Rossana Bonadei

In Wireless Conversation
Bloomsbury and the Radio Days

The Bloomsbury Group at the BBC. The élites speak to the masses

> The mass is a matrix from which currently all customary responses to work of art are springing newborn.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

The Bloomsbury Group "landed" at the BBC around the mid-1920s, when Desmond MacCarthy, a journalist and critical essayist who was to become the mediatic soul of the Group, was appointed resident literary critic for the BBC. Since then, with ups and downs but with an undoubtedly "well thought-out" presence, many prominent members of the Group (including John Maynard Keynes, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Harold Nicolson, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, Edward Morgan Forster) established a meaningful collaboration, which in the decade to come would reach the peak of its ascendancy.

As Avery Todd remarks in his comprehensive study on Radio Modernism, by the 1930s, as the "joingoist" conservatism that had marked the birth of the BBC under the leadership of John Reith began to wane, the action of the Group (and more generally of the intelligentsia of the time) started to pave the way to a major cultural "offensive," the implementation of a new policy of knowledge primarily addressed to art and the popularization of science.

Interesting keys to understanding a debate tinged with political and ethical overtones are the editorials and articles

published in *The Listener*, where a good number of the BBC "talks" were also made available to the readers. As stated in the 30 October 1929 *Listener* editorial, the beginning of a new era was taking shape, "the process of converting intellectuals to wireless," and their "gradual reconciliation with the multitude" (Avery 35). It was a welcome turning point in a society that perceived intellectuals as "cautious and conservative […] very much afraid of having [their] mental craftsmanship degraded or superseded by mental mass-production" (45). In spite of ambivalences and contradictions, the radio also became the opportunity for some interpreters of the modernist avant-garde. In radio talks and conversations meant for the mass public they were finally able to give voice to the tremendous and yet unacknowledged issues of culture and aesthetics raised in the philosophical and scientific debate among the intellectual élites (from Wittgenstein to Frege to Freud). The global revolution that Virginia Woolf herself sensed "in the air" could now literally travel "across the air" thanks to the radio waves: thanks to Harold Nicolson's serial broadcasts on "modern novelists," or Gerald Heard's narratives on scientific discoveries, and many other distinctive voices that allowed the radio to introduce into people's homes unprecedented conversations ranging from literary experiments to the existence of the atoms (an image apparently devoid of common sense that would soon become familiar to the mass public).[1]

But more than this, it is arguably at this stage that, thanks especially to the contribution of the Bloomsbury Group, a stylistic revolution in radio talks occurred. For if it is true that, in the words of its founding fathers, the radio was to be the microcosm of the nation, the official organ of the better part of a national community, in actual fact, as Avery again observes: "the Bloomsbury challenged the BBC's cultural politics from behind BBC microphones, testimony to how in a very short period of time, the institutionalized technology of radio began to outgrow its ideological origin" (36).

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[1] For a broad view of the cultural debate, as reported in recent related academic literature see Feldman, Mead and Tonning; Chignell; and Cohen, Coyle and Lewty.

Paradoxical as it may sound, the BBC's involvement with this so-called British élite—repeatedly branded as snobbish and radical by English intellectuals—seemed ultimately inscribed in the pedigree of the Group. The encounter between Bloomsbury and the radio was in a sense unavoidable, albeit at times controversial. No matter how elitist, the Group's practices were consistent with a hazardous mediatic turn: all they did—the active promotion of social events, the marketing strategies they adopted for self-promotion, even their scandalous sexual coming-outs—became exposed to mass reception. For most of them, using the radio in order to change the cultural climate meant:

> […] to preserve their deeply held ethical and aesthetic beliefs […] while adjusting them to fit the demands of an increasingly technologized mass culture—and more specifically, the demands of a new and, in terms of its capacity to enable connection with vast numbers of people, an unprecedented medium of mass communications. (35)

