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Walking, women and writing : Virginia Woolf as *flâneuse*

The first part of my title is not only meant to allude to the questions Woolf raises all the time, in her novels and in her essays, about the relations between women and writing, art and sex, fiction and femininity, and to the way in which she has been taken up as a key source for enlightenment on such issues ; "Walking, women and writing" is also intended to recall the expression "wine, women and song". Not to suggest that the pleasures of wine are replaced for Woolf by the perhaps less obvious pleasures of the obligatory constitutional : after all, it is she who, having experienced the differences in dining facilities between two "Oxbridge" colleges, one for each sex, demands «Why did men drink wine and women water ? »¹, suggesting the benefits of wine for inspiration. Rather, the change of words is supposed to evoke the way in which Woolf puts in question the traditional status of women as at once the inspiration of literature and its object : as represented, but not themselves writers. As to walking, we shall get to that in due course.

1. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929 ; rpt. London : Granada, 1977), p. 26. Further references included in the text.

Pre-amble

Women are not *flâneuses* in the nineteenth century², and for reasons that are not only sociological. A text entitled *Le Flâneur* by Louis Huart, dating from 1850 and illustrated among others by Daumier, may provide some indications on this point.

Huart sets up the definition of the ideal *flâneur* in large measure by way of descriptions of those who pretend to, but do not deserve, the designation : for example, the *musard*, for whom the English equivalent would have to be the "loiterer on street corners". The *musard's* fault is that he wastes his time, for instance by stopping in front of just one shop without even being capable of choosing the best one. Another of the pseudo- *flâneurs* is the *badaud étranger*, a kind of proto-tourist :

Le badaud étranger consomme tout à son aise les innombrables curiosités du lieu (le Jardin des Plantes). Il compte avec soin tous les cailloux de la galerie minéralogique, toutes les herbes plus ou moins exotiques du cabinet d'histoire naturelle, il calcule combien on pourrait faire de boutons de chemise avec les défenses de l'éléphant...

Le badaud étranger s'est dit, le matin, en se levant : – Aujourd'hui je verrai onze monuments ! – – Pourvu que le soir en additionnant il trouve bien le compte de ses onze monuments, il pense qu'il n'a pas perdu sa journée et il s'endort avec une conscience aussi satisfaite que celle de Titus lui-même.

A peine arrivé devant son monument, le badaud étranger prend à peine le temps de lever les yeux sur les colonnes ou autres accessoires, attendu que sur les cinq minutes octroyées à ce dit monument, il en accorde quatre à la lecture de la description qui en est faite dans le Guide du Voyageur.³

2. For an analysis of the absence in terms of women's exclusion from the newly formed "public sphere" of modernity, see Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse", *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol. 2, n°3 (1985), pp. 37-46.
3. Louis Huart, *Le Flâneur* (Paris : Aubert, 1850), coll. "Bibliothèque pour rire", with "70 vignettes de MM. Alophe, Daumier, et Maurisset", chapter VI. Further references will be included in the text.

We can see quite clearly from this that the *badaud étranger* is an American ; and from this remark that I am English. But we must not spend too much time scrutinising the curiosities of the non- *flâneurs* when we have other items to look at, ten at least.

Let us say straight away that among the criteria which disqualify you from being a genuine *flâneur* is the fact of being accompanied by a woman. There is first of all Sunday *flânerie*, with the family, «où on prouve que le flâneur est un mortel essentiellement vertueux» (ch. IV). But the monotony of «une série ininterrompue de volets verts» bears no comparison to the more serious risks on the other days of the week, which are firmly stressed by Huart :

Des flâneries faites en compagnie d'une femme sont encore plus à éviter.

– *Comment ! même avec une jolie femme, me dites-vous.*

– *Où, monsieur ; et surtout avec une jolie femme !*

Car les femmes ne comprennent les flâneries et les stations que devant les chapeaux des marchands de mode et les bonnets des lingères, – à moins pourtant que ce ne soit devant les cachemires et autres bagatelles, dont l'aspect seul donne le frisson à tout mari, ou à tout autre jeune Français exerçant un emploi à peu près analogue.

Quand on conduit sa femme ou sa maîtresse aux Tuileries ou au spectacle, ce qu'il y a de plus économique, c'est de prendre une voiture.

Le malheureux qui veut faire cette économie de trente-six sous court risque de payer en place un chapeau de trente-deux francs, – ou de passer pour un avare, ou pour un être masculin peu galant.

(Ch. XV).

So women are excluded from *flânerie*, a uniquely masculine privilege, for pragmatic reasons : you, the man, have the money which she, the woman, is going to want to make you lose.

But the woman is also, for a further reason, excluded *a priori*. For *flâneries* involves a certain representation of the woman as herself being part of the spectacle, one of the curiosities in which the *flâneur* will take an interest in the course of his walk. Huart has much to say on this ; it seems, first of all, that as an object of his gaze the woman is indispensable to the *flâneur* :

Rachel Bowlby

Parlez-moi des Tuileries et des Champs-Élysées ! Voilà des lieux de promenades où l'on trouve du moins tout ce qui fait le charme des flâneurs, – nous voulons dire des femmes, des arbres, des enfants, de la foule, et Polichinelle ! (Ch. XIV).

Further, the woman you see is to be pursued – and this is one reason why you should never flâner with a friend :

Vous voudriez suivre une simple grisette, pendant que votre coflâneur vous ferait écraser, ou, pis que cela, éclabousser par la voiture d'une grande dame qu'il aurait voulu admirer de trop près. (Ch. XV).

