Volume 6: 2013-2014 ISSN: 2041-6776

INNERVATE
Leading Undergraduate Work in English

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA
School of English

To what extent do modern urban fictions illustrate, or qualify, Ben Highmore's contention that it is 'the mingling of imaginings and experience that constitute the urban?'

Andrew Routledge

In 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' and *Good Morning, Midnight*, Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys respectively render their female narrator's representations of their cities and their selfhoods in contrasting ways. Deborah L. Parsons notes that Woolf's characters 'use the urban street and room to manifest independence and assert a place on the urban map'. Parsons argues that, by contrast, Rhys's characters 'choose to inhabit streets and rooms that allow hiding-places […] The purpose of their walks is largely retreat, anonymity from others and themselves'.[1] Reinforced by her material possessions, Woolf's narrator feels firmly rooted to a singular and cohesive composition of her identity to the extent that she feels imprisoned by its fixedness. Exiting her private home to enter the public London streets offers a celebration of invention and creativity in which her imagination can meander and lunge into fantastical alternative versions of herself, therefore enabling her to engage with her imaginative potential. By contrast, Rhys's Sasha Jenson claims to have 'no name, no face, no country': to not 'belong anywhere'.[2] Rachel Bowlby argues that Sasha's perceived 'non-identity'[3] encourages 'a melancholic stasis to the possibilities which the narrator imagines for herself, which appears to prevent her from moving at all'.[4] Previous traumatic experiences and broken expectations of what Paris would offer result in Sasha's perception of her selfhood being fractured, hence her residence in spaces that Parson describes as 'in-between areas'.[5] Rhys's narrator retreats from the public Paris streets in an attempt to shelter from the unpleasant fragments of memory and subsequent imaginings that antagonise her and threaten to further pull apart her remaining sense of personal selfhood. Both 'Street Haunting' and *Good Morning, Midnight* therefore qualify Ben Highmore's contention that it is 'the mingling of imaginings and experience that constitute the urban'.[6] Examining the manner in which Woolf and Rhys represent their narrators' private spaces and the city's public spaces, I will explore how the modernist writers illustrate Highmore's contention from alternative, personal perspectives. Whereas Woolf's narrator embraces the public city spaces' entanglement of her experiences and imaginings as to stretch her perceived sense of cohesive selfhood, Rhys's narrator shelters from the city in private spaces in an attempt to retreat from its damaging projections that threaten her fractured selfhood.

[1] Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 125.
[2] Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969 [1939]), p. 38. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text alongside *GMM*.
[3] Rachel Bowlby, *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 42.
[4] Ibid., p. vii.
[5] Parsons, p. 136
[6] Ben Highmore, *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 5.

In 'Street Haunting' Woolf presents the narrator's private room as a space that reinforces the coherence and stability of her identity. Woolf suggests that within our personal homes 'we sit surrounded by objects which […] enforce the memories of our own experience'.[7] Woolf reveals that the narrator's possessions, such as 'that bowl on the mantelpiece' (*SH*, 177), and the subsequent 'cloud' (*SH*, 177) of memory that it generates, provide the narrator with an assurance of her individuality whereby her present self is an amalgamation of her previous experiences: the 'self [her] friends know [her] by' (*SH*, 177). However, the explanation of the objects 'surround[ing]' her and subsequently 'enforc[ing] the memories of [her] own experience' suggests a degree of entrapment, whereby the narrator is forcefully 'tethered' (*SH*, 187) to a fixed selfhood defined by her experiences. Kathryn Simpson notes that 'it is in not insignificant that it is [the bowl] which draws the narrator's attention and which seems key to her feeling of being stifled, her imagination dulled both by the familiarity of the bowl as well as by the memory of its acquisition'.[8] The description of the 'sinister old woman…thrust[ing]' (*SH*, 177) the bowl into the narrator's hands, and the subsequent explanation of how this moment of being 'fleeced' (*SH*, 177) was 'stabilized, stamped like a coin indelibly among a million that slipped by imperceptibly' (*SH*, 177) suggests Woolf's narrator's frustrations of how the private room, and its collection of commodities, imprisons her within her own, limited experiences. The private room effectively 'stamps' and 'stabilizes' her selfhood as one without the potential for change or movement. This notion is similarly outlined by Laura Marcus who claims that 'the shelter of the home' for Woolf's narrator effectively traps her in a place 'in which the objects and possessions that surround' her 'fix [her] in [her] own pasts'.[9] They confine her to a familiar, domestic selfhood that is consistent and singular, but one without the ability to engage with the infinite selves that she could be.

