

Love in the Years of War: the Representation of Love and War in Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

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Abstract

Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939) and Djuna Barnes's Nightwood (1936) explore doomed love within the context or against a background of war. Both texts are vibrant critiques of war and therefore militant in their pacifism. Whether explicit or implicit, these modernist writers' refusal to endorse war counters traditional war narratives; harboring an unfulfilled love, the narratives assert a female viewpoint pitted against a male one, whether rejecting traditional gender roles or blurring gender boundaries. This paper examines the interconnection of love and war within the complex dynamics of history, memory and trauma woven within the narratives as Porter and Barnes engage in gender politics.

Keywords: Katherine Anne Porter, Djuna Barnes, war, love, history, gender, trauma

War fiction written by women became a category of its own during the twentieth century. Katherine Anne Porter's acclaimed novella, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939), and Djuna Barnes's now classic novel, *Nightwood* (1936), could easily be read as belonging to this genre. "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and *Nightwood* explore doomed love within the context or against a background of war. While Porter's narrative ends with the Armistice (1918), Barnes's, wedged between the two world wars and looking back to the First, announces the Second in fear and trembling. Although categories can only be restrictive and classifying these texts as war fiction may sound reductive, reading them together through the prism

of war and love can deepen our understanding not only of “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” and *Nightwood*, but also the experience of war that the two writers weave into their narratives.

These modernists, Barnes a late and a Sapphic modernist to boot (Miller, Benstock), both expatriates in various periods in their lives and with little formal education, pore over the world conflict that shook and enriched their artistic vision and come up with a penetrating depiction of war, thus writing women into war narratives, an area traditionally reserved for men. Likewise, they counter those narratives by protesting and denouncing war in their fiction – there are no heroes and no victory, only distress, defeat, destruction and death in these texts. While in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” Porter clearly assumes a pacifist stance, thus turning her novella into a peace manifesto, in *Nightwood* Barnes exposes the atrocities of war as part and parcel of the human condition.

These two texts represent women writers’ responses to war and suffering. Though Porter and Barnes did not have a particular liking for each other, the former dissociating herself from “the whole gang” (Porter, “Interview” 21), i.e. the expatriate modernists in Europe, ironically their papers lie together in the literary archives of the University of Maryland. Such a symbiosis can be reinforced by their similar approach to the social institution of war, as they both set out to subvert traditional role models and gender stereotypes by denouncing the patriarchal ideology that underpins this institution. However, while gender dichotomies are questioned and evaporate in their texts, demonstrating how gender functions as a system of power, Barnes’s stance is resolutely more radical, as she also raises the issue of sexual orientation, fundamental in her examination of war and love. Likewise, while both texts question language as an appropriate vehicle to convey the emotional distress of war and love, Barnes displays the same radicalism in her use of language that defies interpretation. But where the narratives mostly seem to diverge is in their approach to history – Porter’s vision remains rooted in history, while Barnes seems to assume an ahistorical stance.

In the effervescent climate of the first part of the 20th century, when women’s writing entered a new phase of self-awareness,¹ one way for women to enter the social arena was to question the gendered institution of war and the predominant representations of gender difference associated with it. Porter and Barnes, both coming from unconventional families, vehemently attacked the institution in their narratives. Though they both condemned WWI, Barnes’s dismissal of the war also hammers home the idea that woman is no less of a warrior than man, while Porter’s total opposition to violence is embodied in a female character, Miranda Gay. The novella, somewhat based on autobiographical facts (Givner 127), features a brief romance in 1918 Denver, steeped in the Great War atmosphere and the raging Spanish influenza pandemic, between a young soldier, Adam, and Miranda, a newspaper journalist. Adam nurses Miranda, smitten by the epidemic, and returns to duty. The journalist recovers to find that the war has ended and that her lover, who had also been infected, has died at the front.

The conjunction of love and war in the novella underlines their oppositional nature. Love is doomed because of the war, which is all the more ominous for the civilians because of the 1918 influenza pandemic that makes death a daily experience. Indeed, the war and the influenza combine to fuel the war hysteria, prominent in this third person narrative: “They say [...] that it is really caused by germs brought by a German ship to Boston [...] Somebody reported seeing a strange, thick, greasy-looking cloud float up out of Boston

Harbor” (315).² The pathos that surrounds the romance stems from the deprivation of the future for the young characters, as the narrative voice makes clear: “[Adam is] not for her or for any woman, [...] committed without any knowledge or act of his own to death” (314). The focaliser, Miranda, prematurely mourns the absurd death of her lover. Love in the novella is a *carpe diem* attempt, a temporary haven of peace, configured by the sheer will of the female character. The latter appears immersed in “the radiance which played and darted about the simple and lovely miracle of being two persons named Adam and Miranda, twenty-four years old each, alive and on the earth at the same moment” (310).

