Recall Roster

Recalling forgotten, neglected, underrated, or out-of-print works.

by D.A. Boxwell

Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone.* London: Heinemann, 1929 and Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1930.

"The operating rooms were ablaze. The place was a shambles, the air thick with steaming sweat. . . . This is the second battlefield. The battle now is going on over the helpless bodies of these men. It is we who are doing the fighting now" (155). So spoke one of the most eloquently understated voices heard in all of the eight hours of the 1996 BBC/KCET television documentary, *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*. The voice belonged to a Vassar graduate who established a field hospital behind the front lines in France beginning in 1916, when she was almost 30 years of age and a divorced mother of three. Mary Borden's compassionate and palliative presence stood out for the lack of bitter sarcasm which characterized the trench poets like Siegfried Sassoon, whose work was much more frequently cited by the documentary's producers. Borden's words, metaphorizing the hospitals as the *second* battle front of the War, were read over film footage (little seen during the war itself) of primitive operating theaters and drafty wards whose horrors could only be faintly discerned in the dim, deteriorating medium of images flickering at 24 frames per second. The book from which the documen-

tary producers drew Borden's words, *The Forbidden Zone,* is one of the greatest of the autobiographical-fictional works about the Great War to emerge in that annus mirabilis, 1929 (along with Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms,* Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That,* Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune,* Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War,* R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End,* and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*). The enduring medium of Borden's words on a page do more than the unstable medium of nitrate film ever could to bring to life the otherwise unimaginable carnage endured by men and witnessed by women on the Western Front.

But, until very recently and very briefly on television, Borden's words have had little dissemination since their initial appearance: *The Forbidden Zone* has never been reprinted on either side of the Atlantic, and thus has never been able to attain deserved canonical status among the other works of 1929. Despite recent attention to the book, in a glancing way, by American feminist literary critics like Jane Marcus, Sandra Gilbert, and Margaret Higonnet, there has been no detailed analysis of a book whose importance derives from its unflinching female gaze on the spectacle of war and the annihilated male combatant. I would like to make a case for Borden's work as both very exceptional and all of a part with her contemporaries' war writing.

Borden's book was not the first imaginative eyewitness rendition of the Great War from a nurse's perspective to be published on either side of the Atlantic. That distinction almost certainly belongs to Enid Bagnold's *A Diary Without Dates* (1917), but it is set exclusively on the home front at London's Royal Herbert Hospital. Set in the war zone, Ellen La Motte's banned *The Backwash of War: the Human Wreckage of the Battlefield as Witnessed by an American Nurse* was only issued by Putnam in 1934, eighteen years after the original scheduled

publication date, because its high degree of critical irony and skepticism made it too "demoralizing" for wartime consumption. So, Borden's book was one of the first to appear to directly confront the gut-wrenching reality of the Great War from a woman's experienced perspective. In general, contemporary reviewers in London and New York damned the book with either faint praise or grudging admiration, anxiously mitigating the real implications of Borden's work. For example, G. T. Hellman in *The New Republic* (May 14, 1930) objected to the literary aspirations of *The Forbidden Zone*, whose poetry, while "occasionally very charming," prevented the book "from having any great force." Moreover, the critics could not agree on the supposed objectivity or even the tone of Borden's writing. The anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* (December 5, 1929) dragged predictable gender stereotypes into the assessment of the book's merits: "an interesting book, and only fails to be impressive because it so often whirls off at the critical moment into a vague whirl of emotion and loses the objective picture." By contrast, the *New Statesman*'s critic asserted Borden wrote "with a remarkable detachment."

