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Virginia Woolf, the Dandy and the BBC

The description of Virginia Woolf as an elitist artist who never got her hands dirty with mass culture, complacently exercising the rights of her station, is very familiar in the academic world. Indeed, the image of Virginia Woolf isolated in the ivory tower of Bloomsbury was, to some extent, corroborated by those theories which maintained that Modernism and mass culture were two separate phenomena. From this perspective, the depiction of Virginia Woolf as an ultra snob and archenemy of mass culture—it is no surprise that Arnold Bennett defined her "queen of the high-brows"—is the consequence of how scholars and critics have systematised Modernism. In this sense, A. Huyssen's publication, *The Great Divide*, played a crucial role. In his pathbreaking work of 1986, he corroborated the long-standing separation between highbrow and lowbrow, between "high" Modernism and "low" mass culture. In other words, Huyssen confirmed the hypothesis of a clear opposition between mass culture and Modernism which characterized themselves as two artistic phenomena marked by mutual exclusion. Nevertheless, in recent years literary criticism has changed its position. On the one hand, an increasing number of scholars, such as Avery, Pease, Rainey and Morrison among the others, have rejected this Manichean sharp division maintaining that Woolf and other modernist artists negotiated their primary ethical and aesthetic propositions with the rise of mass culture. On the other hand, other critics such as Jaffe and Brenda Silver, have stated that the primary consequence of the relation between Woolf and new media was her conversion into a celebrity acquiring a type of iconicity which was independent of her academic standing or literary reputation.

The present article focuses on Virginia Woolf's second BBC talk "Beau Brummell" in order to demonstrate that not only there

was a relationship between Modernism and mass culture but also Woolf employed radio as a form of communication and dissemination. Specifically, she made use of this experience as a sort of complementary place where she could explain and discuss her vision of art and literature. In other words, I argue that Woolf's involvement in radio, the quintessence of mass culture, represented the opportunity for her to introduce her modernist ideas to a new audience. As a kind of herald of her time Virginia Woolf presented herself and her cultural statements to the new listener, encouraging him to acknowledge the existence of a common ground between himself and the artist.

Many critics have underlined Woolf's peculiar ambivalence towards wireless as a primary means of communication and dissemination. However, her position on radio was essentially political to the extent that she was extremely aware of it as the new cultural medium for shaping public opinion. It follows that not only she well knew the power of the new medium but also she took responsibility for what she was vehiculating via broadcasting. Her duplicity towards radio is underlined, for example, by Cuddy-Keane who maintains that for Woolf it became increasingly identified with the patriarchy, the military, specifically the voice of Hitler, but "when Orlando plunges suddenly into the twentieth century the ability to be in England and listen to voices in America reflects the marvellous magic of the modern world" (239). Moreover, Leila Brosnan underlines that Woolf was not only "aware of [radio] power as a means of mass communication" but also "fully cognizant of how her own reputation could be conditioned by being the subject of broadcast and how the medium offered opportunities for disseminating her non-fictional prose" (164).

She broadcast three times in 1927, 1929, and some years later in 1937. Of these only eight minutes of the last one have not been lost. Jane Lewty describes Woolf's voice as "slurred and sulky" (150), while to her nephew Quentin Bell it appeared unrecognizable:

> This record is a very poor one. Her voice is deprived of depth and resonance; it seems altogether too fast and too flat; it is barely recognisable. Her speaking voice was in fact beautiful […] and it is sad that it should not have been immortalised in a more satisfactory manner. (200)

We do not know whether Woolf's voice sounded different or not, but Bell's words seem to be true because she recorded in her diary: "I got my pecker up & read with ease & emotion; was then checked by the obvious fact that my emotion didn't kindle George Barnes" (83).

Virginia's first broadcast, in collaboration with her husband Leonard, was aired on Friday, 15 July 1927, with the title "Are too many books published and written?". The topic was the rise of mass publishing and its consequences for the quality and the reading of books. Her other two broadcasts were solo talks aired respectively in 1929 and 1937. The latter was titled "Craftsmanship." It was a reflection on how the mind works with a specific reference to the process of the association of ideas, a process by which representations arise in consciousness as the result of various and multiple external stimuli.

