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# Walking in Virginia Woolf's footsteps

## *Performing cultural memory*

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**ABSTRACT** The past two decades have seen the rise of the walking tour as a tourist practice that stands in uneasy and contradictory relation to commodity culture. Focusing on the guided tour to Virginia Woolf's London, this article examines what happens when we literally go back to Bloomsbury, walking the literary text as we write the urban one. Placing it in a tradition of walking as a cultural, critical and aesthetic practice, this article explores the literary walk as a mapping of the city, a reading of the streets that is also a performance of the text and that, as an embodied experiencing of urban space, is the corollary of the present obsession with heritage and cultural memory.

**KEYWORDS** *cultural memory, experience, flânerie, heritage, lieu de mémoire, London tourism, Virginia Woolf, walking tour*

The tyranny of memory will have endured for only a moment – but it was our moment. (Nora, 1996: 637)

### **The era of commemoration**

In June 2004, the Virginia Woolf Association of Great Britain unveiled a memorial to Virginia Woolf in London. In the south-west corner of Tavistock Square, across from the spot where the English novelist and her husband Leonard Woolf lived in the first part of the 20th century and home to their influential publishing house, the Hogarth Press, many fans and a few onlookers congregated to see the writer's characteristic face revealed. The ceremony formed the finale of an international conference on the work of Virginia Woolf. On their way to the commemoration, the conference delegates, who had spent several days discussing Woolf's life and writings, traced the steps of the writer through the streets of Bloomsbury.

This 'London scene' does not stand by itself; many such commemoration acts took place concurrently. In fact, among the scholars who



participated in the Virginia Woolf conference, some had just flown over from Ireland, where a five-month festival was being held in celebration of the centenary of 'Bloomsday', the day on which the events in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922) take place. Earlier that month, on 16 June, thousands of people had gathered to partake of a 'Bloomsday' breakfast and stroll through the streets of Dublin. One month earlier, in the French town of Illiers-Combray, Proust adepts came together for the annual 'Hawthorn Walk' organized by the Society of Friends of Marcel Proust and Combray. Walking in the footsteps of Marcel, the protagonist of *In Search of Lost Time*, they visited the places described, read passages from the novel 'on location', and generally enjoyed a day in the country.

The three commemoration scenes above, linking Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury, James Joyce and Dublin, and Marcel Proust and Illiers-Combray respectively, are representative of a cultural trend that can be witnessed throughout Europe. Everywhere, writers are remembered by tracing their (or their characters') steps through the spaces described in their books, their names evoked to attach to place, their memory celebrated in rituals that involve complex engagements between local inhabitants and tourists in transit, 'city branding' and the marketing of space as 'cultural capital' in both senses of the term. Although the phenomenon does not limit itself to writers – there are just as many walks trailing painters, taking aficionados to the sites that they painted<sup>1</sup> – it is characteristic of a form of contemporary tourism that calls itself 'cultural', which has been spreading across Europe since the 1970s. Nowadays, indeed, there is hardly a city or town that does not have its walk 'in the footsteps of', inviting its visitors to tread on the trail of some world-famous or locally known celebrity.

In a very basic sense, the pedestrian movement is the necessary corollary of a cultural heritage construed as spectacular environment (Hewison, 1987; Nora, 1996; Urry, 2002). So-called historic city centres often are located within pedestrian areas, thus turning walking into the privileged mode of approaching the 'visual spectacles and revitalized theatrical decors' that form the contemporary 'City of Spectacle' in Boyer's analysis (1994: 54). Thus London's Millennium Bridge, opened in 2001, is the first pedestrian crossing over the River Thames for more than a century, serving primarily to connect Tate Modern (opened in 2000) and Shakespeare's reconstructed Globe Theatre (opened 1997) with the City. Evidently, pedestrian 'access' is not the full story. The 'pedestrian renaissance' (Solnit, 2002) that cities are witnessing currently needs to be understood equally in relation to the increasing speed of modern life as the result of modern technologies, as a reaction to 'the disembodiment of everyday life [that] is a majority experience, part of automobilization and suburbanization' (Solnit, 2002: 267). Similarly, it needs to be understood in relation to the historic preservation and regeneration projects that have transformed urban spaces into destinations for urban tourism and fora for entertainment



