Paving the Way for Mrs Dalloway

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Paving the Way for Mrs Dalloway: The Street-walking Women of Eliza Lynn Linton, Ella Hepworth Dixon and George Paston

> …When the desire comes upon us to go street rambling the pencil does for a pretext, and getting up we say: "Really I must buy a pencil," as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter – rambling the streets of London.

Space, whether private or public, is undoubtedly a prominent concern in Virginia Woolf's writing. Most closely associated with the metaphysical inner recesses of consciousness or with physical interiors, rooms to call one's own, Woolf also had plenty to say about women's relation to urban space. From Mrs Dalloway's delight in leaving her domestic interior, 'I love walking in London…Really, it's better than walking in the country" to the aptly-titled essay, "Street Haunting: A London Adventure', one senses an exhilaration in Woolf, a liberating impulse which only the streets of the city can satisfy. Clearly throughout the eponymous novel Mrs Dalloway is not the only character who enjoys the metropolis. Peter Walsh, in particular, relishes the opportunities that the streets and parks of London offer, but his is primarily a traditional stance – the male *flaneur* observing and fantasising about the women he sees. Elizabeth Dalloway, perhaps less at ease than her mother, found 'London … so dreary compared with being alone in the country with father and the dogs,', and yet she, too, prefers to 'dally a little longer'. 'It was so nice to be out of doors. She thought perhaps she need not go home just yet. It was so nice to be out in the air. So she would get on to an omnibus … .' A few decades earlier, however, such apparently simple pleasures, aimlessly experiencing the life of the city, would have been rather more limited for women, especially of their class.

In Victorian Britain gender governed space, or so we have been led to believe. At a pinch a woman of a certain class might become 'an angel out of the house', doing good works amongst the poor, but as a rule the private and domestic were considered her domain, leaving the public forum for the male of the species, or for women of a lower class. In this paper I would like to examine some of the conflicting ways in which this simple binary divide, perpetuated not only by the Victorians themselves, but also by some twentieth and twenty-first century critics and historians, a few feminists included, was already being contested, particularly by women writers, forerunners of Virginia Woolf, in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Ideologically, there may indeed have been a desire to maintain clearly defined separate spheres according to gender, thereby keeping women within restricted limits, and unchaperoned women on the streets could well have been assimilated with street-walking women of dubious morals. Nevertheless, the gendering of space is somewhat more complicated than this stereotypical view would suggest, and I would like to draw attention to various divergent representations not only of urban, but also of domestic, space provided by women themselves in their fiction and non-fiction.

It is also important to bear in mind that the conception of social space was, and still is, in itself a contentious issue. Some spaces, such as art galleries, museums, restaurants, shops and theatres, are on the one hand public places and on the other confined interior spaces. At the same time access to them can be somewhat restricted according to gender and class. One has only to think of old-fashioned public houses which generally after the 1880s had both a public and a lounge bar, the former reserved for men, whilst the latter, usually with a separate entrance, had a more refined atmosphere and was designed for mixed company or even for women to drink alone. Likewise

public parks and gardens, as their names indicate, may be officially open to all, but who frequents them and when may vary considerably depending on time of day, season of the year and so on.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century London expanded phenomenally. Department stores such as John Lewis (1864), Liberty's (1876), D. H. Evans (1879) opened, as did cafes and teashops such as ABC Teashops and Lyons Corner Houses, theatres and clubs flourished, whilst public transport – buses and the underground – facilitated faster, easier transit for the capital's inhabitants and its visitors. At the same time there was also much concern about the whole notion of what constituted the public domain. In 'Pictures for the Magazines' in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* Michael Wolff and Celina Fox observe a close link between the growth of the city and the expansion of the periodical press. Elizabeth Wilson likewise in 'The Invisible Flâneur', for example, draws attention to the remarkable changes taking place in the literary world. As she says, 'Urban industrial life generated a demand for new forms of writing – the feuilleton, the magazine article. It gave birth to a new kind of literature of the myriad sights, sounds and spectacles to be found on every corner, in every cranny of urban life.' There was indeed a phenomenal increase in the number of journals of various sorts and an overall tendency to assume authorship of articles, stories, reviews. By signing their periodical contributions in their own names, rather than using pen-names, or simply resorting to anonymity as had been the case in the past, many writers were thus going public This was exactly the sort of journalism, 'new journalism' to use Matthew Arnold's disparaging phrase, embodied by the likes of W.T. Stead, which offered many opportunities to aspiring women writers.