But you have to be sure of keeping your distance, going all the way. You do pursue, but the woman must remain separated from you :

Nous pardonnons l'affection pour la marchande de modes, tous les goûts sont dans la nature, mais nous pensons qu'il ne faut pas pousser cette affection jusqu'au fanatisme... Le flâneur a donc parfaitement le droit de suivre de l'œil la jeune modiste qui, sous le nom de Trottin, va porter à domicile de charmants petits chapeaux et des amours de petites capotes ; mais il faut toujours y mettre de la réserve et de la discrétion. (Ch. XI).

Follow with the eye, not with the foot – that is the rule ; and there are even some advantages to be gained from showing oneself in this respect different from others :

N'imitiez pas ces grossiers personnages qui suivent les femmes d'une manière effrontée ; une pareille conduite est justiciable de toutes les bottes vraiment frrrrançaises. – Au lieu de marcher sur les talons de la vertu, établissez-vous le défenseur, le protecteur de cette même vertu effrayée, qui vient se réfugier auprès de vous, comme une pauvre colombe palpitante, pour échapper aux poursuites de ces hommes ignobles qui insultent toutes les femmes. (Ch. XI).

Moral : don't pursue, and the woman will pursue you herself.

Before leaving Huart's flâneur who, as we have seen, prefers to be left on his own, let us just note two more points. First, the woman, the object *par excellence* of the flâneur's interest, is in this regard

analogous to the shop window. Huart concludes with another series of exclusions :

Ne flâne pas ou ne sait pas flâner celui qui marche vite, – celui qui bâille dans la rue, – celui qui passe devant une jolie femme sans la regarder, devant un étalage ou près d'un saltimbanque sans s'arrêter. Le vrai flâneur a droit d'ignorer le grec, le latin, les mathématiques, et les autres superfluités scientifiques ; mais il doit connaître toutes les rues, toutes les boutiques de Paris, savoir au juste quelle est la plus jolie chapelière, modiste, charcutière, limonadière, etc., etc. (Ch. XV).

It is also notable that *flânerie* goes together with literature : «*Le flâneur compose tout un roman, rien que sur la simple rencontre en omnibus d'une petite dame au voile baissé*» (ch. VIII). *The walker is a writer ; and what he notes, with his eyes and his pen, is the woman. The woman cornered by this pen or these eyes does not at first sight look like someone likely to take herself for a flâneur or writer. If she tried to flâner or to write, she might be obliged to identify herself as a man, or at least not to look like a woman. This is the dilemma of all the female Georges of the nineteenth century. Further along, however, we shall see the perspective alter. For Virginia Woolf, it is less a question of (masculine) walking as writing than a completely different turn : she tends to think of writing itself as like walking. But this is to get ahead of ourselves : we have other leads to follow before we get to Woolf.*

La passante

Before thinking of or passing to other possibilities, let us cast a glance at her whose generic name takes in all those *modistes*, *chapelières* and others who are part of the feminine scene viewed or imbibed by the *flâneur*. Baudelaire's poem "A une passante", which dates from around the same time as the Huart text, is an obvious place to look :

*La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse*

*Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet ;
Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son œil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.*

*Un éclair ... puis la nuit ! – Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité ?*

*Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici ! trop tard ! jamais, peut-être !
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
O toi que j'eusse aimée, o toi qui le savais !⁴*

Amid the clatter and din of the street, there she is ; or there she was, no sooner there than gone, vanishing, disappearing, here only in what is now the loss of her.

But the poem brings her back : gone/here, *fort/da* : brings her back fixed and no longer fleeing, but fixed as one who flees, "fugitive", runaway, "tu fuis".

He looked, she looked ; I looked, you looked ; there was an instant, it could have been for ever, it is past.

You knew, "toi qui le savais", you didn't say. Silent woman who knows, whom he sees knowing, who will not (cannot ?) say.

He looks at her, she looks at him. Two looks, his at her and her at him ? Two looks fusing into one ? Or two looks, different ? Or one look, his that sees her seeing him (seeing her (seeing him ...)) ?

She brought new life ("m'a fait soudainement renaître"), and is also a murderer ("le plaisir qui tue") coming in funeral garments, who fled away free ("Fugitive beauté" "tu fuis"). Death-dealer and life-giver, a mother.

A twofold mother : "Moi, je buvais", "I was drinking", in her eye, nourishing eye and evil eye, "la douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue".

In mourning, she has lost someone ; she transmits her loss to him, leaving him marked by her passing.

4. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861) ; rpt. in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris, Seuil, 1968), p. 101.

Anonymous : any woman, "une femme". And also the one and only, the unique woman, love eternal, at first and last sight.⁵

Two women seen in one. She is "noble", "majestueuse", a queen or goddess with her statuesque leg ; unavailable, inaccessible, she is not to be approached. At the same time the woman of the street, the street-walker. A fast ("fugitive") lady. The whore, undomesticated, whose home is the *maison de passe*, the street inside.

From the third person, "une femme", to the second, "toi", addressed at the end. "ô toi que j'eusse aimée", you whom I would have loved, past unfulfilled conditional – if what ? No answer, she disappeared, never to return, consecrated in the restoration of the imaginary moment when it might have been that she was there. Unconditional love : under no conditions could it be, its possibility is past, ruled out, from the start ; and also without interference from external conditions of space and time, in eternity.

The timing puts her definitively in the past, as the one who passed, irrevocably, and yet will have marked him for ever. She is out of time, no sooner here than gone, represented only in her absence. And out of time because only "in eternity", in the timeless, will he see her again. There was a flash of light, "un éclair", then darkness, "puis la nuit". The snapshot of what looked like a woman, caught, taken, in an instant, remaining only in an image, the picture of her.

In the distance between them, only their eyes "meet" : otherwise they are apart. He is fixed, transfixed ("crispé") ; it is she who moves, "passa" across the field of his vision. On this separation between them, in space as in time, depends her perfection, and the unconditional quality of the love.

