

ROUTLEDGE



DANIELA CASELLI

**IMPROPER MODERNISM**  
DJUNA BARNES'S  
BEWILDERING CORPUS



# IMPROPER MODERNISM

*To Emanuele*

# Improper Modernism

Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus

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# Introduction

## Black Capes and Red Herrings

I never make personal statements about myself or others ... much to the annoyance of the thesis writer, and so on. (Djuna Barnes)<sup>1</sup>

### Looking for the True Bohemia

T.S. Eliot, in a desolate letter of 1954, comments on the extreme obscurity of Djuna Barnes's play *The Antiphon*, epitomizing what will become a lasting attitude towards her work.<sup>2</sup> Barnes has been portrayed as the attractive, mysterious, and sexually daring American expatriate who led the glamorous bohemian life of Greenwich Village and Paris from the mid-1910s to the late 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Her figure, impressively clad in a black cape, is a well-known component of nostalgic black-and-white pictures of literary Paris and New York. An eccentric character, she is often said to have created a masterpiece – *Nightwood* – and to have survived her previous mythical self as a hermit in a studio flat in Greenwich Village until 1982.

Barnes is still a minor twentieth-century figure, existing more as part of evocative cityscapes than as a modernist writer in her own right.<sup>4</sup> Appearing more often in paragraphs than in monographs, she moves across, without long-standing associations, the protean artistic groups that make up the American and European literary histories of the period going from decadence to late modernism, from New York to Berlin, London, and Paris.<sup>5</sup> Little more than an anecdote (which she dubbed 'the skeleton of life'),<sup>6</sup> Barnes survives in slogans that declare her the

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<sup>1</sup> Djuna Barnes to James Vinson of St. James Press Ltd. (St. Martin's Press); undated but in reply to his letter dated 15 September 1975. Djuna Barnes Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, Series II, Box 1, Folder 6. Further references are to the same collection.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot to Djuna Barnes, 24 August 1954. Series II, Box 4, Folder 60.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Lynn Broe, 'Introduction', *Silence and Power: a Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe, with an Afterword by Catharine Stimpson (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Phillip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995), p. xvii. Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (London: Virago, 1987); Andrea Weiss, *Paris Was a Woman: Portraits From the Left Bank* (London: Pandora, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Watson, *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde* (New York, London, Paris: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Djuna Barnes, 'Greenwich Village As It Is', *Pearson's Magazine* (October 1916), in Alyce Barry (ed.), Foreword by Douglas Messerli, *New York* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1989), pp. 223–232, p. 229.

‘most famous unknown of the century’, the lesbian who claims not to be one, or ‘the Garbo of letters.’<sup>7</sup> Her black cape remains the sign of textual mystery displaced onto the author; it haunts literary criticism as only Emily Dickinson’s white dress has been allowed to do.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst Barnes’s work is queerly faithful to a high modernist notion of literature as an exceedingly difficult artistic endeavour, what has been read as her obscurity is the result of her still unacknowledged poetics of impropriety, which permeates all aspects of her work and her figure as a modernist author. This book will argue that Barnes’s inopportune modernism has never been fully absorbed within the literary history of the twentieth century because of its inherent scepticism towards genealogy and timeliness and of its staged illegitimate and belated self-conception: ‘her work will not fall into oblivion – it was predestined for it from the outset.’<sup>9</sup>

Chronologically, Barnes is an improper modernist, having survived her 1920s self until the early eighties; her work, which consistently sabotages novelty in favour of anachronistic recuperations of previous literary ages, is not ‘modern’, as she indicates in a 1969 letter to Christine Koschel, one of her German translators:

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<sup>7</sup> ‘My remarks about my writing may have misled you. I haven’t the faintest idea of being a “best seller” (wouldn’t you know, Ryder was!), nor any complaints about the general estimate of my work. I don’t think I could have been better praised by better people than the good Muir (a truly good man) and the very brave Mr. Hammarskjöld. And there was the early approval of T.s. Eliot. The reviewers (particularly in Germany and I don’t know why) have outdone themselves. There is not a person in the literary world who has not heard of, read and some stolen from NIGHTWOOD. The paradox that is [sic] in spite of all the critical work flooding the press since 1963, not more than three or four have mentioned my name. I am the “most famous unknown of the century!” I cannot account for it, unless it is that my talent is my character, my character my talent, and both an estrangement.’ d juna Barnes to n atalie Clifford Barney, 31 may 1963. series II, Box 1, Folder 45. see also a nne B. d alton, ““This is obscene”: Female Voyeurism, sexual abuse, and maternal power in *The Dove*”, in nancy J. l evine and marian Urquilla (eds), *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13/3 (Fall 1993): 117–139, 117 and note; Frann michel, ““I just loved Thelma”: d juna Barnes and the Construction of Bisexuality”, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13/3 (Fall 1993): 53–61, 53; a ndrew Field, *Djuna: the Formidable Miss Barnes* (austin: University of Texas Press, 1985 [1983]), p. 37; Herring, *Djuna*, p. xvii. For Barnes’s witty anecdotes on Greta Garbo, see d juna Barnes, ‘playgoer’s Almanac’, september 1930 issue of *Theatre Guild Magazine*. series 3, Box 27, Folder 56.

<sup>8</sup> The first critic to link Barnes’s cape and hat to masquerading is Alide Cagidemetro, *Una strada nel bosco: scrittura e coscienza in Djuna Barnes* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1979), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> d juna Barnes approvingly quotes this passage to Cristina Campo in a 1969 letter. series II, Box 2, Folder 43. In the original clipping the passage, dated by Barnes, reads: ‘(s ometime in 1967, probably June?): “d juna Barnes hat den Weg existentieller Unbedingtheit mit allen Konsequenzen, auch für ihr eigenes leben, beschritten. Ihr Werk ist nicht in Vergessenheit geraten – es war ihr von vornherein ausgesetzt. Sein Raum ist die Schallfreiheit äußerster Exklusivität.”’ Barnes has the passage translated by the Berlitz school, whose translation includes the note: ‘probably d ie Welt Verlag, sometime in June 1967’. series IV, Box 1, Folder 3.