Not surprisingly, therefore, especially in the *fin de siècle* period some women writers, particularly those also dubbed with the derogatory adjective 'New', otherwise often accused of being too inward-looking, were visibly entering the public arena, encroaching upon urban space, and appropriating for themselves areas traditionally considered the preserve of men. They were thus literally stepping outside the limits of conventional behaviour. I would argue, however, that even earlier some literary discourses contrasted glaringly with the apparently fixed ideologies of gender-specific spaces.

In the 1860s already there had been much discussion about women's use of the streets. One polemic in particular was sparked off by a letter to *The Times* on January 7, 1862, from a certain '*Paterfamilias* from the Provinces', complaining that a female relative and female friend had been seriously incommoded on a visit to London. There ensued a seemingly endless public debate culminating in July in a long article in *Temple Bar* entitled 'Out Walking' signed simply with the intials 'E.L.L.'. This was in fact Eliza Lynn Linton (1822-1898), probably most familiar to present-day readers as the coiner of the phrase 'Girl of the Period', an epithet she applied to the deviant, deviant in her eyes, young woman, a precursor of the New Woman, who through her questioning of the womanly ideal, demanding, for example, easier access to higher education and meaningful employment, was obviously seen as a threat to the established order and severely castigated for it. Eliza Lynn Linton was not, therefore, renowned for her liberal views and her comments are hence all the more revelatory.

She begins logically enough by asking, 'Is it a fact that modest women are continually being spoken to if they walk alone? And that even two well-bred, well-dressed, and well-conducted girls together are not safe, however quiet their demeanour and unalluring their attire?' Somewhat surprisingly, she continues

> What becomes of all the modest single women of the middle ranks, who, if they walk at all, are obliged to walk *alone*, yet who never dream that they are thereby reduced to the standard of social evils? What becomes of the daily teachers, art-students, 'assistants' of every kind, readers at the British Museum, and

> the many other instances of unprotected womanhood *abounding*? (my italics)

This suggests that, contrary to popular belief, as early as the 1860s there were plenty of respectable, unchaperoned women on the streets. Eliza Lynn Linton then offers advice to such women on how to avoid becoming 'the object of attentions not altogether to (their) mind', and provides to all intents and purposes a practical guide, another sort of conduct manual, for women on how to behave in the street. Nowhere, however, does she suggest that they should stay at home.

Moreover in spite of castigating young women for indulging in curiosity when out walking in London, elsewhere in personal writings and in her fiction Eliza Lynn Linton appears to foreshadow Virginia Woolf's exhilarating relationship to the city.. For example in *Christopher Kirkland*, describing the excitement of receiving a favourable review in *The Times* she writes, 'I remember the sunset as I went up Oxford Street, to what was not yet Marble Arch. For I could not rest in the house. I could not go home to dinner. I felt compelled to walk as if for ever,' and elswhere she claimed, 'London is my Home, and there are all my best friends, my work, my Ambition, my surrounding.'

With the growth of a more consumer-oriented society, the metropolis increasingly offered people of different classes and genders the opportunity to come into contact. In *The Story of a Modern Woman* Ella Hepworth Dixon describes a typical morning in London thus:

> Sunshine brightened the huge gilt letters over the newspaper offices; the crowded, brightly coloured omnibuses, the hansoms laden with portmanteaux on their way to Waterloo Station, the flaxen hair and beflowered hats of the little actresses hurrying along to rehearsal. An ever-moving procession of people poured like a torrent up and down the street; journalists, country folk, office boys, actors, betting men, loafers – all the curious shifting world of the Strand was jogging elbows on the pavement.

At one point in the story when the upper middle-class female protagonist, 'the angel out of the house', undertakes to visit Kentish Town, a socially-acceptable reason to leave the home, she announces, 'I'm going on top of one of those charming trams. I told Worth when I was in Paris that I always went on the tops of omnibuses, and he designed me this little frock on purpose.'