This *passante*, a *passante* : we have not heard the last of her. She turns up again, and repeatedly, in Proust. here is one such occasion :

Les charmes de la passante sont généralement en relation directe avec la rapidité du passage. Pour peu que la nuit tombe et que la voiture aille vite, à la campagne, dans une ville, il n'y a pas un torse féminin, mutilé comme un marbre antique par la vitesse qui nous entraîne et le crépuscule qui le noie, qui ne tire sur notre cœur, à

5. I borrow this phrase from Benjamin, who speaks in relation to this poem of "eine Liebe nicht sowohl auf den ersten als auf den letzten Blick", in "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire", *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt : Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 200.

*chaque coin de route, au fond de chaque boutique, les flèches de la Beauté, de la Beauté dont on serait parfois tenté de se demander si elle est en ce monde autre chose que la partie de complément qu'ajoute à une passante fragmentaire et fugitive notre imagination surexcitée par le regret.*⁶

Proust's *passante* might be a direct descendant of Baudelaire's. "Fugitive" once more, she is the fleeting impression, only there is the moment that she is already gone. She is statuesque, "Comme un marbre antique", both noble and dead, her own monument, like the "jambe de statue" of the sonnet. But the "mutilated", "fragmentary" nature of Proust's *passante* also, now, looking back, seems to have been shared by that "statue's leg", just one leg, one part, singled out by Baudelaire. And the "regret" here is like what is inferred from the poet's "ô toi que j'eusse aimée", her loss the condition for the desire of her, and for the conditional being necessarily in the odd time of the "past unfulfilled".

The *passante* here seems to have moved on or away from her Baudelairean singularity, fixed now into a type : not "*une*", but "*la*" *passante*. There is not even a question, this time, of a look in return, from her. "Fugitive" still, her fleeting appearance is not because she passes – she may be quite stationary, in the back of a shop – but because he does – or because "we" do, a community of (masculine) readers invoked for the occasion as sharing in, recognising, this as a commonplace experience, and the appeal to whom is a further reinforcement of the generalisation of the scene. And if we ignore generic differences between lyric poetry and narrative prose, we could note that whereas the poem, in its title and in the concluding apostrophe ("ô toi... ") is addressed *to* a particular *passante*, Proust's narrator addresses "us" who are not *passantes* but viewers of *passantes*, on the subject of *passantes*, a general category. The generality of the experience, recognized as an example of a common type, removes its apparant uniqueness and irrevocability : one *passante* is like another in that she can be replaced, that another and another will figure in the same way, without there being any single, constitutive event, even in retrospect.

6. Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, II (Paris : Garnier Flammarion, 1987), p. 87.

Putting the two together, Proust's spectator appears to extend and confirm what was only potentially there in the Baudelaire poem. Quite explicitly, the *passante* is now (in every sense) a mere projection from the spectator.⁷ Her passing is really his, as he zooms by just catching sight of her ; her partial and fleeting appearance belongs to the same phenomenon. Whence the hypothesis that Beauty might just be «the complementary part added to a fragmentary and fugitive *passante* by our over-excited imagination». The "Beauty" is not out there, but born of "our" own "imagination surexcitée" ; it is *added* as the missing, "complementary" part to make a whole of what would otherwise be just the fragmentary vision. It is this addition, carried over to her from us, which completes her, raising her up to the heights of a capitalised essence. "La Beauté" substantialises her fragmentariness and puts a stop to her disappearance, her passing ("fugitive"). It fits her to him, makes her in the image of his "imagination surexcitée" prompted by her loss, "le regret".

Let us note, before leaving Proust's multiple *passantes*, that the mutation of this figure into pure projection, pure fantasy, may well mark an important turning point in the unpredictable passage of or to women walking and writing. One moment in the course of *A la recherche du temps perdu* brings this sharply into focus. It is the single occasion on which the narrator makes that mistake against which Huart so eloquently warned : the mistake of actually pursuing a passing woman :

Je n'ai jamais rencontré dans la vie de filles aussi désirables que les jours où j'étais avec quelque grave personne que malgré les mille prétextes que j'inventais, je ne pouvais quitter : quelques années après celle où j'allais pour la première fois à Balbec, faisant à Paris une course en voiture avec un ami de mon père et ayant aperçu une femme qui marchait vite dans la nuit, je pensai qu'il était déraisonnable de perdre pour une raison de convenances, ma part de bonheur dans la seule vie qu'il y ait sans doute, et sautant à terre sans m'excuser, je me mis à la recherche de l'inconnue, la perdis au carrefour de deux rues, la retrouvai dans une troisième, et me trouvai enfin, tout essoufflé, sous un réverbère, en face de la vieille Mme Verdurin que j'évitais partout et qui surprise et heureuse

7. Proust uses the word himself in another *passante* passage, referring to "une projection... un mirage du désir", *A l'ombre...*, II, p. 182.

*s'écria : "Oh ! comme c'est aimable d'avoir couru pour me dire bonjour !"*⁸

Neither beautiful, young nor anonymous, Mme Verdurin is the antithesis of every defining characteristic of the *passante*, quashing the enigma with the brutality of her all too familiar familiarity. Given that so many mistakes can be made which, in the normal course of things – when the narrator has the sense to keep his *passante* at a safe imaginary distance – go unnoticed and have no effect, we might consider dropping the only remaining attribute which links the actual and the imaginary *passante* here. For Mme Verdurin, whatever else she lacks or possesses, is, after all, still apparently a woman. But Proust could have gone even further. For if the *passante* is merely or mostly the man's projection, a creature of the masculine imagination, then the field, or rather the street, is left wide open for women to come along and walk in a way of their own, whether or not as a woman, leaving the old-fashioned male *flâneur* to enjoy the view of his fantasmatic *passante* in peace.

