



Paris: A Poem by Hope Mirrlees: The liminal world of Paris in 1919

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Abstract

Paris: A Poem by Hope Mirrlees is a modernist ‘curiosity’ which remained largely unknown due to the peculiar conditions of its original publication. In recent years, however, it has regained its place within the field of modernist studies due to the efforts of Julia Briggs and Sandeep Parmar. Instead of approaching the poem through established categories of urban representation, such as *flânerie*, urban phantasmagoria or the urban palimpsest, this article focuses on Paris, then in the midst of the 1919 Peace Conference, as a liminal space and site of Bakhtinian carnival. This framework advances an understanding of the poem as a complete and complex work of art. The article argues that the peculiar structure and formal organization of the poem, and its relation to the reality of Paris in 1919 and beyond, turns the poem into a liminal space of its own, thus doubling the city it speaks of.

Keywords

carnival, liminality, Hope Mirrlees, Paris Peace Conference, World War I

I

Hope Mirrlees started working on *Paris: A Poem* in the spring of 1919, when she was staying in the French capital with her mentor and companion, the famous classical scholar, linguist and anthropologist Jane Harrison. It is in the context of this creative as well as personal relationship that Mirrlees’ name appears more often than in the context of her own work. Julia Briggs (2006), who rediscovered *Paris* in the early 2000s, attempted to change that, positioning and promoting the poet and her work as ‘Modernism’s lost hope’. In many ways the poem deserves this title: its method, its treatment of the ‘thing’ (in Poundian imagist terms), and the all-embracing and

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transforming reflection of its speaker predates many of the themes and devices which could later be found in seminal works by T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and other ‘monuments’ of modernism.

The poem follows the speaker on a daylong journey through Paris in the spring of 1919: starting in a metro train, it passes through many of the streets and landmarks of Paris to end with a birds-eye perspective from the balcony of a hotel room. The journey is both real and imagined; it can be traced directly on a map, but the transition from one place to another is also achieved through association and allusion: posters on the walls make the speaker think (and write) of myths, artworks and stories, which in turn remind her of other locations in Paris. The complexity of the poem is heightened by the use of many graphic elements: the poem plays with the genre of concrete poetry, juxtaposes different fonts, changes directions of the text, and inserts ‘foreign’ elements on the page, such as advertising slogans, memorial plaques on the walls, or a star sign at the end of the text, thereby turning them into poetry. The poem was published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf, with whom Mirrlees developed a close friendship, and was personally typeset by Virginia Woolf. According to Woolf’s diaries, she had a horrible time incorporating all of Mirrlees’ complex and constantly changing ideas onto a page: ‘Half blind with writing . . . corrections in 160 copies of Paris, a Poem, by Hope Mirrlees’ (Woolf, 1978: 33).

The fact that the poem virtually disappeared until its re-discovery in 2006 makes for a peculiar story of its own: the poem was first published in 1920 by the Hogarth Press in only 175 copies (Briggs, 2006). The next few years in Paris were to become the most productive for Mirrlees: she collaborated with Harrison on numerous translations from Russian, wrote two novels, including the fantasy novel *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926), for which she is better known today. In 1928, Harrison died of leukaemia. This came as a tragedy to Mirrlees and she became a devout Catholic (Parmar, 2011), stopped writing poetry for nearly 40 years, and gradually developed a violent hatred for the poem, likely because of Harrison’s death and her own newly discovered faith. *Paris* can indeed be read as a blasphemous poem (Briggs, 2007), which in part explains the story of the poem’s public disappearance. Since its re-discovery in 2006 (Briggs), and republication in 2011 (Parmar) the poem has been the subject of growing yet moderate scholarly interest. Most recently, in the spring of 2020, a new edition was published by Faber & Faber (Mirrlees, 2020).

