The Fate of the Gifted: Djuna Barnes (1983)

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Djuna Barnes died in 1982 at the age of ninety. For forty-one years, this avant-garde 1920s figure had been living in a small apartment in Greenwich Village, surviving on her meager royalties and a stipend from Peggy Guggenheim. This stipend itself was a sort of survival if one considers the embattled relationship she had with Miss Guggenheim and, almost unfailingly, with everyone else.

The last years were proud and sad, frugal and lonely, and unproductive except for a verse play, *The Antiphon*, completed in 1954. I was present at the first reading of the play at Harvard in 1956, and the evening was dismaying. Djuna Barnes's long silence had ended in this play, which had about it all the anxious, self-destructive tones of an impossibility into which great effort and hope had been poured. T. S. Eliot, in support of his long friendship with her, was in the audience, and he was also perhaps recklessly present in *The Antiphon*, a vehement, overwrought *Family Reunion* of badly written, declamatory verse and intense, unanchored bitterness of feeling. That night, Djuna Barnes, a writer of wild and original gifts, reminded me in her person of one of those *mutile de guerre* posters of the First World War. She was a wounded hostage of some kind and somehow abandoned, but just what the line of her fate had been was difficult to know.

To her name there is always to be attached the splendor of *Nightwood*, a lasting achievement of her great gifts and eccentricities--her passionate prose and, in this case, a genuineness of human passions. A love of literary pastiche and parody made her earlier works, *Ryder* and *Ladies Almanack*, an astonishment of wit, as well as a wearying fluency of capital letters, archaic turns of speech, mannerism, and general mischievousness and amused perversity.

A certain balkiness seems to have been part of her character, and her career showed little aptitude for the sturdy and inspired exploitation that turned the most improbable of her contemporaries, Gertrude Stein, into an institution. For Djuna Barnes, Joyce was the inspiration and grandeur of the period. In Paris, she formed a friendship with him which was strong enough for him to have given her the original manuscript with his annotations, of *Ulysses*. With her usual rotten luck, she was forced to sell it before it commanded a price that might have saved her from the penury and dependence of so many years of her life.

Andrew Field's biography, *Djuna: The Formidable Miss Barnes*, is not a work of any special vivacity. It is under considerable strain in all its parts and can only chatter along desperately about one who was noted for her silences. The title is the first indication of a perplexity. *Formidable* and *Miss Barnes* cannot easily draw us into the riddle, and the primness of the words does not telegraph the creative and personal hardships of the life. He tells of only one meeting with her, in 1977, and from that we conclude that he did not succeed in getting much out of her. Field's book is best when it reads like notes for another book. The portrait of certain Greenwich Village characters such as Guido Bruno, apparently the model for Felix Volkbein in *Nightwood* and a nuisance named Elsa Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven are amusing period pieces from the old days. The American expatriates in Paris--Hemingway, Natalie Barney, and others--are sketched in once more from the well-known documentation. There is a struggle with the written work of Djuna Barnes, but Field finds it hard to stay the course for fifteen rounds, and so there is a good deal of sparring with the names of characters and the names in real life and the name of Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* what, if anything, the correspondence might indicate.

Djuna Barnes was born in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, in 1892. Her father, whom she hated we are told and believe, was a pretentious ne'er-do-well bohemian with mistresses and not much else. Her mother was English, having been born in Rutland. The parents were divorced and the grandparents were divorced and there is a tangle of half brothers and sisters. Quite early, Djuna had to undertake the support of her mother and three brothers, and she did this with admirable energy and talent in the New York newspaper world. The newspaper style of the time was jazzy enough but rather primitive as a vehicle for her talents. Nevertheless, a recent selection from this work, *Smoke and Early Stories*, shows her early mastery of a Firbank-like dandyism and theatricality. From "Paprika Johnson": "The boy from Stroud's was a tall blond

wimpet who had put his hands into his mother's hair and shaken it free of gold; a load who had painted his cheeks from the palette of the tenderloin, the pink that descends from one member of a family to the other, quicksilver running down life's pages."

