

comes contempt. For example, during a seminar given in 1972-73, when his fame was fixed, he suggests that his students look up the etymologies of two words in a particular dictionary "which I delight in and which, I am sure, none of you even have in your libraries." Later, he draws a diagram and then says, "After what I have just put up on the board for you, you might think that you know it all. Don't go too fast." Given the cryptic nature of the diagram, it's unlikely that anyone,

outside of a person who happened to own Bloch and Von Wartburg's *Dictionary*, would presume to know *anything* about it, to say nothing of "it all." One thing is clear from works like these by Silverman and Lacan: the modern conjurers of metaphysical mysteries who claim to be helping humankind are no less secretive than those of past ages, those whom the moderns claim are partially responsible for our present psychological ills. □

## A Grad Student's Delight

**Andrew Field: *Djuna: The Life and Times of Djuna Barnes*; G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York.**

by Brian Murray

The American writer Djuna Barnes died in the summer of 1982 in New York City at the age of 90. Since 1940, she had lived mostly in Greenwich Village, more or less reclusively. In fact it's probably safe to say that to most of the younger mantra chanters and bongo players who were her neighbors during the 50's and 60's, Djuna Barnes was simply a rather phlegmatic old woman who chain-smoked Kools and rarely ventured past the corner grocery store. Few knew that back in the 20's and 30's she had been one of the queens of *la vie de bohème* and an honest-to-goodness author whose first novel, *Ryder* (1928), had been described by a presumably sober critic at the *Saturday Review* as "the most remarkable book ever written by a woman."

Actually, Miss Barnes was naturally haughty, and she quite liked living like an unmoneyed Greta Garbo. So she was rather annoyed when scores of English professors and journalists equipped with tape recorders and diffident smiles suddenly began turning up on her doorstep in the mid-70's. Sometimes she was

downright rude. Andrew Field tells us that a Professor James Scott warned him that when Barnes greeted her afternoon callers, she wore a flannel nightdress and a sneer. Wrote Scott to Field: "I stood the scrutiny of her gaze, her face about a foot from mine, and removed my glasses. . . . I had a fleeting thought, as I took off my glasses, that she might hit me." She didn't; but she did go on and on in her rapid and rasping voice about how she was "the most famous unknown in the world." Scott left with a headache.

That Barnes should have become a bit more famous in the last years of her life isn't really surprising. As a small but growing number of ambitious young academics, hard pressed for fresh and "publishable" research topics have discovered, much of Barnes's fiction lends itself perfectly to extended exegesis: it is derivative, murky, and tissueed with symbols. And it has been certified as "significant" by many of the right people—by Anaïs Nin, Ned Rorem, and, perhaps most importantly, by John Hawkes, whose gloomy and coolly constructed "fictive worlds" are now required stops for all who would pass through graduate school in English in pursuit of the Ph.D. Hawkes admires the "extreme fictive detachment" that he finds in Barnes's "pure and immoral" work.

And certainly, the life Miss Barnes led in her youth does make for hot copy. She resided in the Village during the

Great War years, at a time when Mabel Dodge was holding court at her Fifth Avenue salon and Alfred Stieglitz was showing off Picassos at his gallery nearby. Barnes knew Dodge and Stieglitz; she hobnobbed with Edmund "Bunny" Wilson and the goatish Frank Harris, too. Back then, Barnes was very much the shocking New Woman—the protoflapper who, as Field puts it, "had affairs with many men," but who took care of her own bills, thank you. Indeed, Barnes made a comfortable living contributing features to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the *New York World*, and to several other newspapers and magazines. As a journalist, she interviewed Diamond Jim Brady, Florenz Ziegfeld, and Jack Dempsey. She wrote Orwellian exposés of the local down-and-out, and profiled such popular local oddballs as Twingeless Twitchell, a dentist who pulled crowds pulling teeth. She specialized, however, in what is now called in the post-Wolfe era "new" journalism. Thus did she allow herself to be force-fed through a yard of rubber hose on one occasion, and caressed by a gorilla called Dinah on another.

