

British literature in transmission: writing and wireless

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British Literature in Transmission: Writing and Wireless

Telecommunications, 1920-1940

The new technologically-enabled soundscapes of modernity have been the subject of immense recent critical interest. Through the work of Karen Bijsterfeld, Jonathan Sterne, Douglas Kahn, and other sonically-aware scholars, we are better able than ever before to listen-in to the sounds of the early twentieth century, and to understand how listeners understood the new auditory experiences furnished by the gramophone, the telephone, the film “talkie”, and the wireless. But sound is only part of the story. This chapter argues that rapid innovations in early wireless technology not only multiplied the acoustical experiences available to listeners, but reconfigured their habits of attention and temporal awareness. These changes, in turn, began to alter the way people approached writing for, and reading from, the page. The *liveness* of wireless broadcasting, the *concentration* that proper listening-in was thought to require, and the *ephemerality* of broadcasts – which, in the early days of radio, it was impractical to record – were all widely understood to be essential and transformative properties of the new medium. As the technology of wireless was refined and perfected, its unique capabilities and limitations not only shaped a new kind of literature (the little-studied form of the broadcast play) but also began to influence wider literary culture in Britain.

Between 1920 and 1940, the environment of technological media within which literary works of all kinds were produced, disseminated, and consumed was dramatically reorganised. Familiar words and phrases (“broadcast”, “live”, “noise”) acquired specialised meanings, while the language was supplemented by a bewildering new technical lexicon. It became possible to speak of “narrowcasting” over the “airwaves”, of giving “airtime” to a “newscast”, of participating in a “teleconference” with someone “on the same wavelength”, and even – by the end of the 1920s – of watching distant events unfold on “television”.

The effects of these changes on the literary culture of the period are hard to overstate, though contemporary opinion varied widely as to what exactly those effects might be. Some were remarkably sanguine about the possibilities of new media. In December 1930, for instance, the newly appointed Poet Laureate John Masefield opined in a letter to *The Listener* that, since radio broadcasting had “revived among the people the habit of listening”, it might also encourage young poets “to work at forms and constructions of verse fitter for speaking”.¹ Others were more ambivalent, like Virginia Woolf, who, though an occasional broadcaster herself, had come by 1940 to feel that the new technologies of transmission had imperilled more civilised forms of communication: “News and gossip, the sticks and

¹ John Masefield, “Broadcasting and Poetry: A Letter from the Poet Laureate”, *The Listener* 102 (24 Dec 1930), p. 1052.

straws out of which the old letter writer made his nest, have been snatched away. The wireless and the telephone have intervened.”²

That intervention was more gradual than Woolf makes it sound. The telephone was patented in 1876 by Alexander Graham Bell, and four years later Bell had invented a “photophone” for transmitting voice messages on a beam of light. By 1894, the physicist Sir Oliver Lodge had found a way to send morse signals using radio waves rather than the visible part of the spectrum; building on Lodge’s discovery, Guglielmo Marconi demonstrated the transmission of signals by wireless across Salisbury Plain (1897), the English Channel (1899), and the Atlantic Ocean (1901). Meanwhile, the Canadian-American inventor Reginald Fessenden had conducted successful experiments with the transmission of music and voice. During the two decades that followed, others, including Marconi, refined their own methods of audio transmission, and the early 1920s saw the creation of the first British broadcasters, including Marconi’s own 2MT (“Two Emma Toc”), which began transmitting in 1920 from his Chelmsford factory, and the British Broadcasting Company (later the British Broadcasting Corporation), founded in the high-modernist *annus mirabilis* of 1922.

If writers as different as Masefield and Woolf devoted time and energy to thinking and writing about the implications of wireless, there can be little doubt that the technology had precipitated significant transformations in literary culture. But influence flowed in both directions. Novelists, poets, and dramatists were not merely commentators; many were enthusiastically (or reluctantly) involved in the configuration of new media and its integration into social and cultural life. While writers were certainly inspired by radio broadcasts to reflect on the conditions of modern communication, *tele-* and otherwise, they also endowed new technologies with cultural capital and social context. Established stage dramatists like Reginald Berkeley, Tyrone Guthrie, and Patrick Hamilton developed plays specifically for radio, while novelists began to incorporate wirelesses in their narratives, furnishing readers with descriptions of the technology’s functioning and malfunctioning. Well-known authors contributed their expertise to ongoing debates in publications such as *Radio Times* (founded 1923) and *The Listener* (founded 1929), sometimes to warn about the displacement of writing by the voices of new media, but just as often to direct attention to the new aesthetic possibilities and new audiences those media had created. Broadcasting required writers as well as listeners. As those writers incorporated new technologically-mediated experiences into novels and poems, and as they experimented with writing for broadcast, they both transformed the rhythms and conventions of existing literary forms and began to shape ones that were entirely new.