Critics such as Walter Benjamin have noted that as the century drew to a close urban space in cities like Paris or London became prime sites for spectacle, where the *flâneur*, gendered male, apparently ruled supreme. More recently some feminist critics such as Elizabeth Wilson and Sally Ledger have challenged this notion of the masculine *flaneur* suggesting that to different ends women also strolled through the streets in search of sensation: shopping, window-shopping, going to parks, tea-rooms, and so on. It is clearly important to ask not only who occupied the streets, but also which ones, when and why? For example, Regent Street, an elegant shopping area during the day, became the empire of prostitutes in the evening.

Women of differing classes, therefore, were generally participating more openly in the life of the city. Not all, however, were pleasure-seeking. On the contrary, I would argue that some women such as Ella Hepworth Dixon (1857-1932) in their lives and in their writing were seriously engaged in advocating greater overall independence for their sex and were actively challenging the distribution of power, thereby contributing to far-reaching changes in the real and in the literary world.

By the example of her own professional life and through her fiction Ella Hepworth Dixon demonstrated that it was possible for a woman 'to make her way in the world and compete with men'. Her journalistic career may have begun, as does that of one of her protagonists in *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), by writing a few 'interviews at home' of some personal friends, but very quickly she preferred a less restrictive type of journalism. For example, she contributed

several travel articles to various periodicals, including such unlikely topics as a visit to a leper colony in Norway. Likewise her heroines often preferred the streets of London to the cosy interiors so fraught with unexpected dangers.

In *The Story of a Modern Woman* Mary Erle, arguably the 'modern woman' of the title, deliberately rejects the options traditonally offered to unmarried, fatherless young women of her class – becoming a companion to a High-Church spinster aunt in Bournemouth or marrying a wealthy man she does not love. Like Jane Eyre, she also refuses to become the kept mistress abroad of the man she once loved. At one point her wealthier friend, Alison Ives, comments 'in her world, one had to marry some day or other', adding 'the later the better'. She claims, 'One couldn't permit one's self the *luxury* of being an old maid, unless one had an income of over five thousand pounds a year' (my italics). Marriage, however, is rarely presented as an enviable or preferable state. When, for example, Mary Erle's fiancé proposes, 'his hands, which held her two wrists … felt like links of iron', and she 'tasted for the first time, in all its intensity, the helplessness of woman, the inborn feeling of subjection to a stronger will'.

As it turns out neither woman marries, but they both lead busy lives outside the domestic sphere. Alison remains the angel out of the house and 'devote(s) herself to the task of helping young girls', but avoids drawing attention to it: 'I couldn't bear any one to say that I had "taken up slumming". You know how I detest the whole attitude of the upper and middle classes toward the poor.' 'It would look like a pose,' she adds. Mary Erle, on the other hand, financially much less secure than her friend, ultimately chooses 'to walk alone, to fight the battle of life unaided'. In order to keep herself and her younger brother, she finds various writing jobs. Like her creator, she actually begins by attempting to make a career in art, but quickly abandons her paint brush for a pen. The inherent difficulties facing women artists during the Victorian period have been amply discussed elsewhere in recent years by eminent critics such as Deborah Cherry and Pamela Gerrish Nunn. Suffice to say at this point that it was simply easier and more acceptable for a woman to earn a living wage through writing. Nevertheless, Ella Hepworth Dixon rarely lost an occasion in her fiction and non-fiction to comment, usually ironically, on her contemporary Art world.

From the mid-Victorian period onwards, there had in fact been increasing concern about the growing numbers of women seeking employment and the inadequate possibilities available. In the late 1850s the Langham Place Circle became particularly active in drawing attention to the plight of such women, and over the next few decade numerous publications and articles in the periodical press contributed to the discussion. It should be remarked that most, if not all, of the activities proposed could still be carried out within the confines of the home and remain hobbies rather than jobs. This fundamental distinction between mere pastime and paid employment was a subject to which Ella Hepworth Dixon often returned, as in the *Lady's Pictorial* when she comments on the 'amazing revolution' of Woman demanding 'to be paid proper wages for work performed ...'. Nor was she alone in raising further questions about equal pay for equal work. John Strange Winter in *Winter's Weekly* regularly advocated that a woman should 'by all means do all the work she can get to do, but let her insist on being paid at the same rate as a man would receive'.

