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# "We Are No Longer Quite Ourselves": Rethinking Vulnerability in Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting: A London Adventure"

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**Abstract**

This paper intends to inquire the slippage between writing and walking in Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting: A London Adventure." Reading walking as a metonymy of Woolf's aesthetics, this paper argues that Woolf's writing, like her body, is characterized by its vulnerability to write its own passivity. Drawing from Judith Butler's conceptualization of vulnerability, this paper demonstrates that instead of embracing an invulnerable subjectivity capable of resisting the shock in the streets and taking hold of the social problems, "Street Haunting" is more concerned with the question of the subject's susceptibility and responsiveness to contingent city encounters. In the midst of street haunting in London, Woolf becomes "an enormous eye" in the face of alterity and street shocks. By problematizing the perceiving eye, this paper argues that the enormous eye does not reiterate the primacy of vision; rather, it reveals the tension between agency and passivity in bodily

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vulnerability and the possibilities of ethical responsiveness regarding the suffering in the streets.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, "Street Haunting," Judith Butler, vulnerability, subjectivity, writing, ethical responsiveness

In her free time between reading and writing, Virginia Woolf liked to walk alone in London. While many of her ideas for writing are conceived during walking, her writing in turn pulsates with the rhythms of walking. Her 1927 short essay "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" (hereafter "Street Haunting") is one such example. In "Street Haunting," Woolf reveals that buying a pencil is a "pretext" for her to leave behind the confinement of the household and "indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London" (177). But why would such a pretext augment a sense of safety or alleviate a sense of danger during the pleasurable haunting? In other words, what is taking place in the streets? What is the relationship between Woolf's haunting and writing?

In the beginning of "Street Haunting," Woolf specifies some reasons that the evening hour in winter is the most pleasurable time for street haunting. Firstly, in winter, we do not have to look for the shade under the sun as in summer. Secondly, in the evening hour, the city, covered with a veil of crepuscular luminosity, gives forth a dreamy and absorptive atmosphere that carries us away from the habitual self. As Woolf writes,

> The evening hour, too, gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow. 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. ("Street Haunting" 177)

On the one hand, what makes rambling in London so fascinating is a change in ourselves when we shed off the older layers of the self and appear anew among the company of the anonymous strangers. On the other hand, at this particular moment, we are temporarily relieved from the responsibility in accordance with our social roles and personality. Overall, we are thrown into ecstatic connection with the anonymous crowd in the city.

As Woolf suggests, in the solitude of our own room, the interior objects we possess perpetually remind us of our odd temperaments and past experiences. The household possessions frame us in the past, reinforcing a rigid sense of immobility and stasis. What Woolf seeks for when she is haunting is the "sociality of the street" ("Street Haunting" 177). In this sense, we may conceptualize Woolf's street haunting as the process of being dispossessed—deviating momentarily from one's own property and personality. For Woolf, the open streets, in contrast to the shell-like confinement of the household and habitual personality, are teeming with new stories to be encountered, discovered, recorded and narrated. To some extent, the streets are also liminal space where the self enters into relation with assemblages of the urban milieu and undergoes imperceptible

transformation. The haunting is dangerous since it is when we are most vulnerable and exposed to the unfamiliar public and chance encounters. It is possible that writing is an aesthetic medium for Woolf to cope with the shocks in the streets.

Regarding Woolf's usage of "haunting," both Rachel Bowlby and Janet Wolff point out its literal meaning as frequently visiting a place (*Feminist Destinations* 213; 27). Intrigued by the supernatural turn in urban studies, Wolff goes further to relate "haunting" to the marginal figures and reminds us of the importance of "haunting" in sociological imagination. For instance, the haunting and the ghostly do not necessarily suggest the dead. Rather, as Avery Gordon argues, it designates "a social figure" which is "barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eye" (qtd. in Wolff 27). In other words, the haunting or ghostly figures are obscure lives excluded from earlier urban narratives or theories. Although Woolf is drawn to the beauty of the crepuscular city, she cannot avoid sudden encounters with the dark side of the city "haunted" by ghostly figures, whose presence not only affects the street milieu but also exceeds her faculty of comprehension—it is more than the eye can meet. While Woolf may not attempt to use "haunting" beyond the meaning of frequently visiting a place, its effect turns out to resonate with her recurrent literary motif of and concern for excluded and obscure lives.

With this dual sense of "haunting" in mind, this paper thus intends to tease out a new mode of vulnerable subjectivity in Woolf and interrogate the chiasmic intersection of the aesthetic and the ethical in "Street Haunting" by drawing from Judith Butler's theoretical framework of vulnerability. This paper argues that instead of embracing an invulnerable subjectivity capable of resisting or pinning down the shock in the streets and thus (pretending to be) taking hold of social problems, "Street Haunting" is more concerned with the problem of the subject's susceptibility and responsiveness, rather than prescriptive responsibility, to contingent city encounters and suffering in the streets. The first section of this paper maps out Butler's conceptualization of vulnerability and how it relates to Woolf's street writing and walking. The second section engages with the sexual politics in *flâneur* studies to reconsider the problem of agency and passivity regarding the "I/eye." The third section questions the possibility of ethical responsiveness in the face of the ghostly figures in urban space. Overall, this paper is a critical response to Woolf's musing on "a question [which] is asked which is never answered" ("Street Haunting" 181).

