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# entertainment Obscure writer a delightful find

*Opening New York is like opening a box of dark,  
rich, often bitter, exotic chocolates*

One of the great joys in my life is digging around in the rich earth of art; but an even greater joy is to discover an unknown gem in a field I thought I already fully mined. So when I turned over a cover of one of Djuna Barnes' books I discovered terrific joy. Despite six years of academic study in literature and some considerable time on my own out there exploring, I had never even heard of this woman. Reading on, to learn about her, I became even more confused about her obscurity. Here was a writer whose

style had influenced William Faulkner and Lawrence Durrell (their acknowledgement). She was also very close friends with T.S. Eliot and James Joyce (reportedly the only one allowed to call him Jim to his face in public) and both claimed her to be one of the "greatest women writers" (their sexism). That

the academic oversight of her work could be tied to cultural sexism is a given in even half-enlightened circles these days. That she was also an open lesbian might be even more to the point, although we still don't talk about that much. But I suspect that another reason is that her writing is so dense that it is more than a little taxing, even for academic readers.

Sun and Moon Classics has recently compiled a collection of Barnes' essays about (and titled) *New York*. These talks about life in that city were written by Barnes over a six year period for a large variety of New York City magazines and newspapers. What metaphor best catches the quality of this work? One might call these brief essays snapshots of life in that place and time, but we are closer to an artist's sketchbook, experiments in miniature portraiture, or (since so many move well beyond experiment) a folio of tiny, fine, eccentric prints. But with the richness of prose and subject in this collection, the metaphor and sense need some shifting. Opening *New York* is like opening a box of dark, rich, often bitter, exotic chocolates. Sometimes these are fully-realized pieces, sometimes interesting failures, but they are always exciting experiments in style and content. Barnes at her best is always a very personal writer who fuses a remarkable high-wire juggling act out of words and images, with hair-raising leaps to the depths of convoluted introspection and wrenching human observation. She was paid \$15 for each essays.

The Djuna Barnes we meet here is often out and about "slumming." Her greatest achievements in writing are at those points where her elaborate prose can oddly become the perfect match for expressing, with considerable depth, the feelings of the less-than-articulate lower classes. One fine example is an early essay about simple folk meeting the water at Coney Island. But no sentences can be pulled out of context to show you. Her essay is a thoroughly-realized piece which is strong only when complete (that is a compliment). Even more compelling in this collection are the "interviews" called "Veterans in Harness," which Barnes wrote for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle for two months in 1913. Written as interviews with elderly, working-class men in extremely menial jobs, Barnes has taken their words and images and taught them how to fly. The reader can recognize immediately that these men couldn't possibly talk this way, but that does not matter. She has captured a philosophy of life which was undoubtedly archaic then, but which now, eight decades later, reads like philosophies from another planet. Try this interview with John F. Maguire, who spent 24 years running an elevator. She asks him about the people who come into his cage and what he thinks of them:

*I should think there must be a monstrous fellow with a tail and horns who wields a stinging lash, for they hurry so in their little red boots and*

## BOOKS

RICHARD FRANCIS



AMONG THE UNCONVINCED.

*their black and tan pumps and their always-high heels. I should say that the city was very magnificent and that men had builded it, because they are so pompous and proud, and they have such mighty gestures and they talk so loud. I should sum it up by saying that it is some city, but that people are conceiving things which, when they cease to be dreams, becomes sometimes nightmares; for instead of bringing calm and the glory of having produced something, people hurry and hurry to get it, and the long shadows of the tallest skyscraper points a finger at them and says, 'Are you not thinking too much of your walls and too little of your gardens?'*

Barnes' writing is so very strong that it is hard to believe that she received no formal education beyond a short stint in art school. She is not the pretentious academic playing with words, but rather a person struggling to get it right as an observer, as a listener, as a writer and as a person with heart in even the most mundane situations.

