



Woolf and the City

Elizabeth F. Evans (ed.), Sarah E. Cornish (ed.)

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CHAPTER

Virginia Woolf Underground

Alexandra Harris

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the London Underground. Specifically, it unravels some of Woolf's complicated, changing feelings about the fundamental urban experience of being “blown through the Tube” deep below the streets of London. Although the Tube appears relatively little in her work, when it does appear it is rich in figurative significance, dense with historical and social reference, and with fascinating implications for Woolf's aesthetics. Woolf chooses the Underground as a good place to have an internal conversation about language, function, and communication. She could have used any simple sign to make roughly the same point, but the Underground was a highly appropriate choice because between the wars it became a focal point for contemporary debates about functionalism and particularly about the relationship between function and art.

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If one wants to compare life to anything,” writes Virginia Woolf with mock astonishment in “A Mark on the Wall” (1917), “one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair!” (4). With that striking, comical image, Woolf hints at both the exhilaration and the banality of life—and of the Tube. Hurtling through underground tunnels is a rollercoaster experience, but it is also involuntary and disorientating. You go at high speed but you are out of control, a passive subject swept along until you are dropped, dishevelled, at a destination. In this paper I want to unravel some of Woolf's complicated, changing feelings about the fundamental urban experience of being “blown through the Tube” deep below the streets of London.

In fact, the Tube appears relatively little in her work. Woolf herself tended not to use it unless she had to: she much preferred to be out in the open, walking or on the omnibus, winding through the traffic, looking out at the crowded streets. The District Line from Richmond would always be associated with the misery of living out in the suburbs. She complained a great deal in her diary about having to leave parties at eleven o' clock in order to get the train home, thereby missing all the most exciting bits.¹ For her, one of the many joys of living in the center of London was that she could wander home in roundabout ways, taking a detour and enjoying the night air. This is what she describes so often and so passionately: those lamplit explorations when the whole structure of London is revealed, when daytime incidentals are hidden, when the city is most profoundly hers.

So there are not very many Tube journeys in her writing, but when they do appear they are rich in figurative significance, dense with historical and social reference, and with fascinating implications for Woolf's aesthetics. Take the small, intriguing instance of her Underground thinking which occurs in "Craftsmanship," a talk she gave for the BBC in April 1937. The talk begins with the refusal of language to be functional. Words, Woolf argues, decline to give us one cut-and-dried meaning and insist on leading off into whole trails of association. She gives an example from a Tube station:

There, hung up in front of us, on an illuminated signboard, are the words "Passing Russell Square." We look at those words; we repeat them; we try to impress that useful fact upon our minds; the next train will pass Russell Square. We say over and over again as we pace, "Passing Russell Square, passing Russell Square." And then as we say them, the words shuffle and change, and we find ourselves saying, "Passing away saith the world, passing away... The leaves decay and fall, the vapours weep their burthen to the ground. Man comes..." And then we wake up and find ourselves at King's Cross.

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p. 41 The mind wanders; words wander. However functional the sign may be, it will carry different associations for all who see it, sending them on mental journeys far from the practical ↵ one at hand. Woolf presents herself having an internal conversation about language, function and communication—and she chooses the Underground as a good place to do it. She could have used any simple sign to make roughly the same point, but the Underground was a highly appropriate choice because between the wars it became a focal point for contemporary debates about functionalism and particularly about the relationship between function and art.

The significance of the Tube begins to become clear if we consider the corporate image of London Underground and the influential figures who dreamt up that image. The Tube was forcefully promoted in the 1920s and 1930s as the epitome of speedy, stylish modernity. Bold, bright, clean, efficient: this is the message that emanates from all London Underground designs of the period. It is the image projected by the roundel logo with its special Underground typeface designed by Edward Johnston.² It is in the posters that lined the curving walls of the platforms and the distinctive Underground signage that Woolf studied on the illuminated signboard. Modern efficiency is inscribed in the chic, economical architecture employed at new station buildings. All this announced that the Tube was a feat of engineering and organization, ever-ready to get you to places quickly and in a very straight line.

