

## *When the Kissing Flesh Is Gone*

Djuna Barnes, *The Book of Repulsive Women and Other Poems*.  
Carcenet, £9.95

In Djuna Barnes's most famous work, *Nightwood* (1936), characters fall in and out of love with each succeeding chapter. The typical course of love runs as follows. A lover's face is physically dissected, usually for comic effect. A psychological sketch is quickly added. The beginning of the affair is then skipped through in two or three paragraphs, before the recently consummated relationship just about collapses in time for the characters to be shuffled around for the next chapter. Barnes's prose style owes a lot of Henry James. Dense, overwrought sentences move nowhere in particular word by word. It is a form of writing somewhat akin to a nineteenth-century museum—beautiful and refined yet at the same time cluttered and overbearing. Elizabeth Bishop once wrote that the atmosphere of Henry James's novels left her feeling rather chilly. The characters circled one another continuously but one missed a sense of human touch. The same criticism can be made of Djuna Barnes's prose, although in a way it can also be seen as a kind of praise. As readers, we have deliberately to get in amongst the clauses and sub-clauses as if they were a crowd of difficult strangers. We have to put ourselves in awkward positions, shake hands with characters and situations that make us uneasy. As Dr Matthew O'Connor, *Nightwood's* most erudite raconteur admits, "I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it". Or as Marianne Moore, Barnes's fellow Modernist innovator once remarked, "reading Djuna Barnes is like reading a foreign language, which you understand".

However readers come to Barnes's poems, a degree of bafflement will be involved. There seems, as Dr O'Connor might have

said, to be some continuity of technique and theme but one is hard put to find it. Certainly, as the book's editor, Rebecca Loncraine, observes in a helpful introduction, there is an ongoing fascination with "decaying flesh" and a love of "verbal and cognitive dissonance, particularly at line endings". But where do Barnes's obsessions with the dead come from and why did she invent such an edgy style? Biographical explanations would presumably point to Barnes's childhood which Loncraine describes rather euphemistically as "unconventional, some would say dysfunctional". Barnes's father was a failed artist and successful polygamist. She lived with her father, his two wives and her various brothers and half-brothers until the age of twenty when she moved to New York City to study art. The novel *Ryder* (1928) and the play *The Antiphon* (1958) both reflect on her childhood as a traumatic experience. But in her poetry there is little sense of these events still haunting her. Early poems such as "The Dreamer" and "Call of the Night" hint at home as a "lonesome place" and the dark as a welcome distraction, but surely most adolescents look through the window-pane of childhood bedrooms with similar emotions. Even the autobiographical-sounding "Solitude" backs away from direct confession. "[H]aunting memories" are admitted to, but they walk beside "a chartless road". There is no place for them on Barnes's imaginative map. Instead, sorrow leaks through the adjectives used to describe her bedroom furniture. Her "shrouded mantelpiece" and "sober gap" of fireplace seem like borrowings from the Brontë parsonage—objects which tell of loss without ever fully identifying the perpetrators.

For me, Barnes's dead bodies and dissonant line endings have a less personal history behind them. They seem the consequences of coming to language as a woman writer looking back at the history of Western art to see a surplus of female bodies and very few women's voices. Her delight in flesh, particularly the flesh of corpses (one of her most resonant titles is "When the Kissing Flesh is Gone"), is more than straightforward morbidity. It is a direct ideological attack on the male imagination and its tendency to fetishise and objectify the female body, draining and removing its fleshy vitality. Barnes's bodies cannot be contained by the poems that describe them. They reek of pus and sweat. They bulge out of dresses and skirts. They leer out of sinking coffins. In short, they misbehave. Her poetic forms are just as inadequate as

vessels. The words seem to drool over the page, rhymes and verse structures all akimbo. The poetry stands in relation to the novels like a bedroom adjoining a hallway. While the former is full of chaos, intimacy and skin, the latter is dominated by decorum, order and dress. There is a door from one to the other, but one has to risk the transformation there. To rephrase Marianne Moore, reading Djuna Barnes's poetry is actually like reading a familiar language, which you almost understand.

Barnes, like most experimental poets, is wildly uneven. She also takes several poems to break free from her various influences. Students of Modernist poetry will be struck by the sheer bad taste evident in poems like "Jungle Jargon" and "The Flowering Corpse" with their discordant echoes of Marianne Moore and Thomas Hardy. While Barnes's "monkey with a dreadful past/ And sprawling bigotry of mind" ("Jungle Jargon") has a pleasing absurdity, the overall impression is of a poet trying to worship a poet like Moore simply by feeding animal images into a food mixer. Metre, morality and sense are ingredients she seems to have forgotten along the way. "The Flowering Corpse" is equally misguided. Hardy's "Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard" become blooming armpits in a macabre commentary on decaying flesh that also manages to be utterly banal. Yet for all her misjudgements, one always gets the feeling that Barnes is simply biding her time to become a poet of influence. "Suicide", from her first collection of poems, *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915), is written in a style that most people would now consider Audenesque even though it was composed while Auden was completing his juvenilia. "Birth", first published in 1916, offers an existential view of life as a countdown to death decades before Beckett himself made such sentiments fashionable by placing them on stage. And in "The Yellow Jar", again from 1916, Barnes seems to have told her own verse anecdote of an urn-like pot at least a few years before Stevens made a similar story famous. Thus, while she spectacularly misses the point with her copies of other poets, this is more than compensated for by her dazzling predictions of things to come. Although it is a critical cliché to celebrate a writer for being out of time, in Barnes's case it is more a fact than a marketing strategy.

