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Portraits of the *garçonne* as artist: gender and creativity in French fiction of the *années folles*

Abstract

This article examines a series of popular and middlebrow works of fiction from the 1920s which represent the *garçonne* (the flapper, or androgynous, emancipated young woman) as artist. Challenging the popular view of the *années folles* as a period of relatively relaxed social conventions and gender norms, it shows that far from embracing female creativity, the authors of the period took pains to link it to moral and aesthetic deviance. Having considered what the representation of female creativity in novels by Berthe Bernage, Victor Margueritte and Marcel Prévost can tell us about gender in the 1920s, I go on to examine novels by the art critics André Warnod and François Fosca, who use the figure of the *garçonne* as artist to air art-critical positions about the modernist art produced in Montparnasse, especially by members of the École de Paris. Whereas Warnod represents his female artist as a victim of a modernism linked with the foreign and the 'primitive', in Fosca's novel the female painter is a more threatening figure: an agent of a modernism whose attacks on the female body (in the form of the conventional academic nude) are in turn echoed in a broader 'troubling' of gendered and aesthetic categories.

Cet article considère des romans populaires publiés dans les années 20 qui représentent la garçonne (femme androgyne et émancipée) en tant qu'artiste – avec pour but de s'interroger sur le mythe des 'années folles', qu'on a tendance à imaginer comme une époque de mœurs libérées. Loin d'accueillir l'art des femmes à bras ouverts, les auteurs de l'époque ont fait tout leur possible pour lier leur activité créatrice à la décadence morale et esthétique. En premier lieu, nous considérerons ce que peut nous dire la représentation de la créativité féminine dans des romans de Berthe Bernage, Victor Margueritte et Marcel Prévost à propos de la 'morale des sexes' dans les années 20. Nous lirons ensuite des romans publiés par les critiques d'art André Warnod et François Fosca, qui se servent du personnage de la garçonne-artiste pour exprimer leurs positions critiques vis-à-vis de l'art moderniste associé à Montparnasse et à l'École de Paris. Alors que Warnod représente la femme peintre comme victime d'un art moderniste qu'il considère comme 'primitif' et 'étranger', dans le roman de Fosca elle devient l'agent d'un modernisme dont l'attentat au corps féminin (sous la forme de l'académie conventionnelle) trouve son écho dans une interrogation plus large des catégories du genre et de l'esthétique.

Keywords: *garçonne*, flapper, women artists, modernist art, primitive, art novel, art criticism

In the popular imagination, the 1920s in France are figured as an age of post-war liberation, of loosened social mores, of jazz, drinking and dancing, and of a new female emancipation. This notion of the *années folles* appears to be embodied in the *garçonne*, a figure broadly equivalent to the Anglo-American 'flapper': a young, economically independent and sexually liberated girl about town, who sports bobbed hair and follows the latest androgynous fashions, and who drinks, smokes, and parties hard. In all of these respects, the *garçonne* seems to signify a departure from a staid era of fixed gender roles and traditional sexual moralities, standing instead for a newly open, optimistic age of opportunity and change.[1] If, however, the *années folles* were themselves something of a myth (Birnbaum 2011, 7–8; Millan, Rigby and Forbes 1995, 62), the *garçonne* was, equally, a fiction, who emerged from Victor Margueritte's 1922 bestseller *La Garçonne*. Mary Louise Roberts, in her book *Civilization without Sexes*, delivers a penetrating analysis of the 'symbolic work' performed by Margueritte's and others' representations of the *garçonne* in interwar fiction, showing that these functioned to articulate and ultimately appease anxieties around shifts in gender roles which seemed in turn to herald a broader crisis in postwar French culture (1994, 4). What the existing scholarship has tended to overlook, however, is that the *garçonne* as she appears in fiction texts of the 1920s is often an artist: a painter, or alternatively one of the new breed of *décoratrices* associated with the burgeoning Art Deco movement.[2] This article therefore proposes to examine how the creative activity of the *garçonne* is represented in novels of the period – and how this creative activity serves simultaneously as an emblem of the modern woman's emancipation and as a cipher for anxieties about what that emancipation might entail. Alongside asking what representations of the *garçonne* as artist can tell us about gender in the 1920s, I also ask what they reveal about art and its reception: about women artists and their work, about Art Deco, and about modernist painting.

By the late nineteenth century, ever-greater numbers of women were training as painters, at the École des Beaux-Arts (which admitted women from 1897) and at private ateliers such as the Académie Julian (Fehrer 1994). Women increasingly pursued careers as artists, and formed organizations such as the Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs (founded in 1881), and the Syndicat des femmes peintres et sculpteurs (1904); they held their own exhibitions under the auspices of these organizations, as well as entering Salon competitions where they were able to exhibit alongside male artists. As Gill Perry (1995, 1–8) has demonstrated, however, the early twentieth-century critical reception of women artists' work tended to foreground gender as a critical factor, obsessively policing its 'masculine' and 'feminine' aspects, and treating women's art as distinct from that of men (and, therefore, implicitly inferior). In previously published research ([reference redacted]) I have also demonstrated that fiction about the visual arts published in this period follows a similar

pattern: while writers of fiction may appear on the surface to be receptive to the work of women artists, this apparent openness masks an acute discomfort around female creativity, a persistent belief that art is fundamentally masculine, and a corresponding sense that women's incursions into the art world may result in a generalized aesthetic crisis.