Woolf's narrator's movement into the public, urban streets under the pretext of purchasing a pencil provides her the 'excuse…to indulge…in the greatest pleasure… — rambling the streets of London' (*SH*, 177). Woolf explains that 'when the door shuts on us' the narrator's perception of her fixed, singular self 'vanishes… The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves […] is broken' (*SH*, 177). The 'mingling of imaginings and experience that constitute the urban' therefore enables the narrator to playfully move from the singular, domestic 'I' to an urban 'enormous "eye"' (*SH*, 178) that is unbound and 'becomes part of the vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room' (*SH*, 177). In her description of how the 'eye' perceives London, Woolf reveals:

> We are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure […] 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 with surfaces only (*SH*, 178-79).

Woolf suggests that her narrator is not interested in excavating underlying, actual roots of the city people and items she comes across, as is apparent by the explanation that 'the eye is not a miner'. She prefers to appreciate aesthetics and 'glide smoothly on the surface' in celebration of the mingling of material and imaginary that the city provides her. The manner

[7] Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (1927), in *Selected Essays,* ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford University Press, 2008), p.177. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text alongside *SH*.
[8] Kathryn Simpson, '"Come buy, come buy": Woolf's Contradictory Relationship to the Marketplace', in *Contradictory Woolf* (South Carolina: Clemson University Digital Press, 2012), p. 189.
[9] Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (Devon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 1997), p. 63.

in which 'catching at some branch or root' is depicted as disruptive and 'impeding the passage' down the otherwise 'smooth stream' of imagination implies the narrator's intention to avoid occupying positions that are too close to a stranger's personal anchorage. This would place her in contact with the fixed self that she is eager to avoid, and effectively put her in 'danger' of risking her own psychological collapse. As Beth Rigel Daugherty outlines, Woolf 'focuses on pleasure […] the skimming of surfaces, the *imagining* of other people's inner worlds' (my emphasis) rather than searching for reality. Daugherty reiterates that both the narrator and the people she encounters in the public urban space are 'accompanied by the ghosts of other selves, other identities'.[10] Breaking out of their fixed, private homes enables the city dwellers to 'wear a certain look of unreality, an air of triumph, as if they had given life the slip' (*SH*, 178). Highmore's contention is therefore celebrated in 'Street Haunting' as it enables the narrator to occupy the in-between spaces associated with the ghosts that the text's title evokes. Similarly to how ghosts are free to roam because they are simultaneously dead and undead, Woolf's narrator's 'enormous eye' enables her to wander freely and triumphantly through the city as it provides a stimulating entanglement of the real and the unreal: the experienced and the imagined. Woolf therefore presents a narrator who recognises the restrictions of her domestic, singular selfhood and attempts to assert a degree of autonomy by giving her rooted life 'the slip' as she moves into the public streets, taking up multiple vantage points as she 'put[s] on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others' (*SH*, 187).

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys similarly qualifies Highmore's contention. However, Sasha's absence of a personal and private home, as well as her fractured perception of her selfhood, encourages her to retreat from the city as the ghost-like projections it confronts her with are often threatening or mocking rather than exciting and liberating. Sasha reveals that her 'film-mind' (*GMM*, 147) is prone to uncontrollably elaborating the exposed fragments of past experiences and unachievable alternative selves to the extent that she is constantly battling against her imaginings. The parenthetical juxtaposition of '("For God's sake watch out for your film mind…")' (*GMM*, 147) demonstrates her awareness that she should prevent such projections. However, the presentation of this instruction within parentheses conveys its subordinate position whereby her film-mind consistently dominates her representation of the city and her selfhood in the same way that it dominates the main, un-parenthetical body of the text. Anne B. Simpson similarly notes that 'elements from the past continually threaten to emerge in full consciousness' to the extent that many of Sasha's 'thoughts and statements are coloured by her resistance'.[11] Whereas Woolf's text playfully digresses and takes advantage of imaginative departures, Rhys's narrator cautiously avoids potentially harmful imaginings. She reveals 'there always remains something… Never mind' (*GMM*, 10). Sasha's attempts to 'bury that which is already partially unearthed' is evident by the quantity of ellipses throughout the text.[12] For all her attempts to suppress them her mingling of imaginings and experiences arguably exist and are hidden within the ellipses, continually threatening to burst into her consciousness. This idea is reinforced by the 'programme' (*GMM*, 14) Sasha sets for herself. Carefully negotiating her urban route, rather than 'wandering […] unimpeded' (*SHH*, 182) as Woolf's narrator does, Sasha deliberately 'avoid[s] […] certain cafes […] certain street […] certain spots' (*GMM*, 14) in an attempt to 'arrange [her] little life' (*GMM*, 9) and to prevent her film-mind from latching onto painful reminders that will conjure up imaginings that will dominate her consciousness and threaten her fragile selfhood. This notion is similarly outlined by Bowlby, who argues that Sasha's

[10] Beth Rigel Daugherty, 'The Streets of London: Virginia Woolf's Development of a Pedagogical Style', in *Woolf and the City* (South Carolina: Clemson University Digital Press, 2010), p. 191.
[11] Anne B. Simpson, *Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 92.
[12] Ibid., p. 92.

programme provides 'the form of a daily agenda designed to remove any risk of the unforeseen'.[13] Rhys depicts Sasha's programme as fundamentally simple:

> Planning it all out. Eating. A movie. Eating again. One drink. A long walk back to the hotel. Bed. Luminal. Sleep. Just sleep – no dreams (*GMM*, 14).

