

Mobility in the Metropolis: Responses to the Changing City in Gabriele Tergit's *Käsebier erobert den Kurfürstendamm* and J.B. Priestley's *Angel Pavement*.

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I. Introduction

Upon reading J.B. Priestley's novel *Angel Pavement* (1930), Berlin novelist and journalist Gabriele Tergit was struck by the similarity between Priestley's Lilian Matfield and the figure of Lotte Kohler in her own novel of 1931, *Käsebier erobert den Kurfürstendamm* (Cheesebeer Conquers the Kurfürstendamm).¹ In her autobiography, Tergit stated that Kohler was Matfield's 'identical twin' and that they shared a 'fate typical of the age'.² She was particularly astonished by the parallel course of these characters' romantic relationships, which culminate in their lovers' abrupt departure for different continents. Instead of travelling away with their lovers as they had hoped, Kohler and Matfield are left standing, the latter quite literally immobile in Victoria Station as the crowds swirl around her.

Although the similar conclusion of these romantic relationships was the only resemblance between the two novels noted by Tergit, these scenes are also significant because they bring to a jarring halt relationships otherwise characterised by mobility in the metropolis. Kohler and Matfield meet their lovers in taxis or out walking, on the move through the urban public spaces. Furthermore, both young women experience their journeys alone through the city as liberation from the circumscribed world of the bourgeois interior. By contrast, the male characters Georg Miermann and Herbert Smeeth, who are a

generation older than Kohler and Matfield, exhibit an increasing apprehension whilst travelling the urban space and seek refuge in the static private sphere or almost rural areas.³

This raises the central question to be explored in this paper of why Tergit and Priestley should divide these characters' responses to travelling the urban space along such similar generational and gender lines in novels written virtually contemporaneously and set in Berlin and London respectively. Furthermore, the portrayal of the female protagonists' comparatively positive urban experience is of especial interest, given what Katharina von Ankum terms the 'characteristic emphasis on the stressful rather than liberating aspects of women's experience of the modern city' at least in German writing from the mid-1920s onwards.⁴ Moreover, feminist cultural critics have often observed the very real dangers, harassment and restrictions which have impeded women from taking full advantage of the emancipatory opportunities offered by traversing the urban space.⁵ With this in mind, I also consider to what extent the fates of Matfield and Kohler are indeed typical of the way women's experience in European cities was represented at this time.

II. The Lifeless City

Miermann and Smeeth exhibit a powerful sense of dispossession and anxiety whilst traversing the urban public spaces. Both of these older male characters perceive modernising processes to be undermining the traditional patriarchal structures in the home, in employment and in conventional gender roles. As they journey through the city, they project these fears onto the urban landscape, which is also being transformed by these modernising processes. Therefore, the routes these characters choose to travel through the city and their

reaction to the changing city correspond to their anxieties about the repercussions of modernity and the threat posed to their position of authority.

Georg Miermann, editor of the *feuilleton* at the fictitious *Berliner Rundschau* newspaper in Tergit's novel, is apprehensive about the risks to his position posed by the recent introduction of rationalisation measures. More seriously, he feels so threatened by young divorcée and archetypal New Woman Käte Herzfeld's refusal to accept him as the dominant partner in their relationship that he rapes her. (K, p.232) These fears about the disappearance of patriarchal social structures are also reflected as he traverses Berlin, which has become 'the dead city' in Miermann's eyes.⁶ He deliberately avoids the bustling commercial areas in the West of the city, seeking out instead a public space untouched by redevelopment in the Jüdenhof [*sic*], where a large tree shelters the old houses. The time required for a tree to grow to such a size implies permanence and endurance and, as Inge Stephan has noted, the tree is the one sign of nature encountered by Miermann during his journey through the city.⁷ Significantly, the term 'Jüdenhof' and the suggestion of a small self-contained community are also reminiscent of the Eastern European *shtetl*, a way of life which the assimilated Miermann has firmly rejected: when the feared rationalisation measures finally lead to his redundancy, Miermann dies in the city streets uttering a Jewish prayer for the first time in 35 years. (K, p.250) Both the prayer and the seeking out of this almost rural space indicate a longing to return to the community and values of a religion he had relinquished decades earlier.