In addition to its deliberately inconsistent tone, disorientingly but purposefully veering in a single page from numbed detachment from the spectacle of war to the urgent repetitions and hyperventilating dashes of a hysteric's text, *The Forbidden Zone* evades generic definition and its structure, as a finished work, seems arbitrary. Borden's book begins with of 10 chapters of prose, set outside the hospital, which hover at the threshold between the short story and memoir, without being either in any definitive way. It shares this quality with Sassoon's trilogy, beginning with *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928). For the sake of convenience, we have called these works "semi-autobiographical," which underplays the truly factitious nature of self-inscription. Borden

sometimes uses a first-person narration to make her presence felt, but even more frequently the events and characters play out their destinies without her intervention as either reporter or actor. These first ten chapters concentrate on the circumstances of battle and retreat which bring the wounded into the hospital. While she claims in her preface that she has "not invented anything in this book," it is apparent that the strategies of fiction are brought to bear to represent the war as a surrealistic experience, as when she writes of a captive observation balloon as "an oyster in the sky, keeping an eye on the Germans" (14). She depicts events which she could not possibly have experienced at first hand. Here, for example, she takes the point of view of "the aeroplane," which has no human agent controlling it, in an episode of aerial bombardment:

> And at last signs of terror of bewilderment appeared in the human ant hill beneath it. Distracted midgets swarmed from the houses: this way and that they scurried, diving into openings in the ground: swift armoured beetles rushed through the streets; white jets of steam rose from the locomotives in the station yard: the harbour throbbed. (10)

More overtly autobiographical are the seven chapters which comprise Part Two, "The Somme: Hospital Sketches." Borden draws the strongest picture of herself as a character in this section. In the "Hospital Sketches" Borden uses the present tense and the second person address (both to refer to herself and the reader) in order to capture the reality of the hospital. But there is again a frequent recourse to surreal, or even hyperreal, imagery to evoke the sense that the operating ward is a "curious

dream-place" (147) inhabited by horrific wraiths and monstrosities. Finally, Borden ends her book with five long prose poems, which iterate the horrors of war, and which are the most meditative and religious component of the book.

Stylistically, the book lurches to great effect between contradictory impulses of objective realism (we could call it "reportage") and intensely subjective fabulism—reinforcing the structurally ad hoc nature of Borden's finished work. The book's deliberate stylistic fragmentation, dream-like surrealistic imagery, convoluted narrative progression juxtaposed with narrative stasis, and the reporting of inner psychological states all combine to exemplify the connections between the First World War and literary Modernism. One of the most characteristically Modernist stylistic devices Borden absorbed from Gertrude Stein (one also adopted by Hemingway to greater acclaim) is paratactic repetition. For instance, in her recounting of a regimental inspection, by the insistent repetition of the word "one," Borden is able to express, in highly ironic terms, the ineffectual nature of the French army's leadership and the preparation for combat:

> There was variety among these officers. No one was like another one. Not one had gestures like another one. Not one had clothes like another one. Certainly they were individuals. One was a slim, graceful one; one was a flabby one; one was an elegant one; one a tall, very stiff one; one was a pot-bellied one. Each remained the same one he had been before the war. (33)

Anaphora is also a type of repetition which Borden effectively uses to suggest her inability to articulate the

otherwise unspeakable horrors she has witnessed. Her book demonstrates the degree to which utterance is even possible unless one could resort to the surety and security of an anaphoric life-line like "each one" or "the same" in the following passage, describing French soldiers retreating from the battlefield:

> And they were all deformed, and certainly their deformity was the deformity of war. They were not misshapen in different ways. They were all misshapen in the same way. Each one was deformed like the next one. Each one had been twisted and bent in the same way. Each one carried the same burden that bowed his back, the same knapsack, the same roll of blanket, the same flask, the same dangling box, the same gun. Each one dragged swollen feet in the same thick-crusted boots. The same machine had twisted and bent them all. (27)

The effect of reading passages like this is feeling an army marching in place in the reader's cranium—the only forward momentum in prose like this comes when the repetitions are dislodged by another set of repeated words or phrases. The above passage continues with the trudging anaphora of:

> Nor did they behave like men. They did not look about them as they marched along the road. They did not talk as they marched together. They did not stop marching, never for a moment did they stop marching. They did not shift their burdens to ease them. They did not notice the milestones as they passed. (28)

The relentless stasis-in-motion of this battalion's retreat is, in Borden's canny deployment of Modernist style, a metaphor for the whole war's seemingly endless lack of progress and resolution.