On the other hand, such exposure also entailed the double-edged responsibility of large-scale manipulation. And while such political animals as Keynes, MacCarthy and Clive Bell heartily embraced the prospect, Virginia Woolf kept wavering between celebration of the radio's egalitarian potential and fear of its easily perverted use.[2] As Gillian Beer remarks in her report on the impact of the radio on modernist intellectuals:

> The idea of the 'general audience' could produce a new form of bland authoritarianism, in which the speaker and programme maker pre-select what the listener is supposed to be able to grasp. But in the first years of the BBC it also produced an energetic attempt to address the listener as an equal in intelligence, if not in technical information. ("Wireless" 200)

[2] Woolf's ambivalent opinion is evident in *Three Guineas* (1938)—the composition of which she interrupted to write a script for her last BBC talk—where she fiercely criticized late Victorian values and advocated a social ideal grounded in the ethical demand to resist, as words resist, to the "ceremony and conventions" of a society "infected with infantile fixations." The wireless is here presented both as a "public psychometre" for these fixations and as a useful tool for spreading new ideas.

The Group's allegiance to the BBC signalled a concerted endeavour to redress rigid cultural determinations within a British milieu still entrenched behind class differences:

> Bloomsbury involvement in radio is also an important example of how some modernist intellectuals bridged the cultural Great Divide—the categorical distinction between high and mass culture of the early twentieth century […] while embracing the medium itself in order to shape the mass culture of which radio was quickly becoming an integral part (Avery 36).

But talking about matrices and cultural backgrounds, the allegiance may be traced back to the "conversational facility" of the Cambridge Heretics, which relied on a set of principles, practices, and shared standards of selection notably inspired by Moore's philosophy. In a brief memoir on the Bloomsbury days, J. M. Keynes recalls those "principles" as the result of a work "method,"[3] which required keen introspection (hence Moore's doctrine of the "states of mind") and recovered the value of "human intercourses" (then understood as a "loving" attention to the other—in terms of friendship, delicacy, social obligation). Such method demanded a "stringent dialectic education," a focus on language and its expressive potentials at large which was ultimately grounded in conversation: a most "agonistic" style of conversation, based on constant and rigorous "conceptual clarification," and following a clear line of argument where words are weighed, scrutinized, challenged on the basis of contexts as well as of Dictionary:

> It was a method of discovery by the instrument of impeccable grammar and an unambiguous dictionary. "What *exactly* do you mean?" was the phrase more frequently on our lips. If it appeared under cross-examination that you did not mean exactly anything, you lay under a strong suspicion of meaning nothing whatever. (Keynes 440)

It comes then as no surprise that MacCarthy, Keynes, Nicolson, Leonard Woolf, all deeply involved in journalism and politically

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[3] For an insight on the crucial contribution of Keynes to Bloomsbury rhetorics see Bonadei "John Maynard Keynes."

committed from the start, should also be among the first and most determined intellectuals to "act" in and with the BBC. They believed in the importance of a communication that could, in Keynes' words "bring to everybody in the country the possibility of learning […] new games which only the few used to play, and […] forming new tastes and thus enlarging the desires of the listener and his capacity for enjoyment" (qtd. in Avery 57).

In this perspective, by shaping "a new idea of the public, one far more intermixed, promiscuous and democratic than the book could cater for" (Beer, "Wireless" 200), the radio could contribute to create a new forum of exchange about what was worth knowing and useful to discuss for a community of readers that had become "General Audience." As Beer again here suggests, the radio promoted a new sense of belonging—a sense Woolf herself was yearning for at a time when she felt bound to fragmentation and "dispersion:"[4] "What held them together was the English language and a newly forming and changing British identity" (200), processed by a "radiocracy" that made available a range of ideas to people who could use them even without the traditional badge of higher education.

