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Jon Dietrick

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Seeing Battle, Knowing War: Feminist Re-Visioning in Hortensia Papadat-Bengesçu's "The Man Whose Heart They Could See"

By Jon Dietrick

When Mary Lee remarked that a book about war "may not, perhaps, be written by a man" who "sees only one small corner of the army," she was working to overturn one of the moldiest assumptions of the war literature: that "first-hand" accounts of the scene of battle written by men constitute the only "authentic" writing on war.¹ If this idea rankled writers like Lee in 1929, little wonder that contemporary feminist scholars show concern when, as recently as 1990, Sam Hynes writes that the authentic texts about war "have the authority of direct experience," and that a woman's writing on war must be "about failure, a woman's unsuccessful attempt to enter the heroic world of war"². Fortunately critics and writers like Margaret Higonnet, Jane Marcus, and Elaine Showalter have contributed greatly to a new understanding of war -- one that goes beyond the narrow focus of the "scene of battle" to examine, in Higonnet's words, "the broad social and economic mechanisms" deeply affected by war.³ Viewed in this light, women's writing on war gains a long overdue legitimacy.

In the introduction to her valuable collection of women's writing on World War I, *Lines of Fire*, Ms. Higonnet notes that of women writers on the Great War who have been largely brushed aside by historians and cultural critics, those who wrote in languages other than English have received the least attention. "The historical documentation of the war," writes Higonnet, "has drawn freely on the published and unpublished memoirs and on the creative writing of men as soldiers and political leaders from many countries." The study of women's writing on the War "has by contrast been impoverished."⁴ It is in part to redress this wrong that I offer the following discussion of "The Man Whose Heart They Could See," a chapter -- the only one that has yet been translated into English -- from Hortensia Papadat-Bengesçu's 1923 novel *Belaurul*, which takes as its theme the very concept of authenticity so central to literary modernism. Doubtless much of what I say here will bear revision in light of a much-hoped-for English translation of *Belaurul* in its entirety. In the meantime I ask pardon for dealing here with that most important metaphor of the Great War -- a fragment.

"First man; then, when hit, animal, writhing and thrashing in articulate agony or making horrible snoring noises; then a 'thing.'" Thus Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, paraphrases the soldier-poet Charles Sorley's graphic description of the three stages of what Fussell refers to as "the transformation of man into corpse."⁵ As a Red Cross nurse during World War I, the Romanian writer Hortensia Papadat-Bengesçu was surely all-too-familiar with this transformation. She brings such experience to bear on "The Man Whose Heart They Could See," which takes as its subject the gradual decline of a soldier whose unique war wound has left his beating heart exposed. Told from the perspective of Laura, a young Romanian Red Cross nurse with a penchant for idealizing the patient into a martyr, the chapter explores two of the grand themes of literature concerning World War I: the failure of language to convey realities almost too horrible to imagine, and the sense of disillusionment brought on by the realization of just what kind of violence "civilized" humanity is capable of -- the loss of humanity so poignantly represented by Fussell's "man" turning into corpse. As an exploration of

these themes, "The Man Whose Heart They Could See" would seem, at first glance, to share much with better-known men's writing on the war such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* or Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu: Journal d'une Escouade*. But a careful reading of Papadat-Bengescu's story reveals some crucial differences from these works. Treating the subject of war not in terms of an easily definable "scene of battle" or "war front" but instead as a deeply entrenched cultural logic in which varied aspects of society are both affected and, in an important sense, complicit, "The Man Whose Heart They Could See" mounts a critique of language far more radical and modernist than that found in most war literature, one which implicates the "disillusionment" or "loss of innocence" war narrative itself as a dangerously naive stance toward war.

