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# The Non-Linear Dynamics of Virginia Woolf's London: from Elation to Street Haunting

Catherine LANONE\*

## RESUME

*Flâneuse éprise de Londres, adepte de cette énonciation piétonnière définie par Michel de Certeau, Virginia Woolf choisit pour son premier manifeste moderniste publié par la Hogarth Press, qui lui assurait toute liberté en matière de création, de réinventer la description de la ville en allant délibérément à l'encontre de l'idéologie du parc victorien, qui faisait de Kew Gardens avec ses serres exotiques l'un des grands emblèmes de l'Empire britannique tel que les affectionnait la reine Victoria. Le "Kew Gardens" de Virginia Woolf appréhende donc le parc au cœur de la ville comme un tissu de sons épars qui s'égaillent, bribes de conversations croisées au gré des visiteurs qui viennent s'arrêter devant un seul massif, bouquet de touches de couleurs impressionnistes et non taxonomie d'espèces; parallèlement, l'escargot à fleur de terre impose son parcours délibérément décalé, où la linéarité, si elle existe, ne peut qu'être parodique. Avec Mrs Dalloway, Woolf pousse plus avant l'expérimentation non linéaire, là où se frôlent les trajectoires de Septimus et de Mrs Dalloway, le parc devenant l'espace d'une folie héritée de la Première Guerre Mondiale, tandis que par une sorte d'effet papillon les vibrations de son désespoir vont venir hanter la vie d'une femme qui ne l'a pas vu; enfin, dans Street Haunting, la dérive dans les rues de Londres se fait palimpseste mnémorique, tandis que surgissent dans le récit des figures grotesques qui problématisent la démarche.*

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf; Mrs Dalloway; Kew Gardens; Street Haunting; London; consumerism; feminine; grotesque

Virginia Woolf's claim in *A Room of One's Own* that women need a proper inner space in order to create has remained famous, but she actually lays equal emphasis on women's ability to go outside, to roam the streets of London. Woolf loved London, and she loved living and writing in London; she spent most of her life in the city, and was deeply attached to her successive homes, from Hyde Park Gate to Gordon Square, Brunswick Square, and Tavistock Square, while the very name of the Bloomsbury Group signals the importance of location, as if modernism sprung from the heart of the city. Indeed, for Woolf, London was first and foremost a literary palimpsest, hence her only possible true home or "country" as a writer; when she was estranged from London during the Blitz and had to retreat to Sussex and Rodmell, she wrote to her friend Ethel Smyth:

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How odd it is being a countrywoman after all these years of being Cockney! ... You never shared my passion for that great city. Yet it is what, in some odd corner of my dreaming mind, represents Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens. It's my only patriotism. (Woolf 1980, 460)

Voicing her "passion" for the city, Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* urges women to reclaim this territory, telling the Newnham students to "loiter at street corners" and indulge in "the fascination of London streets". An ordinary practitioner of the city, to borrow Michel De Certeau's expression (De Certeau 93), Woolf walks, shaping cityscape into textual experience: as she writes in her diary in May 1928, "London itself perpetually attracts, stimulates, gives me a play and a story and a poem, without any trouble, save that of moving my legs through the streets" (Woolf 1980 [b], 186). Woolf thus describes her passion for London in terms which are strikingly reminiscent of Michel De Certeau's concept of "pedestrian speech acts" (De Certeau 97), a pedestrian appropriation of the topographical system of the city; for Woolf, experiencing and revisiting the literary capital prompts a new, female text.