Barnes writes with tremendous sympathy for other cultures, for the lower classes, for the Suffragists, for the movers and shakers of Greenwich Village; but Barnes remained largely non-political. This is a warning that you will not find the circus, politically-correct writer that one might expect, given her sympathies. She will condemn causes where one would anticipate her support, and she will make word choices that are no longer proper in a modern, polite society (such as her use of the word "nigger"—the context makes it an arguable choice). And yet when the Suffragists were conducting hunger strikes in their attempt to get the woman's vote, Barnes would give herself up to be force-fed (as were the hunger strikers) simply so that she could write about the experience. The essay is completely purged of any political stance. It reads as a clear, frightening description of a form of physical rape performed,

simply, by one human being upon another. Standing back from this book, I get the sense of Barnes out on a very personal odyssey that contains some essential political ramification, but which remains an idiosyncratic quest by a woman of a very independent mind.

Those few glimpses which she provides into the same-sex milieu of which she was so much a part of are all too brief, and more than a little oblique. But considering the publications she was writing for, she manages to get a lot through between the lines. There is a series of essays from 1916-1917 about the "Bohemian" life in the village where understanding is not that great a stretch:

*The girl I know, too. Her hair is short (a proof that the Bohemians are, after all, so much like others that they are not original even in this); she had a historic past. She is one of the best sports I know—she has all the maladies in the almanac, and she doesn't care. She was born laughing, and she will die that way—a boy's laugh, a laugh that springs up from the gutter like a flower. She smokes cigarettes, perhaps a hundred a day. I have seen her rummage among the ashes for "makings" while there was yet a faint perfume in the air of others but lately smoked at a dollar a box. I have listened to her and have laughed, but way down deep I knew she was keeping things that she feared lived—children of memory, and those memories' children.*

*She is quite reckless; she dances through an evening, she gets terribly drunk, for she can no longer stand what she used to do when, some ten summers ago, she was a girl. All that life holds she has borrowed to hold once also in those long, thin hands; only the eyes never change. They are set in her face like a child's peering over a wall where all the refuse of life has been whirled and caught. It is a terrible and beautiful thing; her name is—let it go at that.*

Barnes had no great lesbian lovers during this period. She did, however, become strongly interested in Mimi Aguglia, a Sicilian actress and dancer whom Barnes first saw in the title role of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. No reading between the lines here:

*Ah, what a creature; a little heavy, not a woman who has eaten her food without so much as observing it, as many do, but a woman who has gossiped with it and become strangely familiar. Short, black curls weighed down with oils and perfumes lay on her shoulders; her eyes, those marvelous, extraordinary eyes of the ordinary Sicilian—set between the upper lid of ebony and the lower lid of bister, like jewels in bondage—looked neither to right nor to left as she advanced with curling feet to the middle of the stage.*

*One forgot her weight, her smallness of stature, her lack of lithe youth... before my eyes did I see Mimi growl and make moan, cupping her hands like leaves in a great fire that fail and break within the heat and die utterly. Mimi, if I am not mistaken, is a pure, great peasant. What she failed to complete with her hands, she did with her feet; that which her feet left unaccounted for, her back told. If indeed there was anything omitted that flesh could utter in that mad orgy of emotion, then I do not know what it is.*

It is possible to ask for some more direct lesbian material, forgetting her publishers and the times, but that is like asking for more food after a sumptuous feast. Added to the writing are also illustrations by Barnes, which mirror that same search for style and expression that is visible in her writing.

In a culture which will delegate us to the dustbin when it can (as it seems to be doing to Barnes), will redefine our sexuality or neuter us, historically, when it can't ignore us; it becomes our work to rekindle the lights that our homophobic culture has dimmed. We need to do this for ourselves and for those who will "come out" after us. That this chore can include such exquisite delights as a stroll through an intoxicating prose landscape such as this provides a double pleasure in the effort. And once you have learned your way around her essays, you might venture into the even more remarkable vistas in her novels.