It is in fact an intimate "we" rather than a merely anonymous audience that the Bloomsbury broadcasters seem to have in mind when they "talked" on the radio. With the wireless, a fascinating new horizon was then opening to anyone who wanted "to do things with words." It was an experience that scientists themselves (many of whom published in *The Listener*) did much to present as a modern miracle: the "wireless" apparatus evoked a "mysterious" reality, solid though invisible—and even poetic, when it comes to sound cascades through the wave systems of the universe "like an ocean roller a mile from crest to crest, through the ripples of heat, and the minor ripples of light, which are one fifty-thousandth of an inch apart" (Braggs qtd. in Beer, "Wireless" 201).

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[4] "*Dispersed are we* the music wailed, *dispersed are we* […] then the music petered out on the last word *we*," so Isa in *Between the Acts* seeks a cure in books and comforts herself with rhyme, sharing her agony with the audience assembled for the pageant (60).

"Words fail me." Virginia Woolf at the BBC

> A forger can imitate a painter's brush stroke or a writer's style and make the difference between them imperceptible, but he will never be able to make his own their obsession, what forces them to be always going back toward that silence where the first imprints are sealed.
>
> Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*

Before and besides the fantastic array of scientific imagery popularised in the media, Virginia Woolf had distinguished herself as a product of the Bloomsbury intellectual "education." When we search for generative models, habits of feeling, inclinations, and discursive practices, we discover that the involvement with the Cambridge Heretics and the Midnight Society certainly played a formative role for those, like Virginia Woolf, who practiced the art of witty conversation and discussion, to learn ways of suiting different audiences. The tradition that inspired the debates of the Midnight Society (with Wittgenstein and Russell as members) was mainly philosophical, but increasing attention was given in fact to issues of aesthetics, art and contemporary literature: it was a true "epistemological turn" aimed at bringing awareness and knowledge within a multidisciplinary approach, equally based on a new centrality of language and a new conception of the public space.[5] But it is certainly in the intellectual and imaginary landscape of the "conversation" of the Cambridge Heretics (which counted her father Leslie Stephen among its founders), that Woolf first encountered the complexity of the idea underlying the "discursive" dimension of reality, where images and words shape the human mind, seen in an endless "intercourse" with other minds. And according to Leslie Stephen, it is to such intercourse, and to it alone, that the process of knowledge must be traced:

> Time and space are the warp and woof upon which is embroidered all the shifting scenery of consciousness. By means of it signals

[5] On these topics and on the relevance of Woolf's involvement in the "public space" see Cuddy-Keane.

> are thrown to us from other centres: our isolation ceases and our very thoughts are built up by the action and reaction of other minds. (*An Agnostic's Apology* 94)

Exchanges, dialogues and narrations, either heard, remembered, or imagined: this is the stuff we are made of and the basis of much of Woolf's writing. Her diaries and letters bear a marked, structurally dialogic imprint; her novels are literally transcripts of "ongoing" conversations caught "in the air," on a train, in a garden, in the city streets, or reverberating "within," in the "serpentine caves" of one's mind. "Conversation" is the title of one of Vanessa Bell's pictures, which convinces Virginia of the innovative reach of her sister's art. Through conversation, a conversation that bears in mind paternal and Moorian values, one can hope to bridge the gap between oneself and the other, between oneself and the world, testing the capacity of the human spirit to exceed boundaries.

The same dialogic and clarifying obsession that mobilized the Bloomsbury intellectuals animates Woolf's writings: a challenge, but also a painstaking task, in her case a veritable "battle" with words and meanings, to search, to choose, to set apart (Bonadei, *Virginia Woolf* 19-22). Writing was thus to her the way to evoke the "intercourses" that she perceived as the very core of reality: a "reality" then described as at one time flickering and solid, the subtle web of intersubjective and interverbal transactions that surrounds our life from its start as in a "transparent envelope" (as she argued in her first, seminal essay "Modern Fiction"). It could be a poetic and narrative word, invoked with dedication and tenacity, launched in defiance of time to redeem *the other* from oblivion (as in her initial "Life of the Obscures" written in memory of those gone by, of whom we would otherwise have no trace). Or it could be a critical word, conceived to make those endlessly "demanding" newspaper and magazine readers come to terms with the unknown. In either case, her writing always came through as a "necessary" act, marked with a distinctive epistemic flavour, never free in its task to affect the world, which she imagined as a curtain of air or water within which we are to make inroads with a sign, a trace, in order to leave behind a legacy, a memory.

