READING AND WRITING THE CITY IN MODERNIST FICTION

Dana BĂDULESCU
"Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi

Abstract: This article starts from the premise that in order to make sense of the protean, complex and challenging reality of the city, modernist writers like Joyce and Woolf first purported to read it, and then to write about it. In doing so, they looked at its signs, and also at its gaps and silences. Woolf was interested in thinking spaciously, fusing masculinity and femininity in the perfectly balanced androgynous mind. The city provides her with the respite from its hustle and bustle, and also with the elements (signs and signals) which she arranges in a pattern whose geometry fuses them. Sometimes she shows us minds revelling in the city traffic, while some other times she captures the shock the mind receives when associated stimuli strike it. Joyce has Stephen Dedalus standing on the steps of the library and pondering on birds flying like words flowing on a page, or later in ***Ulysses*** *he explores the "ineluctable modality of the visible" and "the ineluctable modality of the audible", looking for the signs he needs.*

Keywords: Modernism, the city, "(affective) mapping", reading, writing, signs

"At this moment, as so often happens in London, there was a complete lull and suspension of traffic. Nothing came down the street; nobody passed. A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked."

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Preamble

As Raymond Williams argues, "For a number of social and historical reasons the metropolis of the second half of the nineteenth century and of the first half of the twentieth century moved into a quite new cultural dimension." (Williams in Dennis Walder: 164) Those reasons were underpinned by a set of radical transformations which had a strong impact upon culture: as Williams points out, in its earliest stages, this new cultural paradigm was boosted by imperialism, which turned the capitals of empires into magnets of wealth and power, also giving access to the cultures of the colonies. Thus, long-established cultural norms and conventions started to be thoroughly challenged, undermined and supplanted by new ones.

The unprecedented development of large cities in the wake of the Industrial Revolution brought them to the size of global zones comprising composite groups of people exchanging new ideas in ways which could not be possible in smaller, traditional, closed societies. In other words, these new and large urban locations teemed with what Williams calls a "new kind of open, complex and mobile society" to which small, often Bohemian groups contributed their cultures of "divergence" or "dissent" (Williams in Dennis Walder: 165)

These very features of openness, complexity, mobility and dynamism turned the cities into ungraspable entities. However, it was this very ungraspability which attracted interest. In order for the human mind to encompass their fascinating protean reality, it had to find footholds in the gaps created by moments when the traffic stopped. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, there

BDD-A21936 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:19:34 UTC)

are countless times when the mind revels in the hustle and bustle of city life, while the rhythmical dynamism of the traffic is recorded by the retina and stimulates the imagination:

In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of an aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (Woolf 2007: 129-130)

No matter how dynamic and protean the cityscape is, the eye beholds it adoringly in passages like this. Nevertheless, the very nature of such impressions is ephemeral, they will not last. These moments of fascination and enthusiasm are counterpointed, often on the same page or at least in the same chapter, by episodes when the dynamism and slipperiness of these stimuli seem to threaten the brain, overloading and exhausting it, or causing it a sometimes unaccountable apprehension. Thus, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this early passage is severely counterbalanced by the noise produced by a mysterious motor car. The effect of the shock is terror, and that is a moment when the traffic seems to cease completely in order to give the brain the necessary respite to readjust to the complexity and mobility of the city.

It is precisely this kind of gap and silence that Woolf uses in her essay *A Room of One's Own* to pull the threads of thought together in a loom in order to weave the theory of the spacious and embracing androgynous mind. The setting has to be the city anyway: in *A Room of One's Own*, like in Woolf's novels, diary and life, London fascinates even when it shocks. However, the stimuli are too intense and too varied to be grasped without pauses, which is why the mind waits for such moments of "a complete lull and suspension of traffic." (Woolf 2007: 622) Once the mind takes this moment off its daily urban routine of responding to onrushing stimuli, it is alerted to signals that set it thinking in terms of fusion. Like a camera lens, the eye zooms in and takes the picture of a leaf falling. Unlike the rhythm of the traffic, the fall of the leaf is slow and charged with meaning. When it hits the ground, it seems to be hitting the right spot at the right time to make the sense of "a force in things which one had overlooked." (Woolf 2007: 622)

