

“The Only Spoil We Have Retrieved”: Virginia Woolf’s “Street Haunting”

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The lead pencil in Virginia Woolf’s 1927 essay “Street Haunting” definitely loses its everyday “thingness.” The narrator insists that “no one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can be supremely desirable to possess one” (“Street Haunting,” 122). This essay is traditionally vaunted as feminist classic that grants women the power to become a purposeful flâneuse who celebrates “an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner” (“Street Haunting” 123). Janice Mouton argues in “From Feminine Masquerade to Flâneuse” that Benjamin’s flâneur “seemingly indolent is actually watchful, let everything pass in review” while Woolf’s flâneuse offers “a seeming discrepancy between appearance and reality, between seeing and knowing” (7). By the time the narrator has finally secured the pencil at the end of her perambulations, the reader is left with the distinct sense that there is never “a sign of clear transformation in the gaze” (“From Feminine Masquerade” 10). The narrator has never escaped from a “prior self-absorbed solipsism” (“From Feminine Masquerade” 10). This is the same instinct that governs Woolf’s “Mark on the Wall.” By the time the nameless companion returns with the evening newspaper for the catatonic narrator, it no longer matters to the reader that the mark on the wall is a snail since the weight of the narrator’s conclusiveness of the futility of life crushes any belief in the lasting essence of individual things. All that seems to matter is the pervasive essence of futility even in the act of narration. The weight of consciousness compresses the integrity of objects.

In “Street Haunting” the search for the pencil becomes a floating signifier for the prejudices and pleasures of the voyeuristic narrator. The reader is introduced to a parade of disturbing images that are worthy of Fellini. We are invited to hastily glance at a homeless woman who is carelessly covered with a rag after being beaten unconscious and left on the steps of a pub at midnight, we witness a dwarf whose only pride is her beautiful, perfectly proportioned foot, we see her spend all of her money to feed that single vain hunger while her friend, a Giantess smiles approvingly. By the time we find the narrator in the stationery shop finally securing the lead pencil, all we are left with is the ringing in our ears from the violent quarrels of the Jewish husband and wife shopkeepers: “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” (“Street Haunting” 127). The narrator delights in offering the reader the possibility to “put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washerwoman, a publican, a streetsinger” (“Street Haunting” 127). After this startling procession, the essay concludes with the evanescent boast: “and here--let us examine it tenderly, let us touch it with reverence--it is the only spoil we have retrieved from all of the treasures of the city, a lead pencil” (“Street Haunting” 127). However, the reader cannot even see the lead pencil anymore and can never be in a mood to celebrate its harmless “thingness.”