So let us now, finally, turn to Virginia Woolf, who has been waiting all this time to come out of doors. Woolf's work contains extended explorations of the relations between women, walking and writing ; so much, sometimes, does it appear that the three are natural companions for her that it is as if the figure of the masculine *flâneur* had been pushed off satirically down a cul-de-sac, as someone from whom the adventuring woman had nothing at all to fear, on the streets, or on the page.

Such an encounter is wittily enacted by a section from *Mrs Dalloway*. Peter Walsh, who has left Clarissa's house until the evening party, finds his attention diverted by a classical *passante* :

*But she's extraordinarily attractive, he thought, as, walking across Trafalgar Square in the direction of the Haymarket, came a young woman who, as she passed Gordon's statue, seemed, Peter Walsh thought (susceptible as he was), to shed veil after veil, until she became the very woman he had always had in mind ; young, but stately ; merry, but discreet ; black, but enchanting.*⁹

8. *A l'ombre...*, II, p. 87-88.

9. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1922 ; rpt. London : Granada, 1976), p. 48. Further references will be included in the text.

With its meeting of opposite characteristics, the "shedding of veil after veil" to reveal not so much uniqueness as indistinctness, or rather uniqueness as indistinctness, a fantasy "everywoman", the passage is already bordering on parodic literary cliché. Woolf does not let go :

Straightening himself and stealthily fingering his pocket-knife he started after her to follow this woman, this excitement, which seemed even with its back turned to shed on him a light which connected them, which singled him out, as if the random uproar of the traffic had whispered through hallowed hands his name, not Peter, but this private name which he called himself in his own thought. "You", she said, only "you", saying it with her white gloves and her shoulders. Then the thin long cloak which the wind stirred as she walked past Dent's shop in Cockpur Street blew out with an enveloping kindness, a mournful tenderness, as of arms that would open and take the tired –

(MD, 48).

The paragraph ends, appropriately, with just this *dash* in all senses. The satire continues, most blatantly with the fingered pocket-knife, but then with the neutralisation of "this woman, this excitement ... its back", and with the revelation of the "most private" of names as the generally applicable "you". As in the Baudelaire poem, this woman becomes both an enfolding mother (her "enveloping kindness", but with a hint of smothering) and a mourner.

In the next paragraph Peter wonders whether she is "respectable"; then he imagines a meeting : " «Come and have an ice», he would say, and she would answer, perfectly simply, «Oh yes» " (MD, 49). This happy conclusion is followed by Peter's and her metamorphosis into hero and heroine of a romantic story. Their respective sexual qualities are drawn out, by distinction or assimilation, from the window displays in the shops they pass :

He was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (landed as he was last night from India) a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties, yellow dressing-gowns, pipes, fishing-rods, in the shop windows ; wearing white slippers beneath their waistcoats. He was a buccaneer. On and on she went, across Piccadilly, and up Regent Street, ahead of him, her cloak, her gloves, her shoulders combining with the fringes and the laces and

the feather boas in the windows to make the spirit of finery and whimsy which dwindled out of the shops onto the pavement. (MD, 49).

The displays in the luxury shops are sharply differentiated by sex. But whereas Peter's buccaneering identity is defined by its difference from the accoutrements of masculinity on display, the desirability of his quarry is seen precisely as an extension of the fetishistically feminine bits and pieces visible as they pass. Peter's proud display of himself as distinct from other men is parodied in his pursuit of a femininity as predictable as the dull masculinity he is consciously refusing.

The outcome of Peter's pursuit of his *passante* is as embarrassing as that of Proust coming upon Mme Verdurin, but for a different reason :

Laughing and delightful, she had crossed Oxford Street and Great Portland Street and turned down one of the little streets, and now, and now, the great moment was approaching, for now she slackened, opened her bag, and with one look in his direction, but not at him, one look that bade farewell, summed up the whole situation and dismissed it triumphantly, for ever, had fitted her key, opened the door, and gone !
(MD, 49).

The passage works as the parody of the amorous clinch or climax that might have been expected : the three times culminating "now" of "and now, and now, the great moment was approaching, for now she slackened ...", as well as that of the *passante* encounter itself, with the girl's "one look", twice named, signifying something else entirely from what the convention requires, what Peter desires. The *passante* narrative, in other words, still stands, as the dominant street story : «for it was half made up, as he knew very well ; invented, this escapade with the girl ; made up, as one makes up the better part of life» (MD, 50). Here, the look, not even at him, is nonetheless for him, indicating her understanding of the "situation". The inclusion of the *passante's* angle of view has produced a parody of the genre whose conventions are clearly understood by both parties, transforming it into a gentle power game where she comes out with the victory, "triumphantly", her bag containing a tool more serviceable than the pocket-knife, and which rapidly brings things to a close.

Peter's imaginary girl with her own latch-key and her playful rejection of standard femininity is a model New Woman ; further on in

Mrs Dalloway, Woolf offers us another version in eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Dalloway, whose foray on top of a bus brings her into close affinity with the daring masculinity adopted by Peter Walsh. For Elizabeth takes on the qualities of a buccaneering bus, «the impetuous creature – a pirate» (MD, 120), and does so by an overt distinction from the literary femininity in whose terms she is starting to be perceived : «it was beginning ... People were beginning to compare her to poplar trees, early dawn, hyacinths, fawns, running water, and garden lilies» (MD, 119-120). Elizabeth's adventure on top of a bus is an adolescent equivalent of the dismissal of the *passante* scene accomplished by Peter Walsh's girl, in which she becomes a sort of tomboy female pirate.