"The Man Whose Heart They Could See" shares with other writing about World War I an understanding of the inadequacy of language as a vehicle for expressing one's experience. Repeatedly in this story words are shown to be unable either to convey internal psychological states or to adequately describe "concrete" external reality. On Laura's first hearing of the "unique" new patient, she perceives that the "words seemed to fall out of the sky, squeezed and pressed against each other, too small for the capacity of compassion." When Laura tries to imagine what the man's wound might look like, we are told "her vision stopped, *reduced to words*." And when Laura finally sees the patient firsthand, she speaks "no words" since "there were no words" for what she wished to convey. In these examples words do not simply complicate perception and communication; they seem to work to prevent both processes. Moreover, words threaten to make Laura numb to the pain of others. The words others use to describe the new patient -- both the sensationalizing phrase of the story's title and the doctor's anesthetizing, objectifying descriptor, "a unique case" -- turn the man into an object and thus prevent any real empathy with his suffering. The "feeble voice" inside Laura that calls for "mercy" is "walled in" by words which she feels being "hammered into her brain."⁶ By thus showing language as not only inadequate to imagination, communication and empathy but in direct opposition to these processes, Papadat-Bengescu's indictment of language goes beyond simply pointing out its inadequacy for conveying the experience of war; in this story, language is directly implicated in the violence of war.

A comparison of Papadat-Bengescu's treatment of language to ostensibly similar treatments by other WWI writers may better illustrate what I mean. In both *A Farewell to Arms* and *Le Feu* the sense of the inadequacy of language tends to surface as a species of logical positivism, as a distrust of abstract principles like "honor" or "glory" forces characters to take refuge in concrete, empirically verifiable particulars. "Les Gros Mots," a chapter title in Barbusse's novel, is used to refer both to the scatological language of the soldiers and to the "big" words denoting abstract principles used to justify the war -- words the men have learned to distrust. As a defense against such abstractions, the *poilou* Cocon maintains his grip on reality by obsessively recounting the daily minutiae of the battlefield, such as the number of miles of trenches crisscrossing the front or the names and relative functions of various pieces of artillery.⁷ Hemingway had already read Barbusse by the time he began work on *A Farewell to Arms*; unsurprisingly, Hemingway's novel evinces a similar distrust of "abstract" language. In a much-quoted passage from *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway's narrator tells us he "was always

embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain." The passage continues:

There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.⁸

Thus in both Barbusse's and Hemingway's writing on the war we see a distrust and rejection of ideal, abstract concepts in favor of words denoting "concrete" particulars. We have shown that Papadat-Bengesçu shares with these writers a distrust of language. But unlike Hemingway and Barbusse, Papadat-Bengesçu offers her characters no refuge in concrete particulars. In "The Man Whose Heart They Could See," the very distinction between concrete and abstract language is radically problematized, as again and again the perception of empirical reality is shown to be conditioned -- and in some cases prevented -- by the abstract notions which make up the subjective state of the perceiver.

Papadat-Bengesçu works to emphasize the difficulty of seeing other than that which we are conditioned to see from the first words of the chapter. The very title, in fact, tricks the reader into mistaking the concrete for the abstract. The phrase "The Man Whose Heart They Could See" is likely to put English-speaking readers in mind of a phrase like "to wear one's heart on one's sleeve." We naturally assume that "seeing" one's "heart" is a metaphor for "reading" one's emotional state. But this assumption is an error, which the first lines of the text would correct:

Not in the eyes, not on the lips, nor on the hands. Not in the loyal look which offers the naked soul, nor in the honest word and clear voice. Not in the hand reaching out. . . . Nor down the slippery slope of forgetfulness; in words behind your back; in deceiving hands.