## Writing One's Passivity

Under the pretext of buying a pencil, Woolf sets out for an urban adventure by walking across London. During the process, Woolf becomes an enormous eye resting on pleasurable sights on the streets and speculating on others' lives until certain sighting of precarious men and women interrupts her. In a sense, Woolf is shocked by these unexpected encounters. After Woolf finally returns home with the pencil, she is content to be surrounded with her old household possessions again. For some critics, the major problem with the Woolfian street haunter/essayist amidst snapshot descriptions of misery is the lack of social critique and the risk of epistemological reduction of the others in this essay. As Susan Squier argues, "Description has free rein in this imaginary tour of London, but social criticism is markedly restrained" (46). In Squier's critique, Woolf only touches on the issues of sex and class without further criticizing the injustice induced by the social system. For Squier, "The stroll through London leaves [Woolf] neither morally, spiritually, nor politically changed, but merely entertained. The essay concludes not with an affirmation of the outsider (as in "Street Music"), but with a reaffirmation of the privileged insider" (47). Throughout her criticism, Squier is haunted by an impulse to categorize Woolf as either an insider identifying with the patriarchal society or a feminist outsider identifying with the marginal, but feels puzzled by Woolf's ambivalent oscillation between the dyad.

Squier is frustrated by Woolf's non-action regarding the misery in the streets since she expects Woolf, a feminist critic, to engage more substantially with social suffering. Yet, this paper contends that Squier's activist stance makes her less attentive to the external impingements in the streets and the complex fluctuation of moods or change of the street atmosphere conveyed in Woolf's essay as well as the blurring boundary between activity and passivity regarding responsiveness. In a sense, Squier's critique reveals her presupposition of a self-empowered individual that should be able to contain all the shocks in the streets while taking on obligatory moral responsibility to improve the social injustice. Presumably, Squier is less concerned with the possibility of the intertwinement of politics and aesthetics in Woolf.

If we take Woolf's literary theory of the short essay into consideration, we may understand why Woolf does not attempt to impose overtly her feminist critique in "Street Haunting." For Woolf, essayists "must masquerade" and "skim the surface of thought and dilute the strength of personality" ("Modern Essay" 19). Apart from having the capacity to speculate on life other than their own, they must also lightly touch upon the subject matter so as to allow the reader to

participate.[1] In other words, Woolf's short essay is more engaged with imagining other's lives and asking the "what if" questions than offering a pseudo-holistic understanding of the social condition of life. Intriguingly, these Woolfian "anti-authoritarian tactics" in turn deliberately expose the epistemological limit of the essayist's knowledge while allowing more creative imagination on the reader's part to emerge so as to constitute a "democratic literary community" (Lee 93).

Similarly, in response to Squier's harsh judgement of Woolf, Randi Saloman attributes "this very superficiality" to the genre of the essay, which "allows the essayist . . . to highlight aspects of individuals, using them as figures for larger truths, but in no way pretending to get at the entirety of their individual lives" (81). It is possible that Woolf's literary strategy of skimming the surface results in this (un)conscious restraint from social criticism and allows her to float along the "passage down the smooth stream" without being impeded by "catching at some branch or root" ("Street Haunting" 179). As Saloman argues, "As an essayist, Woolf is not looking to engage herself in investigations of character, or in propagandistic social commentary, but rather to emphasize her ability to occupy and record such moments without being weighed down by the types of interests that would make the continuation of her work impossible" (81).

Indeed, Woolf does not try to picture the entirety of truths. Neither does she force herself into a conventional rendition of essay writing emphasizing egoistic political critique, didactic dogmatism, or opinionated certainties. Although Woolf makes clear that evening haunting gives us some sense of "irresponsibility," that does not mean she is incapable of responding to the street milieus. While taking delight in the haunting, Woolf is at the same time overwhelmed by various street encounters. "Street Haunting" itself in a sense turns out to be a record of Woolf's "response-ability"—responsiveness—to the external impingements before further enactment of social critique or practical action.[2]

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[1] For Woolf, short essays are supposed to engross rather than teach the reader. Hence, the writer should not overtly express his/her own opinions in a superior or didactic manner. Yet, this does not mean all of Woolf's essays lack straightforward social critique. For instance, in her book-length epistolary essay *Three Guineas*, Woolf explores causes of the deep-rooted gender inequality and criticizes the belligerent patriarchal society in a strongly direct and incisive way. In spite of her critique, Woolf does not impose her will upon her addressee, i.e. the barrister, regarding how women can help to prevent the war. Instead, she invites the barrister to think over the differences between men's contribution and women's contribution to help prevent the war.

[2] Here, I use "response-ability" to contrast Woolf's wording "irresponsibility" and highlight the fine line between passivity/activity and responsiveness/responsibility. While responsibility demands that we take action or enact our own will, responsiveness implicates our receptive passivity. We respond because we are affected or acted on. Without this preliminary responsiveness, there will be no question of further responsibility.

In addressing the violation of the street encounters and speculating on other's lives in the form of a short essay, Woolf's "Street Haunting" brings to the fore the question of the walking individual's subjectivity as well as the precondition of ethical responsibility. Here, I want to further conceptualize how Woolf's ability to write or record street encounters is inseparably bound up with her capacity to be affected by bringing in the discussion of Butler's conceptualization of vulnerability. As Butler suggests, feminists are called on to "dismantle" the "masculinist account of sovereignty," which endows the "self-centered form of the thinking 'I'" with power to master and control everything ("Rethinking Vulnerability" 24). In the masculinist-tainted thread of thinking, invulnerability has often been conceived as an ideal image of a self-sufficient and active male individual, whereas vulnerability, fragility, and passivity have been assigned to women. Butler reminds us that power operates in the framing of vulnerability and invulnerability as well as in the designation of hierarchical relations.