These vignettes might lead us to imagine that the street-walking scene is being surreptitiously shifted, moving the *passante* out of focus to make way for something like a feminine *flânerie*. Perhaps this explains the very first words of the novel's heroine : " «I love walking in London», said Mrs Dalloway. «Really, it's better than walking in the country» " (MD, 7). What else, after all, would Clarissa's surname have led us to expect than, the woman who likes to dally along the way, the *flâneuse* herself?

"Street Haunting"

In a diary entry from May, 1928, Woolf wrote : «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.»¹⁰ The essay entitled "Street Haunting", written in 1930, is probably her most graphic development of this statement. The piece dramatises the evening walk through the streets of London of a narrator constantly fabricating or recording the stories around her (or him) ; walking the streets becomes, in effect, the background or ground for story-making (at once, and indistinguishably, its necessary preliminary or pre-amble and its milieu, the place of the story). At the outset – setting off – the narrator declares, disingenuously, that her sortie involves a purely spurious object, an «excuse for walking half

10. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, 1925-30, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (1980) ; rpt. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1982, p. 186 ; entry for 31.5.1928.

across London between tea and diner» to justify the pleasure.¹¹ That object is nothing else than the purchase of a pencil, of the means of writing. At the end of the essay the appointed purchase is duly made, after the narrator has entered a stationer's for the purpose (the purpose of fulfilling the fake purpose). There are two other shops she goes into during the course of her wandering. Given the connection made in the diary between writing and walking, and given that the pencil is already taken care of, it seems fitting that one of these is a boot shop. But we are getting ahead of ourselves and must first retrace our steps to the start of the essay/adventure.

Leaving the house is accompanied, for the narrator, by a loss of personal identity :

We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room. (CE, 4 : 155).

The move outside involves the removal of individuality for anonymity, and the shift from stability – one fixed place – to mobility, a peaceable "army" on the move. Already there are some odd shifts here : "ourselves" is equivocally identified with the projection or externalisation of "the self our friends know us by". The friends are associated with the house that is being temporally left ; but then it turns out that pleasant companionship ("agreeable" "society") is actually to be found out of doors and among the "anonymous". On the very threshold of her walk, the narrator has already effected some striking displacements which should serve as hints of what is to come.

This shedding of self will quickly be given another simile, another walking attribute :

The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. How beautiful a street is in winter ! (CE, 4 : 156).

11. Woolf, *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf, Vol. IV (London : Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 155. Further references will be included in the text.

A corollary, then, of the move from self to anonymity is the change from "I" to eye, from pronoun to organ, the recording eye of «a central oyster of perceptiveness.»¹² A little further on, we discover more of its attributes. First, this is an eye which looks to surfaces, not to an in-depth examination :

But, after all, we are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream ; resting, pausing, the brain perhaps sleeps as it looks ...

But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves ; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root ... Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only. (CE, 4 : 156-7).

The surface looking advocated here does not imply that there is no depth, but that its evasion is part of what defines the pleasures of all eye-looking. Dallying is superficial, "surfaces only". To dig deeper, far from being an obligation, is a danger.

And this leads on to one final characteristic : the spontaneous aestheticism of the roving eye :

For the eye has this strange property : it rests only on beauty ; like a butterfly it seeks colour and basks in warmth. On a winter's night like this, when nature has been at pains to polish and preen herself, it brings back the prettiest trophies, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral as if the whole earth were made of precious stone. The thing it cannot do (one is speaking of the average unprofessional eye) is to compose these trophies in such a way as to bring out the more obscure angles and relationships. Hence after a

12. This "central oyster of perceptiveness" strikes me as a richly enigmatic expression. Apart from the closeness of "oy-eye-I", the oyster itself seems to include suggestions of sensory responsiveness (of the animal itself) and voluptuousness (the pleasures of the consumer). Webster's dictionary defines the oysters as «a marine bivalve mollusk (family Ostreidae) having a rough irregular shell closed by a single adductor muscle, the foot small or wanting, and no siphon, living free on the bottom or adhering to stones or other objects in shallow water along the seacoasts or in brackish water in the mouths of rivers, and feeding on minute plants or animals carried to them by the current.» The specification of "the foot small or wanting" is not irrelevant to the theme of feminine strolling, and in particular to one of the episodes of Woolf's essay discussed below : that Woolf's street should be in a sense submarine accords with an insistent imagery that surfaces throughout her writing.

prolonged diet of this simple sugary fare, of beauty pure and uncomposed, we become conscious of satiety. We halt at the door of the boot shop ...

(CE, 4 : 157).

Here the eye has become a mouth, a consumer of sweet things, "sugary fare". There is a frivolousness, an avowed superficiality, shared in common by the spectator (the eye "like a butterfly") and the surface from which it takes its selection ("the pretty trophies"). This begins to look, to our own unprofessional eye, something like a double feminisation, of the world outside and the woman inside. But put another way, the exaggeration points to a femininity that now seems always to have been implicit in the *flâneur*, not a man who follows the model of ordered masculine behaviour, as the case of Peter Walsh suggests in a different way.

The superficial sauntering of the butterfly eye finds its mots perfect expression or egression in window-shopping. The first example has already suggested this :

Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only – the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses ; the carnal splendour of the butchers' shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks ; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists' windows.

(CE, 4 : 157).

Colour, the surface view, takes precedence over distinctions of substance, say between meat and flowers. The transparency of the plate-glass windows seems, like the glossy omnibuses, to go along with a deliberate indulgence in purely visual pleasures at the expense of all else.