### Cityscape as soundscape

From the start, Woolf experiments with non-linear explorations of the city. In 1919, her modernist manifesto, *Kew Gardens*, attempts to capture the city's energy by decentering enunciation. If there is progress at stake, it is not a pedestrian's but a snail's, and even that is hardly linear—the snail labours over crumbs of loose earth, between brown cliffs and green lakes and tree-like blades of grass, "all these objects lay across the snail's progress between one stalk and another to his goal".<sup>1</sup> In this diminutive pilgrim's progress, the thin crackling texture of a leaf becomes a treacherous obstacle which must be negotiated with the tip of a horn, assessed, before the snail decides to slip under it rather than creep around it. The slow snail is a parodic *flâneur* in a flower-bed. As opposed to this mock linearity, which may be seen as a metaphor of human life,<sup>2</sup> the text creates a random map of intensity, beginning with the flashes of colour, the red, blue, yellow throats of flowers, their heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves, a mute, organic, vibrant colour scheme which speaks to the eye in a language of its own. But there is no "eye", no dominant gaze or subject in the scene, only partial glimpses, snippets of conversations, so that the garden becomes soundscape, a collection of fragmented voices, "insignificant words", "words with short wings with their heavy body of meaning inadequate to carry them far", like clumsy butterflies lighting on the flowers:

Nell, Bert, Lot, Ces, Phil, Pa, he says; I says, she says, I says, I says I says—My  
Bert, Sis, Bill, Grand, the old man, sugar.  
Sugar, flour, kippers greens,  
Sugar, sugar, sugar

<sup>1</sup> Since I am using the facsimile of the original edition, there are no page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, don't we as academics spend our time creeping and crawling round, under, over, the fragile yet crushing papery texture of one obstacle, or one reform, after another?

The prose poem seems to record at random the broken skeleton of language, a *mise en abyme* of the story's structure, *Kew Gardens*, a collection of cues. With this extraordinary tension between the small, static space of the flower-bed and vagrant voices as people come to and fro, Woolf displaces the subject, the stable self, and invents Modernism. We witness snippets of scenes, a shy lovers' reunion, reminiscences of a tryst and a buckled shoe, the diminutive epiphany of a stout woman swaying before a carnation, materialized in the text by Vanessa Bell's drawing printing the flower right in the middle of the lines, so that the reader too is held by this (in)carnation, this becoming-picture or -flower of the page. But if there is elation before tea, the garden with its golden or crimson flowers is also haunted by darker memories which surface through brief allusions, recalling for instance a lost romance, while a mad old man designs a complex telephone which should be put by widows' bedsides in order to call the dead, hinting at the disturbing scars left by the war. The snail's protective shell may then dispel through homophony the threat of World War One shells, revisiting the poetic tradition of the garden as an elegiac space. The camera-eye then shifts to a wide-angle shot, as it were, mingling voices with outside noises to create a vast partition of sounds, so that if the garden may be seen as the metonymic heart of the city, the city itself turns into a vast echoing chamber, soundscape rather than cityscape:

Voices, yes, wordless voices, breaking the silence ... breaking the silence? But there was no silence; all the time the motor omnibuses were turning their wheels and changing their gear; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within the other the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air.

The metropolis becomes one vast system of mechanical and human sound, mingling colour and sound in a synaesthetic vibration.

### **Streetwalking and enunciation**

With her great 1925 London novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf expands on the devices invented in *Kew Gardens*. Again, she wishes to capture both the intensity of affect aroused by the hustle and bustle of city life, and the contrast between linearity (trajectory) and the random connections, the chaotic, aleatory shifts, encounters or lack thereof, coincidences, promiscuity, unseen vibrations and influences, in short, what I would like to call the non-linear dynamics of the city, borrowing the concept, if I may, from chaos theory.

For Woolf's London is aleatory rather than a stable map, a series of random paths that give shape to space and deny a totalizing perspective. As Sonita Sarker suggests, Woolf begins by demonumentalizing Englishness. Mrs Dalloway's mock-Baedeker itinerary through the streets of London produces "an alternative geography of Englishness by exposing and deflating the masculinist grandeur of the capital's monuments and leaders" (Sarker 7). From Picadilly to Bond Street and Oxford Street (so very reminiscent of course of De Quincey's London), from Buckingham Palace to St Paul's or St James's park, Woolf maps Mrs Dalloway's London by

translating the *flâneur's* adventure in feminine terms, as Rachel Bowlby has shown. The city is experienced in terms of sensory experience, breeding delight; going to buy the flowers herself, Mrs Dalloway literally dives into the fluxes and refluxes of the city, taps into its energy: "[w]hat a lark! What a plunge!" (Woolf 1964, 5) In the "soft mesh of the grey-blue morning air" (Woolf 1964, 7) connoting rebirth after the war, her elation is again described in terms of a joyful partition of sounds, an alliterative accumulation which breeds intensity:

In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (Woolf 1964, 6)

But as Woolf insists on the sensual experience of the *flâneuse* who relishes the atmosphere of the city, she undermines the official landmarks which she mentions, such as Buckingham Palace, with the crowd admiring "Victoria billowing on her mound", "her shelves of running water, her geraniums" (Woolf 1964, 22). Besides, there are chaotic, symptomatic disruptions of the traffic, of the flow. An official motorcar brings everything to a standstill, in a parody of Wordsworth's mighty heart standing still, turning the "throbbing engines" into the pulse of the city (Woolf 1964, 17). As all the passers-by gaze at the car, imagining the prime minister or the queen may be drifting by, a sense of awe descends on the pavement, casting an ironic light on "greatness" which "was passing, hidden, down Bond Street". Like the familiar monuments, the car functions as a metonymy of sentimental jingoism and Woolf, who mentions Einstein two pages later, discusses the impact of such symbols in terms which seem to foreshadow the butterfly effect of chaos theory, the way in which a tiny variation in the initial conditions of a dynamical system may produce long-term variations of the system's behaviour, just as the wings of the butterfly may create an impulse, a flutter, which breeds a hurricane far far away:

Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors/shops sailors looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag, of Empire. In a public-house in a back street a Colonial insulted the House of Windsor, which led to words, broken beer glasses, and a general shindy, which echoed strangely across the way in the ears of girls buying white underlinen threaded with pure white ribbon for their weddings. For the surface agitation of the car as it sunk grazed something very profound. (Woolf 1964, 21)

Woolf's point is that beyond "the waves of that vitality which Clarissa loved" (Woolf 1964, 9) the city is a dynamical system which cannot be cut off from politics. The ripples of conversations triggered by the passing car expose the clichés of female purity and of imperialism, two ideological constructs which juxtaposition demystifies. And the passage relies on juxtaposition indeed. Mrs Dalloway's delight

in dallying among displays of commodities is answered by the horizontal linearity of the motorcar and the vertical impulse of the aeroplane in the sky, two mechanical elements which prompt a network of connections and disconnections, as people pause to look at them. People stand closer and closer apart,<sup>3</sup> gazing from different perspectives and different lives at the same objects testifying to the mechanical force of modernity. If the car stands for veiled political power, the plane subverts the emblems of transcendence, which connect the city with the sky. The city's yearning for the divine may well recall Apollinaire's playful *Zone*: "[c]'est le Christ qui monte au ciel mieux que les aviateurs/il détient le record du monde pour la hauteur" (Apollinaire 9). Here, in an extraordinary scene, the passers-by watch the plane in the sky and seek to decipher the mysterious letters it spells in the sky as it loops round and round, and the white smoke draws a T and an O and an F, and "a K, and E, a Y perhaps?" (Woolf 1964, 24) But instead of spelling the key to transcendence, the plane merely advertises Toffee and Kreemo, so that even the sky is conquered by consumerism. Connection is spurious, whether vertical or horizontal—Mrs Dalloway stands watching at the sky, not so far from a distraught young man, who waits for the scene to burst into flames, listening to the sparrows chirruping in Greek, watching his dead friend Evans standing behind the railings of the park, turning water into the Styx, the park into a palimpsest of memory. For the shell-shocked survivor, the prophetic plane merely spells doom, trauma, the permanent scars left by World War One. Woolf expands on *Kew Gardens*, as the heart of the city, the Park, is irremediably haunted by Septimus's visions of the war.