As especially attested in the pages of her *Diary,* often conceived as a guide to her daily "agonic" endeavour, an exhausting tension between "articulation" and "risk" inspired her writings, where she often lingered on the admission of the artist's fragile condition (Spivak 41-42), hers being in fact a task never quite finished and never completely rewarding in itself. Sharing Lecia Rosenthal's view, one may say that the task involved, however, was somehow also "salvific" and tinged with "reassurance," albeit counterbalanced by the constant, humble, recognition of a "counter-archival repository" (Rosenthal 53), made of "unsaid" and "unknown." In "The Fascination of the Pool," sight and word come to terms with the opacity of water and some unfathomable depths, "certainly one could not see to the bottom of it" (Woolf 226). As though aware of a life all clustered inside a dense "semiosphere"—which seems to foreshadow some features of Jurij Lotman's well-known semiotic model—the narrator is wholly engrossed in the pursuit of utterable words but seems no less fascinated by "what remains" (Rosenthal 52), and humbly accepts the evidence of the "unspeakable" side of reality:

> All kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud *but in a liquid state,* floating one on top of another, almost disembodied […] the charm of the pool was that thoughts had been left there by people who had gone away and without their bodies thoughts wandered in and out freely, friendly and communicative, in the common pool. (Woolf 226, our emphasis)

The reference to language in its fascinating liquidity, to meanings "allowed to remain sunken, suggested, not stated, lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of a river," is to be found also in "Craftsmanship," a text where Woolf once again confronts the plasticity—this time "air-based" rather than "water-based"—of words.[6] Depth and instability of reference, capacity to survive in new circumstances and interplay of allu-

[6] "Craftsmanship" (1937) was included in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, edited by Leonard Woolf soon after Virginia Woolf's death. All quotations from the text are from the First Harvest edition, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974. For the above quotation see page 202.

sions: this is what makes words especially fascinating and challenging. In order to find them, to make them suitable to a new context, to ply them into a speech, effort and labour—a humble labour—are needed. Words are both individual and communal, as they include others than the self. They must be extricated from the tangle that keeps them together. The writer's humble job is to challenge their liquidity, to search into the meanders and intricacies of their meanings: one must patiently fish for shadowy images and echoes, in order to pull them back to the surface, materials and debris need to be redefined and reorganized, to be woven into new thought, and into narrative. Stored with meanings and memories as they are, words often "failed" her, as she by and by admits and by the way confirms facing the adventure of the radio talks.

"Craftsmanship," formerly conceived as a script for a radio broadcast (between 2000 and 2500 words, according to George Barnes, a friend of the Woolfs and a member of the BBC Talk Department), will result in a talk of seventeen and a half minutes. Aired on the BBC April 29, 1937 as part of the series *Words fail me* and published soon after in *The Listener*, the text is the only extant sound record of Virginia Woolf's voice, since other BBC talks she gave were presumably lost. Leonard Woolf republished "Craftsmanship," in its *Listener* version, in the collection *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942). To make the whole matter more muddled, the script of Woolf's recorded talk was published under the title "Words Must Have Their Liberty" in *London Calling: The Overseas Journal of the British Broadcasting Corporation* dated 14 September 1950. As a matter of fact, the arduous publishing course of "Craftsmanship" offers a paradigm case for examining folds of Woolf's politics of language still relatively unexamined by critics. For this is a text that addresses in fact the issue of language in the new media-centric environment of the two interwar decades. More specifically "Craftsmanship" engages with the meaning and the weight of words "processed" by the wireless medium.[7]

[7] Some archival texts and notes are relevant to Woolf's sound and record experience. See especially Haller.