In the early 20's, Barnes followed the crowd to the Paris that still fascinates—to that Paris of Dadaist exhibits, surrealist manifestos and cubist ballets: specifically, to that Left Bank district of Paris which the acerbic Sinclair Lewis once aptly described as "the perfectly standardized place to which standardized rebels flee from the crushing standardization of America." There, over the next 20 years, Barnes established herself as a habitué of such celebrated expatriate hangouts as the Café du Dôme and La Rotonde. There she rubbed elbows not only with fellow Yankees and literary betters Ernest Hemingway and Ezra Pound, but with Ford Madox Ford and James Joyce—the writer she admired, and imitated, the most. There, too, she forged alliances with Peggy Guggenheim, Romaine Brooks, and Natalie Clifford Barney: with many of those hedonistic "Amazonians" who gathered weekly for Pernod and chitchat at Barney's posh quarters in the Rue Jacob.

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Interest in Barnes probably also stems from the fact that her novels and short stories and plays consistently present a radically pessimistic, dreadfully deterministic view of life that still squares nicely with the prevailing zeitgeist. According to Barnes, man lives amid bewildering flux in a backwater constellation, in an interminable limbo where there is neither joy nor light nor certitude nor peace. Man is himself a superfluous and grotesque creature, characterized principally by a propensity to selfishness and brutality. The best one can do, then, is to adopt a stance of comic passivity—a detached acceptance of the absurdity that is everywhere, and of those intermittent and spontaneous carnal pleasures that provide a bracing respite from the continuing pain.

Undoubtedly, Barnes's unfortunate upbringing contributed greatly to her Weltschmerz. The three principal role models in Barnes's life—i.e., her parents and her feminist-spiritualist grandmother—were all, as Field politely notes, "inept eccentrics." Of them, Wald Barnes, Djuna's father, was surely the most strange. He was a volatile, megalomaniacal, and probably psychopathic character who hauled his wife, mother, and growing brood off to rural upstate New York so that he could run them through his various "experiments" undisturbed by nosy burghers. As Field notes, Old Wald had decided views on, among other things, eupepsia, and for a time made the Barnes kids "emulate the regimen of poultry by swallowing a small amount of finely pulverized gravel as hens do in order that their digestive systems might be cleansed by it." He also called for the breaking of all sexual restraints—and he practiced what he preached. According to Field, Wald Barnes was an inveterate collector of concubines. He was also quite possibly a sodomite and a child molester who, on at least one occasion, brutalized the adolescent Djuna.

Wendell Ryder, the central figure in the lengthy *Ryder*, owes much to Wald Barnes, and is accordingly—not surpris-

ingly—unsympathetically drawn. At times he does appear as a mildly charming iconoclast gutsily defying "the authorities of the state and the wisecracks of the nation." But more often he is nothing more than a phallus with legs, aiming to fecundate anything that moves. He is lecherous, shiftless, stubborn, uncaring, and, in the end, ineffective: he is for Barnes the typical male writ large.

Field tells us that the Barnes he met in 1977 disdained "the exaggerated posturing of the contemporary feminist movement." But you can bet that feminist critics will be foraging about in *Ryder* for years to come, pointing to its "Rabelaisian" gusto and its tacit commemoration of female superiority. Of course, the book is secure in its status as a literary curio—as a remarkable example of just how ex-

tensive was the influence of Joyce on the impressionable avant-garde writers of his generation. *Ryder*, indeed, reads as if it had been produced by a clever creative writing student who had been instructed to "construct a novel in the mock-epic mode, avoiding a linear plot structure but being careful to employ each of the following: a) paronomasia; b) parody; c) stream of consciousness." In short, it is stiff, pretentious, and dull—paralyzingly dull.

Field makes no outrageous claims for *Ryder*. But he is very much taken with *Nightwood*—Barnes's novelization of her tumultuous love affair with the sculptress Thelma Wood, another beautiful and mysterious self-exile on the Left Bank scene. *Nightwood* is thick with

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles of Culture*:

## To See the World and Man

The application of truthfulness and rationality to the dissection of ideologies and the promotion of liberty and justice does not mean being confined to a narrowly scientific, quantitative set of instruments. Certainly those who I have called "the defenders of freedom," the Machiavellians, did not rely upon Gallup polls or electronic computers to gain their extraordinary insights into the nature of the political processes. As I observed, a touch playfully, in the opening lines of my book *Congress and the American Tradition*, "In ancient times, before the illusions of science had corrupted traditional wisdom, the founders of Cities were known to be gods or demigods."