This random, paradoxical (dis)connectedness juxtaposing Septimus and Mrs Dalloway ties in with what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a mysterious kind of disconnected togetherness, a way of inhabiting or being together in the city, "un être-ensemble dans la ville": "la ville est un système de renvois, de correspondances, d'écartements, de lieux qui ne se jointent que moyennant une commune disjonction".<sup>4</sup>

Mrs Dalloway and Septimus stand worlds apart, in upper-class London and in a haunted garden, adjacent spaces which only meet through shared disjunction, as Nancy has it. But their (dis)connection is pregnant with meaning, in a way which recalls once more chaos theory, since the plane seems to trigger some kind of butterfly effect too: the two characters never actually see or get to meet each other, and yet they are mysteriously connected, and the news of Septimus's suicide ripples through Clarissa's party at the end of the novel, deepening her moment of social triumph into a meditation on time and death, as the leaden circles of Big Ben dissolve in the air. Thus *Mrs Dalloway* offers in a way a theory of spatial practices in the city, from the exhilaration of idle footsteps or the delights of consumerism to the disquieting familiarity of city life and shared public spaces, probing into what it means to actually inhabit collective experience, what happens when people pass each other by unawares, when trajectories cross and miss, and yet somehow

<sup>3</sup> To use, in a different context, Australian poet's A.D. Hope's expression which John Bayley's borrows to speak about his life with Iris Murdoch when she became an Alzheimer patient (Bayley 49).

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from Jean-Luc Nancy refer to the paper he presented at the conference "L'Art de la ville/The Art of the City" at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail on 7 November 2008.

influence each other. Recontextualizing the experience of the city as gendered, historical and political, Woolf perceives the city as the vibrant organic tissue of experience, where surreptitious creativities add randomness to the networks of social constraints or the logic of consumerism.

**"Street haunting": dallying in the twilight zone**

Septimus's suicide might be read in psychoanalytic terms, according to Jacques Press's metaphoric definition of hysteria as a pearl growing out of the grains of sand deposited in the mind by common neurosis and previous experience, as new traumatic affect revives past trauma; but we shall choose to focus instead on Woolf's kinesthetic appropriation of city space, straying away from shell shock in order to discuss Woolf's own metaphor of oyster and pearl, an image which she uses to conceptualize not trauma but street haunting, as she ventures through the streets of London and into another kind of masculine textual shape, the essay.

Indeed, in *Street Haunting*, an essay published in 1926, Woolf wanders through familiar London haunts. Once again, the text explores the way in which the *flâneuse* reclaims the topography of London as a clearly autobiographical "I" ventures in the twilight to roam the streets of London under the weak pretext of buying a pencil, "an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner" (Woolf 1974, 20). The essay may be read as a hyperbolic celebration of city life, recalling the exhilarating plunge of *Mrs Dalloway's* opening lines as the eye retrieves trophies from the sea of streets, or rests on window displays like a butterfly sipping colour and warmth, so that nothing compares with "the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London" (Woolf 1974, 20). But Woolf also plays on fissures, gaps, revealing the haunted margins of the city, dealing this time less with war than with temporal fragmentation and exclusion.

The streets, first of all, turn into a palimpsest of memory fragmenting the sense of self. The mind is compared to a "central oyster of perceptiveness" (Woolf 1974, 22), as drifting creates a line of flight, breaking the shell of daily life; but it is also submitted to a curious double vision. Catching sight of pearls in a window display, the narrator conjures up a different self: "[w]earing pearls, wearing silk, one steps out onto a balcony which overlooks the gardens of sleeping Mayfair" (Woolf 1974, 27), as if city life had jumbled things, so that the "colours have run", as it were, in the self:

But what could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter's evening; we are walking to the strand to buy a pencil. How then, are we also on a balcony wearing pearls in June? (Woolf 1974, 28)

As the mind is an oyster, the pearls function as a metaphor of experience as incremental repetition, the accretion of grains of sand turning into precious mnemonic traces which both enrich and rupture the sense of self: "[a]m I here or am I there?" (Woolf 1974, 28) Memory blurs the map of experience, a dissociation which occurs for instance when the narrator sees the Thames through the eyes of a person leaning over the Embankment, only to realize that this person is herself, at least her former self, unless it is the blurred figure of a man who has now died: "[h]is

is the happiness of death; ours the insecurity of life." (Woolf 1974, 33). The familiar place entails a curious dissociation.