Barnes's most original work lies in her dissection of the dead. Like a mediæval tomb robber, her flesh-digging gives life (particularly poetic life) to other human beings later. "To the Hands of a

Beloved" is perhaps her most moving testament. It captures the obsession of a grieving lover searching the house for a physical sign of somebody recently dead. This everyday quest theme is told through the hands. What did the lover touch in life? Does the looking-glass remember his face there? Do memories reside in objects or in something else more intangible?

I like to think that some day as I pass  
This tall and somber mirror I shall win  
The touch of his quick fingers from the glass  
When, searching in his face for what had been,  
He paused here utterly confounded, looking in.

On some object, unnoticed, cast aside,  
Some hour he'll strike with careless palm outspread,  
And there'll remain of him, though he had died,  
A memory that shall lift him from the dead;  
And weeping between my hands, I shall be comforted.

There is something that is both adolescent and adult about the sentiments expressed in this poem. On the one hand, the lover fetishises the objects touched by the dead like a film star's autograph or a writer's desk. How many other people have touched the poem's "white wall" and "dusty balustrade" and left their trace? How much physical space do we claim for remembrance? Yet at the same time isn't this love of touch (even if it can never be consummated) also wonderfully human? Like Keats's "living hand, warm and capable", the hands of Barnes's poem encourage us as readers to touch others and be touched in turn. They turn private pain into public recollection, intimate grief into a wider discussion of the event of death and how we deal with it.

Death is so much the matter of these poems one cannot help but wonder at Barnes's state of mind. She feels not just time's wingèd chariot at her back, but the history and weight of almost every kind of classical and religious hell. The word, "doom", for example, is used in almost every poem. In "Death", we find her "soul tobogganing upon the sled of doom" (not much of a wintry game), whilst in "To an Idol" a mysterious carving is "conceived in superstition/ And doomed in wood." Happiness clearly reduces Barnes to silence whereas gloom sends her scrambling for the pen. As she admits in one of her later poems, "Rite of Spring":

Man cannot purge his body of its theme  
As can the silkworm on a running thread  
Spin a shroud to re-consider it.

This is not to imply that Barnes lacks a sense of humour, or that her attitude to death is always heavy-hearted. In a sonnet entitled "Crystals", the poet pores over the corpse of a princess's body to uncover a bewildering selection of fruits and spices wedged against her bones and clothes. These include "lemon-blossoms banked at the breast-bone", the "odor of apples rising from the death robes" and most peculiar of all, "[s]eeds of pepper falling down from brittle, spiced womb-cakes". The princess's corpse is less a figure for mourning and reverie, and more like a pheasant about to be cooked.

Barnes's lack of scruples in relation to death reminds one of Renaissance poets, especially John Donne. Making conceits out of corpses is certainly one of her favourite activities. These are wittily embedded in sentimental-sounding poems. In "Lines to a Lady", Barnes invites the earth to "Sew her tenderly, that she may/ Reap her death!". In "The Lament of Women", she wearily describes the body as "this flesh laid on us like a wrinkled glove". One of her most unusual body poems is her heterodox reflection on religion, "The Personal God". In it, Barnes shuns the idea that there is a single God figure who behaves the same to everyone. Her God is a giggling, overweight lover whose body the poet takes over in a ceremony similar to a religious exorcism, though curiously it is the believer's spirit who inhabits God's body rather than the other way round:

... I'll use my own gray plaster  
And I'll build me a personal God.  
I'll breathe out his flaccid belly,  
I'll cup out his sightless eyes,  
I'll sob in the labor bending,  
As I handle his plastic thighs.  
And he shall be rash of judgment,  
And slow in the use of the rod.  
My God shall giggle in spite of himself,  
In the way of a personal God.

Barnes rejects the idea of the body as temple of virtue or vessel for sin. Like a twentieth-century Teresa of Ávila, she makes love to her

personal God in an erotic embrace that here at least has more than a hint of necrophilia. If God is dead, Barnes can at least still hug his "flaccid" flesh, an obviously provocative gesture (then, as now).

Barnes spins out her single theme over almost half a century of writing. The poems of nineteen, for instance, seem almost interchangeable with those she wrote at eighty-nine. The editor of this collection has helpfully arranged the book in chronological order, allowing readers to see the relentless focus of Barnes's poetic gaze throughout her life. Unfortunately, most of the unpublished poems are inferior to those included in the first *Book of Repulsive Women* in 1915 and her second volume, *A Book*, in 1923, suggesting that Barnes's famous reluctance to allow publication of her early work may in fact have been a sensible aesthetic judgement. That said, Barnes is still the kind of writer whose good *and* bad days are both riveting to live through. She is the poet of the earth all our bodies come to, the words we read when the kissing flesh is gone.