In Greenwich Village, she knew Edmund Wilson, Edna Millay, and Eugene O'Neill. She wrote for *Smart Set, Vanity Fair,* and *The Little Review*. She went to Paris and knew all the interesting artists of the time. The wonderful photographs by Man Ray and Bernice Abbott show her to have been extraordinarily chic and good-looking. During this time, she wrote *Ryder, Ladies Almanack,* and *Nightwood*, and by 1940 she was back in New York, where she lived for four more decades.

The life of this remarkable American woman seemed to follow step-by-step the journey of the gifted of her time. Her experiences had a typicality about them: high literary ambitions, a lot of drinking, little money, London, Paris, Berlin and desperate encounters along the way. She was a lesbian in her life and in her work, although there were affairs with men, an abortion fairly late on. "I'm not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma," she said in Field's account. This is a remark. Field thinks of her as "basically heterosexual," whatever that might mean. In fact, "basically" appears to lean the other way, and there is little evidence that she anguished over the fact of lesbianism, even though the terrible Thelma Wood was an anguish indeed. Thelma is the Robin Vote of *Nightwood*, just as Djuna Barnes herself is, in the way of the transformation of literature, the Nora Flood.

Thelma Wood was an American who made sculptures with large feet rather like her own. In spite of that, she was a dashing beauty with a bit of money at times. She drove a red Bugatti, cruised the lesbian bars, drank enormously, lied, teased, was unfaithful, and gave Miss Barnes the miserable fate of wandering the streets at night looking for her. In *Nightwood*, she has the nature of a destructive, forgetful beast. Janet Flanner called her "the bitch of all times." So this love affair was a draining, spirit-crushing disaster, and at last it was broken off. After that, Miss Barnes stayed with Peggy Guggenheim in England, knew the lovers and friends collected there, was stormily friendly with Antonia White and rather more peacefully with Charles Henri Ford. But somehow her friendships did not work out much better than her love affairs. A difficult and unhappy nature she seems to have been--prickly, proud, and sarcastic.

Ryder is a daunting work, published in 1928 when the author was thirty-six. The dreadful father, here called Wendell Ryder, and his three women--mother, wife and mistress--are the center of this tale, as perhaps it can be called. There is an abundance of incident, some of it corresponding to known autobiographical details. Still, there cannot have been an intention to create the feeling of a genuine family chronicle, since events and persons are by style put at a distance of several centuries. In a chapter called "Wendell Discusses Himself with His Mother," the dialogue runs: "Sometimes I am a whore in ruffled petticoat, playing madly at a pack of ruffians and getting thrippence for my pains; a smartly boxed ear, or a bottom-tingling clap a-hind...and once I was a bird who flew down my own throat, twangling at the heart cord, to get the pitch of my own mate-call."

Even the essential facts of narrative information are rendered in a mannered tone that often has the cadence of translation: "At the end of three weeks, his shadow was exceeding lean. On the coming of Saturday he was sacked. (His companions in clerking saying that it was due to his delivery of prussic acid to a weaning lady in Chiswick, in place of bismuth.)" The pastiche, parody, and flow are accomplished with outstanding virtuosity of language, witty juxtapositions and reversals, and a wonderful ending line for the book and for Wendell: "And whom should he disappoint?" *Ryder* is a curiosity, showing its period, the 1920s, only in a sophisticated and conscious malice and in the studied, learned manipulation of styles. The zest and the jest are embraced perhaps too lovingly. The manner itself is the intention, and the ear is bookish and rather overwhelming.

The "Englishness" of Djuna Barnes's work, after her early apprenticeship, is perhaps to be laid at the door of her rejected American father. There is scarcely an American rhythm or cadence in her work, and even the description of Nora's American background in *Nightwood* has the generalizing aspect of something worked up rather than known from birth--for example, the atmosphere of Nora's house: "The Drummer Boy, Fort Sumter, Lincoln, Booth, all somehow came to mind; Whigs and Tories were in the air."