To avoid reinscribing the gendered opposition of paternalism and victimization or justifying the politically induced precarity of the vulnerable populations, Butler proposes a reconceptualization of vulnerability. According to Butler,

> [V]ulnerability is not a subjective disposition. Rather, it characterizes a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way. As a way of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable, vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another, and not distinguished as separate moments in a sequence…. ("Rethinking Vulnerability" 25)

On the one hand, vulnerability designates openness, impressionability, or susceptibility to the impingement of the world and implicates the "I" within social relations. On the other hand, vulnerability suggests spontaneously activity and passivity. As Butler continues to say, "vulnerability is neither fully passive or fully active, but operating in a middle region, a constituent feature of a human animal both affected and acting" ("Rethinking Vulnerability" 26). Butler not only intends to debunk the myth of paternalist and masculinist conceptualization of humanity but also aims to address the middle region in which responsiveness is mobilized or elicited.

For Butler, vulnerability is the constituent feature of the body, which is characterized by its capacity to be affected and to affect. Butler contends that "the body is unbound—in its acting, its receptivity, in its speech, desire and mobility. It is outside itself in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control, and it not only exists in the vector of these relations, but as this very

vector. In a sense, the body does not belong to itself" (*Frames* 52). Vulnerability of the body presupposes our constitutive openness to the world before we even realize the fact. As Butler argues, "All responsiveness to what happens is a function and effect of vulnerability. . . . [B]odies are always in some sense outside themselves, exploring or navigating their environments, extended and . . . dispossessed through senses" (*Notes* 211-12). This vulnerability and dispossession of the body already "establishes a principle of equality and connectedness" (Butler and Athanasiou 107). Butler tries to reimagine the possibility of socio-political equality based upon our ontological vulnerability, i.e. affective equality.

While Butler and Woolf may share something in common in their reconfiguration of vulnerability as susceptibility to external impingements and implication of the "I" within social relations, the tension between Butler's critical theory and Woolf's aesthetics needs to be addressed and clarified. As a critical theorist, Butler seems to move smoothly between ontological and social vulnerability. For Butler, "vulnerability" is both an existential condition and a socially induced condition ("Rethinking Vulnerability" 25). In conceptualizing the politics of street protest or assembly, Butler reminds us how the precarious population's deliberate mobilization of vulnerability or bodily exposure on the streets can be seen as a form of non-violent political resistance to injustice and inequality as well as an exertion of coalitional agency. The significance of political resistance is complicated in two senses in that it suggests not only resistance to the differential assignment of vulnerability to the precarious population but also resistance to the sovereign mastery of vulnerability. In other words, ontological vulnerability is deployed to counter against social vulnerability with the demand for a more livable condition of life.

For Woolf, nonetheless, aesthetics is a struggling medium for her to apprehend and bridge the gap between ontological and social vulnerability in the streets. Unlike the consistent formulation and political agenda of theoretical concepts, Woolf's aesthetic routes, like walking, are characterized by uncertainty and shock. In Woolf's writing, city streets are where chance encounter and unwilled confrontation with alterity and shocks take place. City streets function as a creative milieu for Woolf to be affected, to think, to write, and to connect. It is in writing that Woolf in turn creates a milieu for the inaccessible ontological reality and the differential distribution of vulnerability in the streets to be apprehended in a mediated way.[3]

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[3] Here, I follow Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's use of "milieu" in *A Thousand Plateaus*. As Brian Massumi points out in "Notes on Translation and Acknowledgements" of *A Thousand Plateaus*, "In French, *milieu* means 'surroundings,' 'medium' (as in chemistry), and 'middle.' In the philosophy

Like a frightened child singing in the dark to calm him or herself, Woolf creates a circle against the chaos and marks her own territory within the chaos by writing.[4] In other words, writing is the middle term that mediates between the external milieu of the city and the internal milieu of Woolf. Yet, this circle is not an invulnerable one in opposition to the chaos. Rather, it is porous; it opens up a crack and lets in alterity as a means of communication and connection. Hence, writing as a mechanism of protection or as a condition of her livability is not absolutely successful. It depends upon the constantly renewed creative potential to communicate and to connect. In this sense, we may say that Woolf's aesthetics reveals more about ontological vulnerability than Butler's politics of the street does.

For Woolf, if writing is like walking, it is because the creative process is barely under control. Bowlby is one of the earlier critics to point out the mutual implication of Woolf's writing and walking. Bowlby argues, "For Virginia Woolf, it is less a question of (masculine) walking as writing than a completely different turn: she tends to think of writing itself as like walking" ("Walking" 8). This nuanced distinction leads us to further inquire the agency of the writer. While "walking as writing" is reminiscent of Michel de Certeau's walking rhetoric, which advocates the pedestrian's active resistance to the solar eye vision of the city by walking/writing their own routes, "writing as walking" reveals the writer's vulnerability.

In this sense, Woolf's writing, like walking, can be read as a metonymy of the affective interval.[5] The creative process is almost uncontrollable. Woolf's narrative threads, like the routes of her walking, do not follow a prescribed

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of Deleuze and Guattari, 'milieu' should be read as a technical term combing all three meanings" (xvii).

[4] Woolf's aesthetics brings forth Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical explication of "milieu" and "refrain." As they exemplify, a child in the dark tackles his fear by singing. Singing designates the beginning of order out of chaos. While milieu designates this order, chaos or rhythm is the in-between—between the periodic repetition of heterogenous milieus. See "Of the Refrain" section.