(Boyer, 1994; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). However, it is in the context of the contemporary 'memory boom' (Huyssen, 2003: 18), as part of that 'era of commemoration' which, as Pierre Nora writes at the close of his monumental project on 'sites of memory', *Les lieux de mémoire*, is 'our moment' (1996: 637), that the literary walk is best to be understood: as a particular form of re-establishing our relationship to the past through the experience of place. In *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett maintains that 'Heritage and tourism are collaborative strategies, heritage converting locations into destinations and tourism making them economically viable as exhibits of themselves' (1998: 151). As shall be argued in the following pages, in the memory discourses played out in the public domain, 'experience' is the necessary and inevitable corollary of 'heritage'; they are co-memorative practices. The particular branch of the 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) that is so-called 'cultural tourism', with its 'theming' of sites designed as 'historic', clearly attests to this (see Lippard, 1999). Snubbed for offering 'inauthentic' experiences, such attempts at re-establishing a living relationship with the past and the greediness with which they are consumed speak of a deeply ingrained longing in contemporary western culture. This longing finds a variety of outlets, varying from the deliberately kitsch performance of the experiences offered for sale (in what has come to be known as the 'Disneyfication' of culture, with its theme park approach to existence) to the designing of alternative experiences that counter and engage the commercialization and 'heritage-ing' of culture. For example, in the Institute of International Visual Arts' web-based project *Touring London*, eight artists respond to the 'Ninth Walk' in Harold Clunn's guidebook *The Face of London* (1932) and explore tourism as an artistic and fundamentally urban stance (Sumner, 2001). Setting the stage for understanding the walking tour as a tourist practice that is the performative, narrative and embodied corollary to space read as historic text, such projects effect a *détournement* of tourism for aesthetic and critical purposes. Walking-as-art first emerged – and continues to be practised by performance artists – as acts of resistance, raising questions about the relation to space, time and embodied subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on literary walks in the footsteps of Virginia Woolf, the literary walk will be examined as a mapping of the city, a reading of the streets that is also a walking of the text which, as performance, stands in uneasy and contradictory relation to the commodification of culture.

### **Bloomsbury: Virginia Woolf's *Lieu de mémoire*?**

The Virginia Woolf Memorial in Tavistock Square inscribes the space with the memory of Woolf, writing her story onto the Bloomsbury cityscape. 'Virginia Woolf lived in a house formerly on the south side of Tavistock Square from 1924 to 1939 where most of her greatest novels



were written and published', the memorial's base tells passers-by, providing them with the name of the person represented by the bust and the motivation for its placement at that very spot. Unlike many statues and busts scattered across the capitals of Europe, the bronze cast of Stephen Tomlin's 1931 Virginia Woolf bust does not mention the represented figure's dates of birth and death (1882–1941).<sup>3</sup> Instead, it offers a quotation from an autobiographical text (Woolf, 1985a[1939]: 81), followed by a sponsorship claim:

'Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary rush.'

This memorial was erected by the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain, 26 June 2004.

With this bust, the society dedicated to raising the profile of Virginia Woolf and promoting the reading and discussion of her works gave material form to its aspirations to turn Bloomsbury into a *lieu de mémoire* for Virginia Woolf in Nora's (1989) sense. By marking the spot as the place where Woolf's literary work originated, linking the place to her literary production (rather than her life) – and doing so doubly, first by saying that Woolf lived, wrote and published nearby, then evoking walking round the square as her source and site of inspiration – the society memorializes Virginia Woolf explicitly as a writer, attaching her texts, productivity and artistic person to a material site invested with symbolic meaning. According to Nora, the *lieu de mémoire* is to be understood as at once 'material, symbolic and functional', founded on 'the intention to remember', 'immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration', its 'most fundamental purpose . . . to stop time, to block the work of forgetting' (1989: 18–19). Not necessarily topographical – the *lieu de mémoire* was introduced by Nora as being anything from the national flag to archives, libraries, dictionaries, museums, commemorations, celebrations, monuments and buildings – in practice the concept soon came to be assimilated into that of commemoration, in France and elsewhere. This 'co-optation' is deplored by Nora as he completes his monumental project. As he notes, a 'commemorative bulimia' turned the term coined for critical analysis into 'the instrument of commemoration par excellence' (1996: 609) (the term had found its way into the the French *Grand Robert* dictionary by 1993, juxtaposing Nora's definition with its popular use as exemplified by a phrase from *Le Figaro* magazine; see Nora, 1996: 608). It is explained by Ricoeur as resulting from a particularly French obsession with 'le patrimoine' – patrimony, (national) heritage: 'But it is the promotion of patrimony and its crystallization into the "historical monument" with its spectacular topography and its archaeological nostalgia that marks the signature of the epoch as the "era of commemoration"' (2004: 410).<sup>4</sup>



'Heritage', in fact, stands at the heart of contemporary popular, political and academic memory discourses. The 'emergence of memory as a key cultural and political concern in western societies' (Huyssen, 2003: 11) is tied to the so-called 'spatial turn' in the humanities and the social sciences. Both cannot be thought of as separate from the increasingly ubiquitous so-called 'heritage industry' (Hewison, 1987) and the explosion in 'heritage' projects – national and regional, local, European or even worldwide (for example, the United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage in 2002). As Nora argues, 'the new memorial age' (1996: 632) is characterized by the atomization of patrimonial commemoration – a new form of historical consciousness that emerged as a reaction to national commemoration, which 'for a century and a half centred on the "historical monument" as incontrovertible testimony to a bygone era threatened with oblivion but recognized by the national community and designated as representative of its identity' (1996: 630). In the 'era of commemoration', 'memory' is literally decentred and becomes the recovery of defunct traditions for and by 'those who think of themselves as the descendants and heirs of such traditions' (1996: 626). In particular, where once the responsibility of mediating our relationship to the past rested almost entirely with the school, family, museum and monument, 'the responsibility of these institutions has now flowed over into the public domain and been taken over by the media and tourist industry' (1996: 636). 'Heritage', as Stuart Hall has argued, is a fraught term that 'has slipped so innocently into everyday speech' (1999/2000: 3). Whether under the old national or new patrimonial regime, it remains what Raymond Williams called a 'selective tradition', a 'social memory' that is 'highly selective', that 'highlights and foregrounds, imposes beginnings, middles and ends on the random and the contingent. Equally it foreshortens, silences, disavows, forgets and elides many episodes which – from another perspective – could be the start of a different narrative' (Hall, 1999/2000: 5; Williams 1961: 50–9). Importantly, it operates under the mantle of 'preservation and conservation: to keeping what already is' (Hall, 1999/2000: 3). As Nora (1989: 13) puts it, 'Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image'. This delegation to the archive of the 'responsibility to remember' implies that memory has been turned into a matter of 'storing' and 'story-ing': it has meaning only when retrieved, recalled (as one recalls a library book) and recollected as narrative.