‘I am not a “modern” after all’ Which sounds strange from one who is considered avant garde [sic].<sup>10</sup> Her oeuvre, which repeatedly figures masked authorial presences (from ‘pen performer’ to ‘d an Corbeau’), proleptically inscribes its own untimeliness: ‘in short: you have to know the work by heart to read it for the first time.’<sup>11</sup>

I linguistically, Barnes’s texts are both a slap in the face of syntax and punctuation and an act of faith towards both the oxford english dictionary and the Webster’s.<sup>12</sup> Her musical, often ‘agrammatical’ use of American English destroys the possibility of transparency and naturalness, whilst her corpus is pervaded by archaisms that produce a language which is worn out, used, and never innocent.<sup>13</sup> Rather than nostalgically creating a simulacrum of the past under the aegis of empathy, Barnes’s language is gloriously and ruthlessly estranged as it parades its dubious past and is forced to come back unfathered.<sup>14</sup> The wealth of intertextual references and antiquarianism present in her work do not aim at mastering tradition but at exposing its impure history – its potentially fake nature – and at challenging writing and reading as forms of ideological appropriation. The obscurity, unintelligibility, difficulty, and impenetrability of Barnes’s corpus make it exclusive, but such an exclusivity is not predicated on an inherent nobility of feelings or on an acquired learnedness able to open the most elitist of circles; rather, her difficulty figures the unending complexity and the lack of comprehensibility which in her work exempt no text and no one.

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<sup>10</sup> Djuna Barnes to Christine Koschel, 15 April 1969, series II, Box 10, Folder 47. Koschel worked with Inge von Weidenbaum on the translation of *Nightwood* into German.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Did I tell you of one critics [sic] remarks re The Antiphon? “You have to know it by heart, to read it for the first time” (or words to that effect) which I think splendid; He meant me ill [added in pen]’ Djuna Barnes to Christine Koschel and Inge von Weidenbaum, 24 June 1969. series II, Box 10, Folder 47. ‘Joseph Frank (The Widening Gyre) “Joyce cannot be read – he can only be reread –” (This applies to The antiphon: you have to know it by heart to read it for the first time.’ Djuna Barnes, ‘Other sayings – re the writing of djuna Barnes’, series II, Box 9, Folder 8. In a typewritten note, Barnes quotes from a review of the play by Lionel Abel, in the *Partisan Review* for the summer of 1958. she writes ‘The audience – “They would have to know the play by heart to hear it – that is to see it – for the first time!” (italics mine)’ In pen, she adds ‘He hated it’, referring to Abel’s review and, after the quotation, (Wonderful! Only he could not follow on).’ Series IV, Box 1, Folder 6. see also Lionel Abel, ‘Bad by north and south’, *Metatheatre: a New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), pp. 116–122.

<sup>12</sup> Djuna Barnes writes to T.S. Eliot on 15 July 1954 asking him to correct what she describes as her bad spelling and ghastly punctuation. she claims to be still struggling even after ten rewritings and the help of Fowler, and attributes to her lack of formal schooling her knowledge of language purely by ear, acknowledging that it is now too late for her to learn how to punctuate correctly. series II, Box 4, Folder 62.

<sup>13</sup> michael riffaterre, ‘descriptive Imagery’, *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 107–125.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremy Tambling, *Becoming Posthumous: Life and Death in Literary and Cultural Studies* (edinburgh: edinburgh University press, 2001), pp. 126 and 134.

Gender and sexuality are essential components of this anachronistic, inopportune, and impenetrable modernism, since the obscene quality of Barnes's improper modernism has much to do with authority, femininity, and sexual orientation. Like Miranda in *The Antiphon*, abused as the 'somewhat well-used spinster' who 'stands for Virgo', Barnes refuses to have herself 'clapped between the palms of their approval', rejects the family as the basis of heterosexual procreation (in the journalism, in *The Book of Repulsive Women*, and in *Ryder*), dissects the politics of lesbianism (in *Ladies Almanack* and *Nightwood*) and stages the tragedy of self-birth and annihilation (in *The Antiphon* and the poetry).<sup>15</sup> a persistent engagement with genealogy on the thematic level goes hand in hand with a refusal to either acknowledge a literary legacy or to produce lawful offspring, thus openly waging war against linguistic and literary legitimacy.

Unsurprisingly accused of both haughtiness and ineptitude, Barnes's texts inscribe their own unintelligibility as the mark of a posthumous modernism that rejects T.E. Hulme's and Ezra Pound's illusion of purity and novelty, whilst proleptically performing its own belatedness without the traces of nostalgia found in avant-garde movements such as surrealism. The paradoxical promiscuity of the Barnes corpus – which embraces many different genres, creates unmodern precursors, and persistently equivocates – makes up its own impenetrable and thus potentially threatening quality. By not being 'of her time' Barnes performs an unmodern, unfashionable, unconventional, and inopportune modernism: a queerly anachronistic modernism.<sup>16</sup>

most critics to date have proven impervious to Barnes's improper modernism, and have instead tried to either stick Djuna 'wriggling on the wall' or to find out what lies under her cape.<sup>17</sup> This is not a recent phenomenon, since in an early anonymous 'caricature' in *The New York Press* an emaciated caped and cloched Barnes in black-and-white sports a disgruntled expression on her face and resolutely refuses to look at the viewer, leaning against an outsized vertical book, half aesthete half suffragette (Figure 0.1).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Djuna Barnes, *The Antiphon*, in *Selected Works of Djuna Barnes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 176, 124, 177.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (*Unzeitmässige Betrachtungen*); 'Being posthumous means coming too late for comprehension, and is a trope for feeling a lack of comprehension'. Tambling, *Becoming Posthumous*, pp. 83 and 93.

<sup>17</sup> Barnes borrows the line from *Prufock* in a letter written to Peter Hoare after Eliot's death, in which she writes: 'Cyril Connolly, with his querulous acerbity, and his somewhat androgynous sword play, sticks Tom "wriggling on the wall," with "we were sapped and ruined by the contagion of his despair!"' Djuna Barnes to Peter Hoare, 18 January 1965. series II, Box 9, Folder 34. In her letter of 7 May, 1972 to critic James B. Scott, Barnes disapproves of being referred to by the first name, preferring Miss Barnes instead. Series II, Box 13, Folder 57.

<sup>18</sup> The article is entitled 'our own Gertrude stein' and appeared in *The New York Press*. Barnes, who kept only the illustration, writes in pencil above it: 'caric. of Djuna Barnes'. series VIII, Box 8, Folder 1, Item 4.26.



Fig. 0.1 'o ur o wn Gertrude stein'. Inscription in Barnes's hand: 'caric of djuna Barnes'

Guido Bruno, maverick impresario of the Greenwich Bohemia and publisher of *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915),<sup>19</sup> writes in his 1919 interview of Barnes: 'Red cheeks. Auburn hair. Gray eyes, ever sparkling with delight and mischief. Fantastic earrings in her ears, picturesquely dressed, ever ready to live and be merry: that's the real Djuna as she walks down Fifth Avenue, or sips her black

<sup>19</sup> Jo-a nn Wallace and Bridget elliott, *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)positionings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 132–135.