London's underground system was not actually very modern at all. The underground railway was a Victorian invention. The Metropolitan Railway (later the District Line) opened in 1863 and development after that was rapid. 1890 saw the coming of the City and South London Line, the first line to run in tunnels deep below ground rather than in trenches cut out and covered over like the Metropolitan. By the end of the century the Tube had become a standard feature of London life and by the 1920s there were nine different lines, crossing and meeting in Central London before extending for miles into the suburbs in all directions. As it reached its half-century the Underground was in need of an overhaul. Many of the central stations required modernization, and because the different lines had developed independently (often in competition with each

other) there was now a major attempt to co-ordinate both the running of the trains and the image of the network.³

The interwar years saw a huge redevelopment program. It was masterminded, in large part, by Frank Pick (Assistant Joint Manager and then Managing Director of the Underground Group) whose passionate, coherent vision of how it might be possible to fuse the best art with the most practical functions makes him a more important figure in the story of modernism than is often acknowledged. On the London Underground he put a whole aesthetic philosophy into practice—and, importantly, this was a philosophy explicitly opposed to what he saw as the hedonism of Bloomsbury.⁴ In allying contemporary art with everyday practicality he was mounting a campaign against notions of aesthetic purity. Paintings, thought Pick, should not only be viewed in the rarefied seclusion of galleries. They should be out in the open, serving a purpose.

As Michael Saler has demonstrated in his book *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England*, Pick's ideas grew out of his enthusiasm for the Arts and Crafts thinkers of the late nineteenth century. Pick was a latter-day follower of William Morris and often talked in terms of a new medievalism—hence the rather surprising subtitle of Saler's fascinating book: *Medieval Modernism and the London Underground*. There was nothing “olde worlde” about Pick's plans for the Tube (everything was to be clean and spacious, bearing little resemblance to anything medieval), but it would be based on a medieval model of creativity, which for Pick meant the integration of the artist with society. He called for a new emphasis on functional art for the general benefit of the people, a group effort which he compared with the building of the medieval cathedrals. His Underground was indeed to be akin to a cathedral.⁵ In this common space art would be the property of the people. Ordinary workers, who might never enter an art gallery, would be able to enjoy advanced cubist or constructivist ideas. “We have to establish a new social synthesis,” Pick wrote, and he saw the Underground as the place to do it.⁶

He attracted a good many of the period's greatest artists to the cause. Paul Nash designed seat covers; Edward McKnight Kauffer made enduringly popular posters inspired by avant-garde forms. The overall effect was so impressive that print-maker Cyril Power responded with a whole series of bright, rhythmic lithographs celebrating the newly coordinated and artistically advanced Underground. His 1932 print of a platform at Bank, for example, showed the station to be a dynamic orchestration of color, line, and form that was itself intended to be a work of art.

Virginia Woolf, however, was not going to worship unreservedly in this modern cathedral, and she made a number of small, purposeful rebellions from Pick's careful arrangements for her efficient transit. Rather than admiring the clear typeface on the bold new signs, she let her thoughts wander backwards to Tennyson. Woolf, of course, defined herself very strongly as a wanderer from the straight line. Roman Roads might do great service, she said, but they avoid the forest (*D5* 333). Where Lytton Strachey liked the straightness of Gibbon, whose history books plough straight ahead (his readers “were not invited to stop or wander, or camp out, or make friends with the natives” [Strachey 162]), Woolf took every opportunity to stop and wander.

This writer so interested in the symbolic straightness or windiness of lines witnessed the gradual straightening out of her city in the form of the new Underground map. For most of her life the map had been a straggly affair, showing how the railways criss-crossed and wound out into the suburbs, their courses dictated by the lay of the land above. The District followed the curves of the river; the Bakerloo traced a wobbly curve, plunging into Paddington and then up to Baker Street. But when the engineering draughtsman Harry Beck got to work on the map all this was to change. He recognized that it did not need to represent exact distances and directions. It was only the relationship between stations that mattered, and clarity was of the essence. By 1933 he had produced a rationalized diagram which immediately became a London icon and which is still in use today. With its straight lines and uniform distances between stops, Beck's diagram corrected wriggly reality and re-arranged London to look like an electric circuit. Organic London was cancelled out, its erratic topography called to order.

Virginia Woolf found ways to upset this new underground conformity. She declined to follow the Piccadilly Line through its regular stops, preferring to drift off and wake up in the wrong place. Another part of her rebellion was to engage with the most unmechanical and unregulated aspects of the Underground, especially with the vagrants and buskers who congregated at Tube stations but who were certainly not part of Pick's efficient grand plan. Woolf's attentive encounters with these unlicensed underground personalities were part of her wider determination to wander off and make friends with the natives. One particular encounter was so exhilarating that she recalled it in her diary four years later as part of a "conversion":

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that spiritual conversion (I cant bother to get the right words) in the autumn of 1933—or 4—when I rushed through London buying, I remember, a great magnifying glass, from sheer ecstasy, near Blackfriars: when I gave the man who played the harp half a crown for talking to me about his life in the Tube station.

(D2 141)

The freedom to go where she wanted and talk to buskers if she pleased was a mark of her social liberation. Anna Snaith demonstrated in her plenary paper at this conference that Woolf took up a principled stance in favour of street musicians while the rest of established society saw them as a public nuisance and campaigned for their removal. In a similar way, Woolf fashioned herself as a friend of the underground outlaws rather than as a friend of the polished, rationalized Tube.

