Flora de Giovanni

Citizens of the Bloomsbury Nation

For a century now the Bloomsbury Group has been the subject of a heated cultural debate, starting from D. H. Lawrence's 1915 fierce attack on the Cambridge of Russell and Keynes, which disgusted him with "its smell of rottenness." "Gloomsbury" in Berenson's words; "a rotten crew" according to Russell, who was nonetheless connected with it; "a select and snobbish club" which substituted money for talent in the opinion of Wyndham Lewis; a corrupt clique which infected the cultural establishment, as the Leavises maintained: these were some of the definitions applied to the Group. Others, however, considered it be "the most constructive and creative influence on English taste between the two Wars […] which became almost a cult" (Spender 140). Today such influence—such cult—is more pervasive than ever, as Rosner states in her introduction to the recent *Cambridge Companion to the Bloomsbury Group* (2014), mentioning the legacy of Keynes and Virginia Woolf (2). The Group is still well-known, and not only for its outstanding intellectual achievements in the fields of Post-Impressionism, literary Modernism, macroeconomics and psychoanalysis, to name just a few, which marked the shift from Victorianism to modernity, rejuvenating British culture and allowing it to eschew insularity. It also promoted a change in customs, championing a new, unconventional kind of domesticity, which is the main reason why today its members have an existence in popular culture, one that is based on their image rather than their *oeuvres* (Golsdworthy 186). Although it is undeniable, however, that much of Bloomsbury's appeal lies in their personal lives and sexual attitudes, the key to its successful afterlife appears to be the absence of any clear-cut distinction between their private and public dimensions, so that "the group's artistic advances and

attitudes color their love lives and domestic decisions, and vice versa" (Marler, "Bloomsbury's Afterlife" 216).

Coined as a private joke and publicised in the press in the '20s, the name became a "word of abuse" in the '30s, when its members reached the apex of their ascendancy and power. According to Quentin Bell, "Bloomsbury was always under fire," as often happens to those circles which, contributing to the thought of their time, arouse hostility in their contemporaries (*Bloomsbury* 153). Among other things, its detractors perceived it as "a mutual admiration society," whose influential position allowed it to promote its acolytes' works and ideas, refusing the due recognition to those who did not belong to it. Not surprisingly, therefore, the members strenuously denied that such a group ever existed other than as a group of friends. According to Virginia Woolf, it was "largely a creation of the journalists" (*Letters* 5: 91), while Clive Bell defined it "a collection of individuals" and Leonard Woolf, affirming that they had "no common theory, system, or principles," remarked that their achievements in art, economics, politics and literature were "purely individual" and "had nothing to do with any group" (25-26). Yet still, as Williams argues, they were keenly aware of being different from "the outside world"—from the dominant sector of the ruling class in which they belonged—for their candour, rationality, open-mindedness, and especially for their social conscience. Therefore, in his opinion, the clue to the essential definition of Bloomsbury lies in the seeming contradiction of disclaiming their status as a formal group while insisting on their group qualities. Paradoxically, it is precisely the recognition of the sovereignty of the individual which binds Bloomsbury together. Its true organizing value, in fact, was "the unobstructed free expression of the civilized individual" (Williams 165), which any shared system of thought would have undermined, their various positions being "all in effect *alternatives* to a general theory" (Williams 167).

If we acknowledge Bloomsbury's social concern as one of its constituent features, we cannot but disagree with those who blamed it for being a coterie of languid aesthetes and moneyed *dilettanti* completely detached from the world around them, a criticism intimately connected with the indictment of elitism

