The Domestic Front: Women and the Great War

my sweet old etcetera
aunt lucy during the recent

war could and what
is more did tell you just
what everybody was fighting

for,
my sister

isabel created hundreds
(and
hundreds of socks not to
mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers

etcetera wristers etcetera, my
mother hoped that

i would die etcetera
bravely of course....

- e. e. cummings (1926)

War has nothing to do with masterpieces.
Who says it has.
Everybody says it has.
Does anybody say what a masterpiece is.
no nobody does.

- Gertrude Stein (1935)

The first half of e.e. cummings' poem "[my sweet old etcetera]" satirizing the glorification of the Great War plays on the sentimental view of three women who follow the war from the home front. Cummings' ironic use of the word "etcetera" diminishes each woman's specific contribution. Aunt Lucy's assurance is mocked by the speaker's own description of war, "self etcetera lay quietly/ in the deep mud." (Cummings' experience, well-documented in *The Enormous Room*, reinforces the speaker's view: while Aunt Lucy knows "what," Cummings is mistakenly in solitary confinement at La Ferte Mace.) The sister's knitting (domestic thus trivial) is further reduced by "not to mention wristers" (more trivial than socks). The deliberate break of the lines "My mother wished that/ I would die etcetera/" mocks the mother's patriotism. The emotional expectation is set up, but the word "hero" doesn't follow. "bravely of course" is tacked on too late. Cummings' irony is clear.

In "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," Pound decries his loss of "the best" of young men who fought in the Great War for "an old bitch gone in the teeth." Both Pound and Cummings use female images to reveal the meaninglessness of previous values—and ultimately, the destruction of language. Cummings' speaker dreams of "Your smile/ eyes knees and of your Etcetera," while Pound reduces the war effort (and Aunt Lucy's assurance) to "two gross of broken statues,/ For a few thousand battered books."

All of this has been rehearsed before: the shattered Wilsonian idealism, the ensuing distrust of language after World War I, and thus "the role the war played in creating the psychology of despair in which the ensuing literary movement would ground itself" (Benstock 26). The purpose of this paper is not to rehash the already well-documented male viewpoints that culminated in Eliot's "heap of broken images," but to go back to the woman: Aunt Lucy and her patriotic cant, Isabel and her pile of socks and wristers (not to mention fleaproof earwarmers), and the mother who sent her son off to war.

These seemingly trivial women, and their ultimate betrayal as "a bitch gone in the teeth," represent countless women who participated in the Great War because their brothers or husbands or fathers or sons did. Yet the literature recording the war experience is predominantly male, while the letters, diaries, and popular novels about the war are predominantly female[1] and usually dismissed as minor, insignificant, "etcetera."

As Martha Shull has already pointed out in these pages[2], "To relegate all the fiction written by women, popular or otherwise, as peripheral is to lose or to ignore a valuable source of commentary on the lives, beliefs, values, and feelings of the human beings who were compatriots of the great writers." What not only fiction but letters and diaries written by women reveal about their society during the First World War is important in understanding both the human beings who were compatriots of the great writers and the way the war shaped women's later writing. In her excellent review of fiction written by American and British women of the Great War, however, Shull leaves out one important popular novelist who was as deliberately shaped by her WWI experience as better-known male writers were by theirs.

Kathleen Thompson Norris (1880-1966) was a prolific popular novelist. Her first great success *Mother* (1911) brought Norris recognition and placed her in the dubious camp of sentimental women writers. *Mother* was followed by "a steady flow of popular novels all characterized by a wholesome sentimental concern with domestic comedies and tragedies" (Hart). Yet one might describe her as Martin does William Dean Howells, "a populist with standards" (196). Those standards were brought rigorously to the test during WWI.

Orphaned at a young age, Norris was extremely close

to her five siblings, in particular her sister Teresa Thompson Benét. Both Benét's husband, the poet William Rose Benet, and Norris', the novelist Charles Gilman Norris, were involved in the war. When Charles Norris went to Officer's Training Camp in 1916, he was stationed, recalls Norris in an interview, "at Dix, then camp Dix, New Jersey" (149). Benet enlisted later, first training in Columbus, Ohio, then serving in Florida. The sisters joined by a third sister whose husband was in the Navy spent the war summers together in New Jersey, raising their collective children (seven in all by 1918).

What is significant in the period (1914-1918) is the sisters' attitudes toward war. Norris' attitude in 1914 was conventionally romantic: "I had a little boy and I was very happy and I was writing. I kind of liked the glory. I'm sorry to say I liked the glory" (Interview 176). Benet's view was quite different. On the eve of America's involvement she wrote her sister from Port Washington,

> I have no doubt there is an immense amount of such preparation [for war] going on. Stephen [Vincent Benét, her brother-in-law] says that they have all been scheduled, special training, etc...but I believe Wilson has just simply resolved not to have it, and is trying to shove Congress off his back. The report of their proceedings is sickening. (Letters)

After April 1917, she wrote to Norris, "personally I do not love money enough to murder for the sake of retaining it. Nor sovereignty, nor nationality, nor anything else" and signed her letter, "With love from your Papist, Pacifist, Suffragist, Prohibitionist Sister" (Letters).

