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<CH>Chapter 4

Cross-Channel Modernisms and the Vicissitudes of a Laughing Torso: Nina Hamnett, Artist, Bohemian and Writer in London and Paris

Jane Goldman

This chapter is the fruit of my own cross-channel scholarly activities, beginning with a lecture in June 2010 to the conference, “‘No Hawkers: No Models’”: The Vicissitudes of the Modernist Muse’, held at the University of Westminster, London. I developed this work in April 2015 for presentation to the ‘Cross-Channel Modernisms Symposium’ at Reid Hall in Paris (the University of Kent’s Paris Campus). The latter version was in fact delivered twice within the space of a few days, first on the University of Kent’s home campus and then in Paris. Shuttling between England and France via the Channel tunnel, I was already reworking my text on a remarkable modernist cross-Channel figure who had shuttled a little less speedily but with greater sartorial panache by boat-train a century earlier.

Laughing Torso (1932), the ‘*reminiscences*’ of Nina Hamnett (1890-1956), recounts her notorious cross-Channel vicissitudes as a struggling artist in the 1910s and 1920s in bohemian London and Paris. It opens up all kinds of interdisciplinary modernist crossings and channels. Hamnett’s was an astonishing career not only as a visual artist (whose reputation has only recently been recovered), and as a muse, model, and a self-fashioning bohemian (whose excesses in the bars of Fitzrovia, Soho and Montparnasse, for many of critics, eclipsed her other talents), but also as writer. Reappraisal of Hamnett opens fascinating conduits to numerous modernist circles and to many pressing as well as entrenched critical and theoretical questions on modernism, including its transnational and geopolitical, trans-temporal and

interdisciplinary, and its (trans-)performative, lived and embodied, and cross-gender framings. Hamnett, in her cross-Channel person as well as in her art and writing, may be considered in response to Virginia Woolf's question 'who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?' (Woolf 1929: 73)

Critics tend to focus either on Hamnett's early identification with the acclaimed modernist marble *Torso* (1914), the sculpture made by the French artist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in response to a segment of her supple body as a fragment of classical statuary, or on her reputation as 'Queen of Bohemia' in both Soho and Montparnasse over many decades in the company of luminary modernist artists, writers and critics. These include Walter Sickert, Augustus John, Aleister Crowley, Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Olivia Shakespear, Ezra Pound, Amadeo Modigliani, Pablo Picasso, Serge Diaghilev, Jean Cocteau, Dylan Thomas and Francis Bacon. Yet Hamnett, highly regarded by Sickert and a key participant in early Bloomsbury's Omega Workshop phase, and later widely regarded in the 1920s as one of the most talented young artists in Paris, died in poverty and obscurity. Her reputation as an artist was ditched, overshadowed by her lengthy fall into drunken dereliction, and her presiding over the younger generations of artists in the bars of Soho during the 1940s and 1950s, as a barely surviving muse of old bohemia.

Like Hamnett's visual art, *Laughing Torso* is a neglected, misunderstood modernist masterpiece. It should be read alongside Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). This highly sophisticated document situates Hamnett precisely at the margins between the hegemony of Art (painting, sculpture, and literature) and the emergent para-categories of 'gestural modernism' (Levenson 2011: 247), that is, 'experimental social aesthetics, or self-fashioning which vied with bourgeois norms'

(Brooker 2007: 8). Distinguishing between textual modernism and gestural modernism, Levenson defines the latter with reference to ‘all those events that live beyond the artefacts ... a question of the physical disposition of artists and their audiences—a question of personal style, of dress and costume, men in capes, women on bicycles, workers in the square, suffragettes on the street’ and the ‘increased visibility, not only of modernist art works but of modernist bodies’, engaging in ‘unrepeatable event and evanescent gesture’—happenings and spectacles that barely survive in ‘half-reliable newspaper reports or memoirs’ but ‘were crucial to oppositional culture’ (Levenson 2011: 247). *Laughing Torso* addresses the vicissitudes of Hamnett’s experiences as an ambitious artist who is also positioned by herself and others as a muse and a model, a bohemian poser/poseuse, dancer and flâneuse, in both London and Paris. But it is also testament to her talent as a writer. Her writing relates the lives and intersecting circles of cross-Channel modernists. But it is itself an interdisciplinary form of modernist cross-channeling.

In 1914 Hamnett wore to a fancy-dress dance in Paris a radically prismatic, colourist blouse ‘of a large cubist design in blue, orange and black’. It is depicted in monochrome in *Laughing Torso* in the black and white photograph, ‘Myself: A Fancy Dress Dance in Avenue Maine 1914’, in which Hamnett is at the centre of the crowd ‘where Modigliani is standing in the background’ (Hamnett 1932: 67; see Koppen 2011: 20). This stunning blouse was designed in London’s Omega workshops, a truly cross-Channel modernist garment, and an ephemeral prop of the gestural that survives only in the black and white photograph illustrating her memoir: ‘No one in Paris had seen anything like it and although Sonia Delaunay was already designing scarves, this was more startling’ (Hamnett 1932: 66- 67). The London Omega blouse she wore in Paris, Hamnett seems to suggest here, may have helped spur Sonia Delaunay to

translate her avant-garde experimental colourism from scarves to other more ambitious wardrobe items. Yet Diaghilev's Ballets Russes was surely a common catalyst in 1910 and 1911 for both cities' fashion revolutions well before the Great War. By 1917 Delaunay herself was designing costumes for Diaghilev. Her later simultanist blouse design (1928) on the cover of the present volume nevertheless closely resembles Hamnett's 1914 cross-Channel oppositional colourist blouse.