In the light of the cultural dominance of the 'veneration of the trace' (Nora, 1989: 13), it is not surprising that the Virginia Woolf Society's desire to keep her memory alive should materialize in the form of a memorial bust located on the site of her former home and workplace. 'All space is suffused with traces of its virtual identity', writes Nora (1996: 636), confirming the intuition of Woolf's protagonist Clarissa Dalloway, that after her death

somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived . . . she being a part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met. (Woolf, 1992a[1925]: 9–10)

Yet for the trees and houses to release their remembrances of the past, for ‘Stones and walls [to] come to life, sites [to] begin to stir’, the implicit must be made explicit, the private made public, and local knowledge accede to (supra)national recognition (Nora, 1996: 636). The Virginia Woolf memorial is a topographical sign intended to arrest the attention of passers-by, to make Bloomsbury strollers interrupt their walk to remember the woman writer. Anticipating the need for patrimonial memorials to be narrated in order to achieve cultural meaning, the memorial with its inscription telling strollers that Woolf was wont to exercise her creative faculties as she walked through the same space also reinvests it with her spirit. However, to become a true *lieu de mémoire*, the memorial needs to be performed; as they pause to read the inscription, strollers take part in a ritual of remembrance that makes them heirs to Woolf through the invitation to walk in her footsteps.

Bloomsbury, of course, never held a single meaning. As Woolf herself notes in her reminiscences of ‘Old Bloomsbury’, it can be viewed from several angles at one time and over time; in the 1920s it no longer looked the way that it did when Virginia and her siblings first arrived there in 1904, when it seemed to them ‘the most beautiful, the most exciting, the most romantic place in the world’ (1985b[1921–2]: 181; 184). For Woolf, the move from the parental home in Kensington to the then-disreputable Bloomsbury marks a distancing of herself from the past; it was decided by ‘looking at a map and seeing how far apart they were’ (1985b[1921–2]: 184). Leaving the house of her deceased parents, the Victorian era is left behind: ‘Everything was going to be new. Everything was going to be different’; ‘a great advance in civilisation’ (1985b[1921–2]: 185; 196). In particular, ‘the extraordinary increase of space’ that Woolf remembers symbolizes freedom and excitement; an increase in space both mental and physical, enabling totally different ways of thinking, of behaving and of relating to one another.

Today, Bloomsbury retains little of the edginess and bohemia of Woolf’s ‘Old Bloomsbury’. In the course of the 20th century, the area developed into a gentrified neighbourhood known for its proximity to the British Museum, University of London and its green squares. A space which is contested in relation to its arts communities, it is equally marked by its gay nightlife (clubs and cruising areas), drug-related and racist incidents, and ‘the everyday reality of dispossessed people in social housing, who occupy a space which is absolutely adjacent to the streets in which this type of *flâneur* activity is taking place’ (Sumner, 2001). Its association with the so-called ‘Bloomsbury Group’, moreover, the coterie of artists and





intellectuals notorious for their unconventional lifestyle and artistic experiments of which Woolf formed a part, is not altogether forgotten, and marks Bloomsbury as a contested place symbolically as well as socially and culturally, the terrain where the battles over the meanings of 'Bloomsbury' are being fought. On the one hand, plaques commemorating the Bloomsberries increasingly come to decorate their former homes, claiming 'Bloomsbury' as a space for remembering their lives and work. On the other hand, the Bloomsberries' rejection of Victorian virtues continues to excite public opinion, as evidenced by Bloomsbury-bashing reviews of the film adaptation of *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002), Michael Cunningham's novel about Virginia Woolf, or of the Tate Gallery's *Art of Bloomsbury* exhibition in winter 1999–2000 (Hussey, 2004: 8–9). As Hussey convincingly argues, The Bloomsbury Group still stands for something that threatens established beliefs, a set of cosmopolitan values construed as the antithesis of 'the reliable common sense of plain folk' and 'the sober virtues of thrift, hard work, pride and independence' (Clarke, 1998).