However, she is also immersed in the war, this “plague” (331) that contaminates everyone – even the center of resistance, herself, who self-avowedly “help[s] win the war” (311) yet nearly dies of the influenza. War is synonymous with violence, death and insanity, as the uniform is likened to a “straitjacket” (310); it can by no means be atoned for by the all-pervasive propaganda best expressed in the rhetoric of the Liberty Bonds peddler, which Miranda denounces: “Coal, oil, iron, gold, international finance, why don’t you tell us about them, you little liar?” (325). Thus the myth of the just war, “the WAR to end war, war for Democracy, for humanity” (325), which infuses the rampant patriotism in the text, is shattered as private lives are shattered. If Adam is the sacrificial victim, Miranda is no less so, for women were also integrated into the war effort, as the focaliser Miranda voices: “it [life] matters even less if you’re staying at home knitting socks” (311). Male and female destinies merge and bow down to an institution that serves the interests of the few, namely Wall Street bankers and big industrialists; this was a commonly voiced Socialist belief during those years.

In fact, the novella is a gender-conscious text. As Gary Ciuba observes, “Miranda is attracted by the cultural model that validated one gender by subordinating another, yet she increasingly questions the models that she makes her own” (56). However, Ciuba’s statement needs to be qualified. Miranda is clearly not attracted by this cultural model, but records and dismisses it, notably the “easy masculine morals” (311) that consecrate women’s subordination and the masculinity models associated with them. Assaultive misogynist masculinity is one model of “military masculinity” (to use the concept Cynthia Enloe employed in the 80s) in the text, and it is illustrated by one of Miranda’s colleagues, Chuck, who represents “the rejected man.” Miranda seems to read his thoughts: “War was the one thing they wanted, now they couldn’t have it. [...] All of them had a sidelong eye for the women they talked with about it, a guarded resentment which said, ‘Don’t pin a white feather on me, you bloodthirsty female. I’ve offered my meat to the crows and they won’t have it’” (321). Though Adam is not unreceptive to Miranda’s critical discourse about the war, he has also interiorized the militarized masculinity model that transforms him into a soldier: “If I didn’t go, [...] I couldn’t look myself in the face” (326).

The masculinity model not only involves moral integrity and a sense of honor, but even an accessories code, as Adam’s embarrassment with his wristwatch indicates: “boys from southern and south-western towns [...] had always believed that only sissies wore wrist watches” (309). According to Carol Cohn, “it is extremely difficult for anyone, female or *male*, to express concerns or ideas marked as ‘feminine’ and still maintain his or her legitimacy” (238). Adam must conform to the masculinity model imposed on men, since war appears as a way to evade the threat posed to male identity in those years.

Porter's opposition to the war hysteria during the Great War, which her biographer Janis P. Stout confirms (27), and her dismissal of patriotism as a structural power relation enriching the patriarchy, lead her to make bold narrative choices that overturn gender expectations – it is the man who is transformed into a nurse as Adam nurses the sick Miranda and then returns to the front to die an unheroic death. Likewise, another reversal in the narrative is to be found in the definition of courage, which lies in Miranda's denouncement of war: "Suppose I were not a coward, but said what I really thought? Suppose I said to hell with this filthy war?" (303). If there was some ambivalence in Porter's approach to gender, as Stout maintains,³ this novella does away with it in its depiction of a poised, autonomous, self-willed woman whose romantic aspirations are not at odds with her independence.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that though Porter claimed "to have been a pacifist all her adult life [...] there were times during WWII when she fell away from her pacifist principles," according to Stout (27), notably signing a patriotic piece called "Act of Faith" (Stout 154). Albeit problematic, and though "feminist thinking has historically pitched against war and other forms of violence" (Sylvester 7), her act points to a female diversity of approaches to war, which is more and more the case today.