When analysing a poem of this kind – set in Paris just before the advent of the 1920s – one is tempted to use well-established categories that fit its ostensible theme perfectly: those might include *flânerie* and the figure of the *flâneuse* (Parsons, 2000; Elkin, 2016), the Surrealists’ interest in urban phantasmagoria (Higonnet, 2002), or the urban palimpsest (Certeau, 1984; Huyssen, 2003). These conceptual frameworks occupy a significant space in the scholarship of both the literary and urban history of Paris. Ever since the ‘spatial turn’ (Soja, 1989), Paris as a literary space has been the subject of a sizeable amount of academic attention. For this reason, I employ an alternative approach, one rooted more in the text of the poem itself than the city it is supposed to represent. While the categories discussed above function well when it comes to an analysis of certain ‘areas’ of the text, they do not accommodate or explain some of the essential features of the poem as a whole.

The category which helps to bridge the gap between the different perspectives within the poem, and conceptualizes the space which the poem represents, comes not from the field of literature, but anthropology. I will argue, drawing on Nina Enemark (2016), that the Paris of the poem can be conceptualized as a liminal space. I argue that the liminality of Paris in the poem is not only related to the civilizational break of modernity and/or modernism, but should be associated, first and foremost, with a very peculiar condition of Paris at the moment of the poem's creation. I focus on the way the optic of the liminal advances our understanding of the poem by helping to connect its seemingly disparate elements. I also argue that the peculiar structure and formal organization of the poem, as well as its mimetic relation to the reality of Paris in 1919 and beyond, turns the poem into a liminal space of its own. In other words, the poem becomes a poetic double of the city it describes. As a result, liminality becomes more than just a theme of Paris as a city caught between war and peace, but an artistic method which construes the poem on the-matic, artistic and technical levels.

II

Writing about Paris, Tyler Stovall suggests that '[the] first six months of 1919 in particular represented a liminal period caught between violence and diplomacy, victory and defeat', and that this period constituted 'neither wartime nor peacetime, but a confusing, unstable mixture of both' (2012: 3 and 145). The battles of the First World War in Western Europe were over on 11 November 1918, but the Treaty of Versailles was only finally signed in Paris months later, on 28 June 1919. The period between these two dates witnessed the long Paris Peace Conference, which began in January 1919 and immediately filled the city with presidents, prime ministers, members of royal families, diplomats and international troops, as well as journalists and curious observers. Both contemporary scholars and the attendees of the conference often referred to the Paris of 1919 as 'the capital of the world' (MacMillan, 2001; Dillon, 1920), yet despite this grand title, Paris at that time was a conflicted and liminal space of its own, which is a theme Mirrlees inevitably picks up on in her poem.

Despite the position of centrality which Paris occupies in this peace narrative as 'the capital of the world', the choice of Paris as the location for the Conference was the result of a reluctant and last-minute decision (Nicolson, 1964 [1933]), or even an 'afterthought' (Dillon, 1920). In fact, Harold Nicolson, husband of Vita Sackville-West and a young diplomat at the time, argued that the choice of the location was one of the Conference's most crucial mistakes: Paris was a conflicted space which had suffered greatly from the effects of the First World War; therefore, it could not serve as the 'neutral territory' needed for this kind of negotiation (Nicolson, 1964). The choice of Paris is represented as a tragic flaw which threatened the negotiations before they even began. John Maynard Keynes, who also described Paris as a setting fit for tragedy in his introduction to *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919), perhaps best expressed the ambiguity of Paris as 'the capital of the world' and its futile opposite:

The proceedings of Paris all had this air of extraordinary importance and unimportance at the same time. The decisions seemed charged with consequences to the future of human society;

yet the air whispered that the word was not flesh, that it was futile, insignificant, of no effect, dissociated from events. (Keynes, 1978 [1919]: 5)

The decisions that were made in Paris would affect nations worldwide, yet the world leaders making these decisions had little or no actual knowledge of the countries and peoples whose new borders they were negotiating. In one of the most emotional passages in his diary, Nicolson writes how ‘appalling [it was] that these ignorant and irresponsible men [Wilson, Lloyd George, Clemenceau] should be cutting Asia Minor to bits as if they were dividing a cake’ (1964: 337). Larry Wolff describes essentially the same pattern when it came to negotiating the new borders in Eastern Europe:

Mental maps . . . shaped the perspectives of the peacemakers who gathered in Paris in 1919, disposing of territories that, for the most part, they had never actually visited. Wilson . . . never set eyes on the Czech, Polish, Hungarian, or South Slavic lands whose political futures he so notably determined. (Wolff, 2020: 4)

The importance of these decisions was also further undermined by the constantly changing political context in many European territories around the time: such as the communist coup in Hungary in March 1919, or the ongoing civil war in Russia (Nicolson, 1964). As the delegates negotiated their decisions slowly and laboriously, any of them could be immediately unmade with each new day. The combination of these factors created the sense of absurdity and unreality, which can also be traced in Mirrlees’s text.

