

GENDER AND URBAN SPACES IN *NIGHT WALKS* BY CHARLES DICKENS AND *STREET HAUNTING: A LONDON ADVENTURE* BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

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In *The Painter of Modern Life*, written in the late 1850s, Baudelaire defines the perfect *flâneur* as a passionate spectator, who rejoices immensely to be «in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement»¹. When Baudelaire wrote his essay, Paris was experiencing a period of transformation and modernization and the everchanging spaces of the modern city continued to attract these wanderers and spectators². As suggested, the *flâneur* came to be identified with «a passionate, invisible, male observer of diurnal and nocturnal life in the arcades, parks, boulevards, and cafés and «he identified with the public spaces of the city»³.

Given this early definition of *flâneur*, it is interesting to consider the relationship that generated from the interaction of two different sensibilities with the urban space of London and how the attitude of the *flâneur* changed in response to the dynamic spaces of the modern city. The following analysis of the texts by C. Dickens and V. Woolf concentrates, among other aspects, on the relationship between gender and agency in the urban spaces, and on the attitudes of the narrator. In terms of gender, the essay by Virginia Woolf is a case in point, since it clearly challenges the identification of the *flâneur* with men and yet poses some important issues concerning the relationship between gender and movement.

At the beginning, both texts underline the reason and the urge which made them leave their houses and wander the streets of London. In *Night Walks*, it is a temporary inability to sleep and distress, which couldn't have been defeated if the author had stayed at home. Once the narrator leaves his house, he is completely free to wander wherever he wants. On the contrary, in *Street Haunting*, Virginia Woolf has to invent an excuse (buying a lead pencil) to fulfil her desire to ramble the streets of London. This already gives the reader a perception of constriction and of subjugation of the female identity in a male society.

Movement across the city is related to issues of identity and the encounter with otherness. In *Night Walks*, the central experience of the author in walking the streets of London is the condition of houselessness. Once the threshold has been crossed and his house left, the author gets rid of his identity. A similar notion recurs and is made much more explicit in Woolf's text:

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. By Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995), p.9.

² Baudelaire, p.80.

³ Alison O'Byrne, 'The spectator and rise of the modern metropole' in *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*, ed. by Kevin R. McNamara (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 72.

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.⁴

The contrast between domestic and public spaces is clear. Virginia Woolf famously scorned the idea of the Angel in the House and was extremely concerned with the possibilities that were precluded to the women of her age by domestic ideology.

In both texts, the house becomes a symbol for restlessness and solitude, even though inside it the identity of the author may be well defined («the self our friends know us by»⁵). Leaving the house and joining the other trampers signals the passage between identity and anonymity, between solitude and society. In *Night Walks*, leaving the house becomes associated with a sense of liberation and release, the *flâneur's* agency is empowered. On the other hand, it is arguable whether the agency of the female wanderer is empowered, or whether the world in which she moves perpetuates a male ideology.

The issue of identity also puts forward some reflections on the attitude of the narrator in their encounter with the urban space and its inhabitants. Not only can a good society be found, as Virginia Woolf claims, in the anonymous trampers, but the city itself keeps Dickens company: London is personified and shares the author's fits and starts of restlessness. The natural elements and the environment reflect Dickens's inner feelings: the river has an awful look and the moon is wild. Furthermore, the clouds take up the *flâneur's* own restlessness and the sky lies shadowy and oppressively low upon the river.

The social engagement of Dickens is evident in that he rises issues which affect the modern metropolis as he approaches very significant parts of London. His vision of the city points out the contradictions of modern life and includes the realism of urban grime and misery⁶. The modern city is connected with a sense of disease and decay, which affects men living in the urban space: the Dry Rot. The disease Dickens detects in men and describes in detail leads eventually to the deterioration of the victim. The deterioration of the organism and its crumbling into pieces is a phenomenon which could be extended to the author's perception of the whole society, whose integrity is threatened by the incipient transformations of this era of rapid and radical social change. The theme of the disease is strictly connected to the opposition between sanity and insanity that Dickens sets up as he visits Bethlehem Hospital. The boundaries between sanity and insanity are blurred, like the ones between

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Street Haunting: A London Adventure*. In Woolf, V, *The Crowded dance of modern life* (London: Penguin), p.70.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Street Haunting: A London Adventure*, p.70.

⁶ Murray Baumgarten, *Fictions of the City*. In: John O. Jordan, *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.110.

dreams and reality. People outside the hospital who are supposed to be sane are actually subject to the same inconsistencies and fantasies as people inside it.

