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**Recommended Citation**


The complexity of拥挤

by Meryl Altman

Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity, by Erin G. Carlson.

We would think that it was already established, almost a common place, that literature offers no safe space, no place of grace, that modernist claims to the contrary are demystified to cover a nakeder that can no longer be hidden. But it is not only bad old Male New Critics of bad old male modernists who have gotten over the parts of the porn which seem the most embedded in racial tropes or political mystifications, treating innovative form as an excuse to diagnostize and avoid examining the complicity of their favorite writers. We do it too. Erin Carlson’s brilliant and unerring book places three writers—Dyana 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 were ever to think beyond or outside of it, has made this an essential book for me and for the whole field. Don’t get me wrong: Carlson’s emorously erudite and sophisticated book is no simplistic “j’accuse,” no attempt to sort modernists, Sapphic or otherwise, into two neat boxes, the ones which 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, heresy, and degeneracy” that tended to link the Jew, the homosexual, the urban, the unarticiated, mass culture, foreigners, bourgeois liberalism and even innocent, decent, wholesome others, and to oppose them with attempts to recover authenticity through what she labels “organic” (mythical, 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 diey passages of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, in Maritain’s feminist writings or Max Nordau’s Degeneration, were present even in the writing of those who (implicitly or explicitly, early or late) opposed fascism’s political aims: and often otherwise, since no writer however gifted stands outside of culture? Carlson calls into ques- tion earlier assumptions that either a mod- ernist experimental style, a “sapphic” biogra- phy, or the sheer fact of being female, inevitably makes a writer counterrevolutionary or subversive. It is not enough to be margin, not enough to play: those who are mar- ginal in some places are central enough in others. And yes, one knew this. (Think how in- teresting it was that Achilles Sanger-Sage was. Or, how even in Dorothy Sayers’ Gaudy Night, Harriet’s marriage plot un- folds against the backdrop of the Third Reich.) But, though not that clear, Europe’s: “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 Carlson puts it all together for the first time, at least for me. She writes with a deceptively simple eloquence that the passages and yet takes a stand, and draws from a wide and sure-footed range of refer- ence, from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion to self-hating existentialist Wittgenstein to the Auden generation. She provides a thorough introduction to recent work on fasci- sm and convinced me that “refusing to treat fascist fascism seriously fre- quently leads to a demonization of fascist in- tellectuals that borders on bad faith,” as well as to incomplete readings, or even misconceptions, of those less easily denounced. I’m especially glad she led me to Alice Yeae- keri’s startling original essay, “Re- productions of Banality: Fascist, Litera- ture, and French Intellectual Life,” and I know I have a lot more reading to do.

I found Carlson’s prelims out of cul- tural context most helpful in the chapter on Dyana Barnes’ Nightwood. As the story of the mysterious Robin Vote, Nightwood became a lesbian cult classic; as a “poetic” text, a text where every line is designed for multiple meanings and where language experiment and the beauty of highly laquered surfaces some- times seem to be its own reward, it has been held up as a model for apoli- tical high modernism. But restoring connec- tions between romantic Catholicism, deca- dance, fascist discourses of degeneration and Zionism, the author finds that Robin Vote, Nightwood became a lesbian cult classic; as a “poetic” text, a text where every line is designed for multiple meanings and where language experiment and the beauty of highly laquered surfaces sometimes seem to be its own reward, it has been held up as a model for apolitical high modernism. But restoring connec- tions between romantic Catholicism, deca- dance, fascist discourses of degeneration and Zionism, Carlson reminds us what both these ways of reading unecessarily leave out and explains much that has seemed mysti- fying: the characterization of Robin as “in- fected carrier of the past,” the flirtation with stereotype in the portrait of the Jew, Felix, “with hemorrhage of blood,” the metaphoric resonances of madonnas and dolls, and the prevalence, in the runagres of Dr. Matthew Mighty-Grain of Sand O’Connor, of a “medical model that con- flates significations.”

Female thinkers have often looked away from these elements in reject as complicating the rather more satisfyingly scandalous ignorance (for which I mostly blame myself) shows more than anything else how crucial work like Carlson’s is.

The chapter on “Virginia Woolf’s Disloyalty” is both solid and sensitively written, a profound and very earthshaking than the others, perhaps because I already knew that Three Guineas’ analysis of the links between fascism in the political sphere and the family at home was present to an uncanny degree, and because I had already the habit of reading Woolf in that leftist context, as Carlston’s book 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 some- times happen with political readings. Maybe what I respect about Carlson’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- over that the book is not play but deadly earnest. Torture is not a trope. It happened, it’s happening now. Careful as Carlson is not to canonize or de- mystify herwork, she does 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 the materialist discourse” is clearly, for her, a better answer than Barnes’ aestheticism or Yourcenar’s conservative brand of liberal- ism, and I cannot disagree.

Toward the end, Carlson seems to feel an impulse to draw her three writers closer together. She is inclined to bracket all three 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 to a single vision of what it means to be a woman writer. And yet, considering the subtitle, Carl- son’s book ends up concluding strikingly little about either “Sapphic modernism,” or “Socialist sexual politics” as envis- aging the Barnes chapter with Carolyn Al- len’s recent Following Dyanna, which I also admire, and which is in some ways another as a virulent, as well as a sexual, of the kind,” as the center, have to ask myself, are there two more excellent analyses about the same book? This may just indicate that Carlson is right in her final caveat: “Like fascism it- self, Nightwood seems to pose a fascinat- ing, seductive, and perilous challenge to those who approach it again and again, armed with every critical convention at our disposal, only to find that it slips through our hermeneutic nets.” Or it may indicate that in a theory which we have yet to learn to leap over. Especially with Barnes, I feel that Carl- son’s concentration on fascist tropes made me lose sight of the book as a whole. She has done this text, and also harder for her to say much conclusively about modernism as a way of thinking about these writers. At the same point, since we’ve used both of these as excuses for not noticing the politics of fasci- sm in and around the texts, especially of Yourcenar and Barnes, then perhaps we should have here ought to make that impossible in the future. That’s why this is in my mind an absolutely indispensable book.