[5] The differences between metonymy and metaphor have been studied and debated in contemporary theories such as structuralism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism. For instance, Roman Jackson's distinction of metonymy as characterized by contiguity and metaphor as characterized by analogy has influenced both Freudian analysis of dream and Lacanian analysis of the signifying chain. In Freud, condensation is for metaphor what displacement is for metonymy. In Lacan, metaphor denotes the imposition of the signifier upon the signified, which results in a new meaning by substitution, whereas metonymy disrupts this stable chain. With the example of the Oedipal complex, Lacan reveals how the mother is substituted in the name of the metaphoric Father. The poststructuralists read metonymy and metaphor on two poles of the spectrum. They take on the infinite flow of signification in metonymy and appropriate it to deconstruct the vertical metaphysics or symbolic order through horizontal juxtapositions. Following the poststructuralist appropriation, this paper uses metonymy instead of metaphor to highlight the contiguity and slippage between writing and walking, both of which are characterized by the affective interval.

itinerary or attempt to achieve a specific destination. In this sense, Woolf's writing is created in the midst of her passivity. On the one hand, writing becomes her reflection upon the condition of her being impinged upon by external milieus. As Woolf reflects, "the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. . . . It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me . . . a great delight to put the severed parts together" ("Sketch" 72). By turning immediate psychological and visceral responsiveness into words, she is also screening the stimuli of shock experience—to some extent unconsciously. On the other hand, writing one's own passivity does not necessarily guarantee a writer's victory in the combat with shocks. In Woolf's case, perhaps she can only weaken the shocks' ability to hurt her.

Contra Squier's critique that Woolf remains unchanged by this adventure, as mentioned previously, I argue that imperceptible change takes place throughout the adventure. During the street haunting, Woolf is constantly shocked by the unexpected street encounters in the city. Woolf's image of the moth indicates how she is both attracted to and is at risk of being blown away. As Woolf reflects upon the street haunting after she returns to "the usual door" of her familiar household,

> [I]t is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round, and shelter and enclose the self which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed…. ("Street Haunting" 187)

This passage highlights the contrast between the pacifying household possessions, which reinforce the integrity of Woolf's subjectivity, and the intensity of the dispossessed subjectivity during the street haunting. Here, we may return to the question raised previously regarding Woolf's concern of indulging safely in street rambling. As Woolf writes,

> Walking home through the desolation one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, of the blind men, of the party in the Mayfair mansion, of the quarrel in the stationer's shop. Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. ("Street Haunting" 187)

Rather than seeking pleasure by simply masquerading as different roles in writing, Woolf's pleasure comes from the tension between possession and dispossession, which denotes an affective interlude for possible changes. As Woolf makes clear, the delight and wonder come from "leav[ing] the straight lines of personality and deviat[ing] into those footpaths" that lead her to the unfamiliar parts of

the city ("Street Haunting" 187). The question is not about assuming multiple roles of a washerwoman, a publican, or a street singer but about being in the middle of the creative linkage with others.[6]

In addition, by putting into words the street encounters, Woolf's narrator also alleviates the stimuli of the adventure by writing her passivity. In Woolf's storytelling, London becomes the forest, while our fellow men become the wild beasts living in the heart of the forest. In other words, writing also becomes a safe milieu for her where the shocks can display themselves without consuming her. For Woolf, writing thus mediates between the potential dangers of the wild beasts in the urban forest and the habitual comfort and safety in her household. Nonetheless, Woolf also reminds us of the impossibility of a total knowledge of others just as the moths confront "the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns" ("Street Haunting" 187). A further elaboration on the unwilled transformation from "I" to an enormous eye may be a critical inquiry into the possibility of ethical responsiveness unfolded in "Street Haunting."

## From "I" to an Enormous Eye

In the midst of street haunting, the question of subjectivity is highlighted as demonstrated previously. Instead of embracing a self-enclosed masculinist subjectivity capable of resisting shocks, "Street Haunting" presents an alternative mode of vulnerable subjectivity in the form of "an enormous eye" during street haunting. As Woolf writes, "[t]he shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye" ("Street Haunting" 178). For Laura Marcus, Woolf's recurrent use of images of a "vulnerable organism protected by its carapace" like a snail and an oyster designates the contrast between "home and defense" and "an unhoused and wandering consciousness" (32). Indeed, such contrast is marked in "Street Haunting." Yet, this paper intends to offer an alternative reading beyond this dualist demarcation of the interior consciousness

[6] While Bowlby may be right in suggesting this roleplaying of Woolf as an affirmation of people's plural differences (*Destinations* 258-59), this paper contends that Woolf, instead of actively taking on distinct individual roles at her will within the parameters of theatrical discourse, is forced into the in-betweenness of "sociality of the street" in the midst of contingent encounters. In other words, she is no longer quite herself not because she puts on the role of others but because she is thrown into ecstatic relations with the others. The pleasure of Woolf's street haunting thus does not lie in this possession of multiple roles and the deployment of judgement, but dispossession of the self.

and the exterior materiality and the seeming reduction of vulnerability to injurability.

On the one hand, the wandering consciousness reminds us of the self-contained individual subjectivity, which is independent from and unaffected by the external impingements. On the other hand, Marcus's conception of vulnerability may run the risk of reinscribing Woolf's weakness as a female writer and thus cannot account for the eye's complex encounter with or reaction to the sensations of the streets. As Woolf reminds us, "the brain sleeps perhaps when it looks" ("Street Haunting" 178). Instead of solely existing as wandering consciousness, Woolf is dispossessed through senses in Butlerian parlance and becomes an enormous eye vulnerably receptive to the street impressions. Like the exposed oyster short of protection, the enormous eye ambivalently takes in street impressions passively while shutting something out.

