16 CRITICS DISCUSS

Djuna Barnes

(1892-1982)

"A facetious commenter has said of Miss Barnes that she has a white pine mind with a mahogany finish, which for all its disrespect, is a fairly accurate description of the surface brilliance which glosses the simple, soft, and human intimations of beauty, truth, and pathos in Miss Barnes's work. Her prose is firm, vibrant, and rhythmical and her poetry ambiguous but melodious. Her stories, playlets, and dialogues are for the most part no more than a succession of brilliant, unrelated, ironic comments in an unintegrated design....In escaping the commonplace, the platitude, the cliché and the formula she has retreated so far into ironic and disillusioned disdain that she has seemingly nothing left but a will for acrid observation and grim absurdities."

Burton Rascoe
New York Herald Tribune
(14 October 1923) 25

"In the detail of Djuna Barnes's stories there is a great deal of fine observation, clearly as well as beautifully phrased. It is the larger outlines of her stories that are obscure. This is perhaps because she sees in detail what the rest of us see, but feels about life as a whole differently from the rest of us....The whole book (*A Book*), when one has ceased to ponder its unintelligibles, leaves a sense of the writer's deep temperamental sympathy with the simple and mindless lives of the beasts: it is in dealing with their lives, and with the lives of men and women in moods which approach such simplicity and mindlessness, that she attains a momentary but genuine power."

Floyd Dell
Nation
(2 January 1924) 14-15

"Djuna's story excellent. Much better than the Perlmutter girls that it is about. Why didn't she make Radiguet a writer in the story? I believe when you are writing stories about actual people, not the best thing to do, you should make them those people in everything except their telephone addresses....Still Djuna's is a hell of a good story."

Ernest Hemingway
Letter to Ernest Walsh (2 January 1926)

"No one need be entirely unhappy this fall with such a book as *Ryder* newly come into the world--no one, at least, with a clear head and a stout stomach. Here are nimble wit, gay humor, trenchant satire, and, above all, a grandiose imagination creating a robustious world of loose-tongued, free-living characters such as have hardly ventured on paper for a century. *Ryder* is certainly the most amazing book ever written by a woman. That much abused word 'Rabelaisian'...is here perfectly in place. In fact, *Ryder* is more 'Rabelaisian' than Rabelais himself."

Ernest Sutherland
Saturday Review
(17 November 1928) 376

"It took me, with this book, some time to come to an appreciation of its meaning as a whole...To say that *Nightwood* will appeal primarily to readers of poetry does not mean that it is not a novel, but that it is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it....When I first read the book I found the opening movement rather slow and dragging, until the appearance of the doctor....The book is not simply a collection of individual portraits; the characters are all knotted together, as people are in real life, by what we may call chance or destiny, rather than by deliberate choice of each other's company: it is the whole pattern that they form, rather than any individual constituent, that is the focus of interest....To regard this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks is not only to miss the point, but to confirm our wills and harden our hearts in an inveterate sin of pride....What I would leave the reader prepared to find is the

great achievement of a style, the beauty of phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterization, and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy."

T. S. Eliot
Introduction
Nightwood (1937)

"If genius is perfection wrought out of anguish and pain and intellectual flagellation, then Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* is a book of genius. In language, in philosophy, in the story it unfolds, she has woven a dark tapestry of spiritual and emotional disintegration whose threads never outrage each other in clashing disharmony. No gayety and no light falls upon her pattern, which is not to say that her pages are devoid of laughter or humor. For humor she has in abundance but it runs deep in hidden places and the laughter it evokes is tragic. If she has been ruthless and cruel to herself in writing this book out of the rich essence of her knowledge and her thinking and her experience, she has the compensating reward of compelling the thoughtful reader into attention to what she has to say and her manner of saying it. Her prose is lyrical to a degree where it seems of another age and another world but at the same time it does not lose kinship with the earthiness of humans."

Rose C. Field
New York Herald Tribune
(7 March 1937) 4

"In her novel [*Nightwood*] poetry is the bloodstream of the universal organism, a poetry that derives its coherence from the meeting of kindred spirits. The 'alien and external' are, more than ever, props; they form the hard rock on which Miss Barnes's metaphysically minded characters stand and let their words soar. The story of the novel is like the biological routine of the body; it is the pattern of life, something that cannot be avoided, but it has the function of a spring, and nothing more. It is in their release from mere sensation, or rather the expression of such an attempted release, that Miss Barnes's characters have their being."