In *Nightwood*, Barnes confirms the current female position that women are not necessarily bearers of peace, as Cohn makes clear in her article "Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War." Indeed, Barnes's denunciation of war is conveyed in much more dramatic images. Like Porter's novella, Barnes's novel also draws on autobiographical inspiration, recounting the most passionate love Barnes experienced for the artist Thelma T. Wood, "the longest and most damaging" in her life (Benstock 236). This plotless novel, mostly set in Paris, brings together a host of marginalized characters. The narrative focuses on Nora Flood's desperate love for Robin Vote, the obscure object of desire of the half-Christian, half-Jewish Felix Volkbein, who is unhappily married to her and is abandoned by her, and of Jenny Petherbridge. The latter provokes Nora's separation from Robin. This set of bewildered characters turns to the transvestite Matthew O'Connor for some understanding of their plight. O'Connor, an unlicensed doctor and war veteran, responds to their despair and sense of loss by relating it to his own experiences of war.

Contrary to Porter's representation, love and war are not antithetical in Barnes's novel but collusive – love in *Nightwood* is indeed a battlefield. In an autobiographical text titled "War in Paris," Barnes wrote directly about her experience of war. Before her return to the U.S. in 1939, the author was in Paris undergoing a breakdown, and thus she describes a firsthand experience of the war: "So, though none of us caught in Paris had seen one dead body, or heard many guns, or suffered any personal attack, neither imprisonment nor loss of men, still the fear was there, and the nerves giving away" (Barnes, *Collected Poems* 268). Ironically *Nightwood* had already expanded on this experience picturing the Great War and its impact on private lives, notably on O'Connor's, whose indelible war memories constitute an anti-war cry.

Though the direct references to war in *Nightwood* are not numerous and may appear incidental, they are tightly woven into the narrative which complements the war-like atmosphere with military metaphors and diction. O'Connor is the sibyllic storyteller in this third-person narrative, interspersed with his long monologues; he is also the war-teller whose war memory is mobilized by the ongoing battle of love. To each character's anguished query about love the doctor responds in an apparently incoherent way with an animal story

that points to the absurdity, the abjection and grotesqueness of war. O'Connor's haunting recollections aim at exorcising the double terror of war and love; he is the one endowed with a survivor's memory. As Klaus Theweleit puts it, "The survivor's memory, speaking from the pole of anesthesia, has stored the tested invulnerability (blood proof) of its owner" (308). It is precisely this sort of invulnerability that educes O'Connor's gruesome war stories.

In the very first chapter, "Bow Down," the Doctor demonstrates why he can argue "about sorrow and confusion too easily," as Nora accuses (39). He does so through his first animal story, which features a terrified cow during a bombardment. The animal acts as a mirror image of O'Connor, whose observation of the cow saves his mind from maddening fear, as expressed in a witty understatement: "Thanks be to my Maker I had her head on, and the poor beast trembling on her four legs so I knew at once that the tragedy of the beast can be two legs more awful than a man's" (40).

Indeed, animal imagery along with metonymy make it easier for Barnes to write about the war, which is all the more difficult as "to describe the material effects of war means to possess an anatomical knowledge and vocabulary from which women traditionally were excluded," as Margaret Higonnet points out (207). In fact, Barnes faced a double difficulty, as she was also writing a sexuality that was rarely represented in literature.

Thus after the tableau of a panicking cow where the fecal motif predominated, Barnes turns to horses and creates the tableau of "the horse who knew too much" (162) to penetrate Robin's mysterious character, the least voluble figure in the novel. To Felix's disconsolate question why Robin married him, O'Connor answers with another war image of an afflicted horse: "She was in mourning for something taken away from her in a bombardment in the war – by the way she stood, that something lay between her hooves – she stirred no branch, though her hide was a river of sorrow" (163). This insight into Robin – who thus appears steeped in uncontained grief and unresolved mourning, just like the other characters – points to O'Connor's interpretation of Robin's inability to take on not only matrimony and maternity but also a fulfilling love affair. Robin's comparison with a horse, profoundly affected by a bombardment, is a point in the text that could justify Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick's consideration of Robin as a shell-shocked civilian whose trauma is inarticulate (28). However, since O'Connor's understanding of life and love seems to be mediated by his war experience and his discourse is characterized by war-related tropes, Robin's "undefinable disorder" (169), in Felix's view, may also appear to defy etiology in the text.

Indeed, Robin remains impenetrable and unconquerable until the end of the narrative. If love has some paradisaic qualities in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and can be understood through the ancient Greek concept of *Philia*, Empedocles' ruling principle of attraction and combination, it is a permanent hell in *Nightwood*; it points to *Neikos*, strife, the force of repulsion and separation. Specifically, O'Connor's wartime memory of a decapitated horse – recounted to the disconsolate Nora – evokes the ghastly nature of memory known to those who have experienced loss. Robin only temporarily becomes the war trophy of Jenny, who fights for her by all possible means and wins the battle with Nora and her other rivals, but who finally also loses the war, since the young woman returns to her wandering life in search of Nora. Thus all warriors, even Jenny, a most unlikeable character, share the same destiny, as pointed out by O'Connor's rhetorical question: "Who knows what knives

hash her apart?” (180). His war memories, along with his constant deployment of war imagery, underline the desperate human condition – death is no longer an abstraction or a sanitized notion, but is immediate and gut-wrenching.