While peace negotiations in Paris were the focus of global politics in 1919, the city and its urban politics could not be put on hold, and after the end of the First World War ‘whole areas of Parisian existence, including industrial production, food pricing, housing, entertainment, political life, and cultural policies, had to be carefully rethought’ (Stovall, 2012: 145). As a result, in the spring of 1919 the Peace Conference was regularly accompanied by large-scale working-class protest which focused on matters of local dissatisfaction with the government. The coexistence of global and local agendas in the same urban space is described by Stovall:

[The] different spheres of high and low politics, local concerns and global visions, intersected in a variety of ways, underscoring the dualities that had so characterized Parisian life during the war itself. Paris in 1919 was a city whose inhabitants by and large were both witness to and excluded from the councils of the powerful . . . Ideas of class war and world peace coexisted uneasily in a city struggling to define the postwar era. (Stovall, 2012: 144)

As Stovall notes, the separation of the two worlds takes place not only along the lines of global versus local agendas, but first and foremost along those of class division. The international decision-makers inhabiting Paris’s lavish hotels and restaurants, observed by the struggling working-class Parisians and demobilized soldiers exhausted by the war, belonged almost exclusively to the world’s aristocracy and upper classes. This ‘spectacle’ created a sense of double vision – of two different Parises existing simultaneously, yet hardly ever crossing paths. This is noticeable especially in the detached, disinterested intonation which dominates the descriptions of the protest on 1 May 1919 in memoirs of

diplomats (for instance, Nicolson, 1964), but also in day-to-day descriptions of urban spaces:

One often witnessed long lines of motor-cars driving up to a theater, fashionable restaurant, or concert-hall, through the opening portals of which could be caught a glimpse of the dazzling illumination within, while, a few yards farther off, queues of anemic men and women were waiting to be admitted to the shop where milk or eggs or fuel could be had at the relatively low prices fixed by the state. (Dillon, 1920: 32)

The distance between the local and the global agenda was therefore marked in the space of the city itself. Both ‘Parises’ appear prominently in Mirrlees’ poem, as its form, multiple viewpoints and treatment of liminality allow her to trespass across borders in her description of Paris in 1919 – especially those of class, life and death, war and peace, as well as the borders of the local and the global.

III

This complex moment in the history of Paris provides the space and time in which Mirrlees places her poem. The connection to the time of the Paris Peace Conference puts *Paris* into a very peculiar position of being neither a war, nor a post-war poem – a position which advances the theme of liminality in the text.

When one employs this liminal optic to analyse the poem, many elements of the text, seemingly scattered, fall into place. The speaker walking through Paris constantly compares it to images of antiquity, myths, ancient and pagan rites, the rite of spring (in this case Mirrlees borrows terminology of Jane Harrison, ‘the Spirit of the Year’)¹ – and then to religious, Christian rites, particularly Lent as it corresponds to the time of writing – and historical events such as working-class protest in Paris (Stovall, 2012) and elsewhere, particularly the Russian Revolution of 1917 (also, arguably, a state in a liminal condition at the time of writing).

In fact, it is worth noting that a ‘Russian trace’ appears to be particularly significant both in the poem and in the city that it describes. Mirrlees refers to Russia on several occasions, perhaps, most tellingly, in the second half of the text:

Vronsky and Anna
Starting up in separate beds in a cold sweat
Reading calamity in the same dream
Of a gigantic sinister mujik . . .
(Mirrlees, 2020: 15)

It is easy to read these lines as a symbolic representation of the Russian Revolution. But this sentiment also refers to a particular tension at the Paris Peace Conference: the Bolshevik delegation was not invited to take part in the conference, yet the question of what to make of the new Russia, as well as the communist revolutions continuously breaking out in various parts of Europe during the conference, haunted its international participants (Nicolson, 1964). Therefore, the image created by Mirrlees is especially fitting: the ‘sinister mujik’² appears as a nightmarish threat (physically non-existent,

but mentally threatening) to the upper-class European world of the characters from Tolstoy's iconic novel.