But it is the marble sculpture *Torso* (1914), made in the same year as the blouse, in a collaboration between the French artist Gaudier-Brzeska and the British artist/model, Hamnett, that is the focus of the present chapter. *Torso* is cross-Channel in its conception and in its translation eighteen years later from visual to verbal realm in and by *Laughing Torso*. If the sculpture *Torso* is understood as Levenson's more monumental textual modernism—a kind of corpse—is *Laughing Torso* announcing itself as gestural? Is this memoir a fleeting paroxysm of affect that revivifies the sculpture corpse in attempting to record some of the evanescent gestural performances that were vital to the material realisation of *Torso*? Yet *Laughing Torso* is no mere ephemeral footnote to the limbless, headless *Torso*. Perhaps the book may be understood to cross channels and turn the sculpture itself into an ephemeral illustration and record of the evanescent gestural performances vital to the material realisation of *Laughing Torso*, an indisputable instance of Levenson's monumental textual modernism. Who's laughing now?

PT: Models and Artists and Bohemians

In undertaking to speak at the Kent/Paris Cross-Channel Modernisms events on both sides of the channel, I was bodily following Hamnett's own crossings. But I have other experiences in common with her too, as an artist's model.

In fact, E—, my former colleague in my former profession, is now an artist, but she has many stories about her first career as an artist's model. I will restrict myself to just one. In a typical 'double life' class, E— was once posed seated with our colleague G— standing at her side in front of a large wall mirror. This was to be for two weeks. In the session after lunch a few days into the pose, G— suddenly burst into tears, put on her gown and ran sobbing from the set. E— went after her to the rest room where a very unhappy G— was eventually coaxed into explaining: 'E—, I'm so embarrassed! I just farted and I'm sure I've steamed up the mirror!' As it happens her farts were not that powerful, but G—'s flight from the pose exposes the great paradoxical taboo of traditional life class – the fact of the living body of the model. In traditional life class we must conspire to conceal the fact that the nude model in all his or her nakedness is an historically situated, embodied, living human being and that his or her body is always and already speaking, signifying, making marks and inscriptions and as such is co-shaping the art attributed to the artists on the other side of the easel who are themselves historically situated, embodied, living human beings and not divinely inspired culturally transcendent geniuses.

This is certainly one thing we might learn from *Laughing Torso*. This book puts forward an avant-garde model of embodied creativity, a transformative modernist multiple artist-muse figure, shaped by and shaping a radical gender politics, and one that may stand with and productively speak to feminist modernism's more famous anti-muse, the messianic Shakespeare's Sister of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, who is waiting to 'put on that body she has so often laid down.' (Woolf 1929: 172)

My project to reclaim *Laughing Torso* is in conflict with itself. On the one hand I want to endorse the very making visible and validating of Hamnett's 'gestural modernism' as a set of self-fashioning performances made available to us in

retrospect through her own writings and artworks and those of the numerous sculptors, painters, writers, memoirists and even critics and cultural historians to whom she has been a topic and an inspiration. But on the other hand I want to tear down this ‘gestural modernist’ that I know Hamnett, along with so many other women artists, has in any case always been (for a majority of what remains of her public), albeit in more derogatory terms, and usually to her detriment; and I want to make a possibly more conservative claim for due recognition of her talent, not only as a visual artist (which was not in dispute in her youth and has always retained a quiet following) but also as a *writer*. Lois Oliver, in her helpful essay ‘Bodies of Work: Models as Artists’ for Jill Berk Jiminez’s *Dictionary of Artists’ Models* (2013), cites Hamnett, along with Gwen John, as exemplars of models who ‘were trained first as artists but posed for colleagues and friends as a means of supplementing their income. In most instances, the artist’s reputation as a model has subsequently greatly overshadowed his or her work as an artist.’ (Oliver 2013: 20) Hamnett’s artistic achievements, furthermore, as Katherine Mellor has rightly noted, ‘have virtually been eclipsed by her “bohemian” reputation, as attested by her own memoirs and those of her contemporaries.’ (Mellor 2013: 260) Her oeuvre, not so slender or mediocre as some would have it, has certainly been overshadowed by accounts of Hamnett’s later dereliction and her eventual and possibly suicidal end impaled on railings after a fall from her window. And the end of her life is most often encapsulated for commentators by the photograph of her seated on her bed in a shabby room surrounded by bottles. Less often shown is the photograph from the same period of her standing in dignified authority in her studio. The very title of Hamnett’s memoir, *Laughing Torso*, of course already in 1932 recognises and further torques such tensions or vicissitudes inherent in her career and reputation.

Very soon after his death in the Great War in 1915, Gaudier-Brzeska's famous marble sculpture of Hamnett, *Torso* (1914), was acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum (and since 1983 has been in the Tate). In fact, there are number of such Torsos by Gaudier-Brzeska made before and after his death: 'Gaudier made at least two other torsos of which he listed one, namely a torso in Seravezzo marble purchased by Olivia Shakespear, the mother-in-law of Ezra Pound ... The other torso was made in clay and cast in plaster. ... Two plaster casts were made from the aforementioned plaster ... An unrecorded number of bronze casts have been made posthumously from these plasters' (Tate 1986: 174). Likewise proliferating in number are the personae attributed to *Torso*'s model, Nina Hamnett. Gaudier-Brzeska also made a counterpoint sculpture of Hamnett, untruncated, entitled *Dancer* (1913) which is also in the Tate (The Tate 1986: 168-169). *Laughing Torso* appeared in standard and De Luxe editions when it was first published in 1932, and was republished as a Virago paperback in 1984 (just after the *Torso* itself transferred to the Tate). Hamnett published a sequel, entitled *Is She a Lady?*, in 1955, the year before she died. If the title of her first volume of reminiscences indicates Hamnett's proud willingness to lock her reputation to her role as muse and model for one of the most renowned works of modern sculpture, so too does the much circulated anecdote from later life that, when she had become a notorious drunken and derelict fixture of Soho's bars and clubs, she would introduce herself as she did once at any rate to Ruthven Todd in the company of Dylan Thomas: 'You know me m'dear ... I'm in the V&A with me left tit knocked off!' – referring to a slight fracture in the marble (Hooker 1986: 213; citing Todd 1973). Another much repeated quip to an admirer was 'Don't forget I'm a museum piece, darling' (Hooker 1986: 236; quoting conversation with John Heath-Stubbs 1982). And thus she appears in Part 2 of Basil Bunting's poem, *Briggflatts*

(1966): The 'half-pint / left breast of a girl who bared it in Kleinfeldt's' (*Briggflatts* 2.18-19, Bunting 1966: 17). And there may be a further salutary nod to Hamnett, who introduced Bunting to Pound's poetry, in Part 3: 'to hug glib shoulders, mingle herpetical/ limbs with stumps and cosset the mad./Some the Laughing Stone disables/ whom giggle and snicker waste/ till fun suffocates them.' (*Briggflatts* 3.56-59, Bunting 1966: 26).