they were often charged with. In listing all the activities in which they were engaged and the causes to which they were committed, Virginia Woolf concludes: " […] they have done their very best to make humanity in the mass appreciate what they knew and saw," also mentioning, as a proof, the wide circulation of such her essays as *The Common Reader, A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, which reached "a far wider circle than a private little circle of exquisite and cultivated people" (*Letters* 6: 419-20). The interrelated issues of Bloomsbury's supposed elitism and disengagement are also tackled by Quentin Bell, who, while admitting that the Bloomsbury artists and Virginia Woolf in some of her novels were decidedly elitist since they "could have only appealed to a small minority," maintains that the prose writers such as Keynes, Strachey, MacCarthy, Leonard Woolf (and Woolf herself as an essayist) should not so much be thought of as "'literary artists' but rather as social theorists who made use of language," a language that any English-speaking person can easily understand ("The Vulgar Passion" 240). Rejecting the image of the Group as one entirely devoted to the pleasures of art and human intercourse, Bell conflates the notions of elitism and disengagement, showing how Bloomsbury's main concern was to defy "the vulgar passion"—i.e. intense emotions elicited by those emotive ideas and rhetoric which are "the very stuff of reactionary politics" (242)—in the name of reason, whose use in the management of public affairs they regarded as essential. And among the examples of Bloomsbury's "war with the forces of unreason," he aptly mentions *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919), where Keynes clearly states that no nation is authorised, by whatever belief or principle, to take revenge on its enemies' children for their parents' misdoings, a position apparently very unpopular in interwar Britain. Questioning established mythologies, discussing enduring taboos, Bloomsbury acts, in Bell's opinion, as a sort of antibody attacking the viruses of "the vulgar passion" whenever they menace the values of liberal England. Crediting the Group with a crucial role in imposing the restraint of reason on the untempered emotionalism that endangers English cultural and political life, Quentin Bell provides an early version of the relationship between Bloomsbury

and contemporary culture in terms of moral commitment and dissemination of democratic ideas. Along these lines, Cuddy-Keane's seminal study *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere* (2003) further articulates the connection between highbrow intellectual values and mass audience, showing how Virginia Woolf "opposed the increasing standardization or 'massification' of the reading public implicit in the process of mass production and distribution." By encouraging a dialogic relation with her readers, she recasts "'highbrowism' as a radical social practice," based on "democratic inclusiveness and intellectual education" (1-2). Hence the oxymoronic but illuminating definition of "democratic highbrows."

Today it is widely recognised that, far from being two reciprocally exclusive phenomena, Modernism and mass culture are "historically related and dialectically interdependent" (Pease 197). In the wake of Huyssen's *After the Great Divide* (1986), where Modernism is seen as constituting itself "through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (vii), a lively debate has been sparked off among the scholars. Though convinced that the relation between high and low culture was more dynamic and ambivalent than it has been admitted in the past, apparently the critics do not agree as to how and to what extent the two were interrelated and mutually influential. Some of the issues at stake are: how far reaching and pervasive "the anxiety of contamination," which cannot be dismissed altogether, was; how Modernism altered the way in which the market was perceived, changing its nature once and for all (Wicke 5); whether the market influenced modernist aesthetics, which appears to be "embedded in the very type of writing its logic and development tended to erase" (Jaffe 6); whether "radical poetics of Modernism were 'co-opted' by market society" or rather, they were the expression of "the very essence of post-traditional modernity" (Cooper 217); in what ways "early-twentieth-century artists engaged mass-culture practices to enhance or advance their work" (Pease 200); how the market-savvy modernist in the incipient age of celebrity sought to expand the literary market, transforming his/her unmistakable style into a means of promotion.

In many recent studies, Bloomsbury's connection with mass culture has been convincingly dealt with. Cooper, for instance, has interestingly analysed Bloomsbury's genetic link with market society, resorting to the notion of noetic community—a subcultural formation, that is, organised around shared affects, experiences, interests and goals, whose ties with the past and the nation become increasingly looser, like those of the capital, which no longer recognises national borders or past loyalties. Arguing that "the noetic communities themselves are the fissures and fractures in the cultural monolith under the disintegrative pressure of the market-form" (147), Cooper maintains that the Bloomsbury Group, one of late modernity's founding enclaves, "provides market society with its most typical form of social and cultural development" (246), and claims that "[t]oday we are all citizens of the Bloomsbury nation" (248). Also the vexed question of the Group's mixed attitudes towards the new media has been examined, not surprisingly, since Bloomsbury was "the first aesthetic movement to be subject to the now familiar phenomenon of media hype" (Whitehead 121). Undoubtedly, the Group's contribution to fashion magazines like *Vogue* and BBC programmes testifies to their willingness to bridge the Great Divide between high and mass culture. But whereas in his influential *Radio Modernism* (2006), Avery points out that their involvement in radio is a key example of how they "strove to preserve their deeply held ethical and aesthetic beliefs […] while adjusting them to fit the demands of an increasing technologized mass culture" (35), other scholars mainly focus on the circulation of their image promoted by the mass media, where they appeared less as artists and intellectuals than as eccentric "personalities" whose fashionable lifestyle was advertised as a marketable commodity (Whitehead, Garrity). As a consequence, Bloomsbury's elitism has been radically questioned, whether by reinterpreting their aesthetic principles in a more inclusive, accessible way (an example being the post-impressionist emphasis on form, apparently perceived as troubling by Woolf herself, which has been credited with a new democratic appeal) (Goldman 132, Spalding 491), or by highlighting, especially in her case, "the tension between the urge to decry the institutions of the literary market-