The exclusionary gender politics of male-dominated modernist and avant-garde circles are already well known thanks to the work of scholars such as Suleiman (1990), Tickner (1992), and Duncan (1993). The present article thus focuses on authors of texts aimed at popular and middlebrow audiences, with the aim of establishing whether manœuvres calculated to contain or dismiss female creativity are exclusive to modernist elites, or whether they gain a broader currency in the *années folles*. In the first instance, I shall review a number of popular texts, by Berthe Bernage, Victor Margueritte, and Marcel Prévost, dealing with *garçonnes* who happen to be artists, and note the way in which art is framed as a dangerous, potentially corrupting activity for young women – a view which of course reinforces the notion of art as an essentially masculine territory, and which may also be seen to reflect the dominant, reactionary discourses of the postwar period in which *any* form of work carried out by women outside the home was potentially contentious because it diverted energy from women's 'real' duties, especially motherhood. Following this, I review two novels by art critics, André Warnod's *Lina de Montparnasse* (1928), and François Fosca's *Derechef* (1927), showing that both use the creative activity of their female protagonists as a way to articulate art-critical positions relating specifically to modernist art. While Warnod positions his vulnerable female painter Lina as a victim of a modernism that is not only masculine but also identified with pernicious foreign influences, Fosca's female protagonist is both the agent and the emblem of a modernism associated with various kinds of otherness: the foreign, the primitive, and a deviant or monstrous femininity.

Conservative *garçonnes*

In the immediate postwar period, French women were the subject of an intensive propaganda campaign which promoted traditional models of femininity defined in terms of marriage and motherhood. Many women who had worked outside the home during the war were summarily dismissed; laws were passed to not only ban abortion but limit the dissemination of information about abortion and contraception; any hopes that women might be granted the right to vote, as they had in other European countries, quickly faded as 'the war period refocused the emphasis on the collective goal of the nation rather than on the rights of the individual, undermining women's arguments for their rights as citizens and repositioning them as mothers, wives and symbols of the nation' (Holmes 1996, 109). Hysteria caused by an apparent demographic crisis (already a major worry before the war), and a concern that too many women were favouring entry into the world of work above the domestic duties of the

housewife and mother, sustained a wealth of conservative discourse fretting about the demise of traditional values and the prospect of what Drieu la Rochelle envisaged as a decadent civilization without sexes.[3]

Nevertheless, many bourgeois families were worried about what the future might look like for their daughters: given that 1.4 million French soldiers did not return from the war, would they be able to find husbands at all? And, given the perilous state of the French economy and the erosion of many families' fortunes, what would happen if they could not provide them with a dowry, or support them in the event that they did not marry? With these concerns in mind, even the most conservative commentators began to acknowledge that women may have to work to support themselves, and that there may be various types of appropriate work in which they could engage should they fail to follow the conventional path of marriage and motherhood – which was, of course, still held up as the ideal (Roberts 1994, 183). This resulted in a number of educational reforms helping to prepare women for the world of work, including a move towards a standardized curriculum for both male and female students at *baccalauréat* level, in 1924; it also manifested itself in a number of works of narrative fiction which treated women's work through a relatively sympathetic lens.

One key example of this was Berthe Bernage's *Brigitte* series, first published in serialized form in the Catholic youth magazine *Les Veillées des chaumières* in 1925, and then collected together in a first volume as *Brigitte jeune fille, jeune femme* in 1928. This first volume, which is my focus here, was awarded the Prix Sobrier-Arnould (the Académie française prize for youth fiction) in 1930 and was continued in thirty-one further *Brigitte* novels published by Bernage before her death in 1972. The original text was conceived by the editors of the *Les Veillées des chaumières* as providing a positive, healthy role model for young women, and as Daniela di Cecco observes (2009, 549), Brigitte is thus a kind of 'safe', unthreatening iteration of the *garçonne*: independent and outgoing, athletic and well-educated, she is nevertheless chaste, modest, and fundamentally wedded to conservative values.

While Bernage's novel explicitly promotes a conservative Catholic agenda (with Brigitte as narrator frequently talking about motherhood as a sacred duty to church and country), the text also acknowledges that things have changed since the war, that young women enjoy more independence, and that they both need and want to plan careers. Brigitte desires marriage and motherhood but chooses a career as a decorative artist as a backup, because it will allow her to earn a living and, she believes, will fill the hole left by husband and children: 'Mais si je ne dois être ni madame, ni maman, j'essaierai de devenir une artiste, une vraie artiste. Les couleurs de ma palette mettront un arc-en-ciel à l'horizon pâle de ma vie sans amour' (Bernage [1928] 1995, 19). Enriching though it may be, art is also framed in the novel as a potentially dangerous course for young women. At her art class, Brigitte meets

‘Arabella, une étrangère futile comme un oiseau’, who casually asks her if she might go to Montmartre (a Bohemian den of iniquity if ever there was one) for her birthday. Brigitte is fortunately resistant to the temptations offered by the foreign – and, implicitly, promiscuous – young woman: she archly replies, ‘Les jeunes filles françaises ne vont pas à Montmartre, ma chère’, and proceeds to deliver a brief lecture on the value of family life and hard work (9). Brigitte’s severe aunt Marthe is also against her career choice, viewing art as a corrupting force. As she visits an exhibition of modernist art with Brigitte, she observes:

> De mon temps, une jeune fille bien élevée faisait surtout du piano; elle peignait des fleurs à l’aquarelle pour orner quelques éventails, des boîtes de bonbons. Voilà tout. Elle ne serait point allée dans ces ateliers de peinture, mal fréquentés, et elle n’aurait point perdu son temps à gribouiller des horreurs. (Bernage [1928] 1995, 23)

In Marthe’s view, the space of the studio is itself potentially corrupting, frequented by morally dubious characters; domestic arts and crafts are more appropriate choice of activity for a well-bred young lady. Brigitte responds to Marthe’s argument by defending the modernist art that the latter dismisses as ‘des horreurs’ – and yet her choice of a career in decorative art cements the text’s conservative position: her work emerges naturally from the embroidery she does as a pastime; it is appropriately based in domestic space, rather than the threatening space of the studio; and it corresponds to the well-established association between women’s art and decoration.[4] Much as she professes to admire it, she leaves the masculine terrain of modernist easel painting to the men.