'We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left,' says Nora, adding: 'There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieus de mémoire*, real environments of memory' (1989: 7). Evoking the classic geographical distinction between *site* (the topographical location) and *situation* (the place's relation to its surroundings), Nora's lament on the passing away of 'real memory',<sup>5</sup> which he conceives of as alive and contrasted with 'memory transformed by its passage through history', suggests that true memory is embodied: it has 'taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories' (1989: 13). The distance of the past which has turned it into 'a foreign country' (Lowenthal, 1985), so that 'heritage trails' worldwide are so many invitations to 'walk down memory lane', not only poses itself as a question of representation (Nora, 1989; Radstone, 2000; Terdiman, 2003), it also calls for compensations for discontinuity and lack of directness, demanding the development of a variety of means for restoring the flavour, sounds and smells of bygone days. As Nora puts it: 'Paradoxically, distance demands the *rapprochement* that negates it while giving it resonance. Never have we longed in a more physical manner to evoke the weight of the land at our feet . . . or the stench of eighteenth-century cities' (1989: 17).

### **'Back to Bloomsbury': literature and place**

When the International Virginia Woolf Society announced its 14th annual conference to be held in Bloomsbury under the title 'Back to Bloomsbury', its reminder to the participants that 'Between sessions, delegates might also enjoy a nomadic wander through the squares in which the



Bloomsberries lived, and loved' (Vitello et al., 2005) suggests that the appeal of Bloomsbury for Woolf scholars lies in a quest for knowledge that is embodied and located. In her account of her pilgrimage to Haworth, the home of the Brontë family, Woolf herself had already wondered 'whether pilgrimages to the shrines of famous men ought not to be condemned as sentimental journeys'. She concluded: 'The curiosity is only legitimate when the house of a great writer or the country in which it is set adds something to the understanding of his books' (1980[1904]: 121). As can be distilled from the many accounts of stays in Woolf's houses that have been recently published (e.g. Bird Wright, 1995; Dell, 1999; Groen, 1998), the added value of a visit to the writer's sites is to be found in the physical experience of space and place, and in the sensory stimuli that allow one to see what she saw, but equally to hear, sense and smell what she heard, sensed and smelled. Thus Jeanette Winterson, writing about Woolf's house in Rodmell, Sussex, encourages the literary pilgrim 'to go and stand in the garden and look at the view. To see what she saw.' As she says: 'If you concentrate, then gradually the present will fade and the day trippers will fade' so that the perspective becomes Virginia Woolf's (1993: 466). As Hein Groen (1998) explains, critics and biographers reduce experiences to facts; the literary tourist tries to turn these facts into experiences again. As a form of knowledge that stands in opposition to 'facts', it is associated with the body and the senses, rather than the mind. In the words of Walter Benjamin, it 'feeds on the sensory data . . . but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge – indeed, of dead facts – as something experienced and lived through'; a capacity for 'felt knowledge' that Benjamin defines as the province of the *flâneur* (2002[1982]: 417).

The *flâneur* is, of course, Benjamin's figure for a particular mode of being in the street and perceiving the urban environment.<sup>6</sup> A figure he retrieves from Baudelaire's poetry about the transformed Parisian landscape in the 19th century, the *flâneur* is an urban stroller whose wanderings are marked by reminiscence. Going about the city in an 'anamnestic intoxication' (2002[1982]: 417), the *flâneur* sees the present as he remembers the past – a past which then comes to him as lived experience, 'felt knowledge'. In Benjamin's account, it is the *flâneur's* soles that remember as he stands on a particular spot, and what he remembers is not 'the great reminiscences, the historical shudder – these are a trumpery which he leaves to tourists' – but (elements of) a quotidian yet vanished life as it was lived. Reflecting on 'the spot where in former times the *cheval de renfort* – the spare horse – was harnessed to the omnibus that climbed the Rue des Martyrs toward Montmartre', Benjamin muses:

Wouldn't he, then, have necessarily felt the steep slope behind the church of Notre Dame de Lorette rise all the more insistently if he realized: here, at one time, after Paris had gotten its first omnibuses, the *cheval de renfort* was harnessed to the coach to reinforce the two other horses. (2002[1982]: 416–17)



The distinction that Benjamin draws between the gaze of the tourist and the tread of the *flâneur* is crucial. In Benjamin's perspective, the *flâneur's* knowledge is indigenous and local, in harmony with the place, which resonates with his footsteps, 'its mere intimate nearness giv[ing] him hints and instructions' (2002[1982]: 416). In contrast, the tourist can gain no real access to 'the genius loci': his knowledge of historical facts is illusory and inauthentic, lacking real connection to the place. In other words, the *flâneur* is a repository of cultural memory and *flânerie*, an embodied way of participating in a past that is not our own but to which we relate as if it were our own past. By this definition, cultural memory is the intersubjective faculty by which we can learn from and share in the memories of other people from a more or less distant past, whom we may not have known, 'one of the outer dimension of human memory' as Assmann puts it (1992: 19).<sup>7</sup> *Flânerie*, taken here in Benjamin's sense of walking for cultural meaning, thus allows for the anchoring of one's self in the social past and its urban spaces and so to acquire a sense of identity, continuity and belonging. Through the evocation of defunct cultural practices and traditions, the site is (historically, socially and culturally) situated, such that we can think of ourselves as its heirs. Although traditionally conceived of as a mode of knowledge production, *flânerie* actually encompasses the reproduction of felt knowledge, the performance of cultural memory. Whereas historically, the *flâneur* is the Parisian stroller taking stock of his transformed environment in the 1850s, 'reading' the street and transforming the walk into text, for Benjamin he soon becomes the 'dreaming idler' for whom 'the study of these books constitutes a second existence': not the reader of the streets themselves, but of the texts that 'took form and figure during an afternoon walk before the apéritif' (2002[1982]: 417). In other words, the *flâneur* is the reader who takes the knowledge gained from the writings of earlier *flâneurs* to the streets; and *flânerie* is an experience of the urban environment that is mediated by literature.