Fig. 0.2          s self-portrait in earrings

coffee, a cigarette in hand, in the Café Lafayette.<sup>20</sup> Bruno exemplifies an anxiety to be encountered again and again in the criticism devoted to Barnes: that of capturing ‘the real djuna’. Tellingly, the portrait provided by Bruno is an alternative to a self-portrait by Barnes (reproduced in Figure 0.2 and in the december 1919

<sup>20</sup> Guido Bruno, ‘Fleurs du Mal à la Mode de New York – An Interview with Djuna Barnes by Guido Bruno’, *Pearson’s Magazine*, 45 (december 1919), in alyce Barry (ed.), Foreword and Commentary by douglas messerli, *I Could Never Be Lonely Without a Husband: Interviews by Djuna Barnes* (london: Virago, 1987), pp. 383–388, p. 388. The clipping from *Pearson’s Magazine* is in series VIII, Box 8, Folder 1, Item 4.41.

issue of *Pearson's Magazine* in which the interview appears), which he judges 'contemptibly bad. Not a shadow of likeness. There isn't a bit of that slovenly doggedness in the real d juna.'<sup>21</sup>

Bruno provides his verbal portrait as an antidote against such a visual malaise: what is under our eyes (the self-portrait) is not the real Barnes; on the contrary, she will be found – so the text tells us – in Bruno's words, in turn attempting to produce a visual image. Neither Barnes's art nor her words can be taken seriously, according to Bruno: her beauty and style speak in her stead. In this interview, she is the spokesperson for a potted existentialism avant-la-lettre which Bruno backdates by calling it 'morbidity' and 'decadence': 'Today we are, tomorrow dead. We are born and don't know why. We live and suffer and strive, envious or envied. We love, we hate, we work, we admire, we despise ... Why? And we die, and no one will ever know that we have been born.'<sup>22</sup> He sees this as the dislocated position of the followers of 'the decadents of France and of England's famous 1890s, in vigorous, ambitious America'. Bruno tries to counter both the self-portrait and the statement by proposing a red-cheeked depiction of a beautiful d juna whose 'morbidity is not a pose. s he is as sincere as she is herself.'<sup>23</sup>

This early interview illustrates a general critical problem: when Barnes speaks she cannot be believed, and her self-portrait is considered not to resemble, let alone coincide, with the beautiful, lively, 'picturesquely' dressed woman conjured up by Bruno's words as being in front of our eyes. most importantly, her portrait is not read as art but as a failed transposition of the real, while Barnes's verbal account of the real is dismissed in favour of the allegedly solid nugget of experiential reality reported by Bruno.

Instead of disregarding her unpleasant self-portrait, we may say, in the words of a picasso defending his portrait of Gertrude stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: 'Yes, ... everybody says that she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will ...'.<sup>24</sup> s tein's picasso vindicates his power to change representational paradigms, and to produce an art able to change the ways in which people will look at the real. In Stein's work perception is no longer dependent on a stable reality, but is the outcome of habits and conventions, which the artist can revolutionise. The very notion of resemblance depends on historical progression, and Picasso (mirroring Stein herself) is firmly positioned as the avant-garde artist able not just to predict but also to shape the future.

If Barnes's self-portrait is part of a modernist framework that challenges representational habits by troubling Bruno's notion of reality, it does however something quite different from what Stein's fictional Picasso vindicates for his art. Jo-ann Wallace and Bridget e lliott have argued that this picture

<sup>21</sup> Bruno, 'Fleurs du mal', p. 388.

<sup>22</sup> Bruno, 'Fleurs du mal', p. 387.

<sup>23</sup> Bruno, 'Fleurs du mal', p. 388.

<sup>24</sup> Gertrude stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 16.

still uses Beardsley's characteristic black-and-white vocabulary by juxtaposing the white ground of her face and dress with the black mass of her hair, emphasizing the decorative drops of her art-nouveau earrings and dress pattern, and, finally, stylizing her facial features and signature in a way that is reminiscent of many of Beardsley's 'portraits' and signatures. And yet, in spite of its obvious stylistic debt to the 1890s, Barnes's rather crude self-portrait (which is certainly much more roughly rendered than anything by Beardsley) disrupts the languidly elegant and decadent tone of the text.<sup>25</sup>

By constructing a decadent tradition that flags its sources, the portrait professes its own untimeliness while also proclaiming its lack of faith in the redeeming power of art in its refusal to please, which is read by Wallace and Elliott as the 'roughly rendered' facial features and by Bruno as a factually inexistent 'slovenly doggedness.'<sup>26</sup> Bruno's need to recuperate the portrait's unpleasantness under the aegis of personal beauty clarifies the extent to which such declared lack of originality and faith in beauty are closely linked to issues of gender. Paradoxically, for Bruno her authentic self is the one produced by his words rather than her pen, refusing Barnes the space to make an artistic intervention.

Barnes's Beardsleyesque style cannot simply be dismissed as artistic failure not only because of the reasons internal to the portrait examined above, but also because it is in line with other self-portraits of Barnes which appeared in print as 'self-caricatures'. For instance, 'd juna Barnes, author of *A Book* – a self caricature' (Figure 0.3),<sup>27</sup> an undated drawing which must have appeared after 1923 (date of publication of her first recognised artistic achievement), presents us the author casting a sideways glance to the viewer, her face half masked by a hat whose feathers entwine the right side of her face, like menacingly growing algae.

This 'self-caricature' has recast many of the 1890s features of the 1919 portrait, but still displays an author unwilling to give herself up for dissection. The glance is hard and the features are chiselled to the point of harshness: this is a far from reassuringly humorous self-caricature. If 'the modernist female artist was caught in an impossible bind since representing herself as a woman meant renouncing her claim to originality'<sup>28</sup> both self-portrait and self-caricature explicitly set up and trouble artistic allegiances, questioning the politics of originality and authenticity whilst shattering the association between pleasing and resembling, thus producing their own status of 'self-caricature.'

<sup>25</sup> Wallace and Elliott, *Women Artist*, p. 135. see also d juna Barnes to Emily Coleman, 30 November 1937: 'We went to the National Gallery and I showed him [Peter Hoare] the Umbrian fifteenth cent. school of painting, and asked him if he did not agree that it was the source of Beardsley. He did.' Series II, Box 3, Folder 11.

<sup>26</sup> Wallace and Elliott, *Women Artist*, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> The drawing has the caption: 'd juna Barnes, author of *A Book* – a self caricature'. Undated. series VIII, Box 8, Folder 1, Item 4.25.

<sup>28</sup> Wallace and Elliott, *Women Artist*, p. 111.



