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The complexity of complicity

by Meryl Altman

Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity, by Erin G. Carlston. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 217 pp., \$39.50 hardcover.

ONE WOULD THINK that it was already established, almost a commonplace, that literature offers no safe space, no place of grace, that modernist claims to the contrary were attempts to cover a nakedness that can no longer be hidden. But it is not only bad old male New Critics of bad old male modernists who have skipped over the parts of the poem that seem the most embedded in racial tropes or political mystifications, treating innovative form as an excuse to dehistoricize and avoid examining the complicities of their favorite writers. We do it too. Erin Carlston's brilliant and unnerving book places three writers—Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Yourcenar—in the context of European fascism between the world wars. Her tightly argued insistence that we must “think fascism” and not “other” it, if we are ever to think beyond or outside of it, has made this an essential book for me and I think for the whole field.

Don't get me wrong: Carlston's enormously erudite and sophisticated book is no simplistic “j'accuse,” no attempt to sort modernists, Sapphic or otherwise, into two neat boxes, the ones who are “nice to know” and the tainted. Rather, she argues that early twentieth-century writing about sex and the body, whether coming from the Left or from the Right as we would now see it, “shared a vernacular,” a nexus of ideas about “perversion, heredity, and degenerescence” that tended to link the Jew, the homosexual, the urban, the unpatriotic, mass culture, foreigners, bourgeois liberalism and even modern rationality itself as dangerous Others, and to oppose them with attempts to recover authenticity through what she labels “organic” (mystical, romantic) tropes of blood and soil and so forth, through what Walter Benjamin called the aestheticization of politics, and through the “political use of the erotic.”

This shared set of tropes, visible in the more dicey passages of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, in Marinetti's futurist writings or Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, turns up even in the writing of those who (implicitly or explicitly, early or late) opposed fascism's political aims: and how could it be otherwise, since no writer however gifted stands outside of culture? Carlston calls into question earlier assumptions that either a modernist experimental style, a “sapphic” biography, or the sheer fact of being female, inevitably makes a writer countercultural or subversive. It is not enough to be marginal,

not enough to play: those who are marginal in some places are central enough in others.

And yes, one knew this. (Think how intertwined with eugenics Margaret Sanger was. Or how, even in Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night*, Harriet's marriage plot unfolds against the backdrop of the Third Reich's infiltration into England: “should Genius marry,” Miss Schuster-Slatt with her “astonishing flood of propaganda about the sterilization of the unfit,” isn't, or shouldn't be, simply comic relief...)

But Carlston puts it all together for the first time, at least for me. She writes with a deceptively simple eloquence that never postures and yet takes a stand, and draws from a wide and sure-footed range of reference, from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion to self-hating sexologist Otto Weininger to the Auden generation. She provides a thorough introduction to recent work on fascism and convinced me that “refusing to treat intellectual fascism seriously frequently leads to a demonization of fascist intellectuals that borders on bad faith,” as well as leading to incomplete readings, or even misreadings, of those less easily demonized. I'm especially glad she led me to Alice Yaeger Kaplan's stunningly original essay, “Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life,” and I know I have a lot more reading to do.

I FOUND CARLSTON'S FLESHING out of cultural context most helpful in the chapter on Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*. As the story of Nora's love for the mysterious Robin Vote, *Nightwood* became a lesbian cult classic; as a “poetic” text, a text where every line is dense with multiple meanings and where language experiment and the beauty of highly lacquered surfaces sometimes seem to be their own reward, it has been held up as an achievement of apolitical high modernism. By restoring connections between romantic Catholicism, decadence, fascist discourses of degeneration and sterility, and modernist rejections of rationality, Carlston reminds us what both these ways of reading uneasily leave out and explains much that has seemed mystifying: the characterization of Robin as “infected carrier of the past,” the flirtation with stereotype in the portrait of the Jew, Felix, as “heavy with impermissible blood,” the metaphoric resonances of madonnas and dolls, and the prevalence, in the harangues of Dr. Matthew Mighty-Grain-of-Sand

O'Connor, of a “medical model that conflates...significations.”

Feminist readers have often looked away from these elements in rejecting homophobic readings of *Nightwood* as a collection of grotesque and freakish misfits; while Carlston does see Barnes and other lesbian modernists like Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney as turning the discourses of decadence to their own uses, *Nightwood*, she says, “cannot be said to have a purely oppositional relation to fascism, and, indeed, the novel mimics many of fascism's favorite tropes.”

She does see signs of “resistance to fascism” in the novel's non-mimetic style, and its denial of any “outside” to the world of the damned: “Just as there is no organic, unmediated, ‘healthy’ style in *Nightwood*, there are also no healthy human beings, with an unmediated relation to blood, history, or culture...If *Nightwood* is antifascist, it is so not because it opposed the absent Aryan superman, but because it denies that he exists, or ever could.” Carlston rejects Jane Marcus' assertion that the novel is a “feminist-anarchist call for freedom from fascism” as clearly as she rejects Shari Benstock's criticisms of Barnes, Barney and Vivien for borrowing tropes of decadence from male writers. She simply does not give us a reassuring handle on how to take Barnes' “mimicry” of fascism, refusing either to “save” or to “damn” the book, to offer us any easy way out of our own complicity with it. This makes all kinds of sense.