Splitting the self through the palimpsest of memory, walking also exposes the wanderer to the fissures of city life. As the narrator harps on the delight of streets and window displays, she suddenly shifts to a grotesque double: "[w]hat, then, is it like to be a dwarf?" (Woolf 1974, 24) It takes a split second for the reader to understand that the narrator has actually entered a shoe shop, and is now looking at a dwarf buying shoes. The dwarf has perfect feet, and courts the gaze she normally flees, flaunting her shoes before the mirror, a deformed version of "proud, sure-footed femininity" as Rachel Bowlby points out (Bowlby 215). But consumer society is a lure; as soon as the dwarf leaves, she is stripped of the shop assistant's flattering praise and quickly dwindles back to her distorted body, an anticlimactic shrinking stressed by the ironic adverb "only" which echoes at the end of the sentence:

At length the pair was chosen, and, as she walked out between her guardians, with the parcel swinging from her finger, the ecstasy faded, knowledge returned, the old peevishness, the old apology came back, and by the time she had reached the street again she had become a dwarf only. (Woolf 1974, 25)

The would-be Cinderella emblemizes the way in which consumer society makes peevish dwarves of us all. The dwarf with her useless shoes is the ironic counterpart of the energetic narrator, the grotesque grain of sand which as is important as the pearls in window displays.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the text creates a disquieting collage, as the streets are haunted by marginal presences which suddenly materialize in the limelight, as if the dwarf had triggered a strange macabre dance, a "human spectacle" (Woolf 1974, 26): "all joined in the hobble and tap of the dwarf's dance" (Woolf 1974, 26). For instance, Woolf juxtaposes the glittering legs of ladies and gentlemen entering a theatre with the grotesque shape of an old beggar, the "humped body of an old woman abandoned on the steps of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey" (Woolf 1974, 26). The liminal creature looms large, yet remains invisible for the passers-by (the shot is framed as if by a camera, the legs which are free to walk seductively contrasting with the static heap, a jarring grain of sand marring the city's picture). The "derelicts" (Woolf 1974, 26) lurk in the city, recalling Michel De Certeau's words: "[a]n uncanniness lurks there, in the everyday life of the city. It is a ghost that henceforth haunts urban planning" (De Certeau 133). The narrator notices them before retrieving her pencil and returning safely home, aware of the social boundaries which protect her world, ironically pointing to the way such presences tend to be dismissed by the pedestrians, through the strategic, ironic use of "we": "[t]hey do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity" (Woolf 1974, 26). Thus she revisits not only the streets of London but also

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<sup>5</sup> During the discussion following the paper, one of the participants suggested that this play on irony and the grotesque may well be characteristic of the way the female modernist voice appropriates the experience of the city.



the masculine tradition of the essay, reinventing her own rambling, feminine form but also remaining intensely aware of her own privileged social viewpoint.

To conclude, Woolf's experience as a twentieth-century *flâneuse* tends to entwine exhilaration and a disquieting plunge into ominous fissures, the scars of an exclusion caused by poverty or deformity, not to mention war-induced madness. For Sara Gerend, who applies to Woolf Benjamin's concept of "urban phantasmagoria", "the simple act of an individual rambling aimlessly amidst the city crowd turns the metropolis into a spectral milieu" (Gerend 237). Woolf appropriates the *flâneur* tradition and though aware of her middle-class moorings within the house to which she returns in the end, she attempts to open her text to marginality and *errance*. Indeed, we might say that Woolf's text throbs with what Nancy called "palpitation du passage", attempting to recreate the shock and (dis)continuity of modernity, as peripatetic enunciation thrives on the delights of the street, the moment-to-moment rhythm of the city, but also probes into the mechanics of consumerism (from the ironic writing in the sky to the dwarf's dance or the figures of grotesque beggars), and into connections and disconnections, coincidences, side effects, gaps and fissures, all the choreography of the city, which, according to Nancy, can never be experienced as a ballet by whoever is playing a part in the actual experience of cityscape...

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