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Catherine Perry. *Persephone Unbound: Dionysian Aesthetics in the Works of Anna de Noailles*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003. 455p.

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Anna de Noailles (1876-1933) was born Anna-Elisabeth Bassaraba-Brancovan, in Paris, to parents of Roumanian and Greek heritage, and married Mathieu, marquis de Noailles, in 1897. Catherine Perry's *Persephone Unbound* is a critical study of the character and formation of her literary identity and participates in the revival of interest in Noailles' life and œuvre, especially the poetry.

The title captures Perry's goal of resuscitating Noailles and establishing her as a first-rate poet, recognition, Perry contends, that has been generally denied Noailles despite critical acclaim and immense popularity in her lifetime. Perry maintains that Noailles' literary production was received primarily as a woman's work and as such subject to expectations about women and women artists. Even though Noailles was honored as a poet, there were reservations about the originality of her work and her command of poetic inspiration, which denied her full critical recognition among many commentators of her time, though not all, and which led to the near oblivion into which her œuvre fell.

Noailles practiced Dionysian aesthetics, inspired by Nietzsche's writings, which governed her thematic choices and set her literary tone. She celebrated the sensual and the erotic, extolled vital energy, embraced the exaltation that comes from both fully pursuing one's intuitive desires and accepting the concomitant destruction, or disintegration, that attends the actualization of ever-changing, finite desires. Noailles' artistic credo was based on Nietzsche's metaphysics: that there exists only the natural world, which is animated by a dynamic, material life force. As Perry sees it, because Noailles embraced this metaphysics, critics placed her on a lower rung of the literary ladder as the Dionysian in her work provoked knee-jerk reactions about the feminine.

The body and sensuality in general were associated with woman, an affiliation that led women to be judged inferior to men; men represented the mind or spirit and moral control. Noailles' Dionysian subject matter played into this prejudice, causing her poetry to be deemed lesser. Noailles was unabashedly feminine, Perry insists, in that she expressed and exalted the body's instinctual desires and human powers to exult in physical experience, but that expression was based on the insight that the animate, ever-changing material world she represented captured the real. This insight, though, was not always detected or countenanced.

Aligned with the common disparaging association between the physical and women were the biases that Noailles' lyrical writings on the body and its sensations

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and on nature were natural to literary women and that the breadth of her poetic inspiration was inherently limited to this lyrical sensuality. Furthermore, Noailles' writings were considered to be spontaneous outpourings. They naturally flowed, artlessly, as she, a woman, was more responsive to vital energies and not blocked by intellectual demands and the intellectual distance required for concerns of craftsmanship. Perry documents critical reviews suggesting that Noailles did not craft her literary expression, was not in full conscious control. Such standpoints on women's experience and the nature of women writers inclined critics, even when dazzled by such a natural talent, to take her work less seriously, as all such naturalness was lacking in intellectual, or spiritual, weight and grasp.

The lyricism of the poetry and the natural world as object of Noailles' artistic attention gave critics license to align Noailles' art with romanticism. Many called Noailles a neo-Romantic, despite significant philosophical differences, and situated her poetry in artistic currents that had been waning since the end of the 19th century. This categorization underlay the judgment that Noailles' work was derivative. Noailles' use and defense of traditional forms of verse reinforced this dismissive judgment, at a time when formal experimentation, in the new age of modernism, was considered normative. Thus, the character and content of Noailles' poetic inspiration, compounded by an allegiance to "old-fashioned" poetic form, steered critics and scholars to diminish Noailles' artistic achievement.

In four chapters, Perry addresses the prejudices and misjudgments responsible for the eclipse of Noailles. Further, she establishes the latter's unique identity as a talented literary artist in an ample and at times exhaustive documentation and discussion of the similarities and differences between Noailles' writings and those of philosophers, writers, poets, composers, and others whose works influenced her own. Perry considers affinities and divergences in an attempt to establish the specific character of Noailles' literary accomplishment. By these comparative scrutinies and by touching on her ancestral roots in classical Greece, Perry hopes to eliminate the grounds for dismissing Noailles as a minor artist.

Perry begins her study by documenting Noailles' critical adherence to Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's philosophies, which postulate that desire, or the will, is the essential feature of human nature and that desire originates in the body, which mediates it, gives it expression. The human spirit, they held, is animal: it is born, it dies, and returns to time and space; the Dionysian is the heroic way of the universe. Schopenhauer made it clear for her that there is no spiritual transcendence in the sense of being cut off from the world; there is desire, or the will, the life force. The so-called feminine preoccupations of Noailles' *œuvre*, therefore, are not merely un-self-conscious, natural effusions of a woman poet but a conscious statement about

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the nature of what is essential to human reality, of what is real about both men and women. Noailles *was* in control of her message, participated in the spiritual as much as Baudelaire claimed poets do, whose creative forms voice the meaning of poetic content, establishing a critical grasp and understanding of the contents. Baudelaire denied this mastery to women, who are dominated by sensations and feelings. Noailles rejected this facile dualism, which privileges the intellectual, or spiritual, and divorces it from what is essential.

