

Women in Love

Wild Girls: Paris, Sappho and Art: The Lives and Loves of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks

Diana Souhami

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by Lydia Perovic

WHEN EXACTLY in the course of 20th century sexual history did we all forget that lesbianism equals glamour? At what point did the thinking about female queerness become a grave matter never to be divorced from the issues of homophobic and sexist oppression? The general mood of saturnine earnestness in lesbian studies is, fortunately, being increasingly forsaken by cultural historians like Carolyn Dinshaw, Terry Castle, Judith Halberstam, and Elspeth Probyn. Diana Souhami's latest lesbiography, *Wild Girls: Paris, Sappho and Art*, likewise adds an important title to the body of work on the joie de vivre side.

"At the centre of this idyll are Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks—both American, rich and grandly lesbian. They met in Paris in 1915 when they were in their forties, and their relationship lasted more than fifty years." But the Ladies of Llangollen they weren't. Barney was among the biggest seductresses of her time, who classified her affairs into liaisons, demi-liaisons and adventures, and believed that "we do not touch life except with our hearts." Brooks's elegant and ghostly paintings were to be known as, in Truman Capote's words, "the all-time ultimate gallery of famous dykes." Souhami's pages abound with oomph, wit, and lesbian camp, and with *Wild Girls*' arrival it will be even less clear how it was ever possible to write about Sapphism without writing about pleasure and art.

Granted, the poetics and practices of lesbianism are still less visible in both low and high culture than gay male sexuality. Lesbianism, or female queerness, to this day tends to figure as something unrepresentable or even inconceivable in popular culture; see bell hooks's article on *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, season four of *Six Feet Under*, the fate of Laura Innes's character on *ER*, the ending of *Boys Don't Cry*, or the general lesbophobia of *Will and Grace*. The fact that the *L-Word*, the *Showcase* series, is trying to overcompensate for decades of invisibility sometimes adds an inadvertent comic aspect to the show. And in literature, as Terry Castle shows in her books, there is an entire tradition of a *disappearing* lesbian. What should be of interest for the reader of contemporary fiction is the current presence of another, more sophisticated type of mediation in the writing of lesbian desire. The best known works in the English-speaking world that have any kind of lesbian content gravitate towards the fantastic or the historical: magical realism, sci-fi, fantasy, or costume dramas are de rigueur disguises for lesbians in fiction today (notably in Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Waters, and A. S. Byatt). A lesbian equivalent to Alan Hollinghurst has yet to emerge: somebody who would write about contemporary urban queer



"I could but choose to face the future alone."
Romaine in 1908 aged thirty-four.



"Natalie, the Amazon, circa 1907 in riding habit. Each morning she rode bareback in the Bois de Boulogne."

women within a mainly realist narrative framework.

If lesbian desire is still dogged by world-historical invisibility, and even if the questions of trauma and oppression are still very much alive, it should be more widely understood that lesbianism has as much to do with aesthetics as with politics—it is an artistic project before it is law reform. Souhami does a great job of reminding us of that. Most women (and men) in *Wild Girls* understand their love lives as a crucial part of their artistic oeuvre. In addition to the women-only Sapphic rituals in the garden, Barney's house on rue Jacob was famous for its literary salon. Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Sylvia Beach, Janet Flanner, Colette, Djuna Barnes, Ida Rubinstein, Dolly Wilde, Peggy Guggenheim, Radclyffe Hall, Ezra Pound, André Gide, Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Jean Cocteau, and Rainer Maria Rilke were among the people who stopped by. Souhami's narration focuses on the liaisons of the two protagonists: the women that Barney showered with poetry and the women that Brooks painted in her Gothic portraits. The Barney-Brooks circle was a much more sexual, women-centred and international version of London's Bloomsbury group.

Very noticeable is the lightness of tone in Souhami's history and at times it may arouse suspicion. "The capacity for farce—or tragedy—in all this was great, and both possibilities constantly hover around these letters," Ruth Bernard Yeazell rightly comments about the Bloomsbury crowd in her recent *London Review of Books* piece on Lytton Strachey's correspondence. One of the simpler tripartite liaisons, consisting of Strachey himself, Dora Carrington, and her new husband Ralph Partridge, is summed up in one of his letters thusly: "The world is rather tiresome, I must say, everything at sixes and at sevens—ladies in love with buggers, and buggers in love with womanisers, and the price of coal going up too. Where will it all end?" There was even more playing with fire in the Sapphic circles of Paris. Here is a typical *Wild Girls* passage:

"The launch of this Sapphic idyll had problems. Lady Anglesey was about to divorce her transvestite husband. Freddy Manners-Sutton fell for Natalie. Natalie was enchanted with Olive—her wonderful complexion, her vibrant poetry. Renée Vivien was morbidly jealous, and Olive was in love with 'Bosie', Lord Alfred Douglas."

Souhami decidedly keeps to the vaudevillian interpretation of it all. Even the lesbian pope, Natalie Barney, occasionally has to cope with moments of obsession, jealousy, or feelings of betrayal. Yet Souhami conveys these episodes in the same gently humorous way she talks about Barney at her most Don Juanesque. The darker characters, like Renée Vivien, or Romaine Brooks herself, get a similar treatment. It is this aspect of Souhami's re-creation of the female Parisian artistic universe that steers her co-biography towards utopia. Souhami is good at convincing us that their entire lives were Sapphic gardens festooned with unlimited supplies of brilliant, artistic, and very sexual queer women living in

near-harmony. Moments of darkness and despair? Souhami won't have any of it. Not in the Barney-Brooks history itself. The only moments of sullenness—equivocal and fleeting at that—are contained in brief inserts about episodes from (one presumes?) Souhami's own love life. Still, to think of these asides as 'reality checks' would be misguided; they are too discreet and self-ironising for that.