Fig. 0.3 'd juna Barnes, author of *A Book* – a self caricature'

In Barnes's corpus 'the potential "illegibility" of the world is not simply a metafictional game ..., nor is it a contingent obscurity that might be cleared up if one had more personal documents with which to construct the autobiographical "subtext" of the story; it is an anguishing historical problem.'<sup>29</sup> Criticism has often taken upon itself the task of assuaging the pain recognised in such illegibility of the world and the author, paying the price of ignoring the ways in which both are constructed as illegible in Barnes. most importantly, even those few critics who crucially recognise Barnes's obscurity as constitutive of her work, like Tyrus Miller

<sup>29</sup> Tyrus miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the Worlds Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 146.

does above, have no doubts about the legibility of such illegibility, in his case arguing for a solid – if anguishing – historical dimension to the problem. Barnes's illegibility is instead produced, this book contends, as a crisis of critical mastery, in which the reader is uncomfortably poised between complicity and collusion. In Barnes's work there is always gain and expenditure but no proper bookkeeping; the balance is never equal and the reader is forced to doubt of her accountability.

Her refusal to please and her refusal to console have been recuperated as mysterious attractiveness, seductive elusiveness, or as the sign of an unconventional past, as demonstrated by the pervasive presence in criticism of terms such as ambiguity, elusiveness, morbidity, and opacity,<sup>30</sup> from the interview with Bruno in 1919 to the conversations with Hank O'Neal in the late 1970s, who reports in his memoir the well-known anecdote that 'At one point she [Barnes] said: "Don't think for a minute this is the real Djuna Barnes. The real Djuna Barnes is dead."'<sup>31</sup> Many critical volumes reproduce this claim in order to set up the opposition between bohemian Djuna and elderly Trappist.<sup>32</sup> Were we to follow a biographical approach that places the author in an oracular position, we would have to trust Barnes. We would have indeed to believe that Barnes herself not only saw her life as split, but also thought that somebody or something called 'the real Djuna Barnes' was dead. Barnes's words produce the paradox of Epimenides, the Cretan liar: if the real Djuna Barnes is dead, the person declaring her dead is not the real Djuna Barnes; and yet, in order to believe that the real Djuna Barnes is dead, we need to listen to this impostor.

Such a melancholy anecdote can help us to think about the name of the author as a 'function' – as theorised by Foucault – or, in consumerist terminology, as a brand name;<sup>33</sup> it also sheds some light on yet another problem, which regards the criteria adopted by critics to decide what to believe and what to ignore. If reading and writing on an author means retrieving what the author means, then we should believe anything she tells us in person; and yet, any critic obviously

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<sup>30</sup> Louis F. Kannenstine, F., *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), pp. 63–64; Philip Herring, 'Introduction', *Collected Stories of Djuna Barnes* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1997), pp. 7, 8, 10, 12. For an exploration of this critical problem, see Daniela Caselli, "'Tendency to Precocity" and "Childish Uncertainties" of a "Virago at Fourteen": Djuna Barnes's *The Diary of a Dangerous Child*', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 32 (2002): 186–204; and "'Elementary, my dear Djuna": Unreadable Simplicity in Djuna Barnes's *Creatures in an Alphabet*', *Critical Survey*, 13/3 (2001): 89–112. Reprinted as 'Il bestiario eccentrico di Djuna Barnes: *Creatures in an Alphabet*', in Enza Biagini and Anna Nozzoli (eds), *Bestiari novecenteschi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2001), pp. 197–212.

<sup>31</sup> Hank O'Neal, *Life is painful, nasty and short ...in my case it has only been painful and nasty': Djuna Barnes 1978–1981* (New York: Paragon, 1990), p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> 'I live the life of a Trappist.' Djuna Barnes to Natalie Clifford Barney, 16 May 1963. Series II, Box 1, Folder 45.

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 101–120.

feels entitled to interpret what an author really means. In the case of Barnes, all of the existing critics have chosen to read her words as indicating her mourning for the lost glamour of the expatriate artist, but the paradox of the real Djuna Barnes telling us that the real Djuna Barnes is dead takes us back not only to the textual instability of diaries, letters, manuscripts, interviews, and memoirs but also to the posthumous and improper quality of Barnes's modernism.<sup>34</sup> As Eliot recognises in his preface to *Nightwood*, the written status of the word is evident everywhere in Barnes's oeuvre as an inevitable preoccupation: words have always been already used in Barnes, they are never granted innocence. The very phrase 'the real Djuna Barnes' refers intertextually to Bruno's attempt to pin down 'the real Djuna'; the expression that should guarantee truthfulness and authenticity is, paradoxically, an unreliable formulation which, from its inception, evokes a mismatch between itself and what it tries to define. The brand name fails to reassure, and the reader cannot be a trusting customer.

The real is in Barnes always recalcitrant; it cannot simply be discovered, but needs to be read, and such readings are never definitive. Moreover, Barnes's work oscillates between the impossible task of capturing the real and knowing that such an attempt is illusory, at times not even desirable. If in Woolf 'Mrs Brown' is the elusive and tantalising ghost who teases the author with her 'catch me if you can', in Barnes the heroic attempt to hunt down the prey of representation is always accompanied by melancholic procrastination, repetition, and exchange.<sup>35</sup> With Barnes we are not just dealing with a 'modernism of marginality' as Jane Marcus's definition would have it, but with a relentless assessment of the price to pay in order to claim to have seized the real, of the costs involved in mimesis.<sup>36</sup> Meaning in Barnes is promised as ready-made but not delivered, gestured towards but not unveiled, and – at times – exposed as too simple to be read. Such strategies, rather than subscribing to a transcendent form of ineffability, generate a meaning which is never innocent, or, to put it otherwise, an oeuvre in which everything is meaningful, even what is presented as meaningless, nonsensical, or impenetrable. Language is constantly exposed as 'words used', 'as if to inform us: This is what it is like to *word*, this is what it is like to *mouth*.'<sup>37</sup>

These strategies explain why the bawdy and the obscene are so important in Barnes's equivocal work, which also devotes a lot of attention to antiquity, both in terms of developing languages that appear to belong to different historical times, and in terms of the antiques which populate her works. Barnes's texts do not offer meaning to the reader (there is no gift in Barnes which is not tied into an economy

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<sup>34</sup> Nancy J. Levine and Marianne Urquilla, 'Introduction', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13/3 (Fall 1993): 7–16.

<sup>35</sup> Woolf, Virginia, 'Mr. Bennet and Mrs Brown' (London: The Hogarth Press, 1924).

<sup>36</sup> Jane Marcus, 'Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic', in Mary Lynn Broe (ed.), *Silence and Power*, pp. 221–250.

<sup>37</sup> Paul West, 'The Havoc of this Nicety', 'Afterword' to *Ryder* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), pp. 243–250, p. 247.

of exchange) and they often imply that the promise of an ultimate meaning is empty in any case. No nostalgia of a simpler or more natural world finds place in her work, in which meaning is always part of a process, never definitive or final, and yet inescapable. Investing in Barnes's stocks has never been financially sound.