In her second talk, "Beau Brummell," Woolf portrayed the *persona* of Brummell, the dandy. George Bryan "Beau" Brummell became an iconic figure in France and England in the first half of the nineteenth century. He was considered an *arbiter elegantiae* and a master of aplomb, wit and physical distinction. The French writer, Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly wrote an essay devoted to the celebration of the life of Beau Brummell, underlining that "heaven-born elegance was his, such as Social trammels often spoil, and he was thus able to supply the capricious wants of a society bored and too severely bent under the strict laws of decorum" (24).

Brummell was the apostle of masculine elegance, the first celebrity famous for being famous. In *Beau Brummell: The Ultimate Dandy*, Ian Kelly writes that Brummell was "indifferent to politics […] he was essentially the cult of celebrity" (3-4). In other words, Brummell became a polarizing social figure.

"Beau Brummell" was aired on 20th November 1929, after the nine o'clock news, as the second of a three-part series entitled "Miniature Biographies." The other two speakers were Bloomsbury friends, Harold Nicolson and Desmond MacCarthy.

Joe Ackerley (1896–1967), the assistant producer in the Talks Department of the BBC, wrote to Lytton Strachey on 24th September 1929, offering him to speak during a BBC broadcast on the theme of biography:

> We want to give you a talk one evening during the next two months—or not exactly a talk but a reading in a series which we are calling something like "Potted Biographies"—real or imaginary, and to which Virginia Woolf, Desmond MacCarthy and others are contributing. There are no rules to the game of choice—people are choosing just whatever character—real or imaginary—gives them most fun. I am not sure what Virginia's choice is, but Desmond is going to write up an imagery biography of Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes' friend, and someone else [Harold Nicolson] is going to do Lord Byron's valet, [William] Fletcher. Will you join the group and give us, for instance, the biography of a real or imaginary minor Victorian? We do hope you will be attracted by this idea, and please do not let yourself be influenced against it by any question of the suitability of your voice. (16)

So far the letter included also Virginia Woolf among the writers invited to contribute to the "Potted Biography" project. Lytton Strachey did not accept the offer, Harold Nicolson did, and gave his talk on 23rd October 1929, during the first radio broadcast of the series. Desmond MacCarthy gave the 4th of December 1929 talk. *The Radio Times* announced Nicolson's talk, proclaiming that "this is the first of a series of 'Biographies in Brief', specially written by the most distinguished biographers of today" (McNeillie and Clarke 617).

For the occasion, Woolf wrote "Dorothy Wordsworth," which was accepted by the BBC and also advertised for the 20th November 1929 to be broadcast, from 9:15 to 9:35, after the nine o'clock news. At the very last moment, however, Woolf replaced "Dorothy Wordsworth" with "Beau Brummel." Vita Sackville-West, an intimate friend of Hilda Matheson (1888-1940), the Director of Talks at the BBC from 1926 to 1932, received a letter dated 19th November 1929, in which Virginia expressed all her disappointment for the BBC experience and her dislike for Hilda Matheson:

> I shall be glad when my broadcasting and my speaking at Mauron's lecture are both over. And, your Hilda—my God what friends you have!—has not proved exactly helpful—but there—I daren't say more […]. She affects me as a strong purge, as a hair shirt, as a foggy day, as a cold in the head—which last indeed I believe I am now developing (but its sure to be the nerves) so if you listen in, you'll probably hear sneeze, cough, choke. But as, what with Hilda and the B.B.C, my poor little article has been completely ruined (but don't whisper a word of

> this) I'm not altogether looking forward to 9.20 tomorrow night. Also I am billed at 9.15—Oh dear oh dear what a tumult of things one does one doesnt (sic) want to do! (*Letters* 4: 110)

Even though the BBC experience was not pleasing, it is worth noticing that in 1929 radio was deeply interested in biography and in its circulation. The whole episode proves not only how prestigious biography had become in those years, but also that the genre was getting increasingly popular thanks to its mass diffusion through radio broadcasts and specific programmes. Woolf's prestige as a biographer had grown after the publication of *Four Figures* (September 1929), a collection of four essays on Austen, Brummell, Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth[1].

