



Pencilling in the Margins: Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" and Limning the Imperial Metropole

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Abstract

This article reads Woolf's London essay – with particular reference to the pencil that frames the narrator's London 'ramble' at both ends – in conjunction with recent histories and commentaries on urban, imperial, London in the early twentieth-century to establish how the modernist and feminist spatial restlessness in Woolf's writings comes into complex interface with the imperial geographical forays of her time. The exercise of flânerie in Woolf's city essays and fiction, the significance of which within a feminist paradigm is undeniable, cannot however be detached from how the space of the imperial metropolis was indelibly stamped by the awareness of empire. Taking cognisance of recent readings suggesting that Woolf's use of flânerie could be viewed as an embrace of otherness that holds out a challenge to nativist/nationalist boundaries, I wish to engage with such readings to urge that the essay in its gendered impulse towards breaking through boundedness reads as transgressive but also as oddly disconnected from the social immediacy of some of the questions related to London's "teeming streets", and also as troublingly partaking of the lexical framework of imperial adventurism to privilege, in Woolf's own words, a "discursive sauntering".

Keywords: Imperial City, London Streets, Modernism, Female Flânerie, "Street Haunting: A London Adventure"

London, thou art a jewel of jewels, and jasper of jocunditie – music, talk, friendship, city views, book publishing, all this is now within my reach...

Virginia Woolf (1924; Bell 2008:175)

Introduction

Emanating from the pen of a nonconformist woman writer at work in the early twentieth-century, this ode to London as a “jewel” makes one drawback a little. The reference to London’s radiance seems startlingly close to the English being acutely conscious of the ‘lustre’ surrounding London as “world city” (Asa Briggs, qtd .in Schneer 10). In *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis*, Jonathan Schneer emphatically underlines that power “radiated” from the city as above all “the capital of a formally constituted and governed empire upon which the sun never set, an imperial city” (10). But then, one might argue, there couldn’t be a writer farther than Virginia Woolf from buying into that self-narrativization of imperial England as the beloved isle.¹ While criticism on female flânerie foregrounds the challenge in such statements as my epigraph above from Woolf, reading it as an instance of women staking claim to urban spaces in early twentieth century period Britain, this essay seeks to take a closer look at Virginia Woolf’s London essay, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (1930) to probe how the sceptical thrust of Woolf’s writings on imperialism is modulated nonetheless by a modernist and writerly sensibility that roves hungrily over the spectacle of the sprawling city, a sprawl that was closely enmeshed at this time with England’s “reach” extending far beyond its shores. Reading Woolf’s essay in conjunction with documented accounts of imperial London in the early decades of the twentieth century such as Schneer’s and James Winter’s *London’s Teeming Streets:1830-1914*, this essay probes how far Woolf’s own location, in her setting out to re-write the centre from the point of view of the margins, inflects or even compromises that exercise. Placing a focused reading of the essay alongside contemporary fixation with the “graticule of longitude and latitude” (Hegglund 51), I seek to establish how the modernist and feminist spatial restlessness in Woolf’s writings comes into complex interface with the imperial geographical forays of her time.

In a 1928 diary entry, Woolf would record in a nostalgic tone an impulse to “take the globe in my hands and feel it quietly, round, smooth, heavy and to hold it day after day” (in Adams 203). Notably again, very similar imagery such as when Londoners were invited to configure of the London underground as “a belt around the globe”, permeated the imaginary of the period (Gilbert and Driver 23). That the desire for scope on the part of an early twentieth-century British woman writer should be so tellingly interleaved with the contemporary representations of a globe cupped by Britain impels closer enquiry. Given the recent turn towards reading literary records of urban experience with a view to registering “the specificity of particular, urban spaces”, I turn to the work of cultural historians and contemporary commentators such as H G Wells to tie Woolf’s city ruminations more firmly to the materialities her essays seem to bypass or alternately to sublimate into art (Seshagiri and Zimring 236).