Rhys's employment of short, incomplete sentences conveys the desired fixedness of Sasha's lifestyle. She intends to structure each part of her day to ensure she does 'not leave anything to chance — no gaps' (*GMM*, 14) in which her film-mind can take control. Significantly, in the planning of her day there are no ellipses that threaten her with suppressed imaginings. As she later instructs, 'have a plan and stick to it. First one thing and then another, and it'll be over before you know where you are' (*GMM*, 67). This similarly depicts Sasha's fatalist attitude whereby her days are to be endured instead of being enjoyed. Whilst the programmed routine offers Sasha an assurance of order in which she can maintain a degree of cohesion in her otherwise disoriented existence, the rigidness of her routine similarly entraps her within a grim and lonely cycle. By contrast, the imagined freedom of Woolf's narrator's 'adventure' (*SH*, 186) is rendered with a selection of sentence structures that unfurl and whisk the narrator and reader through various city spaces and selves in a playful manner that embraces 'dallying' in the urban space's mingling of experiences and imaginings. Unlike Sasha, Woolf's narrator 'fabricate[s] the excuse, and invent[s] the necessity of buying something' (SH, 185) simply to enjoy the creative stimuli that the city offers rather than enduring it out of necessity.

The properties of the private room that the narrator of 'Street Haunting' finds frustrating are largely the reason why private rooms are desired as places of retreat by Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Whereas Woolf's narrator criticises the 'solitude of one's own room' due to its restriction of imagined selves and lack of interaction with city dwellers, Sasha deliberately moves into private rooms as they offer places to 'hide from the wolves outside' (*GMM*, 33). Her explanation that she 'crept in and hid. The lid of the coffin shut down with a bang' (*GMM*, 37) offers interesting parallels to Woolf's narrator's explanation of exiting her private room, whereby 'when the door shuts on us, all that vanishes' (*SH*, 178). Both texts therefore render their private spaces as containers. Whereas Woolf's narrator deliberately breaks out as to give 'life the slip' and embrace the mingling of imaginings and experiences that her ghost-like 'eye' 'creates' and 'enhances' (*SH*, 181) from the public, urban space, Sasha climbs into her claustrophobic container of self-burial grounds to retreat from her intimidating film-mind. Whilst Woolf's narrator's ownership of her private territory enables her to draw distinct boundaries between the private and public spaces, Sasha's 'deterritorialization';[14] that is her lack of personal ownership over her private spaces (such as the hotels rooms which complicate the public/private dichotomy) results in the public and private spaces blurring into each other. Unlike Woolf's narrator, who deliberately exits for a couple of hours to occupy a ghost-like, in-between position before returning home, Sasha does not have a true home to return to and is therefore unwillingly caught in a middle, unstable position permanently. This notion is reinforced by Bowlby, who argues that Sasha 'drifts around the city […] in states of melancholy from which [she] seem unable to escape'.[15] Sasha 'resolves in a mental universe where nothing seems to change, all times are the same'.[16] Rhys depicts this flattening of experiences by concluding the novel's first section

[13] Bowlby, p. 42.
[14] Parsons, p. 139.
[15] Bowlby, p. 35.
[16] Ibid., p. 35.

with the claim that Sasha will 'lie in bed all day, pull the curtains and shut the damned world out' (*GMM*, 68). However, at the end of the second section, she reveals:

> This damned room — it's saturated with the past […] It's all the rooms I've ever slept in, all the streets I've ever walked in. Now the whole thing moves in an ordered, undulating procession past my eyes. Rooms, streets, streets, rooms… (*GMM*, 91)

For all her attempts to 'shut the damned world out', the manner in which the room similarly becomes 'damned' depicts the dominance of her suppressed experiences as they merge and overpower her consciousness. Highmore's suggestion that the individual's representation of the city is 'the experience of ambiguity, of thickly compressed meanings, that can't be untangled and arranged into neat legible patterns' is evident.[17] The rooms and streets of Sasha's past entangle and blur with each other ('room, streets, streets, rooms…') and reinforce her disoriented existence as the film-mind she wants to suppress presents an 'undulating procession past [her] eyes.' Whereas in 'Street Haunting' personal commodities, such as the mantelpiece bowl, surround the narrator and imprison her within a singular, unified self, the hotel room's lack of possessions in *Good Morning, Midnight* prompts the room itself to similarly convey Sasha's entrapment. However, in Rhys's text, this entrapment does not depict a cohesive self but a fractured one that reiterates both her loneliness and her instability: '"Quite like old times," the room says', demonstrating the blurring of the past and the present as well as the imagined and the real.