The list of what is *not* meant here by "heart" goes on: it is neither "the heart of the good" nor "that of the evil"; it is not even the "mysterious heart which urges man against the current, though reason steers the boat. No, not that heart!"⁹

As we soon learn, the word "heart" in the story's title is meant to be read denotatively rather than connotatively, referring simply to the physical organ: the very last meaning of the word most readers would expect. The opening lines describe the heart as emotion, as soul (both good and evil), and finally as will, only to tell us what is not meant by the word as it is used here. In a curious reversal of Hemingway's narrator's mindset, these abstract, metaphysical concepts are here more easily spoken of than the concrete referent – the heart that exists as physical matter and can be observed empirically. Papadat-Bengesçu thus begins by forcing the reader to enact the process Laura will also enact in the course of the chapter: as our own assumptions condition our reading of a text, so will Laura's assumptions condition her "reading" of the unique patient. Like Jehovah in the Hebrew bible, the man's heart, apparently, cannot be mentioned by name (instead we are told what it is not). And like the face of God, neither can it be looked upon directly, as Laura's abstract beliefs consistently filter the empirical reality she "sees." Papadat-Bengesçu thus inverts a conventional way of thinking about the physical and the metaphysical by showing the metaphysical to be, in a sense, more accessible to perception than the physical. The comparatively simplistic distinction

between the concrete and the abstract that informs both Hemingway's and Barbusse's novels is here replaced by a conception of the two as existing in a dialectical relationship: abstract notions filter one's perception of concrete particulars which in turn lead us to revise those abstract notions.

Just as the actual, physical heart cannot be spoken of but only obliquely alluded to, neither, it seems, can it be "seen" by Laura. From the beginning of the text, Papadat-Bengescu complicates the relationship between "seeing" and "knowing" -- a relationship crucial to male writers' claims to literary authority over the subject of war. The question of whether or not one has "seen battle" is by now a well-worn cliché of war literature, one that has functioned to keep the subject largely under the literary jurisdiction of male "soldier-poets." But by complicating the very act of seeing by showing perception to be an active and necessarily subjective rather than a passive and objective process, Papadat-Bengescu undercuts the soldier-poet's claim to exclusive literary authority and establishes the possibility for women writers to share such authority.

Upon arriving at the hospital at the beginning of the chapter, Laura is immediately greeted with a telling series of enigmatic questions in tacit reference to the mysterious patient of the story's title: "Have you seen? Did you find out? Do you know?" A few lines later, the questions transform into a command: "Have you seen? You have to see!" An uncomplicated relationship is assumed by most of the characters to exist between seeing and knowing: in order to know, one must have seen. Upon hearing of the patient, we are told, Laura "opened her eyes wide, as wide as she could, to see the beating heart of a living man." But at this point Laura has yet to observe the actual patient; so her "opening her eyes" is here meant metaphorically, as is her "seeing." Laura "sees" the man's heart not with her eyes but with her imagination. Accordingly, the vision she imaginatively constructs of the patient is a romanticized one: although he is "a peasant," he nevertheless has "such distinguished features"; the man's wound becomes for Laura "somehow noble . . . like an altar unveiling itself . . . The body opening to show the sacred organ of life to anyone!" -- all this before Laura has even set eyes on the man.¹⁰ By allowing us access to Laura's preconceived notions about the heroic patient, Papadat-Bengescu emphasizes the way such notions necessarily inform one's supposedly "objective" perception of concrete particulars.

Furthermore, there is an important irony embedded in Laura's "vision": in her wanting to view the man's wound as the body's "opening to show the sacred organ of life to anyone," Laura evinces a transcendentalist longing for a direct, unmediated experience of essential "reality." Yet when the opportunity presents itself to actually see the man's heart, her vision fails -- she cannot see the heart. Laura's description of the patient upon first meeting him is significant, as it shows her actual vision to be colored by the idealized vision of the man she has already constructed. Lying among "white sheets" in a white nightgown, the man appears "tall, fair, the handsome oval of his face white, white, almost lacking pallor." This description is certainly at odds with later descriptions of the patient once he has "fallen" in her estimation; but since Laura has prepared herself to see an idealized, saintly figure, that is precisely what she sees -- with one important exception: "He was as she had imagined him, only--she couldn't see his heart."¹¹

On a subsequent visit the next day, Laura has the same difficulty seeing the man's heart. Commanded by a doctor to "Look!," Laura "cast a desperate look; she looked again and saw nothing but grey." She then asks the doctor what caused the wound in

order "to find out what she had not seen"¹² In fact, Laura is never able to actually see the man's heart. In a powerful critique of a conception of visual perception as an unmediated, objective and passive process for the viewer, Papadat-Bengesçu demonstrates, via Laura's failure to see, that the imaginary constructions we erect necessarily set limits to what we can "see"; we see, in a sense, what we are prepared to see, whether we're at the battlefield or in "the rear" at a Red Cross hospital.