Walking back through the old lanes, Miermann observes with regret that houses are soon to be replaced by new office blocks. (K, pp.236-237) He therefore categorises negatively the increasing commercialisation of the city which encroaches upon the urban

space previously available for the private domestic sphere. He recalls the city's appearance before its explosive expansion, 'when it still looked like a town, before house after house had been torn down'.⁸ His stroll through the city constitutes an attempt to reclaim the urban territory as he maps his memory of the town before its metamorphosis into a metropolis onto the space he is traversing. Yet this enterprise fails in the face of the present use of urban space and cannot prevent Miermann's apocalyptic vision of having returned to the city after a thousand years to find a scene in which laughter and desire have been extinguished, in which the urban space has been dehumanised. Miermann's negative response to the changing city reveals his fears about the detrimental impact of increasing commercialisation and the growing metropolis upon traditional community, values and social structures.

Herbert Smeeth, head clerk at Twigg and Dersingham, wholesalers of veneers and inlays, similarly expresses apprehension whilst travelling the urban space through the image of the lifeless city. Smeeth is proud of having risen to his position through the office hierarchy, but realises with dismayed incomprehension that neither his younger colleagues nor his children share his attitude to employment and loyalty to the firm. He wanders through London following a series of disturbances to his usual routine and a threat to his employment to visit a sick acquaintance in hospital, only to discover disease and death lurking at the heart of the city, which he associates with consumption and mobility in the metropolis. The hospital has 'all the bustle of a market-place' and is filled with 'mysterious silent traffic'. (AP, p.488) Later Smeeth cannot stave off this sense of dissolution and impermanence whilst moving through the streets: 'Barbican and Golden Lane [...] spoke to him only of decay'. (AP, p.491) He encounters a graveyard he has scarcely noticed before and finds himself scrutinising not only the graves, but the detritus of the modern age, the flip-side of

consumption as exhaustion, waste and destruction:⁹ 'It was as if the paper and cigarette ends and the empty tin, there in the old cemetery, only marked in their shabby fashion the passing of a later life, as if the twentieth century was burying itself in there too, and not even doing it decently.' (AP, p.492) Whilst the previous centuries have shaped the urban landscape with the more enduring gravestones, the twentieth century's contribution is transient.

Smeeth's response to the increasing commercialisation of the city is to retreat, like Miermann, from the busy public spaces of consumption and leisure. He takes refuge in the static, circumscribed world of the domestic interior, and his overcrowded living room which 'contained far too much furniture and too many knick-knacks' (AP, pp.65-66) creates a protective barrier between himself and the rushing mobile external world: '[his] imagination, heightened by fear, perhaps told him that outside beyond the firelight and the snug walls were stalking poverty, disgrace, shame, disease and death'. (AP, p.66) According to Christoph Asendorf, similar motivations generated the artificial separation of the private and public spheres in the nineteenth century: the nineteenth century man 'created for himself the fiction of a static "property" in the form of immobile medieval furniture, which helped him endure the tension between necessary capital mobility and his desire for personal longevity'.¹⁰ Yet this response, devised to evade movement and circulation in an earlier phase of modernity, is inadequate in the face of a more advanced phase of modernity which encroaches increasingly upon the private sphere: the new mass entertainment and leisure industries prompt Smeeth's children to question his patriarchal authority in the home. (AP, pp.70-72) Nevertheless, when Smeeth is made redundant his world fails to collapse around him as he has dreaded throughout the novel and whereas Miermann loses the will to live,

Smeeth discovers a new capacity to cope. This more optimistic outcome can perhaps be attributed to the less bleak political situation in Britain in comparison with contemporary Germany.

