

Virginia Woolf and The Age of Listening

We wish to address the question of listening in Woolf's work in the context of the zeitgeist or spirit of the age as characterized by two distinctly different but contemporary modes of listening which emerge at the Turn of the Century and bear the stamp of Modernity: the invention of psychoanalysis and of radio.

When Freud abandoned hypnosis for the talking cure in 1895, he inaugurated an age of listening and thereby a paradigm shift in which the active passivity of the analyst's listening is construed as a reading surface for receptivity and reconstruction. The same year Guglielmo Marconi experimented with radio waves for wireless communication and transmitted the first radio signals. In 1897 daily radio programmes were broadcast, then soon after the First World War, in November 1922, the BBC launched its first radio broadcasts. In his 1912 essay "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psychoanalysis", Freud uses the image of a sound wave receptor to describe the analyst's unconscious at work:

he must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone. Just as the receiver converts back into sound waves the electric oscillations in the telephone line which were set up by sound waves, so the doctor's unconscious is able, from the derivatives of the unconscious which are communicated to him, to reconstruct that unconscious¹.

How might we read Virginia Woolf in the light of this twofold reinvention of listening at the heart of Modernity? The encounter between these two modes of listening invites us in fact to consider the interface between intimacy and common space in Woolf's writing. Furthermore, we might think in parallel about the ear she lends to the unsaid or half-said:

to catch those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling, when women are alone².

and the importance Freud accords to veiled or occluded strata of signification emerging at the interface between two unconsciouses in the psychoanalytic encounter.

"Her genius was intensely feminine [...] as if on the alert for some distant sound"³.

This might lead to thinking about how for both Freud and Woolf listening is an essentially feminine activity, how in hollowing out the monumental edifices which occupy the landscape of literature and of male learning, she sculpts a space for echoes of a more archaic, eternal order of things, such as that upheld by the figure of Antigone in *Three Guineas*⁴. We might consider the place reserved for listening in her modernist poetics, how stream of consciousness espouses the contours of unspoken thought and the unsaid is present in all the signifying dimensions of the text, including its breaks, gaps and silences. The question of *signifiante* as occurring at the interface of image and acoustics might lead to considering the movement of sonority in the text as related to different levels of reminiscence or memorialising (Smith-Di Biasio 2010)⁵, as well as to reflecting on the historiographical implications of Woolf's listening to the past. This in turn might lead to considering the link between temporal strata and sound layering in her writing in terms of intertextual or ancestral

¹ Freud, "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psychoanalysis" (1912), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol XII, London: Hogarth Press, 1958, 115-116.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1945, p.84.

³ Christopher Isherwood, in *Recollections of Virginia Woolf*, Joan Russell Noble (ed.), Middlesex: Penguin 1972, p.214-216.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966, p.141.

⁵ See Anne-Marie Smith-Di Biasio, "Le tracé de la parole dans l'écrit, 'cette mélodie presque inaudible, cette musique intermittente'", p.63-79, *Virginia Woolf, la Hantise de l'écriture*, Paris : Indigo & Côté-femmes, 2010.

voicing.

What place does Woolf accord to listening to language in her essays and specifically in her reflections on the activity of reading?

But what was lacking, what was different, I asked myself, listening to the talk? [...] Everything was different [...] (and now) Nothing was changed; nothing was different save only—here I listened with all my ears not entirely to what was being said, but to the murmur or current behind it. Yes, that was it, the change was there. [...]

Those words – There has fallen a splendid tear/ From the passion-flower at the gate/ sang in my blood as I stepped quickly along towards Headingly⁶.

One might consider the anterior and immemorial quality of the voice of Anon in the light of Woolf's own listening to the murmur and song of the past and furthermore the way in which in this essay the words of the Elizabethan poet dramatist are imagined taking shape in the silence of the audience listening. This idea of words taking shape in the context of collective listening is akin to the way in which in "On Not Knowing Greek" the lyrics of Greek tragedy strike the listener with a haunting anteriority, while erasing the sense of authorship or characterisation. This might lead us to think about how in Woolf's thinking language is embodied at an interface between recitation and listening, an interface analogous to that between writing and a form of reading or receptivity called for by the text, which takes us back to Freud's model of the analyst's listening.

For we are apt to forget [...] how great a power the body of a literature possesses to impose itself [...] how it will not suffer itself to be read passively, but takes us and reads us [...] making us [...] yield our ground⁷.