In this passage, which prefaces this study, Woolf signals to her readers that she is a reader of signals and signs. Such an attentive reader is she that no falling leaf without and no mark on the wall within pass unnoticed and unaccounted for. The falling leaf is a significant sign whose slow motion alerts the mind to the faster motion of the city traffic. According to this design, which the mind responds to and projects further, new elements step onto the stage, each playing its part in Woolf's urban drama. The lens zooms out and in, and the tempo quickens and slackens as each actor enters:

Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other a girl in patent-leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxicab; and it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept off by the current elsewhere. (Woolf 2007: 622)

The perceiving subject stands at a vantage point, i.e. above the scene observed, and, recording the successive movements, the mind traces a geometric design of the three elements meeting "at a point", fusing, and then gliding off and out of the subject's sight.

"Affective mapping"

The very next passage in *A Room of One's Own* is an introspective analysis of one's mental process of reading the signs of this geometric design as one reads the signs on a page:

BDD-A21936 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:19:34 UTC)

The sight was ordinary enough; what was strange was the rhythmical order with which my imagination invested it; and the fact that the ordinary sight of two people getting into a cab had the power to communicate something of their own seeming satisfaction. (Woolf 2007: 622-623)

What the artist's mind actually does in these passages is to achieve a synthesis which is essential in the achievement of art. That synthesis is the fulfillment of a universal desire for a seamless unity, which is imaginatively drawn in this urban spot. As Ann C. Colley accounts for it in *The Search for Synthesis in Literature and Art*, the effect of most impressionist paintings upon the viewer is that the farther one "steps back from the painting, the more its pieces recompose. This retreat dissolves the spaces between the individual strokes until they run into one another and fuse within the beholder's eye to form familiar shapes and structures." (Colley 1990: 6) Indeed, like in the impressionist paintings, in Woolf's writing the eye is just a lens, and sensory experience is one half of the process. The other half is imagination, which fuses the elements into a meaningful shape. The outcome is the synthesis, which goes beyond the level of the visual into the deeper level of vision. It is vision that reveals the "force in things which one had overlooked." (Woolf 2007: 622)

It is not enough that the sight is perceived. What really matters is that it communicates something, which clearly indicates that the process is a kind of reading, i.e. extricating a meaning communicated by signs. The signs are not linguistic, but that is precisely what Woolf captures here: how the eye perceives, how the imagination fuses, and how her art renders the urban space in words, discovering a meaning behind the pattern. Had it not been for the encounter between a man and a woman getting into a cab and being driven away, the mind would not have had the signs to juggle with in its alternative scenarios:

The sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain, I thought, watching the taxi turn and make off. (Woolf 2007: 623)

Jonathan Flatley coins the phrase "affective mapping", starting from the idea that affects "involve a transformation of one's being in the world, in a way that determines what matters to one; affects require objects, and, in the moment of attaching to an object or happening in the object, also take one's being outside of one's subjectivity" (Flatley 2008:19). As far as mapping is concerned, Flatley explains that "the affective map is not a stable representation of a more or less unchanging landscape; it is a map less in the sense that it establishes a territory than that it is about providing a feeling of orientation and facilitating mobility." (Flatley 2008: 7) Flatley's concept accounts for Woolf's enactment of her urban scene in *A Room of One's Own*. Indeed, the elements of the scene, their successive movements and the pattern they form take the thinking mind outside its subjectivity, and relate it to the world. It is this response to the objects (the anticipation of the falling leaf, then the entrance of the woman, followed by that of the man and their departure in the cab) that relates the mind to the world, the room to the street. After the cab leaves the scene, the mind draws alternative maps:

What does one mean by 'the unity of the mind'? I pondered, for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being. It can separate itself from the people in the street, for example, and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them. Or it can think with

BDD-A21936 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:19:34 UTC)

other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out. (Woolf 2007: 623)

In these lines Woolf deconstructs her own designs in fiction. She is interested in the world in order to recreate it in her own imagination. Whether she writes novels or essays, she delves into her own mind to retrace the connection between her self and the world, and she signals it for the reader. In order to write, one needs to read first.

