PASSION, POWER, WILL, DESIRE: GENDER TRESPASSING IN THE POETRY OF ANNA DE NOAILLES

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They shut me up in Prose
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still"–
Emily Dickinson

Dickinson's lines aptly illustrate the position of women poets in the history of Western patriarchal culture. Cora Kaplan has noted that, throughout history "..the language most emphatically denied to women is the most concentrated form of symbolic language--poetry" (82). Women poets, she observes, embody a dilemma central to understanding the relationship of gender to poetic language: the contradiction inherent in the Romantic notion of "the poet as the transcendental speaker of a unified culture" (82), when half the members of that culture are proscribed from full participation in the creative use of this "high language" (70). One result, Kaplan explains, has been that a great many women poets have taken as their subject matter "the right to speak and write" (71), often producing poetry whose overarching tone is one of melancholy (Kaplan 86).

Anna de Noailles, award-winning French writer of the *belle époque*, poses a fascinating exception to this norm; she neither demands that her voice be heard nor defends her decision to write poetry. In addition, the first three volumes of her work (and to a lesser extent, her fourth collection) contain poetry brimming with strength, energy, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and an unbridled lack of inhibition. Yet in spite of her immense popularity during her lifetime, her work was long ago exiled to the realm of "feminine poetry" or "nature poetry", judged too personal--not sufficiently universal--to warrant her inclusion among the paragons of this highest form of literary expression--a situation that resulted in her banishment to a canonical "no-man's land," that peripheral zone where women's literary voices languished for so many years. In this paper I will explore certain features of Noailles' poetics in an attempt to elucidate some reasons for her relegation to the margins of mainstream literature. Such an analysis will also furnish an opportunity to examine some of the ways Noailles "trespasses"--boldly assuming traditionally masculine prerogatives--on territory traditionally reserved for the discursively privileged, thereby liberating her personal, feminine voice and claiming, albeit covertly, her right to consideration on her own terms.

Writing during the revival of poetry in the Romantic mode that flourished in the wake of *Le Parnasse* and *Le Symbolisme,* Noailles admitted unabashedly her spiritual ties to Musset and Hugo--Léon Blum, in his 1908 study, called her "un Musset barbare" (229)--and she achieved instant success with the publication of her first volume of verse, *Le Coeur innombrable,* in 1901. Readers found her poetry to be, as Tama Engelking notes, "instinctive, close to nature, and anti-intellectual" (342). For many critics, however, while Noailles' poetry embodied the personal lyricism of the Romantics, it lacked the representative voice of her (male) predecessors. Blum's description of Noailles' divergence from nineteenth-century Romantic poets illustrates this assessment:

> ...les romantiques ont reconnu et proclamé... fièrement la fonction représentative du poète.... Ils ne chantaient que leur souffrance ou leur joie, mais en eux la foule muette des hommes trouvait sa voix. Rien de pareil chez madame de Noailles. Sa poésie sort d'elle-même et retombe en elle, comme l'élan d'un jet d'eau dans le bassin. Son éternel sujet, c'est sa personne, mais dans ce qu'elle a de particulier, d'unique, non dans ce qu'elle a de commun et de général. (229-30)

Several considerations must be addressed if we are to understand the critical reaction of many of Noailles' contemporaries and to appreciate her uniqueness as a poet. First, as Marlon Ross has observed, Romanticism is an historically masculinist phenomenon (2); women writers in this mode have, traditionally, been seen by critics as nothing more than extensions of male Romantic practitioners (Ross 5). Thus Blum and other critics of the period were operating within an inherited, well-enscenced literary tradition inherently prejudicial toward--indeed, fearful of--a female Romantic presence. Second, (as surely our more enlightened, late twentieth-century sensibility can allow us to say), it was certainly unreasonable and illogical for male critics to expect that women poets--for centuries effectively denied a voice in the public discourse of poetry--all of a sudden blithely and proudly claim to speak for humanity. Moreover, Noailles' autobiography, *Le Livre de ma vie* (first published in 1932), confirms her belief that the universal poetic voice is a myth--that to attempt to speak for others is an exercise in futility, since, she believes, we can never truly know another human being, never interrupt "sa solitaire et dure continuité" (*Livre* 9).

In Noailles' estimation, our only common denominator as humans is our capacity for passion, for love, for desire: "...la passion seule, sa férocité, son acquiescement habile et tendre à tous les sacrifices, parvient à mêler les êtres" (*Livre* 9).