Finally, in thematic terms, Borden's most significant achievement is to make readers aware that women, immediately behind the front lines in the so-called Forbidden Zone, were also traumatized by their experience of war. As she notes, "It is impossible to be a woman here. One must be dead" (64-5). If nurses, for all their exhaustion, were not physically wounded by the spectacle of countless dead and wounded, they were psychically damaged, even destroyed, in special ways, which demanded representation in print. In fact, at times, Borden figures her psychic and emotional trauma in terms of the war's effect on her own body, from which she is almost completely alienated.

The heart of the book, therefore, lies in the "Hospital Sketches." Borden's stunning use of both understatement and hyperbole in describing the fragmented, annihilated combatants contrasts with her own sense of dissociation from herself and the war throughout this part of *The Forbidden Zone*. One passage comes at the end of an exhausting shift in the operating ward (note the shifts in voice and tense):

> I think that woman, myself, must have been in a trance, or under some horrid spell. Her feet are lumps of fire, her face is clammy, her apron is splashed with blood; but she moves ceaselessly about with bright burning eyes and handles the dreadful wreckage of men as if in a dream. (160)

Here Borden's grammatical waywardness exemplifies the effort to associate her experience of disorientation

and even physical pain with that of her charges. But the men are rarely individualized or even named. In large measure they are portrayed in synecdoche, merely fragmented body parts, deprived of their functions, existing in a text which is itself "a collection of fragments," as Borden's preface announces to the reader. In her representation of the wounded and dying, Borden is predictable in only one regard: the willful inconsistency of tone from under-inflected anomie, at the one extreme, to outraged and profane protest. A compelling example of the former is this:

> There was a man stretched on the table. His brain came off in my hands when I lifted the bandage from his head.
>
> When the dresser came back I said: 'His brain came off on the bandage.'
>
> 'Where have you put it?'
>
> 'I put it in the pail under the table.'
>
> 'It's only one half of his brain,' he said, looking into the man's skull. 'The rest is here.'
>
> I left him to finish the dressing and went about my business. I had much to do. (151)

Drained of any outward emotional response, and reporting the episode as flatly and neutrally as possible, Borden here only implicitly registers the gore to disturb the reader's complacency. She understands the power of the reader's imagination to create fear and horror beyond written language. If she has, as she so frequently shows, become inured to the horror of war as a protective defense in order to carry on her work, the reader has not been allowed to. Because it is in such dramatic, and close, juxtaposition to hyperbole, understatement is a powerful device in *The Forbidden Zone*.

And Borden's hyperbolic writing is stunning. One memorable episode in the book is her personification of pain as a "harlot in the pay of War, [who] amuses herself with the wreckage of men" (66). Borden's allegorical figure enables the nurse to spin out a beautifully sustained meditation on war's abjection and the connection between eros and thanatos.

> She consorts with decay, is addicted to blood, cohabits with mutilations, and her delight is the refuse of suffering bodies. You can watch her plying her trade here any day. She is shameless. She lies in their beds all day. She lies with the Heads and the Knees and the festering Abdomens. (66)

Borden elaborates this trope to its expected conclusion: the shudders of death in war a perversion of a pleasurable, life-giving act. Borden's deliberate use of purple prose derives from the Gothic tradition, for she vividly renders the *Zone Interdite* as a moonlit space populated by evil succubi and nightmarish specters: predators and prey in a war which can't be sufficiently understood in terms of objective reportage or rational explanation. The flagrantly anti-realist and non-Modernist nature of much of this book is one which sets it apart from Borden's contemporary memoirists.

The Forbidden Zone merits praise and revival for the very qualities that make it such an effective representation of war: its stylistic and structural inconsistency, incoherence, and chaotic unpredictability. And never more so than in her representation of her own personal experience of war. She frequently alludes to having become a machine, a dehumanized and unsexed entity who, like the wounded and dying, "seemed to be breaking to pieces" (167). Yet she also avers that as a rescuer

capable of heroic deeds, she "was happy there" (157), fulfilled as a woman and human being for her service to the suffering. On "the second battlefield" of the Great War (and all wars, in fact), the struggle for life in death depends upon those, like Mary Borden, who understand that war is a complex and paradoxical human enterprise, one best understood as a dream state interrupted by vivid, waking moments of unbearable intensity.