Benet's more radical views certainly influenced her sister because the views were rooted in family, the sisters' deepest bond. The severing of this family as a result of the war will deepen the tone of Norris's novels and strengthen the theme. Her war experience reinforced her belief that only through family can America sustain its greatness. The family, however, must be redefined; and women must be recognized. In *Martie The Unconquered* (published in 1918 and praised by Teresa), Norris' heroine stands up to her stuffy Victorian father:

> Then-**then!**- when we must really begin to live, you suddenly failed us. Oh, you aren't different from other fathers, Pa. It's just that you don't understand! What help had we in forming human relationships? When did you ever tell us that this husband was a possible husband, and that one was not? I wanted to work, I wanted to be a nurse or bookkeeper— you laughed at me! (302)

As her sister speaks out in letters ("The report of their proceedings is sickening"), Norris in her fiction reveals women's preoccupations and struggles during the war years. One might even argue that Martie is as betrayed by an older generation as the speaker in "[my sweet old etcetera]" whose father "used to become hoarse talking about how it was/ a privilege [to serve in the war]." Martie's father "in a toneless dry voice" (304) condemns her wish to serve society in any meaningful way.

War is not dealt with directly in Norris' novels. The ten novels she wrote between 1914 and 1922[2] allude to Europe as a place the rich can afford to visit or where one can learn culture and manners in the fashion of the Grand Tour. Occasionally a male character will be an officer at a nearby camp or in charge of a unit of men, but the references are very vague.

Yet Norris, far from ignoring or glorifying war, chose to write fiction that reinforces the values of family and motherhood—with or without men. Norris saw the Great War as a divider: men might deal with the "psychology of despair," but women still had to raise the children. Her focus is on the domestic problems of the war, summed up clearly in a letter of February 1917 from Teresa:

> Marketing is certainly getting queerer and queerer. Not simply meat, eggs, and butter, but vegetables like carrots and cabbages have doubled, dried beans are 24 cents a pound, I used to buy them at Kilroy's for 8 cents, dried apricots are 25 cents, dried apples are out of the market! Carisio gave up potatoes after they were 60 cents a peck, and now Beechnut products are taken off because they have sold their entire output to the Allies. Campbell has cancelled lots of their advertising because they cannot get cans, and so it goes....If this German embargo goes through (and insurance on ships is leaping up) it ought to bring down prices. (Letters)

In *Reading the Romance* Janice Radway points out that readers of popular fiction are

> significantly more inclined than their feminist critics to recognize the inevitability and reality of male power and force of social convention to circumscribe a woman's ability to act in her own interest. It must also be said that they are comfortable with the belief that a woman should be willing to sacrifice extreme self-interest for a long-term relationship where mutually agreed-upon goals take precedence over selfish desire. (78)

Certainly, the sacrifice for and care of family that both Norris and Benét record in novels and letters underlines this view. And as Radway notes, this seems objectionable to a reader who has accepted the equality of male and female abilities (78). Norris, however, sees the superiority of the female ability to sacrifice and not give in to despair. Family, of course, supplied the "meaning" that war took away. The domestic front was a long way from the trenches.

Norris' philosophy was tested in January of 1919 just less than two months after the Great War ended. The influenza epidemic "swept across the world, taking 20 million lives and disrupting families and work everywhere" (Brinton 301). As Norris recalls in her memoirs, "My sister Teresa Thompson Benét was thirty-seven when she died in 1919. The deadly flu of that time, that piled soldiers' coffins like cordwood at Camp Dix...was mortal to pregnant womanhood" (154).

Ironically, the sisters had separated in the early fall of 1918, thinking Benét should be with her husband's family in Augusta, Georgia, and thus closer to her husband, serving in Florida. As Norris recalled,

> It seemed so safe for her, but nothing was safe that year. Then, my husband wanted his mother to see him in his major's uniform and I had to come out to California....When we got back we had the news my sister was gone. Her baby and she went together. (151)

Because of this "war casualty," Norris herself looked more deeply into the non-glory of war. She and her husband visited post-war London: "We saw men begging with decorations on. We saw it was demoralized" (Interview 178). She met Jane Addams, who asked her to take part in a meeting to "establish some type of peace organization," and Norris "suddenly thought of what the war had cost us all. My sister, Mrs. Benét, had died as a result of that war" (180). Thus, Norris became one of the most tireless speakers for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In her continuing fiction, Norris outlines a view of women and family as central powers to achieve both.

In the predominantly male canon of the literature of the Great War, Kathleen Norris has no foothold. Her war experience, however, shaped her vision as clearly as her literary compatriots'. Her approach was popular, not intellectual, her readers mostly women, certainly not academics. Yet she merits attention for giving women a way to cope with the realities of a society irrevocably changed by World War I. On the domestic front, as Gertrude Stein remarks, "War has nothing to do with master-pieces."

Notes

1. Exceptions such as *Letters from America* by Rupert Brooke or Harry Crosby's diaries anticipate or underline the loss of promising young men, thus reinforcing the significance of these literary forms in understanding the male war experience.

2. See her article, "Voices from a Forgotten Generation," in *Focus*, Fall 1990.

3. The novels of this period include *Saturday's Child* (1914), *The Story of Julia Page* (1915), *The Heart of Rachel* (1916), *Martie TheUnconquered* (1917), *Undertow* (1917), *Josselyn's Wife* (1918), *Sisters* (1919), *Harriet and the Piper* (1920), *Beloved Woman* (1921), and *Certain People of Importance* (1922).

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Pauline Fry
University of Maryland
European Division
Naples, Italy