In her autobiography, Noailles describes the passion that filled her as a young girl and guided her into adulthood:

> L'[...]amour qui m'envahissait s'adressait aux paysages, aux cités inconnus, à l'espace, à l'espérence, à l'aventure...je souhaitais réellement séduire l'espace et plaire au Bosphore lui-même." (*Livre* 148)

Similar expressions of desire and *volupté* abound in her poetry. The following example from "Plénitude" is typical of the nature and scope of her passion:

> Mais alors c'est de moi que monte et que s'élance
> Un univers plus beau, plus plein de passion,
> Je suis le sol, la flamme, et l'orchestration
> Je foule l'infini, j'embrase le silence,
>
> Et mon coeur est unique, universel, puissant,
> Mon esprit est ouvert comme une immense porte,
> Je m'attendris, je meurs, je m'exalte et je porte
> Quelque chose, ce soir, de divin dans mon sang...
> (*Éblouissements* 183)

Perhaps Blum, along with his male contemporaries, was unable to reconcile his critical sensibilities with the fact that here was a woman writer who insistently and ubiquitously spoke of desire, who not only espoused the type of pleasure heretofore reserved for males--that is, adventurous, self-centered--but who also took the initiative in its acquisition, who spoke of "seducing," and who required no man, no child (her poetry is conspicuously devoid of the maternal) on whom to center her attention as poet. Perhaps her critics perceived the overwhelming verve, self-assurance, audacity--even egoism--that emerges from her poetry as an affront to their male sensibilities and inherited expectations about women. In any case, while Blum recognizes her profound originality, he remains incapable of conceiving a feminine model of desire in general, and in Noailles' case in particular, of discerning the essential connection between desire, *volupté* and *volonté*--all qualities he attributes to her verse.

Noailles' autobiographical revelations corroborate much of what her earlier published poetry reveals: that, for her, desire and *volupté* are a source of strength and self-affirmation: "Que j'eusse tous les pouvoirs, l'excès de mon désir, l'absence de contradiction intérieure me l'affirmaient. J'avais la certitude d'être capable de marcher sur les flots" (*Livre* 6). It is "le souhait de la volupté," she believes, that motivates humans to live (*Livre* 78), that informs "cette volonté d'exister" that Blum accurately identifies as a hallmark of her poetry (231). She candidly recognizes that although she feels great kinship with the notions of logic and intelligence (qualities traditionally prized by and in men), she cannot live exclusively in this world; to do so is tantamount to being in prison (*Livre* 6). Surrendering to the "ivresse plénière" which inhabits her nature provides the means for her to transcend the limitations imposed by tradition and to "dispose[r] d'un univers sans lois," to become "pareille aux dieux" (*Livre* 6) (and, we might note, not *pareille aux déesses*). The self Noailles creates in her autobiography is clearly ambitious and self-assured, a creature of dionysian ardor and abandon determined to make her mark in the world, and the verse in her first three collections bears out this portrayal.

If such a description strikes us as decidedly "male" or "masculine," we should not be surprised. For what Anna de Noailles accomplishes in her early poetry is, in effect, a sort of discursive encroachment on "forbidden ground," a foray into a territory where desire, *volupté* and *volonté* are sanctioned and where the empowered voice is a given. In essence, she crosses over into the masculine, a gendered domain where, traditionally, active manifestations of power attest to egoistic dominance (Devor 30). Her feminine voice intact, she manages to usurp a surprising number of male/masculine prerogatives in her early volumes of verse.

As my title suggests, the masculine birthright includes an array of privileges, especially power, passion, will, and desire--all identified by William Wordsworth as the poet's rightful heritage. In the *Preface* to the 1800 and 1802 editions of the *Lyrical Ballads* (an early manifesto of Romanticism),[1] he describes the poet as "a man...pleased with his own passions and volitions and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighted to contemplate similar passions and volitions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe..."(324). According to Wordsworth, "[A]ll good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (321) whose "object is truth,...general and operative...carried alive into the heart by passion" (325). In his estimation, the poet possesses more acute sensibilities

than ordinary humans; he is blessed with "a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings, which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him..."(324-25). The poet enjoys

> a greater power in expressing...the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men...[which] are...connected...with our moral sentiments and animal sensations....with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe, with storm and sunrise, with the revolution of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. (327)

Moreover, Wordsworth suggests the poet's essential link with sensual gratification, defending the engendering and experiencing of pleasure as the *propre* of the poetic experience:

> Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe....it is homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows and feels, and lives, and moves. (325)

In short, Wordsworth's poet need apologize neither for his superior sensibilities nor his passions nor his will and desires and very human appreciation of pleasure nor his special relationship to nature; his unique gifts empower him to speak in the voice he deems proper to his endeavor.