The social commentary takes on an ironic tone as Dickens stops at Westminster Bridge and looks at the British Parliament, the symbol of the power of Britain and «the admiration of all surrounding nations and succeeding ages»⁷. Two other symbols of power, the Courts of Law and Westminster Abbey, are personified and keep the author company. Like the British Parliament, they have a significant institutional role, but both of them hide a darker side. On the one hand, the Courts of Law have troubled and oppressed a myriad of «unfortunate suitors»⁸. On the other hand, Westminster Abbey suggests the author a procession of dead people. Reality and imagination overlap, and the boundaries between life and death tremble, till the point when his thoughts take up Gothic overtones: the author considers «what enormous hosts of dead belong to one old great city»⁹. The allusions to a world of death and ghosts recur till the end of the text. The last person he encounters, the man with the pudding, is described as mysterious and spectral, and his figure promises cadaverousness.

In *Night Walks*, Dickens also stresses the paradoxical and fallible nature of human perception in the urban space. The church clock strikes are at first mistaken for company, but they give a sense of a much more profound loneliness. The space he describes in this passage is one which intensifies the sensible perception of sounds, which vibrate across with a great clearness. Furthermore, while Dickens seeks company in the personified city, he objectifies a youth of twenty he comes across and gives him animal features: he is a thing and his whining mouth is that of a worried dog. This episode conveys and denounces the misery and the terrible condition of houseless people, and the effects that the city has on them. The degradation of the city concerns children too: they prowl about Covent Garden and try to steal anything they can and the author is profoundly distressed by their sight.

If the social commentary of Dickens and his engagement with the problems of the modern city appear to be unquestionable, the experience of Virginia Woolf around the streets of London has been considered ambivalent. As Susan Squier wrote, «Whether she thought it "the most beautiful place on the face of the earth" or "the very devil," to Virginia Woolf the city of London was the focus for an intense, often ambivalent, lifelong scrutiny»¹⁰. In *Street Haunting*, Virginia Woolf herself considers an ambivalent attitude in the approach to the city. At first, she states that her experience of rambling the streets of London is highly perceptive and yet it cannot penetrate the surface:

⁷ Charles Dickens, *Night Walks*. In: D. Pascoe (Ed.), *Charles Dickens, Selected Journalism, 1850-1870* (London: Penguin) p.77.

⁸ Dickens, *Night Walks*, p.77.

⁹ Dickens, *Night Walks*, p.77.

¹⁰ Susan Squier, "The London Scene: Gender and Class in Virginia Woolf's London", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 29.4 (1983), p.488.

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 sleeps perhaps as it looks.¹¹

The movement of the eye, like that of a butterfly moving from one flower to the next, is that of the author across the streets of London. The superficial and visual perception of the surrounding spaces determines the acknowledgment of the beauty of the city: «How beautiful a street is in winter!»¹², «How beautiful a London street is [...]»¹³.

The city is, at first, described in natural terms: a London street has islands of light and groves of darkness. However, its real nature is soon revealed: the oblong frames of reddish-yellow light among the trees are windows, and the low stars are lamps. The author warns against the risk of penetrating deep into surfaces, lest «the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordities»¹⁴. The twofold (and sordid) nature of the city is soon implicitly revealed. Nevertheless, the author reminds the reader once again that the eye allows only a limited perspective: it cannot «bring out the more obscure angles and relationships»¹⁵. Probably, it is this continue warning that prompted Squier's claim that, in *Street Haunting*, «social criticism is markedly restrained»¹⁶, and that «the stroll through London leaves her neither morally, spiritually, nor politically changed, but merely entertained»¹⁷.

However, it could be argued that a social commentary and criticism emerge prominently in the scenes of urban life that Woolf depicts. The narrator examines the city's inhabitants and the spaces they occupy. For instance, she halts at the door of a boot shop and through the depiction of the episode she witnesses, Virginia Woolf conveys the mediocrity of the girl's character, which parallels her physical deformity. The sense of physical deformity which emanates from the dwarf-girl pervades also the following scene, when two blind men appear, marching down the street. As in Dickens, the imagination of the author takes over and the two men and the dwarf girl seem to take part to a «hobbling grotesque dance»¹⁸, which engages all the other people on the street. Furthermore, the author wonders in which crevices or crannies these figures (she calls them derelicts) may live, as if they were more obscure creatures than human beings.

¹¹ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.71.

¹² Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.71.

¹³ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.71.

¹⁴ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.72.

¹⁵ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.72.

¹⁶ Susan Squire, 'Achieving an Authentic Voice' in *Virginia Woolf and London: the sexual politics of the city* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), p.46.

¹⁷ Squire, 'Achieving an Authentic Voice', p.48.

¹⁸ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.74.

These imaginative thoughts and explicit contrasting images turn into a more implicit social commentary and political debate, denouncing inequality and the misery of these derelicts, who often lie near buildings which are symbols of wealth and commerce.

