

Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) ISBN: 9780754666462

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Modernist short stories are frequently marginalised, omitted from the canon, or undertheorised. Even Katherine Mansfield's short stories, beautifully worked as they are, earned the writer the label of 'sentimentalist and miniaturist', according to Claire Tomalin.¹ These two accusations, of sentimentality, and of producing 'small' and therefore insignificant, art, are interlinked. Hermione Lee has a similar characterisation of the pre-1970s public view of Virginia Woolf, as a 'delicate lady novelist of a few experimental novels and sketches', where short stories are not even designated as such, but rather are 'sketches': rough, unfinished, and fragmentary.² As Claire Drewery puts it in *Modernist Short Fiction by Women*, 'commentary on Woolf's stories and sketches has traditionally been sparse' (7). And if this marginalisation is true of the shorter fiction of Mansfield and Woolf, then how much more so the stories of Dorothy Richardson and May Sinclair?

Claire Drewery's *Modernist Short Fiction by Women* is a comparative study of Mansfield, Richardson, Sinclair and Woolf, written 'in order to redress this critical neglect' (8). In order to do this, Drewery presents a conception of the short story form itself as a liminal form. The essential liminality of short fiction by women, she argues, is the reason why these short stories have been largely ignored:

The brevity of the modernist short story, as well as its connection with the liminal 'moment' is further suggestive of why it has often been viewed as a minor, inferior literary form: the novel in miniature (5).

This conception of the short story writer as 'miniaturist' is in fact the very reason why a critical reappraisal of modernist short

¹ Claire Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 5.

² Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 4.

stories is so necessary. The short story form promises ‘a creative, experimental potential [which] transcends accepted literary distinctions, challenging fictional and literary boundaries by nature of its form and content’ (6). It also displays, by the very constraints of its form, key modernist tropes such as the significant moment, the inadequacy of language, plotless life, and notions of space and place.

Drewery take us through, chapter by chapter, the liminal tropes of journeys (pilgrimages, holidays and exile); mourning; death (being and non-being), and the uncanny. As Drewery suggests in her first chapter ‘The Journey not the Arrival: Pilgrimage as a Modernist Liminal Metaphor’, many modernist short stories, are concerned with liminal spaces: ‘set in such in-between spaces as gardens or the seashore, or transitional areas like hotels, waiting rooms and railway carriages: spaces that are occupied only on a transitory basis’ (3).

‘The Journey not the Arrival’ almost sounds like a coda for *Pilgrimage*, but is instead principally about ‘Journey to Paradise’ and ‘Tryst’ with their significant railway journeys, and seaside destinations. The analysis here focuses on a kind of theory of space and transit that recalls Elisabeth Bronfen’s analysis of *Pilgrimage* in *Dorothy Richardson’s Art of Memory*, but Richardson’s longer work is not explicitly examined. Rather, the emphasis is upon comparative analysis of the short stories of Drewery’s four writers. Richardson’s ‘Tryst’ and Mansfield’s ‘The Little Governess’, with their solo travelling women contain ‘a similar interrogation of women’s identities’ (26), and Richardson’s ‘The Garden’ as a ‘safe’ liminal space, with the child’s ‘still-fluid [...] identity’ is likened to the ‘linguistic slippage’ (22) in Woolf’s *Kew Gardens*. The liminal here is not only liminal spaces, and in-between places, but precisely the kind of unspoken, or indefinable ‘something’ that Richardson so often returns to. The central liminal motif in ‘The Garden’, Drewery argues, is partly the ‘fear of outside spaces’, but *enabled* by this, the fear ‘of unspoken languages; of unformed subjectivities; of veiled potentialities’ (23).

The final two chapters, on 'the inner life', and 'the revelatory moment' respectively, return to this idea of the indefinable. 'The "Inner Life" as Liminal Discourse' features an interesting analysis of language as 'occupying a liminal position between order and other' (85), which situates Drewery's short story writers firmly at the forefront of the concern for representing subjectivity in modernist writing as a whole. There is an inevitable focus on 'stream of consciousness' and Bergson's 'duration', but this is then extended to an interesting analysis of Richardson's 'Sunday' and 'Excursion' for their telescoping of time. The two stories attempt to bridge the liminal gap between inner and outer, or express a sense of 'the medium *between* the past and the present' (90), which is, Drewery argues, Richardson's conception of the 'inner life'.

The final chapter, 'Out of the Ordinary: The Revelatory Moment as a Liminal Space' extends the concept of the indefinable further, focussing on the 'significant moment' as crucial to the form of the modernist short story, and characterises that moment as liminal, or in Drewery's words:

Examines the notion of an opposition in modernism between a concern with the ordinary and extraordinary, and between the revelatory moment as a moment of insight, or the impossibility of reaching a reality behind or beyond everyday appearances (106).

Woolf's 'moments of being', Sinclair's theories of 'sublimation', and 'epiphany' in Mansfield's stories are all examined in relation to Joycean epiphany, and some interesting conclusions are drawn. The modernist short story becomes, in Drewery's reading, a site where 'momentary glimpses' (one of Mansfield's words for her epiphanic moments) 'draws attention' to the liminal, or 'the realm of the interstices, of the not-said' (121). Dorothy Richardson's conspicuous absence from this final chapter is perhaps due to Drewery's self-imposed focus on only the short stories of her four writers, and Miriam's 'being versus becoming'³ is not examined. However, Richardson's short stories in *Journey to Paradise* are filled with epiphanic moments: from a version of Miriam's bee-memory

³ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage 4* (London: Virago Press, 1979), p. 362.

in 'The Garden' to the 'light' and 'wonder' perceived by the protagonist of 'Summer' when alone.⁴ There is potential here for some profitable comparisons between the 'moments' of all four writers. Drewery's redrawing of the quintessential modernist moment, and the modernist short story itself as liminal is extremely convincing, and ultimately has us looking for more examples.

⁴ Dorothy Richardson, 'Summer', in *Journey to Paradise: Short Stories and Autobiographical Sketches*, ed. by Trudi Tate (London: Virago Modern Classics, 1989), p. 42.