Moreover, Barnes’s central character, Nora, condemns militarism when she enters the conversation between Felix, who praises Vienna’s military superiority, and O’Connor, who responds ambiguously (34). The author also dismisses militarism in her parody of a female character, Hedwig Volbein, “a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty” (11), significantly the only straight female character in the novel. Thus positing Hedwig, a masculinized woman, an “androphiliac” (Ruddick 113), and O’Connor, an effeminate man who, deep in gender trouble, enlists to fight in the war, Barnes undermines the opposition between masculine and feminine. O’Connor’s war memories not only shape Barnes’s dark vision of love, but also serve her exploration of sexual identity. Margaret Bockting rightly observes that “One way to subvert [...] the predominant representations of gender difference was through the figure or concept of androgyny [...] employed by [...] Barnes” (Bockting 21).

While some of her female characters are only figuratively warriors in the love-equals-battle trope in O’Connor’s discourse, the Doctor, who assumes a Tiresias-like part in the narrative, experiences it both as a man and as a woman in the combat zone; he jointly condemns it, interpreting his father’s attitude in an interesting manner: “he hoped I could conduct myself like a soldier. For a moment he seemed to realize my terrible predicament: to be shot for men’s meat, but to go down like a girl, crying in the night for her mother” (110). O’Connor’s father, representative of the common belief of the times that violence and aggression reinforce masculinity, had viewed the war as a remedy for his son’s homosexuality. Like Porter, Barnes dismantles heroism, but does so through shifting sexual identities. Fulfilling this duty reserved for men turns out to be a mutilating, undignified, traumatic experience.

Gender in Barnes’s work also strongly intersects with other power structures such as class and race, and these social arrangements shape the experience of war in the narrative. Felix’s fascination with militarism and Christian aristocracy seems to stem from his desperate need to gain access to history denied to those of his race. His friendship with O’Connor, Felix’s antipode, stems from the affinities woven by their subordinate masculinities – racialized or feminized. Barnes’s marginal characters – Jews, Blacks, homosexuals and lesbians (also disqualified from war) – are no less war-wired, albeit paradoxically so. It is clear that Barnes does not condone war; yet her narrative – heavy with the premonition of WWII (Marcus) and intent to exterminate those she brings to life in her novel – has no use either for romantic love or for peace.

Not that Porter has any use for peace at the end of her novella, where the narrator’s loud irony cleaves the silence she means the reader to hear: “No more war, no more plague, only the *dazed silence* that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything” (350, my emphasis) There is no ambiguity as to the war’s irreparable damage – the war affected the capacity for mourning, essential for the creation of a future. Death got the better of everyone. The instrumentalized discourse of propaganda, preeminent in the narrative, corrupted language irreparably and transformed thinking beings into speechless ones (323). The “prefabricated language of big, empty exhortations” (Stout 31) is certainly

not the only type of discourse in the narrative. Nevertheless, the transcendent view of language and death, intimated by Albrecht Durer's print which is subtly incorporated into the narrative (Davis), and reflected by the Negro spiritual of the title sung by the two lovers, does not prevail – Miranda is unable to do the work of mourning. The discourse of love culminating in Miranda's pathetic apostrophe of Adam (350) also falls silent against the larger context of a numbed world. As Ciuba rightly observes, "The world of 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider' has lost such an awareness of transcendence" (57).

Indeed, there is no uncertainty about this loss in Porter's novella. Its chiseled and limpid, controlled and compressed language, with the elaborate juxtaposition of different discourses in the narrative, tapers off into unambiguous silence. By contrast, Barnes's novel, whose complex tropes (such as "carachresis") take the uninformed reader by surprise, offers the most ambiguous ending.⁴ In her brief last chapter, "The Possessed," Barnes brings a hiatus into the linguistic continuity of her narrative. In this chapter, which brings together Nora and Robin again in the former's chapel, the author withdraws the heavy artillery of her tropes, thus leading her prose to a rhetorical standstill. Rhetorical silence and the silence of the characters are only cleft by Robin's and the dog's barks and cries. The two women collapse, thus remaining tantalizingly proximate yet apart and unable to communicate.