Woolf reports in rather injured tones in a 1922 diary entry a conversation with her sister Vanessa Bell where Bell seems to associate, to Woolf’s chagrin, a “settledness” with Woolf: “Told me I liked my own fireside...implied that I was settled and unadventurous” (Bell 138). David Adams points out in *Colonial Odysseys* that “Woolf is the one writer who had the least direct experience of colonial travel” but Woolf also clearly chafed against any associations of settledness (80). Read from within that frame, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” one can argue, is an attempt to discover the unfamiliar in the climes of London by sloughing off “the shell-like covering which our souls have secreted to house themselves” and to court unhomeliness via a London ramble (*Selected Essays* 178). The prickliness evoked in Woolf by Bell’s comment makes one look harder at how “discursive” nomadism was intrinsic to Woolf’s writerly craft. Francesca Wade points out that in the later years of the writer’s life she often thought of residing in the countryside as a “contraction” (qtd. in Wade 259). But the writer’s recordings also suggest how she turned that pause in the direction of supplanting one kind of “sauntering” with

another: she could in the quiet of the countryside “take a turn on the terrace, throw away my cigarette & go in to more rambling and *discursive sauntering* over all the countries of the mind” (qtd in Wade 259; emphasis mine).

Foreign climes and traces – the memories of Mantua, the china bowl on the mantelpiece, chancing upon books full of references to explorers to India and China in a bookshop – embedded in an ambulatory narrative weaving its way through London invite a closer probing of the extended nuances of ‘hauntings’ in the piece as othered silhouettes haunt the London ramble. In *The Postcolonial City*, Rashmi Varma begins her chapter on London by pausing at a reference from Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*. Varma points to how Clarissa in her walk through London sees the city as haunted by spectral presences and underscores in particular the word haunted to propose “a spectral view of the postcolonial futures yet to come” (Varma 36). I wish to bring the argument back instead to the here and the now of Woolf’s London and to underline that in the many references to foreignness in Woolf’s essay, distant presences are both recorded and rendered shadowy. In how Woolf’s artistic process dives into the vitality of that variegated canvas, the excess and unruliness of the urban spectacle of contemporary London becomes so much copy. The modernist praxis of the reading / writing imperative as locked in a mutuality that disembodied otherness even as it took cognisance of it. In setting out to embrace an “irresponsibility” as the narrator of “Street Haunting” proposes to do at the beginning of the essay, a gendered and modernist vagrancy comes dangerously close to replicating the adventurous spirit that was so much a part of the self-definition of London and by extension England at this time (178). Schneer reminds us that “the imperial drumbeat was steady and all-enveloping in turn-of-the-century London. Greater than the thrum or background noise, it provided the city’s defining tone and rhythm” (163). In recording the “thrum” of London, the metaphors and imagery in Woolf’s essay seem to absorb this “imperial drumbeat” in myriad ways, in part provocatively and critically engaging with the

domineering imperial impulse, but also partaking of, as this article urges, the exploratory adrenaline of the imperial spirit.

In exploring how the sceptical cast of Woolf's ideas on dominion are compromised by a modernist avant-gardism that thrives on the aesthetic possibilities of the urban spectacle, it bears underscoring that the politically engaged element of Woolf's readings of the city rests in uneasy conjunction with Woolf's implication in the vanguardist writerly proclivities related to modernism's quest for "fanatic exclusiveness" (Baldick 55). The readers / narrators of Woolf deconstruct official narratives by coaxing out what resides in the margins, but in the counter-narrativization that results the materiality of the margin is elided through its co-option within Woolf's (and modernism's) favoured aesthetic tropes.

The penetrativeness with which the spaces of the city are read and prised open, but with the spectre of the pencil never far away, such that the observations are in danger of becoming copy, is suggested through this statement from Woolf: "London itself perpetually attracts, stimulates and gives me a play, a story and a poem, without any trouble save that of my moving my legs through the streets" (qtd. in Bowlby 37). The statement serves also as my entry point into Woolf's essay since in most records of London at this time the concern with diffusion was closely allied to coagulation of its streets, so that the sinuous aspirations of the narrator seem quite at odds with prevalent anxieties. Reading Woolf's essay against the contemporary concern with London's swelling proportions and zealous attempts on the part of architects and urban planners to manage that sprawl, the essay in its gendered impulse towards breaking through boundedness seems to read as both transgressive but also oddly disconnected from the social immediacy of some of the questions related to London's "teeming streets". As James Winter, elaborating on the idea of how London increasingly became a city struggling to handle expansion and the crisis of space that this would entail, argues:

The rhetoric of crisis changed between 1901 and 1914. Psychological reactions to the sense of boundlessness tended more frequently to be expressed in the imagery of explosion and fragmentation. This can be observed in an essay called *Anticipations* which HG Wells published in 1905. He remarked that London had inflated the way “a puffball swells” [...] A new wave of immigration and the shock of the new transportation technology had shattered the containing walls: London had burst its “intolerable envelope and splashed”. (13-14)

While the spillage arrests the ruminative eye of Woolf’s narrator, more ‘mundane’ records of this populousness from the time such as H G Wells *Anticipations* (1902) would focus on the choked arteries of London routes. Even as the voice in “Street Haunting” records the crowd as a spectacle to read, Wells’ admittedly more clinical documentation of the “already almost impassable streets” speaks of a city where streets would require skills of negotiation to even pass through (23). Woolf’s narrator of course chooses evening, arguably a quieter time, but since the essay does from the beginning concern itself with the tramp of the busy multitude marching through the streets, the turn from the pedestrian and everyday surfaces to the philosophical readings this catalyzes in Woolf’s narrator connotes the uneasy shift between the democratic and the aristocratic in the writer. For the people constituting the ‘other’ side of that urban traffic – those ‘outsiders’ who would constitute for the Londoner the dark underside of that pedestrian flow – the crowded streets would presumably have been anxious and fraught routes of transit. While Woolf’s essay seems to be liberate itself from contemporary xenophobic and parochial anxieties of ‘pollution’ by turning to an artistic mining of the London tide, the purported playfulness or challenge of its differently slanted vision connotes self-preoccupation of a different order. It might be argued that Woolf’s essay resists affiliation with the prevalent discourse of contamination tied for instance to the influx of immigrants but

this nomadic interlude, in its consuming concern with finding food for thought on the part of the secure middle-class street haunter, turns the contact with the globalism of the imperial city into another involuted affair.

Read through the frame of gender upheavals in the early twentieth century and the greater presence of women on the streets, the challenge of the essay lies in its limpid movements and eccentric peregrinations meant to counter the briskness of masculine adventure. Yet its recurrent and favoured imagery of treasures and jewels recovered from the journey rankles vis-à-vis the roving imperialistic foraging of the time. For instance, the narrative voice expresses a confidence in how the eye in dalliance with the scene in front of it “brings back the prettiest trophies, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral as if the whole earth were made of precious stone” (179). It would be almost sacrilege to read Woolf literally, appreciative as one is of the suggestive, teasing layers in her writings. However, that an essay composed in the early decades of the twentieth century and dwelling on the imperial city so frequently uses these metaphors and images is hard to overlook.

The patrician ranging over common lives is of course underlined in how the narrator’s rambles are framed by a lead pencil at both ends. Though the pencil is cast as a pretext for a need to stroll through the streets, the fact that the narrator also sets an hour and a time for the jaunt qualifies its ambulatory randomness: “The hour should be the evening and the season winter...the evening hour gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow” (177). The suggested spontaneity of the ramble is thus problematized by a certain deliberation, making one sceptical of the narrator’s democratic casting of herself as part of “the vast republican army of anonymous trampers” (177). The long preamble to the jaunt and the stated need for liberation from a structured existence stands in contrast with the circumscribed lives of the deprived and the impoverished who march through the streets of necessity rather than indulgence. The narrator displays a proprietary

voraciousness in the mind's transformation into "an enormous eye" that is especially drawn towards oddities and eccentricities (178). There is a certain hierarchization of vision as a distinction is made between the "average, unprofessional eye" that can only skim surfaces and the possession of the faculty to "compose the trophies in such a way as to bring out their obscure angles and relationships" (179).

The word 'trophies', with its treasure-laden resonances, is revealing and suggests that the treasures mined from the experience are as important as the experience itself. The vocabulary takes on a distinctly modernist resonance as the narrator declares a dissatisfaction with the eye's superficial hoverings, an impatience at it not being a miner, a diver. This is in line with modernism's fascination with the subterranean. In the narrator's resolve to dive into the buried, it is the residuum of the city that forms the constituent part of the narrator's recording of the "dwarf dance", a visual anatomization of urban marginalia and dereliction (180). But even as the dwarf woman leads the narrator to wonder about the lives lived in crevices and crannies, the "sportive" eye is abruptly drawn to other spectacles (181). Woolf's focus is ultimately on the variegated texture of urban life and these sharp observations of penury and victimization taper off, spurred on by this reminder of the teeming variety of London's streets, into her favoured speculations about the fluidity of identity itself when she asks: "We are streaked, variegated...Am I here or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there..." (182). The fleeting specificity of Woolf's consciousness of the effluvia that float at the margins of a more privileged city dissolves into a philosophical assertion of the mystery and multiplicity of human existence. The unrecorded lives of the city that Woolf's narrator recovers become of a piece with the forays into otherness that the pencil records in its eclectic, writerly ramble.