Chapter Two is a wide-ranging examination of Noailles' changing representations of nature and the allied feminine, as they move steadily away from Romantic notions of human fellowship with nature and any claims of its transcendental significance. In as much as animal energy, or the life force, is associated with the feminine, Noailles asserts that the feminine *is* reality. Perry selects passages from her poetry that plot Noailles' evolving awareness of the new identity between the natural world without consciousness and the poem's speaker: both are alive and changing, but neither has any absolute spiritual meaning or significance. To align the natural and the feminine and see them as distinct from the masculine, traditionally considered to deal in abstractions and to accord transcendent spiritual or abstract meaning to nature, is vain and deluded.

In Chapter Three, Perry deeply investigates Noailles' filiation with the Romantics. Perry especially focuses on lineage between Noailles and her literary forebears Lamartine and Hugo, as all three intently analyzed nature in relation to human understanding and experience of it and created poetic speakers of intense feelings, with great lyrical powers. Perry lays out philosophical differences between Lamartine's and Noailles' poetry, diminishing the credibility of claims that there are strong affinities between them. With respect to Hugo, however, Perry gives a thorough account of Noailles' liberating struggle with the great Romantic poet, whose creative power and whose obsession with creativity, strongly moved and influenced Noailles, indeed nearly "suppressed" her, as Perry shows. Hugo's powerful will to bring characters and emotions to life readily aligns with the dominant Dionysian in Noailles' poetry, establishing important resemblances between the ideals of the two artists. To be creative herself, however, Noailles had to overcome the awe in which she held Hugo, which inclined her to be passive and to allow Hugo to silence her genius, suffering his artistry to suppress the expression of her own. Perry presents this literary relationship from a very Nietzschean perspective.

In Chapter Four, Perry takes up the long professional and private friendship between Maurice Barrès and Noailles, the strength of which has recently come to light. Perry shows that this was a peculiar relationship in that their friendship was deep and their works and correspondence testify to their mutual artistic respect and

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influence. At the same time, it was a relationship fraught with conflicts, because of the dissonances between their thinking with regard to national and international politics and to sexual politics. Perry mainly focuses on Barrès' obsessive attachment to Noailles, his junior by fourteen years, whose literary work he admired and publicly praised, but whose personal behavior frustrated him, as Noailles would not play the role of either lover or submissive female protégée, a Galatea to his Pygmalion. The choice to focus on Barrès in this chapter rather than on Noailles (whose literary identity Perry has already elaborately investigated) affords Perry the opportunity to represent in specific detail an important male reception of an artist like Noailles, who possessed personal and literary attributes that conformed to traditional views of women but who preserved her autonomy and chiefly acted towards Barrès as a professional in their literary relationship and a friend in their personal one. Noailles insisted on *her* will, on her resolve to impose her desires, rather than simply acquiescing to Barrès', and so she played a male role. Barrès had to accept the tense character of this relationship, a rivalry of wills. Noailles saw this frustrated relationship as natural, as Nietzsche would, as reality is such conflict, the tensions of conflicting wills. Perry's take on Barrès, who pursued this relationship hoping to resolve the conflict, relies on a psychological explanation that has sources in Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's thought. Barrès saw in Noailles what he possessed himself but could not face: the ungovernable, animal life force. He wanted to live with the lie that men in dominating women bring into their lives in a controlled way the feminine, which is alien to them, subsuming the passively feminine into themselves, destroying the alien in making themselves complete. Barrès' troubled relationship with Noailles serves thus as a paradigm of the general reception of Noailles' work as tantalizing but somewhat deficient and lacking the power to impose itself.

In the conclusion, Perry reviews the last stage of Noailles' development, where the artist, less interested in celebrating the life force, lucidly confronts the reality of its natural disintegration for the individual. The deaths of many close friends had an impact on Noailles, turning her attention to what these deaths and the prospect of her own made her feel given the meaninglessness of reality. Faithful to the tenet of the dissolution of the individual life, of the inevitable process of the development and destruction of the individual, Noailles resignedly meditated on the absolute loss of the individual, exploring feelings and reactions from the vantage point of one who knows that dying means the disappearance of a person, short of his or her accomplishments that may last posthumously. She refused the comfort of this possibility, which especially privileges artists, so many of whom think to cheat death and prolong their survival by the immortality of their art. She remained faithful to her Muse, and her writings on death take their inspiration from reality and present

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death from the perspective of one who chose to be in solidarity with all men and women, sharing the same fate.

Perry insists on a metaphysics in Anna de Noailles' literary work. This focus, guiding the critical discussion, appears to be a campaign, a clear sign of Perry's commitment to save Noailles the poet from the patronizing judgment that she was merely "natural." Perry, like Noailles, seems to adhere to the reality of the Nietzschean will and necessary power relationships, and she hopes to redress the balance in Noailles' favor, showing that the condescending reception Noailles received as a poet was the product of a male will to dominate. Perry presents Anna de Noailles as a willful artist, feeling and knowing her power despite setbacks and biased expectations. ✱