Even a brief sampling of Noailles' verse reveals that as a *poet*, (gender aside) she has done nothing less than carry out the programme recommended by Wordsworth. Wordsworth's poet is authorized to celebrate his own passions, volitions, and life spirit and those of the "visible universe" around him, to wit, nature; Noailles' early collections are replete with expressions of her passions, volitions, desires and abound with direct appeals to nature's sensual--even sexual--capacities. The entire poem "L'Amoureux été," for example, portrays her desire for union with a very sensual summer wood as well as her complete and ardent surrender to this obviously pleasurable experience:

J'ai ce désir qu'à l'heure ardente de ce mois
Le bois frais et touffu se serre autour de moi
Et m'emplisse les mains de sucs et de verdure.
--Ah! sentir sur son coeur s'abbatre la nature!
Boire le miel léger des calices profonds
Comme l'abeille d'or et les insectes font.
Prendre pour vêtement, quand la chaleur arrive,
L'ombre qui se balance au gré des feuilles vives,
Baiser l'air, goûter l'eau glissante, avoir le coeur
Simple et chaud comme un fruit qui donne son odeur,
Respirer librement sur les feuilleuses branches
Le parfum des bourgeons et de l'épine blanche,
Et mourir d'un si doux et profond accord...
(*Le Coeur* 81-82)

Like Wordsworth's poet, Noailles seems aware that her unique faculties have elevated her to a higher plane of humanity, from where she can speak confidently of "mon divin émoi" (*Éblouissements* 68) and contemplate--almost cocksurely--her importance for posterity:

Mes livres, je les fis pour vous, ô jeunes hommes,
Et j'ai laissé dedans,
Comme font les enfants qui mordent dans des pommes,
La marque de mes dents.
[...]
Je vous laisse, dans l'ombre amère de ce livre,
Mon regard et mon front
Et mon âme toujours ardente et toujours ivre
Où vos mains traineront. (*Éblouissements* 315)

Moreover, she quite naturally assumes the stance of Wordsworth's poet-as-pleasure-producer, as evidenced in this stanza, where the poetic act itself has acquired a *soupçon* of voluptuousness:

Lorsque tout en mon sang s'émeut, puis-je choisir
D'une voix sûre et lente,
Le chant harmonieux, la strophe du désir,
La syllabe odorante? (*Éblouissements* 26)

In short, Anna de Noailles' poetic expropriation of male poets' cherished prerogatives must have seemed an impertinent challenge to male *belle époque* critics, an unforgivable encroachment on the

masculinist turf of Romanticism. More audaciously, however, Noailles interlopes beyond the gendered creative boundaries suggested by Wordsworth and certainly those envisioned by Blum and his *confrères*. Her poetry sometimes offers up surprising images tinged with violence --acceptable to critics, perhaps, in poetry written by men but no doubt off-putting in the verse of a woman. For example, in one poem from her first collection, in the persona of the lover of Damétas, Noailles reveals the true nature of her "Offrande à Kypris":

> Mon sein est puéril, mais mon coeur est farouche,
> Damétas le sait bien à l'heure de l'accord,
> Car la flûte est moins vive et chaude sur sa bouche
> Que ne l'est *mon baiser qui s'appuie et qui mord.*
> (*Le Coeur* 108)

And in another poem from the same collection she expresses her wish to

> Serrer entre [m]es bras le monde et ses désirs
> Comme un enfant qui tient une bête retorse,
> *Et qui, mordu, saignant*, est ivre du plaisir
> De sentir contre soi sa chaleur et sa force!
> (*Le Coeur* 20)

Indeed, the striking alliance of violence and pleasure in these passage emanating from the pen of a woman might very well have shocked Noailles' critics. Had she assumed a male/masculine poetic persona in creating such images, she might have been forgiven. As these lines--and many others too numerous to cite here--attest, however, her female voice remains intact and unapologetic.

I would suggest that Noailles' poetic "cross-dressing" alienated her male critics to such a degree that they were effectively blinded to those poems where, despite her belief to the contrary, she speaks in a voice that borders on the universal, where desire is effectively a non-gendered *human* quality:

> Ah! ce coeur toujours ivre et toujours inquiet,
> Le pauvre coeur sensible et vaniteux de l'homme,
> Toujours plein du besoin qu'on l'aime et qu'on le nomme
> Toujours fort de désirs, et las de ce qui est...
> (*L'Ombre* 76)

Indeed, we might characterize Noailles' poetic philosophy as one of desire--in essence, Wordsworth's "grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which [man] knows and feels, and lives and moves" (325)--in which the act of surrendering to desire, to *la volupté*, becomes an act of *volonté*, a declaration of self-acceptance, of self-sufficiency and a celebration of self-empowerment. If, as Ross, paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,[2] suggests, "desire is intrinsically revolutionary" (9), then Anna de Noailles was indeed a rebel who became, in the eyes of her critics, a female *hors-la-loi* who boldly, audaciously--albeit covertly--staked her claim in the masculinist Romantic tradition. Her poetic derring-do alone certainly makes her work worth revisiting.

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NOTES

[1] We should note that Wordsworth's intent in consenting to write this *Preface* was to defend his reasons for departing from conventional "poetic diction" in the *Lyrical Ballads* (his collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge). The occasion furnishes him, nonetheless, an ideal opportunity for meditating on the notions of "poet" and "poetry."

[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985) 9.

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