Cultural historians have commented on how these imperial cities often measured themselves against each other, and that

London was seen to lack the boulevards and walking spaces of Paris (see Dauntton 6, and Schneer 27)². This congestion was in fact turned around to become the hallmark of a city always in motion. There was a note of self-congratulation in “a sense of London as a central space in constant motion, a site of restless commerce and frenetic activity” (Gilbert and Driver 26). At crucial points Woolf’s essays turn to the traffic on the streets but it is the pauses in that workaday world that motor the narrative. The everyday world of bustle and commerce is registered only to be transcended as the dive into the “crevices and crannies” drives the pencil. This could be seen as a rupturing of the commercial spirit of the times. Conversely, it suggests an almost willed sublimation of the quotidian trudge and tramp of daily commuters. The voice in the essay records the nightly “stream of walkers” but what the narrative eye envisions is their being wrapped in “some narcotic dream, now that they are free from the desk” (185). This can either read as of a piece with the writer’s concern with endowing this de-individualized mass with subjectivities, or it can be suggestive, on the other hand, of a tendentious modernist bending of the mundane to an artistic purpose.

The movement outward in Woolf has a centrifugal bias, indicated by the acquisition of the pencil, that will in the creative crucible of the room shape these jagged edges into aesthetic documents³. The colonial echo can be heard throughout an essay that is purportedly so grounded in the urban matrix. In fact, the vocabulary almost overlaps. One of the detours the narrator takes is into a second-hand bookshop, where the books that one chances upon, it is claimed, are unlike the domesticated volumes in a library. The embrace of unhomeliness that runs through the essay surfaces again as these are figured as wild, homeless books. As the narrator browses through the volumes in a bookshop, she is attracted by the decrepit tomes that speak of how “People went slowly up the Rhine...were lost to civilization for years; converted negroes in pestilential swamps. This packing up and going off, exploring deserts and catching fevers, penetrating even to China

and then returning to a parochial life at Edmonton...so restless the English are, with the waves at their door" (184). The explorative impulse seems to link the wandering of the persona with the penetrative zeal of the colonizer. She makes this explicit when she says a little later "Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on the bodies and minds of others... And what greater delight ...can there be than to deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men?" (187). Woolf suggests a difference that is gender inflected. The openness of the narrator towards the flux of the metropolis is related to a sensibility unimpeded by masculine linearity and rigidity. The goal-oriented "arid scimitar" like male gaze is countered by the woman's gaze that combines a playful subversiveness with nimbleness (*To the Lighthouse* 43). Unencumbered by the weighty self-conception of the masculine explorer, the female sensibility can realise better the protean, quicksilver, nature of the explorative experience.

In sync with that element of discovery, the volumes the narrator alights upon are largely of travellers, predominantly masculine ones, making their way determinedly through the bogs and swamps of alien lands. Even as the terminology evokes the imperial frame in terms of the voyage out, one wonders where the narrator fits in her own voyaging, figured so much in similar terms - a casting off of the homely, penetrating into the unexplored, an encounter with the other. And how then can one ignore the imperial allusion embedded in the last line of the essay, the pencil figured as the "spoil retrieved from the treasures of the city" (187). The essay remains ambivalently poised as on the one hand, the sportive eye of the female narrator writes a counter text to the brisk and utilitarian purposiveness of the colonizer, and the readerly malleability of the ramble is counterpointed to how the imperialists in their voyages wrote themselves and the glory of their empire textually and architecturally into being. And yet this eye too

ranges over the other with a cerebral curiosity that appropriates the vignettes into a writerly narrative.