"The map of the world"

In the opening of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the narrative voice, which grants readers access to Clarissa's own thoughts, alerts them to the fact that the London in the book is not one but many (as many as the characters), not stable, but protean (changing its shape in every second) – a mind construct:

For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, creating it every moment afresh (Woolf 2007: 129)

Although it is mainly a London novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* is also a post-World War I novel, which relates the city and its dwellers to the world. The two protagonists, Clarissa and Septimus are very keen readers of signs. Looking for their meaning, they chart their own maps. Just before his final act, Septimus asks Rezia for "his papers", "the things he had written":

She brought him his papers, the things he had written, things she had written for him. She tumbled them out on to the sofa. They looked at them together. Diagrams, designs, little men and women brandishing sticks for arms, with wings – were they? – on their backs; circles traced round shillings and sixpences – the suns and stars; zigzagging precipices with mountaineers ascending roped together, exactly like knives and forks; sea pieces with little faces laughing out of what might perhaps be waves: the map of the world. (Woolf 2007: 220)

The abstract geometry of Septimus's world is so sharply focused that it feels like a cutting edge. It turns the reader into a fakir walking on knife blades and needles. The reading of Woolf's writing here hurts. The most painful aspects of the violent world outside are brought inside, in the room of Septimus's mind. His map is a cubist collage / montage, while its fantastic suns and stars, zigzagging precipices and sea pieces that look like little faces laughing out of ambiguous waves tap into surrealism.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* the young boy Stephen Dedalus tries to get to grips with the world and himself by writing words on the flyleaf of the geography book. The words map out the universe and the world starting from himself and getting down to the universe. What this vertical layout suggests is that the mind projects the world which it inhabits. However, the opposite page was used by Fleming, who wrote some verses which place Dedalus in the same central position. Dedalus practices his reading skills by reading backwards. He discovers that no matter how he reads it, he is central in the sense that it is his mind that generates the thinking about the universe, "the nothing place" (Joyce 1993: 13), everything, everywhere and God. Later in the book, he develops the theory of the artist "like the God of the creation", whose personality "finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak." (Joyce 1993: 233)

Perception and "apperception"

BDD-A21936 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:19:34 UTC)

In the "Proteus" chapter of *Ulysses*, a more mature Stephen broods on the "ineluctable modality of the visible" (Joyce 1946: 38) while walking along Sandymount strand. Both Joyce and Woolf liquefied the solidity of the world and of the self, often describing the city as fluid, thus suggesting that both the mind and what it projects are in a permanent flux.

What Stephen sees in "Proteus" are signs:

Signatures of all signs I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. (Joyce 1946: 38)

Tackling perception in Joyce's writing, Sheldon Brivic argues that its search, in which Joyce engages both his characters and his readers, finds its sources "in the movement of language." (Brivic 1991: 8) Brivic holds that Joyce's characters actually see through language. Anticipating Derrida's deconstructionist idea that "*il nýa pas de hors-texte*", Joyce projected his own mind onto Stephen's. Dedalus perceives the world as a world of signs, which he reads and then writes.

It is vital for him that his body should be moving, i.e. walking, as his mind is moving, from one sign to the next. The pace of his walks quickens or slackens following the rhythm of his thoughts, from reading to writing the same world of signs:

Reading two pages apiece of seven books every night, eh? /…/ Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read this F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara. Pico della Mirandola like. Ay, very like a whale. When one reads these strange pages of one long gone one feels that one is at one with one who once… (Joyce 1946: 41)

In the first passage of "Proteus" Stephen records his sensory perceptions "of the visible", starting from the idea that they are "ineluctable" but rather deceiving. He is a keen reader, who would rather see them as signs. In the second paragraph he closes his eyes in order to hear, i.e. to experience and also experiment with "the ineluctable modality of the audible." (Joyce 1946: 38) Before he walks into the signs of the books he read and wrote, Stephen walks through his perception of various other objects as signs. The ultimate goal of any journey (any walk) is the artist's self-discovery, which is essential to his art. However, the only way in which he can achieve this self-discovery is through other objects. In *Stephen Hero* Joyce accounted for his concept of epiphany as the adjustment of the vision of the spiritual eye to an exact focus. Distance is essential, and by that Joyce and his fictional projection Stephen mean the distance between themselves and any animate or inanimate object as different from the self, i.e. the object's otherness.