Journalism, significantly, was rarely included in such surveys of possible employments for women, or merited separate treatment altogether. In February 1890 writing on 'Journalism for Women' in *Woman*, Mabel Collins cites the example of a naval officer 'of the old school of thought and feeling' who, having fallen in love with a lady journalist, asks her to give up her newspaper work. 'I can understand a lady taking up her pen when she has *some fancy* she wants to express *prettily* - but *newspaper* work!' (my italics) A similar opinion is echoed by Mary Erle in *The Story of a Modern Woman* when she declares, 'Aunt Julia ... thinks I am given over to the Evil One since I've become a journalist.' It should be mentioned that even for men the world of journals was

regularly looked down upon. In J.M.Barrie's *When a Man's Single*, a short exchange between the hero's beloved and her mother is revelatory:

> '... he is evidently to be a newspaper man all his life.'
> 'I wish you would say journalist, mamma, ... or a literary man. The profession of letters is a noble one.'
> 'Perhaps it is, ... but I can't think it is very respectable.'

Even when it was accepted that women could write for the press, there was often a desire to maintain a gender divide within the world of journals. An earlier unsigned article in *Woman* had indicated as much.

> There can be no doubt as to the increasing opportunities which journalism as a profession offers to a bright, clever woman, but I am not among those who are disposed to believe that the newspaper of the future is to be altogether the work of the ladies, and I may perhaps be permitted to point out where, according to my experience, *their true sphere* in journalism lies, and how they may best fit themselves for it. (my italics)

The writer overtly maintains, 'A woman's sphere in journalism generally lies far away from the office or composing-room ... '. This article also prefigures many of the issues raised in *Journalism for Women*, a Guide published in 1898 by Arnold Bennett, one time editor of *Woman*. The very title of Bennett's guide surely suggests that society's prescribed gender-based distinctions were to be upheld within the press world as well. As late as 1925, the year *Mrs Dalloway* was published, Ella Hepworth Dixon comments on the situation with a telling choice of metaphors.

> These modern days are certainly the opportunity of the Women. For the first time they can, and do, compete with men ... . One of the last citadels to fall was the newspaper office. Here prejudice reigned supreme ... . Today the Bastille of Journalism has fallen.

For my present purposes, it is interesting to note that Ella Hepworth Dixon's fictional budding journalist is rather more at ease in the streets than she is indoors, whether in newspaper offices, her new lodgings or even 'kettledrums' amongst the wealthy. Some critics, including Steve Farmer in his Introduction to the new 2005 edition of *The Story of a Modern Woman*, have commented on the overall claustrophobic atmosphere of the novel. Whilst I would agree that this is indeed 'clearly symbolic of the plight of the nineteenth-century Englishwoman … cornered by the cant of tradition', I would suggest that urban space offered some relief from the constraints of domestic domains and semi-restricted public interiors. As Mary Erle traipses alone through the city in the course of her work visiting editors, going to interviews and so on, neither a street-walker nor a *flaneuse*, she is both observed and observer. In no way does she idealize the city. Accutely aware of a multiplicity of images and possibilities that urban space offers, she negotiates her way around public places, and notes, for example, the prostitutes outside Charing Cross station, the sordid little eating-houses and the 'battered leavings of the vice of a great city', as well as chic districts like Portman Square, Regent's Park and South Kensington. More importantly, and perhaps contrary to what one might expect, even as a fairly young woman she feels less threatened under the gaze of the men in the streets, than she does under that of the men of her own class in so-called safe surroundings:

> With her chin in the air, looking straight before her, she stepped along, in the half-dark, with a royal scorn for the well-dressed loafers who find their pleasure in accosting ladies in the street. She was twenty-two, and a young woman now; it behooved her to be able to take care of herself. And, after all, they were perhaps more easily disposed of than some of the men who took her in to dinner, men who had

> tired eyes and a dubious smile, and who were fond of starting doubtful topics with a side-long, tentative glance.