In "The Possessed," which is under O'Connor's oracular prediction of an end that has in store "*nothing, but wrath and weeping!*" (233, italics in the original), impossible love, in all its unhappy splendor, and the war-wired future of mankind, in all unspeakable monstrosity, merge. In this suspended moment of near-reunion, Barnes attempts to intimate the sublime.⁵ Contrary to Porter's ending, Barnes's ending appears open-ended, though only to presage more misery and death in the offing. The formal cohesion of Porter's subtly symbolic, poised and precise language allows for a closure that naturally points to the chilling silence of death. On the contrary, Barnes's arcane, parodic and satiric language, at the intersection of modernism and postmodernism, abandons cohesion to intimate the inarticulateness of existence, as the last sounds the reader hears in *Nightwood* are Robin's and the dog's cries and whimpers. While "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" remains fixed in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, *Nightwood* portrays a world on the verge of disintegration, which corresponds remarkably well to the social and political era in which it was written, i.e. the 1930s, as Andrew Field suggests in his biography of the author (Field).

Moreover, her depiction of this world is characterized by decadent aesthetics, with an emphasis on homosexuality, the sterility of lesbianism, corporeal decay, mortality, death and above all suffering as a universal condition. Indeed, Erin Carlston, who investigated the novel's ideological affiliations with Nazism, points out that "The philosophy of the decadents, and Barnes, denies the origins of suffering in material conditions, ascribing it instead to that which is entirely beyond the power of historical, political, or scientific progress to rectify" (Carlston 56). Likewise, *Nightwood's* sensibility to Catholicism (Eliot, Carlston) suggests the acknowledgment of the profound reality of human suffering and mortality. In addition, as all the psychoanalytic interpretations of the novel have shown, the narrative is imbued with yearning for the lost maternal (and grand-maternal) object, and the return to the undifferentiated, unmediated space of the womb (Sherbert, Smith). For the orphaned, inveterate melancholics of *Nightwood* who live in and through the night, "the trauma of life" overrides all other traumas.

Unlike Barnes, Porter's vision of life is shaped by her leftist political ideas, which – in spite of her disaffection from the politics of the left in the late thirties – inspired her political activism that strove to improve social conditions. Her high modernist immaculate depiction of a transcendence-deprived world in the aftermath of WWI highlights her aversion for the institution and demonstrates the author's pacifist stance, whereas Barnes's disfigured language gropes for what Tyrus Miller calls a "mystical mode": "O'Connor, in his hermeneutic function; holds out a glimmer of hope in the mystical interpretation of the events, a reading in which the passion of suffering, written on the surface of the body of the sufferer, points to a deep hidden truth. This mystical mode [...] is the last refuge of modernism's gesture of symbolic 'rescue' in *Nightwood*" (158).

This said, Barnes's exposure of an alienating society and her critique of the war are no less sharp and far-reaching, nor is her depiction of the specter of the Great War in the text less acute. Thus the denunciation of war paradoxically remains a genuine value amid an all-pervasive pessimism and a dark vision of life that leaves no room for hope. Barnes's anti-romantic, hopeless vision of love in *Nightwood* found a good match in a life-devastating institution that proved the irrationality and destructiveness of humankind. If Porter opted for a mismatch between love and war, Barnes equally engaged with the gendered politics of war and thus undermined "the insidious and deadly division, based on sexual orientation... among women of the expatriate community" (Benstock 244). Porter's and Barnes's responses to war cast history in a larger perspective which includes a female outlook, and though they both questioned the term feminism, their literary voices did have a say in the writing of a conflict that turned human beings into expendable items.

Notes

¹ Elaine Showalter's typology of the construction of female tradition in her article "Towards a Feminist Poetics," though problematic and controversial, could be useful. Her distinction between feminine (until 1880), feminist (1880-1920) and female (from 1920 onwards), tracing the establishment of female roles in society, somewhat clarifies the terms.

² All citations from the novella refer to *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*.

³ "She had to prove to herself again and again that she could also fulfil the myth of romantic womanhood, a myth she could never reconcile with her conception of herself as an artist and superior achiever. The result was a lifelong conflict" (Stout 176).

⁴ For the use of carachresis, "a trope that stayed beyond the field of contextual determinations warranting its usage" (Singer 72), in *Nightwood* cf. Alan Singer.

⁵ For a discussion of the sublime in *Nightwood* cf. Aristi Trendel.

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