The Listening-Sense

The first made-for-radio drama, Richard Hughes’s *A Comedy of Danger*, was transmitted at 7:30 p.m. on 15 January 1924. Set in a coal-mine, Hughes’s play began a long-running trend by literalizing the

² Virginia Woolf, “The Humane Art” (Apr 1940), in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, VI, ed. Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth Press, 2011), pp. 225-229.

most obvious limitation of the medium. Geared towards what the B.B.C. producer Val Gielgud would later call “the Theatre of the Loudspeaker and the Darkened Room”, a number of early plays employed elaborate set-ups to place their protagonists in the same situation as an audience imagined as a set of ears and nothing more.³ Reginald Berkeley’s spooky one-act play *The Dweller in the Darkness* (1925), for instance, lays its scene in a haunted house with eerily unreliable lighting. As Jean Chothia has pointed out, it did not take long for this “blindfold theatre” to become a target for parody: L. du Garde Peach’s *The Séance* (1928) seems to tread a similar supernatural path to Berkeley’s *Dweller* until the sudden appearance of an American radio-voice reveals that the audience is eavesdropping not on a mediumistic encounter with the other side of the void, but a radio-bug’s attempts to communicate with the other side of the Atlantic. Such parodies were enabled by the rapidity with which listeners were, by the end of the 1920s, becoming comfortable with the conventions of the wireless. Radio audiences were encouraged to cultivate what the *B.B.C. Hand-Book* for 1928 described as a “listening-sense”, giving their “undivided attention” to the new medium: “Distracting influences must be eliminated – the listening room of the house must be as free from interruption as the auditorium of the theatre.”⁴

To many literary commentators, the most significant feature of early radio was precisely that, in concert with the telephone, the cinema talkie, and other new technologies of sound, it had reorganised the hierarchy of the senses, making listening into an *active* practice and putting sound once more on a level with sight. These technologies, and pre-eminently radio, were understood to be resensitizing audiences – readers as well as listeners – to the sound-world, and particularly to the special category of sonic phenomena represented by the human voice. For some, including the novelist and playwright Clemence Dane, this revaluation of the voice registered as an overdue rejoinder to modern literature’s “neglect of the ear” and the “shorthand prose” of modern novelists. The wireless, Dane concluded, was among those new technologies which were “training the public to listen as well as to look”, and giving much-needed competition to fiction-writers who would henceforth have to write for the ear as well as the eye.⁵ The educationalist (and soon to be Editor-in-Chief of Penguin Books), William Emrys Williams, agreed that listening-in “might give us our ears back”, but pointed out that while the wireless might prove a “competitor” to shorter fictional forms, its “early saturation point” meant that it was unlikely to kill off the novel: “even a broadcast serial seems scarcely feasible, unless its narrative is limited to a well-defined and simple plot, and unless it is stiffened by such devices as a musical accompaniment.”⁶

Williams’s observation that the listening-sense was susceptible to fatigue is worth noting, not least because the public discourse surrounding early wireless literature emphasised the listener’s new obligation to concentrate, just as much as the sounds to which they listened. It took time and effort to become accustomed to a form which, unlike stage drama and the talkie film, addressed a single sense: “Since the audience is dependent on one sense only,” noted Tyrone Guthrie, “it follows that the impression they receive, though limited, is highly concentrated in quality.” Guthrie, one of the first widely-accepted masters of broadcast drama, achieved his greatest successes with *Squirrel’s Cage* (1929)

³ Val Gielgud, *How to Write Broadcast Plays* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1932), p. 14.

⁴ *B.B.C. Hand-Book 1928* “Production of Radio Plays” (London: B.B.C., 1928), pp. 115-117.

⁵ Clemence Dane, “What’s Wrong with the New Novels?”, *The Listener* 122 (13 May 1931), p. 821

⁶ William Emrys Williams, “Can Literature Survive?: II— Theatre, Cinema, and Broadcasting, *The Listener* 346 (28 Aug 1935), p. 370.

