



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 28 | Spring 2019

Title	Book Review: Andrew Thacker, <i>Modernism, Space, and the City: Outsiders and Affect in Paris, Vienna, Berlin and London</i> . Edinburgh University Press, 2019. 249 pp.
Author	Sara Krolewski
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	28
Issue Date	Spring 2019
Publication Date	28/06/2019
Editors	Dominic Richard

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

**Book Review: Andrew Thacker, *Modernism, Space, and the City: Outsiders and Affect in Paris, Vienna, Berlin and London*.
Edinburgh University Press, 2019. 249 pp.**

Sara Krolewski
University of Edinburgh

The ‘modern spirit,’ wrote the Scottish poet Edwin Muir in *We Moderns* (1920), is ‘a principle of Life itself.’ Certainly this is an attitude shared by champions of modernist studies, for whom literary modernism embodies the plurality of life’s experiences. It is a movement bound up in feeling and affect, in culture and character, and in odysseys and the desires that fuel them—in short, in life’s possibilities and infinite dimensions. Crucially, it is cosmopolitan settings that most often inspire the modernist narratives in which these categories are tested and explored. Andrew Thacker’s recent monograph, *Modernism, Space, and the City*, follows on the heel of recent criticism (including his own 2003 work, *Moving Through Modernity*) that takes a spatialised approach to modernist literature, examining the city as a site of attraction for the modernist writer. ‘All great art is born of the metropolis (or *in* the metropolis),’ Ezra Pound wrote to Harriet Monroe in 1913, and the modernists Thacker assembles in this study of place, space, and modernity would tend to agree. For Thacker, as for other scholars of the city, the city is a setting that by its very vibrancy necessitates depiction in prose and verse, yet it is also a profoundly complicated, elusive subject: one that makes affective demands on urban-dwellers, including the modernist writer.

Thacker takes seriously one of the major criticisms levelled against literary modernism in recent years—that this was a movement (or, for Muir, as for other modernists, a way of life) that made systematic exclusions on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, and social position. This sprawling yet richly-drawn monograph thus considers the spatial fabric of Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and London through the perspective of the ‘outsider’: the expatriate, exile, social outcast, or, importantly, the colonised subject. For literary modernism often constructed walls to keep out those without the cultural connections or backgrounds touted by High Modernists. One need only think of the Bloomsbury Group’s high-class credentials, for example, or the educational qualifications of writers like Malcolm Cowley, who describes his experiences at Harvard in his memoir of the modernist expatriate movement, *Exile’s*

Return, as an initiation into intellectual culture. To unsettle the monolithic perception of literary modernism as essentially elitist, Thacker examines writers on the fringes of the movement such as the poet Hope Mirrlees, whose poetry of Paris reclaims the French avant-garde tradition for female artistry, alongside more established modernists: T. S. Eliot, Apollinaire, Ezra Pound.

Yet he also registers those writers like Claude McKay and Mulk Raj Anand, who, though now widely considered part of the modernist canon, were confronted by walls in the modernist cities (Paris, London) they traversed. For both McKay and Anand, the modernist city was not a utopia—a space for the free, inspired exchange of ideas and creative production, energised by the ‘flow of ideas and individuals from abroad,’ as Thacker writes in his chapter on London—but a strictly-guarded fortress representing imperialism and Western hegemony. For McKay, the relatively positive treatment of black Americans in Paris did not overshadow the French empire’s brutality towards its own colonised peoples. For Anand, traveling to London from India to meet with literary Bloomsbury, the imperial metropolis, in which he encountered prejudice from Western intellectuals, including Eliot, as a space that elicited intense unease.