However, when I turned to the chapter on Marguerite Yourcenar, the highly respected historical novelist and first woman to be admitted to the French Academy, I found this balance hard to maintain. The problem wasn't with Carlston's nuanced and subtle reading of Yourcenar's texts and career, focused especially on the two versions of *Denier du rêve* (*A Coin in Nine Hands*), an account of the failures of human relationships, political and personal, set in Mussolini's Rome. It's a good chapter. Again I learned a lot of history and was impressed by Carlston's ability to provide a depth and richness of context in a small space. No, the problem was that, since of the three writers included I knew almost nothing about Yourcenar, I undertook actually to read some of her novels before reading Carlston's chapter.

I came away in a blind rage. I had had some vague notion of Yourcenar as a high-brow Mary Renault, a master stylist, a lesbian who explored lesbianism obliquely by writing about male homosexual relationships and by setting some of her work in the classical period. Since I tend to like these things, I expected to like her. Nothing had prepared me for what I encountered in *Alexis* (1929), *Coup de Grace* (1939) and *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951): blatant, unapologetic anti-Semitism and the eroticization of a chilly, brutal form of male sexual power, linked to war and violence, dismissive of women and other lower forms of life, masked by an infuriating “classical” calm.

I turned to biography and autobiography, hoping to learn that I was misreading, but, alas, there were problems there, too... The smug assertion in the 1971 preface to *Denier du rêve* that the 1934 edition was the first book to speak out against Mussolini is pretty hard to stomach; Carlston's comprehensive demonstration that most of the anti-fascist elements it contains were added in the 1959 revision, which Yourcenar falsely asserts was minimal and purely stylistic, made it even harder.

Now, arguably this woman is a “major figure” in twentieth-century literature, which is supposedly my field. *Why didn't I*

know any of this before? Carlston's reading is, as I said, much more nuanced and mature than mine; she does find some marks of resistance as well as complicity. But my scandalous ignorance (for which I mostly blame myself) shows more than anything else how crucial work like Carlston's is.

THE CHAPTER ON “Virginia Woolf's Disloyalty” is both solid and sensible, but I found it less intellectually earthshaking than the others, perhaps because I already agreed that *Three Guineas*' analysis of the links between fascism in the polis and authoritarian patriarchy in the home was prescient to an uncanny degree, and because I already had the habit of reading Woolf within a leftist context, as Carlston does here. She adds to the discussion of Woolf's complicated class politics, but doesn't flatten Woolf out or turn her into an ordinary prose writer, which can sometimes happen with political readings.

Maybe what I respect about Carlston's book is one of the things I most love about Woolf herself: love of language's own myriad movements, appreciation of textual complexity, do not lead to a simple hands-off attitude to ethics and politics. Her music is not play but deadly earnest. Torture is not a trope. It happened, it's happening now. Careful as Carlston is not to canonize or demonize, and clear as she is that we must not compare different intellectual strategies in the 1930s as though any of them, or better ones, could have prevented the camps, Woolf's attempt to “put the body back into materialist discourse” is clearly, for her, a better answer than Barnes' aestheticism or Yourcenar's conservative brand of liberalism, and I cannot disagree.

Toward the end, Carlston seems to feel an impulse to draw her three writers closer together, and finds one point of similarity in all three: a critique of fascist politics around the maternal body. Her discussion is plausible, but I finished the book still feeling that these three don't have much in common, at least not much that they don't share with everyone else writing at the time. It is perhaps not surprising, and not a flaw; just because all are women, all are sort of lesbians (different sorts) and all wrote at the same time does not commit them all to be writing the same thing.

And yet, considering the subtitle, Carlston's book ends up concluding strikingly little about either “Sapphic modernism,” or “Sapphism” as such. I can't help comparing the Barnes chapter with Carolyn Allen's recent *Following Djuna*, which I also admire, and which takes “reading lesbian” as the center; I have to ask myself, are these two excellent analyses about the same book? This may just indicate that Carlston is right in her final caveat: “Like fascism itself, *Nightwood* seems to pose a fascinating, seductive, and perilous challenge to those of us who approach it again and again, armed with every critical weapon at our disposal, only to find that it slips through our hermeneutic nets.” Or it may indicate a rift in our theory which we have yet to learn to leap over.

Especially with Barnes, I feel that Carlston's concentration on fascist tropes made it harder to see the lesbians in and of the text, and also harder for her to say much conclusively about modernism as a way of writing. Of course, this is in a way her point, since we've used both of these as excuses for not noticing the politics of fascism in and around the texts, especially of Yourcenar and Barnes. What she has done here ought to make that impossible in the future. That's why this is in my mind an absolutely indispensable book. ❧

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