of the genesis of the novel after a visit to Edward Carpenter, the essay explores the complex and ambivalent relationship that connects Forster's tale of homosexual self-discovery to Carpenter's thought and life and investigates the way in which Forster's narrative draws on Carpenter's evolutionary progressivism and reworks his utopian vision. Subverting traditional class and gender distinctions, the cross-class homosexual relationship between Maurice and Alec seems to create room for a new and different model of social and sexual relations. However, as Marina Lops argues, the much-discussed "happy" ending of the novel, with its generic turn from realism to pastoral fantasy, transforms Carpenter's nineteenth-century optimistic stance into a more sombre view, which problematically questions "the very possibility for the homosexual subject of a concrete and successful integration into the collective social body" (p. 127) and closes the narrative on a dull note of scepticism and disenchantment.

Experimentation and innovation in fields as multifarious as literature, economics, art, psychoanalysis represent only part of Bloomsbury's legacy. With their bohemian lifestyles, their sheer contempt for the conventions of their age, their espousal of homosexuality and heterosexual sex outside marriage, the artists, writers and intellectuals of the Group marked a definitive break with the Victorian ethos and embodied the new spirit of modernity in their everyday experience as much as in their outstanding intellectual achievements. The blurring of the boundary between "private" and "public" is thus a key to understanding Bloomsbury's successful afterlife and helps to explain much of its enduring appeal. Paradigmatic in this respect is the case of Lytton Strachey, to whom Todd Avery devotes the essay "A Mandarin for the Masses. Lytton Strachey's Jesus Complex." Avery's reading of Strachey's

unpublished letters to his lover Roger Senhouse introduces a new critical perspective from which to investigate the close connection between Strachey's queer sexuality and his broader ethical and spiritual concerns, and, in particular, his hitherto unexplored interest in the figure of Jesus. As Avery argues, this interest, expressed in an extremely unusual and transgressive form towards the end of his life, gave Strachey an opportunity to assert in an unprecedented and provocative way the value of freedom of choice and action in private and sexual matters as a pre-requisite of civilization and to imagine, along with his Bloomsbury friends, "the simultaneously personal and political, biological and cultural arena of sexuality, [...] as a workshop of democratic civilization" (p. 116).

If Bloomsbury helped to pave the way for modernity and revitalized British culture, enabling it to eschew its traditional insularity, it was in part thanks to its crucial role in popularizing psychoanalysis in the English-speaking world. The publication of Freud's works by the Hogarth Press, as Benedetta Guerrini degl'Innocenti reminds us in her "'A house full with unrelated passions.' Bloomsbury and Psychoanalysis," was a major cultural event and to Bloomsbury's influence, she claims, we should attribute the characterization of psychoanalysis as a literary rather than a scientific discourse that became a leitmotif in England. With reference to both Virginia Woolf's fiction and autobiographical writing, Guerrini discusses the writer's ambivalent attitude to psychoanalytic thought and concludes her essay with a touching evocation of Woolf's first and only meeting with Sigmund Freud, in January 1939.

Finally, in Francesca Orestano's "Virginia Woolf and the Art of Cooking" we are introduced to the private realm of the writer's domestic life. In line with the recent critical focus on Bloomsbury's material culture and drawing on the results of this research, Orestano sets out to analyse the many ways in which the art of writing and the art of cooking mingled in the course of Virginia Woolf's life and work. A meaningful token of cultural identity, food is the key to understanding the complex network of lowbrow-highbrow relationships that existed within her household and, in particular, within the space of her kitchen. Generally precluded to the Victorian mistress, the kitchen acquires a

new and different connotation when Virginia no longer limits herself to presiding over it, as her mother had done, but actively participates in the preparation of food, for example by teaching her cook, Louie Mayer/Louisa Annie Everest, how to bake cottage loaf. The proximity of mistress and cook, and their shared intimacy, "no longer channeled in the conventional master/servant, order/obedience pattern," (p. 45) as Orestano observes, acts as an implicit questioning of consolidated social hierarchies and habits and reflects that change in "human character" that Woolf celebrated in her "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924). A change that Bloomsbury helped to enact and that certainly represents an essential part of its invaluable legacy.

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