In the course of rambling, Woolf exclaims on the beauty of the streets in a winter evening which is "at once revealed and obscured" due to the lamps ("Street Haunting" 178). Before unfolding the itinerary of the adventure, Woolf already foreshadows the dialectic between the visible and the invisible and the limit of the perceiving eye by dwelling on how the eye looks only at the surface. Throughout "Street Haunting," Woolf keeps reminding us the eye, like a butterfly, alights on colors and seeks warmth, as it is driven by instinct to rest on beauty only. After seeing some poor and shabby figures in the streets, who appear to be content with their life, Woolf ponders, "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" ("Street Haunting" 178). In other words, Woolf, at this moment, prefers not to confront the unwilled and inevitable proximity with alterity in order to avoid the stirring of responses in the brain. As Woolf goes on to write,

> But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves. . . . At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities. Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only. . . . ("Street Haunting" 179)

The refusal to resort to the brain does not suggest that Woolf is incapable of profound thinking. Rather, what Woolf unfolds is the duration of shock in street encounters, her susceptibility to being overwhelmed, and her momentary impotency to pin down in expression what she sees. What is at stake is Woolf's subjectivity since it is open to unpredictable impingements outside of the self's willed control. Yet, is it actually possible to resist?

Regarding the tendency of Woolf's eye to look at the surface, critics have disparaging views. Deborah Epstein Nord relates "Woolf's eye" to de Certeau's "solar eye" in that the former "seems to float above the scene" without digging deeper (214). Nord does not attribute the *flâneur*'s privileged individuality to Woolf since Woolf "becomes a generic walker" by "using the pronoun 'we' in place of 'I,' which is then "transmuted into an 'eye'" (214). As Nord argues, "[Woolf] is not so much the flâneur, who enjoys anonymity but has a privileged sense of his authority and visible person, as an invisible presence whose being dissolves and disperses" (214). For Nord, the street-haunting Woolf is "wholly disembodied, a spectral figure (as the essay's title might suggest) whose pleasure derives in part from shedding the self and assuming—in imagination—the identities of those she observes" (214). However, while it makes sense to account for the dispossession of the self in its connection to "sociality of the streets" and participation in the anonymous trampers, let us not forget that the walking self is also entwined with the materialities and sensibilities of the streets during four to six o'clock in the winter evening ("Street Haunting" 177). Instead of suggesting the self as a dispersed and disembodied figure, the eye's vulnerability to stimulation of light and colors points exactly to the material relationality of the body and the impact of street encounters as this paper contends.

Like Nord, Bowlby also addresses the Woolfian transition from "I" to eye by arguing that "the move from self to anonymity is the change from 'I' to eye, from pronoun to organ" ("Walking" 20). Yet, unlike Nord, Bowlby retains the materiality of the eye in its literal sense while criticizing the gendered privilege of the male gaze. Bowlby's major concern lies in affirming the female walker's agency. On the one hand, by emphasizing the "spontaneous aestheticism of this roving eye," Bowlby reverses the female passivity under the gaze of masculinist *flâneur* and sees Woolf as an "active looking" *flâneuse* and "mobile spectator" ("Walking" 22). On the other hand, Bowlby maintains that Woolf's "less accommodating eyes," which only look at the surface, also indicate that "such an attribute may be hiding something else too" ("Walking" 23). Although Bowlby's focus does not stay in the idea of the "less accommodating eyes," the idea itself counters against the power structure associated with the stereotypical "all-seeing" activity of the male spectator. Hence, rather than stressing the active looking dimension to demonstrate Woolf as a *flâneuse*, a counterpart of the masculinist *flâneur*, this paper is more interested in teasing out Woolf's reconsideration of the ability of the eye and its unwilled passivity to external impingements.

Regarding the street haunter's alertness to the impingement of street scenes, Cheryl Hindrichs rightly points out that "the true focus of the story

is the narrator's mediation on the relationship of the eye and the brain as the streets' various sights provoke the brain into imaginative flights" (295). For Hindrichs, this mediation also brings forth the "paradoxes of seeing and knowing, the double movement of revelation and obscurity" that resonate with the Woolfian conception of essay writing (296). That is the reason why Woolf, displaced as an enormous eye vulnerable to sensations, injury, "oddities and suffering and sordidities" in the streets also exposes the very limit in claiming a total knowledge of the others by deliberately skimming the surface ("Street Haunting" 179).

In a similar vein, Woolf's other essay "Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car" also addresses the issue of impressionability and what Hindrichs calls "the mediation between the relationship of the eye and the brain" (295). When Woolf is overcome by the beauty in Sussex, she realizes that "one's perceptions blow out rapidly like air balls" ("Evening" 204). Suddenly, "a pin pricks; it collapses" (204). For her, the pin "has something to do with one's impotency" (204). She elaborates on this impotency of one's express-ability:

> I cannot hold this—I cannot express this—I am overcome by it—I am mastered. Somewhere in that region one's discontent lay; and it was allied with the idea that one's nature demands mastery over all that it receives; and mastery here meant the power to convey what one saw now over Sussex so that another person could share it. (204)[7]

This sense of impotency has something to do with one's reliance on language. Instead of demanding expressive mastery over what the eye sees, Woolf advises on "passivity." As she writes, "But relinquish . . . it is best to sit and soak; to be passive; to accept; and do not bother because nature has given you six little pocket knives with which to cut up the body of a whale" (204-205). Here, Woolf's embrace of impotence and passivity marks a stark contrast with a masculinist temperament to conquer the natural landscape. Nonetheless, while the self remains passive to receive the myriad impressions of beauty, splinters of selves are also summoned up to respond to this unaccountable beauty in various ways.