Papadat-Bengesçu demonstrates the extent to which our "objective" perceptions are actually informed by our subjective imagination by exaggerating the phenomenon in the character of Laura. Laura's idealizing of the "unique" patient quickly reaches absurd proportions. Although she is told that he is a peasant with a wife and children, Laura nevertheless sees in his "noble appearance" the "refinement of a skillful portrait." The word "portrait" is telling here, since Laura's description of the man sounds more like a description of a work of art than a human being: "She studied again his white, *well proportioned* face, his blond hair, his mouth *harmoniously drawn* under the gold shadow of a mustache, his wide, smooth forehead, his intense blue eyes." If the man's features seem "harmoniously drawn" it is because Laura is the artist who draws them in an act of perception that is at the same time an act of creation. When her constructed vision of the man refuses to match what she knows about his background, Laura claims the man "almost seemed disguised."¹³ It does not occur to her, however, that she placed the disguise there -- that her own imaginative construction of the patient prevents her from "seeing" him in any other way.

But Laura's mistaking her own imaginative conception of the patient for his actual appearance is only the first step in her transformation of the man into a saint. For she then goes on to theorize that the "distinctive" character of his outward appearance is actually a manifestation of some internal, essential characteristic:

But there was still something about him that outlined from the depth of his being the best features . . . something that idealized him . . . His pallor? His immobility? . . . or the fact that his organic functions, which confuse the circulation of our blood and alter the purity of our image, seemed somehow ecstatically suspended in him because of the enormous trouble with his heart?¹⁴

What is truly startling in this passage is the extent of Laura's privileging of the ideal over the real. According to Laura, the "organic functions" of the human body are in themselves a kind of sickness, "alter[ing]" as they do the "purity of our image." Thus the most "impure" image, by Laura's logic, would be that of a human being in robust good health; conversely, the most "pure" would be that of a corpse soon after the moment of death, free from the interference of the body's organic functions. But a corpse won't stay "pure" for very long, as testament to its continued involvement in the "organic" processes of nature. The patient, on the other hand, exists "ecstatically suspended" between life and death.

Other examples of Laura's worship of the ideal at the expense of the organic follow. A drop of the patient's blood is referred to as "a sparkling red impurity" (360); his heart is "the 'enemy' inside his chest" and "the 'monster.'"¹⁵ By viewing the corporeal body and its organic functions as something alien and impure, as antithetical to one's "real" self, Laura is the personification of a disposition toward empirical reality that Nietzsche spent the better part of a lifetime critiquing: one which the philosopher saw as originating with Plato and reaching its apotheosis in Christianity:

Once the concept 'nature' had been devised as the concept antithetical to 'God,' 'natural' had to be the word for 'reprehensible' -- this entire fictional world has its roots in *hatred* of the natural (-actuality!-), it is the expression of a profound discontent with the actual.¹⁶

The extent of Laura's "profound discontent with the actual" may be measured by her view of the patient's gradual decline as a "fall" "with every passing hour to the humiliating pettiness of his degrading flesh." With the patient's decline, Laura perceives, "the martyr was falling" from a state of "legend and mystery" to one of mundane corporeality. The patient's relentless physicality -- exaggerated by a wound that his doctors cannot treat and that he refuses to let them "cover up" with bandages -- stands in the way of Laura's need to idealize the man into a martyr. But what is significant here is that the patient's "fall" can only occur in the mind of one who has already idealized the patient as something more than human -- who must idealize him as more than human out of her own "discontent with the actual": the man's "suffering had *descended to human turmoil*." ¹⁷ Thus, this chapter's primary subject is not the physical decline of the soldier, but the "disillusionment" of Laura.

