

## NEUTRAL TERRITORY

*Scott McCracken*

Elizabeth F. Evans, *Threshold Modernisms: New Public Women and the Literary Spaces of Imperial London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.261  
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Elizabeth F. Evans's excellent new study makes an important intervention into studies of modernism and the city. Over the last twenty years, the critical understanding of the role of the city in modernist formations has developed from an abstract idea into something concrete. At one time, the city conjured up a constellation of attitudes, moods, and atmospheres. Cosmopolitanism, sophistication, decadence, or just urbanity were words that characterised how the city felt. Now we know so much more about what the city was: its buildings, its public spaces, its populations. Social, cultural, and literary historians have done the hard labour required to pluck the literatures of the city out of the ether bringing them back to the street.

Evans's monograph is steeped in this research. Her bibliography alone makes for a rich read and should be the recommended reading list for any student who wants to map the field. But her study also brings to the 'spatial turn' a welcome expansion into questions of gender and 'race', drawing on Edward Said and feminist cultural geographers such as Doreen Massey, Linda McDowell, and Gillian Rose (13). London is the focus, but an expansive London, the capital of the British Empire and a 'contact zone' (a concept which Evans borrows from Mary Louise Pratt's work on colonialism and applies to the imperial metropolis (208)) for visitors, students, travelling intellectuals, workers, and migrants from across the globe.

The phenomenon of the 'New Woman' has been the subject of numerous studies. In her introduction, Evans usefully reframes the debate around 'the new public woman', a concept that highlights the importance of the urban public sphere in the making and remaking of gendered identities. Taking a clear position in critical discussions about whether women were empowered or disempowered in the spectacular politics of the city's streets, Evans makes the case for the agency of the new public woman. These women were, she argues, far from passive, but rather 'active

negotiators of the male gaze', engaged in 'a dynamic use of the status of spectacle'. In this respect, *Threshold Modernisms* follows the lead of Liz Conor's 2004 study, *The Spectacular Modern Woman* in arguing for the public sphere as an arena of contesting and contested gazes.<sup>1</sup>

On a terrain where power was being challenged, much depended on the material context. As Evans shows, the intense encounters that produced new gendered identities were concentrated in 'threshold' locations that included 'offices, cafés and restaurants, theatres and music halls, hotels and hospitals, parks and exhibition grounds' (10). These 'liminal sites [in] modernist London [...] expose the tension between structure and anti-structure – between order and chaos – in modernism's project' (12). Evans focuses specifically on bars, shops and department stores, streets, and the under-researched phenomenon of turn-of-the-century women's clubs. Her first chapter outlines a genealogy of the new public woman and uses the figure of the barmaid as a case study for what Evans calls 'spectacality' as a mode of agency. Chapter 2 looks at the shop girl in Henry James, Amy Levy, and George Gissing. Chapter 3 examines the politics of the walking the streets in H. G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* and Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* and *The Years*.

Not surprisingly *Pilgrimage* comes to the fore as central to these concerns. Cafés, teashops and, more recently, boarding houses in *Pilgrimage* have been discussed in detail.<sup>2</sup> But Evans is the first to have done the background research on the important role of women's clubs in Richardson's fiction. Clubs were, in Amy Levy's phrase a 'neutral territory', where women were relieved of burdensome familial and professional ties and could cultivate equal relationships with their peers. Miriam Henderson's quest for independence requires just such a 'neutral territory' and she picks up Levy's phrase in *The Trap* to describe the freedom she finds in her club, The Belmont. Evans writes that 'The club in *Pilgrimage* represents a chronotope of possibility, fusing openness of time ("moments") with that of space' (153). Its enabling threshold status

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Scott McCracken, *Masculinities, Modernist Fiction, and the Urban Public Sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); See Terri Mullholland, *British Boarding Houses in Interwar Women's Literature: Alternative Domestic Spaces*, 2018, reviewed in *Pilgrimages* no. 9.

relies on bringing intimate, private, and the public spaces into dialogue. Though, as Evans's illuminating reading of the Brooms' visit to the The Belmont in *The Trap* reveals, the gin traps of domesticity have to be eluded even in the club. For Miriam, the enjoyment of playing the hostess becomes too reminiscent of the 'deathly allures of domestic life' (156) and 'the expectation of catering to others anticipated needs and desires' (157). Crucially that 'catering' makes her into a 'spectacle not a spectator (157-8). Nonetheless, it is The Belmont that gives Miriam and Amabel the time, the space, and the freedom to launch a same-sex relationship, acting as a threshold not only between public and private space but also between 'conventional domestic life' and 'independent female bohemianism' (161).

The new public woman, of which Miriam is a prominent example, became a prominent signifier of London's modernity. Evans shows how in example after example the (mostly male) visitors from North American and the British colonies are struck by the frank and free-gazing, free-speaking, and free-moving women of the city. Because, in the words of Booker T. Washington, 'the English colonial system [brought] every year hundreds of representatives of all races and colors from every part of the world to London' (9), the politics of the gaze in its public spaces was complicated by more than class and gender. *Pilgrimage* records this but, if Jewishness is the most overt figuration of cultural otherness (notably in the character of Miriam's suitor Michael Shatov) black and Asian figures also figure at the margins of the narrative.

'Spectality' is not only a mode of agency for Miriam, it is also a mode of racism, appearing as early as her fascination with the blackface minstrels on Brighton Pier in *Backwater*. Critics have often struggled with the contradictions between Miriam's iconoclasm with regard to conventional femininity and, for example, her disgust at seeing a black man eating; or her embrace of cosmopolitanism and her willingness to ham up a stereotype of an Indian man for comic effect. Even though in *Deadlock* Michael Shatov takes her up on her ignorance of her own prejudices ('You are wrong: believe me you have immensely these prejudices', III 150-1), *Pilgrimage's* subjective narration is more often complicit with Miriam's chauvinism.

Evans completes Chapter 4 with Una Marson's very different experience of a London club and her final chapter, 'New Public Women Through Colonial Eyes: Reverse Imperial Ethnography' continues this much-

needed counter view. Using contemporary writing about London by B. M. Malabari and T. N. Mukharji, A. B. C. Merriman-Labour and Duse Mohamed Ali, she unveils the London spectacle as disputatious, but often also (to borrow Paul Gilroy's term) convivial. If power was unequal, that inequality was never uncontested. Beneath public tirades against miscegenation and periodic violence against migrants (such as the pogroms against black and Asian workers in many British cities in 1919), a multicultural Britain sustained itself, where people met one another on the city's thresholds. Indian students joked with waitresses in teashops, relationships between old Londoners and new Londoners started, then sometimes stopped, but sometimes continued. Yet this history of conviviality has not been recorded. Paradoxically, while writers such as Richardson use the 'other' as a way of emphasising the strangeness of the modern city, for men of colour forced by a racialised gaze to see themselves as strangers 'the phenomenon of the new public women provided a method for articulating their own belonging in the imperial city' (6).

Evans's monograph does modernist studies an immense service. Pointing us to the early twentieth-century texts we need to rethink the relationship between imperialism and modernism, she encourages us to see modernism again through a reverse, decolonising gaze. As with any advance in research her book raises as many questions as it answers. Its meticulously researched readings provoke new paths of enquiry about, racism, class, and masculinity in the city. From now on *Threshold Modernisms* will be an essential starting point for new scholarship on the cultures of urban modernity and urban modernisms.