In the event, Brigitte does get married, to a religious painter whose work henceforth takes priority, while she abandons her artistic career to sacrifice herself to her family. Later, she briefly takes up tools again, when the family encounters financial difficulties, and she finds work such as designing wallpaper for children. This allows her work as an artist and as a mother to merge unproblematically, but quickly falls by the wayside once the family are on a more even keel. Meanwhile, Brigitte’s counterpart and rival, ‘cette pauvre belle Françoise à laquelle j’ai disputé le cœur d’Olivier, et qui se console comme une vaillante en travaillant encore plus, encore mieux’ (Bernage [1928] 1995, 140) continues to pursue an artistic career but is treated with thinly veiled pity, for despite her successes it is Brigitte who is deemed to have won the real prize, in her husband and children. Brigitte’s artistic background – along with her education and independent-mindedness – may help to position her as a version of the ‘newly constructed’ middle-class housewife that, in Robert Frost’s analysis (1993, 120–21), emerged in the interwar period as a synthesis or compromise between the *garçonne* and the traditional image of the ill-educated, bovine *femme au foyer*. Within the conservative moral schema of Bernage’s text, however, marriage and motherhood always come first: art is merely a temporary diversion, a means to a financial end, or a consolation prize.

A similar position is articulated through Victor Margueritte's *La Garçonne* and its sequels. *La Garçonne* was an enormous hit, selling over a million copies by the end of the 1920s; Anne-Marie Sohn (1972, 8) estimates that between twelve and twenty-five per cent of the French adult population read it. Despite its popular success, the novel's explicit treatment of female sexuality also caused a scandal which resulted in its author being stripped of the Légion d'honneur (Hewitt 1982), and it was widely condemned by critics on both sides of the political spectrum, including by feminists who worried that the link established in the text between female sexuality and emancipation might bring the movement into disrepute, or even corrupt impressionable young girls (Sohn 1972, 19; Bard 1998, 69–71). Certainly, making such a link ran counter to the pronatalist discourses of the period, with their persistent emphasis on the framework of the nuclear family and the importance of female sexuality put to the service of procreation. As Roberts (1994, 54) notes, however, the text's radicalism – its apparent celebration of female emancipation, its criticism of the institution of marriage – is only skin deep.

The *garçonne*'s activity as a *décoratrice* is initially used as a means of emphasizing the value of her independence and creative self-realization, but Margueritte ultimately transforms her creative trajectory into a moral downfall that can only be remedied through a renouncement of art and a corresponding return to traditional models of femininity. The heroine, Monique Lerbier, becomes a *décoratrice* after breaking with her cheating fiancé and her corrupt family. The terms in which she explains her career choice to a friend make it clear that her motives are primarily pragmatic:

> […] je sens bien que c'est dans le travail, et dans le travail seul que je trouverai un allégement au boulet que je traîne!… Peut-être vais-je donc essayer de revenir, avec plus de continuité, à mes essais d'autrefois… Vous vous souvenez peut-être des petites compositions auxquelles je m'amusais, du temps que je n'avais rien à faire? J'ai repris mes ébauchoirs, mes pinceaux… Je dessine même quelques modèles d'ameublement, je peins des étoffes…
>
> On me conseille, comme un métier pas trop encombré encore, la décoration. J'ai envie aussi d'y adjoindre, grâce à l'argent de ma tante, un magasin d'objets d'art anciens… Je crois que je trouverai là, en même temps que de quoi achever de gagner ma vie, une occupation, – et, qui sait, un divertissement. (Margueritte [1922] 1948, 160)

Monique emphasizes the salutary value of work, as a distraction from her past traumas; she also reminds her friend that she had already done some decorative art as a young woman. As for Bernage's Brigitte, then, Monique's work as an interior designer emerges naturally out of a pastime that was seen as wholly appropriate for young bourgeois girls, and is safely positioned within the 'feminine' domestic sphere. The vocabulary of vocation, or of artistic genius, is entirely absent here: Monique becomes an artist not out of any irrepressible desire

for self-expression, not because some innate instinct or talent drive her, but simply because she needs, for reasons both practical and psychological, to work.

Monique may initially envision her creative work as a form of moral redemption, but rather than keeping her cloistered away in safe domestic spaces, it comes instead to expose her to a host of temptations. Having distanced herself from her corrupt haut-bourgeois family, her work as an artist then forces her into contact with an artistic milieu that Margueritte explicitly associates with illicit sex (especially homosexuality), drugs, and jazz. The decadence of this milieu is emphasized not only through a series of lurid scenes but through a critique of decoration itself, which as Élodie Lacroix di Méo notes (2012, 268) was associated in the early twentieth century with superficiality (as in Adolphe Loos's 1908 *Crime et ornement*), and in the interwar period came to be bound up with a broader malaise about luxury commodities and the cosmopolitan elites who consumed them.[5] Recognizing that her work obliges her to 'collaborer au bien-être et à la vanité de ces mufles' and that it is an 'œuvre superflue' (Margueritte [1922] 1948, 228), Monique wonders whether she might find fulfilment elsewhere:

> L'amour? Elle n'y croyait plus. L'art, tel que son habileté le pratiquait, qu'était-ce? Une distraction, oui… L'illusion de n'être pas tout à fait une inutile… Tandis qu'un enfant! Créer de l'action, de la pensée, – de la vie!… Orgueilleusement elle salua la lueur d'aurore, l'idée rédemptrice… Un enfant! Une compagnie et un but de toutes les heures! (Margueritte [1922] 1948, 200–1)

With a certain predictability, then, motherhood turns out to be Monique's real destiny: the creative activity in which she engages is represented as a poor substitute for the procreativity which should by rights be her principal occupation. And yet, her work as an artist having placed her in a world of subversive otherness, Monique finds herself to be stripped of her essential femininity, that is to say her fertility. The *garçonne* – the deviant androgyne – is no longer a 'real' woman, and can only be one if she changes her ways. It should come as no surprise, then, that Monique is eventually reformed, and in Margueritte's sequel *Le Compagnon* (1923) we find her happily married and, having grown out that boyish crop, a devoted mother of two children.