Both of these middle-aged male characters retreat from the urban public spaces through which they have always moved freely to the more fixed, circumscribed private sphere or a semi-rural scene, a retreat which corresponds to their fears about modernisation's repercussions upon patriarchal social structures. In sharp contrast, the same modernising processes liberate the female characters from the static world of the home into a new realm of possibilities in the city's public spaces. Nevertheless, the authors also highlight the impediments to full mobility in the metropolis for Kohler and Matfield.

III. The Living City

One such hindrance to Matfield's mobility emphasised by Priestley is the difficulty of surviving in London as a female white-collar worker. This is linked explicitly both by Matfield and by the narrator to male manipulation of economic power which places obstacles in the way of young single women in the metropolis. Daughter of a country doctor, Matfield relies on her father to supplement her low pay and she is fully conscious of her limited employment options: 'What chance has a girl? The rot they talk about women working! The men jolly well see where all the decent jobs go to.' (AP, p.389) Furthermore, private rented accommodation is not readily available to Matfield, as it is to the male shipping and railways clerk in her office, Harold Turgis, and she lives in a residential hostel along with a large number of single female office workers, who, as the narrator notes, are 'compelled, by economic conditions still artfully adjusted to suit the male, to live in London

as cheaply as possible'. (AP, p.208) However, this housing opportunity, like the supplementary income from Matfield's father, is only available to girls 'from good middle-class homes in the country', (AP, p.208) revealing that class as well as gender plays a significant role in the individual's access to urban public spaces.

Matfield's low income restricts her solitary journeys through the city mainly to the unavoidable bus trip between the office and hostel interiors. She dislikes the highly crowded and commercialised areas of London, particularly the landscape of ostentatious consumerism and decorations during the run-up to Christmas. Encountering this side of the city prompts Matfield to take inward flight to traditional gender roles in two key ways. Firstly, she dreams of a perfect Christmas in a large country house with an adoring husband and loving children, surrounded by traditional objects of the bourgeois interior valued for their longevity, such as the silver and a mahogany dining table. In this day-dream, the interior represents to Matfield a secure haven from the demanding sphere of circulation and movement in the metropolis, as it does to Smeeth and Miermann. The second means of escape from the bus journey is reading travel books or novels set in exotic locations, preferably the South Seas. The heroes of these novels - they are typically male - play a crucial role in determining Matfield's ideal partner, a 'strong, adventurous, roving male with a background of alien scenes, of little ships and fantastic drinking haunts'. (AP, p.406) Although she longs to journey to such places herself and envies a friend who is given the opportunity to travel, Matfield never imagines travelling independently, but dreams instead of indulging in such voyages vicariously through the experiences of a future husband.

In James Golspie, Matfield discovers just such an adventurous type and in his company, the city comes alive. Their relationship enables her to frequent the spaces of

leisure from which she otherwise feels excluded, as her response to an invitation to dine at a particular restaurant reveals: 'I've never been there. It's more a restaurant for men, isn't it?' (AP, p.417) Both Golspie's financial resources and his status as a masculine companion provide Matfield with access to the urban public spaces of consumption closed to a young single woman, to parties, music halls, the cinema and boxing matches. Visiting him at the docks before he sets sail to trading partners in the Baltic suddenly makes travelling the urban space itself thrilling, as Matfield ventures unaccompanied into areas of London beyond her ken, in this instance not on the bus, but in a taxi and on foot. In the harbour, the city acquires an unexpectedly exhilarating edge and exotic lure through its commercial connections with distant locales: 'London was really marvellous, and the wonder of it rushed up in her mind and burst there like a rocket, scattering a multi-coloured host of vague but rich associations'. (AP, pp.255-256) International trade and commerce therefore spark Matfield's enthusiastic fascination with the urban space, in stark contrast to Smeeth and Miermann. However, Matfield's vision of trade is idealised and romantic, an attitude she shares, according to the narrator, with 'most members of the English middle classes' (AP, p.255), and the associations evoked by the harbour are mostly connected to imperialist activities and exploration: 'Dick Whittington and galleons, Muscovy and Cathay, East Indiamen, the doldrums far away'. (AP, p.256) Although the encounter with this part of the city proves thrilling and liberating for Matfield, her perspective on the city is unmistakably determined by both middle-class and imperialist values.

