STREETWALKING
THE METROPOLIS
Women, the City and Modernity
Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity, Deborah L. Parsons, Oxford University Press, 2000, 019158410X, 9780191584107. Can there be a flaneuse, and what form might she take? This is the central question of Streetwalking the Metropolis, an important contribution to ongoing debates on the city and modernity in which Deborah Parsons re-draws the gendered map of urban modernism. Assessing the cultural and literary history of the concept of the flaneur, the urban observer/writer traditionally gendered as masculine, the author advances critical space for the discussion of a female ‘flaneuse’, focused around a range of women writers from the 1880's to World War Two. Cutting across period boundaries, this wide-ranging study offers stimulating accounts of works by writers including Amy Levy, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, Rosamund Lehmann, Jean Rhys, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, Anais Nin, Elizabeth Bowen and Doris Lessing, highlighting women's changing relationship with the social and psychic spaces of the city, and drawing attention to the ways in which the perceptions and experiences of the street are translated into the dynamics of literary texts.

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`The book will find a readership not only among specialists across the relevant disciplines, but also among students and general readers eager to explore alternatives to the traditional Pound-Eliot-Joyce axis: that OUP has published both hard and paperback editions testifies to this broad appeal' Sean Matthews, Times Higher Education Supplement

many of the 19th century writers -- starting with gogol (prequel: pushkin, sequel: dostoevsky) -- and emphatically including baudelaire and dickens -- wrote of what has come to be known as the revolutionary encounter. this happened beginning in czar peter's st. petersburg, where the wide sidewalks along the nevsky prospect (designed by a frenchman, leblond) let russia's "new men" -- drawn to the new capital by the new bureaucratic jobs -- mix on the sidewalks with soldiers, aristocrats, formerly cloistered women. the different classes mixed for the first time in history, and *saw* one another.

manet and the french impressionists took up the idea from their friend the poet baudelaire, that there was a "new man" called a flaneur. he *saw* modernity (and streetwalking "new" women) on the new sidewalks of haussman's paris...dickens, who walked at least six miles a day, much of the time at night, through london, transformed what he saw as a "flaneur" -- including, for the first time, the use of a child as a hero/narrator -- into revolutionary "modern" art.

this book argues, and proves that there were women walking the streets and observing modernity in our own way. among the forgotten woman writers parsons writes of is amy levy, a "flaneuse" of london, who argued among other things that jews' identities first formed in modernity, in the revolutionary encounters on the sidewalks.

other women who wrote of the revolutionary encounter on the sidewalk with whom parsons deals are woolf, lessing, and dorothy richardson. the best achievement of this book -- aside from the fact that something you always thought but never quite put your finger on is elucidated on every page -- is to show how women's identity was formed in the streets, and how the 19th century (piggy) social scientists who invented crowd psychology conflated women with rioters...no doubt giving rise to the rivetting art nouveau image of woman as dragonfly.

Very good as far as literary criticism goes; a key reference for my dissertation. Incidentally, the author was one of my professors at Birmingham. She was nice enough but somewhat flighty. Either
she constantly forgot things or was a persevering procrastinator. It sort of gave me a glimmer of hope that I might one day be able to teach in spite of my constant inability to focus on the task at hand.

Deborah Parsons's study of modern women writers and their relationships to the city takes part in a couple of important intellectual debates. Most generally, it addresses the question the art critic T. J. Clark poses in a well-known debate with Michael Fried: Does modernism have "anything to offer but the spectacle of decomposition?" That is, does our experience of urban dynamism, the fragmentation of tradition, and the psychological disorientation that accompany these tend to produce only disabling negativity within ourselves and our aesthetic and intellectual creations, or can the challenge of modernity be said to be positive and productive in its effects?

The other line of debate Parsons's study enters into involves the more local question of women's place within modernity. Given that they endured greater social and mental constraints than men did, how have women in particular fared in the urban landscape? Indeed, have they even been able to move and think freely within the modern city, or has Baudelaire's peculiar modern product, the flâneur, always been an exclusively male phenomenon?

While Streetwalking the Metropolis contributes to a much-needed revision of this second, more local, debate, it is, I would argue, rather too sentimental in its claims to enter very usefully into the first. Let me begin by discussing the book's welcome revision of received feminist wisdom about women and modernity.

Parsons rightly notes that feminist critics like Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock have typically portrayed the urban woman as almost exclusively the immobile object of the male gaze: the female equivalent of the flâneur is the prostitute, the fallen, stigmatized woman forced into the public realm by poverty. Men are about the public realm, women the private, and this rather rigid dichotomy means that those women who venture into public will be punished for it. Thus, "by asserting that female experience concerns the domestic world, critics such as Wolff and Pollock only serve to exclude women from the 'modern' altogether and resituate her [sic] in the Victorian home" (40). Even more intelligent writers, like Elizabeth Wilson, tend to literalize the figure of the flâneur, forgetting that "the post-Benjaminian flâneur is more influentially a conceptual metaphor for urban observation and walking that extends even to the present day and the flâneur of de Certeau's postmodern city" (41). After a series of telling, though somewhat blandly written, chapters considering the work of writers like Amy Levy, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy Richardson, Parsons concludes that in fact these women emerged into the modern city "keen for freedom and autonomy, seeking to understand the city on their own terms and ready to express their experiences in their own voice" (224). Her own "social and literary genealogy of the flâneuse," she writes, reveals women as "observing subjects in the city." Parsons "troubles" gender in this study; she insists upon the ambiguous gender of the flâneur and therefore the availability of the stance of urban observer and wanderer to both men and women. And she portrays the city itself as a site far more complex than traditional feminist critics of modernity tend to do. She makes wise use of the impressive work of the urban theorist Richard
Sennett in arguing, as he does, that the city is in fact "a positive site for the 'other' and the exile . . . the city should be regarded not as a sanctuary but as an open space 'in which people come alive, where they expose, acknowledge, and address the discordant parts of themselves and one another'' (226).

But Parsons herself cannot resist simplifying the terms of the discussion as she concludes her study. Flâneuses, in fact, she argues, go one step further than flâneurs. Unlike their typical male counterpart who tends to regard the anonymity afforded by city crowds as threatening to his sense of the integrity of his self,

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