## Virginia Woolf's London

'I love walking in London,' said Mrs Dalloway. 'Really, it's better than walking in the country.' (Woolf, 1992a[1925]: 6)

It is in this Benjaminian context of walking for cultural, critical and aesthetic meaning that this article wishes to explore what happens when Virginia Woolf aficionados literally go back to Bloomsbury, focusing on the literary guide to, and guided tour of, Virginia Woolf's London. It is a well-known fact that Virginia Woolf, who lived most of her life in London, loved walking in the city. As she records in her essay 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', she would go for long afternoon strolls in pursuit of an idea, 'walking half across London between tea and dinner', using the excuse of a small errand such as a pencil she would forget to buy to go 'street

rambling' (1961[1930]: 23). Woolf's writings contain many sketches of urban street life, attesting to her fascination with its spectacle no less than the physical, embodied pleasures of perambulation. It is indeed characteristic of her attitude to urban walking that the first words that the eponymous character speaks in *Mrs Dalloway* are 'I love walking in London'. Since Clarissa Dalloway's words do not directly answer the question put to her – she is on her way to the flower shop and she is asked: 'Where are you off to?' – they make clear that the act of walking is the real goal of the errand. The centrality of walking as a figure for street-writing is further confirmed by her name, 'Dall[y]-o-way'; hers are not teleological journeys but ramblings around the writer's (housing) block. Allowing the mind free rein, the movement through urban space, the sights, sounds and smells of chance encounters and the physical exercise of walking combined to stimulate the circulation of blood and words in that alignment of mind, body and external world that Solnit has termed 'the mind at three miles an hour' (2002: 14). In Woolf's frequently cited phrase, London gives her 'a play & a story & a poem, without any trouble, save that of moving my legs through the streets' (1982: 186).

This is not the place to detail Woolf's writings about London.<sup>8</sup> Nor is it the place to examine her complex relationship to the city, reshaping it in her writings to explore the engendering of social experience.<sup>9</sup> Suffice it here to observe that Woolf repeatedly produced London as the stage and setting of her texts, and that out of these writings a London has been distilled that is, in turn, projected onto today's material city. As early as 1959, Brewster writes of the ways that 'We come to distinguish Virginia Woolf's London from the London of other writers and see the Strand churches through her eyes' (1959: 9). Twenty years later, Daiches and Flower (1979b) include a chapter on 'Virginia Woolf's London' in their *Literary Landscapes of the British Isles: A Narrative Atlas* alongside chapters on, among others, Shakespeare's and Dickens' London. Focusing on the image of the city as it forms itself in the act of reading Woolf's text, Brewster's early account of the 'general impression of London [that] grows in our minds as we read the novels' (1959: 11) and Daiches and Flower's (1979a) subsequent mapping of the trajectories of the main characters in *Mrs Dalloway* in 'A Walking Tour with Mrs Dalloway' pave the way for the literary guides to Virginia Woolf's London that would start to appear in the late 1980s (i.e. Moorcroft Wilson, 1987). Indeed, from the inclusion of an actual map of 'Mrs Dalloway's London' and the illustration of the text with a picture of 'The Strand in 1923, busy and bustling, exactly as Clarissa Dalloway might have found it' in Daiches and Flower (1979c: 85, 87), it is but a small step to the walking tours that conjure up the historical past and map fictional worlds onto the city in order to proffer it as a valuable and memorable experience.

110 Woolf's precise descriptions of streets and buildings, parks and monuments, the mappings of the city that are the walks undertaken by



the characters in her urban novels such as, for example, those of Clarissa Dalloway or Peter Walsh in *Mrs Dalloway*,<sup>10</sup> and her view of London as 'the centre of life itself' and of its 'noise, dirt and frenzy' as ultimately vital (Moorcroft Wilson, 2001: 9) – all these form an integral part in making Woolf an appealing guide to London. As a 'pedagogics and aesthetics of the city' (Donald, 1999: 7), Woolf's writings teach us to view the city in a 'seeing' which, as Moretti has argued, takes place 'in a glance – not so much "absent-minded" as intermittent' (1988: 125). According to Moretti, 'It is essentially through *description* that the city penetrates literature, and literature our perception and understanding of the city' (1988: 111; see also Moretti, 1998). Within the novel, descriptions arrest the flow of time and narrative; within the city, they function rather like illustrations in (guide)books, cutting up the city view into tableaux and turning it 'into an open-air imaginary museum' (Boyer, 1994: 58). However, texts differ from pictures in that the temporality of narrative 'reveals that the meaning of the city is not to be found in any particular place, but manifests itself only through a temporal trajectory' (Moretti, 1988: 112). Narrative texts, in particular, reveal the work of time so that, as Brewster writes *a propos* of Woolf's London scenes, 'At any moment one may be reminded of the long past of the city by some association or some image' (1959: 11).