Although writing between and with the genres is a common predicate in Woolf's canon, "Craftsmanship"'s trans-medial history and textual hybridism make for a special case. Floating between "script," writing and performance, the text/script enhances the broken voice it puts on record: a speaking/reciting/narrating voice, suspended between the "transience" of transmission and the alleged "permanence" of the written language, between essay and theatrical performance, between journalism and wireless talk. A dense text where the interweaving of "authorial" voices reminds us—as Leila Brosnan notes—"of the relevance of context to the process of plotting any locus of meaning within the text" ("*Words fail me*" 68).

On the one hand it is a "live" voice, addressing "living" listeners who, thanks to the artifice of technology, listen to words that can simultaneously "sound" differently to different ears, bound to the time of utterance and yet imbued with an "unconscious" sense generated by "sunken meanings allowed to remain sunken, suggested, not stated, lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of a river" ("Craftsmanship" 202). Tensions and divisions, virtual struggles and cross conflicts, alliances and matrimonies referred both to language and to human experience: the unstable environment we inhabit every day is metaphorically set up in this Woolfian text. It is a text loaded with "political unconscious" in a Foucauldian fashion, where words are "marked" by the events of the time (such as the "unspeakable" Royal scandals of the day). But those references which listeners, abreast with the latest news, would have recognized immediately, can in fact sound incomprehensible if taken "out of context," and therefore deprived of a sense that was there at that time of the utterance, but is soon bound to sink into oblivion.

On the other hand, the technophonic medium itself produces a "pure" voice, a voice suspended in the limbo of a meta-moment, which is "past," no longer existing, and yet is being. Precisely this voice—that was then recorded and somehow consigned to "eternity"—comes across timidly at first and gradually grows more confident, as if to taste words rather than utter them, as if to court them, to release them, at least temporarily, from their nomadic fate. And more than ever, those words uttered on the radio

cannot be "pinned down"—they manage to regroup into different discursive clusters, refractory to the presumption of intention impressed by the speaker, unpredictable because of the yet unprobed senses towards which they move, open to odd trajectories and contradictory diversions.

Struggling with words, struggling with one's own voice

We know, from Derrida, that we are merely guests of language, in the sense the language greets us, but we always welcome it, making it our own, putting it to the test of our lives. We use it—we choose words in order to make utterances, to create feeling. Or we fail to find and use words altogether. Everything in language is ever a "trial"—as Woolf constantly reminds herself and us (Colaiacomo 1993). "Craftsmanship" starts exactly from the possibility or impossibility of ascribing a specific "use" to words, of tying them down to one "truthful" use or meaning—and it does so, meta-textually, first of all by questioning the "congruity," the appropriateness of the word that was suggested (by the BBC editor) as the title of the ensuing "talk:"

> We must suppose therefore that the talker is meant to discuss the craft of words—the craftsmanship of the writer. But there is something incongruous, unfitting, about the word craftsmanship when applied to words. The English Dictionary, to which we always turn in moments of dilemma, confirms us in our doubts. It says that the word 'craft' has two meanings: it means in the first place making useful objects out of solid matter—for example a pot, a chair, a table. In the second place, the word 'craft' means cajolery, cunning, deceit. […] Therefore, to talk of craft in connection with words is to bring together two incongruous ideas, which if they mate can only give birth to some monster fit for a glass case in a museum. (198)

Incongruous and monstrous bodies, generated by queer "marriages," transfers of sense the Dictionary foresees and rushes to clarify: an apparent yet deceptive solidity—in fact inherent in the nature of words—undermines the very possibility of discourse, which is therefore partially "decapitated" from the start: a talk which, like a headless chicken, turns around a blind spot waiting

to collapse (198). The "suicidal" and vaguely grotesque metaphor carries in itself a hard and fast premise, or promise.