- a circular series of vignettes in the life of an office-worker from birth to parenthood - and *The Flowers are Not For You To Pick* (1930), in which a young missionary drowning at sea experiences flashes of scenes and voices from his earlier life. In his view, sensations created by the broadcast play were “more subtle because received by each listener privately at home, not coarsened by being flung into an auditorium”, and “more real because the impression is partly created by the listener himself”.⁷ Such concentration, producers and writers quickly realised, could not be maintained indefinitely. Though the length of early broadcast plays varied widely, from short vignettes like *Dweller in the Darkness* to full-length epics like Reginald Berkeley’s *The White Chateau*, by 1932 Val Gielgud was advising would-be radio dramatists that 40 minutes was ideal. “People are not used to relying on their ears alone,” he explained, “therefore the Radio Dramatist demands an extraordinary degree of concentrated attention for his work, and this quality of concentration must not be unduly or unreasonably strained.”⁸

If B.B.C. executives like Gielgud emphasised the cultivation of the listening-sense as an aesthetic attunement to the new medium, prudent listeners had their own reasons for listening in concentrated bursts. In 1937, the novelist Arthur Calder-Marshall would recall that early wireless audiences, though not immune to some kinds of interruption, were at least constrained by technical factors to be more selective and attentive than their later counterparts:

The early radio sets depended upon accumulators and high-tension batteries, which had to be renewed when they became exhausted. Rather than the expense, the trouble of renewal made people go easy with their sets. They turned it on, when they wanted to listen to what was being broadcast: and they did listen, usually cursing their neighbours for oscillation and running out into the garden to see whether the aerial had blown down whenever there was a fade-out. But now that sets have been devised that run off the electric current, the wireless is kept going all day long. Housewives cook and make the beds and dust to music: and not music only.⁹

Batteries needed recharging; aerials had to be adjusted. The first fully batteryless set - the “Baby Grand” manufactured by Gambrell Brothers Ltd - did not appear until 1926. Even then, interference from mains electricity tended to cause an undesirable “hum” in the valves that processed the signal, and the new mains-powered sets did not catch on until the introduction of indirectly-heated valves in 1927.¹⁰ Listening habits formed before then were determined in large part by the technological limitations of the medium.

There was yet another reason, besides the unfamiliar technique of close listening and the limitations of early sets, that early radio demanded uniquely intense concentration: unlike the stored sound contained in gramophone records and cinema talkies, nothing broadcast live could be repeated. In 1929 the journalist Alan Bland concluded his review of Guthrie’s *Squirrel’s Cage* by noting his disapproval of a particular sound effect. “I cannot suggest anything better,” he admitted, “but perhaps the experts can provide a more satisfactory alternative if, as one hopes, this interesting little play is ‘revived’.”¹¹ The play would have to be *revived*, rather than repeated, because no quick and reliable method of recording live

⁷ Tyrone Guthrie, *Squirrel’s Cage and Two Other Microphone Plays* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), pp. 8-9.

⁸ Gielgud, pp. 147, 17.

⁹ Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1937), p. 85

¹⁰ See *Wireless World and Radio Review* 29:3 (15 July 1931) p. 51, and Keith R. Thrower, *History of the British Radio Valve to 1940* (Ropley, Hants.: MMA International, 1993), p. 13.

broadcasts existed until the beginning of the 1930s. Until then wireless drama would remain, in Val Gielgud's words, "almost heartbreakingly evanescent [...] literally 'here to-night and gone to-morrow'".¹²

Throughout the 1920s the ephemerality of radio broadcasting was widely understood as part of its unique character, distinguishing wireless aurality from the pre-recorded sounds of the gramophone and, after 1927, the film talkie. Writing in 1929, the B.B.C.'s Director of Education J. C. Stobart echoed a common view when he judged the wireless superior to these other technologies "because it is a living voice, not tinned or bottled, and it comes, provided reception is satisfactory, with the special inspiration of the living voice".¹³ A *Listener* editorial of the same year was more conciliatory, suggesting that each invention would carve out "its own peculiar sphere of usefulness". Broadcasting would retain "the advantage of simultaneity – speaker and listener having contact in point of time as well as in place", while for its own part the talkie would "give permanent form to what, broadcast, cannot easily be repeated".¹⁴

The détente did not last long. In 1931, the B.B.C. installed its first recording device, the "Blattnerphone", a magnetic tape-machine invented by the German engineer Kurt Stille and leased to the Corporation by Ludwig Blattner, the entrepreneurial cinema owner and film producer who had licensed the technology. Blattner had envisioned modifying the device to produce synchronized-sound films, but the capacity to record up to 20 minutes of audio on a heavy drum of steel tape, to play back the recording immediately, and to switch between reels with no loss of continuity, made it ideal for recording radio programmes for delayed or repeat transmission. The installation of the device was acknowledged in the *B.B.C. Year-Book* for 1932 as "the most important event of the year", and it soon proved indispensable.¹⁵ The Blattnerphone made it possible to produce recordings much more quickly than the time required for pressing a record, and was used to "bottle" programmes for later retransmission on the Empire service. It also enabled the B.B.C. to keep records of significant broadcasts: a Blattnerphone does sterling service in the 1934 detective novel *Death at Broadcasting House* (written by Val Gielgud in collaboration with fellow B.B.C. executive Eric Maschwitz), where it allows Inspector Caird of Scotland Yard to replay the sound of a murder committed live on air.