It is significant that the beggar woman in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is standing outside an Underground station. Woolf tells us twice, emphatically, that she is "opposite Regent's Park Tube station" (69). If the woman's voice is bubbling up from the ground it is also bubbling up from the Tube. But Woolf replaces the rhetoric of mechanical underground efficiency with the language of sexual fertility and ancient myth which characterises that extraordinary passage. As Peter Walsh hears it in that moment, the woman's song is primeval, "soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages." With her rude open mouth the beggar is a sort of ventilation shaft from the tunnels below, in whom metallic and organic ideas merge: she is "like a funnel, like a rusty pump, like a wind-beaten tree forever barren of leaves" (69).⁷ There she stands, bringing up buried energies from deep in the earth. Her roots go down to tap an ancient spring, which Woolf prefers to the Piccadilly Line that is actually beneath her. The modern identity of the Underground is revised here to become an image of archaeology below the pavements, the strata of human existence that Woolf so often imagined below the surface of London where once "the pavement was grass" (69).⁸

For all her archaeological visions of the earth's riches, Woolf was also possessed by the alternative subterranean concept of humanity riding a great unstoppable machine. She felt the vastness of it, like a whole hidden, humming universe, a piece of science fiction that had become a daily commute.⁹ Her characters pause in the midst of it to feel its full force. In *The Waves* (1931), Jinny stops for an ecstatic moment at Piccadilly Circus station. As David Bradshaw has explained, the concourse where Jinny stands had recently been redesigned as part of Frank Pick's modernization project. The sub-surface booking-hall was designed by Charles Holden, the great architect of the interwar Underground; by all accounts it was a masterpiece of elegant curves, marble pillars and well-lit display cases. And yet this glittering new place, as Bradshaw acknowledges, is also an underworld, explicitly associated by Woolf with death. Looking at the crowds on the escalators, Jinny thinks of all those who have died. She sees those passive bodies being conveyed mechanically into the bowels of the earth and imagines them as ghosts inhabiting an afterlife. She cowers as she watches "the soundless flight of upright bodies down the moving stairs like the pinioned and terrible descent of some army of the dead downwards" (161).

The image of the streaming phantom crowd of commuters clearly connects up with the crowds flowing over London Bridge in *The Waste Land*: "I did not know death had undone so many" (57). Eliot's spectral London haunts Woolf at Piccadilly station, and she is haunted too by the words that lay behind Eliot's: those of Dante

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in *The Inferno*. Jane de Gay observes that Woolf was reading the *Inferno* carefully in Italian as she wrote *The Waves* (175). Its influence shows. Jinny's vision of the crowds on the escalator resounds with Dante's description of souls travelling between the circles of hell where "an interminable train of souls pressed on, so many that I wondered how death could have undone so many" (3, ll. 55–7). A compelling contrast begins to emerge: the London Underground which was imagined by Frank Pick as a cathedral, a version of Morris's "earthly paradise," is re-imagined by Woolf as a version of hell.¹⁰

The conventions of epic demand that the hero pay a visit to the underworld and survive it. This is one of the oldest and most powerful structural devices of western narrative and Virginia Woolf uses it, very purposefully, in *The Waves*. In the symbolic structure of the novel, which requires that each character survive the death of Percival, Jinny at Piccadilly Circus is a hero undergoing an epic trial. "Percival died," she thinks as she stands there; "I still live" (160). Hell threatens to consume her but she rallies. With her fragile armour (her patent shoes and her gauzy handkerchief) she knows she will pull through and rise up to the surface. Like a hero sharpening a sword, she makes "the angle of [her] eyebrows sharper than usual" (162).

It is not only Jinny who makes this journey. Rhoda, while climbing a mountain in Spain in the same section of the novel, remembers how she hated the squalid look of people sitting opposite each other in the Tube. Neville, too, faces the trial and states explicitly that "the descent into the Tube was like death" (147). It is deathly because it separates him from his new lover: "We were cut up, we were dissevered by all those faces." When Neville gets down to the platform in hell, it is not a bright shining place but primal and elemental—almost as ancient in its feel as the woman at Regent's Park—blown by "the hollow wind that seemed to roar down there over desert boulders" (148). Neville, for a moment, feels himself alone in the desert wilderness.¹¹

These are images of remarkable intensity. Woolf's associations with the Tube had for a long time been dramatic: Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for example, comically but apocalyptically thinks to herself that she would certainly expect Mr. Tansley to get her out if the Tube were to burst into flames (75). And now here, in *The Waves*, the Tube has become the *Inferno* itself. Andrew Thacker, in *Moving through Modernity*, is certainly right to point out Woolf's "negative view" of the Underground, but in describing Jinny's mood at Piccadilly as "gloomy" and the Underground experience in general as "dismal," he may be underestimating the force of the figurative language in play (168). These passages are much more than dismal. They are raging and epic; they are a matter of paradise versus hell. The Underground provides an experience rich enough to serve Woolf as a metaphor both for life (though which we are blown at fifty miles an hour) and for death.