Alfred Kazin
New York Times
(7 March 1937) 6

"[In *Nightwood*] the web of entanglement is naturally and inevitably woven, and the action progresses powerfully to its horrible conclusion. Though the characters are plainly and obtrusively psychopaths, the quality of the book does not derive from that particular, which is simply the mechanism of the tragedy, but from the force and distinction of Miss Barnes's writing. Her style is richly poetic; sometimes it becomes oppressive from a too conscious refinement of perception and language, but for the most part her wit and passion rescue it from its faults. In some passages the intensity of pity and terror effects something akin to genuine catharsis; in other words, where the scope of implication contracts to the particular dilemma of the characters, a kind of hysteria results that leaves the reader merely horrified."

Philip Horton
New Republic
(31 March 1937) 247

"This [writer] stares away from her in a rigor of horror, probing distance with fixed eyes in the hope that it will yield a niche where the contemporary mind, trained on distrust and disgust, can lose itself in stretches of time beyond our time....For brilliance and formal beauty few novels of any age can compare with it [*Nightwood*]. But one must also say how desperate it is."

Mark Van Doren
Nation
(3 April 1937) 382-3

"New York-born author long resident in Europe. Her first major work was *A Book* (1923) of short plays, stories, and poems, introspective analyses of people whose temperamental sympathies lie with the simple lives of animals. It was reissued with three new stories as *A Night Among the Horses* (1929), and the stories were somewhat refashioned as *Spillway* in her *Selected Works* (1962). *Ryder* (1928) is a satirical novel in the stream-of-consciousness style, concerned with a man's relations with his mother, his wife, and his

mistresses. *Nightwood* (1936), a novel of the relationships of five psychopathic people, has been described by T. S. Eliot as having 'a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy.' Other publications are *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1948), poems and drawings created in 1915, and *Vagaries Malicieux* (1975), two essays based on life in Paris in the 1920s but described as stories. *Smoke and Other Early Stories* (1982) collects juvenilia."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"In *Nightwood*, as in the work of Braque and the later abstract painters, the naturalistic principle is totally abandoned: no attempt is made to convince us that the characters are actual flesh-and-blood human beings. We are asked only to accept their world as we accept an abstract painting...as an autonomous pattern giving us an individual vision of reality, rather than what we might consider its exact reflection.... The eight chapters of *Nightwood* are like searchlights, probing the darkness each from a different direction, yet ultimately focusing on and illuminating the same entanglement of the human spirit...[*Nightwood*] combines the simple majesty of a medieval morality play with the verbal subtlety and refinement of a symbolist poem."

Joseph Frank
Sewanee Review
(Summer 1945) 435, 438, 455-56

"Djuna Barnes, so charming, so Irish, and so gifted, came to Paris early in the twenties. She belonged to the *Little Review* and the Greenwich Village group, and was a friend of McAlmon's. Her first novel, which was published in 1922 and called simply, and so characteristically, *A Book*, established her as a writer. Her work, with its strangeness and its melancholy note--which contrasted with her delightful smile--did not resemble that of any other writer of the time. Moreover, she was not one to cry her wares. Fortunately, T. S. Eliot, with his usual discernment, sought her out and ushered her to the place she deserves to occupy. Even so, she doesn't seem to have been given her due in books on writers of the period. Certainly she was one of the most talented and, I think, one of the most fascinating literary figures in the Paris of the twenties....

A little-known masterpiece by an anonymous author, probably Djuna Barnes, *The Lady's Almanac*, is, so they say, a portrait of Miss [Natalie] Barney....[Ezra Pound] sent us an invitation to a private concert to hear some of the compositions of Pound and Antheil. This concert of two musical conspirators was held at the Salle Pleyel, in one of the small rooms. Adrienne and I were seated with Joyce and his son, Georgio. Joyce had brought Georgio along in the hope of converting him to modern music, but Pound's and Antheil's compositions were hardly the best choice for that purpose. Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap were present. So were Djuna Barnes and Ernest Hemingway."

