

Lord Alfred Douglas along the pathway of virtue. His was the love that finally dared to speak its name, despite the consequences, but Wilde had failed to carry out his most basic duties.

In short: in my opinion an excellent study in the field of "Classical Tradition" that, while concentrating on a specific subject and country, offers an approach and style which stimulate general interest.

**STREETWALKING THE METROPOLIS. WOMEN, THE CITY
AND MODERNITY**

Deborah L. Parsons

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(by Teresa Gómez Reus. University of Alicante)

Deborah L. Parsons's analysis of the literary representations of women in the modern city is a welcome contribution to a line of enquiry that for the last fifteen years has sporadically explored the possibilities and implications of the *flâneuse*; that is, the female counterpart of the *flâneur*, a conceptual figure related to the characteristics of the modern artist, his modes of observation, and the public spaces he portrays. Parsons has taken up the gendered approach that art historians and cultural sociologists such as Griselda Pollock (1988) and Janet Wolff (1990) initiated in the wake of the 1980s to expose the masculine bias of the canonical versions of modernism, and to reveal the subtle techniques women artists used to assert their differing perspectives on the urban experience. Pollock's study of Impressionist artists concentrated on the socio-sexual division of the nineteenth century to argue that women painters such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat, restricted in their freedom of the city, either represented their alienation through interstitial spaces that imply tension between the inside and the outside, or offered unconventional angles of public places, like gardens and embankments, as sites of enclosure. Wolff's seminal "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity" also employed the concept of separate private/public spheres as evidence for the exclusion of women from the socially fluid world of the streets. Although she noted the presence of public women in Baudelaire's city—the prostitute and the *passante*—, she regarded them as diametrically opposed to the

position of the *flâneur*, which, in keeping with the Benjaminian definition of the term, she described as a figure of freedom, detachment and spectatorial authority. Her conclusion was that female *flânerie* was impossible to posit: the *flâneuse* was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century.

During the 1990s the question of women's role as strollers and observers in the urban environment became an object of critical interest in other gender-conscious criticism. Cultural theorists described the mobility of bourgeois women to shop or to undertake social or charity work in certain districts of the nineteenth-century metropolis. And a few essays initiated explorations of literary images of urban women (Bowly 1985; Nord 1993; Ledger 1995; Ankum 1997), and of the relations between women, writing and streetwalking in modernism (Bowly 1992; Hidalgo 1993). These publications questioned the supposed universality of the trope of the *flâneur* and contributed to re-drawing the maps of literary urban modernism. Yet, the female *flâneur* continued to be practically absent from debates over the status of the image and the perceptions of modernity, and formulation of the city as a text to be inhabited, traversed and interpreted by men remained largely unchallenged.

124 The well-established assumption that the urban artist-observer is necessarily male explains why Deborah Parsons's *Streetwalking the Metropolis. Women, the City and Modernity* is such a welcome contribution. Timely and innovative, this book begins by assessing the cultural and literary history of the *flâneur*, and advances critical space for the discussion of the female *flâneuse*, focusing on a range of writers from the 1880s to World War II. Questioning Wolff's and Pollock's argument, namely that the gender divisions of the nineteenth century were strictly mirrored in the urban environment, she takes as a starting point the empirical fact of women's increased autonomous presence in the late nineteenth century, both in terms of leisure and employment, to challenge the view of aesthetic, urban perception as a specifically masculine phenomenon and privilege. The real originality of her thesis, however, lies in her reinterpretation of the *flâneur* as an elusive trope that contains "gender ambiguities that suggest the figure to be a site for the contestation of male authority rather than the epitome of it." (p. 6). Indeed, central to her argument is a reassessment of the concept of the urban spectator as ambiguously gendered. This androgyny undercuts the myth that the woman in the city is necessarily a labelled object of man's gaze and the notion, temporally universalised, that *flânerie* implies an omniscient perspective and superior detachment. By presenting alternative modes of spatial awareness and involvement, less leisured and less assured, yet more consciously adventurous, Parsons validates a place for women.

A remarkable feature of this book is the scope of the ground it covers. Its focus is not exclusively concerned with the purely literary, but explores a range of cultural

factors that are pertinent to the theme, connecting feminist theory, urban and cultural sociology, and literary analysis with clarity and common sense. She examines *ambulatory* metaphors (the *flâneur*, the *passante*, the man of the crowd, the cosmopolitan), current research on turn of the century urban patterns, and feminist critiques of hegemonic modernism before centring her attention on post-Victorian and modernist female characters as participants/observers in the public spaces of the city. Brief but satisfying analysis of the representation of women in department stores and streets in the work of Gissing, Zola, Henry James and Proust precludes Parsons's discussion on women writers. Authors analysed include Amy Levy, Dorothy Richardson, H.D., Djuna Barnes, Jean Rhys, Janet Flanner, Anaïs Nin, Rosamond Lehman and Elizabeth Bowen; and the trajectories she covers explore the different spatial images they posited: from Richardson's emancipatory metaphors of "pilgrimage" to Rhys's, Bowen's and Lehman's sordid or disillusioned images of urban knowledge. As a postscript she turns to Doris Lessing's protagonist Martha Quest to observe the landscape and possibilities that have been left to a post-war generation.

A historical development is clearly suggested. Parsons examines how the urban-based novels of Rhys, Bowen and Lehmann, written in the late 1920s and 1930s, abandon Woolf's and Richardson's metaphorical flirtations with the streets, and depict disorienting and futile spatial movement, as they present the struggle of the woman not so much to enter but to survive in the consumer world of the city. Particularly sophisticated is her discussion of *flânerie* in the war-torn city, when the traditional categories of space are radically disrupted, and the city frequently becomes the province of women. There are obvious tensions within the idea of *flânerie* during wartime, and Parsons addresses them with acumen. She explores the trope of *flânerie* as a metaphor for the increased freedom of women in urban life, but without neglecting the less positive aspects of enforced wartime nomadism.

In this perceptive research some relevant writers have been omitted. Kate Chopin's account of female *flânerie* and consumerism in stories such as "A Pair of Silk Stockings" (1894) would have been relevant in Chapter 2; Edith Wharton's war reportage "The Look of Paris" (1915), an autobiographical narrative in which she clearly portrays herself as a *flâneuse*, would certainly have added texture to Parsons's discussion of women in the war-torn city, and there are other modernist writers, like Katherine Mansfield, whose peripatetic heroines could have been included (I am thinking of stories such as "Miss Brill" and "Je ne Parle pas Français"). On the other hand, genres such as travel writing could have been considered: As Efterpi Mitsi notes (2004), the trope of the "invisible *flâneuse*" equals that of the invisible woman traveller, while modern travelling, with its emphasis on the "transitory, the fugitive, the contingent", suggests the rhythms of the modern city and the potential to transgress spatial gender boundaries. But these are minor observations that do

not obscure the pleasures of this text. Indeed, after reading this study, with its plethora of detail, one looks forward to hearing more about this topic, so substantial to the history of women and the literature of modernity.

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Abstracts