

Listening Beyond Words:
The Therapeutic Effect of Vocal Pleasure
in the Audiobook Reading of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*

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A growing body of neuroplastic research suggests that music, instrumental as well as vocal, interacts with cognitive functions such as memory and language and that it may have an impact on the treatment of various brain disorders. A particularly beneficial effect is obtained when the patient is *producing* music but merely *perceiving* it is enough to stimulate intersubjective communication and to cause changes in the amygdala. The fictional treatment of a similar connection between music, pleasurable emotion and language has attracted considerable attention among literary scholars. A case in point is the research on Virginia Woolf's novels. Woolf herself stated that prior to composing her books, she thought of them as music. Incidentally, despite (or perhaps due to) lacking a proper musical training, Woolf comes across as a music lover of the type that early-twentieth-century sound reproduction technology engendered.

In the proposed article, I will approach Woolf's writing through contemporary vocal technology. I will argue that, like music, the audiobook has a potential for establishing a sense of therapeutic intersubjectivity between the listener and the alterity of the narrating voice. The perception of the acousmatic voice is situated at the intersection of a signifying orality and a vocalicity that reaches beyond language. I am indebted to Adriana Cavarero's idea that while being perceived as excess in a logocentric system, vocal manifestations outside speech signification have a liberating function. Virginia Woolf's novel *Night and Day* (1919) lends itself to an exploration of the creative tension between orality and vocalicity since here realistic prose is juxtaposed with a more experimental style. A key argument is that in her reading of Woolf's text, Juliet Stevenson emphasises semantic speech in most of the characters thus inviting the listener to explore the contrasting vocal flatness reserved for the protagonist Katharine Hilbery as a field of pleasure, rest and healing.