By the beginning of the 1930s, technological advancements like the mains-powered radio set and the Blattnerphone were beginning to change the way listeners understood and consumed broadcast media, though wireless retained many of the associations it had accumulated in the previous decade. In 1933, Julian Huxley celebrated the wireless for "bringing to the multitude the actual living voice of statesman and singer, teacher and preacher, instead of mere printed accounts", but noted that the technology had also taken on a new and more troubling aspect: "Broadcasting has given statesmen enormous new powers. Look at the influence exerted through this channel in the last few months by Roosevelt and by Hitler".¹⁶ Trained to concentrate intently on a "living voice", listeners had become susceptible to the

¹¹ Alan Bland, "Squirrel's Cage", *The Listener* 9 (13 March 1929), p. 333.

¹² Gielgud, p. 190.

¹³ J. C. Stobart, "A New Epoch in the Schools", *The Listener* 29 (31 July 1929), p. 150.

¹⁴ "Eyes and No-Eyes", *The Listener* 929 (9 Oct 1929), p. 472.

¹⁵ "Programme Notes", *B.B.C. Year-Book 1932* (London: B.B.C., 1928), p. 101.

¹⁶ Julian Huxley, "Science Speeds Up Communications", *The Listener* 253 (15 Nov 1933), p. 72.

combination of intimacy and authority which, by the middle of the 1930s, had begun to characterize the broadcaster. A character in Elizabeth Bowen's short story "Summer Night" (1941) can be heard complaining that "No one speaks the truth to [her] but the man on the wireless"; by then politicians, monarchs, and propagandists from the White House to Westminster, Buckingham Palace to Berlin, had become adept at exploiting the medium's unrivalled capacities as a means of persuasion.¹⁷

Two late-1930s broadcast plays by Patrick Hamilton – *Money With Menaces* (1937) and *To the Public Danger* (1939) – are noteworthy for the way their suspenseful plots make use of the time-limited temporality of wireless in order to develop a critique of the persuasive power wielded by the radio voice. In *Money With Menaces*, a newspaper proprietor, Carruthers, receives a telephone call from the mysterious and evasive "Mr Poland", informing him that his daughter has been abducted on the way to the children's birthday party she is supposed to be attending. Demanding £1,000, Poland forces his victim to complete a series of absurd tasks across central London before revealing to the desperate Carruthers that the girl was never abducted at all: the whole "blackmail" plot is merely the revenge of Mr. Poland – real name Stevens – for the bullying to which Carruthers subjected him at boarding school: "You simply lost your nerve, showed no fight, made not a single attempt to verify my statements, and have been bluffed by a bogey voice all afternoon, a voice which has made you perform every conceivable idiotic antic all over town".¹⁸ Hamilton mischievously turns the "bogey voice" of Mr. Poland against radio listeners, who like Carruthers allow themselves to be duped by the false intimacy of electrically-mediated speech. Any relief that the audience feels – or, indeed, any outrage at the implausibility of the plot – ought to be tempered by a new awareness of how easily a willing listener can be made to assent to an authoritative telecommunicative presence.

In *To the Public Danger*, Fred and Nan, a young working-class couple on a date in the public bar of an Oxfordshire road-house, unwisely fall in with a seedy officer-class drunkard named Cole and his almost-catatonic sidekick, Reggie. Having played a few games of pinball – another dubious technological time-sink – and downed an excessive quantity of whisky, the four decide to go for a spin in Cole's car, which before long is involved in a collision with what appears to be a man on a bicycle. While the easily-led Nan has by now fallen under Cole's spell, Fred nobly insists on backtracking to check whether the man is still alive. He first reasons with the unrepentant (and by now very inebriated) Cole, then begs him to stop. After suffering a beating, Fred escapes and calls the police while the remaining three joyriders, under the impression that they are being followed by a police car, lose control and are killed in a head-on collision with a tree.

For the driving sequence, Hamilton cleverly rejected dramatic transitions of time and setting, which had become a common feature of radio drama, in favour of a real-time effect which encourages the listener to share Fred's anxiety. After the accident, as Cole temporizes, Fred insists that time is of the essence: "We're wasting minutes – every *minute*."¹⁹ Yet in an epilogue voiced by the Coroner, it emerges that the "victim" was in fact a sack of potatoes propped up by two bicycles left at the side of the road: the public-

¹⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, "Summer Night", in *The Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 653-684 (p. 666).