"Beau Brummell" could be categorized as a piece of celebrity journalism with many aspects in common with "Jack Mytton" which Woolf wrote for *Vogue*. In both cases she deals with mediocre figures who have, in Woolf's opinion, achieved fame and success in an inexplicable way. In portraying the *persona* of Beau Brummell, the dandy *par excellence*, Woolf introduces her reader to the life of an adventurous man who in the end becomes the caricature of himself.

The figure of the dandy became very famous in France and in Great Britain in 1830s causing contrasting responses. According to Thomas Carlyle, the dandy was just a "clothes-wearing man" (166), while to Baudelaire the dandy embodied the elevation of aesthetics to religion:

> Contrary to what many thoughtless people seem to believe, dandyism is not even an excessive delight in clothes and material elegance. For the perfect dandy, these things are no more than the symbol of the aristocratic superiority of mind. (420)

Even though Lord Byron defined Brummell the first of the great men of the nineteenth century, Woolf does not share the same vision but she criticizes his actions and his dandyism. The dandy was one of the main figures of the nineteenth century and considered to be a herald of Modernism because he was the embodiment of the disenchanted and leisured outsider, something

[1] The text of "Beau Brummell" was the same of the radio talk.

very close to the first definitions of the Bloomsbury Group[2]. Nevertheless, Woolf employs ironic words to express her aversion to Brummell's lifestyle. Woolf's sarcastic tone may sound very surprising because one would imagine that as an elitist icon she "praised" her equal. Woolf's essay starts from the last days of Brummell when "in his imbecility [he] was dreaming that he was back in London again giving a party" ("Beau Brummel" 114), and then moves retrospectively to his youth only to return to his current state of decay in order to demystify his figure. Moreover, Woolf writes that a " dandy's way of life was the only one which could place him in a prominent light, and enable him to separate himself from the ordinary herd of men" (116). She adds that Brummell was a curious combination of wit, of taste and insolence and Byron himself "in his moments of dandyism, always pronounced the name of Brummell with a mingled emotion of respect and jealousy" (117).

In addition, Woolf informs us that "he who had played at love all these years and kept so adroitly beyond the range of passion, now made violent advances to girls who were young enough to be his daughters" (116) and "he wrote such passionate letters to Mademoiselle Ellen of Caen that she did not know whether to laugh or to be angry" (116). In other words, Brummell was no longer the epitome of exquisite manners and style but a pervert and a "disgusting old man" (117). So the question is, why does Woolf employ such unexpected words in describing what was considered to be a sort of embryonic version of the modernist artist? Why does Woolf condemn the figure of the dandy? I am strongly convinced that in "Beau Brummell" Virginia Woolf clarifies her position towards dandyism and Aestheticism tracing 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. As anticipated, the figure of the dandy

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[2] The 1972 supplement to the most authoritative dictionary of language, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, defined Bloomsbury as a school of writers and aesthetes. Similarly, G. Holbrook Gerzina maintains that "those who portray Bloomsbury as a positive influence on art and culture use the term 'intellectuals'; those who denigrate their impact refer to them as 'dilettantes' or 'aesthetes'" (112).

was frequently associated to Woolf and her friends. As a rebel and opponent to his century, dominated by "the rising tide of democracy, which spreads everywhere and reduces everything to the same level" (Baudelaire 422), the dandy affirmed a new kind of aristocracy. Moreover, he made of his body, of his behaviour, his feelings and passions a work of art. In other words, the figure of the dandy was the *aesthete par eccellence* and, in some respect, the embodiment of the idea of *l'art pour l'art*, in that it had neither social nor political function.