At the expense, in fact, of expense : this process is extended even further when looking in shop windows is represented as a pleasurable end in itself, unconnected with a potential purchase :

Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure. With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous ; it creates, it adorns ; it

enhances. Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet. (CE, 4 : 160).

The "treasure" here is not excavated, the depth beneath a surface, but "cast up" spontaneously. "Passing, glimpsing", the *passante* has become the mobile spectator herself, not the one who is glimpsed, her active looking making an implicit contrast with what now appears to have been the passivity of the woman seen by the masculine flâneur.

But this is not the only possible reading of "Street Haunting". To read it like this involves just the same kind of selectivity as the eye is supposed to perform, with its "butterfly" flitting to and fro, alighting only on what pleases it, or even, like Proust's narrator, imagining what suits it : "it creates".

Pursuing a different trail, we would see quite other things along the way of this essay. Its title, after all, might suggest that there is more going on than a simple childlike delight. "Haunting" is almost a homonym of one of the possible English words for translating *flâner* : "sauntering". In a diary entry from a few years before, Woolf had written : «I like this London life in early summer – the street sauntering & square haunting» (D, 3 : 11 ; 20.4.1925), as if bringing the two terms into complete synonymity, neighbours of sense as well as sound. But "haunting", in its ordinary usage, is anything but a casual, strolling word. The essay that so vehemently advocates looking only at surfaces is also, by that very exaggeration, indicating that such an attitude may be hiding something else too.

Reading with less accommodating eyes, we spot other details. At first, indifferently, as we have seen, the narrator left her house and her "self" to «become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room.» (CE, 4 : 155) A few pages on, her companions have been metamorphosed into «this maimed company of the halt and the blind.» (CE, 4 : 159). The section immediately prior to the passage on window-shopping reads as follows :

They do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity ; when, suddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery ; or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like a hasty covering thrown over a dead horse

or a donkey. At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect ; a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes ; a question is asked which is never answered.

At the beginning it looks as though the self-consciously reassuring suggestion that "they" are content with their inferiority to the observer is to be turned into a restatement of a clear-cut difference, but of another kind, as "they" become desperate, even dead animals. But the grotesque is twisted in an unexpected direction here. The wildness of the "sights" is reciprocated in the bestialisation of the genteel spectator too, reduced or transformed to a body of instinctual responses : «the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect». The passage continues :

Often enough these derelicts choose to lie not a stone's-throw from theatres, within hearing of barrel organs, almost, as night draws on, within touch of the sequined cloaks and bright legs of diners and dancers. They lie close to those shop-windows where commerce offers to a world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs, sofas which are supported by the gilt necks of proud swans ; tables inlaid with baskets of many-coloured fruit ; sideboards paved with green marble the better to support the weight of boars' heads ; and carpets so softened with age that their carnations have almost vanished in a pale-green sea. (CE, 4 : 159-60).

Preceded by this extreme juxtaposition, the "Passing, glimpsing" paragraph becomes open to, if it does not demand, other readings. It is going to haunt the harmless pleasures of window-shopping. One way of looking at the relationship, clearly, would be as that of an implicit reprimand to the luxury-loving spectator. But here again, as in the earlier section, there is not a contrast but a rapprochement, even an identification, and in more than one way. The "derelicts" freely "choose" their position, and it is to them that "commerce offers" its exhibition. They are not beggars but ideal consumers. And the prosperous narrator, by her own account, is not looking to buy, but only to look, using what is on view in the windows as a basis for pure fantasy : she is only going to buy a practical pencil.

The curious individuals who "choose to lie" near the theatres and shops are "sights" for strolling eyes, but they are also themselves connoisseurs of the pleasures of spectacle for its own sake. And though

the narrator does not see herself as seen by them, the path of her own description has had the effect of abolishing the difference it initially sets up.

From this perspective, we can turn to two particularly odd trios encountered en route. Inside the boot shop, the casual walker is cut down to size :

We halt at the door of the boot shop and make some little excuse, which has nothing to do with the real reason, for folding up the bright paraphernalia of the streets and withdrawing to some duskier chamber of the being where we may ask, as we raise our left foot obediently upon the stand : «What, then, is it like to be a dwarf? » (CE, 4 : 157).

Here the difference of indoors and outdoors makes the streets equivalent to the butterfly's wings, their display an extension of the walker who is at liberty to fold them up for her withdrawal inside. The interior of the shop is represented as a place of infantilisation, «as we raise our left foot obediently», of *fitting* conformity, in which the footloose and fancy-free *flâneuse* is brought abruptly to a standstill. In this light, the question "What is it like to be a dwarf ? " acquires enough of a rationale for its literal explanation, in the next sentence, to come as something of a surprise :

She came in escorted by two women who, being of normal size, looked like benevolent giants beside her. Smiling at the shop-girls, they seemed to be disclaiming any lot in her deformity and assuring her of their protection. She wore the peevish yet apologetic expression usual on the faces of the deformed. She needed their kindness, yet resented it. (CE, 4 : 157-8).

So far, the female dwarf is still a curiosity, and also a type, wearing the «expression usual on the faces of the deformed». But then her pride in her feet alters the focus to hers as she stands unique among an undifferentiated audience of "us" :

Look at that ! Look at that ! she seemed to demand of us all, as she thrust her foot out, for behold it was the shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman. It was arched ; it was aristocratic ... Her manner became full of self confidence. She sent for shoe after shoe ... She got up and pirouetted before a glass which

reflected the foot only in yellow shoes, in fawn shoes, in shoes of lizard-skin ... She was thinking that, after all, feet are the most important part of the whole person ; women, she said to herself, have been loved for their feet alone. (CE, 4 : 158).