If in *Brigitte* art is associated with the vaguely louche space of the atelier, *La Garçonne* goes further in figuring art as a veritable gateway drug leading to a variety of threats and forms of otherness: deviant sexualities, drug use, jazz (itself closely associated with exoticism and the primitive), and a cosmopolitanism frequently seen, in the reactionary discourses of the interwar period, as a scourge of French civilization (Di Méo 2008). One of the messages that emerges from these novels is thus that nice bourgeois families should do their utmost to keep their daughters away from the corrupting influence of art, in all forms

other than the most domestic and innocuous. Marcel Prévost's *Les Don Juanes*, the other bestseller of 1922, also advances a thesis along these lines, as it discusses the fate of a number of female characters who, like Margueritte's eponymous *garçonne*, are held to have strayed onto masculine territory, both in terms of their attitudes to love and sex, and in terms of their professional activities. The novel opens at a jazz club, which Prévost holds up as an emblem of a postwar 'crise de l'esprit' characterized by chaos, uncertainty, and the disintegration of traditional French culture (Prévost 1922, 7–14). Of the central female characters, one (Camille) is a banker who fought in the war, one (Berthe) a writer, and one, Albine, a painter; all are ultimately punished for their transgressions against 'la morale des sexes'. Camille and Berthe have their sins against femininity writ large over their bodies: Camille is repeatedly described as physically ravaged and unlovable, while Berthe discovers a mysterious physical defect that makes her not fully woman: nature, we are told, has left her 'inachevée' (Prévost 1922, 247), and she complains to Albine, 'Jamais je ne serai un être comme toi… Ni pour être mère, ni pour être aimée' (243). The twin imperatives of heterosexual love and motherhood are denied; the postwar crisis of traditional gender roles is figured in terms of Berthe's deviant, implicitly intersex body, echoing the infertile body of Margueritte's *garçonne*.

However, it is the trajectory of the *garçonne* or '*Don Juane*' as artist that interests us particularly here. Albine is herself of dubious, *déclassé* origins, since she is the illegitimate daughter of a well-known painter and his model. She has worked her way into the aristocracy via marriage, and although she is described as an artist, she no longer practices – indeed, has stepped back from any sort of creative activity: 'Les arts qu'elle a abordés en amateur, musique, peinture, poésie, elle a montré qu'elle y excellerait, si sa discrétion de grande dame ne lui défendait pas de concourir avec les artistes' (Prévost 1922, 89). It would be unseemly for a woman of Albine's stature to seek to compete with artists – that is, presumably, with male artists – and so she remains an amateur, and there are no descriptions of her paintings or other creative activities in the novel, beyond the close description of her tastefully arranged domestic interiors. At the beginning of the novel, then, it looks like Albine's activity as an artist has been appropriately contained. However, Albine is hiding a major transgression, as Prévost's initial summary of her life story indicates:

> Fille de Pierre de Mestrot, gentilhomme artiste, et d'un modèle; adolescence libre, voyage suspect à l'étranger, dès dix-huit ans, avec une amie douteuse, cette Henriquette Dupont qui lui enseigna la peinture. Au cours de la randonnée, mariage soudain avec un grand seigneur moldave… Veuve, des années galantes à Paris et en Europe. (Prévost 1922, 65)

Here Prévost immediately engages our curiosity regarding her mysterious 'voyage suspect' – which, as it eventually turns out, was undertaken to hide an illegitimate pregnancy. Albine

will at the end of the novel receive the ultimate punishment for this, when the man she loves turns out to be her abandoned illegitimate child. More crucially for our purposes, this transgression is from the outset linked to her artistic background, and to her creative activity. It is her morally dubious, female art teacher who oversees her corruption, travelling abroad with her to conceal the child; growing up in a permissive artistic milieu, Albine has an 'adolescence libre'. Later in the novel, she admits that she was insufficiently supervised, and that she was allowed to 'sortir seule, faire des parties avec des jeunes gens, recevoir comme une femme dans mon atelier' (Prévost 1922, 174): as in *Brigitte*, the studio appears as a particularly potent magnet for suspicious types and for deviant behaviour. In a postwar cultural context in which bourgeois parents fretted over the new freedoms enjoyed by young women (Roberts 1994, 185), Prévost's novel delivers a stern warning that frames young women's artistic activity, if not as a form of deviance in itself, then as inevitably disturbing 'la morale des sexes', which the novel ultimately works to uphold and entrench.

Modernism and gender trouble

Bernage, Margueritte and Prévost all approach the visual arts as a way into debates around gender in the post-war period, and conclude that women's creative activity needs to be very closely monitored and contained. Art is used in these texts as a convenient emblem of female self-realization, dangerous precisely because it is linked to the expression of the instinctive self and of hidden desires, beyond patriarchal control, but also because it is indelibly associated with 'Bohemian' outsiderdom and moral deviance. These popular authors tend to engage with aesthetics insofar as it reflects broader societal tendencies: hence the focus, in Margueritte's novels, on 'decadent' decoration, which is placed in opposition to a clean, healthy, vigorous art representative of a new hope for postwar society (Margueritte 1923, 101–5). The art critics André Warnod and François Fosca bring a different perspective to their fictional representations of the *garçonne* as artist, using the latter not only to work through anxieties about gender, but to articulate art-critical positions relating especially to modernism, which both critics identify with the foreign and the primitive but whose gendered characteristics vary according to each author's rhetorical aims.