Beyond these literal, textual traces, a number of works written by Russian poets provide a curious link with Mirrlees' poem. Vladimir Maiakovskii's *The War and the World* (*Voina i mir*, published in 1917) also creates an unstable, liminal world drifting between war and peace; the poem incorporates slogans, onomatopoeic elements and even several bars of music into the poetic text, rather as Mirrlees does in her poem (2020: 18). Perhaps even more curious is the connection between *Paris* and *The Twelve* (*Dvenadtsat'*, 1918) by Aleksandr Blok, which follows a band of Red Guards who patrol the streets of Petrograd (Saint Petersburg) amid the chaos of the revolution. Both Blok and Mirrlees use religious as well as violent and ritualistic images and metaphors to portray the 'new' world order. It is difficult to identify whether Mirrlees was in fact familiar with these two texts.³ It is more to the point, however, that violent historical change and a sense of a destabilized (urban) space appear as recurring motifs in the works of the three poets written around the same time.

Alongside these Russian texts, Mirrlees' poem is in dialogue with other works of pre- and post-war international modernism. It echoes, for instance, *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (1905) by Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay, as well as works by Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire and Jean Cocteau (Parmer, 2011). Through Mirrlees' connections to the Woolfs, and later T. S. Eliot, it engages with aspects of British modernism too. (For instance, Briggs (2007: 264) argues that *Paris* in many ways 'anticipated' *The Waste Land*.) This dialogue can be construed as a form of cosmopolitanism, but also, arguably, as a liminal position: a simultaneous sense of (non-) belonging, and a palimpsest of a multitude of national and international texts, contexts and traditions.

By referring to Lent, ancient rites, the Russian Revolution and so on, Mirrlees creates an image of Paris in-between war and peace as a logical continuation of these seismic, liminal moments, and the Paris Peace Conference becomes an explicit manifestation of this theme in the poem. Mirrlees refers to it on numerous occasions, but there is one particular example which directly attributes liminality to the Conference: 'Many a *Mardi Gras* and *Carême Prenant* of the / Peace Carnival' (2020: 12). Through this comparison, the Peace Conference becomes an element of the 'festive season'. This is not the only instance where the Peace Conference is described through carnival imagery: earlier on, Mirrlees describes how 'President Wilson grins like a dog and runs about the / city, sniffing with innocent enjoyment the diluvial / urine of Gargantua' (2020: 8). Briggs interprets the figure of Gargantua as the symbol of old Europe (2007: 292). In fact, the quote in its entirety can be read as a reference to carnival culture, as defined decades later by Mikhail Bakhtin (who also employs Rabelais' novel as the classic example of the carnivalesque) and reveals how Mirrlees uses images of this kind to heighten the impression of liminality.

According to Bakhtin, carnival is characterized by a temporary break with all previous hierarchies and norms, and, in particular, a symbolic overturning of the physical body, in which its previously hidden and 'shameful' functions become visible and enter public discourse, thereby creating a particular form of language which defies previously available definitions of what is normal and appropriate (Bakhtin, 1965). The quote from Mirrlees'

poem above conforms to all of these ideas, as the president of the USA, who was greeted by common Parisians as an international hero upon his arrival to Paris (Stovall, 2012: 154),⁴ is compared to a dog sniffing urine. Interestingly, it is only one of many examples of the poem's 'indecencies' and blasphemies, as the speaker constantly compares the Catholic Church to a shopping arcade and talks of homosexuality, prostitution, venereal diseases, bodily fluids and 'indecent' body parts (something seemingly incongruous in the work of such a respectable, well-educated upper-class woman such as Mirrlees). This curious disparity, ranging across aspects of high culture (as in the constant referencing of art, myth and antiquity) and elements of 'low' culture as represented by these 'obscene' elements, once again supports the idea of the particular mode – the carnivalesque, or the liminal – in which old rules, including those of moral judgement, no longer apply.