To those who wish the city's rich past to stir as they walk through it, Woolf's recordings of London street life provide a vantage point from which to look on it, releasing the past into sight as one looks onto the present, all the while intimating that this past is already layered, thick with stories and reminiscences. This double perspective inscribes the Virginia Woolf walking tour not only in a tradition of themed tours, but also in the history of walking as an urban cultural practice through which individuals attempt to remedy their historical alienation and urban estrangement.<sup>11</sup> To begin with, and as Solnit points out, 'Walking allows us to be in our bodies and in the world' (2002: 267; see also Jencks, 1995, 1999). Moreover, historically, *flânerie* is the product of a sense of (dis)location precipitated first by the physical displacement to the cities, then by the equally rapid as radical transformation of the 19th-century industrializing city, culminating in an attempt to 'domesticate' the new urban environment, reconstructing its prehistory, as Terdiman writes, 'in the effort to naturalize it' (2003: 6).

In other words, the leisured pace and the environmental attentiveness of the (purposeless) urban walk is linked to the rise of the city as a space of consumption and spectacle, and to the development of the city as a node of flows of people, traffic, goods and money. In a physical sense, walking the city as a cultural, critical and/or aesthetic practice was made possible by the development of 'sidewalks' (as the Americans appositely say),<sup>12</sup> boulevards and *passages* (arcades) – those covered streets reserved to pedestrians (*passants*) designed to 'canalize' the flow of strollers, away and across from the main 'arteries' through which traffic and populace was to



circulate.<sup>15</sup> Literally separating the hasty journeys of cars, carts, journey-men and women from the leisured strolls of the new middle class, the urbanization of 19th-century cities (and the Haussmannization of Paris in particular) is what brought the *flâneur* into being.

For almost two centuries, then, the urban walk has functioned as cultural criticism in an uneasy relationship to the commodity form (Cox, 1999: 8), while in the 20th century it has operated repeatedly as 'resistance wrought through a change of pace, or walking "out of step" with the late-modern rhythm of the city' (Jencks, 1995: 150). In contrast to the Dada anti-walk and the surrealist and situationist *dérive* (Careri, 2002; Debord, 1996[1958]), to Iain Sinclair's (1997) London explorations and Tim Brennan's 'manoeuvres' (Brennan and Cox, 1999), throughout the western world the past decades have seen the rise of the themed walking tour as a cultural product offered to tourists for consumption, enabling them to consume the urban (or rural) landscape as they purchase the tour. Serving to distinguish audiences, these tours systematize and construct the tourist gaze, selecting not only the places to be looked upon, but also the terms in which the gaze is framed. Telling us where to go, what to see and how to look, themed tours organize the gaze, objectify sights into signs and reify them into marketable icons (Urry, 2002). Structuring our movement through space and narrativizing the script that we trace with our steps, they also allow today's global tourists to make sense of their trips by sorting out the sensory information overload that travelling abroad usually entails.

Differing from the pace of our daily lives (which may involve a variety of more or less fast means of public or private transportation), the walking tour invariably entails slowing down and gazing at the environment in ways that we do not usually do (de Botton, 2002; Urry, 2002). A mode of visiting cities that differs from the double-decker sightseeing tour, the pub-crawling tour or the family reunion,<sup>14</sup> the walk invests the urban script with historical meaning and a 'rhythmical order' (Woolf, 1993[1929]: 87) in several manners, which combine to give the walker a sense of place in history, culture and the world. Put simply, walking as Woolf did and looking at the sights that she saw and wrote about, we are given 'to see what she saw', as in *Mrs Dalloway*, what Clarissa Dalloway believes her friend Peter Walsh will do 'if she told him to': 'He would put on his spectacles, if she told him to; he would look' (Woolf, 1992a[1925]: 7). Obviously, this is not a pleasure that everyone seeks; it is a leisure activity reserved to those who have achieved material prosperity and for whom literature is a theatre of memorable experiences. Yet in its promise of enhanced literary understanding to those for whom her name stands guarantee as a mark of distinction, the walking tour of Virginia Woolf's London stages an engaging activity that partakes of what has come to be designated as 'the experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).



## Walking in Woolf's footsteps

Moorcroft Wilson's *Virginia Woolf's London: A Guide to Bloomsbury and Beyond* (2001) and Bender's 'Virginia Woolf's London' (1999) will serve to illustrate how urban literary walks articulate city experience, allowing it to be '[re]produced, marketed, circulated and consumed' as representation (Urry, 2002: 130). Emphasizing the constructiveness of the walk as a particular mapping of the city, Moorcroft Wilson writes that:

In this effort to recreate Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury I have had to choose between convenience and chronology. In order to avoid a great deal of retracing of steps I have chosen to introduce her houses as they fit into a pleasant walk. (2001: 177)