As a tale of the disillusionment brought on by war "The Man Whose Heart They Could See" moves once again into familiar literary territory: disillusionment is the theme *par excellence* of the war novel, and the overriding theme of both Hemingway's and Barbusse's contributions to the genre. But by accentuating the absurdity of Laura's initial idealizing of the wounded soldier, as opposed to mourning Laura's lost "innocence," Papadat-Bengesçu's chapter is in fundamental opposition to the war novel's usual treatment of the theme of disillusionment. In the introduction to his anthology *The Lost Voices of World War I*, Tim Cross generalizes that in the minds of those who fought in and survived it, "the Great War would always divide their lives into a *before* of innocence and laughter and an *after* of hopelessness and loss." ¹⁸ But it is worth remembering that what Cross calls innocence entailed the naive idealism that made war possible -- that, by 1914, made many in Europe actually look forward to war enthusiastically. In 1915 Freud made just this point when, positing a fictional post-war European "civilized cosmopolitan" who has become disillusioned by the violence of war, he noted that "[i]n criticism of his disillusionment, . . . certain things must be said. Strictly speaking, it is not justified, for it consists in the destruction of -- an illusion!" ¹⁹ The longing for a return to pre-war innocence is, as Freud saw, an attempt to repress what war has taught us about the violence human beings are capable of committing. This consideration should, I think, cause us to re-evaluate the "disillusionment" narratives of Hemingway, Barbusse, and others. For if such narratives treat the disillusionment of the subject as a tragic occurrence, it seems at least possible that they represent, in part, a nostalgia for the "innocence" that lead many people to support war in the first place.

The idealizing of war is symbolized in "The Man Whose Heart They Could See" by Laura's idealizing of the soldier and his wound. When she first hears of the bizarre case, we are told, Laura "imagined a scene without blood. Immaculate . . . intact . . . and? . . . she could see the heart." ²⁰ If we sympathize with Laura's eventual disillusionment, we must nevertheless remind ourselves that the vision of a war "without blood," here represented by Laura's imagining of the man's wound, was a factor that helped make possible support for the war on all sides.

In Papadat-Bengesçu's text, repression of the violence and horror of war is represented not only by Laura's tendency to romanticize, but also, on a larger scale, by the infirmary where she works. Repeatedly the infirmary is described as both physically and psychologically confining. We are told that a "legend" would have arisen around the strange patient "had it not been for the strict regulations" of the hospital. The place is a "noisy ant hill" and a "hive," where Laura exists inside "the tight circle of her daily duties." As a place where patients are treated only to be sent back to the battlefield, the infirmary, as Laura perceives, is both "in contrast and in accord with the energies of war." It is, in an important sense, part of the total economy of war: without it, war -- prolonged war, at any rate -- would be impossible. The doctors and nurses of the infirmary contribute to the violence of war simply by offering their services. Seen in this light, Laura's description of her fellow nurse Dudu as "loyal" and "a precious asset of the infirmary," and her referring to her colleagues in general as "more useful than sensitive, more industrious than impressionable," amount to a quiet but startlingly powerful critique of the medical workers' complicity in the war.²¹