place and the need to master and manipulate those institutions" (Collier 363), with the result that she is seen as both a subject and an object of manipulation as far as her relationships with the marketplace are concerned.

Bloomsbury's appearance in interwar British media both as contributors and "personalities" is largely responsible for their current image in popular culture and can be considered the first step toward their canonization as celebrities. Though their fortunes rose and fell in the course of last century—as sometimes happens to those intellectuals who are ahead of their times once the innovations they have introduced have been progressively absorbed into the established culture and superseded—the late '60s saw the inception of Bloomsbury revival, started by Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey, which made them seem revolutionary again "at a moment when rebellion of every kind was most likely to find a receptive audience" (Marler, *Bloomsbury Pie* 93). A favourable cultural shift was taking place—one that the Group had seemingly anticipated in ethos and ideology—and Bloomsbury's radicalism, likened to the youth movement's, was recognised as such and welcomed by the new generation. The circle was mainly associated with queer rights and women's struggles, respectively through Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf, whose extraordinary posthumous success is in fact deeply indebted to second wave feminism. Her rise to fame and iconicity, brilliantly described by Silver in *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999), is a most fascinating example of border crossing between "'high culture' associated, variously, with the academy and/or intellectuals and the realm of mass-produced and/or popular culture" (4).

Also Leonard Woolf played a crucial role in the Bloomsbury revival both as his wife's attentive and keen literary executor in the years of neglect and as the author of a five-volume autobiography (1960-1969) which was very well received by the reading public, becoming, as Marler maintains, "the bridge between Bloomsbury itself and what would become the Bloomsbury industry" ("Afterlife" 221). Today such industry is a thriving and ever expanding one, as attested by films such as Gilbert's *Tom & Viv* (1994), Hampton's *Carrington* (1995), Daldry's *The Hours* (2002), the forthcoming *Vita & Virginia*; BBC dramas (Kaijser's

2015 *Life in Squares*); ballets (*Bloomsbury/It's not Real* and *Woolf Works*); novels such as Giménez-Bartlett's *Una habitación ajena* (1997), Seller's *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008), Parmar's *Vanessa and her Sister* (2014); exhibitions both in England—*The Art of Bloomsbury* (1999) and *A Room of their Own: Lost Bloosmbury Interiors 1913-1940*—and abroad (*Un altro tempo. Tra Decadentismo e Modern Style*, Rovereto 2012); and by the favour enjoyed by Monk's House and Charleston as tourist attractions. The list is far from complete and, moreover, does not include the great number of scholarly studies devoted to the Group and its members, but it certainly provides ample evidence of Bloomsbury's popularity and strong presence in mass culture. And although it is undeniable that the Group's reputation and fame are partially built on the current Woolf craze that is sweeping both the academy and popular culture, I am inclined to think that she owes part of the fascination she exerts as an author and icon to her Bloomsbury connection. Because Bloomsbury, "a pleasant reverberating sound" in Vanessa Bell's words (95), still evokes freedom and experiments, the courage to speak one's mind and the rupture with the past, mutual influence and cross-collaboration, but also tolerance in sexual matters, fun, gossip and a touch of frivolity—all ingredients, it appears, of an everlasting myth which does not seem to be on the wane.

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