Moreover, both female protagonists in the novel experience moments of crisis, moments when they learn the truth about their respective suitors, not in the privacy of their respective homes but in public places which are nonetheless enclosed spaces, one in a fashionable theatre, the other in a hospital for the poor, thus obliging them to exert admirable self-control, as their public image has to hide their personal sufferings. Throughout her long writing career Ella Hepworth Dixon frequently commented on women's obligation to keep up appearances behind 'an acquiescent smile'. For example in 1898 in the *Lady's Pictorial* she writes

> Not the least tiresome of the conventions of Society is the one which ordains that we should always be smiling when we appear in public. It is a rule, to be sure, which is applied with special rigour to feminine persons ... . A woman, however tired or worried or preoccupied she may be, is expected to be for ever 'wreathed in smiles'.

'Public' here must surely mean not the general crowd, but the restricted company of select society, as in the last meeting between Alison Ives and Dr Strange which takes place at one of her mother's famous dinner parties. As Alison awaits his arrival with dread, she too contemplates the 'foolish, fixed smiles of the women'. In contrast, Alison greets the doctor with a 'hard look on her face' and 'a royal scorn in her glance', making her also perhaps a modern woman, defying the contraints of social propriety within the domestic sphere.

Towards the end of the novel after various trials and tribulations Alison, the supposedly traditional woman, the angel, whether in or out of the house, dies from a disease caught during the course of her charity work in slum areas, whilst Mary, the modern woman, survives. Much has been written about the final scene, and even Ella Hepworth Dixon offered revised versions for different editions of her novel, revealing perhaps some difficulty in attaining the exact mood she wished to imprint on a reader's imagination. I would suggest that part of the problem arises from a resistance to end the novel with marriage or death, as custom would have it. This rejection of the simple binary options and the open-endedness of New Woman fiction might thereby indicate further opportunities elsewhere and was surely a deliberate attempt on the part of some writers to challenge the fixed codes society imposed on women in life and in literature, a theme to which Virginia Woolf would turn her attention a few decades later to greater effect.

In the last scene Mary Erle returns to Highgate cemetery to the site of her father's grave where she had earlier stood with her brother. On that occasion

> Out yonder, at their feet, the dun-colour of the buildings lost in the murkiness of the horizon line, London was spread out. Here and there a dome, a spire loomed out of the dim bluish-grey panorama. A warm haze hung over the great city; here and there a faint fringe of tree-tops told of a placid park; now and again the shrill whistle of an engine, blown northward by the wind, spoke of the bustle of journeys, of the turmoil of railway-stations, of partings, of arrivals, of the change and travail of human life, of the strangers who come, of the failures who must go.
>
> 'Jim,' said the girl suddenly, taking the boy by the arm, 'There's London! We're going to make it listen to us, you and I. We're not going to be afraid of it - just because it's big, and brutal and strong.'

Now as she once again surveys London, this time unaccompanied, ostensibly much more alone, with both her brother and her lover married and her best friend dead, 'she made a feint as if to grasp the city spread before her, but the movement ended in a vain gesture, and the radiance of her face was blotted out as she began to plod homeward in the twilight of the suburban road'. This may be

interpreted as ‘gloomy’ to use Ella Hepworth Dixon’s own phrase, but Mary Erle ultimately turns her back on the grave-yard, not on the city, and I would argue the emphasis is consequently on the triumph of life over death. In *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*, particularly in the section dealing with Woolf’s *Night and* Day, Deborah Parsons draws attention to the city as both exhilarating and isolating, and comments on the number of women who choose to remain alone, with the city as a sort of surrogate lover. Mary Erle’s preference for the city, disregarding the suburbs, could also be read in this light

At the same time Ella Hepworth Dixon would seem to be drawing on the well-read reader's familiarity with earlier works. T.P. O’Connor in his contemporary review of the novel notes the resemblance, for example, between this scene and

> That awful passage at the close of *Père Goriot* in which Lucien de Rubempré looks down from Père la Chaise on Paris. … Doubtless, too, the resemblance is intentional, for the two passages mark the everlasting difference between man and woman. Lucien de Rubempré shakes his clenched hand in fierce and brave defiance; but the woman’s hand ‘ended in a vain gesture’. Defiance and conflict and victory are the hopes, and often the portion of the man; but tranquil endurance and blind obedience is the highest to which woman can reach.