¹⁸ Patrick Hamilton, *Two Radio Plays: Money With Menaces and To the Public Danger* (London: Constable, 1939), p. 42.

mindful Fred has escaped, while his selfish companions have perished for no reason. (Again, the implausible situation is to some extent redeemed by the medium, since the drunken occupants of the car remain just as much in the dark as the radio audience about what they have actually hit.) *To the Public Danger* effectively dramatizes Fred's moral struggle against the influence of the insidious radio-voice of Cole, who is repeatedly associated with the car wireless that plays at the moment of the original collision and continues after the climactic crash. Although framed as a warning against the dangers of drunk-driving, Hamilton's play may have more to it than that. Broadcast in 1939, when the hectoring voices of Hitler and Oswald Mosley had become all too familiar to listeners, *To the Public Danger* cautions the British radio audience against succumbing to the persuasion of authoritarian bullies in possession of wireless sets.

Natural Wireless: Telecommunication in *The Waves*

In the foregoing section I argued that, in the early years of radio, the technological limitations of the medium inculcated a habit of concentrated attentiveness and an awareness of the ephemerality of broadcast material that was at least as transformative for writers and listeners as the sounds emanating from their wireless sets. Published in October 1931, Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* was conceived, written and revised during this early period and, as more than one critic has suggested, seems to owe something to the experience of listening-in.

Both Melba Cuddy-Keane and Pamela Caughie have produced rich analyses of Woolf's engagement with wireless sound, and of *The Waves* in particular as a novel whose sonic palette "resembles radiophonic and electroacoustic art".²⁰ Not only, as Caughie has pointed out, does *The Waves* read "like a radio drama" – it would be successfully adapted for B.B.C. radio by Louis MacNeice in 1955 – Woolf herself appears to have discussed the idea of a wireless version with the actress Virginia Isham, her distant cousin, as early as 1933.²¹ But if *The Waves* undoubtedly *sounds* as if it belongs on the radio, it was also the result of sustained thought about the principles of wireless transmission, the new possibilities wireless offered for thinking about communication, and the new rhythms and patterns of attention the technology had introduced into everyday life. That Woolf might have assimilated radio into the texture of her later writing has been suggested by Patricia Laurence, who wonders "how much the speaking voice and presentation of news on the radio influences the form and voice of [*Between the Acts*]"²² In this section I want to suggest that *The Waves*, written a decade earlier, marks a significant transition not just in Woolf's thinking about wireless, but in the wider influence of broadcasting on the form and voice of 1930s fiction.

¹⁹ Hamilton, p. 72.

²⁰ Melba Cuddy-Keane, "Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality", in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 69-96 (p. 90).

²¹ Pamela Caughie, "Virginia Woolf: Radio, Gramophone, Broadcasting", in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 332-347 (p. 345); on Woolf's remarks to Isham, see Melba Cuddy-Keane, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²² Patricia Laurence, "The Facts and Fugue of War: From *Three Guineas* to *Between the Acts*", in Mark Hussey (ed.), *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth* (New York: Pace University Press, 1992), p. 228.

Almost from the beginning, the development of wireless technology had been accompanied by two parallel discourses. One was a popular discourse, primarily about sound, carried on largely in the pages of the *Radio Times* and *The Listener*. The other was a technical discourse, primarily about functionality, reserved for specialist publications like *Radio Review*, *Experimental Wireless*, and *Wireless World*. In the early days, however, the boundary between those two discourses was by no means as stark as it later became. Early editions of the *B.B.C. Year-Book*, for instance (before 1930 the *B.B.C. Hand-Book*), reported on programming policy and the social aspects of listening-in, but they also advertised batteries, valves, coils, and wave-meters to tech-savvy consumers, and included an extensive “technical” section for professional engineers and hobbyists.

As far as we know, Woolf was not a subscriber to *Experimental Wireless*. Yet she shared with its readers an informed interest in telecommunications media that went beyond the transmission of sound. The electromagnetic subtext of *The Waves* has been widely noticed: wireless waves have been thought by some to figure among the implications condensed in the title itself, and it is well known that Woolf was reading works and listening to radio broadcasts by the physicist Sir James Jeans while revising the novel in the winter of 1930.²³ Metaphors of broadcasting are encoded repeatedly in the novel, not least in its several references to the term’s earlier agricultural meaning. Birds scatter from the scullery door “like a fling of seed” as young Rhoda looks on. Bernard wonders whether, by having children, he might “cast a fling of seed wider, beyond this generation”, and later in life imagines his mind thrown out into the world “as a man throws seeds in great fan-flights”. Finally, in old age, he discovers new order in his lived experience, which in earlier life had appeared “fiery and furtive like a fling of grain cast into the air”.²⁴ Other telecommunicative allusions abound, if not so insistently. In Rome, Bernard likens the experience of feeling his impressions of the world cohere to the way “dots and dashes [...] run themselves into continuous lines”, recalling the physicist Arthur Eddington’s description of the mind as a wireless (telegraph) receiver which “reads the dots and dashes of incoming nerve-signals”.²⁵ Jinny, in a metaphor that couples technological awareness with an expanding consciousness, notices how her own listening-sense is developing as she grows older: “Membranes, webs of nerve that lay white and limp, have filled and spread themselves and float round us like filaments, making the air tangible and catching in them far-away sounds unheard before.”²⁶

