

Hope Mirrlees: Collected Poems. Edited and introduced by Sandeep Parmar. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011. 140 pp. £14.95 paper.

Hope Mirrlees (1887-1978) has gained notoriety in recent years for her 1919 work *Paris: A Poem*, which Virginia Woolf called “obscure, indecent, and brilliant,” and which inspired T.S. Eliot’s canonical work of modernism *The Waste Land*. When Bonnie Kime Scott included the poem with Julia Briggs’s commentary in her 2007 anthology, *Gender in Modernism*, a wide range of modernist scholars became aware of Mirrlees. And in 2011, with the publication of Sandeep Parmar’s groundbreaking edition of

Mirrlees's collected poems, Mirrlees was even featured in the *Times Literary Supplement*, alongside Mina Loy, in a blog post on "Forgotten Female Modernists."

The reasons Mirrlees fell out of the story of Modernist poetry—and eluded the net of feminist recuperation longer than Loy, H.D., Nancy Cunard, and other "FFMs"—have largely to do with Mirrlees's own desire to be forgotten. Upon the death of her partner, the classicist Jane Ellen Harrison, in 1928, Mirrlees struggled to continue with her writing and then converted to Catholicism in 1933. Mirrlees published nothing for 30 years, and the poetry she published after this hiatus was surprisingly flat and conventional after the brilliant flash of *Paris*. However, her sci-fi historical novel, *Lud-in-the Mist* (1926), is another text scholars have revalued in recent years. Parmar provides an extensive introduction that situates Mirrlees within the context of the modernist tradition, accounting for the impact of her relationship with Harrison on her work, her links with Bloomsbury (with Virginia Woolf and TS. Eliot in particular), her conversion to Catholicism, the decline of her writing life, and her "return" in 1962 with the publication of *A Fly in Amber*, a biography of the Romantic antiquarian Robert Cotton, which took her 30 years to write. Parmar's collection contributes greatly to our understanding of this singular author and will be of much interest to scholars of modernism and intermodernism.

Born into a well-off Scottish family, a "stunningly beautiful woman" by all accounts, Mirrlees was deeply influenced by Harrison, the "famous scholar" who haunts Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: ("on the terrace, as if popping out to breathe the air, to glance at the garden, came a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great forehead and her shabby dress—could it be the famous scholar, could it be J---- H--- herself?"). Harrison, the first woman to lecture at Cambridge, was Mirrlees's tutor at Newnham from 1910-1913, and by 1914 the two women were living together. Harrison was some forty years older than Mirrlees, and her scholarship had a profound influence on Mirrlees's blend of classical reference and popular culture. Woolf published *Paris* with the Hogarth Press in 1920 in an original run of 175 copies and hand-set its complex typography herself.

Paris is proof that, as Roland Barthes wrote, "the city is a poem," one that resists straightforward interpretation. It wends its way through *Paris*, on the metro, through the Tuileries and the rooms of the Louvre, psychogeographically finding the affective map which overlays the city. The poem itself becomes the city, as Mirrlees shapes its verses into trees, and spaces out its words to mimic the city's tempo.

The Tuileries are in a trance
Because the painters have stared at them too
long. (3)

In its experimentalism, in its fondness for collage, for fragmentation, and for exploring the possibilities of layout, the poem's affiliations with Stephané Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Tristan Tzara are evident. Parmar sources some of the less obvious influences on *Paris* to include Anna de Noailles, Jean Cocteau, and an aging salonnière called Madame Duclaux.

The poem ambitiously critiques the commodification of war, peacemaking, and especially religion from a feminist perspective; the streets of Paris become a site for the creation of female subjectivity as the masculine monoliths of the city and the state become permeable to the female gaze. While the poem's urgency makes sense in the immediate context of the First World War and the Paris Peace Accords, Mirrlees later felt she had gone too far; in 1973, when *Paris* was reprinted in the *Virginia Woolf Quarterly*, a more devout Mirrlees insisted on cutting and rewriting sections which she found fifty years later to be blasphemous. Parmar has appended references to those cuts after Briggs's commentary: they include excisions of lines like "Le petit Jésus fait pipi" and references to the commodification of Holy Communion at the department stores of Paris—which read clearly as critiques of capitalism's infringement on piety, but one imagines Mirrlees thought it better to be safe than heretical. Parmar does not discuss, however, the degree to which Mirrlees's poem influenced T. S. Eliot, who was a close family friend of Mirrlees, and a fellow author at the Hogarth Press.

Parmar was the first scholar to win admittance to the Mirrlees archives at Newnham College, Cambridge, which has allowed her to delve deeply into the coded references to her sexuality which persists across Mirrlees's work. A previously unpublished poem in the archive indicates that Mirrlees and Harrison not only referred to each other as Elder and Younger Wife (which we know from their letters), but that they had a stuffed bear who played the mediating role of husband: "My husband chose her out / To be his concubine / His morganatic wife / And last -- O joy divine / We dwell together free from strife / His younger and his elder wife" (xv). The Bear, Parmar explains, was a sort of totem animal for Harrison, showing up in her *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* (1925) as a symbol of the Athenian rites of womanhood: "No Athenian man would marry a girl unless she had accomplished her *bear-service*, unless she was, in a word, *confirmed* to Artemis" (Harrison's emphasis, qtd. in Parmar xvi). Ursula Major, the Great Bear in the sky, shows up throughout their correspondence and, memorably, at the end of *Paris*.

At the opposite end of Mirrlees's poetic career is *Moods and Tensions* (1976), privately printed in three volumes as early as the mid-1960s. Parmar's notes in the appendix situate the poems within Mirrlees's personal life and integrate explications culled from her papers. These poems,

Parmar admits, “will not necessarily appeal to those who admire *Paris*.” They engage with a heroic form of English literary history, referencing the great stalwarts of an Oxbridge education: highly formal, privileging rhyme, they operate in heroic and Romantic mode with references to Homer, Aeschylus, Wordsworth, and Cowley. But lest the collection be thought to lurch toward self-serious ponderousness, there are two poems on dead pets (“The Death of Cats and Roses” and “A Doggeral Epitaph for My Little Dog Sally”).

In spite of its name, Parmar’s volume contains not only Mirrlees’s poems but her essays as well, some of which were published in *Time & Tide* and *The Nation & Athenaeum*. These essays engage with the concept of the past, the Gothic, and historical novels, and will be of particular interest to scholars interested in *Lud-in-the-Mist* as well as in the question of the modernist attitude toward history. In her essays as well as her poems, Mirrlees shows herself to be a sensitive reader of the texts of Western culture, both high and low, and is keenly aware of the responsibilities of the reader and critic. “Criticism is at best a thankless task,” she notes, “and reading is almost as hard an art as writing” (84). Given that her life was set on its course through her experiences as Harrison’s student, it is unsurprising that Mirrlees continued to be, throughout her life, the most attentive of readers.

Works Cited

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