Precisely because it is part of an ongoing and unavoidable process, meaning cannot be transcended in Barnes, stories need to be narrated again and again, as demonstrated by the fictions of origin in *Ryder* and *The Antiphon*, which echo each other without coinciding; by the way in which all Barnes texts, even the early journalism, draw attention to the 'open secret' of what has been omitted by the pervasive intertextual references; by the use of forms of simplicity (bestiaries, trochaic poetry) which produce illegibility; by pseudonyms (from Dobrujda to Jack Fool) and fictional authorial personae; and by the material history of Barnes's writing, embroiled in an endless process of revision (from *Nightwood* to *The Antiphon* and the late poetry).

This volume will initially focus on the most explicitly antiquarian object in the Barnes canon, *Ladies Almanack*, discussing the relation between sexuality and textuality, its legacy in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century almanacs, the relevance of its history of production and distribution, and the estranging quality of the language. Relatedness, origins, and descent are not just themes but also linguistic problems in the Barnes oeuvre, which claims to come from somewhere else, at times teasingly, as in some of the poetry's references to Blake – discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 – at times explicitly, as in the title of one of her early one-act plays pointing to J.M. Synge, *Kurzy of the Sea*. To analyse what it means to use words that are always second-hand in Barnes means to focus on intertextuality and genealogy but also to devote attention to texts previously overlooked because regarded too simple or inadequate to deserve interpretation: the posthumously published *Creatures in an Alphabet* (Chapter 2), the journalism (this chapter), and the short stories (Chapter 3). Chapter 2 will therefore focus on the poetry, from the early *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915) to the post-1950s poetry. Building on the issues of genealogy and filiation, Chapter 3 will argue that the figure of the child in the short stories and in the letters questions the link between innocence and experience. The book will contend that the quintessential 'picture of innocence' is not exempt in Barnes from the interpretive complications of adult life and narration. This is why sexuality is prominent in the Barnesian child, the odd offspring of decadence and psychoanalysis. The short stories challenge American sentimentality not by employing the child as the visionary revolutionary modernist or perverse and precocious degenerate (although borrowing from both the language of modernity and that of decadence) but by uncomfortably dissecting the ideological investment in the very trope of childhood. Chapter 4 will be devoted to exploring the central issue of collusion in *Nightwood*, a crucial text for a reassessment of contemporary queer politics and aesthetics. The core preoccupations of the previous chapters are reflected in Chapter 5, which will discuss literary traditions, genealogy, and the politics of reading through an

analysis of the narrative of origins present in *Ryder* (1928) and *The Antiphon* (1958), an assessment of the relevance of 'unmodern' literature (from Chaucer to Middleton) in these texts, and a discussion of the play's anomalous position in relation to dramatic trends of the period.

### Pen Performer

If mystery, reticence, and veiling are part of the Barnesian game of seduction, such a game has no investments in revelations or faith in ultimate truths. Seduction, in the words of Baudrillard, 'does not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence. Its sole strategy is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, hypnotic mechanism that crystallizes attention outside all concerns with meaning. Absence here seduces presence.'<sup>38</sup> Baudrillard's definition draws attention to two different kinds of readings elicited by the Barnes *oeuvre*. On the one hand, readers have seen desire as 'a will to power and possession' and try to penetrate the surface of the text, wanting to discover the truth beyond the veil, or, more appropriately in the case of Barnes, her cape. On the other hand, readers who are seduced by the 'flickering, hypnotic mechanism' of the 'to be-there/not-there' strategy have crystallized their attention 'outside all concerns with meanings.' But if the Barnes *oeuvre* makes the most of these games of finery and puts a lot of emphasis on surfaces, objects, and fashion, it also deprives them of their antithetical concepts of depth, feeling, or bodily stability, demonstrating a radical scepticism towards truth, which, nevertheless, cannot easily be accommodated within the posed cynicism of the decadent.

Among the critics who have concentrated on understanding the relation between Barnes and decadence,<sup>39</sup> Carlston argues that 'style is for Barnes, as for the decadents, a means of expressing, rather than masking, the central preoccupation she shares with them, an emphasis on suffering and death'<sup>40</sup> and Kannenstine writes that this 'attitude is perfectly serious, though it deeply involves the frivolous .... Suffering becomes tolerable, even purifying, if it is done prettily.'<sup>41</sup> But if Kannenstine's reading of Barnes's 'unnatural stress upon superficiality, upon unnecessary' leads Carlston to conclude that 'both the aestheticized style and an

<sup>38</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990 [1979]), pp. 85 and 87.

<sup>39</sup> Kannenstine, *The Art of Djuna Barnes*; Cheryl J. Plumb, *Fancy's Craft: Art and Identity in the Early Works of Djuna Barnes* (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986); Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 'Strolling in the Dark: Gothic Flânerie in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*', in Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (eds), *Gothic Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 78–79; Anette Bretschneider, *Decadent Djuna: eine Untersuchung dekadenter Themen und Motive im Werk von Djuna Barnes* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997).

<sup>40</sup> Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> Kannenstine, *The Art*, p. 9; also quoted in Carlston, *Thinking Fascism*, p. 51.

antirealist narrative structure, then, can express the desire to evade finality',<sup>42</sup> in Barnes the strategies of the decadent do not 'ward off the necessary anguish of mortality' but are exposed in their ineffectiveness, as demonstrated by her 1923 *Vanity Fair* alliteratively titled article 'What is Good Form in Dying: In Which A Dozen Dainty Deaths Are Suggested for Daring Damsels.'<sup>43</sup> The piece mocks precisely the usefulness of suffering 'prettily' and ironises on femininity as a form of decadent and Bohemian cultural capital by advising various 'types' of women (from 'the blonde' to the 'heavy-lidded vampire of the brunette order') about matching fashionable deaths, from hanging from Venetian mirrors to 'slow-green' poison. If Barnes's 'ostentatious use of "anti-natural" figures, including the lesbian, the vampire, the nomadic Jew, the hermaphrodite, and the transvestite' have been variously linked to decadence and the Gothic (from Guido Bruno to recent critical work on gothic modernism), she nevertheless 'dissipates any redemptive aura invested in these figures by earlier writers.'<sup>44</sup> This strategy can also be read historically; Wallace and Elliott argue that their analysis of 'four sketches of bohemian life published in three different magazines ... suggests that when Barnes was writing for Guido Bruno, she laid the decadence on with a trowel.'<sup>45</sup> However, Barnes was also laying the decadence on rather heavily when publishing not for Bruno but for *Vanity Fair* and *Shadowland*, as Dobrujda's 'The Murder in the Palmroom' and Lydia Steptoe's 'Naming the Rose' demonstrate.<sup>46</sup>

Style in Barnes is not ornamentation, which can be 'stripped bare of its Jangle', as *Ladies Almanack* puts it, because there is no bare flesh to be found once the finery has been stripped away. Language is deceptive, unstable, temporary, and grotesquely and humorously duplicitous; and yet, there is no solid, material, eye-witnessed reality able to ward off such fears of instability or constitute an alternative to it.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Carlston, *Thinking Fascism*, p. 51.