"A Ramble Around Words" could be—as Woolf admits—a less ambitious but promising way to start. She prepared thus herself to work on words, as an urban flâneur works on collective imagination and on memory: a "walk" then, vague movements of an enshrouded subject who, enthralled by words, indulges on the euphoria of their sounds among "vagrant" and half-cast bodies, and diverts her path in search of assonances and associations. But certainly, if "the power of suggestion is one of the most mysterious properties of words," words, in their long lasting life, "are full of echoes" (203) that turn them into mysterious archives of meanings.

In line with a poetic manifesto that has taken on the contentious challenge of modernity, the talker investigates the life of language, pondering on the layered life of words and on the further layers of meaning words take on when they combine into sentences. The starting point of her walk will be an instrumental announcement, one among the many to be heard in the Tube: "Passing Russell Square." The new start brings in an abrupt change of setting—from the monologic space of a radio broadcast to the brightly lit, cacophonous scenario of the London Underground. Author and listener are plunged into the "crowded dance" of urban masses: the new scene conjures up a new textual environment, made of the transit and fast motion of metropolitan subjects who "pass" quickly from one space to another and are entangled in words that resist a purely functional or referential use:

> When we travel on the Tube, for example, when we wait on the platform for a train, there, hung up in front of us, on an illuminated signboard, are the words 'Passing Russell Square.' We look at those words, we repeat them, we try to impress that useful fact upon our minds, the next train will pass Russell Square. We say over and over again as we pace. 'Passing Russell Square. Passing Russell Square.' And then, as we say them, the words shuffle and change, and we find ourselves saying, 'Passing away saith the world, passing away. …The leaves decay and fall, the vapours weep their burthen to the ground. Man comes. …' And then we wake up and find ourselves at King's Cross. (199)

Words combine, "they combine unconsciously together" (202). With their secret and ephemeral trove they "impress" the

mind. They inspire the writer "without the writer's will, often against his will" (202), leading along unexpected trails: with its emphatic reiteration, the "s" assonance unfolds a range of phonic associations that become literary quotations; the surface meaning contains so many sunken meanings, that eventually connect King's Cross to a biblical landscape. The originally referential sense of "passing the station" in the euphoric thrill of speed slips away (with the irruption of "away," etc.) into tragic otherness ("passing away with the world"). Mulled over and over, such "passing" opens up unexpected depths, seeps into transcendent thoughts, ventures along poetic and even theological paths. In the material and immaterial transitioning that massively marks the modern world, the subject experiences herself, *the other* and the world within a setting of sliding, floating surfaces which betray her precarious state. And yet, at the same time, even ordinary everyday experiences—such as an announcement in the underground—are endowed with sudden bursts of enlightenment, profound revelations called forth from the ancient fabric of language.

In her preface to Woolf's short pieces on modernity and media, including "Craftsmanship," Rachel Bowlby, aptly records the persistent references to the "passing" of individuals exposed to this "swift passing" in space and time, in body and mind:

> With its words flashing on and off, and its actual citing of the 'passing' word, this sign looks as though it might have been made (as well as to guide the traveller on the Tube) to illustrate Baudelaire's definition of the modern as the 'transitory, the fleeting, the contingent,' completed, as it comes to be in the narrator's associations, by 'the other half… the eternal and the immovable' by the biblical connection. (Bowlby xxviii-xix)

Inside the Tube station, a collective space where the radio talker leads us in her passionate but rigorous "digression," an electronic panel short-circuits with the Holy Scriptures: a mechanical warning turns into Biblical language and common words are literally "married"—says Woolf—to schools of thought steeped in philosophy. All that happens in a flash, in a short-circuit triggered by words, words which are bound to a long, albeit ever changing, life:

> Language too is drawn into this drift, as part of the heterogeneous world encapsulated by 'its dresses, and its dances and its catchwords' […] words are granted values not in themselves, but only in so far as their meaning is not determinate, not useful. (Bowlby xxviii)

We are all "passers-by," invested with words which are themselves "passing-by." We are subject to a relentless interpretative tension which ideologies, grammars, and customs have tried to stem by imposing paths of order and "truth." These are truths that the author hands over to the laws of speech, to the mesh of cultural and mental litigations that speakers inhabit: "According once more to the Dictionary there are at least three kinds of truth […]. But to consider each separately would take too long. Let us then simplify, and assert that the test of truth is the length of life" ("Craftmanship" 201).

After this apparent "relief," which in fact brings to the fore a model of experiential and relational subjectivity endlessly debated in Woolf's work ("truth is the length of life"), discourse waxes "poetical," and the tone of her radio voice becomes lighter, closer to the surface, somehow seduced by the sounds words carry with themselves, and by the effects they have, their capacity to mesmerize. In this perspective, the medium of the radio appears as the ideal environment to make words resonate as "pure" signifiers, in an out-of-time suspension of reality. And if we tune into its wavelength we will have more chances to capture unexpected nuances of meaning or to lose ourselves in their drift.

Radio is then a manifestation, close at hand, of the nature of life itself, the perfect metaphor of the on-going fabric of ideas and images we are made of. As it produces disembodied voices and actions at a distance, the wireless—Gillian Beer recalls—accesses the tumult always at work in our silences and intermittently discloses the invisible traffic passing through us. The ultramodernist scientists who were seeking an image for the end of the physical world would actually view reality itself as a "stupendous" wireless broadcast (Eddington 71).

Wireless was then less obsessive than fascinating. All Bloomsbury was magnetized by a medium that was perceived as "magic" since it could also shape words into "music," into a landscape made of echoes and resonances where sense seemed

to multiply and endlessly expand, in a "wireless" environment, through waves which invade the universe.

"Words are full of echoes" ("Craftmanship" 203), and the radio certainly magnified the words' mysterious, "diabolical" power of evocation. When uttered "in the air" words become even more volatile, "irreclaimable vagabonds," "the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things" (204). Heedless of cultural, national or racial barriers, words are first of all seductive, and sexy: "they have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries […] and they have been contracting so many marriages" (203). The English language, "our dear Mother English […] an impure mother whose past one is well-advised not to examine too deeply" (205), is for Woolf there to testify the melting pot where "Royal words mate with commoners. English words marry French words, German words, Indian words, Negro words if they have a fancy" (205), to record wars and colonial endeavours, legal or illegal trades and liaisons—like the "embarrassing" affair between Prince Edward and Lady Simpson. The bold allusion to Royal sexual transgressions—a "turning point" in the British Royal etiquette—goes together with a praise for words that are "highly democratic" (206), for their indifference to caste or class: "they believe that one word is as good as another, uneducated words are as good as educated words, uncultivated words as cultivated words, there are no ranks or titles in their society" (206). "Craftsmanship" stands thus also as the humble attempt to shape a thought in face of the liberty of words: on the BBC a voice tried to break the surface of silence, "muttering" even something political.

It may have been a failure: "the little wretches are out of temper; disobliging; disobedient; dumb. What is it that they are muttering?" (207). Or perhaps not at all, if we consider that Virginia Woolf nowadays stands somehow as the icon of the emerging transmodal artist, a voice "open for, and productive of, a wide range of passionate attachments" (Rosenthal 71).

What is left, once the time of radio performance has elapsed, is after all not silence; the discourse has moved elsewhere, into other media. In order to "tempt words," to set up bridges, "inter-

courses" and affections, in order to talk about ourselves and talk about the world: "to come together in one of those secret marriages which are perfect images and create everlasting beauty" ("Craftmanship" 207), the ways are many, and the writer well knows them.

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