Surging forwards through the twentieth century, Thacker briefly outlines the ways in which totalitarianism and communism created more walls, and thus more divisions, in the modernist city. In Berlin, for example, these walls were both figurative and physical. Though Thacker’s is not a study of the twentieth-century city in its totality, it is cognisant of the historical forces that shaped these cities as they developed at the turn of the century and fragmented over the course of two World Wars. As a result, this monograph is a perceptive work of historical and cultural analysis, buttressed by clear, compelling readings of modernist poetry, fiction, memoir, and even art and architecture (including the design of the London Underground, which Thacker astutely describes as the ‘social unconscious of the city,’ ‘the site [...] of many of our deepest fears and anxieties about urban life’). *Modernism, Space, and the City* takes into account the diverse ways in which art and urbanity interact. However, instead of focusing on the city as many of the modernist avant-gardes saw it, as a space enabling artistic epiphany and euphoria untethered to the forces of urban capitalist production, Thacker gestures to the other side: to ‘outsider’ artists for whom the city was profoundly terrifying, even gruesome, and to the cultural institutions (book stores, publishing houses) in which modernism circulated and that maintained an ambivalent

relationship to urban capitalism—profiting from its structures even as they attempted to distance themselves from the market.

Thacker acknowledges that ‘discussing expatriates in cities such as Paris or London is not exactly novel,’ yet by opening up a new field of study—which he terms the ‘geographical emotions of modernism,’ drawing from a phrase used by the novelist Bryher in her writings on Berlin —Thacker introduces this well-known term of modernism, the ‘outsider,’ to new avenues of investigation. No one city produces a uniform affective response in the writers (and characters) who inhabit it. Bryher, Thacker posits, found Berlin liberating, exciting, and vital, attracted powerfully to its ‘restless spaces,’ while Christopher Isherwood, writing at the beginning of the Nazi era, experienced both joy in the city’s numerous queer spaces and horror when these spaces vanished, replaced by institutions of terror and torture. In this way, the city becomes a conduit for a host of affective responses, both positive and negative. Thacker evokes modernism as a ‘movement,’ not just in the artistic sense, but also in the context of motion and space: modernist writers and characters move through different affects as they move through the city, absorbing and releasing these emotions as they encounter different urban stimuli. I think Thacker is right to only occasionally conjure the famous figure of the drifting, aloof *flâneur*, since the figures on which he focuses are hardly detached. These are individuals who experience profound feeling in, and because of, the city.

Among Thacker’s most compelling strands of argument is his account of ‘outsiders’ who defy walls within the city to become ‘insiders’ such as Joseph Conrad, whose novel *The Secret Agent* (1907) portrays London as a space in which foreigners become ‘assimilated’ to the very uncanny, foreign quality of the city they have encountered. New and fascinating stories, Thacker argues, can be produced from the feeling of ‘unplacement’ ‘outsiders’ experience in the metropolis, unmoored from familiar experiences and disorientated by new landmarks. As a result, Thacker articulates a vision of modernism in which the ‘outside’ is an advantageous position for remaking the ‘inside’: reconstructing the modernist city and even the narrative fabric of literary modernism itself.

As Thacker rightly indicates in his conclusion, ‘geographical emotions’ can be excavated in many post-modernist and post-colonial texts, and would thus prove a useful framework for in-depth studies of contemporary literature of the city. How

would a Zadie Smith character, for example, encounter the London Underground differently from a modernist ‘outsider,’ and how might the growing presence of digitality (screens, mobile phones, and the like) produce an affective response in the figure of the contemporary city-dweller? These are important, relevant questions, and ones for which Thacker offers an original analytical structure. As our twenty-first century cities become more diverse and multifarious, uniting individuals of different cultures and practices, theoretical work like Thacker’s proves all the more valuable. We need models for reading both cities and the individuals who populate them. In approaching the city as a space of fluidity and plenitude—in affect, identity, and experience—we can work to fracture the walls that separate us from our urban kith and kin, reading across boundaries to examine many urban perspectives.

Author Biography

Sara Krolewski is a M.Sc. candidate at the University of Edinburgh, where she studies Literature and Modernity, supported by the Witherspoon Scholarship. She graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton University with an A. B. in English (Highest Honours) and a certificate in French Language and Culture. At Princeton, she received the Class of 1859 Prize for highest achievement in the English concentration. Her M.Sc. dissertation focuses on queer modernism and the recently rediscovered short fiction of Robert McAlmon.