<sup>43</sup> Djuna Barnes, 'What Is Good Form in Dying: In Which A Dozen Dainty Deaths Are Suggested for Daring Damsels', *Vanity Fair*, XX (June 1923).

<sup>44</sup> Miller, *Late Modernism*, p. 129.

<sup>45</sup> Wallace and Elliott, *Women Artist*, p. 137. The four sketches are 'The Last Petit Souper ...', *Bruno's Weekly* (29 April 1916); 'Greenwich Village As It Is' (published six months later for Frank Harris's *Pearson's Magazine*); 'Becoming Intimate with the Bohemians', *New York Morning Telegraph Sunday Magazine* (19 November 1916); 'How the Villagers Amuse Themselves', *New York Morning Telegraph Sunday Magazine* (26 November 1916).

<sup>46</sup> Dobrujda, 'The Murder in the Palm-Room: An Adventure with the Woman in Silver and Black', *Vanity Fair* (December 1916): 47. See also Figure 2.1. Series VIII, Box 9, Folder 1. Lydia Steptoe, 'Naming the Rose', *Shadowland* (May 1923). Series VIII, Box VIII, Folder 1, Item 4.40.

<sup>47</sup> Tellingly, Barnes marks the following from Proust's *Remembrances of Things Past*: 'But another reason for this change lay in the fact that, having reached the turning-point of life, Odette had at length discovered, or invented, a physiognomy of her own, an unalterable "character", a "style of beauty", and on her incoherent features – which for so long, exposed to every hazard, every weakness of the flesh, borrowing for a moment, at the slightest

This is why in Barnes the naked body is always inscribed, like Nikka's tattooed black body and Frau Mann's tightly clad aerodynamic one in *Nightwood*.<sup>48</sup>

One of the reasons why Barnes's own caped body haunts the criticism as a promise of revelation of 'the real Djuna' lies in the pervasive use of the cape and the cloak in her work as tropes which question the relation between femininity, spontaneity, and pose, a challenge reproduced by her photographic portraits.<sup>49</sup> Fashion in Barnes points to the impossibility of being outside complicated worldly inscriptions; it renders the world at once legible and potentially elusive and indicates that 'modernism's absolute commitment to "the New" had as its corollary that yesterday's artistic rage could be tomorrow's old hat.'<sup>50</sup> The early interviews with well-known stage or screen personalities or less famous spokespersons for Bohemia, the stunts which constitute a large part of her apparently frivolous journalism, and the later pictorial arrangement of gossip, reviews, and comments in 'The Wanton Playgoer' column of the *Theatre Guild Almanac* indicate how the ephemerality of existence and the problems of representation are central to Barnes's modernist preoccupations.<sup>51</sup>

In a 1925 article by Barnes, Mary Garden, opera singer, gives fashion advice to the interviewer and to women in general: "'And don't, oh don't,'" she added, "wear a cape unless you are tall and slender. Why will women cut their line down! A cape carries out the width of the shoulders – almost no woman can wear one",<sup>52</sup> while in 1917 Helen Westley in New York describes her precious Mephistophelian self as looking: 'like a cloak model – very exclusive.'<sup>53</sup> Capes are also discussed in a 1924

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fatigue, from the years to come, a sort of flickering shadow of ability, had furnished her, well or ill, with a countenance dishevelled, inconstant, formless and attractive – had now set this fixed type, as it were an immortal youthfulness.' Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Introduction Joseph Wood Krutch (4 vols, New York: Random House, 1934); vol. 1, *Swann's Way and Within a Budding Grove*, p. 271. Inscribed 'Djuna Barnes Xmas 1934'.

<sup>48</sup> Wallace and Elliott, *Women Artist*, p. 132.

<sup>49</sup> With characteristically benevolent misogyny Robert McAlmon writes: 'Djuna was a very haughty lady, quick on the uptake, and with a wisecracking tongue that I was far too discreet to try and rival. ... Once I had written a letter to the *Little Review*, asking how came it that Miss Barnes was both so Russian and so Synge-Irish, a comment Jane Heap apparently used frequently to cow Djuna. Jane kept assuring her that McAlmon was not taken in by her cape-throwing gestures but understood her for the sentimentalist she was. ... Djuna is far too good-looking and fundamentally likable for anything but fond admiration, if not a great deal more, even when she is rather overdoing the *grande dame* manner and talking soul and ideals.' Robert McAlmon and Kay Boyle, *Being Geniuses Together, 1920–1930* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc. 1968), p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> Miller, *Late Modernism*, p. 138.

<sup>51</sup> Wallace and Elliott, *Women Artists*, p. 128.

<sup>52</sup> Barnes, 'How the Woman in Love Should Dress' (October 1925), in *I Could Never*, p. 312.

<sup>53</sup> Barnes, 'The Confession of Helen Westley', *New York Morning Telegraph Sunday Magazine* (23 September 1917), in *I Could Never*, pp. 249–262, p. 260.

journalistic piece by Barnes titled 'The Models Come to Town', in which Bronja and Tylia Perlmutter are described as sitting 'in their capes at the bar drinking *Yvette* and *Menthe* for its color, discussing Belgian poetry with the bartender, or ... overheard saying to Marcel Herrand, the Romeo of Cocteau's *Romeo and Juliet*: "A high lace collar, a pair of tights, and immediately you are almost something else! Isn't it?"'<sup>54</sup> The theatricality of this piece (observed in much of Barnes journalism across New York and Paris, between the early 1910s and the 1930s, and present in the short stories 'The Grande Malade' and 'The Robin's House', where capes also appear) classically connects fashion and disguise. And yet, the faltering English (which possibly should stand for French) of the two Dutch women also indicates the inherent fragility of identity, since 'you are almost something else', implies that Herrand was not quite somebody in the first place. Moreover, the two models wearing their capes are just as much theatrical figures in disguise as Herrand is, on and off stage. The actors in this short piece are all well-known figures in 1920s Paris: Kiki de Montparnasse was famously immortalised by Man Ray as *Le violon d'Ingres* in 1924; Bronja appears, also in 1924, with Marcel Duchamp in Man Ray's *Adam and Eve. Marcel Duchamp and Bronja Perlmutter*; and Tylia is portrayed in Paris by Berenice Abbott in 1925.<sup>55</sup> They stand for a Bohemia at once represented as familiar through the use of the alluring second person singular – 'drinking your coffee (as deadly as the rapier of a D'Artagnan), eating your *petit pain* (as hard as a woman's heart), you raise your eyes and meet their eyes. They smile a little and you smile'<sup>56</sup> – and as inaccessible, 'For the Montparnasse model is everywhere you are and are not. That is their life, their life is their "confession" – the only one they make. Any other would be unnecessary.'<sup>57</sup> Their capes and their colourful drinks do not stand, then, for artificiality opposed to naturalness, but are made to coincide with the performance of their life, which amounts to a confession.