This is a wonderful turning upon ordinary viewpoints, as the female dwarf, already diminished in the common perception, is shown to aggrandise herself by an identification with an even slighter part, her feet alone, classic choice of male fetishism ; and by means of what might be assumed to be her weakest point, the figure of the narcissistic woman, parading herself as an object of visual admiration. Instead of a surface/depth structure, in which the appearance of abnormality or deficiency is represented as nonetheless concealing an inner virtue or beauty (the pure heart or soul within), the surface look which it might have been thought tactful to disregard is highlighted as the very image of perfection. Unerringly, the dwarf puts her best foot forward, thereby transforming the narrator's own view : «she had changed the mood ; she had called into being an atmosphere which, as we followed her out into the street, seemed actually to create the humped, the twisted, the deformed» (C, 4 : 158).

Woolf's transformation of the small woman into the epitome of a proud, surefooted femininity perversely plays on other representations of the grotesque and of the feminine, the impact of the passage deriving from the way in which the negative connotations of each are dramatically inverted. The impression that Woolf is playing with distortions of sexual perspective is reinforced by the sighting, immediately on leaving the boot shop, of a second, equally bizarre, single-sex trio : «Two bearded men, brothers, apparently, stone-blind, supporting themselves by resting a head on the small boy between them, marched down the street» (CE, 4 : 158). There is something deliberately staged in the symmetrical contrasts here : two groups, one female, one male, formed to protect a disability, the one in the middle being the sufferer in the first case (the dwarf), and the support (the little boy) in the second. In the second group, the two on the outside are the blind, in the first group the "outsider", the dwarf, is on the inside. But this focussed formal perfection is not left as an aesthetic spectacle : it moves out to take over the onlookers as well :

As they passed, holding straight on, the little convoy seemed to cleave asunder the passers-by, with the momentum of its silence its

directness, its disaster. Indeed, the dwarf had started a hobbling grotesque dance to which everybody in the street had now conformed ; the stout lady tightly swathed in shiny seal-skin ; the feeble-minded boy sucking the silver knob of his stick ; the old man squatted on the doorstep as if, suddenly overcome by the absurdity of the human spectacle, he had sat down to look at it – all joined in the hobble and tap of the dwarf's dance. (CE, 4 : 159).

This is a scene quite similar to the one in *Between the Acts* in which the audience of the village play is forced, by means of mirrors turned in their direction, to see themselves as part of the spectacle, not its comfortably external observers. The street "scene" here becomes precisely the place where the simple stereotypical distinctions associated with anonymous encounters and visual judgements are broken down. Everyone is grotesque, just as all the seeming poor can turn out to be equivalent to affluent consumers.

My suggestion here is not that Woolf is making a moral point about the harmony of all mankind, whether wealthy or impoverished, disabled or healthy, or, on the other hand, that she is wilfully disregarding the effects of social and physical differences ; nor is she using a form of ironic assimilation to emphasise these differences all the more. All these possibilities are present in the way that the scenes are narrated, but are exposed as limited, much as the artificially distinguished sexual groupings point by exaggeration to the inadequacies of the habitual binary division.

Woolf's essay finishes with another pseudo-symmetry when she goes into the stationer's to make her planned purchase of a lead pencil, having declared from the outset that this object is a mere excuse for the *flânerie* in which her narrator has meanwhile been indulging. But of course the point of the pencil is a sharper one than this allows. The shoes and the pencil suggest the connection between walking and writing, between strolling and story-making, which Huart had also assumed : these boots are made for writing.

But there is a third shop entered along the narrator's way : a second-hand bookshop. Placed between the two other shop scenes, this episode has the function, by position as well as by subject matter, of a *mise en abyme* of this ambulatory inventiveness : «Second-hand books are wild books, homeless books ; they have come together in vast flocks of variegated feather, and have a charm which the domesticated volumes of the library lack» (CE, 4 : 161). Most of the volumes

randomly perused turn out to be accounts of foreign travel, «so restless the English are» (C, 4 : 162), and their printed narratives, of which random fragments are gleaned here and there in a few minutes' browsing, are identified with the casual encounters of the walk in London :

The number of books in the world is infinite, and one is forced to glimpse and nod and move on after a moment of talk, a flash of understanding, as, in the street outside, one catches a word in passing and from a chance phrase fabricates a lifetime. (CE, 4 : 163).

The street here is one of words, just as the book is a passing street acquaintance, briefly sighted, from which we "move on".

The essay ends with a celebration of walking as fantasy, as creative mobility :

Walking home through the desolation one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, of the blind men, of the party in the Mayfair mansion, of the quarrel in the stationer's shop. 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 briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others ... And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and 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 ? (CE, 4 : 165).

The valorisation of deviation over the straight line itself makes way for a transformation here of a conventional comparison. Covertly displacing the usual opposition between the artificial city and primitive country, the urban landscape becomes a natural wilderness.

Before moving on into another of Woolf's walking texts, let us just note in passing a moment in the "Street Haunting" essay where the narrator seems to put the clamp on the open and fluid identifications she is elsewhere suggesting. The passage takes a very standard, direct-line route to the suburbs south of London :

The main stream of walkers at his hour sweeps too fast to let us ask such questions. They are wrapt, in this short passage from work to home, in some narcotic dream, now that they are free from the desk and have the fresh air on their cheeks. They put on those bright

clothes which they must hang up and lock the key upon all the rest of the day, and are great cricketers, famous actresses, soldiers who have saved their country at the hour of need. Dreaming, gesticulating, often muttering a few words aloud, they sweep over the Strand and across Waterloo Bridge whence they will be slung in long rattling trains, to some prim little villa in Barnes or Surbiton where the sight of the clock in the hall and the smell of the supper in the basement puncture the dream. (CE, 4 : 163).