Self-identification with and reification as the marble *Torso*, limbless and decapitated, may have been a cynical strategy to ensure her celebrity status, but of course the term *Torso* also speaks volumes about the status of women in art where the transition from Muse to Model to Artist is not as simple as some cultural historians would have it. But we must also attend to the term *Laughing* which may at least suggest artistic agency and locates affect, expression and pleasure, whether voluntary or involuntary, as somatic rather than cerebral and, in the manner of surrealism, synthesizes facial and genital organs. The epithet *Laughing* reanimates the petrified marble body of the *Torso*. Compare too the *Laughing Torso* with the singing head of Orpheus, the classical god of poetry, torn limb from limb by the frenzied Maenads (Graves 1955: 1: 115). His singing head represents the transcendence of art (always and already masculine) over embodied, material life (always and already feminine). Or perhaps the headless and laughing *Torso* was once capped by the petrifying head of the Gorgon, Medusa who was decapitated by Perseus and represents the monstrous feminine inverse of the Orphic. In death her head could still turn onlookers to stone and it hangs as a trophy on the girdle of the patriarchal goddess Athena, who was borne, motherless, from the head of Zeus (Price and Kearns 2003: 2).

My focus is both the *Torso* sculpture itself, and Hamnett's text *Laughing Torso*, mainly as it relates to the production of the *Torso* sculpture in that crucial

cross-Channel period of her life between London and Paris, and the various accounts of either or both by artists, critics and historians. I am seeking to understand these accounts in relation to emergent modern theories and accounts of the changing status of women artists, which tend to posit an in the main optimistic historical trajectory from Muse to Model to Artist, and to recently explored critical frames for reading ‘gestural modernism’ and modernist self-fashioning – such as the Bohemian and the Celebrity. Hamnett was later crowned ‘Queen of Bohemia’ and her name has become a by-word for bohemian, but aside from mentioning how she met around 1908 Arthur Ransome ‘who had written a book called *Bohemia in London*’ (Hamnett 1932: 22), she does not make use of the terms Bohemia or bohemian in *Laughing Torso*. She does however have a chapter entitled ‘Back to Paris and to Celebrities’. Given Hamnett’s haute bohemian credentials, it is no surprise that she features in Peter Brooker’s excellent book, *Bohemia in London: The Social Scene of Early Modernism* (2007), which defines the bohemian as ‘the figure in whom aesthetic and cultural style, artistic strategy and personal bearing, male and female, come together’ (Brooker 2007: viii). Brooker seeks to explore ‘the coordinated relations between self-fashioning personae and symbolic places, in modernism as an emerging aesthetic and art of life, and in the accompanying, inescapable fictions of the cultural record’ (Brooker 2007: ix).

Unshackled from the *Torso* and even from her own record as an artist, Hamnett might have emerged in Brooker’s book as an inspiring quixotic series of virtuoso, self-fashioning bohemian personae, given, for example, her accounts in *Laughing Torso* of her spirited campaigns from earliest childhood of resistance to interpellation by dominant gender ideology. On the opening page, Hamnett says of her own birth: ‘Everyone was furious, especially my Father, who still is. As soon as I

was conscious of anything I was furious too, at having been born a girl; I have since discovered that it has certain advantages.’ She describes the savage beatings she took in girlhood from her father and how

[EXT] [a] large doll was brought for me with a view to instilling some feminine feeling into me, but being of imitative disposition I placed its head in the fire-place with its legs sticking over the nursery fender, stole one of my father’s bamboo canes, turned up its skirts, and beat it so that its head was battered on the grate; it was mended but as this occurred again and again the family gave it up. (Hamnett 1932: 5)

Hamnett delights not only in gender-passing but in the autonomy of this couple of women conspiring to undo the boundary between masquerade and reality. -But the creation of such personae in the medium of social aesthetics is represented in a continuum with her creation of other personae for herself in the more conventional medium of paint, as for example, when she describes her earlier attempt at a self portrait (1913) while under the spell of Aleister Crowley:

[EXT] I now began to feel that having finished with Art Schools I must leave the student stage and become an artist. This I realized was a difficult thing to do as many students at the Art School—and they were of all ages—seemed to have remained students all their lives. I painted a life-size portrait of myself in the looking-glass. The colour was very dull but it was well drawn. I painted a pale-faced and half-starved woman in black, holding a yellow tulip. She was one of Crowley’s poetesses and he called her the “Dead Soul”; it was a very good description. (Hamnett 1932: 35)

Two paintings are elliptically described here (‘I painted ... I painted’)—a picture of herself, presumably *Self Portrait* (1913; Hooker 1986: 29) and *Dead Soul* (1913), a

portrait of Crowley's associate, the poet and novelist Ethel Archer (188?-1961), but the juxtaposing of descriptions allows the reader to understand they could be one—a self portrait *as* 'a pale-faced and half-starved woman in black'. Pay attention to Hamnett's artful syntax and use of personal pronouns here too. The transition from 'I' to 'she' while differentiating between herself and Archer, is nevertheless telling, and the implication may be, if she were still referring to her self-portrait *as* a dead soul, that this painted persona was still-born. Crowley 'later referred to Nina as one of his students' (Hooker 1986: 35), so perhaps she is opportunely announcing the demise of the *painter* persona who was briefly under the sway of Crowley when she made this picture named by him in a gesture that also therefore anointed her as his follower. She certainly very soon took a different path after her 'brush with him', and Crowley later lost a libel suit he brought against Hamnett for some of her darker anecdotes about him in *Laughing Torso* (Hooker 1986: 35, 197-206). Compare her account of meeting Gaudier-Brzeska for the first time four pages later where she identifies herself as the painter of the 'picture of a "Dead Soul"' he had seen in the Albert Hall and he replies: "Yes, of course, I remember it, you are the young girl who sat with my statues; my sister and I called you 'La Fillette'" (Hamnett 1932: 39). In this dialogue Hamnett has herself anointed anew by Gaudier-Brzeska.

