

**Djuna Barnes, Tortured Genius**  
**1892 – 1982**

by L. Margaret Pomeroy

The tones and themes that fill the poetry and fiction Djuna Barnes wrote were set early in her life. Born into a dysfunctional New York family in 1892, her childhood was anything but normal. Barnes was born near Cornwall-on-Hudson, growing up there and on a Long Island farm. Her father was Wald Barnes (having chosen his mother's name over his father's), an extreme nonconformist who did not work at a real job until after his mother's death when he was in his fifties. Djuna's mother was Elizabeth Chappell, an English wife who obediently endured her husband's views, mistresses, and sexual molestation of their daughter. Zadel Turner Barnes, Djuna's grandmother, also lived in the home, though she would remarry later and live abroad, but her influence on her granddaughter remained strong. In fact letters that she wrote to Djuna were pornographic, implying sexual activity between them, and leaving scholars to wonder if her grandmother, as well as her father, had an incestuous relationship with young Djuna. Also in Djuna's childhood home were her two younger brothers as well as the mistress of the day and any children she might have had. Barnes' novel *Ryder* reflects this chaotic family structure and the players in the drama. A double self-portrait that Barnes drew also illustrates the torment of her childhood. In the portrait Barnes depicts herself concurrently as child and woman.

At age 18 Djuna started publishing poetry, and two years later she moved to Greenwich Village. During this time she had her only formal education, first at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and then in 1915 at the Art Students League in Manhattan. It was during these years that Barnes embarked on her journalistic career that she continued off and on for the next twenty-five years. Her journalistic style was sensational and often participatory as she put herself through the experiences on which she was reporting, doing such things as entering a gorilla's cage, being force fed, and getting rescued from the top of a skyscraper. Barnes was first employed to write as well as draw by the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, but she quickly moved on to writing for such New York papers as the *Press*, the *World*, and the *Morning Telegraph*. Her poems and stories also began appearing in these newspapers as well as in magazines such as *All-Story Weekly*. Her first book was published, *The Book of Repulsive Women: 8 Rhythms and 5 Drawings*, and she soon made connections with the Stieglitz gallery, the *Others* group, the *Little Review*, and the Provincetown Players, who put on three of her short plays during their 1919 - 1920 season. Through the theater Djuna met Edna St. Vincent Millay and Eugene O'Neill.

Barnes' poetry from this period was generally traditional in meter, rhyme, and stanza. The topics were sadness, nature, love, death, and time. Her first published poem was "The Dreamer." "And drips the rain with seeming sad, insistent beat,/Shivering across the pane, drooping tear-wise,/And softly patters by, like little fearing feet." These early poems, 1916 - 1923, appeared in the *Little Review* and the *Dial*, and eleven of them eventually appeared in her collection *A Book*.

Djuna Barnes spent most of the 1920s and 1930s in Paris or abroad, living and writing among other expatriates. She supported herself with her journalism and contributions to magazines such as

*Vanity Fair* (for whom she interviewed James Joyce), *Charm*, *McCall's*, and the *New Yorker*, often writing anonymously. In Paris Barnes met such notables as Robert McAlmon, Natalie Barney (with whom she had a brief affair), Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce whose writing influenced hers. She also met T. S. Eliot who later edited *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*.

She also met Thelma Ellen Wood in Paris in 1921 or 1922. Wood, described as a "tall, handsome, hard-drinking woman," was from St. Louis, and became the great love of Djuna's life. For eight years they had a passionate, if tempestuous, lesbian marriage. When they met, Wood was the lover of photographer Berenice Abbott, but she left her in the winter of 1922 to live with Djuna. Although Wood had come to Paris to be a sculptor, Barnes persuaded her that her artistic medium should be silverpoint. They were often seen walking close together along the streets of the Left Bank. But monogamy was not something that particularly interested Thelma; her sexual appeal was well recognized and a point of pride to her. Her dalliances included the likes of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Peggy Guggenheim. As time passed Thelma's alcoholism led her to the cafes looking for casual partners of any sex with Djuna hunting for her and often ending up as drunk herself. In 1928 Thelma Wood formed a relationship with Henriette Metcalf, a friend of Colette's, and Barnes finally broke off her relationship with Thelma. In 1937 Barnes would write to her friend Emily Coleman of her relationship with Thelma. "I must have been very young at twenty nine when I met her! Much younger than her nineteen, for her years were aged in sensuality and its consequent need of craft - I was a (truly) virgin yokel looking for lost sheep, and mistook her wolf's blood." (*Djuna*, p. 156.) Had Barnes not had those years with Wood, however, there would have been no basis for her novel *Nightwood*.

One of Barnes closet friends in Paris in the 1920s was Mina Loy. She and her daughters, Joella and Fabienne, lived in the same building that Barnes and Wood moved to after *Ryder* was finally published. Djuna and Mina shared mutual friends that included Mabel Dodge, Carl Van Vechten, Laurence Vail, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray. Although Mina's daughters did not like Thelma, they did like Djuna and, along with their mother, would accompany Djuna to the cafes where Loy would work crossword puzzles while the others visited. Barnes and Loy experienced some tension in their friendship when Joella married, and once both women were gone from Paris, they drifted apart. Barnes, like Loy, preferred solitude. In 1930 she wrote, "I've gotten cranky & old-maid like - I don't even like to have an animal looking at me, & when I lay a thing down I want to find it exactly where I put it - its as bad as that!" (*Djuna*, p. 147)

After the end of her relationship with Wood, Barnes traveled abroad some and then settled into writing *Nightwood*. Much of it was written on the English estate rented by Peggy Guggenheim and other work was done in Tangier in 1933 while she was involved with a young writer, Charles Henri Ford. After unsuccessful attempts to get the manuscript published in New York, Emily Coleman was able to get T. S. Eliot to accept it at Faber and Faber in London. It was Eliot who wrote the introduction for the first American edition. *Nightwood* established Barnes' reputation and is her only book containing no verse, though it is always described as very "poetic."

Janet Flanner has said that Barnes was the most significant woman writer in Paris in the 1920s, but by the end of the 1930s she had made her final return to the United States. In the fall of 1940 she moved into an expensive apartment in Greenwich Village where she lived a very

reclusive life of poverty helped along by an allowance from Peggy Guggenheim. She wrote one last published notable work, a verse play entitled *Antiphon*. Poems from her later years remain unpublished. During these years Barnes shunned interviews and even correspondence with old friends, including Loy who was also a reclusive living nearby in the Bowery. She did write to Natalie Barney when she was in her seventies. "Of course I think of the past and of Paris, what else is there to remember?" (*Paris Was a Woman*, p. 173) Djuna Barnes died in Greenwich Village in 1982, no doubt still haunted by the childhood that so influenced her writing.

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