Significantly, one of the few spokespersons of naturalness in the journalism is Coco Chanel, advocate of a highly regimented routine of sport and healthy living; to her, puns Barnes in 1931, 'that thing is natural which is most complete and coordinated.'<sup>58</sup> The text collapses the opposition between the natural and the artificial, flicks depth into surface and vice-versa, and makes us intimate with estrangement through the seductive 'you' which turns coffee into literary steel and a stale roll into a misogynist attack, transforms the reader into a Bohemian while also presupposing the possibility that s/he is not, or at least not quite there.

<sup>54</sup> Barnes, 'The Models Come to Town' (November 1924), in *I Could Never*, p. 301.

<sup>55</sup> See also Kiki de Montparnasse, *Souvenirs retrouvés* (Paris: José Corti, 2005), for which Hemingway wrote a preface in 1928.

<sup>56</sup> Barnes, 'The Models Come to Town', p. 302.

<sup>57</sup> Barnes, 'The Models Come to Town', p. 303.

<sup>58</sup> Barnes, 'Nothing Amuses Coco Chanel After Midnight', (September 1931), in *I Could Never*, pp. 376–382, p. 379. See also Djuna Barnes, 'Against Nature: In Which Everything that Is Young, Inadequate and Tiresome is Included in the Term Natural', *Vanity Fair*, 18 (August 1922): 60. Series III, Box 12, Folder 5.

Rather than a revelation of the real Tylia, Bronja, and Kiki de Montparnasse, the text presents itself as at once mirror and confessional, two important elements in *Nightwood* and in an early New York piece such as ‘David Belasco Dreams’ (1916), in which Barnes visits the monastery-educated producer, actor and director in his rooms over his theatre. She writes: ‘As we talked Mr. Belasco kept on moving, so that in the course of time we seemed to have passed through a score of rooms, each lovelier than the last; each more mysterious with that mystery of the now deserted chair, the cloak long laid aside, the guitar long still.’<sup>59</sup> Here the cloak is not just the theatrical object, a variation on the mask theme, it is also the object whose mystery lies in its having been ‘long laid aside’, thus participating in the economy of lack (of presence and of sound) which produces the setting. Barnes follows David Belasco through the jumble of discarded theatrical objects and precious antiques, down little staircases and narrow rooms, ‘rooms which, could ghosts come and could those ghosts speak, would be full of the cadences of pleasure and of pain, mournful with the little exclamations of the dead.’<sup>60</sup> In this emptied gothic setting, Belasco, a man intent in stopping ‘that active time’ (that is, woodworms destroying his beloved antiques), baroquely muses on the fugitive nature of existence:

do you realize that you are – we all are – working on perishable things? That the sheet the author writes upon is maturing under his pen? That the very canvas the artist is laying his brush upon is aging under the stroke? That the very vaults that we hide them in are aging, too, and that nothing can protect and guard anything forever? Ah, yes, it is sad – but then, all things that are beautiful are. Sadness and sorrow, are the two most beautiful words and the most abused.<sup>61</sup>

Belasco evades Barnes’s original questions about stardom-making (which remain unformulated until the end), and in the melancholy finale of this *memento mori* the interviewer says of his vague dinner invitation: ‘But I know he will forget.’<sup>62</sup> Declaring the very ephemerality of its own status as writing, the article’s closing moment casts an ironic light on both its anachronistic gothic setting and baroque intimations of mortality.

The presence of jumbles, cast-offs, and antiques not only leads to a decadent meditation on the passing of time (reminiscent of Barnes’s words in Bruno’s interview) but also figures the status of language in Barnes. Always oscillating between being a cast-off and an antique, worthless and precious, Barnes’s language

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<sup>59</sup> Barnes, ‘David Belasco Dreams’, *New York Morning Telegraph Sunday Magazine* (31 December 1916), in *I Could Never*, pp. 186–199, p. 197.

<sup>60</sup> Barnes, ‘David Belasco Dreams’, p. 188. See also the poem ‘Antique’, published in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* August 1918 and republished in Djuna Barnes, *Collected Poems with Notes Towards a Memoir*, eds Phillip Herring and Osias Stutman (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 83.

<sup>61</sup> Barnes, ‘David Belasco Dreams’, pp. 189–190.

<sup>62</sup> Barnes, ‘David Belasco Dreams’, p. 199.

is overtly intertextual even when the source is not explicitly mentioned. The Gothic and the Baroque, just like Decadence, are opportunities to fabricate and expose the histories and legacies of words and syntax; constructing these genres is never just a pose in Barnes, and yet she has no faith in their redemptive power. Barnes's language is always second-hand, at times mysterious because bearing the traces of having been 'laid aside', at times crystallising into a 'gem', which, however, is not exempt from the passing of time, at times making a spectacle of its own lack of purity and originality. Within this setting, the cloak is the mystery which refuses to reveal itself, it is meaningful because worthless, abandoned in a corner of this piece, which meanders through the corridors of time without ever reaching a conclusion.

The link between time and antiquity is mediated by a cloak in *Ryder* too, in which Sophia's 'pauper's cloak' is 'that threadbare green-grey cloak of thirty summers past, that garment that she was wise enough to add to the appeal in "mother", that spoke even louder of her needs than her words.'<sup>63</sup> The cloak which Sophia wraps 'over her bent shoulders', stands both for her ongoing sorrows and for her investment in the past, which has a visual parallel in her walls 'covered with multitudinous and multifarious crayons, lithographs and engravings', including the women she admires, from George Eliot to Lotta Crabtree; the men she admired from Proudly 'the railroad magnate', to the Divine Dante and Wilde and Thompson; and the 'prints of all she abhorred.' 'Like the telltale rings of the oak' Sophia's walls 'gave up her conditions ... for she never removed, she covered over.'<sup>64</sup> The palimpsest of the past which reveals Sophia's present, the jumble of the great and the loathsome, the bawdy and the divine, which organically grows on Sophia's walls, is woven into the fabric of Sophia's cloak, at once a figure of the accumulation of time, a reminder of past and better times, a sign of her dignity and of her cunningly devised emotional appeal ('call me mother'). Shabby and mysterious, able to hide and disclose, Sophia's cloak is endowed with the power of communicating more effectively (or at least more vocally) than Sophia's words.