Turning specifically to the question of Woolf and radio, let us recall the incursion of sound waves into her essay "The Leaning Tower", in which a break with the sonority of the long nineteenth century is signified by the foreign syllables of Hitler's voice:

Scott never saw the sailors drowning at Trafalgar; Jane Austen never heard the cannon roar at Waterloo. They never heard [...] neither of them heard Napoleon's voice as we hear Hitler's voice as we sit at home of an evening⁸.

In this light we might consider the thickening of aurality in late Woolf (Caughie 2010)⁹, the deafening quality of fascist voices, « such that we can hardly hear ourselves speak [...] As we listen to the voices we seem to hear an infant crying in the night »¹⁰, how noise invades and interferes with the resonance of language in *Between the Acts* and *The Diaries*:

the war – our waiting while the knives sharpen for the operation – has taken away the outer wall of security. No echo comes back. I have no surroundings. [...] There's no standard to write for: no public to echo back¹¹.

Then what do we know about Virginia Woolf's radiophonic listening, the concerts or radio plays which held her attention, the sounds of which found their way into her writing as a counter-poetics to fascist voices (Beer, 1996)?¹²

Since the room is dark [the mind] can create only from memory. It reaches out to the memory of other Augusts – in Bayreuth, listening to Wagner; in Rome, walking over the Campagna; in

⁶ *A Room of One's Own*, p.13-14.

⁷ "Notes on an Elizabethan Play" in *The Common Reader* 1, 1925, Londres: Pelican, 1938, 57-66, p.57.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, "The Leaning Tower" in *The Moment and Other Essays*, Harcourt Brace and Company, 1948, p.128-154.

⁹ See Pamela Caughie, "Virginia Woolf, Radio, Gramophone, Broadcasting", in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. Maggie Humm, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, pp. 334-348.

¹⁰ *Three Guineas*, p.141.

¹¹ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volume 5 1936-41 (le 27 June, 1940), p.299.

¹² See Gillian Beer, "Wireless, Popular Physics Radio and Modernism", in ed. Spufford and Uglow, Faber & Faber, 1996.

London. Friends' voices come back. Scraps of poetry return. Each of those thoughts, even in memory, was far more positive, reviving, healing and creative than the dull dread made of fear and hate¹³.

In this respect we might consider her injunction to the readers of *Three Guineas* to – “turn on the wireless and rake down music from the air”¹⁴; or think about Woolf's radiophonic imagination as bearing the imprint of and being inspired by radio, reflecting an awareness of being in a world whose contours were reshaping in the context of regional, national and transnational broadcasting; how the art of listening joins forces with “thinking” as Woolf's specific mode of fighting or conceiving peace in terms of a harmonics of listening to native sounds (Davison 2019)¹⁵ :

And if, when reason has said its say, still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give to England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world¹⁶.

We might finally consider the different modes of listening produced by Woolf's work in terms of the relationship between sonority, musicality and the amplification or fragmentation of meaning, such as recently examined by Jean-Luc Nancy in his philosophical essay *À l'Écoute*:

Le sonore [...] emporte la forme. Il ne la dissout pas, il l'élargit plutôt, il lui donne une ampleur, une épaisseur et une vibration ou une ondulation dont le dessin ne fait jamais qu'approcher¹⁷.

Or equally, the question might be extended to include consideration of musical, choreographic or translational adaptations of Woolf's writing?¹⁸

A diversity of approaches and modes of listening to inspire your proposals (200-300 words) in English or French and a short biobib. indicating thesis subject, to be sent to : amdibiasio@neuf.fr and claire.davison-pegon@univ-paris3.fr by 1st May 2019.

¹³ “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 6, London: Hogarth p.323.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, ed. Jane Marcus, New York: Harcourt. p. 98.

¹⁵ See Claire Davison, « European Peace in Pieces: Virginia Woolf and the Radiophonic Imagination » in *Virginia Woolf, Peace and Europe* in 2 volumes, Derek Ryan, Peter Adkins, et al.(ed.), Clemson University Press, 2019.

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, ed. Jane Marcus, New York: Harcourt, p. 129.

¹⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *À l'écoute*, Paris : Galilée, 2002, p.14.

¹⁸ *The Waves*, Max Richter, Wayne Mac Gregor, *Woolf Works*, 2017 ; J-R Lapaire *To the Lighthouse: a choreographic re-elaboration* - <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/10898>, 2017 ; *Performing Mrs Dalloway* - <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/14255>, 2018.