Here, 'pleasantness' and 'convenience' are the operative terms, signifying that the walk is to offer an agreeable experience of the metropolis; evidently social problems will be avoided, being no more part of a 'pleasant walk' than excessive peripateticism. Designed to 'help us to see what she saw as she took her daily walks' (2001: 177), the text guides our steps as well as our eyes, enjoining us to 'walk eastwards', 'retrac[e] our steps westwards' and 'turn left' while drawing attention to particular buildings or, as in the case of the site of the former Hogarth Press, 52 Tavistock Square, to the house that is no longer there, but which can be imagined for 'houses very similar to it stand on the west side of the square' (2001: 180). (The gesture is typical, conceptually sound yet topographically incorrect, serving imaginatively to reconstitute a situation on the blitzed site.) Similarly yet more intent on recovering Woolf's gaze as a nostalgic gaze, Bender punctuates her text with quotations, providing Woolf's perspective while evoking her voice, and pacing the movement of walking and looking according to what Woolf termed 'the rhythmical order with which my imagination had invested it [a particular ordinary sight]' (1993[1929]: 87). Wilfully ignoring the transformation of Bloomsbury, Bender selects spots for their capacity 'for summoning the Bloomsbury phantoms', recommending that the walker skips Brunswick Square and Mecklenburg Square for 'both areas have lost their Old Bloomsbury character' (1999: 7).

Mapping a romantic and historical past onto the material city, the walk through Virginia Woolf's London reveals the presence of the past; it makes the past present, yet tends to do so by being oblivious to the present. Turning past time into pastime, it is the reproducible experience, which especially functions as guarantee of its supposed 'authenticity'. Operating like open communication channels that bracket off social reality, 'experiences' are construed to connect the present with the past in ways that can be lived and felt. Thus Bender writes of the shells that are still crunchy in Kensington Gardens, allowing one to indulge in 'the pleasures of scrunching the shells with which now and then the Flower Walk was strewn', of



which Woolf writes (1985a[1939]: 76). As they occasion the recollection of how the gesture stood for a range of meanings for Woolf and her siblings, the shells literally come to bear the imprint of Woolf's footsteps, giving historical depth to the sound and feel of an otherwise unexceptional experience.<sup>15</sup>

The cult of Virginia Woolf that finds its expression in flocks of devotees walking in Woolf's footsteps, 'lovingly retracing Virginia Woolf's path across the meadows to the River Ouse' near her final home (Marler, 1998: 3) and spending the night in the Tavistock Hotel wondering where Woolf sat when she experienced her 'state of perfect glory' upon the completion of her novel *The Waves* (Groen, 1998: 77), is a cultural practice through which we re-inscribe our relationship to history and culture. Distinguishing audiences, the literary walk in Woolf's footsteps promotes participation in the act of recognizing her by sharing insider knowledge and information. (It is, indeed, no coincidence that Moorcroft Wilson is Leonard Woolf's nephew's wife; her presentational strategies certainly include hints of insider secrets.) Performing the special knowledge that is the recognition of Woolf's life, person and writing, the walk assumes loyalty which it rewards with a sense of belonging achieved through the choice of affiliation. However, literary recognition is also a cultural product happily exploited by the so-called Bloomsbury industry; it cannot be thought of as separate from, or outside of, commodity culture. Surely the proprietor of the luxury apartments into which Talland House, the former holiday home of Virginia Woolf's parents in Cornwall, has been converted (see [http://www.chycor.co.uk/apartments/stives\\_talland/](http://www.chycor.co.uk/apartments/stives_talland/)) capitalizes on Virginia Woolf's cultural clout, selling a cultural experience as it advertises a holiday home. This subterfuge is evident in the tagline advertising 'Talland House, known in literary circles worldwide as "the childhood home of Virginia Woolf"'; it is represented most characteristically on a picture on its website showing Virginia Woolf photoshopped onto the building, becoming part of it.

Seen in the light of the commodification of culture as an experience that is valuable because it is memorable (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), it is not surprising to find that it is precisely shops that serve as foci of authenticity in the Virginia Woolf walks. Both Moorcroft Wilson and Bender point to shops such as Hatchard's, Brook's or White's as spots where the past is still present. 'There are no longer any flower shops in Bond Street, nor is there a fishmonger, but there is still at least one shop where Clarissa's father might have bought tweed for his suits and a number of jewellers, such as Cartier, 'where Clarissa could have bought her pearls', Moorcroft Wilson writes (2001: 198). Similarly, Bender identifies shops and shopping as 'the one thread in the social fabric of the present that will permit direct contact with the irrevocably dead past' (Nora, 1996: 626) when she writes that where 'Virginia Woolf remembered an old woman selling sweets outside the palace grounds. I saw a Pakistani doing a brisk trade in jumbo