I would argue, however, that Mary Erle also has her portion of ‘defiance and conflict and victory’ and hopes. The last scene may take place in a cemetery, but ultimately the heroine turns her back on the grave-yard, not on the city, surely emphasizing the triumph of life over death. There may be disillusion, but there is little lamentation and even less of a sense of defeat. Mary Erle may not have achieved all she set out to do, but she is no Ruth, ‘sick for home’. She has survived and can ‘plod homewards’. The final note, therefore, however tenuous, remains positive.

It is also possible to see similarities with the opening of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, ‘from yon City's walls set free, ... The earth is all before me’, itself a reflection of the end of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, ‘The world was all before them’. If, unlike Adam and Eve, ‘hand in hand’, Mary Erle was to stand alone, unlike Wordsworth she has no desire to flee the city. Moreover, as she proceeds homewards towards the metropolis she describes it not in typically hostile Victorian terms, but as ‘majestic, awe-inspiring, inexorable, triumphant London’. In so doing she surely has some of the makings of a Paul Morel or a Mrs. Dalloway, and Ella Hepworth Dixon, I would maintain, had added a paving stone to the road towards Modernism.

I would also suggest that *The Story of a Modern Woman* led to a spate of fictions, novels and serials, based on the experiences of lady journalists. In June 1894 the *Sunday Times* reviewer of *The Story of a Modern Woman* commented, ‘So far as we know the career of the heroine is new to fiction’, but two years later in July 1896 in her overview of ‘Leading Lady Journalists’, which somewhat surprisingly makes no mention of Ella Hepworth Dixon, M.F. Billington declared, ‘Fiction has made heroines of us, and the “lady journalist” has figured in more than one recent play or burlesque.’

In fact, even earlier in 1888 Eliza Lynn Linton herself had already included a subplot about a newspaper woman in her novel *Sowing the Wind*. After the death of her father, Jane Osborn finds herself, rather like Mary Erle later, having to work to cater for her own needs and those of her family, and elects to write rather than become a governess. Although the story touches on various issues concerning women’s quest for both respect and equality with men in work, it remains in many ways a curiously unflattering portrait. Jane Osborn claims to be proud of being able to do the work of a man among men, and does her work ‘manfully’, but at the same time describes herself as ‘ungainly’ and as an ‘unlovely boy-woman’. Her editor even calls her ‘Mr. Jane’ and ‘old Johnny Osborn’, suggesting that only unwomanly women could thus succeed in a man’s world.

Fortunately, rather more flattering images were propagated in the 1890s. After *The Story of a Modern Woman*, the most notable series about lady writers were Cottrel Hoe's 'Jennie Baxter, Journalist' which appeared in the *The Windsor Magazine* from December 1897 to November 1898, and was later published in book form and signed by the author's own name, Robert Barr, and Annie S. Swan's 'Journal of a Literary Woman in London' in *Woman at Home* from April 1901 to September 1902. As the title suggests, this consists of a series of stories told by Miriam Carter, and includes several descriptions of literary women. Here, too, however, a woman author is not as generous to her sex as one might expect. For example Kitty Ford, a 'journalist for the latest ladies' paper', is described as an 'odd little figure in a very limp and soiled white nun's veiling frock peering through her shabby lorgnette at the smart guests'. Jennie Baxter, on the other hand, perhaps due to the male gaze of her creator, is 'always most beautifully attired, and her whole affect was so charming that men have been known to turn in the streets and say "By Jove!"'. She also has a strong sense of her profession, but is tired of relying on a 'fitful income', and, as the story unfolds, reveals admirable enterprise. She rarely walks the streets of London, however, and usually "stepped lightly into a hansom cab".

