

## Parsons on Reznicek (2017)

Reznicek, Matthew L. *The European Metropolis: Paris and Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Novelists*. Clemson UP and Liverpool UP, 2017, pp. 224, ISBN 978-1-942954-32-3

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It was in Paris that W. B. Yeats told (or claims to have told) dramatist John Millington Synge to learn Gaelic on the west coast of Ireland. It was also in Paris that a young Samuel Beckett met James Joyce. Irish writers of the early twentieth century had a habit, it seems, of having fateful, life-altering meetings in Paris. And it is no wonder, given the city's capacity to allow the young Irish traveler to find himself: the protagonist of Kate O'Brien's 1931 novel *Without My Cloak* finds in Paris "his own ghost, his own projection of himself, his own future, his own unchained, unchallenged, unclaimed personality" (Reznicek 182). If ever there were a city that defined the *Bildung* of the young Irish artist, it is Paris at the turn of the last century. Or so, at least, the story goes. But what happens if we turn our attention from the early twentieth century to the nineteenth, and from the young man to young women? *The European Metropolis* does exactly this, drawing our attention to a long and complex imbrication of Paris and Irish writing from the early nineteenth century onwards, and in the process fleshing out the ill-defined outlines of a tradition of the Irish female *Bildungsroman*.

This study is heavily influenced by the sociological work of Georg Simmel and Franco Moretti, with its attention to the sights, sounds, geography, emotions, and economies of the nineteenth-century continental European city. At the same time, *The European Metropolis* makes an original and thought-provoking claim for the importance of Irish women's writing in the literary imagination of Paris, arguing throughout that the *Bildung* of the characters in the novels under scrutiny is always marked by a struggle with the city and with the conditions of capital. It is a struggle that they almost invariably lose. Novelists' and characters' Parisian encounters—whether with the city itself or with its denizens—reveal the "persistent ambivalence" (3) of interactions with both Paris and capitalism, as the protagonists of the novels stall, fail, refuse, repent, or otherwise question narratives of progress into which they have been thrust. These novels all attest to the "ongoing inequality of the modern metropolitan experience" (143), and draw attention to the impossible predicament in which women find themselves when confronted with the inescapable Parisian realities of capital and modernity.

The time span of the study is ambitious—its four full-length chapters feature discussions of *The Novice of Saint Dominick* by Sydney Owenson (1806), *Ormond* by Maria Edgeworth (1817), *Max* by Katherine Cecil Thurston (1910), and *French Leave* by Edith Somerville and Violet Florence Martin (Martin Ross) (1928), and it concludes with a fascinating, though all too brief, discussion of Kate O'Brien's novels, dating from the 1930s to the late 1950s. These authors mark out the boundaries of a very long nineteenth century, and stress the ongoing relevance of a particular narrative of bourgeois, male progress undertaken against the background of a metropolitan city, even if that progress is always under suspicion in novels featuring female and economically precarious characters.

What will likely strike the reader is that Paris does not loom large in many of these novels. Reznicek makes a good deal of the Parisian scenes in these novels, but in the main they are short interludes. As such, they have been long overlooked or dismissed, and here they find their first, and welcome, sustained attention. For Reznicek, the short Parisian interludes are revelatory, with Paris appearing as perhaps a minor character set to reveal the entire workings of the plot. But the minor status of Paris is intriguing—what is it about the city that enables it to make a series of cameo appearances that also happen to be transformative? The answer is that Paris "functions in nineteenth-century Irish women's novels as a central site for debate and anxieties over the emergence of a capitalist modernity" (7), as we see most starkly in *Ormond*, with its anxiety-ridden juggling of the *Ancien Régime* and an untested future. But it is, I think, much more than that: Paris is a quickening agent, and all that is solid melts into the Parisian air, surely one of the most stirring airs of the nineteenth century. The city plays the role of the bourgeoisie—Marx's most revolutionary class, but also the class destined to be overthrown at the moment of the Revolution. In Ireland, George Moore (another Irish *habitué* of Paris) wrote, "there is nothing but the land" (110); in Paris, it seems, there is nothing so concrete, so immovable, and therein lies the attraction. For a people steeped in the tradition of worship for the solidity of landed capital and the social relations it demands, Paris offers liquidity and risk, and it tears asunder fast, fixed relations.

The value of *The European Metropolis* to scholars of Irish literature is plain to see—Reznicek performs a bracing reorientation of the study of the Irish novel in the long nineteenth century, moving it away from an obsession with land and territory and towards an urban landscape of transition and formation. In doing so, he takes on a significant blind spot in Moretti's analysis, establishing the critical importance of the Irish novel for our understanding of European literature. Accordingly, the book joins

the select few that take seriously the history of the *Bildungsroman* in Irish literature. Reznicek wrests the genre from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Joyce's cold, dead hands (or his obsession with artistic self-fashioning) and enlivens it by insisting that the Irish *Bildungsroman* is just as critically engaged with questions of capital and politics as its European counterparts.

The European Metropolis will also be of interest to the readers of this journal for its bracing analysis of *Bildungsromane* that are written from the margins—by women; from Ireland; and very many of them long after the genre's heyday. As such, the book offers a detailed, careful, and surprising counter-history of both the *Bildungsroman* and Paris as told by authors and protagonists whose outsidership is their principal virtue.

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