Woolf was always an ambivalent listener-in. Critical of what she dismissed as the “middlebrow” proclivities of the “Betwixt and Between Company”, she nonetheless made broadcasts in 1927 and 1929 – before the introduction of the Blattnerphone – and again in 1937: a partial recording of this final broadcast provides the only known record of her speaking voice.²⁷ It isn’t clear when the Woolfs themselves first acquired a wireless set, but there was certainly a set in their Tavistock Square home during the General Strike in 1926, when Woolf notes in her diary that she had listened to a broadcast

²³ Michael H. Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 190; Jane Marcus, “Britannia Rules *The Waves*”, in Karen Lawrence (ed.) *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-century “British” Literary Canons* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 136-162 (p. 160).

²⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 5, 67, 129.

²⁵ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 111; Arthur Eddington, *Science and The Unseen World* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 35.

²⁶ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 78.

by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (“he rolls his rs”), and heard the announcement of the strike’s end on 12 May. She may, however, have been listening on her servant Nelly Boxall’s set: a letter to her sister Vanessa Bell the same day mentions news of the strike “coming at intervals in Nelly’s bedroom from the wireless”.²⁸ In any case, by 1927 Woolf was clearly acquainted with the experience both of broadcasting and of listening-in, and she had a wireless at her Sussex home, Monk’s House, by 24 April 1930, when she wrote to Vita Sackville-West to say that she and Leonard had enjoyed a B.B.C. talk given by Vita and her husband, Harold Nicolson.

The first draft of *The Waves* had been completed exactly two weeks earlier; a week later, Woolf would begin the gruelling process of revision. One change she had already decided on concerned the title, which had been “The Moths” until September 1929, when she recalled that moths “don’t fly by day”.²⁹ (Like radio signals, moths do better in the dark.) The initial idea for “The Moths” seems to have come from a letter Woolf received in May 1927 from her sister, Vanessa Bell, who was staying in Cassis in a house nightly inundated by the insects. Having captured a specimen, Vanessa eventually managed to kill and preserve it for her children. In her letter, she alludes to an experiment reported by the French entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre, whose books sold briskly in English translation throughout the 1910s and 1920s: “didn’t Fabre try experiments with this same creature & attract all the males in the neighbourhood by shutting up one female in a room? – just what we have now done”. Struck by the image, Virginia replied that she “could think of nothing else but you & the moths for hours after reading your letter”; indeed, she intended “to write a story about it”.³⁰

Virginia and Vanessa, both passionate lepidopterists, knew Fabre’s work well.³¹ In *The Life of the Caterpillar* (1916) – to which Woolf would later pay understated homage in the title of her posthumously-published essay, “The Death of the Moth” (1942) – Fabre describes how he sealed a female Great Peacock moth in an air-tight container so as to test whether males could still find their way to the female in the absence of any scent. If they could, Fabre wondered, was it possible that moths had some hitherto unsuspected capacity for telecommunication? “Physical science is to-day preparing to give us wireless telegraphy, by means of the Hertzian waves. Can the Great Peacock have anticipated our efforts in this direction? [...] In a word, does she, in her own manner, employ a kind of wireless telegraphy?”³²

The outcome of Fabre’s experiment was enough to persuade him that moth-telegraphy was unlikely, but his striking hypothesis (as Vanessa’s letter suggests) was more widely repeated than the result. In July 1922, *Popular Wireless Weekly* carried a short news item on “Moth Radiograms”, reporting that “well-known scientists” were carrying out experiments: “It has been suggested that the insects use some form

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Middlebrow: Unpublished Letter to the Editor of the *New Statesman*”, in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 113-119.

²⁸ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. 3: 1923-1928*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 262.

²⁹ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Penguin, 1985), III, p. 229.

³⁰ Quoted in Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1972), II, p. 126.