In dealing with what the eye can do, this paper argues that Woolf is spontaneously imbricating the undertone of what it cannot do into her essay. As Hindrichs suggests, in addressing the limitation of her imagination in her essay, Woolf also unfolds its potential to engage the reader in a more critical

[7] While Woolf may be rendered impotent in the midst of being affected, the impotency to express is also what makes her a writer. Her artistic mediation of the world is her endeavor to cope with this impotency.

way (297). Hindrichs's argument resonates with Woolf's sense of co-writing, in which the reader is invited to participate rather than be excluded. Hindrichs argues that the Woolfian narrator's "suspended judgment" designates "a politics of positioning"—"a feminist 'objectivity, that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing'" (297). In this sense, the supposed superficiality of Woolf's essay and the street haunter's vision, by acknowledging partial and limited knowledge, turn out to be more radical than the moralist prescriptions.

In this aspect, we may pause to ask more questions: what ethical significance is implicated in the presupposition that Woolf cannot absorb all the scenes encountered in the streets? Apart from taking into account what Woolf sees, what is hinted regarding the ethics of seeing misery in the streets? How may we relate this less accommodating eye to the question of the self and the others? Departing from Laura Marcus's dualistic reading of home as protection and the streets as unhoused vulnerability as well as Bowlby's sexual politics of the *flâneur* and *flâneuse* and the seemingly mutually exclusive reversion of male activity and female passivity, this paper problematizes the agency of this perceiving eye, the active looking, mobile spectator, and addresses the ethical significance of an alternative sense of vulnerability. Rather than resorting to moral sympathy or humanist sentiments immediately, Woolf reveals how she is being affected by scenes that provoke unanswerable questions. Perhaps, the point here is not a quick judgement or rash reasoning regarding the solutions to the misery in the streets. What is more important here is to highlight the initiation or awakening of an ethical responsiveness—that is, the condition of being addressed and capacity for responsiveness.

## Questioning as the Awakening of Ethical Responsiveness

Woolf's "Street Haunting," apart from the aspect of "passing, glimpsing" ("Street Haunting" 181) is characterized by several questions regarding others and the condition of life. For instance, "after a prolonged diet of this simple, sugary fare, of beauty pure and uncomposed," Woolf remarks, "we became conscious of satiety" (179). By "withdrawing to some duskier chamber of the being," Woolf asks what it is like to be a dwarf (179). Later, in speculating on the possible lodging places and living conditions of "this maimed company of the halt and the blind," and reaching at such quasi-concluding remarks as "life which is so fantastic cannot be altogether tragic," Woolf's thinking is

unsettled and suspended upon sudden confrontation with the precarious sights of a "hunger-bitten" Jew and "the humped body" of a lifeless female vagrant (181). While Woolf is still musing on how "[t]hey do not grudge us . . . our prosperity" (181), what follows not only seems to evade an easy conclusion and call for further self-reflexive critique but also renders the previous conception ineffective. As Woolf writes, "At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect; a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes; a question is asked which is never answered" (181). We may say that a cluster of street scenes work together to culminate in such questioning. Nonetheless, the nuanced difference in affective intensity of the sights leads Woolf to respond differently.

In imagining the life of the female dwarf, Woolf does not simply reduce her to a deformed person or merely fantasize the woman's "desire to be seen, and to be seen as normal" as Maren Tova Linett contends (20). Rather, in this sketch, "it's ecstasy that matters" (Woolf, *Orlando* 200). Woolf dwells upon the dwarf's variation of moods before, during, and after she tries on pairs of shoes in the shop. As Woolf writes,

> Look at that! Look at that! . . . it was the shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman. It was arched; it was aristocratic. Her whole manner changed as she looked at it resting on the stand. . . . Her manner became full of self-confidence . . . . And as this was the only occasion upon which she was not afraid of being looked at but positively craved attention, she was ready to use any device to prolong the choosing and fitting. ("Street Haunting" 179-80)

Instead of concentrating on the feet, Woolf is more concerned with how the shoes and the dwarf compose a positive increase of affects. In other words, Woolf does not see the dwarf as merely a dwarf because of her physical deformity. It is the dual sense of ecstasy—the dwarf's overwhelming excitement in trying on new shoes and temporary dispossession from her self-identification—that Woolf is drawn to portray. What is highlighted here is the dwarf's capacity to be affected and to affect rather than rash victimization of the dwarf.

As Erinn Gilson expands on Butler's vulnerability, "Vulner*ability* is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn" (310). The process of trying on different shoes in the shop makes a great change in her since she is no longer quite herself. Yet, when she finally has to buy one pair and leave the shop, she becomes "a misfit out on the streets" since "the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it" (Linett 21). With just a few lines, Woolf sketches the variation of affective intensity in the shop and in the streets. As Woolf writes,

> [T]he ecstasy faded, knowledge returned, the old peevishness, the old apology came

> back, and by the time she had reached the street again she had become a dwarf. . . . But she had changed the mood; she had called into being an atmosphere which, as we followed her out into the street, seemed actually to create the humped, the twisted, the deformed. . . . Indeed, the dwarf had started a hobbling grotesque dance to which everybody in the street now conformed. . . . ("Street Haunting" 180)

Here, the invisible fluctuation of moods and street atmosphere is visualized with the physical figure of the dwarf and her grotesque dance. Woolf is quite aware that the street is the improper place for the dwarf to shed her old selves. Although the dwarf resumes her old self in the street, she has changed the atmosphere and affected Woolf. By putting herself in the dwarf's shoes even for just a few moments, Woolf explores what it may be like to be a dwarf. Through her artistic mediation, Woolf may also find herself exposed to but protected from this implication within others' lives. More importantly, we witness the unequal distribution of social vulnerability in the street—the street is not hospitable to everyone.