In the pages between these moments, Hamnett drops the story of the 'Dead Soul' to relate her Pound-like experience of spotting and pursuing a girl in the tube with 'a most wonderful face, like the portrait of the girl in the National Gallery by Ghirlandaio; she was rather fatter and I decided that at all costs I must paint her portrait.' Eventually Hamnett gets her way with Dilys 'and I painted a life-size portrait which delighted us both. I gave it to a second-rate woman novelist who, I believe, put it in the dustbin' (Hamnett 1932: 36). And soon Hamnett is telling us of

her first encounters and meetings with Dora Carrington, Mark Gertler, Walter Sickert, Lucien Pissarro, Wyndham Lewis, T.E. Hulme, and Jacob Epstein and then Gaudier-Brzeska, all in a matter of three pages. The rapid-fire pursuit and creation of personae on and off canvas is the mode of the entire book.

Brooker's account of Hamnett tends to read the exuberant gestural modernism of her youth through the jaded lens of her later prolonged, derelict existence, and to downplay at all points her talent and her achievement as a painter. Commenting on her class status in comparison with other women bohemian-artists, such as Helen Saunders, Jessica Dismorr, Iris Tree and Dora Carrington, he notes that Hamnett 'by contrast, though she plunged into the bohemian life of London and Paris, was an average artist who came from Tenby in South Wales and struggled financially all her life' (Brooker 2007: 126). I find that rather harsh to call her 'an average artist'! The fact is that Hamnett enjoys the reputation of having been identified as one of the most talented, successful, well-known and respected young artists in Paris in the 1920s and it is her fall from this early pinnacle of promise that sets her apart from the average Soho alcoholic falling off the bar stool next to her. Brooker is no less harsh about Hamnett's talent for bohemian self-fashioning in foregrounding her launching gestures as cynical and perfunctory. Like Virginia Woolf, who in her diaries and letters glimpses 'in the midst of a chattering crowd (Nina Hamnet drunk)' and in parentheses (Woolf 1977-1984: 4: 51), Brooker has throughout his book knocked one of the Ts off Hamnett's surname—perhaps in silent homage to the damaged left breast of the *Torso*. At any rate from Hamnett's heady and sparkling prose, Brooker fishes out a somewhat tarnished and diminished younger persona kitted out to meet the dominant derelict persona of latter days with whom he travels with hindsight to greet her. Brooker's 'Hamnet[t]' serves a grim and cautionary function in his account of the

stakes of bohemian self-fashioning in all its delights and perils. Hamnett is Brooker's prominent example for the bohemian career path more often designated to *women*: 'Once embarked upon, this life meant the role of minor artist or co-worker, editor or sponsor of others' art'. And he has Hamnett, with other women, complicit in disavowing her own status as artist in favour of self-fashioning in 'a life of masquerade in which their leading art exhibit was their own public image ... The Bohemian option for women was to be first an artist-in-life and only secondly an artist in words or paint, and ... this testing role could bring dissipation and a raggedly tragic end.' (Brooker 2007: 108)

Brooker rightly identifies the treacherous risks women run in oscillating between 'artistic vocation and public image', but he seems only too willing to collude in positioning Hamnett as all image and little or no vocation. Meanwhile Hamnett, in *Laughing Torso*, is at pains to present herself as an artist first and always foremost before she becomes bohemian or muse or model. And at numerous places in the text she distances herself as a serious and ambitious artist from the bohemians, dilettantes, collectors, patrons, muses *and* professional models who populate her narrative.

Laughing Torso is for Brooker

[EXT] a series of endless encounters [*sic*] and adventures. Parties, affairs, bursts of spontaneous naked dancing and some painting and drawing pass by like entries in a day-by-day diary. Her beguilingly simple prose manages to hold off the deleterious effects of drink and age, but from the late 1920s, when she teamed up with Augustus John and Tommy Earp, the frazzled pub life of Fitzrovia began to take its toll. (Brooker 2007: 108)

However much drink affected her, Hamnett was in fact only 40 years old when she wrote *Laughing Torso* so it is gratuitous to suggest she was holding off 'the

deleterious effects of ... age'. Brooker renders Hamnett's 'raggedly tragic end' twenty-five years later thus:

[EXT] She was remembered in the 1930s and post-war years as a pathetic figure, obviously drunk and bemoaning the loss of a new beautiful young man or singing lewd ditties for a drink; a tramp on the cadge. The price of Bohemia was that her work was neglected and little regarded by herself or others. ... In December 1956, after a period in hospital, Nina Hamnet [*sic*] fell from her small second-floor flat in Westbourne Terrace, Paddington and impaled herself on railings below. (Brooker 2007: 109)

Brooker, whose main sources aside from Hamnett are Elizabeth Wilson's *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (2000) and Hugh David's *The Fitzrovians: A Portrait of Bohemian Society 1900-55* (1988), at no point goes to Hamnett's biographer, Denise Hooker, whose excellent book, *Nina Hamnett: Queen of Bohemia* (1986) is a richly detailed and impressively argued 'attempt to recreate the myth' of Hamnett the bohemian personality and 'legend in her own lifetime', 'and to suggest the real talent for art and for life that lay behind it.' (Hooker 1986: 13)—if only Brooker had read Hooker.