Woolf shared several contact points with Aestheticism but such a connection was misread and this could be the reason why Woolf along with the other members of the Bloomsbury Group were associated to the figure of the dandy. For example, Michael Holroyd agrees with the idea that Bloomsbury was said to be "an over-serious, self important Bohemia. […] They formulated a set of restricting rules which had the effect of substituting phoney aestheticism for genuine creative talent" (232). In addition, Holroyd maintains that the Bloomsbury Group "represents more truly than anything else the culmination and ultimate refinement of the aesthetic movement" (53). But the arch-enemy of the Bloomsbury Group was F. R. Leavis, the Cambridge literary critic, who along with his wife, Q. D. Leavis and his prestigious journal, *Scrutiny*, defined Woolf and her friends as a "a corrupt clique" and he was "irritated by the extreme aestheticism of Bloomsbury" (qtd. in Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* 203). In other words, Bloombury became a term of abuse to identify a group of intellectuals who had no specific talents, marked by a snobbish and libertine lifestyle.

As I have just said, it is undeniable that Woolf shared several contact points with Aestheticism and in particular with his founder, Walter Pater. Rejecting the Victorian notions of objectivity and immutable truths, Pater described a world of fleeting impressions, a practice that Woolf refined in her fiction. Every individual, Pater maintains, has a subjective experience provided by intense sensory engagement with the things he loves. On the one hand, this seemed a recipe for self-indulgence through the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure if compared with Ruskin, who maintained that art existed to redeem the world, or Matthew Ar-

nold, who underlined that art had a moral purpose. On the other hand, Pater's statements represented a positive departure from Victorian moralism.

Perry Meisel provides a detailed analysis of the influence of Pater and his aesthetic principles on Woolf's writing, particularly on her work as critic and reviewer. In both authors he notes "a shared vocabulary of judgement and analysis" (73). Moreover, he highlights how both Pater and Woolf were concerned with the search for the "perfect fusion of form and matter" (58) in writing as well as the desire that superfluity be eliminated from the work of art. Moreover, Meisel underlines the fact that there is Pater's influence on Woolf's fiction in its concern with the description of her characters' thoughts and sensations. A significant part of Meisel's analysis is devoted to the fact that Woolf embraced Pater's Aestheticism as an effort to distance herself from the patriarchal Victorian tradition which called for a type of novel with a morally edifying purpose. Moreover, Meisel maintains that Pater's influence on Woolf is particularly evident in the search of "the languages of sense and perception" (44). Perhaps, he continues, the most important lesson that Woolf absorbed from Pater regarded the extremely important need for an acutely refined receptivity to life, the experiences it offers, and how these observations and experiences can affect one's subjectivity.

Although such a vision does not imply that the artist had to lead an active life among others, at the same time "it does preclude the self-willed isolation of the artist from society as exemplified by Des Esseintes, the aesthete-hero of Huysmans's novel *À Rebours* (1884)" (Ronchetti 30). As is commonly accepted, the English aesthetes and decadents of the late nineteenth century read Pater assiduously, but also took inspiration from the French Symbolists, declaring the will "to stand apart from the common life and live only in the imagination" (Wilson 32). This element marked the difference between Pater and his successors. Indeed, Ronchetti argues that "many opponents as well as proponents of Pater's Aestheticism misread his work, especially the notorious conclusion to *Studies in the History of Renassaince* (1873) as advocating the indulgence of the senses for one's personal gratification" (31).

In England, it was Wilde himself, and not Pater, who was identified as central to the English decadent tradition, along with Arthur Symons and the poet Ernest Dowson. Wilde became very famous and his name became the epitome of Aestheticism. He dressed flamboyantly, sparking fashions that others copied. He was a brilliant self-publicist, and quipped that his life was a work of art. In other words, he was the embodiment of the perfect dandy. The drift of Paterian Aestheticism was put into practice by Wilde with the acclamation of the *persona* of the dandy.