Critics respond differently toward Woolf's portrayal of misery. As mentioned earlier, Squier straightforwardly relates the above-mentioned unanswered question to "Does my [Woolf's] privilege cause or maintain their misery?" and argues that the potential social criticism it may provoke is abandoned when Woolf "retreats to the security of her own home" (47). Leena Schröder attributes Woolf's shocked reaction to the untimely and alien appearance of the hunger-bitten Jew in a broader context of Woolf's conception of Englishness and racist textual representation of the Jews (55).[8] In a similar vein, Lassner and Spiro engage themselves with the Jewish question by juxtaposing Woolf's texts with Simon Blumenfeld's novel *Jew Boy* to investigate the significant representation of Jews in the East End of London in the 1930s. They propose that Woolf's "Society of Outsiders" should be more inclusive to incorporate the obscures lives of the Jews.[9] And the multivalent voices of the Jews in *Jew Boy*

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[8] Here, the word "racist" seems unfair to Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf was very aware and sensitive to European fascism's hostility against the Jews since her husband Leonard Woolf was a Jew. As intellectuals, they actively voiced their opposition against fascism. During the 1930s, when Nazi anti-Semitism was on the rise, both Virginia and Leonard Woolf felt their lives were threatened. Here, Virginia Woolf's reaction to the miserable Jew in "Street Haunting" may be understood as a reinforcement of the dual shock of ontological and social vulnerability—the sight of the Jew not only triggers Woolf's responsiveness for the ontological and social vulnerability of the Jew but also reminds her of her own life at stake. In either way, Virginia Woolf and the Jew are implicated within ethical relation in this encounter.

[9] The general concern of Woolf's "Society of Outsiders" is to improve women's educational, professional and financial status. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf proposes a "Society of Outsiders" as a refusal to the barrister's request that she join in men's society in order to preserve peace. For Woolf, the educated men's daughters can only help for the common ends—justice, equality and liberty for all men and women—outside men's society, not within (183). Woolf believes that the power to change and grow

appear, for them, to "represent themselves, their own history, and their culture" (77).

The above criticisms implicitly call for a more inclusive recognition of differences since the critics are keenly aware of the intellectual's responsibility and privileged position in relation to the socially vulnerable population—the disabled and the abject—who, in Butler's words, suffer from unequal distribution of precarity. To some extent, the critics are either frustrated with or curious about Woolf's response to the precarious population, which seems to run counter to her outsider and anti-fascist politics. Nonetheless, this paper suggests that Woolf's questioning in "Street Haunting" in a way complicates the issue regarding the possibility of ethical responsibility. As Jane Lyon argues, when Woolf's narrator asks "What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?" it is "calculated to shock" since "it irrupts into the text, preceding any explanation" (561). Lyon departs slightly from the intellectual expectation by situating Woolf's depiction of the dwarf and the blind under the context of modernism's "aesthetic and epistemological challenges to 'normal'" (561). As for the Jew and the abandoned body on the floor, Lyon argues: "these are the affective triggers of political revelation. Woolf has made the face of the *homo sacer* itself—*zoe*, without *bios*—flash into view and ask a mute, unanswerable question: What is it like to *be* and yet to be cancelled" (563)?

Just as the sudden sight of the dwarf and the blind shocks Woolf, Woolf's speculative question functions as what Lyon calls "affective triggers for political revelation" that may in turn raise the readers' ethical responsiveness to the unanswered question. In a sense, Lyon's criticism is closer to Butler's social ontology as addressed in this paper. In the following paragraphs, I will bring in the discussion of Butler's nuanced distinction between responsibility and responsiveness in the hope of teasing out the potential of ethical responsiveness in "Street Haunting."

In her reconfiguration of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics, Butler suggests that the ethical relation precedes any individual sense of self ("Precarious Life" 141-42). For Levinas, the self should absolutely be responsible for the Other. Responsibility in Levinasian ethics not only presupposes an unequal and non-reciprocal relationship between an individual self and the Other with a Scripture injunction "Thou shall not kill" but also negates the potentialities of the creative interval taking place between the transforming self and the Other. Yet, if we follow Levinasian ethics, the self's encounter with the others will produce only

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can only be preserved by obscurity (190).

one kind of response and prescribed solution, which is to take responsibility for the life of the Other over that of the self. This obligatory ethics explicitly designates a hierarchy of life, i.e. the supremacy of the Other's life.

On the one hand, Butler is aware of the conflicting struggles and asks what if this Other is enacting violence upon someone we love? If we try and respond to every Other, it will only result in radical irresponsibility, as Butler paraphrases Jacques Derrida's words (*Precarious Life* 137-38). On the other hand, Butler is also discontent with the priority of self-preservation proposed by "the Spinozists, Nietzscheans, utilitarians, and the Freudians" (*Precarious Life* 140). While Butler agrees with the Levinasian "refutation of the primacy of self-preservation," she wants to "insist upon a certain intertwinement between that other life, all those other lives, and my own—one that is irreducible to national belonging or communitarian affiliation" ("Precarious Life" 140). As Butler elaborates on this ethical relation,

> "I" becomes undone in its ethical relation to the "you," which means that there is a very specific mode of being dispossessed that makes ethical relationality possible. . . . You call upon me, and I answer. . . . [O]ne has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness. ("Precarious Life" 142)

For Butler, the self and the others are mutually implicated within each other. The self's unwilled receptivity, susceptibility, or vulnerability to the call of the others is what makes ethical responsiveness possible.