Elizabeth Bronfen, in *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), argues that our culture's self-representation is bound up with 'articulation as effacement of the unencompassable body of materiality-maternity-mortality' (Bronfen 1992: 434) and reflects in her closing chapter, 'From Muse to Creatrix', on the strategies of modern women writers and artists for intervening in the pervasive scene of Woman and Death. Here she points out Woolf's strategy in *A Room of One's Own* of a 'double dialogue' with the fictional dead Shakespeare's sister and her present and living audience of women: 'Woolf's model also grounds writing in the death of a woman,

yet the paradox that emerges in her anecdote is that, having inspired the writing of other women, the dead woman poet as muse will come into being again, for the first time' (Bronfen 1992: 398). Hamnett's revival and reanimation of the *Torso* as *Laughing Torso* is a similar gesture of messianic resurrection. Woolf's creative androgyny is also relevant: 'Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated' (Woolf 1929: 157). Celebrating these 'nuptials in darkness' (Woolf 1929: 157), Woolf posits refiguring the hierarchized binary opposition of male poet and female muse where the fatal opposition of body and mind may be undone by artists of any gender. Hamnett's *Laughing Torso* extends to and exposes in Gaudier-Brzeska's *Torso* feminist messianic resurrection and androgynous nuptials.

There are numerous studies of women artist/models, in which Hamnett sits awkwardly. Clearly she does not quite fit with the kind of narrative related in Ruth Butler's *Hidden in the Shadow of the Master: The Model-Wives of Cezanne, Monet, & Rodin* (2008), nor with that of Karen L. Kleinfelder's *The Artist, His Model, Her Image, His Gaze: Picasso's Pursuit of the Model* (1993). Both of these works rely on familiar feminist analysis of the politics of the gendered gaze and of artist-model-muse relations. But it is refreshing to find Hamnett represented in both roles in Martin Postle's and William Vaughan's *The Artist's Model from Etty to Spencer* (1999), a book accompanying an exhibition. The book and exhibition are in four phases: 'From Academy to Art School'; 2 'Behind the Screen: The Studio Model'; 3. 'Models and Muses'; 4. 'The Naked and the Nude'. 'By the 1920s', they conclude, 'the myth of the "muse" model was exploited largely by society and Academy artists. The most progressive artists no longer had much interest in it' (Postle and Vaughan 1999: 85).

Hamnett is first encountered in Postle's and Vaughan's work as an academic tutor setting the pose at Westminster Technical Institute and joining her class in drawing from the life model. See her pen and ink, *Life Class at the Westminster Technical Institute* (1919). This drawing by Hamnett appears in the first section (Postle and Vaughan 1999: cat. 37: 47), 'From Academy to Art School' which 'traces the development of the use of the model in art education from the study of the figure in the Royal Academy Schools to its use in the Government Schools of Design, private art schools and institutions such as the Slade School of Art where aspects of the French atelier system were introduced' (Postle and Vaughan 1999: 7). And in this section Postle and Vaughan point up issues such as 'the propriety of using the naked model in state-funded institutions; the rights of women to study the model; and the status of models themselves within the *status quo*' (Postle and Vaughan 1999: 7). The note for the sketch explains how Hamnett got the post on the recommendation of Walter Sickert when he retired from it in 1918. She taught at Westminster for the next two years, three evenings a week, until she returned to Paris in 1920.

In Hamnett's own account of this experience in *Laughing Torso* she mentions that Augustus John joined Sickert in recommending her 'and I got the job. The class consisted of five students when I arrived. They were as much frightened of me as I was of them. I wore a large grey hat pulled over my eyes which I never took off. I had to engage the models. A small girl and her brother came and sat for me and also a large and very fat woman. After several weeks I had thirty students, including five tough Australian soldiers, who were very serious and always kept cigarettes behind their ears. I used to ask them to tea, two at a time. They were very simple-minded and unspoilt' (Hamnett 1932: 111). She also mentions that at her Art Class she 'generally drew with the students. I taught three evenings a week and for two nights a week I

joined the St. Martin's Art School and drew from the nude' (Hamnett 1932: 115). Postle and Vaughan paraphrase Hamnett, but they also add Sickert's words of encouragement to her: 'I am convinced that once the students have had a fortnight's experience of you, you will create an enthusiastic following, because, firstly you have been through so much, and secondly because you have so much intellectual vitality and students quickly feel that' (Postle and Vaughan 1999: 47; Lilly 1971: 87). They observe the influence of Gaudier-Brzeska in Hamnett's 'fine outline technique' and emphasise that in keeping with her own ethos when sketching in other contexts outside Life Class, 'it is the total situation she is recording rather than making a particular study of the model. The study does show, however, that Hamnett had no scruples about posing the male nude for female students' (Postle and Vaughan 1999: 47; citing Hooker 120-122, 124). Our first encounter with Hamnett courtesy of Postle and Vaughan, then, is heartening in its acknowledgement of her talent as a teacher and an artist, despite that niggling deference to Gaudier-Brzeska as dominant rather than mutual influence. And this sighting of Hamnett is dated 1918. But it is an *earlier* Hamnett whom they exhibit in the final phase and section of their show, 'The Naked and the Nude'. She is named as the model for cat. 109, Roger Fry's *Nude on a Sofa* (1917) and for cat. 111, Gaudier-Brzeska's *Torso* (1914). Postle and Vaughan explain:

[EXT] As in previous generations, it remained common practice for young student artists to act as models for themselves and each other, as when ... Nina Hamnett posed for Gaudier-Brzeska. This was partly a process of self-discovery and partly an economic necessity. Few aspirant artists could afford to pay for substantial use of a professional model. With the change in social status of the model, it also became more common for artists to act

professionally as models. This was, inevitably, more the case for female than male artists. For not only were female models in greater demand by this time, but women artists were also likely to be in greater financial need than males.