Warnod was an illustrator, novelist and art critic chiefly remembered for popularizing the term 'École de Paris' to refer to modernist artists of foreign (especially Jewish) extraction, working in Paris in the postwar period.[6] He was, on the face of it, sympathetic to these painters and to modernist art more generally, although his attitude to women artists appears to have been more sceptical. In his 1925 review of modern art, *Les Berceaux de la jeune peinture* (Warnod 1925, 227), he claims that women artists merely express 'leur sentimentalité et leur état d'âme', and queries the value of this, asking, 'C'est gentil, mais est-ce quelque chose en plus?' Going on to examine the work of individual women painters in

more detail, in an apparent attempt to take them seriously, he nevertheless persistently assesses them in terms of 'masculine' and 'feminine' attributes. He states, for instance, that Émilie Charmy's painting is 'masculine, vigoureuse, brutale même parfois; mais ce qui est d'une femme, c'est la sensualité avec laquelle l'artiste sait faire épanouir sur une toile des roses vivantes dans la lumière' (228) while Alice Halicka is 'une artiste au tempérament viril si sa sensibilité reste très féminine' (230). While the attribution of 'masculine' characteristics to these painters and their work may seem to indicate a willingness to treat them on equal terms with male artists, Warnod's expectation that such characteristics should be balanced with reassuringly 'feminine' attributes makes it clear that they are held to quite different standards.

Warnod's novel *Lina de Montparnasse*, however, appears to paint a rather more positive picture of female creativity. The novel traces the artistic career of Lina, a young working-class girl who falls in with the Montparnasse art crowd. At the beginning of the novel, she has no real ambitions to be a painter: she works in a factory making dolls (an activity that often seems to have been viewed by male authors of the period as an appropriate scale of creative activity for women).[7] It is only once she meets her lover, the painter Ossip Aprim, that she moves beyond the mechanical activity of the factory and begins to develop creatively:

> Elle essayait de reproduire sur le papier la forme des objets qu'elle voyait et le démon de la peinture entrait en elle. Elle connut la volupté d'avoir l'illusion de se donner toute entière en étalant de la couleur sur la toile blanche. Ossip Aprim, son amant, la poussait à peindre. Leur amour devenait ainsi plus vif et les unissait davantage. Lina sentait orgueilleusement naître sa personnalité; elle en éprouvait une joie nouvelle qui lui paraissait prodigieuse. (Warnod 1928, 15–16)

This passage is interesting for a number of reasons: firstly because the creative impulse, if not originating from the male painter, is at least nurtured by him, a notion corresponding to what Carol Duncan describes (1993, 98) as a predominant early twentieth-century understanding that 'the wellsprings of authentic art are fed by the streams of male libidinous energy'. Lina's creativity is closely bound up here with heterosexual love and romantic fulfillment, and therefore seems dependent on their relationship. And yet Lina is not entirely passive, and Warnod draws attention, in particular, to the development of her 'personnalité', a term usually used by critics to connote male genius (along with terms such as 'tempérament' and 'force', whereas *peinture féminine* tended to invite attributions of 'grâce', 'charme', 'délicatesse', or 'sensualité', as we have seen).[8]

Lina's creative activity appears to be taken reasonably seriously, then, and while it may begin with toy dolls there is no attempt to relegate it to the comfortably 'feminine' realm

of the domestic or the decorative – or, as in Warnod's critical writing, to police its gendered characteristics. What is more problematic as the novel goes on, however, is the coupling between Ossip and Lina: Warnod presents Ossip as wild, violent foreigner whose lack of precise origins, beyond his Jewishness, are unknown, making him even more of a troubling figure. Warnod's highly caricatured portrait of Ossip as a savage with a 'tête de singe' (Warnod 1928, 11) positions him as a threat to the delicate Lina – much like Montparnasse, which is at once portrayed as a locus of artistic freedom and innocent pleasures, and at the same time a dangerously, disorientatingly cosmopolitan 'carrefour du monde' or 'Babel' (7–8). Within this hive of foreign influences, Lina herself represents a pure Frenchness that must be protected: Warnod figures her as 'une honnête fleur de France transplantée d'un jardin de curé dans la terre pelée d'un bled' (108), a delicate French flower unable to flourish in the scorched earth of a foreign territory. Taking up the metaphor again, Warnod describes Ossip as a 'barbare troublé et inquiet devant la floraison rose et blanche des vergers de l'Ile-de-France au printemps' (74).

Lina's creative activity thus flourishes when she extricates herself from her relationship with the brutal, foreign Ossip. But she must also resist a host of other moral temptations associated with Montparnasse, including brushes with prostitution, and a lesbian relationship that seems to sap her creative energy – again, suggesting that her creative activity is somehow bound up with heterosexual love. Eventually, she gains success as an artist, and Warnod describes this using the kind of language of heroic self-sacrifice usually reserved for male artists represented in the hagiographical mode described by Heinich (1991):

> Lina est restée à Montparnasse. […] La peinture l'a sauvée.
> Elle voulait peindre, se donner tout entière à la peinture, elle y est parvenue. Mais au prix de quels tourments! de quelles souffrances! Elle a eu faim, elle s'est sentie glisser vers les pires déchéances. (Warnod 1928, 173)

Lina has successfully run a gauntlet of material privations and moral temptations and come out the other side, having realised her creative powers. Painting is presented here as a kind of moral salvation, while the idea that she gives herself to it 'tout entière' suggests that this is her sole focus, and that it fulfils her. And yet, yoking Lina's creative trajectory to the conventional romance plot, the novel ultimately implies that without heterosexual love, Lina is destined to remain unhappy, stuck – as is the case for Margueritte's and Bernage's female artists – in a life that can only ever be 'grise et sans attrait' (Warnod 1928, 177). Rather than a heroine of a hagiographical art narrative, she begins to look like a hapless victim, and the last past of the novel sees Lina move from one unhappy relationship to another, looking for the fulfilment that art cannot give her. She even envies the artists' wives who sacrifice

themselves to their husbands' needs, hankering after a creative partnership in which she would be the subordinate (142).