The famous Dr. O'Connor of *Nightwood* makes his first appearance in *Ryder*. And he is there as he will be--a monologist. Dr. O'Connor, an American going about Paris, talked and talked, both in life and in novels by Americans other than Djuna Barnes. Andrew Field runs the doctor down and finds that his performances received a mixed reception, with some remembering him as fantastical and amusing and others, of course, bored out of their skulls in his presence. In any case, his real name was Dan Mahoney, and he was a very noticeable queen around the Paris bars. He blued his eyelids and coated his eyelashes and covered his heavy beard with face powder. He claimed to have served in the navy and to be a medical doctor, but he was the sort whose name does not appear in the records of institutions. Aside from his fabrications, he spoke of himself, truthfully, as "poor Minnie Mahoney, the girl whom God forgot." Fashionable lesbians liked him, and he was cozy company.

"A slight satiric wigging," Djuna Barnes called *Ladies Almanack*, and it is just that. Many of the lesbian women in Paris appeared in this amiable calendar, which "featured" Dame Evangeline Musset (Natalie Barney), Lady Buck-and-Balk and Tilly-Tweed-in-Blood (Lady Una Trowbridge and Radclyffe Hall). The book was privately printed in Paris in 1929 and "hawked along the Left Bank by bold young women." It is a teasing and bold production and very much *written*, not tossed off, and again in the mock English Lit manner: "Now this be a Tale of as fine a Wench as ever wet Bed, she who was called Evangeline Musset and who was in her Heart one Grand Red Cross for the Pursuance, the Relief and the Distraction of such Girls as in their Hinder Parts, and their Fore Parts, and in whatsoever Parts did suffer them most, lament Cruelly, be it itch of Palm, or Quarters most horribly burning." It is possible to see in this book and in *Ryder* a crippling facility for inspired verbal cartooning. After the freedom, the parodying dash and dazzle with no necessity for the restraints of verisimilitude and narrative coherence, the small production of this large talent is a loss not altogether surprising.

Nightwood is a novel of intrepid originality. It appeared in 1936, published in England by Faber at the strong urging of T. S. Eliot. Eliot supplied an introduction, thereby giving his unique imprimatur to assist a daunting work of the imagination. Even this most important and promising lift to a career in literature was met with down-dragging decisions, some aesthetic and some practical. Djuna Barnes herself cut the manuscript to a third of its original length, and Eliot supplied the title. The expectation of loss caused the firm to publish without an advance and to claim 25 percent of the American rights. The reviews in England, especially those by Edwin Muir, Dylan Thomas, and Graham Greene, were favorable. In America the reaction was largely negative, and the "Elizabethan tragedy" claims of Eliot's introduction were considered high-flown and dropped from the second American edition. Considerable impertinence attended this most sober and ambitious achievement in the work of Djuna Barnes.

Nightwood opens in the formal, instructing manner of a European novel, perhaps a German one. The beginning pages are laden with ancestral claims, old furniture detailed in wood and decoration, portraits on the wall, the lady in "great puffed and pearled sleeves," a gentleman on a charger. "The blue of an Italian sky lay between the saddle and the tightened rump of the rider." Thus the introduction of Felix Volkbein, a stiff-necked Jew, with the false title of Baron, a haughty, romantic obsequiousness and elaborate imitative leanings. "He kept a valet and a cook: the one because he looked like Louis the Fourteenth and the other because she resembled Queen Victoria." Some have questioned the more or less lengthy, in terms of this short book, intrusion of Volkbein at the beginning of a work to which he is not central. But he is attentive to structure and quite soon meets the human core of the novel--Dr. Mathews O'Connor, Robin Vote, and Nora Flood. Indeed, he rushes in and marries Robin, whom we first observe in a deathbed scene: "On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the note of unseen birds." Robin is not dead, she is only dead drunk.

Volkbein's elaborate aspirations for ancestral validation in no way prepare us for his marriage to the wayward Robin. Still, perhaps it is useful for a plot in which a hieratical and abstract conception of character almost precludes the usual conventions of psychological patterning. The characters are the subjects of a ruminating intelligence, and almost anything might be said about them by the author. Here, we do not have an accumulation of biography; instead, character is seen as a timeless intimation of universal buried life. Robin Vote: "Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past; before her the structure of our head and jaws aches--we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers."