The affable quaintness of a sexual/cultural history before the emergence of identity politics is just the thing Souhami is trying to re-introduce here. In *Wild Girls* you will find nothing resembling the concept of coming-out, the same-sex marriage or domestic partnership debates phrased in either legalese or the language of religion, or any reference to the serious butch/femme divide. Yet the book is heavily contemporary and will continue to be at all times: it's about relationships and how to make them feasible and meaningful. The 1910s, '20s, and '30s were a period of great change in the philosophy and practices of coupledness and marriage, and the records left by the intellectual and artistic classes attest to something akin to a quiet revolution. A lot of serious 'queering' took place, either discreetly or the Natalie Barney way. The rue Jacob salon in Paris, the Bloomsbury group, and the Sackville-Nicolsons in a much more queer-intolerant London of the time, were the environments in which a new and queerer partnership ethics could be tested.

The British records are more sombre. Books were banned and authors proscribed; there were unhappy children (see Angelica Garnett's portrait of her mother, Vanessa Bell, *Deceived by Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood*); romances took genuinely tragic turns, and there were suicides. The civilised model, which declared in essence, "Look, old chap, you know in your heart of hearts that your wife and I belong together, so let's all be friends" (so brilliantly satirised in Iris Murdoch's novels some decades later), was anything but unproblematic. In spite of all that, however, there were remarkable achievements in the art of love and friendship. In the Sapphic Paris of Souhami's *Wild Girls*, as in the queer London portrayed in some of her earlier works, abandoning the idea of sexual fidelity did not imply that anything goes. A new ethics of fidelity was being put forth, no less—and likely more—exact than the old fidelity of sexual exclusivity.

"There were only three sins: cruelty, dishonesty and indolence," writes Nigel Nicolson of his parents' marriage. "Their morality can be summed up as consideration for other people, particularly for each other, and the development of their natural talents to the full. It was an amalgam of the Christian virtues and the 18th-century concept of the civilized life." In the world of Natalie Barney and friends, the lesbian Don Giovanni comes with a code of ethics. "Sappho welcomed women from all countries, and derived inspiration and desire from jealous lovers . . . Sappho was more faithful in inconstancy than were others in their fidelity, Natalie told Renée. Only women were chimerical and complex enough to attract her, hold her, and offer her all ecstasy and all torment." One of the rules of behaviour that Barney seemed to have



"From Nat Nat's weak heart, full of love for her Angel.' Romaine Brooks, Miss Natalie Barney, 'L'Amazone', 1920 (oil on canvas, 86 cm x 65 cm)."



"My dead mother stands between me and life.' Romaine Brooks, Self-portrait, 1923 (oil on canvas, 118 cm x 68 cm)"

adhered to was: "Once a Lover, Always a Friend." Former lovers were bound to become friends for life, and there were no tragic separations. Also, finding oneself in love with a person other than one's current partner increased not one's liberty but one's responsibility to both parties. Barney and Brooks were fiercely protective of their independence even when in love, but for Brooks this meant travel and seclusion, and for Barney a life abuzz with presence of other women. For both of them this also entailed uninterrupted artistic production and patronage; forgetting to turn everyday moments (letter-writing, saying hello, caring, throwing a party) into artistic endeavour would have been the only unforgivable kind of betrayal. Asymmetry in a partnership—in giving or taking, in decision-making, compassion, or granting of and making use of freedom—was also to be avoided.

Being rich and owning property around Europe certainly helped maintain one's peace of mind in the face of the many adversities of love, but wealth was rather an exception in the artistic coteries of Paris in the '20s and '30s. *Wild Girls* is also a book about the critical period in the history of Bohemia—the period in which being an artist, being poor, and being extravagant could, and did, go hand in hand. Most of the artists we know today as comprising the modernist canon died in poverty, whether they were recognised during their lifetime or not. A sustained artistic production in conditions of poverty today seems unlikely. Is it the case that the poverty that besieges artists became much uglier in the intervening decades? Or is it that the Bohemia in which beauty and poverty can go hand in hand is nothing but a myth anyway—a myth we like to situate in the urban European centres of the first decades of the 20th century?

What can be inferred from books like Souhami's is that in those artistic salons—and love affairs—a lot of class miscegenation took place, perhaps more than is likely to happen today. Wealthy Maecenas proliferate in Souhami's pages, women and men of 'independent means' who took great interest in the arts and made it their business to support artists financially. Glamour in (spite of) poverty was indeed able to emerge, and artists like Isadora Duncan were in a position to note that they were so poor they "hardly knew where the next bottle of champagne was coming from" (Janet Flanner, *Paris Was Yesterday*).

Among the biggest of art patrons, of course, was Barney herself, in whose salons writers found translators, poets found publishers, and everybody found lovers. The concluding years of her life were consistent with those of her youth, and she exited the stage surrounded by friends and well-wishing visitors, having affairs late into her old age. Brooks, also faithful to her own narrative, passed on during one of her prolonged voluntary seclusions, not willing to receive anybody. Souhami's account does justice to the lives of the rue Jacob, lives that had been—albeit far from flawless or easy—extraordinary in their intensity and their determination to refine love between women into an art form. •

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