As anticipated, by the early 1930s, the label "Bloomsbury" became synonym of dandyism, suggesting a life style marked by superficiality and political indifference. This is corroborated, among the others, by Regina Marler who in *Bloomsbury Pie* maintains that the members of the Bloomsbury Group were seen "as irresponsible aesthetes […] and Woolf's novels in particular as idle experiments cut off from the concerns of ordinary life" (146).

Nevertheless this was a false depiction of Woolf and her friends. Indeed, among the Bloomsbury Group, E. M. Forster satirized the *persona* of the dandy as early as 1908 in his characterization of Cecil Vyse in *A Room with a View*. Moreover, Woolf herself did not appreciate the worsening of Aestheticism embodied by the dandy. One detects evidence of it in her portrayal of William Rodney in *Night and Day* (1919) and Ashley in *The Years* (1937).

Woolf was not a mere aesthete in defiance of the world surrounding her. For example, defending herself and the other "bloomsberries" against the accusation of elitism and snobbery, she wrote in a letter to Benedict Nicolson, 24 August 1940:

> Apparently you mean by Bloomsbury a set of people who sat on the floor at Bernard Street saying 'more and more I understand nothing of humanity in the mass' and were content with that […] I never went to school or college. My father spent perhaps £100 on my education. When I was a young woman I tried to share the fruits of that very imperfect education with the working classes by teaching literature at Morley College, and politically by working for the vote. It is true I wrote books and some of those books […] have sold many thousand copies. That is, I did my best to make them reach a far wider circle than a little private circle of exquisite and cultivated people. Leonard too is Bloomsbury […] he has spent half his life to prevent the growth of Nazism. Maynard Keynes is Bloomsbury. He wrote the Consequences of the Peace. Lytton was Bloomsbury […] Duncan was Bloomsbury […] These are facts

> about Bloomsbury and they do seem to me to prove that they have done their best to make humanity in the mass appreciate what they knew and saw. (*Letters* 6 : 418-20)

For this reason "Beau Brummell" could be read as a text in which Woolf traces in a clear way the perimeter of her vision of art and the engagement of the artist. It is not surprising that Woolf made such an operation given that in her essays she repeatedly underlined the need for artists and writers to live in the real world. For example, in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" Woolf states that writers "shall come down off their plinths and pedestals, and describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs Brown. […] for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself" (118). Similarly, in "A Letter to a Young Poet" she remarks that the younger generation of British poets must not live in isolation but among others: "But how are you going to get out, into the world of other people? That is your problem now, if I may hazard a guess—to find the right relationship, now that you know yourself, between the self that you know and the world outside" (220).

In conclusion, Woolf's aversion to the figure of the aesthete embodied by Brummell, that is to say the idea of life as a work of art, could well indicate her discomfort at being associated with Aestheticism, especially during the highly politicized 1930s. In other words, unlike Brummell, who "without a single noble, important, or valuable action to his credit […] cuts a figure" ("Beau Brummel" 114), Woolf has no hesitation in affirming her sensitiveness to the atmosphere which surrounded her, whether personal, social, or historical. Although Woolf acknowledges that Brummell "stands for a symbol; his ghost walks among us still" (116), she underlines her distance from dandyism. Indeed, while Brummell was unconcerned about politics and this is proved by the fact that he did not face a single cannon during the French revolution, Virginia Woolf instead distances herself from this position because she was an engaged artist. She was not indifferent to politics, the social and civic instances of her writings emerged from the shadows of her supposed elitism. In other words, Woolf rejects the label of famous for "being famous" because even though she was implicated in the culture of celebrity—in this sense her cooperation with *Vogue* is very

significant (Garrity 188)—she aimed to be legitimated as an influential intellectual figure through her literary production and not her lifestyle.

This could be one of the reasons why she chose Brummell for her second BBC talk. If this is true, not only Woolf fulfilled the requirements of the BBC about biography but also she took advantage of the medium to bypass that part of criticism which associated her to dandyism and to introduce herself and her artistic principles.

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