Another cloak in *Ryder*, meant to wrap the mourning figure on the funerary monument that Sophia plans for herself and her husband Alex Rudolph Alexson, stands for the inexpressibility of grief. In Sophia's will, her monument should have 'a weeping Greek or Athenian surmounting all, leaning on a lachrymal urn, draped in the folds of a double-skirted cloak of grief.'<sup>65</sup> The visualisation of the metaphor of the ineffability of pain signifies Sophia's dream of immortality, paradoxically realised by the narrative perspective, which humorously informs us that Sophia will look in after-life upon such a document 'with amazement.'<sup>66</sup> While the text presents itself as able to cross the boundary between life and death (speaking from the vantage point of after-life), it also mocks the possibility of accurately disposing

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<sup>63</sup> Djuna Barnes, *Ryder* (Normal, IL: The Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> Barnes, *Ryder*, p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> Barnes, *Ryder*, p. 78.

<sup>66</sup> Barnes, *Ryder*, p. 80.

of one's life and of controlling the memories one leaves behind. The cloak, whose 'double-skirted' frivolity vocally communicates the unspeakability of sorrow, is the figure of the open secret; while it refuses to 'deliver' the content of grief, it nevertheless solidifies grief in the elaborately clad memorial of mourning, whose own mock immortality is targeted in *Ladies Almanack*. At once speaking 'louder' than words and concealing, the marble cloak is a poor shield against death.

If the antique, the abandoned theatrical object, and the funerary monument feed an image of a 'decadent Djuna', corroborated by critics from Bruno to Bretschneider, Barnes nevertheless uses depth superficially, treats frivolity seriously, fashion politically, despair mockingly, and the self and its destruction ironically. This form of sabotaging applies to various genres and traditions, from the Elizabethans to the Gothic, from the Restoration to the Decadents, which are constantly evoked in Barnes and then declared void of their power to contain, ordain, and shape. Something is always missing, out of the picture, 'beyond rescue.'<sup>67</sup>

This can be observed also if we look at the history of publication of Barnes's early work, which 'crosses the boundaries between avant-garde and mainstream appearing in a range of periodicals from *Bruno's Weekly* (Guido Bruno's small Greenwich Village publication) to the *New York Evening Telegraph Sunday Magazine*.'<sup>68</sup> The 'blurring' of 'the "modernist" distinctions between "the avant-garde" and "the popular", "the professional" and "the commercial", and "genius" and talent"' is not a trait which can be exclusively ascribed to modernist women writers.<sup>69</sup> The example of Italian Futurists involved in advertising and the graphic

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<sup>67</sup> Miller, *Late Modernism*, p. 121.

<sup>68</sup> Alex Goody, 'Consider Your Grandmother': Modernism, Gender and the New York Press', *Media History*, 7/1 (2001): 47–56, 53. See also Alex Goody, *Modernist Articulations: a Cultural Study of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>69</sup> In a letter of 27 November 1962 to W. H. Scarborough (who had written about her in *The Chapel Hill Weekly*), Barnes writes: 'Dear Mr Scarborough: A thousand thanks for the three copies of the Weekly for September 9, 1962, which I wanted because I was pleased, pleased in spite of a few factual errors, – may I correct some. I was not a "friend" of Miss Stein; I met her possibly three or four times, at tea. Miss Barnes has "influenced" a number of writers, alas, and one steals outright, one at least. I did not write plays for the Theatre Guild, I did not contribute to "myriad" little magazines, I believe The Little Review, The Dial, and two very dead little magazines xxx [was erased] the New York total. xxx [erased] I must have missed something – I do not recall ever having been charged with the "manner of Wyndham Lewis" [quotation marks in pen], Eliot yes, and that's [apostrophe added in pen] as idiotic as may be [brackets added in pen around the last clause], Oscar Wilde? Walter Pater. Where?' Series II, Box II, Folder 51. See also Goody, 'Consider your Grandmother' and *Modernist Articulations*, Wallace and Elliott, *Women Artists*, and Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), and Diane Warren, *Djuna Barnes' Consuming Fictions* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

arts such as, for instance, Ferdinando de Pero, can help us complicate this gendered historical dualism. Nevertheless, the early combination of avant-garde and popular does reflect how Barnes's entire oeuvre has a strong commitment – often a paradoxical one – in mixing classic literary tradition and valueless remainder, a theory reflected in the practice of producing painstakingly elaborate drawings which would then be cropped and reduced in size according to the needs of the daily papers in which they appeared. Not unlike in David Belasco's rooms, *objets d'art* and theatrical props are jumbled in Barnes's work, which often equivocates on the potential interchangeability of the former with the latter.

In this respect her links with Decadence are as tenuous and as important as her link with previous traditions: as I will demonstrate in the course of this book, Barnes's work generates relations with decadence, Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, Restoration plays, Donne and Blake, and chapbooks, almanacs and *images populaires*. This process of 'creating one's precursors' is not aimed, however, at establishing philological accuracy or cultural allegiances;<sup>70</sup> images, conceits, and structures are presented as belonging to certain traditions and then mobilised and sabotaged by Barnes's works, in which nothing is new and nothing is innocent. As Barnes wrote to one of her translators of *Nightwood* into German, Wolfgang Hildesheimer: 'page 32 ... just *what* word, undoubtedly short and improper the Tudor king said I've now forgotten, but Tiny M'Caffrey [sic] is a word the doctor uses for both himself and his member, if you recall, he took out "Tiny" in the scene in the Church, asking God "which" was the true Matthew; ... it is also a sort of "cant" word among certain homosexuals of that day, and in Paris, a "camping word" ... passing for a number of things.'<sup>71</sup> The priority is neither on the retrieval of the exact words of the King ('undoubtedly short and improper') nor on the precise 'coded' meaning of the word within a geographically and temporally delimited sub-culture, but on the ability of such word to pass for a number of things, on its overt protean and equivocal character, on its potential to camp things up.

Barnes's journalism also queerly clashes and combines mass and high culture in her 1913 interview with Mimi Aguglia, in which she describes the New York Italian actress as 'the epic of undulating spaghetti, turmoil of tragic chiffon, damp spurning feet', concluding tragic Mimi/Salomé's interview with the bathetic: 'The end of the oblique eyes, the soft sound of a woman's body threshing the inevitable, and – back to monkeys again.'<sup>72</sup> In this 'behind scenes' 'the tropics [are] just out of mothballs',<sup>73</sup> gossip and tragedy collide, national stereotypes are

<sup>70</sup> Jorge Louis Borges, 'Kafka and his precursors', in Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (eds), *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 199–202, p. 201.

<sup>71</sup> Djuna Barnes to Wolfgang Hildesheimer, 17 July 1959. Series II, Box 9, Folder 27; also quoted in Broe, *Silence and Power*, p. 219.

<sup>72</sup> Djuna Barnes, 'The Wild Aguglia' (28 December 1913), in *I Could Never*, pp. 19–23, p. 22.

<sup>73</sup> Djuna Barnes, 'The Wild Aguglia', p. 20.