The experience of being abandoned at Victoria Station by Golspie shocks Matfield out of her reliance upon a male companion and his money for mobility in the metropolis. A new day-dream replaces that of the perfect Christmas, in which she works not as a static

secretary, but as a travelling sales representative with a car and a large salary. Instead of expecting to experience travel and adventure through a male figure, Matfield envisages her own financial independence and the power to determine where and when she traverses the urban space in her car. Moreover, although homes still figure in this dream, the extravagant country house has been replaced by homes for a single, mobile working woman: a small town flat and tiny week-end cottage whose interiors are not described. (AP, p.579) Yet at the very point where Matfield begins to embrace with enthusiastic excitement the idea of independent movement through the city, her opportunities for surviving at all in the metropolis are drastically diminished. Golspie's departure leaves the company bankrupt and the high levels of unemployment emphasised throughout the novel suggest that Matfield's prospects of finding work are hardly rosy.

Like Matfield, Tergit's Fräulein Dr. Kohler has a privileged background, although the family's 12 million Mark fortune has been devoured by the inflationary crisis which followed the First World War in Germany.¹¹ As Miermann's colleague at the prestigious *Berliner Rundschau*, Kohler enjoys the kind of responsible, challenging job and substantial salary of which Matfield can only dream. However, whereas Matfield receives support from her father, Kohler has to support her mother, whose desire to preserve the remnants of the bourgeois household binds them to a huge and correspondingly expensive apartment. Rather than offering a refuge to Kohler, the bourgeois interior is a deadweight which fetters her movement and she longs to discard it:

But we can't get into difficulties for the sake of the linen and the silver and the porcelain. To say we need a big apartment just because of the cupboards is

simply absurd! As a child, she thought, I always used to mark out my favourite curtains and table-linen in the catalogues of Herzog and Gerson and Grünfeld. I have absolutely no feeling for possessions any more! Oh, to be as mobile as possible, free of burdensome objects!¹²

Kohler's desire for mobility and emancipation from the private, circumscribed bourgeois interior is echoed as she traverses the urban public spaces in a chapter entitled 'A Girl Walks Through The City'.¹³ This journey differs from Matfield's walk through London harbour to Golspie's moored ship in three important respects. Firstly, Kohler does not undergo the same progression to enjoyment of her mobility in the metropolis experienced by Matfield, but appears to be utterly at home in the city. Secondly, although Kohler hopes to travel to France with the elusive Oskar Meyer, she does not depend upon his company to walk through Berlin, but simply takes for granted her freedom to move alone through the urban public spaces. Thirdly, whereas Matfield's journey through London harbour has the ultimate aim of taking down business letters, Kohler wanders the streets without any particular purpose. She directs her attention towards the city's architecture, towards street signs, advertising, walls scarred by bullet holes and displays of commodities. The stimuli she encounters provoke her to reconstruct the city's past and to reflect upon its present; in other words, to consider the modernity of the city. For instance, the sight of the Prussian directorate for construction and finance triggers the recollection of the building's function during the First World War and a particularly powerful memory surfaces from August 1918 of a strong seventeen-year-old boy swinging his suitcase against the prison gate. This building therefore prompts Kohler to construct a kind of personal urban topography. The