(Postle and Vaughan 1999: 83)

This seems fair comment in some respects. But Fry and Hamnett, it is explained, had an affair between 1916 and 1918 and Fry's picture 'in which Nina's naked form is set against the bright colours of the Omega rug, reveals the casual intimacy of the relationship, and Fry's admiration for her "queer satyr-like oddity and grace"' (Postle and Vaughan 1999: cat. 109: 130; Hooker 91). But their reciprocal artistic relationship is also noted: 'Nina, in turn, made a number of pencil sketches of Fry naked, very much in the manner Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, whom she had also sketched naked, and for whom she had also posed as model (cat. 111).' (Postle and Vaughan 1999: 130) Hooker includes a fine sketch by Hamnett of Fry nude in 1918 (Hooker 1986: 113) – which might equally be, I suggest, very much in the manner of Nina Hamnett.

PT: *Torso and Laughing Torso*

So now we come to the *Torso* itself (or *Torsos* themselves). The main source for Gaudier-Brzeska's documented conception of *Torso* remains H.S. Ede's *Savage Messiah* (1931) which precedes Hamnett's *Laughing Torso* by two years and makes extensive use of Ede's archive of Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska's diaries and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's letters. For example, the Tate catalogue sees it 'both as an answer to Gaudier's critics who disliked his primitive, modernistic approach to sculpture and as the culmination of an ambition to make a sculpture in the classical style' (The Tate 1986: 74). They cite the artist's letter to Sophie Brzeska: 'I long to make a statue of a single body, and absolute, truthful copy – something so true it will live when it is

made even as the model *himself* lives' (Tate 1986: 174; see Ede 2011: 73, my italics), and his description of it to Major Smithies as 'a marble statue of a *girl* in a natural way, in order to show my accomplishment as a sculptor' (Tate 1986: 174; Ede 2011: 187, my italics). So if these refer to the same project, the artist himself refers to the model as masculine and the statue as feminine. The first citation is from a letter of 3 June 1911, which is years earlier than the second, and which actually continues: 'The statue has nothing to say - it should only have planes in the right place - no more' (Ede 2011: 73).

The Tate catalogue also cites Hamnett's much quoted account of posing for Gaudier-Brzeska and of helping him to stealing the marble for *Torso* from a stonemason's yard. But it makes the point that as well as referring to a living model, Gaudier-Brzeska made the *Torso* with antique models from classical statuary in mind. *Torso* is, as the art historian Richard Cork remarks, "a polished imitation of a Greek original – extended even to the broken arms and neck", but the Tate, invested in the narrative of a naturalist project, adds: 'although he probably does not intend to imply by this that Gaudier actually copied a particular sculpture.' (Tate 1986: 174; Cork 1976: 1: 167) Postle and Vaughan draw on similar statements from Ede's archive, and also address the modernist conceit of the *Torso* as faux classical fragment. (It stands comparison to Pound's poem 'Papyrus' in this respect.) It is worth interjecting here that it was part of formal training for art students to 'draw from the antique' as Hamnett herself recounts (Hamnett 1932: 18). Gaudier-Brzeska, in a letter (3 November 1912) he illustrates with a rhymical sketch of four pairs of twisting torsos of indecipherable gender, claimed inspiration in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony which 'gives the impression of a very beautiful young woman's torso, firm but soft, seen at

first by rarefied lights and then with strong light and shade.’ (Ede 2011: 133-134) The *Torso* is then also a distillation of music into line into flesh into marble.

Postle and Vaughan do acknowledge reciprocal posing of model and artist (which I will come to shortly). Yet in their summation of Hamnett’s career in ‘The Naked and the Nude’, the final section of *The Artist’s Model*, they have Gaudier-Brzeska after *Torso* going on to make more art before his untimely death in the Great War (the significance of which is *not* mentioned here and yet which surely has some bearing on why the *Torso* was acquired by the V&A); whereas they have Hamnett ‘soon to make full use of her new found awareness of her body, dancing naked at parties in Montmartre. She also remained immensely proud of having been the model for this work, which had early won recognition for its exquisite beauty and which had been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum’ (Postle and Vaughan 1999: 131). They close with the reproduction of Hamnett’s much cited quips about being a museum piece with her ‘left tit off’. Yet according to the opening section of this catalogue Hamnett was also ‘soon’ (in 1918 at any rate) to take over Walter Sickert’s teaching post at Westminster Technical Institute and continue her career as a serious artist. But having played fast and loose with chronology, Postle and Vaughan allow the impression to arise that in using Hamnett as the fleshly model for his marble *Torso*, Gaudier-Brzeska also simultaneously awoke in her a new bodily self-awareness and set her on her true vocation, not as an artist, but a bohemian poseuse and danseuse, presumably channeling in some necromantic fashion Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony which they have given as the sculptor’s originary inspiration. ‘All too often’, Lois Oliver concludes, ‘history has focused on the artist-model’s personal life at the expense of his or her art’ (Oliver 2013: 25).

Postle and Vaughan here contribute to entrenching further a dominant art historical narrative of *Torso*, in which this work is created solely by Gaudier-Brzeska using Hamnett as his subordinate model. The piece is furthermore considered an exercise in naturalism by which the sculptor could demonstrate his virtuosity in classicism in the teeth of critical hostility to his apparently more avant-garde primitive works, and his correspondence with Smythies is cited where Gaudier-Brzeska claims making 'a marble statue of a girl in a natural way, in order to show my accomplishment as a sculptor' (Postle and Vaughan 1999: 131; Ede 2011: 187). Pound too makes the point that when Gaudier-Brzeska wrote to him what amounts to 'the "renunciation" so vaunted by our enemies', from the trenches: 'If I ever come back I shall do more "Miles. G. . ." in marble'. This he explains was 'the nickname of a naturalistic torso, plumper and not so fine as the one reproduced' which the artist 'had repeatedly stigmatised ... as insincere' (Pound 1916: 75). Presumably this is the second marble of Hamnett bought by his mother-in-law, apparently 'not so fine' in Seravezzo marble (Tate 1986: 172). Is this actually a renunciation of his avant-gardism in either of these marble torsos? Gaudier Brzeska had also written to Smythies: 'We are of different opinions about naturalism. I treat it as hollow accomplishment, the artificial is full of metaphysical meaning which is all important' (Ede 2011: 186). So can we really understand *Torso* as a one-off cynical exercise in naturalism? And here, in any case, the sculpture may nevertheless cross gender channels and come retrospectively to commemorate the dead artist himself and other war dead whose mutilated corpses were strewn on the battlefields across the Channel but are now somehow transcended by this faux classical marble. The same narrative, keeping artist and model each to their own channel, also has Hamnett not only denied the status of artistic collaborator on this particular piece (as we will come to below)