³¹ See Christina Alt, *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

of radio to get in touch”.³³ The idea did not go away. Writing in the *B.B.C. Year-Book* for 1930, just as Woolf was revising *The Waves*, the eminent Scottish naturalist J. Arthur Thomson concluded that “Natural ‘Wireless’” was indeed a possibility: “where there is definite evidence of electro-magnetic waves, besides ordinary heat and light, being naturally present in the immediate environment of a living creature, there is no reason to deny the possibility of the living creature sensing these waves.”³⁴

Harvena Richter has suggested several plausible reasons, both personal and entomological, for Woolf’s intense interest in moths as symbolic creatures, and is no doubt right to say that “the waves [...] like the moths, suggest the unconscious and creativity”. But in substituting “The Waves” for “The Moths”, Woolf also exchanged one wirelessly-charged natural metaphor for another. Fabre’s influence is readily discernible in *The Waves*, which shares not only his interest in the behaviour of moths, but much of the vocabulary of his English translations. His description in *Social Life in the Insect World* (1911) of the behaviour of the Oak Eggar moth, for instance, would not be at all out of place in Woolf’s novel: “Without any material emanation a luminous point shakes the ether with its vibrations and fills with light a sphere of indefinite magnitude. [...] The moth does not emit molecules; but something about it vibrates, causing waves capable of propagation to distances incompatible with an actual diffusion of matter.”³⁵ Compare this naturalist’s account of the Oak Eggar’s telecommunicative “vibrations” with the account given by the youthful Bernard, in *The Waves*, of his passage through a London crowd: “Am I not, as I walk, trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy, which, unmoored as I am from a private being, bid me embrace these engrossed flocks; these starers and trippers; these errand-boys and furtive and fugitive girls who, ignoring their doom, look in at shop-windows? But I am aware of our ephemeral passage.”³⁶

In *The Waves*, such oscillations and vibrations are associated with an ephemerality that characterizes not only the transience of human life, but also the unpreservable signals – technological or “natural” – which offer the possibility of fleeting connection. In revising her manuscript, Woolf emphasised that sense of momentaneity by recasting the narrative into present-tense commentaries delivered by its six main characters, who continually draw the reader’s (or listener’s) attention to the *now* of the narrative, to a temporal logic of telecommunicative liveness which Mary Ann Doane has described, in relation to television, as “a ‘*This-is-going-on*’ rather than a ‘*That-has-been*’”.³⁷ “This is only here, this is only now”, says Jinny in early childhood; leaving for the first day of school, Bernard observes that “Everybody seems to be doing things for this moment only; and never again. Never again. The urgency of it all is fearful. [...]”.³⁸ *The Waves* was perhaps the first novel to register fully, and formally, the new sense of urgency reinforced, if not engendered, by the rapid expansion of wireless broadcasting in the 1920s. It would not be the last. The later 1930s saw a sudden proliferation of media-savvy narratives narrated

³² J. Henri Fabre, *The Life of the Caterpillar*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1916), pp. 268-269.

³³ *Popular Wireless Weekly* (1 July 1922), p. 66.

³⁴ J. Arthur Thomson, “Is There Natural ‘Wireless?’”, *B.B.C. Year-Book 1930* (London: B.B.C., 1930), 205-210 (p. 205).

³⁵ J.H. Fabre, *Social Life in the Insect World*, trans. Bernard Miall (New York: Century, 1912), p. 236.

³⁶ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 67.

³⁷ Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe”, in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 222-239 (p. 222)).

wholly or largely in the continuous present, including Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), John Sommerfield's *May Day* (1936), and Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). That so many writers chose to experiment with the narrative possibilities of the present may be, at least in part, attributable to the influence of *The Waves* and the new familiarity of the ephemeral wireless voice. After all, as Neville points out in Woolf's novel, "Each tense [...] means differently".³⁸

The Talking Voice that Runs On

It has frequently been suggested that the rise of telephony helps to explain the modernist novel's shift of emphasis after about 1930 from the "stream of consciousness" to what David Lodge has called the "stream of talk".⁴⁰ But while the telephone had a head start on wireless, it long remained a notoriously unreliable form of communication, as apt as any high modernist poet or novelist to produce cross-talking voices and incomprehensible fragments. It was the mid-1920s before engineers at Bell Labs and the G.P.O. managed to get the problem of line noise under control, and the telephone, no longer an exasperating novelty or necessary commercial evil, could begin to be understood as a reliable means of communication, let alone a constitutive technology of modern selfhood. In the meantime, its adoption by private individuals was relatively slow, so that by 1925 there were about as many wireless receivers in Britain as there were telephones (1.3 million). Wireless sets were installed in pubs and places of work as well as domestic residences, reaching a wider and more varied audience than the telephone; and it may be that the increasing hubbub of wireless voices at this time helps, quite as much as the experience of talking on the telephone, to make sense of that new real-time garrulity in fiction which Pompey Casmilus, the narrator of Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), calls "the talking voice that runs on".⁴¹

In Patrick Hamilton's novel *The Plains of Cement* (1934), the barmaid Ella, having written to arrange an interview for a job as a nursemaid with a family travelling to India, receives a reply in the form of a postcard bearing the following inscription:

5 Amprey Gardens,
N.W.3.
Mrs Sanderson-Chantry thanks Miss Dawson for her letter, and would be obliged if she would call to talk the matter over at the above address between 2 and 3.15 on Friday afternoon.
E. Sanderson-Chantry.⁴²

Expecting a more encouraging response, Ella feels "a little snubbed" not only by the note's perfunctoriness, but more particularly by the way her potential employer frames the invitation "in the third person and present tense, as though relating a story, or like a broadcasting announcer describing a sort of athletic event in progress". For Ella, accustomed to a rather different set of social conventions from the Sanderson-Chantrys, the postcard's continuous present evokes not the bourgeois formality of

³⁸ *The Waves*, pp. 12, 17.