This carnivalesque was also a characteristic feature of many descriptions by those who participated in, or simply observed, the Paris Peace Conference. Émile Joseph Dillon described the city as

nothing so much as a huge world fair, with enormous caravanserais, gigantic booths, gaudy merry-go-rounds, squalid taverns, and huge inns. Every place of entertainment was crowded, and congregations patiently awaited their turn in the street . . . Extortion was rampant and profiteering went unpunished. (Dillon, 1920: 14)

It is worth noting that in Dillon's description, the festive exterior of the 'world fair' is also accompanied by illegal activities, thereby corroborating Bakhtin's logic of the carnival as a space where established rules and laws are temporarily undermined or suspended. Another telling account is Helen Pearl Adam's *Paris Sees it Through: A Diary, 1914–1919*, where she writes: '[We] are living in a jumble of things little and big, as though a charity bazaar had been melted down and we were swimming for our lives in it' (Adam, 1919: 295).⁵ The metaphor of Paris as a bazaar, fair or carnival seems to have been a common one among observers of the Peace Conference.

In Mirrlees' poem, the carnivalesque representation of the Peace Conference is only one element of a complex image of Paris as a liminal space. The state of being in-between is also constantly dramatized by bringing contrasting, almost oxymoronic elements together and allowing them to exist in the same time and space. Paris is portrayed as dreaming of its rural self: 'Paris is a huge homesick peasant, / He carries a thousand villages in his heart' (Mirrlees, 2020: 6). This effect is also emphasized through recurring references to the agricultural cycle and to agricultural rituals elsewhere in the poem. At the same time, Paris is seen as the centre of the world at that particular moment: it is represented by soldiers from all over the world stationed in Paris, including from the French colonies (which allows Mirrlees to add a critical (anti-)colonial perspective), by black American soldiers playing and dancing to jazz – 'they writhe in obscene syncopation' (2020: 21) – and, more generally, through the cosmopolitan mixture of arts, languages and traditions which meet on the pages of the poem. Paris becomes a middle point, a crossing of all the cultures it embraces.

Equally, the city is represented as very 'tangible' and real – a feeling produced by references to the current topics of conversation, relevant news items, such as strikes, sensational murders, and even the plays that were premiered in Parisian theatres at the

time of writing (Briggs, 2007), all of which allows the poem to be situated very precisely in terms of time and space (the route of the walk is clearly identifiable), yet be simultaneously phantasmagoric. The latter impression is achieved through the phantasmagoric images scattered around the poem, such as ‘The Louvre is melting into mist / It will soon be transparent’ (Mirrlees, 2020: 14) or ‘The Eiffel Tower is two dimensional, / Etched on thick white paper’ (Mirrlees, 2020: 15). The mutual presence of all these oxymoronic components side by side creates a sense of duality of the *pre-post-war* Paris: a grotesque image of a city in a moment of transition from one state to another, with both states co-existing yet never prevailing over the other.

A tangible feeling of the recent war is represented in the poem through the descriptions of Paris as a space where the dead and the living co-exist on equal terms. The poem displays mourning and festivity side by side, the opposition visible even in advertising slogans: ‘AU / BON MARCHÉ / ACTUELLEMENT / TOILETTES / PRINTANIERES’⁶ and ‘DEUIL EN 24 HEURES’⁷ (Mirrlees, 2020: 7 and 9). Mirrlees also plays with the motif of anticipation of resurrection, as the poem constantly returns to the image of Lent and pagan spring rituals. It is, for instance, represented by the symbolic coming back ‘from the dead’ of the paintings to the Louvre from the underground storage they were kept in during the war: ‘They arise, serene and unetiolated, one by one from / their subterranean sleep of five long years’ (Mirrlees, 2020: 8). The spaces in the poem referring to death and war in many cases find their own double in the actual space of Paris: the stage ‘thick with corpses’ simultaneously describes the actual horrors of the war (‘theatre of war’) and a particular location mentioned earlier in the poem, the first horror theatre of Paris, the Grand Guignol (Briggs, 2007: 292). The metro simultaneously becomes the underworld of Greek mythology, emphasized by the chorus from *The Frogs* by Aristophanes, as quoted on the first page of the poem. The *Père Lachaise Cemetery* is materialized, walking the streets of Paris ‘in a black curtain embroidered with the letter H’ (Mirrlees, 2020: 11) – the image turning the cemetery into a figure of Greek tragedy, but also through the French pronunciation of the letter ‘H’ as ‘ash’ returning to the image of Lent through the association with Ash Wednesday (Briggs, 2007: 294).