location has now changed: the building has been painted in soft shades of pink and, where the boy once stood, there now hangs a ripped poster protesting about hunger, unemployment and mass poverty, ending ominously in the word 'Diktatur' ('dictatorship', K, p.91). Crucially, observing changes to the city's fabric does not elicit the same sense of anxiety in Kohler as it does in Miermann and Smeeth. She notices tiles arriving on barges and imagines without apprehension their future use in the construction of new houses. New factory buildings strike her as impressively solid, 'splendidly vertical, red bricks, pragmatically modern, hard'.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Kohler's vision of the impact of international commerce in urban areas is not, like Matfield's, an idealised, romanticised one, but one shot through with an awareness of the harsh economic realities of city life during the Depression, as evinced by her observations in working-class districts. She perceives the cramped living and working conditions of individuals in the dilapidated buildings and compares the price of groceries displayed in the streets with the low wages of the working classes. In addition, she notices the unemployed lingering in the streets or desperately trying to scratch a living from the sale of small items like braces or combs. Observations of flower boxes and dovecotes and of children playing with marbles or spinning tops on the asphalt may suggest a slightly more idyllic view of working-class life. Nevertheless, this is immediately undermined by the sight of older children dressed formally for confirmation, which causes Kohler to wonder anxiously about their future prospects now that apprenticeships are difficult to obtain. Therefore, although Kohler shares Matfield's sense of exhilaration in traversing the urban spaces, her view of city life is ultimately more realistic and differentiated than that of Matfield.

Kohler's activity as she journeys through the city bears a remarkable similarity to that of the *flâneur*, making her something of an anomaly. Much recent criticism has pointed quite rightly to the conspicuous absence of the female *flâneur* from the visual arts and literature.¹⁵ Such critics have noted that women who indulged in the aimless loitering or strolling required by *flânerie* were frequently misrecognized as prostitutes or accosted by men when they ventured out into the public arena. Women traversing the urban public spaces were only deemed respectable by the prevailing bourgeois morality if they were perceived to have a specific objective such as shopping or the journey between work and home, which undermines the aimlessness required by *flânerie*.¹⁶ Yet Kohler meanders aimlessly through the city without displaying any consciousness that she is the object of observation by men and without being accosted or harassed by men. As such, her travels through the urban public spaces bear a remarkable resemblance to *flânerie*. However, Kohler's realistic perspective differs significantly from that of male *flâneurs* such as Baudelaire's or Benjamin's, whose vision of impoverished urban figures tends to be symbolic or idealised.

As in Matfield's case, the economic prerequisite for Kohler's mobility in the metropolis is undermined at the end of the novel. Rationalisation measures close down the newspaper, whilst fraud destroys the remainder of the Kohler family's fortune. This catastrophe finally compels Kohler's mother to contemplate selling the furniture and moving to a smaller apartment. Nevertheless, with worries about job security, Kohler does not greet this event with the expected sense of freedom from the interior: instead she begins to worry about whether they should keep the furniture to barter for basic living requirements with the butcher and the baker. (K, p.266)

IV. Conclusion

The journeys of the middle-aged male characters in *Angel Pavement* and *Käsebier* illustrate a negative response to transformations in the urban infrastructure which these protagonists perceive as alienating and dehumanising. They project their fears about the effects of modernisation upon patriarchal social structures in employment and traditional gender roles, which undermine their sense of security, onto the urban landscape portrayed as lifeless and increasingly impermanent and seek to escape from it. By contrast, these same modernising processes offer hopes of emancipation from the bourgeois interior to the young female characters who relish the opportunity to move through the urban public spaces, although the economic recession ultimately halts this new-found mobility. The liberating aspects of the metropolis for women are therefore shown to be precarious, even for these middle-class women, who have a better chance of establishing themselves in the city than most.¹⁷ The fates of Matfield and Kohler are in this sense typical of representations of women's experience in the metropolis at the onset of the Depression. Yet Priestley does not allow Matfield to move beyond purposive forays through the city and her sense of exhilaration and adventure is only shown by him to be possible through the company and finances of Mr. Golspie. Tergit, however, offers a very rare glimpse of a woman who wanders aimlessly through the city on her own terms, taking for granted her right to move through the urban public spaces and observe both the urban infrastructure and its inhabitants. Viewed from this perspective, Kohler ceases to be Matfield's identical twin, and becomes the very unique creation of this female novelist.