In fact, Papadat-Bengesçu's critique of the wartime medical profession goes well beyond simply pointing out its failure to protest the war; it goes on to suggest that the infirmary is a place of violence in its own right. When Laura refers to the nurse Milly's being consulted "for the exclusive practice of surgery, for the war butchery," it is not clear whether or not the surgery itself is what is being referred to as "butchery." In a similarly enigmatic observation, Laura cringes at "the horrific ingenuity with which people were mocked by endless hacking." And the intensive care unit of the hospital is referred to as the "chamber of agonies." As a place where the ravages of war are "bandaged," i. e. concealed or repressed, so that soldiers can return to the front and war can continue, Papadat-Bengesçu reveals the hospital's indispensable role in the total system of war. In such a system, the patient's role is either to have his wounds treated and return to fighting, or to die and thus become idealized as a "martyr." Both options function to perpetuate war. But the man referred to in the title of this chapter is a "unique case," and he refuses to fit into this tidy and efficient system. As a doctor explains to Laura, "Because of the heart we cannot treat the wound, and because of the wound the heart cannot function properly." Because he can neither return to the front nor die and be idealized as a martyr, the patient forces all those who come into contact with him to come to terms with the violence of war. He is in a sense the opposite of the "useful" workers of the infirmary, and his very *uselessness* becomes a powerful protest against a war machine that demanded a total reorganization of society to meet its needs. Inspired by the patient's silent protest, Laura herself, by the story's end, learns to make a sort of religion out of uselessness, "devot[ing] herself to everything . . . not useful to the immediate purposes of existence."²²

By devoting herself to what is "useless," Laura has decided to value the aesthetic over the utilitarian. While certainly the notion of art as "useless" puts one in mind of Kant's conception of art as purposeless purposiveness, it would be a great mistake to read Laura's devotion to the aesthetic as a turn away from the political. In her devotion to all that is "useless," Laura in fact adopts a philosophy very similar to that of the Dada artists who gathered in Zurich during the war. Far from apolitical, these artists' emphasis on play, on the reclamation of detritus, and on the gratuitous act separated from any obvious purpose, represented aesthetic and moral stances adopted largely in reaction to the

experience of living in a state of *total* war. In his *Flight Out of Time: a Dada Diary*, artist and writer Hugo Ball, a major force among the Zurich Dadaists, called for "a way of life opposed to mere utility" and an "[o]rgiastic devotion to the opposite of everything that is serviceable and useful." ²³ This is precisely the stance of protest Papadat-Bengesçu's protagonist takes in "The Man Whose Heart They Could See." Moreover, it is a stance that is unimaginable in much better-known writing on the war, simply because much of this writing has so much invested in locating the war within a very limited physical space -- the "front" -- rather than seeing war as a state of affairs which affects every aspect of the societies involved. What Papadat-Bengesçu so powerfully shows us in this story is that, in a time when everything "useful to the immediate purposes of existence" -- from food and clothing production to medical care -- is functioning to perpetuate war, the adoration of the "useless," of that which serves no purpose, is a powerful moral stance and critique of the war.

In the end, Papadat-Bengesçu's critique of the Great War is one that treats the war not as a localized scene of battle but, to return to Higonnet's words, as a force that deeply affects "broad social and economic mechanisms." Moreover, it is the kind of critique, as Mary Lee saw, for which the male soldier-poet was uniquely unsuited. In order to make such a critique, Papadat-Bengesçu needed to first undermine a simplistic (and, unfortunately, long-lingering) association between "seeing" and "knowing." The result is a poignant example of the extent to which questions of historical memory are inextricably bound up with issues of gender and power.

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- ¹ Mary Lee, *It's a Great War!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), quoted in Higonnet.
- ² Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), 158, 94.
- ³ Margaret R. Higonnet, "Introduction," in *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet (New York: Penguin, 1999), xxi.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, xxiv.
- ⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), 126.
- ⁶ Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, "The Man Whose Heart They Could See," trans. Dayana Stetco, in *Lines of Fire*, 357-358.
- ⁷ Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu: Journal d'une Escouade* (Doullens, France: Flammarion, 1965).
- ⁸ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner, 1957), 191.
- ⁹ Papadat-Bengescu, 356.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 356-357.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 359.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 358-359, emphasis mine.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 358.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 361.
- ¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 15-16.
- ¹⁷ Papadat-Bengescu, 360, emphasis mine.
- ¹⁸ Tim Cross, *The Lost Voices of World War I* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1988), 1.
- ¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Reflections Upon War and Death," in *Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. A.A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 113.
- ²⁰ Papadat-Bengescu, 357.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 356-361.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: a Dada Diary*, trans. Anne Raimés, ed. John Elderfield (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1996), 3-4.