IV

So far, Mirrlees’ poem has been discussed in primarily referential terms and examined for what it can reveal about the representation of Paris at a given historical moment. But the poem is also fascinating for the way in which the poetic text itself is organized on the page, and for the way in which this textual form mirrors the poem’s representation of Paris. Enemark discusses the inability to perceive the poem separately through either sight or hearing: when read aloud, the lines positioned vertically, the change of fonts and the graphic elements grouping the words together, the unclear direction of reading would make complete comprehension impossible (Enemark, 2016: 126–30). On the other hand, countless onomatopoeic elements and, in one case, several bars of music simultaneously make it essential for the poem to be read (or, perhaps, even sung or hummed) aloud. Bringing all these elements together, the poem defies many of the conventional rules of poetry-writing – to the extent that the *Times Literary Supplement* (1920: 286) announced in its brief but harsh review that these tricks ‘don’t belong to the art of poetry’. At the

same time, the word ‘Poem’ is attached to the text’s title, which leaves the reader or the critic no way around the genre definition. The fact that the poet ‘drags’ the advertisement slogans and other ‘external’ elements into the poem makes them poetic as well, thus only increasing its overall ambiguity. Peter Howarth (2011) takes this ambiguity of the title even further: is this simply a poem about Paris, or is it this text that turns Paris itself into a poem (2011: 7)? The principle of treating the poem as liminal space allows both readings.

The way Mirrlees constructs the imagery of the poem is also unconventional and puzzling at times and, I would argue, adds to the possibility of interpreting the text as a liminal space of its own. Mimetic, biblical and historical allusions dominate the text of the poem, but the inclusion of each of these allusions creates additional layers of meaning which ‘travel’ between the inside and the outside of the text. The distinction of the spaces within and ‘without’ the poem becomes more blurred as the reading progresses. The allusions to the ‘outside’ become secret passages to other texts which produce new meaning when projected back onto the text of the poem itself. I will now look into one example which deals with war imagery to show the principle in more detail:

Little boys in black overalls whose hands, sticky with
play, are like the newly furled leaves of the horse-
chestnuts ride round and round on wooden horses till
their heads turn.
(Mirrlees, 2020: 4)

Julia Briggs reads this image as a very traditional war trope: ‘boys’ refer to soldiers, the black colour of the overalls is the colour of mourning, which reappears throughout the poem, and hands sticky with play are hands covered in the mud of the trenches (2007: 288). Supporting this interpretation, the use of ‘play’ and game is also a common metaphor for war, used especially in propaganda poetry. Every element of this particular image, however, becomes three-dimensional when submerging the text into its additional contexts. For instance, the detail of ‘horse-chestnuts’ has a military narrative of its own in Britain: the chestnut has been traditionally used for a children’s game called ‘conkers’ (two players try to strike each other’s conker – which is the chestnut hung on a string – until one breaks, which might as well be another metaphor for war). In 1917, children were asked to collect conkers for the Ministry of Munitions – the chestnut was believed to have a minimal amount of acetone needed for cordite (David, 2020 [2011]). In 1917, British children collected over 3000 tons of conkers in total, which, in the end, turned out to be of little to no use for the ‘war effort’ (David, 2020). This symbolic inclusion of children in the space of war appears synonymous to Mirrlees’ image. Returning to the poem and adding this external layer to the image in the poem, the effort of the soldier ‘boys’ becomes pointless and sadly ironic, and the transition of the function of the object itself – from the game of conkers to the ‘war effort’ – simultaneously portrays the transition from peace to war.