The most sustained, and most sustainably hellish, of Woolf's underground descriptions was intended to form part of *The Years* (1937) although in the end it did not do so; it was one of the "two enormous chunks" that she cut from the novel at a very late stage, after the galley proofs had been made.¹² The reason and effects of the excision belong to another essay, but I want briefly to suggest the complex dynamics of this scene, where Woolf's strongest feelings about the Underground come together.

Woolf develops a potent contrast between Miriam Parrish, who must take the train into London from Richmond to Leicester Square and leave the theatre promptly to get the train back again, and Eleanor who, on the other hand, lives in London, possesses London, and can dawdle on the way home. Miriam's Tube ride is a tense, protracted, claustrophobic experience. Trapped in their places, lined up on each side of the carriage, "the passengers stared at each other, or looked at their own reflections on the glass-lined tunnel" (364). On a Tube train, with no view from the window, there is nowhere else to look. People face each other head-on but must pretend not to stare. The atmosphere in Miriam's carriage is so awkward and stifling that it becomes a kind of agony. "Nobody moved, nobody spoke" (364). One man looks in horror at humanity as it is represented on this train: "respectable ladies in their drab coats and hats," a red-faced man, a flower-woman in a ridiculous hat. "Everybody seemed to be gloating; to have fed on the garbage in the newspapers; and to be passively chewing the cud" (365). Surely he is different, more alive, than these anonymous people? But no: his awful moment of realization comes when he catches his own reflection in the glass and sees himself objectively,

“quite indistinguishable from the others” (365). As if to seize back his individuality before it is stamped out completely, he gets off the train before his station.

When Miriam herself gets out as scheduled at Leicester Square there is a moment of simple, awful sadness:

It would have been a relief to her if somebody had asked her to help them; she looked along the platform in case anyone wanted to be directed for instance to the Hampstead tube; but nobody wanted to be helped, and the liftman clanged the door in her face as she reached the gate.

(366)

Miriam, too, battles to keep some humanity in the face of the anonymous machine. She looks for tiny flickers of human contact. Like others around her, though they do not show it, she wants to reach out and exchange a newspaper or make just some small comment. They are all trying to stay alive in this place which Woolf reads as deathly. They make their journeys through the underworld by performing small imaginative adventures. Miriam wants desperately to do something active rather than just be blown along, something that will personalize this uniform subterranean world. Her instinctive internal subversions of the machine are in fact not far removed from those of Virginia Woolf, whose mind is determined to wander as she’s passing Russell Square.

Notes

- 1 See for example *D2*: “I might know people. In Richmond this is impossible. Either we have arduous parties at long intervals, or I make my frenzied dashes up to London, & leave, guiltily, as the clock strikes 11” (251).
- 2 The typeface was commissioned by Frank Pick and launched in 1916. Johnston redesigned the roundel in 1919.
- 3 Wolmar gives an excellent short history of the London Underground.
- 4 Saler describes medieval modernism as “a rejoinder to both Fry and Bell’s deliberately provocative aesthetic views” (59).
- 5 See Saler 92 for more on Frank Pick’s “Community in Relation to Transport” (April 1924, notes, London Transport Museum).
- 6 “Growth and Form in Cities” (January 1926, London Transport Museum) 26, qtd. in Saler 92.
- 7 Garvey shows how the song dissolves barriers and differences, “flood[ing] the seemingly solid and hierarchized space of London” (64). ↪
- 8 For other visions of what lies beneath the streets see, for example, *The Waves* where “beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence” (93) and *Between the Acts*, with “rhododendron forests in Piccadilly” (8).
- 9 The Tube had indeed inspired science fiction. See, for example, E.M. Forster’s 1909 short story “The Machine Stops,” which sees humanity resident in a sanitized underground world.
- 10 For Pick’s interest in Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise* see Saler, chapter 5 “The Earthy Paradise of the London Underground” (92–121).
- 11 On the “heroic theme” of *The Waves* see Hulcoop (470), who argues that Bernard (taking over from Percival the role of hero) undergoes cycles of death and revival. It is not only Bernard, however, who goes through this epic process of death and rebirth.
- 12 Jeri Johnson reprints these as an appendix to her edition of *The Years* (361–401).

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