Nightwood is a love story. Were it not, the high-pitched brilliance of the writing would offend by its disjunction from feeling. The love of Nora Flood for Robin Vote is a sort of sacramental agony, and for this affliction the devices of style, the demonism of the heavy night airs, have a ghastly appropriateness. Nora and Robin are American women who meet at a circus, under the gaze of a lioness with "her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire." Nora is said to be a Westerner, but there is no dust of Omaha or Sacramento about her. Like enchanted creatures, they immediately begin to travel to Munich, Vienna, Budapest, and Paris. The misery begins as each night Robin stands by the door, saying, "Don't wait up for me." Since Robin is the object of obsession, another American woman becomes obsessed and takes her off.

The nighttime misery of a desperate love holds the novel together and allows even the uncertain significations of Dr. O'Connor's monologues. He is a dog of then night, going from bar to bar, saying as he leaves a chance acquaintance, "The lady will pay." In the most powerful scene in the book, Nora seeks him out at home, or in the pitiful room that passes for the home of this person alive only in the presence of others. She finds him on a dirty bed in a woman's flannel nightgown: "The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders, and falling back against the pillow, turned up the shadowy interior of their cylinder."

Dr. O'Connor is asked to think about the night and about love. He is ready, fully prepared; he is precocious, ludicrous, pedantic, and a consolation. To Nora's "What am I to do?" he answers: "Be as the Frenchman, who puts a *sou* in the poorbox at night that he may find a penny to spend in the morning--he can trace himself back to his sediment, vegetable and animal, and so find himself in the odour of wine in its two travels, in and out, packed down beneath an air that has not much changed its position during that strategy." Or he answers something else, at length. Dr. O'Connor, as I read it, is to be taken seriously because he is seen as providing in all his appearances the consolations of language itself, of memory, of jumbled information, of metaphor. "Was it at night that Sodom became Gomorrah? It was at night, I swear!" On and on. He is a fruitful creation of loquacity just as the animalistic Robin is a devastation by silence. But Eliot was wise enough to see the mischief of this rhetorical Satan going to and fro. As we have the novel now, we could not usefully have more of Dr. O'Connor.

Eliot's introduction sees the powerfulness of Dr. O'Connor and that "such a character needs other real, if less conscious, people in order to realize his own reality." He wants us to insist upon the naturalness of the work as fiction, to see it as having some of the practical experience of human existence. "Felix and his child are oppressively real." Some of this is the kindness of the wish to aid in the marketplace a seemingly unmarketable inspiration. He ends: "What I would have the reader prepared to find is the great achievement of the style, the beauty of the phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterization, and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy."

There is the Black Mass ending of *Nightwood* in which Robin in front of a "contrived altar, before a Madonna," and with two burning candles, turns into a dog to fight with a true dog nearby, both biting and barking until they give up, "lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along his knees." This is revenge indeed, and a minor Elizabethan bloody finale it is.

As a work of its own period, *Nightwood* is not minor, though it is decadent. The literature of decadence with its ornamental style, artificiality, its relishing horrific incident, is common today in America with Norman Mailer and others, and so perhaps the charge is not impugning. Now, *Nightwood* appears more acceptable to the sensibilities than it might have in 1936, during the reign of documentary portrayal of what the actual was thought to be. It is a work of the imagination, a recognizable and frightening love story, accomplished with a high, cool, and loyal belief in the possibilities of words in place and out of place, vocabulary stretched and strained, incident and arrangement without practical preparation--all, in this case, instruments of revelation.

Andrew Field has learned what he could about Djuna Barnes, and it is not to his discredit that there isn't much to tell. There is a sadness in the life. She seemed to fall aside after she had done her best work. Her

nature is not easy to take hold of. There was little luck, and to that she added a bit of obstructive paranoia. Thus, she suffered.

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