However, it is not only the spatial distance that counts, whether that is the distance between the self and the otherness of objects or the distance covered by one's walking. Joyce, like Proust and Woolf, was interested in exploring temporal distances, not so much as moments of the past *per se* as the relevance of those moments to the present. "The Dead", which is significantly the last piece in *Dubliners*, strikes that note of the overwhelming importance of a moment of the past carefully locked up in the characters' hearts and shedding epiphanic light upon them. That is what Brivic calls "apperception", which means both full awareness of conscious perception and a process by which one realizes how newly observed qualities of an object are related to past experience. That is exactly the trajectory Gabriel Conroy's mind follows in "The Dead": first, he perceives Greta without even knowing it is his wife, then he projects his desire onto her, making a mental note that the beautiful sight he

BDD-A21936 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:19:34 UTC)

perceives could be a painting, and later he discovers the secret of her youth locked in her heart, which leads him to a re-adjustment to the world.

Brivic argues that "Perception in Joyce searches toward its cause and desire, moving toward apperception, which means both seeing fully and seeing oneself. As the text grows aware that the objects it frames are products of convention, it moves toward finding reality in the structure of its own process." (Brivic 1991: 183) It is most poignantly in *Ulysses* that "the world appears as a veil of signs, evoking the feeling that reality is beyond, to be sensed only in hints that flicker through language." (Brivic 1991: 183)

"What birds were they?"; "But what letters?"

The modernists took a keen interest in the sky, its colours, its movements. At the end of the first chapter of Forster's *A Passage to India* "the sky settles everything" (Forster 2005: 6) after a rather confusing panorama of the city of Chandrapore. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* heavily relies on the symbolism of birds and their flight related to the young artist's need to fly by the stifling nets flung at his soul by the Irish society. In the last chapter of the novel, Stephen looks up and wonders:

What birds were they? He stood on the steps of the library to look at them, leaning wearily on his ashplant. They flew round and round the jutting shoulder of a house in Molesworth Street. The air of the late March evening made clear their flight, their dark darting quivering bodies flying clearly against the sky as against a limp-hung cloth of smoky tenuous blue. (Joyce 1993: 243)

Stephen watches them in strained attention, trying to count them as they fly round and round, and although he cannot be sure about their number, because some come down from the upper sky, he is nonetheless certain that they are "ever flying from left to right, circling about a temple of air." (Joyce 1993: 243) What the direction from left to right suggests here is that the birds follow a pattern of filling out the space of the sky, their dark bodies against its blue colour, as letters would on a page. They write a message across the sky, and Stephen, who is a reader of moving signs which he translates into language, needs to know what they are called, how many they are, and to listen to the sounds they make. He finds both their sight and the notes they produce soothing.

As always, Stephen looks for a meaning, and the meaning comes as his mind continues to ponder and to make associations: he wonders whether they are "an augury of good or evil", and that sends him to his readings (Cornelius Agrippa and Swedenborg) "on the correspondence of birds to things of the intellect and of how the creatures of the air have their knowledge and know their times and seasons because they, unlike man, are in the order of their life and have not perverted that order by reason." (Joyce 1993: 244) Perception leads to reasoning through association, and that further leads him to apperception, though this time the past is not his own, but that of the human species: "And for ages men had gazed upward as he was gazing at birds in flight." (Joyce 1993: 244) That sends him to an apprehension of his future as a writer, and in one long sentence his present is connected to his future, and that future to an archetypal past:

A sense of fear of the unknown moved in the heart of his weariness, a fear of symbols and portents, of the hawklike man whose name he bore soaring out of his captivity on osierwoven wings, of Toth, the god of writers, writing with a reed upon a tablet and bearing on his narrow ibis head the cusped moon. (Joyce 1993: 244)

BDD-A21936 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:19:34 UTC)