Sylvia Beach
publisher of *Ulysses* (1922)
Shakespeare and Company (Paris bookshop of expatriates)
(1956; U Nebraska 1980) 112, 115, 124

"*The Antiphon* is unmistakably the work of a mind of distinction and stature. I was not so much moved as shaken by the spectres it raises. But is it, as a work of art, successful? Is it really comparable with Webster, or is the style a sham Jacobean, or a sham Eliot-Jacobean make....The speeches of the characters are never, in the true sense, dramatic, shaped by a living emotion. For all the sombre violence of imagery, they are aggregates of fancy, not imaginative expression proceeding from an inner unity of condition and thought."

Kathleen Raine
New Statesman
(8 February 1958) 174

"In *Nightwood*, published in 1936, Djuna Barnes gave us a novel of extraordinary and appalling force, a study of moral degeneration recited in a rhetoric so intensely wrought, so violent and so artificial, that it discouraged all but the hardiest readers and became a kind of symbol of sinister magnificence. *The Antiphon*, a verse play in three acts, repeats the oratorical modes of the novel, though with less obscurity

and with some reduction of queerness. It is still difficult, perversely wayward; but it does make concessions to ordinary humanity, and there are in it moments of poetry and true excitement. It is scarcely a play: one cannot imagine it on any stage this side of Chaos and Old Night; but it is dramatic poetry of a curious and sometimes high order."

Dudley Fitts
New York Times
(20 April 1958) 22

"In 1928 she published *Ryder*, which was expurgated for the American edition. In 1936 appeared *Nightwood*, with an introduction by T. S. Eliot; it is a novel dealing with life in the Parisian underground and has been one of the most highly regarded modern novels among avant-garde critics and writers. She has also written *The Antiphon* (1958), a surrealistic play in blank verse."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"The sapphic Miss Barnes was a sight all by herself. Tall, ramrod-straight, and handsome, she ranged the Latin Quarter in a black cape that set off her fair complexion and fine head of glossy auburn hair. On first coming to Paris she had put up at the Hotel Jacob, where the Hemingways perched upon their arrival in the city. After a sojourn in Berlin--the homosexual capital of postwar Europe--she again dropped anchor in Paris. Hemingway spoke well of some of her writing, admired her good looks and in all likelihood was delighted to hear of the trap she set for Harold Loeb.

Prior to his romance with Kitty Cannell, Loeb had sexually exploited a secretary who worked for him at *Broom*. Eventually he brought her to Paris and set her up in a room at the Jacob. (The secretary's last name has never been satisfactorily established, but her first name was Frances, and in *The Sun Also Rises* Hemingway would give his readers two of Loeb's mistresses for the price of one by dubbing the Kitty Cannell character Frances Clyne.) Once Loeb took up with Kitty, he cut the secretary off cold turkey. It was Djuna Barnes's thought that Loeb should be entrapped into giving the girl some money. The secretary should plead with him to come to see her at the hotel one last time. As soon as he entered the room, Djuna would swoop in from the hall and say that his presence proved his involvement with the young woman and that he was financially obligated to her because she was pregnant. Whether the plan paid off is unclear, but for Hemingway at least that detail can't have mattered much. For him, the thought of Loeb's discomfiture at the sudden appearance of black-caped Djuna must have been satisfaction enough.

How numerous were the lesbians of Hemingway's acquaintance! How numerous, how intelligent, how high-spirited! Yet with his abiding interest in human vulnerability, Hemingway would not have been Hemingway if his imagination had not been engaged by the dark side of lesbian life, by Djuna Barnes's drunkenness and nervous collapses, by the pathological infidelity of Natalie Barney, and by the humiliating drama that sometimes broke out behind the scenes at [Gertrude Stein's salon]....'You've a hell of a biblical name, Jake' [Jake Barnes, in *The Sun Also Rises*]. Natalie Barney, 20 Rue Jacob; Djuna Barnes, Hotel Jacob. From these two associations Hemingway derived the name of a man who is passionately in love with a sexually aggressive woman with an androgynous first name and a mannish haircut, a man whose dilemma is that, like a lesbian, he cannot penetrate his loved one's body with his own."

Kenneth S. Lynn
Hemingway
(Simon & Schuster 1987) 323

Michael Hollister (2015)