Thus, while Warnod appears in places to treat Lina's creative activity in terms that place her on a level pegging with male artists, his novel makes it clear that this activity can only ever be secondary to her romantic preoccupations. Unlike Bernage, Prévost or Margueritte, Warnod does not see a resolution to Lina's predicament in marriage or motherhood; but *Lina de Montparnasse* does nevertheless buy into the logic of the cautionary tale espoused by these authors, suggesting not so much that art is morally problematic in and of itself, but rather that it is dangerous for the young female painter because it brings her into contact with a world of foreign otherness – a world that, metaphorically, also poses a threat to French art. Lina's vulnerability as a young woman in a dangerously cosmopolitan Montparnasse, 'un monde qui n'était pas le sien' (Warnod 1928, 33), ultimately seems to underscore the threats posed by the foreign art of the École de Paris to French aesthetic traditions. Despite Warnod's previous openness to the foreign modernist painters who constituted the École de Paris – and despite having noted, in *Les Berceaux de la jeune peinture*, that many French women painters entered into relationships with foreign artists and that 'Leur art offre ainsi le fruit hâtivement mûri de ces échanges internationaux qui peut-être demain présideront aux grandes créations artistiques' (Warnod 1925, 227), in *Lina* such transnational artistic and romantic exchanges are no longer viewed quite so positively. Instead, the novel appears to serve as a vehicle for a highly racialized, especially antisemitic vision of Montparnasse and the modernist art with which it was associated, asserting a need for French art to assert its specificity and purify itself of foreign influences.

Such a vision was altogether common in the late 1920s – a fact that may explain Warnod's apparent shift in attitude. By that point, as Romy Golan (1996) has demonstrated, a rising tide of antisemitic and anti-cosmopolitan rhetoric had shifted the terms of art-critical debate, pitting the foreign painters of the École de Paris against the French painters of the École française. Golan shows that even Jewish critics such as Waldemar George and Adolphe Basler 'introjected' antisemitic discourses into their assessments of the decadence of French art – but by far the most strident voice was Camille Mauclair, whose invective directed against Montparnasse and modernist art appeared in the pages of *Le Figaro* and *L'Ami du peuple*. In this series of articles, Mauclair raged against Montparnasse as a vicious melting-pot of cultures, a stain on French civilization. The art produced there was very much bound up with its foreignness and its decadence: in one article, he claimed, 'La foule de Montparnos réunit dans le culte de l'alcool, de la coco et de l'art vivant des Allemands, Polaques, Petits-Russiens, Yankees, Japonais; il y a même des nègres et des Peaux-Rouges, et tout cela constitue "l'École de Paris"' (Mauclair 1930, 41). Mauclair does not simply associate the art of the École de Paris incidentally with the foreignness of Montparnasse; he does not just treat

it as primitive or crass; rather he views 'l'art vivant' or modernist art[9] as *equivalent* to the drug-taking and other deviant behaviours he sees as typifying 'Montparno'. Within this framework, painting of a modernist bent becomes a sin in and of itself.

The association between artistic modernism and foreign, supposedly primitive influences had been established in Mauclair's work as early as 1906, in his 'Crise de la laideur en peinture', in which he responded to the Fauve paintings on show at the 1905 Salon d'automne and 1906 Salon des indépendants by bemoaning an atavistic 'retour à la barbarie' – and, notably, figuring the Fauves' apparent cult of the ugly in terms of an attack on the female nude. Mauclair claimed that the Fauves replaced the conventional (if sickly sweet) 'femme en savon rose' with 'les femmes équarries à coups de serpe et les barbouillages congolais', images associated with the primitive (specifically with Africa), and which suggest a mangled or violated female body, with 'équarries à coup de serpe' bringing to mind a machete displacing the artist's paintbrush (Mauclair 1906, 314–15). This imagery may well play into a broader tendency in the early twentieth century to figure threats to French culture in terms of violations of the female body. There is, clearly, a resonance between Mauclair's imagery and the deviant and deficient bodies of Prévost's and Margueritte's *garçonnes*, who by transgressing fixed gender roles become not-fully-women, and literally embody the possibility of the decadent 'civilization without sexes' envisioned by Drieu la Rochelle; there is also a resonance with Lina's vulnerable body violated and beaten by the brutal Ossip in Warnod's novel. In 'Crise de la laideur en peinture', Mauclair is clearly using the female nude to stand as an apparently unassailable symbol and guarantee of conventional beauty, and exploits the emotive effect of the rosy flesh of French womanhood coming under violent attack and even being displaced by the black, 'primitive' body to underscore his view that the modernist painting of the Fauves constitutes an attack on the core aesthetic values of French art, and on broader cultural values incarnated in the body of the (white) female nude.

François Fosca's 1927 novel *Derechef* engages with the very same discursive terrain as Mauclair's diatribe. Like Warnod (and like Mauclair), Fosca was an art critic, and between 1927 and 1931 was editor of the glossy art magazine *L'Amour de l'art*. Fosca's critical writings do participate to a certain extent in the treatment of 'la peinture de femme' as distinct and easily held apart from mainstream – that is, male – art; but gender is not a primary concern for him as critic.[10] His novel, however, seems to register much more strongly a set of anxieties about a female creativity that he associates, through his fictional painter Noémi, with modernism. Within the novel's complex narrative framework, Noémi's modernist art is positioned as dangerously 'other', through its association with a wild, unrestrained, and essentially un-French primitivism; it is figured as a troubling force which threatens to upset traditionally gendered notions of art as masculine, and indeed to emasculate the male artist; it is conceived, above all, as an attack on femininity and the female body.