but also recast by it and thereafter stripped of her own calling as an artist, having somehow now become called back from aesthetic transcendence to her own living and mortal body free to cross and re-cross the Channel in a downward spiral toward drunken dereliction cracking jokes about her mutilation by proxy as model for the statue. Demoted to life model, not collaborating artist, she is made to stand as guarantor of Gaudier-Brzeska's fabled sudden turn to naturalism in making the silent *Torso*. *Laughing Torso* offers an alternative account of *Torso's* conception as radically cross-gendered and collaborative, opening to creative channels between artist and model.

Ede offers a key point of reference ignored by Postle and Vaughan and the Tate in the formative experience they claim for the creator of the *Torso*. This charming drawing depicts Henri and Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska as dancing and embracing nude lovers, their bodies symmetrically posed, with matching hairy legs, puckered lips, parallel pubic parts, and parallel torsos (Ede 2011: 136). Closing the same letter illustrated with the turning torsos, this seems the very image of Woolf's model of creative androgyny, the 'collaboration [that takes] place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished', the consummation of the 'marriage of opposites', the 'nuptials in darkness' (Woolf 1929: 157). And it speaks to a sense of cross-gender collaboration available in Hamnett's account of the making of *Torso*. There is also, to complicate matters further, the closely related bronze, a later cast known as *Torso of a Woman* (1930), and taken from one of two plaster casts of an original clay made in 1913 at the same time as the marble *Torsos*. One breast was broken on the second plaster cast (hence presumably Hamnett's much cited 'left tit off' quip), and from it three bronze casts

were made in 1930, one of which is now in the Tate (see Chamot et al 1964: 207-208).

The entire memoir *Laughing Torso* constitutes Hamnett's own necromantic mythologized account of the collaborative creation of *Torso* and of its artistic, social and political confluences and influences. The more immediate circumstances of its creation are related in six pages (Hamnett 1932: 37-43). She begins with the 'Independents' Exhibition in the Albert Hall where five of her works were shown, including the 'Dead Soul' and her portrait of Dilys. Finding Gaudier-Brzeska's sculptures also on show (and having seen his drawings in *Rhythm* magazine), she 'sat down on chair in the midst of his statues' and surmises that the young foreign man who was looking at her 'in an amused kind of way ... was probably the sculptor, but was too shy to tell him how much I like his works. He walked away and afterwards ... to my delight [I] found him standing in front of my pictures.' (Hamnett 1932: 38) Later he annoints her: "'you are the young girl who sat with my statues; my sister and I called you 'La Fillette'" (Hamnett 1932: 39). Posing for him, she emphasizes his poverty and his respect for her as a fellow artist:

[EXT] I went one day to his studio in the Fulham Road and took off all my clothes. I turned round slowly and he did drawings of me. When he had finished he said, 'Now it is your turn to work.' He took off all his clothes, took a large piece of marble and made me draw, and I had to. I did three drawings and he said, 'Now we will have some tea.' From the drawings he did two torsos. The other day Harold Nicolson published one of the drawings in the *Evening Standard* and said that the torso was of myself. Henri was very poor and lived with an elderly woman who, he told me, was his sister. We used to wander round Putney and look at stonemason's yards, where tombstones were

exhibited, in the hopes of finding odd bits of stone in reach of the railings.

(Hamnett 1932: 39)

There is a delicate ambiguity at work in Hamnett's exquisitely carved prose here allowing us to understand that 'the drawings' from which Gaudier-Brzeska worked to create the marble *Torso* were *hers* as well as his, and to read a teasing tone into her account of Nicolson's identification of herself as the model. Should Nicolson be so sure? Is the implication that Hamnett drew directly onto the 'large piece of marble'? We cannot ever know for certain whether or not Gaudier-Brzeska did create the androgynous morphology of his *Torso* out of drawings of himself as well as of Hamnett, but we might nevertheless acknowledge Hamnett's opening of this radical possibility in her own *Laughing Torso*, a gesture that seems to mirror Gaudier-Brzeska's original conception, in the letter that documents his inspiration, encompassing both his rhythmical series of female torsos *and* his mutually supporting, collaborative courting couple. Perhaps the two artist-models were playing a version of the game Hamnett later describes playing every Sunday afternoon during the war with fellow artists and her father when

[EXT] we all played "heads, bodies, and legs." That is where everyone draws a head and leaves two lines indicating where the next person should begin the body. The pieces of paper were then passed to the next person and then again until the legs were done. The drawings were very funny and some of them very good. (Hamnett 1932: 85)

There is something eerie in her dwelling on the marble's tombstone provenance, given Gaudier-Brzeska's imminent death in the Great War and the subsequent cultural reception of his sculptures as a kind of Poundian 'Ode Pour L'Election De Son Sepulchre'. Indeed, it was exhibited at the Memorial exhibition To

