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Forgotten Memoirs

Laughing Torso

By Nina Hamnett

1932

The Square Sun

By Stefan Knapp

1956

Artists' memoirs rarely provide insight into the creative process. Classics of the genre offer other pleasures: vignettes of notorious contemporaries, snapshots of a particular métier from a participant's point of view—in short, history at first hand. Both Nina Hamnett and Stefan Knapp had seen enough of life by early middle age to write a book about it. Their engrossing if neglected memoirs depict differently the effort to maintain equilibrium in a hostile world. The authors' circumstances differ wildly, but both books indelibly capture the tenor of their time and place.

Born in 1890 in Tenby, on the coast of Wales, Hamnett was trained at London's Slade School, and she first traveled to Paris when she was twenty-four. A lively lass, always up for a bit of fun, she quickly met the denizens of bohemian Montparnasse and joined their ranks with gusto. A model as well as a painter, Hamnett was also a sexual adventurer who became a minor celebrity in a milieu with no shortage of them. Amedeo Modigliani and Roger Fry painted her portrait; her book's title refers to a ten-inch-high marble based on her youthful, gamine frame, sculpted by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in 1914 and now at the Tate.

A headlong rush through Hamnett's first forty-two years, *Laughing Torso* was a best-seller both in Britain and America. The reader would scarcely suspect that by the time it was published its author was well past her prime. Hamnett's flame burned brightly, but it had begun to flicker

by 1925. In May of that year, Fry wrote to a friend: "What a collapse . . . she's suddenly become a coarse heavy middle-aged *rouée* and all the queer satyrlike oddity and grace of her is gone forever. She's quite repulsive." Her book limns a hardscrabble existence kept afloat on rivers of booze, but it glosses over such nettlesome autobiographical details as her many simultaneous affairs and her bisexuality. Scant mention is made of the author's many exhibitions, both in Paris and London, before and after World War I. But their insouciance and what-the-devil indecorum make these reminiscences a propulsive, irresistible read.

Hamnett's voice is enchanting, dizzy, and deadpan, simultaneously self-effacing and in-your-face. Her tone veers from frenzy to ennui, matching Hemingwayesque affectlessness to borderline non sequiturs, and suggesting stream-of-consciousness recollections, lightly edited. Its rhythms are captivating. She recounts the embarrassment of running into acquaintances at the selling desk of the neighborhood pawnshop; she asks Aleister Crowley about his sexual encounter the previous evening; she teaches sea chanteys to Georges Auric, hoping that the composer might finally finish the third act of *Les Matelots*; she leads Satie's funeral procession. In print, Hamnett is a shameless name-dropper; the book's index references three hundred personages. "Joyce," she writes, "said I was one of the few vital women he had ever met. I don't know if that is true, but I have very big lungs and can make a great deal of noise if encouraged."

The book's photographs include a few of Hamnett, a beguiling woman with bobbed hair and a bemused yet alert expression. Her book ends with her return to London, where she fell into alcoholism and poverty, spending decades drinking at the Fitzroy Tavern. In 1956, she dropped forty feet from her apartment window (probably by accident), and she died from the resulting injuries a few days later.

Stefan Knapp's comparatively workmanlike autobiography, *The Square Sun*, was published the year of Hamnett's demise. The title refers to a different high window, in a cell in Kherson Prison, near Odessa, Ukraine. There Knapp spent three months in the fall of 1939, having been

rounded up at the age of eighteen by Soviet soldiers who overran his Polish village. That incarceration was followed by two years in a Siberian labor camp, where endless toil was rewarded with black bread. Knapp's harrowing memoir of unimaginable hardship and hard-won subsistence was published seventeen years before Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. The brutality of camp life seems to have stoked rather than sapped Knapp's creative drive, suggesting a common source in the will to survive.

Years later, Knapp would settle in London and become a painter and sculptor, working in a Cubist-Surrealist mode employing forms derived from the human figure. Known in the U.K. for public mural projects, he also traveled to the U.S., where his experimentation in large-scale enamel techniques led, in 1960, to what was then considered to be the world's largest painting, a 50' x 200' mural on the side of a (now demolished) department store in Paramus, New Jersey. That was a far cry from the pigments he had devised in the Kherson prison: red from blood, yellow from onions, blue from laundry soap.

Knapp was nothing if not resourceful. After being released from camp in 1941 and declared a Soviet citizen, he made his way across the frozen hinterland by train to Moscow in the uniform of the Red Army. Along the way, he ate roots and, when lucky, dogs. He crossed the Caspian Sea to Persia, where there was food but little soap, then shipped to Bombay, Cape Town, and, eventually, Glasgow. He joined the Royal Air Force and earned his wings in December 1943. By the following summer, the Allies had taken Naples, and Knapp found himself stationed there: "Famine or no famine, the Opera in Naples was excellent." Scenes from *Rigoletto* rang in his ears as he flew his Spitfire over German positions north of the city, shells exploding around him. For the sake of the war effort, Knapp was expected to stifle his ire at the British public for its naïve embrace of the dictator at whose command he and countless others had suffered so profoundly. But by then his antinationalist convictions were galvanized: "Flying taught me one thing: frontiers are fiction. The world is one from 40,000 feet. . . . It seems pretty futile to chop up the Alps and call one part one thing and another part

something else. . . . How foolish, how petty to try and split the grain of the granite, to etch a line across the running waters, to clutch at one slanting ray and claim it as your own."

Both Hamnett and Knapp were capable if unremarkable artists, in step with the prevailing pictorial idiom of the day. Neither their work nor their memoirs are "timeless," but are very much products of the remarkable times they witnessed. Their writing crackles with keen observation and penetrating description borne of empathy with their surroundings. These books are vividly etched portraits—of the authors, and of their eras.

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Left Hand, Right Hand!

By Sir Osbert Sitwell

1945–50

Written somewhat in the manner of the *roman-fleuve* pioneered by Proust, Sir Osbert Sitwell's autobiography was very successful in its day, and published by Macmillan in five beautifully designed volumes as follows: *Left Hand, Right Hand!* (1945), *The Scarlet Tree* (1946), *Great Morning* (1948), *Laughter in the Next Room* (1949), and *Noble Essences* (1950). Sitwell may be said to have been privileged, not only as a member of the upper classes—with a stately home in Derbyshire and a castle near Florence—but also as a man whose life (1892–1969) moved from the countryside of nineteenth-century England, through Diaghilev, Picasso, and the beau monde, and into the Swinging