The debated involvement of Virginia Woolf, which Squier doubts, calls into question her position as an outsider or insider. In particular, Squier argues that the question about human suffering is never answered, supposing therefore a shunning of social responsibility: «Any social criticism the question might have instigated is abandoned»¹⁹. The role of the outsider, Squier argues, could also be suggested by the position of the woman in society. Indeed, a woman walking alone through London at twilight was always «at risk of being seen as a streetwalker, and treated as such, by the men she encounters»²⁰. This definitely suggests a gender-based reconsideration of the extent of freedom she could enjoy in a society of male insiders.

The role of the woman as an outsider appears to be a significant issue in the text by Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own*. The essay contains Woolf's famous argument that, «A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction»²¹, which claims the importance of financial freedom and independence for women in order to achieve intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom can be thus achieved through financial possessions, but at the same time she claims the right for women, especially writers, to wander the streets of their cities, as a way to enhance female creativity. In the essay, a central role is played by the walk of Woolf's alter ego, which takes her from the men's college in the centre of the fictitious university town of Oxbridge to the women's college on the outskirts of the same town. On her visit, Woolf's narrator finds herself repeatedly locked out from the chapel and the library. The exclusion from these buildings leads to a different perspective and challenging attitude of the author towards existing gender codes:

I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in.²²

According to Susan Squier, in *A Room of One's Own* the city embodies the difficulties in a woman writer's position in a patriarchal culture. Woolf meditates upon the secular exclusion of women from literature, that is also their exclusion and marginalization from the spaces occupied by men. Woolf's readers just need to imagine a fictitious sister of William Shakespeare, called Judith and born with as much talent as his brother. But in 16th century England, as a woman, Judith cannot develop her talent. As Virginia Woolf imagines, Judith is never sent to school, is pressured into

¹⁹ Squier, 'Achieving an Authentic Voice', p.47.

²⁰ Squier, 'Achieving an Authentic Voice', p.48.

²¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, London: Vintage, 2001, p.2.

²² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, p.19.

marriage, and is consistently denied her independence. She runs away to London but her escape ends not with fame and fortune but with her death. Judith's struggle to create a place for herself as a writer in London fails and her story represents the impact of the urban environment on a woman writer's creativity.

In *Street Haunting*, the comparison between male and female experience is part of the meditation on the variety of human nature and on the relativity of the perception of reality, which is generated from the variety of perspectives from which the city can be told. The issue of relativity permeates, firstly, questions about our true nature:

Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?²³

Then, the variegated nature of human beings is clearly in contrast with the unity required by the bourgeois life, where good citizens have their defined identity and place in society. The identity, the whole compelled by convenience, is a male figure:

Circumstances compel unity; for convenience sake a man must be a whole. The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky [...]²⁴

In this passage, Woolf seems to suggest that the male is constricted too. As previously mentioned, one of the main themes of the essay by Woolf turns out to be the opposition between movement and constriction. This opposition is explored through the contrast between a settled life and a nomad wandering the infinite space of the desert. In the following scene, this contrast is conveyed again in the description of a second-hand bookshop. More specifically, the bookseller's wife stands for the feeling of safety deriving from a fixed identity and status. By contrast, the books are wild and homeless, and resemble the experience of homelessness of the *flâneur*. The variety and multiplicity of human nature the narrator recognizes affects deeply the identity of the wanderer and the way he/she moves and suggests further reflections upon it. Interestingly, the experience of wandering through books is compared to the act of walking across the streets:

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.²⁵

²³ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.76.

²⁴ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.76.

²⁵ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.78.

The sociability the author finds in the streets is explored through the act of dipping in and out of people's minds, which implies, as Woolf claims in the final part of her essay, the estrangement of the author from her own identity:

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?²⁶

In conclusion, the encounter of the author with the spaces of the city affects and inevitably questions the notion of identity, which is in its turn related to the opposition between home and urban/open spaces. Restlessness, freedom of movement and the taste for adventure are concepts traditionally linked to men, whereas women are associated to immobility and family life. Virginia Woolf challenges the ideological construct that promotes two separate spheres, the public sphere for men and the domestic sphere for women, even though urban spaces perpetuate a perceptible male ideology. In *Three Guineas*, walking past Westminster Abbey and The House of Parliament, she notes that it's there that "our fathers and brothers have spent their lives [...] preaching, money-making, administering justice" (Woolf, 2001, 19). Thus the *flâneuse*, far from being just the female version of the *flâneur*, starts defining herself from spaces filled with patriarchal prejudices, representing the first steps towards women's emancipation in the urban landscape.

²⁶ Woolf, *Street Haunting*, p.81.

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