Butler devotes herself to teasing out the condition of ethical responsiveness because it is "located in the affective responses to a sustaining and impinging world" (*Frames* 34). As Butler elaborates, "That responsiveness may include a wide range of affects: pleasure, rage, suffering, hope, to name a few" (*Frames* 34). Butler emphasizes this aspect because "such affective responses are invariably mediated, they call upon and enact certain interpretative frames; they can also call into question the taken-for-granted character of those frames, and in that way provide the affective conditions for social critique" (*Frames* 34-35). In other words, the affective responses are not necessarily natural, instinctual, or pre-social; they are also "invariably mediated" for the benefits of the stakeholders. Nonetheless, they are the precondition for further action or social critique.

As an affective interval, "Street Haunting" embodies and provides the Butlerian affective condition that highlights ethical responsiveness as a prerequisite for ethical responsibility. We may argue that Woolf's response toward the people suffering from precarity in "Street Haunting" is invariably mediated by social frames of class, gender, or race. But we may also argue that Woolf's question, which is never answered, is itself a questioning of the taken-for-

granted frames and aesthetic challenges to the normal as demonstrated earlier. In either way, Woolf does not attempt to impose upon the reader the Levinasian ethical responsibility. What she does through writing is to solicit our ethical response-ability.

As implied in "Street Haunting," the priority of the street haunter is perhaps self-preservation rather than a Levinasian obligation toward the Other. Apart from the precarity on the streets, Woolf is even more haunted by the "precariousness" of life itself. As Butler conceptualize precariousness, "[t]o live is always to live a life that is at risk from the outset and can be put at risk or expunged quite suddenly from the outside and for reasons that are not always under one's control" (*Frames* 30). In pondering upon the difference between the self in the past and in the present, Woolf reveals, "His is the happiness of death; ours the insecurity of life. He has no future; the future is even now invading our peace" ("Street Haunting" 186). For Woolf, the adventure is not simply fantasy or great escape. Rather, the self's composure is at risk of being shattered in every street encounter as demonstrated in previous sections.

While critics like Squier expect Woolf to take on her intellectual responsibility and intervene in the social critique, this paper contends that Woolf is more concerned with the awakening of ethical responsiveness in "Street Haunting." Again, this emphasis on ethical responsiveness does not lead to Woolf's ignorance of ethical responsibility. As reiterated throughout this paper, responsiveness is the precondition of responsibility. The question Woolf asks is perhaps not intended to be resolved but to serve as a constant questioning of the established frames of normality. It can also be a call upon the reader. The reader must be capable of receiving the call before answering. Hence, questioning implicates within it the awakening of ethical responsiveness.

## Concluding Remarks

Throughout "Street Haunting," instead of reinscribing an invulnerable masculinist individuality, Woolf embraces "passivity, affectivity, openness to change, dispossession, and exposure, which are the basis for certain fundamental structures of subjectivity, language, and sociality," as Gilson aptly explicates on Butler's conception of vulnerability (310). While acknowledging this mode of vulnerable subjectivity, Woolf also hints at the tension between ontological vulnerability and social vulnerability. The question that haunts Woolf may be put this way: we are equal by the principle of our shared ontological vulnerability; why are some populations rendered more socially vulnerable than

the others?

As suggested earlier, Woolf has a strong distaste for textual dogmatism. She prefers not to put an end to her writing or endow it with moral lessons or specific closure. By lightly touching on the surface, Woolf's writing in a way demonstrates what Gilson terms "plastic vulnerability"—susceptibility to changes—and "epistemic vulnerability," which "begins with being open to not knowing, which is the precondition of learning" (325). In this sense, Woolf's limitation in imagination pushes the reader to position themselves more critically and take part in this relay of questioning by thinking with Woolf. As reiterated throughout this paper, we must be capable of being affected before responding. "Street Haunting" has endeavored to impinge upon us and call for responsiveness.

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# 「我們不再全然是我們自己」：重思吳爾芙〈出沒街頭：一段倫敦歷險〉中的受弱性


## 摘要

本文試圖探究吳爾芙〈出沒街頭：一段倫敦歷險〉文中關於書寫與行走之間的滑動關係。本文視行走爲吳爾芙的美學轉喻，認爲吳爾芙的書寫如同她的身體一般，具有書寫自身被動性的受弱能力。本文援引巴特勒的受弱性概念，論證相較於肯認有能力抵擋街頭各種驚嚇、掌握社會問題的非受弱主體性，〈出沒街頭：一段倫敦歷險〉更關切的問題是主體的易受感性，以及主體如何回應城市中的偶然遭逢。走繞倫敦街頭之際，吳爾芙在他異性與各種街頭驚嚇面前變成了「一個巨大之眼」。藉由問題化感知之眼，本文論證此巨大之眼並不重申視覺優越性，而是彰顯身體受弱性所兼具的能動性與被動性兩者之間的張力，以及關於街頭苦難的倫理回應可能性。


**關鍵字：** 吳爾芙、〈出沒街頭：一段倫敦歷險〉、巴特勒、受弱性、主體性、書寫、倫理回應