³⁹ *The Waves*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ David Lodge, "Dialogue in the Modern Novel", in *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 81.

⁴¹ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper: Or, Work it Out for Yourself* (New York: Morrow, 1937), p. 37.

⁴² Patrick Hamilton, *Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky*, (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 463.

N.W.3, but the casual usage of the bar-room raconteur, or – better yet, as the longer simile suggests – the antagonism of a sporting event on the pub wireless.

The B.B.C. was surprisingly slow to exploit the radiogenic potential of live commentary. In June 1923, the crime novelist Edgar Wallace gave a talk entitled “My Impressions of the Derby”, but not until March 1926 was the first “outside broadcast” of a sporting event made (from a boxing match, Curley v. Corbett, at the National Sporting Club). The following year saw the beginning in earnest of broadcast sport, with the first football match (Arsenal v. Sheffield) in January, the first racing fixture (the Grand National) in March, the first Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race in April, and the first cricket commentary in May. In 1929, the *B.B.C. Hand-Book* printed selections from the running commentaries on the previous year’s Grand National, Derby, and F. A. Cup Final.

By the end of the 1920s live commentaries had become a regular fixture of the broadcasting schedules, and even those with only a passing interest, like the mystery novelist Dorothy L. Sayers, found that the background noise could encourage productive wanderings of the mind: “You get a running commentary on a football match, and it occurs to you how easy it would be in the rough-and-tumble of the scrum to jab something into a man [...] and suddenly you realise that somebody has scored a goal and you weren’t paying attention”.⁴³ Soon, the characteristic commentary style was so familiar as to prove a rich resource for parodists. In a *Listener* article of 1935, the radio producer Grace Wyndham Goldie describes a broadcast routine in which the comedian Nelson Keys performed ‘Mary had a little lamb’ in the style of various B.B.C. announcers of the day. “The gem of this collection was the football commentator. The very tones, the very spirit of a thousand breezily gruff running commentaries were in the rising excitement of ‘Mary passes to Lamb; Lamb passes to Mary; Mary to Lamb; Lamb-Mary; oh, well played, Lamb!’”⁴⁴

Given her evident familiarity with such running commentaries, it is perhaps not surprising that Ella’s thoughts should hit on a sporting broadcast as the most recognisable instance in her experience of an address made in the third person and the present tense. Nor were such commentaries confined to sport. B.B.C. presenters commentated on a range of newsworthy events, including the visit of the French President Gaston Doumergue and the dedication of the Menin Gate in 1927, the Armistice Day service at the Cenotaph in 1928, and a sale of Old Masters at Christie’s in 1929. In the course of a very few years, the influence of the wireless had transformed present tense narration – generally associated in Hamilton’s trilogy with the lower-class pub raconteurs of Ella’s acquaintance – into a respectable style for gentlemen speaking the widely-ridiculed dialect that the public had begun to call “B.B.C. English”.

Perhaps it would be stretching a point to suggest that the commentaries accompanying racing fixtures and public events directly influenced the forms of modern fiction after the late 1920s. Yet the unprecedented boom in present-tense narrative at about this time suggests, at the very least, a new effort by writers to capture some of the immediacy and excitement that had begun to be associated with the voice of the wireless. “On the screen, in a book, even in a special edition of a newspaper,” wrote *Mass-Observation* founder Tom Harrisson, “you do not get the feeling that the story you see *is happening at*

⁴³ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Trials and Sorrows of a Mystery Writer”, *The Listener* 156 (6 Jan 1932), p. 26.

this moment; radio gives the moment's actuality. The vivid drama, or the running commentary, can catch hold of the whole attention and excite beyond all commonsense."⁴⁵ Whether or not they were responding directly to the voice of the radio, many writers, from Woolf onwards, found themselves using similar techniques in pursuit of the same aim.

⁴⁴ Grace Wyndham Goldie, "Variety and H.G. Wells", *The Listener* 338 (3 Jul 1935), p. 16.

⁴⁵ Tom Harrison, "The Power of Radio", *The Listener* 625 (2 Jan 1941), p. 27.