Gaudier-Brzeska held at the Leicester Galleries in May-June 1918. It is not Hamnett's live body but the artist's own once living body and now mangled corpse that the *Torso* comes to elegise. Yet pages later in her memoir Hamnett records her own narrow escape from Zeppelin bombs, near the Gaiety Theatre in London in 1915, a grim reminder that there war dead on both sides of the Channel, including civilians: 'The people in the 'bus that I should have taken, if I had not had another cigarette and a drink, were sitting in the 'bus with their heads blown off, as a bomb had dropped outside' (Hamnett 1932: 86). In describing this brush with death in London, she also relates re-meeting five years later a fellow survivor across the Channel in Paris:

[EXT] I took a 'bus to the Café Royal by the Savoy Hotel. In it were two Japanese. The evening cloak of one was torn to bits. He had been inside the Gaiety Theatre, but fortunately, his cloak had been hanging up in the cloak room. We all talked together of what had happened. In Paris in 1920 I met him. I said, 'I have met you in London.' He did not remember me but did when I reminded him of the air raid. The café was in uproar and everyone drank to celebrate their escape. Edgar and I saw the daylight air raid from our attic windows. (Hamnett 1932: 86-87)

Hamnett's sentences cross-cut between London and Paris, war and post-war, so quickly and cleanly that the drink celebrating survival may be happening in both places and both times at once. When she immediately cuts to the scene of her and her lover watching the daylight raid with artists' eyes, there is a startling turn from a sense of visceral danger to one of surreally detached spectacle: 'It was a fine sight, and they were in wonderful formation, like a flock of birds surrounded by the little white puffs of smoke of the British guns' (Hamnett 1932: 87). In the very next paragraph, Hamnett recounts waking from a dream when staying with her parents in Acton and

seeing from her window ‘what I thought were fireworks, a big golden pencil diving to earth’ and then with her father in the garden they ‘saw it break in half and come down in a rain of golden showers. This was the Cuffley Zeppelin’ (Hamnett 1932: 87). This was the first German Zeppelin to be shot down, and it happened in 1916. Just as much as Gaudier-Brzeska’s fate in the trenches, these vignettes of Hamnett’s experiences of the war-zone in London may be understood as a kind of retrospective cultural patina accreting on *Torso*.

Returning to Hamnett’s account of *Torso*, she continues with details of the domestic life, the poverty and austerity and sexual tensions of the Gaudier-Brzeska ménage, his avant-garde dress, his anarchist politics and of another significant sculpture he made around the same time. It is not, as one might expect, the limbed companion piece, *Dancer*, that becomes Hamnett’s focus here, but Gaudier-Brzeska’s notorious Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound: ‘Ezra said, “You must make me look like a sexual organ.” So Henri got to work with a piece of charcoal and drew on the stone. He chipped and he chipped and it was magnificent and it has been offered to and refused by many museums.’ (Hamnett 1932: 41)

I wonder if it is entirely modeled from Pound, or is there an element of self-portraiture here too? Whose priapic cock did the artist use as model for this head? In including this story Hamnett is surely offering comment on the equally radical status of *Torso*, which in her account at least confronts us with the inescapable presence of the body of the *artist* as well as the body of the model at the scene of its making. Yet in Hamnett’s account of *Torso* its creation does represent a watershed of sorts in her own career. After all, this important period of artistic and sexual intimacy with Gaudier-Brzeska forms the conclusion to her chapter ‘I Come of Age’, and her coda certainly mixes up sexual and artistic imagery already at play in the Pound anecdote:

‘Henri came to my room sometimes. He arrived one day and took out of his pocket a large statue. I could see it sticking out as it was about a foot long.’ The reader could be forgiven for expecting after this possible double-entendre the protruding statue to be the Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound, but:

[EXT] It was ‘The Singing Woman’ and is now in the Tate Gallery. We put it on the table and admired it. Henri talked about art and said, ‘Painting is an art for women, Literature is an art for old people, but Sculpture is the art for strong men.’ (Hamnett 1932: 42)

This is probably *Singer* (1913), the stone statue Gaudier-Brzeska first entitled *Chanteuse*, and, according to the Tate, was first referred to as ‘La Chanteuse Triste’ by Pound in 1916 (see Pound 1916: 159), who wrote of it in 1918: ‘In the *Singer* we have what may seem an influence from archaic Greek, we have the crossed arms motif ... also an elongation possibly ascribable to a temporary admiration of the Gothic’ (Chamot et al 1964: 203; see Pound 1980: 250). The elongation of this female form of course also lends to it the phallic qualities Hamnett plays upon in her memoir. And how pointed is its unsheathing there in her room along with Gaudier-Brzeska’s macho declaration of gender divisions for artistic media. Whatever part Hamnett did play in the making of *Torso*, and whatever she may have thought of Gaudier-Brzeska’s ruling, it was certainly to painting and other arts (and then to literature) that she turned. And she cuts from this preposterous macho ruling subtly to undercut it by explaining how she came next to work in Roger Fry’s Omega Workshops, and then co-opted Gaudier-Brzeska:

[EXT] Feeling brave one morning I went to Fitzroy Square and asked to see Mr. Fry. He was a charming man with grey hair, and said that I could come round the next day and start work. I went round and was shown how to do

Batiks. I was paid by the hour. I made two or three pounds a week and felt like a millionaire. I brought Henri round one day and he did a design for a tray which was eventually carried out in inlaid woods. (Hamnett 1932: 42-43)

The Omega Workshops was an avant-garde site where the (gender) channels of artistic production rashly endorsed by Gaudier-Brzeska were certainly being crossed and breached, where collective and anonymous production was not uncommon, and the boundaries blurred between art, craft and design. Indeed, the heroic classical tradition of individual statuary seems to come crashing down as Hamnett's poignantly signs off her chapter with that modest domestic tray. The vicissitudes of her career after *Torso*, and of her subsequent reputation in art history and cultural criticism, for all that she and the modern art world were apparently moving away from forms dependent on the fraught gendered politics of artist and model, nevertheless demonstrate how entrenched *arrière-garde* views persist. That the body of the model might also be that of the artist still shocks.

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