Sasha's anthropomorphic imaginings continue in the public, urban streets, however when walking alone at night they present themselves in a much more threatening way:

> Walking in the night with the dark houses over you, like monsters. If you have money and friends, houses are just houses with steps and a front door […] If you are quite secure and your roots are well struck in, they know. They stand back respectfully, waiting for the poor devil without any friends and without any money. Then they step forward […] Frowning and leering and sneering, the houses one after another (*GMM*, 28).

Sasha's perception of being vulnerable and not 'belong[ing] anywhere' is reiterated by the manner in which the shapes of houses are imaginatively heightened to resemble 'monsters' that overlook and intimidate her. As a result of her paranoia, Sasha's film-mind emphatically personifies the houses as extensions of bourgeois society that she imagines deliberately wait for her as to 'frown…and leer…and sneer' at her due to her homelessness and loneliness. Her feelings of insecurity and lack of rootedness to a stable perception of her selfhood, as well as her absence of a permanent home, qualifies Highmore's contention that her representation of the city is composed of the mingling of her personal imaginings and experiences. This notion is similarly evident when Woolf's narrator encounters the exteriors of houses. Whereas Sasha's film-mind uncontrollably dominates her representation of the houses, Woolf's narrator actively enables her urban 'eye' to excitedly enter and furnish them:

> 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 a vast imaginary house and furnish them at one's will […] That alabaster bowl shall stand on a carved table in the window […] But, having

[17] Highmore, p. 6.

> built and furnished the house one is happily under no obligation to possess it; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye (*SH*, 181).

Similarly to how Sasha's imaginings develop out of her personal experiences of trauma, Woolf's narrator's imaginings develop out of her perceived sense of entrapment due to her material possessions. However, the 'eye' enables Woolf's narrator to confidently and creatively subvert her feelings of imprisonment and live out alternative imaginative responses whereby her commodities and experiences are different. She conveys this by playfully alluding to her actual 'china bowl on the mantelpiece' that 'enforces the memories of [her] own experience' and displacing it with an imagined 'alabaster bowl' that she 'stand[s] on a carved table in the window'. By deliberately presenting an alternative bowl in an alternative position Woolf conveys the narrator's imaginative reconfiguration of her commodities and their subsequent memories. Unlike Sasha, who is threatened by the imagined houses, Woolf's narrator can confidently 'dismantle [them] in the twinkling of an eye', therefore confirming Parsons' claim that the city offers her a place to assert creative independence.

Ben Highmore's contention therefore enables 'a variety of representations of city life'.[18] Woolf and Rhys present their narrator's renderings of their respective cities in a manner that is unique to them, whereby their perception of their selfhood's stability, as well as the psychological security of their private rooms, alters the manner in which they represent their urban environments. The fixedness of the 'Street Haunting' narrator's personal home and selfhood provides her impetus to employ the 'enormous eye' and imaginatively experience fantastical versions of herself. Crucially, this fixedness also provides her a comforting place of retreat whereby she can 'enclose the self' (*SH* 187) and return when she no longer wishes to occupy the in-between position that her urban eye offers. By contrast, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha's lack of a fixed, truly private space reinforces her fragmented perception of her selfhood. Despite her attempts to suppress it, the city stimulates her film-mind and imprisons her permanently within an undesirable in-between position.

[18] Highmore, p. 6.

Bibliography

Bowlby, Rachel. *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Carr, Helen. *Jean Rhys* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 2008).

Daugherty, Beth Rigel. 'The Streets of London: Virginia Woolf's Development of a Pedagogical Style', in *Woolf and the City* (South Carolina: Clemson University Digital Press, 2010).

Highmore, Ben. *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Marcus, Laura. *Virginia Woolf* (Devon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 1997).

Parsons, Deborah L. *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Rhys, Jean. *Good Morning, Midnight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969 [1939]).

Savory, Elaine. *The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Simpson, Anne B. *Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Simpson, Kathryn. '"Come buy, come buy": Woolf's Contradictory Relationship to the Marketplace', in *Contradictory Woolf* (South Carolina: Clemson University Digital Press, 2012).

Woolf, Virginia. 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (1927), in *Selected Essays* ed., David Bradshaw (Oxford University Press, 2008).