hot dogs' (1999: 4). More characteristically still, she finds the (much transformed) Army & Navy store on Victoria Street 'to be a trove for Christmas stocking stuffers' (1999: 10), thereby giving the more frivolous parts of Christmas shopping a romantic patina of authentic historical experience and infusing it with the aura of literary precedent.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, topographical knowledge can enhance one's understanding of literature. In the case of Virginia Woolf, there is no doubt that such knowledge is at times indispensable. Not to know the meanings that attach to Westminster, Kensington, Strand or Bond Street is to miss the point of *Mrs Dalloway* almost entirely. It is to walk the street without seeing or knowing where one goes, like de Certeau's *Wandermänner*, whose bodies follow the thick and thin of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it' (1984: 93). In contrast, knowledge of the city's geography and topography allows one to discern their meaning in the text, much like the bird's-eye view offered by the World Trade Center in de Certeau's pre-9/11 account, which 'makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text' (1984: 92). Evidently, the purposeful retracing of Woolf and her characters' footsteps through the streets that she haunted and still haunts 'help in understanding her work' (Moorcroft Wilson, 2001: 15). Yet for all the enhanced understanding and increased knowledge that visits on location indubitably provide, there is nonetheless a sense in which the walks, designed 'in the belief that on-site visits enhance appreciation of a writer's work' (Bender, 1999: 2), end up appreciating (in the sense of raising) its value as cultural commodity. Revealing historical and fictional layers as they narrativize the urban script that we trace with our steps, walks map the city in ways that raise interest in the writer in more than one sense.<sup>17</sup> This increase in cultural capital makes the writer's legacy to contemporary culture all the more worth attending to, particularly as it turns the literary walk into not just an embodied, analytical tool in the reading and reproduction of literature, nor simply a means of authenticating and verifying this reading, but a way of reassuring us that we are citizens of the world by giving us selected traditions to inherit.

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### Notes

1. To name but two: Patty Lurie's *Guide to Impressionist Paris* (1997) consists of nine walking tours featuring impressionist paintings compared with their present day location; a recent Van Gogh exhibit at the Hague Gemeentemuseum was complemented by a walk 'In the footsteps of van Gogh' (Varma, 2005).



2. A history of urban walking as a critical artistic practice would have to go back to the Dadaists and the surrealists (Careri, 2002). Among performance artists who are notorious walkers we will remember Marina Abramovich. Recently, Laurie Anderson started walking through Manhattan as an aesthetic practice.
3. Tomlin's original sculpture is at Charleston, the country home of the Bloomsbury Group in East Sussex. There are casts of the bust in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London as well as at Smith College in the US, among others.
4. It might be worth observing that the issue, in France, of 'le patrimoine' is brought further into relief by the rise in land rent. Traditionally, the French attach much importance to patrimony in the sense of inherited homes. The increase in property prices and rising land rents have prevented people from owning, even staying, in what they considered to be 'their home'. It is against the backdrop of this loss of patrimony as place to which one belongs by virtue of family ties, and in the context of economic changes resulting from the new European market (which Harvey, in *The New Imperialism*, calls the logic of capital 'accumulation by dispossession'; 2003: 137), that Nora's discussion of (national) patrimony needs to be understood.
5. See also Terdiman (2003) and Assmann (1992) who similarly identify a time of 'real' or 'living' memory. For Terdiman, this time is to be located in the pre-19th century, and is linked to Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft*; for Assmann, the distinction is less historical than generational, and has to do with his distinction between communicative and cultural memory as set out below.
6. The literature on the *flâneur* is too extensive to be rehearsed here. A good survey is to be found in Parsons (2000).
7. Assmann distinguishes two memory stages: a communicative one, marked by communication and the sharing of memories between contemporaries; and a cultural one, which refers to 'fixed points in the past', and is maintained through rites, monuments and other institutional practices (Assmann, 1992: 50).
8. An early account of the representation of London in Virginia Woolf's novels is Brewster (1959).
9. Squier (1985) remains authoritative. Recent analyses of the representation of urban space in Woolf's work include Cohen (2004).
10. Among others: Woolf's novels *The Years* (2002[1937]), *The Voyage Out* (1992b[1915]) and *Night and Day* (1992c[1919]) equally contain characters mapping the city through urban pedestrian journeys. In addition, many of Woolf's short stories and essays contain references to London.
11. It is important to distinguish between urban and rural walking, as the meanings with which each is invested vary greatly (Solnit, 2002). Reminding us that 'the history of walking as a conscious cultural act rather than as a means to an end is only a few centuries old in Europe' (2002: 14), Solnit provides a context in which to understand the tradition of walking that I am tracing here.
12. The English term is 'pavement', a term that is much less descriptive of its function than 'sidewalk'. The French term 'trottoir' similarly (and etymologically) refers to the act of ambulating, albeit not leisurely, but



hurriedly: 'trotter' is to trot; a young man and woman running errands for a patron was called a 'trottin'.

13. The flow and circulation imagery is Haussmann's.
14. Urry (2002) notes that purposes for travel vary greatly between different ethnic groups, and that some aspects of the western holiday are viewed as rather frivolous motives for travel by some recent migrants to Britain.
15. At the time of writing, however, there were no longer any shells in Kensington Gardens to bear the imprint of Woolf's footsteps.
16. The items thus acquired, of course, function as souvenirs in which the experience lingers, available for recall through narrative (see Stewart, 1993). As such, they form an integral and important part in experiencing the (re)collected past.
17. Casanova (1999) and Guillory (1993) are among recent critics to have explored the implications of the metaphors of value, credit, debt and market operation in the vocabulary of economics used to talk about literary value.

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