However, as the reader places the fragment of the text onto the map of the city, the meanings of the excerpt grow exponentially. In this part of the poem, the speaker is walking through the Tuileries Gardens, which might have had a carousel at the time, but more

importantly than that, the gardens on one side lead to the Place du Carrousel. The name refers to a type of military dressage rather than a children's attraction – another confirmation that the boys of the poem are indeed soldiers. This is the geographical perspective, an x-axis; when one adds the historical perspective (as Mirrlees constantly does throughout the poem) to this particular location, it turns out that in August 1792 a guillotine was erected in the middle of the square and was in use for almost a year. With that in mind, the 'turning heads' of the boys in the excerpt become synonymous with the chestnuts of the game, and the image becomes more violent and macabre than the interpretation that Julia Briggs suggests.

To conclude: the liminality of Paris in 1919, stuck between two conditions, or two stages of a global 'ritual' – between war and peace – amid the Paris Peace Conference, was recognized and commented on by many contemporary witnesses who attended or observed the negotiations. The city was simultaneously 'the capital of the world' and the centre of local working-class protests, the stage of the most important peace negotiations, yet surrounded with the air of futility and absurdity at the same time. In *Paris: A Poem*, Mirrlees recreates this liminal space, and her poetic form supports this vision: by bringing together the historical '(sur-)realities' of Paris in 1919 – its advertising slogans, theatrical bills, political leaders on the one hand, and biblical texts, surrealist images, works of art, myths, images of antiquity, religious and blasphemous images on the other – Mirrlees represents the immediate post-war urban space of the French capital – and indeed the European continent – in all its complexity. Furthermore, many of the poetic images reach 'beyond' the text and acquire additional meaning when placed in the historical context of Paris in 1919. This kind of tension between the poem and its context creates the feeling of a text placed in a web of other texts and contexts, including the broader literary context of other contemporary works by Russian, French and British poets. As a result, the poem not only describes a liminal space of 'pre-post-war' Paris, but also creates a poetic liminality all of its own. With this delicate relationship of the text and the city, the title *Paris: A Poem* can be read both ways, as if it were a palindrome: the poem *is* Paris, and Paris *is* the poem.

Notes

- 1 The reference to Harrison's work is most likely here, since the poem refers to her terminology on many occasions throughout the text. However, it is an interesting coincidence that in one of his essays devoted to the Paris Peace Conference, John Maynard Keynes borrows several lines from the *Spirit of the Years*, a 'character' from Hardy's play *The Dynasts*. Around that time, the play was an important and relevant reference point reflecting on the Napoleonic Wars. It was even staged in a London theatre and successfully ran for several months at the beginning of the First World War (Hynes, 1994: 228), and the comparison of the Paris Peace Conference with the Congress of Vienna appears in several witness accounts (Nicolson, 1964; Dillon 1920). In this context, the connection between Hardy and Mirrlees is also possible.
- 2 In Russian, 'mujik' means both 'peasant' and – more colloquially, 'man'.
- 3 Around the time *Paris* was written, Mirrlees was engaged in the study of the Russian language, receiving a diploma from the *École des Langues orientales* (Smith, 1995). Mirrlees also most likely read prominent contemporary poets such as Maiakovskii, who is mentioned

- in a postcard that Harrison sent to Mirrlees in November 1916 (Harrison suggests they read his work together). This source was kindly suggested by Sandeep Parmar and provided by the Jane Harrison Collection at Newnham College, Cambridge.
- 4 Several sources, such as Nicolson (1964), also mention that the popular love for Wilson was short-lived: shortly after the start of the Conference, but especially in the spring of 1919, the French media was ruthless to him, which, according to Nicolson, greatly bothered the American president.
 - 5 Harold Nicolson also recognized the break from the ‘norm’ in the life of the city, referring to Paris as the ‘sombre and authoritative capital [which] during those barbarian weeks [appeared] to have lost her dignity’ (Nicolson, 1964: 77).
 - 6 Translation: ‘AT BON MARCHE SPRING OUTFITS AVAILABLE’ (Briggs, 2007: 291).
 - 7 Translation: ‘YOUR CLOTHES DYED BLACK IN 24 HOURS’, or, when read literally ‘MOURNING IN 24 HOURS’, as noted by Julia Briggs (2007: 292).

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