The god's image dissipates his fears, and, in a more relaxed mood, he returns to the question: "What birds are they?" The answer is not a certainty, but it is a result of reasoning, and the meaning he draws from their migratory flight is that they build "ever an unlasting home under the eaves of men's houses and ever leaving the homes they had built to wander." (Joyce 1993: 245) That realization unleashes his creative capacities, and he composes a stanza which references Yeats's play *The Countess Cathleen*, and which fills him with "a soft liquid joy" of accomplished creation, when he contemplates "the words where the soft long vowels hurtled noiselessly and fell away, lapping and flowing back and ever shaking the white bells of their waves in mute chime and mute peal and soft low swooning cry", until he feels that the sign of the birds in the sky above "had come forth from his heart like a bird from a turret quietly and swiftly." (Joyce 1993: 244) In their turn, the verses tap into his memory, which relates this moment of inspiration to the moment of Yeats's first production of *Princess Cathleen*. Surely, this epiphany anticipates Stephen's prayer at the end of the novel for him to be granted the skills "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." (Joyce 1993: 276)

In the first episode which introduces the readers to Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* (Chapter 4), Bloom sees a cloud covering the sun, and that dramatic sight sends his train of thoughts to the "dead names" and "a dead sea in a dead land" which "bore the oldest, the first race." (Joyce 1946: 61) This is significantly Leopold's first walk in Joyce's one-day novel, and as Leopold walks he thinks at the archetypal wandering of the Jews and relates that to his own restless wandering. Every single page and turn of the sentence signals myriads of auguries and signs and draws the readers' attention to their status of signs. Just as the characters are engaged in reading them as they are being written, the readers find themselves compelled to make sense of the book's signs as they read the book.

In Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* the ciphers on the sky are complicated by technology. An aeroplane writes letters on the sky

> But what letters? A C was it? An E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, an E, a Y perhaps? (Woolf 2007: 140)

Either because the perceiving subjects walk, and therefore they are always in motion, or because the signs themselves move, signs need to be accounted for and interpreted in motion in Woolf's and Joyce's modernist fiction. The interpreting mind is often frustrated by the incessant motion, but the motion itself is crucial to both life and writing. These writers often associated it with the fluidity of water and shiftiness of air, and both with the protean quality of life in the city. In photography, a similar experiment was undertaken by American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who, from 1922 into the thirties, took pictures of clouds in a series which he called *Equivalents*. Stieglitz's clouds are underpinned by a modernist aesthetics originated by Kandinsky, which sought to relate images to experiences, thoughts and emotions.

Therefore, what these experimental artists created was an art which reflected not so much the cities they saw, but the cities they imagined, recreated and reinvented, seen through several pairs of eyes (their characters), always in motion, at different times of the day, in different lights, from above (a window), or below (watching the birds, the clouds, or the letters written on the sky).

Conclusion

The city generated a challenging context, which both entranced and terrified its dwellers. Responding to it, the artists felt its duality, captured its dynamism and the synergy

BDD-A21936 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:19:34 UTC)

of their interaction with its complexity. In the first place, these artists were readers of signs, which they saw both in the traffic and in its gaps and silences. Then they translated these signs into a language that glimpses into their characters' conscious and unconscious minds, sometimes doubting the adequacy of words. As Harry Levin argues, "Joyce's own contribution to English prose is to provide a more fluid medium for refracting sensations and impressions through the author's mind – to facilitate the transition from photographic realism to esthetic impressionism." (Levin 1971: 53) Both Joyce and Woolf were interested in the ways in which the minds of their characters reflected on their encounters with the city, reading or misreading its signs. In doing so, they charted "affective maps", or, borrowing from Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Cubism in painting, and also from the new arts of the cinema and photography, they experimented with novels of collage / montage.

Bibliography

1. Brivic, Sheldon. *The Veil of Signs: Joyce, Lacan, and Perception*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1991. Print.
2. Colley, Ann C. *The Search for Synthesis in Literature and Art: The Paradox of Space*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens & London, 1990. Print.
3. Flatley, Jonathan. *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, Harvard University Press, 2008. Print.
4. Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India*, Penguin Books, 2005. Print.
5. Joyce, James. *Ulysses*, Random House, New York, 1946, Print.
6. Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin Books, 1993. Print.
7. Levin, Harry. *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, Faber and Faber, London, 1971. Print.
8. Williams, Raymond in Walder, Dennis (Ed.). *Literature in the Modern World. Critical Essays and Documents*, Oxford University Press in association with the Open University, 1990. Print.
9. Woolf, Virginia. *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*, Wordsworth Library Collection, 2007. Print.

BDD-A21936 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:19:34 UTC)