—from "To See the World and Man"  
by James Burnham

Also:

Opinions & Views—Commendables—In Focus  
—Perceptibles

Waste of Money—The American Proscenium  
—Screen—Art—Music

Correspondence—Liberal Culture—Journalism

animal imagery and death symbolism, and is packed with bizarre supporting characters borrowed from the Nathaniel West Repertory Company, including one Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante O'Connor, whose rambling monologues on religion and ethnology and hygiene and God knows what else go on for pages and pages and pages. Field thinks Dr. O'Connor is "of Shakespearean stature and certainly one of the most memorable characters in our century." He describes *Nightwood* as "one of the artistic keystones of its time." And he points out that he is not alone in his admiration. T. S. Eliot, he reminds us, praised *Nightwood's* "beauty of phrasing" and its "quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy." Dylan Thomas, Field claims, thought *Nightwood*—in Field's words—"one of the three great prose books ever written by a woman." This, put simply, is hyperbole. *Nightwood* is better written than *Ryder*, certainly; but its Gothic feverishness and frequent Swinburnian heavy-handedness will forever limit its audience to assistant professors and to those who are nostalgic for the fin-de-siècle—those whose idea of a good rainy-day read is Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* or Huysmans's *À Rebours*.

And what of the logorrheic Dr. O'Connor? Well, his real-life model was an expatriate American and unabashed homosexual named Dan Mahoney. When not performing back-alley abortions, Mahoney killed time by boozily speechifying in the chic bars and cafés that Djuna Barnes frequented. In *Djuna*, Field admits that John Glassco—author of the delightful *Memoirs of Montparnasse*—once described Mahoney as "the sort of fellow who was very interesting to talk to for about five minutes, and then was a bit of a bore." Enough said.

After the publication of *Nightwood*, Barnes published nothing extensive until 1958, when her years-in-the-making "closet drama," *Antiphon*, appeared. Rarely have labor and zeal been more

absurdly wasted. For this highly autobiographical rendering of an eccentric family's horrific reunion in a decaying English manor was enthusiastically received by only a handful of Barnes devotees—most notably by Edwin Muir and Dag Hammarskjöld—and has since then probably never been read straight through by more than a dozen determined souls. Indeed, this peculiar collection of loosely connected images and private mutterings has got to be one of three most tedious verse dramas ever written by a woman—or man. Even the charitable Field likens it to "an unfamiliar opera sung in a strange language."

In *Djuna*, as in his controversial 1977 biography of Vladimir Nabokov, Field writes colloquially, in the first person. Too, he employs a narrative structure that is nonchronological, kaleidoscopi-

cally episodic. He proceeds intelligently and judiciously for the most part, though at times so digressively—so offhandedly—that things do get a tad muddled. And of course he's quite wrong about Barnes. He wants us to consider her "a major writer of our time." Certainly, some of Djuna Barnes's early stories—like "Aller et Retour" and "The Jest of Jests"—are clearly, deftly constructed and are, in their bleak sort of way, compelling. And as Eliot noted, there are some lovely "musical patterns" to be found in Barnes's writing, even in *Antiphon*. But if the idiosyncratic Barnes must be ranked among her contemporaries, then she must be placed in the company of the likes of Anna Wickham, James Branch Cabell, and Carl Van Vechten. She may have been James Joyce's friend, but she was hardly his equal. □

## Of Belief and the Bourgeoisie

**Nicholas Rzhevsky: *Russian Literature and Ideology: Herzen, Dostoevsky, Leontiev, Tolstoy, Fadeyev*; University of Illinois Press; Chicago.**

by Bryce Christensen

The English novel, critics commonly aver, is a bourgeois literary form. Its historic origins seem to corroborate this, since the two men responsible for its inception, Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, were both thoroughly middle-class. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is written from the perspective of a small merchant; Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) shows how a yeoman's daughter can marry her well-placed boss if she is industrious, attractive, and hard to get. The creation of art was not a deep concern of either of these authors, nor was it among most of their successors, who made the novel a fixture of middle-class life. Nonetheless, without thinking too

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much about their role as artists, two centuries of British and American novelists did manage to produce an inestimable treasury of art. But many who are conscious of artistic criteria believe that the novel is now in serious trouble. Even if the genre is not actually dead, most contemporary representations—popular and academic—do justify the response: "No man alive could write such tripe."

The pathology left-leaning scholars often advance to explain the novel's demise is that the form has suffocated within its bourgeois parameters. The themes of adventure, money, heterosexual romance, and social advancement, as well as the equally bourgeois stylistic conventions have become effete, they maintain. Even a cursory examination of the racks of popular fiction would appear to confirm this diagnosis: the front covers are provocative and the back covers adulatory, but the pages between invariably deliver just another stale manipulation of stilted bravado, shallow, boring solipsism, and lust. Even if a few new permutations of the plot-setting-hero