Derechef is perhaps best viewed as a 'middlebrow' text: published by the Surrealists' publishing house Simon Kra, which was known for its small print runs, it appears to be aimed at a relatively select readership (the kind of reader who might have subscribed to *L'Amour de l'art*, in fact). As a critic, Fosca may also be seen as a proponent of middlebrow or *juste milieu* aesthetics, dismissing both the outlandish and insincere avant-garde painter and the staid *pompier* in favour of a 'réaliste et raisonnable' middle ground (Fosca 1927b, 446, and 1927c). These aesthetic extremes are represented in *Derechef* through Noémi, a young painter who is 'très moderne', and the middle-aged painter Jacques Malestré, a figurehead for bourgeois art with whom she embarks on an affair (Fosca 1927a, 26–7). The novel is, at least in part, a consideration of what happens when the latter type dallies superficially with modernism, adopting an aesthetic stance that Fosca sees as insincere since it does not proceed from his unique 'personnalité'. But it is also a trenchant critique (formulated by the conservative Jacques, who serves as focalizer for much of the narrative) of Montparnasse and of modernist art. Just as Mauclair saw 'Montparno' as a seething hive of undesirable foreign influence, Fosca's Malestré considers artistic Montparnasse, the world inhabited by his young mistress, as a 'monde de métèques et de sauvages' (Fosca 1927a, 142), but what is most crucial is that this foreignness is reflected in the strange, monstrous art produced there, by Noémi and her circle. This strangeness is repeatedly insisted upon in descriptions of Noémi's painting: observing her rendering of a landscape, Malestré exclaims, 'Ah, ces arbres d'arche de Noé, ces gros cernés de bleu de Prusse, et ces terrains roses et caca d'oie qui font penser à de la charcuterie avariée!' (Fosca 1927a, 37) The painting is experienced by Malestré as an unacceptable distortion of nature, characterized by an excessive use of colour (which in the twenties still suggests an affiliation with the Fauves as much as it does with German Expressionism). It is likened here not just to bodily excretions or 'caca', but also to the spectacle of rotting flesh or meat, in a way that recalls Mauclair's visceral disgust. This disgust is more explicitly linked to the *female* body later on in the novel, where Malestré takes issue with Noémi's variation on the theme of *The Rape of Europa*:

> 'Quelle outrecuidance ! Un si magnifique sujet, si riche en éléments pittoresques ! Le Véronèse du Palais des Doges, bien qu'il soit abîmé et repeint… De beaux corps de femmes et un taureau blanc devant une mer bleue… Mais non : des Hottentotes mafflues, taillées dans un pain d'épice… Des gestes de marionnettes… Et une vache de bois blanc! Vraiment, qu'elle se contente de ses trois pommes sur une assiette, et de ses vues du Salève, mais qu'elle ne touche pas à ces sujets-là…' (Fosca 1927a, 65)

For Malestré, Noémi's painting is a disastrous travesty of a classical theme, as well as an unwelcome attempt by a female painter to stray away from the lower, more 'domestic' genres of the still life and the landscape into the masculine terrain of history painting. Noble, living

flesh is reduced to inert and valueless ‘pain d’épice’ and ‘bois blanc’; and yet it is the distortion of the *female* body that seems particularly problematic here, with the ‘Hottentotes mafflues’ bringing to mind the black female body whose anatomy and sexuality so fascinated and disturbed the colonial psyche.[11] Noémi’s take on the subject takes the idealized, white female body seen in Veronese’s painting – the body of Europa/Europe – and displaces it with a disturbingly ‘other’ black African body. That this speaks to the period’s fears of racial and cultural *métissage* is clear,[12] but it also speaks to fears that Western European standards of beauty, indeed an entire aesthetic canon built around the conventional, idealized (white) female nude, may be displaced by the ‘primitive’ aesthetic for which the black body stands. The role of the conventional academic nude as aesthetic cornerstone is confirmed in Fosca’s novel by the fact that Malestré’s objections to Noémi’s painting are overwhelmingly motivated by such distortions of the female body:

> ‘Et dire que c’est cela qu’elle fait d’un corps de femme’, se dit Jacques devant le grand nu qu’elle venait de placer sur le chevalet. Lui qui avait pris tant de plaisir à retracer de beaux corps, il fut exaspéré par ce tronc bossué, cette gorge à facettes, ces jambes boursouflées. (Fosca 1927a, 66)

As this quotation indicates, Malestré’s response to Noémi’s art is bound up with a certain conception of what the female nude should look like; but it is also bound up with his own desire, and with his pleasure in looking at and representing the female body as object of his creative gaze. In distorting the female body, Noémi thwarts his conception of art as founded in this male desire – the conception, once again, of art as proceeding from male (pro)creative energies. He also asks her, ‘Pourquoi peignez-vous des femmes nues, si c’est pour les peindre laides? Vous seriez joliment embêtée de leur ressembler, avouez-le.’ (Fosca 1927a, 69) Here, in querying Noémi’s artistic representation of the female body, Malestré simultaneously seeks to reduce her to her own body, via the play on ‘joliment’ which frames her as a recipient of the appreciative male gaze and implicitly denies her status as creative subject – as he does more explicitly elsewhere when he refuses to describe her as an artist, calling her instead ‘une jeune personne qui fait de la peinture à Montparnasse’ (171).