Woolf's representation of the commuter crowd takes a conventional distance, through its predictable representation of bourgeois conventionality. It first promises, as with the other encounters of the evening walk, to complicate the stereotype, making the rush-hour into a time of escape, of dreaming. But then the homogeneous crowd is swiftly dismissed into the standardised horrors of "some prim little villa", where the narrator seems positively to turn up her nose at «the smell of the supper in the basement». If the conventional representations of the Victorian "nether world" of the back streets of London can be successfully questioned and rendered differently, Woolf's narrator seems to stop short when it comes to imagining suburbia as other than a nightmare when viewed from what now becomes the safe preserve of the inner-city aristocratic gaze.

A Room of One's Own

"Street Haunting" suggests a model of *flânerie* as a perverse modern writing in which it is not necessarily the sex of the walker which is in question, but the effect of the *flâneur's* glancing interest and abandonment of his or her own identity in shifting the perspective with regard to many assumed ways of seeing. If, as has been suggested, there might be reasons for thinking of this as a feminine form of *flânerie*, it is not at all evident that only a woman would go about it : Woolf's narrator does not sex, or unsex, "her" self. *A Room of One's Own* is concerned, however, with the sex of the writer / walker throughout.

It might seem outlandish to think of *A Room of One's Own*, which is all about the importance of an inside, personal space for the woman writer, as having any connection with the links I have been making

between women, walking and writing in Woolf's work. Far from it : the book is structured throughout by an imaginary ramble (through "Oxbridge", London and the British Museum, and through many byways of bookish history) leading up to the point at which the narrator represents herself sitting down to start writing what she has just recounted. The literal and the recorded walk thus overlay one another so as to play upon the difficulty of differentiating them. As with *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the circular structure is such that the end sends you straight back to the beginning ; but Proust's novel is not set out, as is *A Room of One's Own*, as a *flânerie*. For Woolf, it is as though casual walking were the only possible way of dealing with such an impossible subject for a lecture as "women and fiction".

A Room of One's Own has many direct evocations of this fictional *déambulation* : «I had come at last, in the course of this rambling, to the shelves which hold books by the living» (ROO, 79) ; «And with Mrs Behn, we turn a very important corner in the road» (ROO, 64) ; «I spare you the twists and turns of my cogitations, for no conclusion was found on the road to Headingley» (ROO, 17). The figure of rambling serves to suggest the argument which turns into the narrative of its own lack of an ending :

I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these questions – women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems. But in order to make some amends I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money.
(ROO, 6).

"How I arrived", in the context of the general language of strolling and rambling, exposes one of a whole clutch of metaphors which writers and readers normally pass by without a second glance. Introduction, digression, excursus, passage : it is as though the very grounds of rhetoric were made for walking on, measured out in properly poetical metres and feet.

But there are also stopping points in Woolf's text where the city walk provides a more elaborated analogy for the writer's stamping ground :

There came to my mind's eye one of those long streets somewhere south of the river whose infinite rows are innumably populated. With the eye of the imagination I saw a very ancient lady crossing

the street on the arm of a middle-aged woman, her daughter, perhaps, both so respectably booted and furred that their dressing in the afternoon must be a ritual ... (ROO, 88).

What starts here as a typical ("one of those") and imaginary ("in my mind's eye") street soon becomes specific and actual, with the narrator acting as though it were not in her own power to determine the description of the characters "I saw". The scene then become precisely a question of specification :

The elder is close on eighty ... And if one asked her, longing to pin down the moment with date and season. But what were you doing on the fifth of April 1868, or the second of November 1875, she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked ; the plates and cups washed ; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie. (ROO, 8909).

The disingenuousness of this is blatant : the lady is a fictional invention to begin with – a projection, perhaps of the "imagination surexcitée" of the woman writer. But that is only to say that the usual fiction that the subject is not a fiction – as though the narrator had simply said "I saw an old lady of eighty" – has here been exposed. Though the final sentences seem to deplore the absence of solid written evidence for the woman's everyday life, or else its distortion in the novels which "inevitably lie", the self-consciously fictional framing of the argument undermines the straightforward differentiation of the facts from the errors. This gives a quite distinct cast to the proposal for future writing projects :

All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded, I said ... and went on in thought through the streets of London feeling in imagination the pressure of dumbness, the accumulation of unrecorded life, whether from the women at the street corners with their arms akimbo, and the rings embedded in their fat swollen fingers, talking with a gesticulation like the swing of Shakespeare's words ; or from the violet-sellers and match-sellers and old crones stationed under doorways ; or from drifting girls whose faces, like

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*waves in sun and cloud, signal the coming of men and women and
the flickering lights of shop windows.* (ROO, 89).

Some very unexpected moves are going on here. It is a self-conscious poeticisation of the never before recorded lives which first suggests itself, through the Shakespearean gestures or the girls with faces "like waves in sun and cloud", as though Woolf were pointing out the risks of assuming that words could act as a pristine or undistorted medium for the new records demanded of them. And then, the unrecordedness of the lives is in the eyes or the "feeling" of the beholder, who, as in the case of the old lady and her daughter, is only a beholder "in imagination". She hereby records what she declares at once unrecorded (a presumed fact) and fictional (her own invention). What looks to the eye of the reader like a predictable call for indiscriminate documentary detail is actually a passage which creates all sorts of complications about the claims of documentary writing and the claims or place of the documentary observer.

So when, elsewhere in *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator speaks of «the fascination of the London street» (ROO, 94), or when she urges her audience of Newnham students to "loiter at street corners" as one of the means «to write all kinds of books» (ROO, 107), she is advocating a form of streetwalking or streetwriting which is clearly going to deviate from the expected routes in the writing of or about women, on and off the streets.

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