More interesting for my present purposes is George Paston's full-length novel, *A Writer of Books*, which appeared in 1899. Four years earlier she had published a short story entitled 'A Lady Journalist' in which the lady journalist of the title, Evelyn Lambert, is in fact rather dubious, since she persuades her fiancé to write for her and passes his work off as her own, ultimately doing him out of a job until she marries the editor and persuades him to reinstate her former lover. Interestingly, however, it is her editor who engages in the more stereotypical traditional behaviour of women – window-shopping and thinking about his appearance: "He was seen by a member of his staff standing in front of a hairdresser's window, gazing wistfully at the bottles of hair-restorer therein displayed …".

In *A Writer of Books* the female protagonist, Cosima Chudleigh, is a more complex character altogether, and bears many resemblances to Mary Erle as she experiences the city, including, of course, Grub Street. More of a sensation-seeker than Ella Hepworth Dixon's woman writer, Cosima is nevertheless by no means a mere *flaneuse*; she deliberately explores urban space in search of material for her fiction.

> Often, as she passed through the crowded streets, she felt tempted to slip between two lovers and listen to their whispered words, to follow the tired-looking shop girls and chattering factory hands as they hurried home from their work, to eavesdrop at the doors of sinister-looking houses in narrow back streets, or to strike up an acquaintance with the sandwich.men and flowers-sellers who lined the Strand.

Interestingly, Rachel Bowlby in *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis* comments on the close links between walking the city and writing for women such as Virginia Woolf. In *A Writer of Books*, the woman writer is seen rather as a reader of the city: "Every day….she explored the sights of London, but still she felt impatiently that the great city lay like a clasped book before her, a book every page of which she wished to turn, while as yet she could only gaze upon the cover.

Unlike Mary Erle, Cosima had grown up in the provinces, but she demonstrates none of the typical provincial anxiety about the metropolis. On her first day she immediately sets about her self-assigned task with gusto.

> Once more she glanced at the well-studied map of London. Yes, she felt sure she could find her way unaided to her destination….
>
> Across Holborn she directed her course, and presently through a narrow alley emerged upon the

> wide-stretching fields of Lincoln's Inn. Resisting the temptation to stop and examine the picturesquely gloomy buildings that lined her route, she pressed forward till at length she stood at the junction of the Strand with the highway of letters, and saw the long wings of the griffin which, like the dragon in a fairy tale, seemed to be guarding the approach to the gold-paved streets of the city. With beating heart and dilated eyes, she took her first walk down Fleet Street, stopping from time to time to gaze upon the temples dedicated to the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Chronicle*, or *Punch*. Ludgate Circus had but little interest for her beyond the fact that from thence she obtained her first view of St Paul's … .

Cosima displays a positive enjoyment of the freedom of the city and partakes of its various pleasures, even more trepidatious than Elizabeth Dalloway twenty-five years later.

She (Elizabeth Dalloway) looked up Fleet Street. She walked just a little way towards St Paul's, shyly, like someone penetrating on tiptoe, exloring a strange house with a candle, on edge lest the owner should suddenly fling wide his bedroom door and ask her business, nor did she dare wander off into queer alleys, tempting by-streets, any more than in a strange house open doors which might be bedroom doors, or sitting-room doors, or lead straight to the larder. For no Dalloway came down the Strand daily; she was a pioneer, a stray, venturing, trusting." (152) ….She penetrated a little farther in the direction of St Paul's. She liked the geniality, sisterhood, motherhood, brotherhood of this uproar. It seemed to her good.

Again, as in the case of Mary Erle, for Cosima the streets of London are more enticing than her boarding-house, and regularly she 'would wander out and indulge herself with a cheap seat at a concert or theatre'. Her enthusiasm and desire to experience everything the city has to offer sometimes lead her into a few awkward situations, reminiscent of the above-mentioned 1860's *Times'* debate.