Historians and commentators remind us that this was a period when London's imperial status was in evidence in the global flows – not only of objects but of peoples – that defined its physical spaces. The landscape of England changed as migration accelerated. A noteworthy feature of increased migration was the “dazzling heterogeneity” of the migrants, from “places as far apart as Germany and Jamaica” (Feldman, *Urban History* 186-187). Feldman underlines that in the period between 1920 and 1950, migration came to be linked to anxieties related to “decay of ‘community’” (201). Judith Paltin, analyzing the idea of the crowd in modernist literature, registers how from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries “intellectual fields concerned with popular and mass politics in European and North American societies demonstrate a high level of social adrenaline about their populace, and generally endorse the perception that crowd dangers were coming to a simultaneous, nearly, global, crisis point” (3). Is Woolf's essay radical in registering the diverse multitude while retaining distance from the pressing flash points of her time or does it betray an aesthetic solipsism that connotes Western parochialism of a different order? Woolf's essay ranges over the crowd and ponders over its heterogeneity with a diffuseness of vision that appears willing to embrace the variegated nature of the urban crowd. In the perspectival flux that characterizes Woolf's writings on London – the dizzyingly cinematic exuberance of its shifting zooms – it is the “city's inherent theatricality” that holds the writer in thrall (Sheringham 97). One could argue that the narrator's willingness to slough off the calcified contours of personality by courting contact with heterogeneity is an egalitarian gesture. Paltin, in fact, would read Clarissa Dalloway's ramble through London in the early section of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in this light when she argues that moving away from the modernist emphasis on the autonomy of the self, Woolf evokes – through Clarissa's absorption of the hum of the city – a “connective” impulse (89).

It is however possible to overstate this, given the selective route of Clarissa's walk, and that the rough and tumble of existence recorded in "the triumph and jingle" of the streets she registers is of a different order from the notion of "continuous circulation" that prevailed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards vis-à-vis London streets, or else the streets "like an individual – would suffer apoplexy" (*Mrs Dalloway* 4; Daunton, *Urban History* 6).

The lingering of Woolf's female narrator seems far away from this urban crush. "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" is a valuable document for its feminist avant-gardism, but we need to retain an equal awareness of its obfuscations. With its fluid movements, its dives into hidden crannies and its pauses and reflections, the essay departs deliberately from the brisk and hectic world of the business of the imperial city. If "the standard urban narratives...concerned themselves with bourgeois masculine activities and subjectivities in the city", the perambulations of Woolf's narrators slyly conceive of another order of urban walking, as I have argued (Varma 48). However, as this article also urges, the radicalizing energy of female flânerie in Woolf needs to be counterweighed against the essay's lexical absorption of the colonial frame via a voracious exploratory impulse. The essay remains ambivalently poised at the cusp of reading the city and the 'pencilling' it into being. Thus, even as the pencil runs freely, inscribing a counter-discourse into the margins of the embodied text of the city, the pioneering impulse in modernist writing simultaneously pencils *in* the margins, that is, co-opts them into its generative dynamics. The essay shifts between rendering the underworld of the city legible and simultaneously sublimating its often resistant heterogeneity into art, hence consigning it – in the aesthetic narcissism of coaxing out the philosophical resonances of the London scene – anew to illegibility. As a writer who never shrank back from cerebral cross-dressing, Woolf's reading of London provokes both in its expansiveness and its elisions.

Endnotes

1. The satirical cast of Woolf's ideas on the masculinist imperializing instinct is clearly underlined in Woolf's *Three Guineas* as also in *Mrs Dalloway*. As she says with a biting edge in *Three Guineas*, dwelling on what she pillories as the male instinct for power that leads to wars: "Obviously there is for you some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting which we have never felt or enjoyed. Complete understanding could only be achieved by blood transfusion and memory transfusion" (121).
2. Schneer quotes from a report filed by the Further Strand Improvement Committee in 1903 that urges Londoners to ponder over how other modern cities such as Paris, New York and Vienna had "streets finer than any that London can show. We ask – is London...to refuse this opportunity of showing itself in reality an imperial city, a worthy capital of a world-wide Empire" (from *The Case for Further Strand Improvement*, ed Mark Judge, 1906, p 8, qtd in Schneer p. 27).
3. Beth Rigel Daugherty points out that there are seventeen questions posed in the course of the essay, which underline its status as "philosophical rumination" as thoughts on the passers-by "are accompanied by ghosts of other selves, other identities" (191).

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