Noémi’s painterly attacks on conventional femininity are echoed elsewhere in the text, where a lawyer acquaintance of Malestré’s is shocked at the idea that a young woman could produce images of ‘haridelles en putréfaction’ (129), while the work of Noémi’s friend Alix is conceived by Malestré as such an affront to femininity that he exclaims, ‘sa peinture ferait avorter les femmes grosses, et achèverait les mourants!’ (142) – the attack on the female body being extended here to include not just the painted nude itself but the body of the spectator too. The painterly attack on femininity also goes hand in hand with supposedly ‘unfeminine’ behaviour and physical characteristics: all of Noémi’s female friends are judged

by Malestré to be ugly; of the 'maigre' Alix he complains: 'Qu'elle suggère peu la volupté!' (152). Their somewhat masculine names further emphasize their deviant femininity – indeed, Malestré's pet name for Noémi, 'ma petite No' (195) hints simultaneously at his desire to dominate her (to render her 'petite'), and at her resistance to control and compliance ('No'). His fear throughout the narrative is that she has the upper hand in the relationship, and that 'Il s'était laissé berner par une gamine' (143). This anxiety about the power dynamics of their love affair is in turn related to Noémi's appropriation of a bold primitivist style much more closely associated in this period with male painters and generally understood as an expression of a 'virile' creative temperament. Colour, in particular, having been considered a 'feminine' complement to the more essential, 'masculine' practice of drawing in Charles Blanc's 1867 *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, was reappropriated by the Fauves and their successors as an expression of pure, brute, masculine force (Perry 1995, 46 and 54). Noémi's adoption of a boldly coloured style – in which 'un beau corps de femme' becomes 'un sac bariolé de bleu de Prusse et de jaune sale' (Fosca 1927a, 68) – is disturbing, therefore, because it carries with it the implication that she has taken on a position of virile power and mastery.

Derechef thus bespeaks a deep-seated anxiety about a modernist *peinture féminine* that is primitive and also in some sense fundamentally, disturbingly masculine. Malestré's own conservative, 'pompier' style, meanwhile, is seen as weak and feminized, an easy, elegant painting appealing primarily to bourgeois women who want their portrait done, earning him the nickname 'Malestré sœurs' (121). His 'feminine' weakness is seen particularly in his lack of distinctive painterly vision, and his willingness to adopt Noémi's avant-garde style despite his earlier insistence on its failings. This leads him to engage in his own distortions of the female body, prompting his somewhat alarmed wife to comment that he has not 'done justice' to his model: 'Pourquoi lui as-tu mis des plaques vertes sur les reins? Est-ce que tu deviendrais cubiste, Jacques?' (124). Critics, meanwhile, see Malestré's change of direction for what it is: 'une conversion trop rapide, suspecte, dont ne pouvait être capable qu'un talent adroit mais dépourvu de personnalité' (186).

For all Noémi's monstrousness – both as a creator of a monstrous, 'primitive' art and as a woman who is seen to overstep the limits imposed on her by society – she is at least authentic: her art is an expression of her unique 'personnalité', while Malestré is weak, feminized, and a failure as a painter precisely because he has no sense of his 'personnalité', changing his manner, under the influence of a woman, 'comme on change de tailleur' (191). As we have seen, *Derechef* expresses anxieties about women's incursions into the art world; it places modernism and the feminine in a reciprocal relationship whereby each makes the other monstrous, and it associates both categories with other varieties of threatening otherness (deviant sexual and gender identities, the foreign and the primitive).[13] But it also, crucially, expresses a concern about a broader 'troubling' of gender in French art – a threatened

inversion of the ‘natural’ order of things whereby women painters take on worryingly virile characteristics, but the male painter equally becomes a beleaguered and impotent figure who seems to incarnate a broader postwar crisis of masculinity.[14] And yet all-out crisis is reassuringly averted: at the end of *Derechef*, the pregnant Noémi kills herself, and Malestré returns to his wife and his bourgeois art, his ill-advised dalliance with modernism safely put to rest. Fosca’s novel nevertheless stands as yet another cautionary tale, warning its readers not only that the creative powers of the *garçonne* need to be appropriately contained, but that modernism, as a force that disrupts both gendered and aesthetic categories, also needs to be policed and ideally shut down.

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Endnotes

[1] On the long Anglo-American history of the flapper, see Simon (2017); on the *garçonne*, see Bard (1998).

[2] The one exception to this that I am aware of is Lacroix di Méo (2012), to which my own analysis of Margueritte is indebted.

[3] Cited by Roberts (1994, 2). For a historical overview of gender in the postwar period, see Holmes (1996, 107–114); McMillan (1981); Milligan (1996, 5–16; Reynolds (1996).

[4] On decoration, and its potential for feminist disruption as well as its associations with traditional femininity, see Elliott (2000).

[5] The broader critical reception of Art Deco as it emerged following the 1925 Exposition des arts décoratifs also tended to emphasize its association with elitism and consumerist excess: see Silver (1989, 365–66), and Golan (1995, 93).

[6] See Chevrefils Desbiolles (2008), which claims that the expression was actually coined by

Roger Allard in 1923. On the ambivalence of the term 'École de Paris' as a critical category, and its political ramifications, see Kangaslathi (2009).

[7] In his novel *La Femme assise* ([1920], 1977), Guillaume Apollinaire praised women artists who made 'poupées-portraits' during wartime. Blaise Cendrars's *Une nuit dans la forêt* also ends with the disfigured heroine making dolls for a living (Cendrars [1929] 2001, 198–99).

[8] The notions of 'personnalité' and 'tempérament' derive principally from Impressionism, and from Zola's theory that art is 'un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament'; see Zola (1879, 25).

[9] The term 'l'art vivant' was coined by the critic André Salmon, and used synonymously with 'l'art indépendant' to connote new art that stood in opposition to the stale, moribund art of the Salon des artistes français; see Salmon (1920).

[10] See for instance Fosca (1928), where the critic comments on Hélène Marr's painting.

[11] On the cultural resonance of the black body in the interwar period, see Ezra (2000); on the figure of the Venus Hottentot evoked by Fosca here, see Boëtsch and Blanchard (2008).

[12] The theme of *The Rape of Europa* is also taken up by Claire Goll (1928) to give expression to similar fears of racial and cultural *métissage*.

[13] Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer (2003, 7–8, 12) note that the tendency to collapse several categories of 'other' (woman, Jew, homosexual, etc) gains a broad currency in postwar France, under the enduring influence of Otto Weiniger's *Sex and Character* (1903).

[14] Tickner (2011) examines two British art novels that deal with similar fears of a feminized art. On the broader crisis of masculinity brought about by the war, see Showalter (1987, 167–74).