> It was on the occasion of one of these outings … that she met with her first adventure worthy of the name.
>
> When the concert was over she passed slowly out into Regent Street … . She had not proceeded more than a few paces, however, when she became aware that a young man was walking alongside her, and glancing with a sort of furtive eagerness into her face. She quickened her pace a little, and he quickened his; she slackened, and he fell back on a level with her. It was not the first time that she had thus been 'shadowed' by tentative admirers; but hitherto, thanks perhaps to her *studiously unconscious air*, not one of them had summoned up courage to speak to her. (my italics)

She would appear to have followed Eliza Lynn Linton's advice in 'Out Walking', and acquired 'that enviable street–talent, and pass men without looking at them, yet all the while seeing them'. None-the-less, she still comments on the 'oddity of such a situation (which) had always impressed her':

> The man hovering at the woman's elbow, the woman conscious of his proximity in every nerve, yet maintaining an expression set and impassive as that of a waxen mask. And both of them human beings, who would be free to enjoy each other's society and conversation were but a few unintelligible words muttered by a common acquaintance. After all, it was only conventionality that forbade a respectable woman to enter into conversation with a stranger in the street, since in a railway carriage or on board ship the proceeding would not be regarded as a social crime.

As it happens, 'her literary curiosity' gets the better of her and she does strike up a conversation with the young man, which in turn leads to her making the acquaintance of Bess Heywood, a would-be actress, working as a barmaid who is a far more knowledgeable woman of the world.

Like Mary Erle, Cosima runs greater risks from so-called respectable quarters. Mr Carlton, a fellow lodger, whom she considers a 'harmless, elderly coquette', first invites her to his room for

tea, slightly compromising in itself, and afterwards offers to take her, chaperoned, to a restaurant and then the theatre. Here, not only is the chaperon useless, and the performance not up to Cosima's expectations, but the behaviour of her escort is even worse.

> Half an hour of almost intolerable boredom had well-nigh reduced her to tears, when her attention was distracted from the imbecilities on the stage to the peculiar behaviour of her host. Mr Carlton's arm was stretched along the back of her seat, and he was leaning towards her, his eyes gazing with maudlin tenderness into hers, his wine-scented breath almost scorching her cheek. As she turned away her head, she felt a hand close tightly over hers. An immense disgust seized her, an overpowering repulsion. She snatched away her fingers, and sitting forward, tried to forget her discomfort in an endeavour to catch the words of a thrice-encored patter-song.

On the way home in the cab, a restricted yet still public space, he again importunes her.

Sometimes, however, public places offered greater security, for example from her over-zealous fiancé.

> She could no longer blind herself to the fact that in his capacity of lover, Tom was growing day by day less timid, less submissive, in a word, less bearable. He now assumed the privileges of affianced husband with a confidence that silenced while it appalled her. She had no right to shrink from his caresses, and her one consolation lay in the fact that it was easy to avoid opportunities of being alone with him. Their meeting-places were of necessity restaurants, theatres, and railway carriages, and Cosima grew to love the great open-eyed, open-eared public that acted as a continual check upon the terrible demonstrativeness of her lover.

Also, like Mary Erle, and before Virginia Woolfs more advanced women, in moments of crisis she found relief in taking to the streets on her own even at night to escape the claustrophic atmosphere indoors. Similarly, at the end of the novel, she finds herself alone. This time, however, the female writer goes even further than Ella Hepworth Dixon's protagonist – she has left her unfaithful husband and offered herself to a much older man whom she has grown to love and who persuades her against acting rashly. She then accepts that there is more to life than love and marriage. 'Her old-fashioned prototype' gave way to a modern woman for whom 'all was not lost, … life was not over', and she sets about writing '*the* book, the flawless masterpiece that every author is always going to write' (her italics).

Like Mary Erle she finds solace in activity, and one is reminded here of the plight of the nameless narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) who is driven mad by confinement and enforced inactivity. Some spaces such as the home, ostensibly safe havens for women, could prove to be even more dangerous than public places. As we all know, domestic violence is not uncommon, nor is it limited to a particular class. Earlier novelists, both male and female such as Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White* (1860) had raised the question of the dangers of domestic interiors, but I would argue writers such as Ella Hepworth Dixon and George Paston went a step further, and showed that a life outside the home was not only possible, but also at times preferable. By the end of the century, to return to Cosima Chudleigh's figurative language, not only did such women writers start to turn the pages of 'the great city (that) lay like a clasped book', they even began to add some pages of their own. It would take another generation to argue for a room of their own, and furthermore to 'become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreable after the solitude of one's own room'.

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