NOTES

¹ J[ohn]. B[oynton]. Priestley, *Angel Pavement* (London, Heinemann, 1930). Henceforth abbreviated as AP. Gabriele Tergit, *Käsebier erobert den Kurfürstendamm: Roman* (Berlin, arani, 1997). Originally published [no forename] Tergit, *Käsebier erobert den Kurfürstendamm* (Berlin, Rowohlt, 1931). Henceforth abbreviated as K. All translations into English are my own, unless otherwise stated.

² Gabriele Tergit, *Etwas Seltenes überhaupt. Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main, Ullstein, 1983), p.79: 'ein eineiiger Zwilling'; 'Zeitschicksal'.

³ For the purposes of this comparison, I have focused upon these four characters, although Tergit and Priestley each record the impressions of one other individual travelling alone through the city. In *Käsebier*, middle-aged playwright Otto Lambeck also retreats from the bustling spaces of consumption to the interior of an inn decorated in pre-war style. In *Angel Pavement*, the young Harold Turgis is enticed by the luxury and promise of sexual adventure in the new mass entertainment venues, but finds his expectations constantly disappointed.

⁴ Katharina von Ankum, 'Introduction', in *Women in the Metropolis. Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. by Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1997), pp.1-11 (p.2).

⁵ See, for example: various essays in *Women in the Metropolis* (note 4); Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity', in Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London/New York, Routledge, 1988), pp.50-90; Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity' in *The Problems*

of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London/New York, Routledge, 1989), pp.141-156. For an essay which also emphasises the opportunities for women in the city, see Elizabeth Wilson, 'The Invisible *Flâneur*', *New Left Review* (1992), 191, pp.90-110.

⁶ K, p.236: 'die tote Stadt'.

⁷ Inge Stephan, 'Stadt ohne Mythos. Gabriele Tergits Berlin-Roman "Käsebier erobert den Kurfürstendamm"', in *Neue Sachlichkeit im Roman: Neue Interpretationen zum Roman der Weimarer Republik*, ed. by Sabina Becker and Christoph Weiß (Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 1995), pp.291-313 (p.298). Stephan also claims that the tree represents a family tree and hence Miermann's Jewish origins.

⁸ K, p.236: 'als sie noch aussah wie eine Stadt, als man noch nicht Haus um Haus abgerissen hatte'.

⁹ On the etymology of 'consumption', see Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised and expanded edition (London, Fontana, 1988), pp.78-79.

¹⁰ Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life. On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1993), p.137.

¹¹ Cf. Detlev J.K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic. The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991), pp.62-66.

¹² K, p.263: 'Aber man kann doch nicht wegen der Wäsche und des Silbers und Porzellans in Not geraten. Wegen der Schränke braucht man eine große Wohnung! Das ist zu irrsinnig. Als Kind, dachte sie, habe ich in den Katalogen von Herzog und Gerson und Grünfeld

immer die Gardinen und Tischwäsche angestrichen, die mir am besten gefielen. Ich habe gar kein Gefühl mehr für Besitz! So beweglich sein wie möglich! Nur keine Sachen, die einen beschweren.'

¹³. K, p.81: 'Ein Mädchen läuft durch die Stadt'.

¹⁴. K, p.92: 'herrlich vertikal, roter Ziegel, sachlich modern, hart'.

¹⁵. Cf. note 5 and Anke Gleber, 'Female Flanerie and the *Symphony of the City*' in *Women in the Metropolis*, pp.67-88.

¹⁶. Janet Wolff, 'The Artist and the *Flâneur*: Rodin, Rilke and Gwen John in Paris', in *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (London/New York, Routledge, 1994), pp.111-137 (p.125).

¹⁷. On the obstacles to mobility in Berlin for a lower-class female character during the Depression, see Katharina von Ankum, 'Gendered Urban Spaces in Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*', trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, in *Women in the Metropolis*, pp.162-184.