

Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus.

By Daniela Caselli. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. x + 290 pp. \$114.95 cloth.

Modernist Articulations: A Cultural Study of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, and Gertrude Stein. By Alex Goody. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xii + 242 pp. \$75.00 cloth.

Djuna Barnes' Consuming Fictions. By Diane Warren. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. xviii + 188 pp. \$99.95 cloth.

It is something of a scandal that so many people read *Nightwood*, a text that used to be so scandalous. For much of the twentieth century, the obscurity of Djuna Barnes's novel was considered to be a central part of its appeal. To read or recommend it was to participate in a subversive or subcultural tradition, an alternative modernism that signified variously *lesbian*, *queer*, *avant-garde*. Within the expanded field of recent modernist scholarship, however, Barnes's unread masterpiece is now simply a masterpiece, one of the usual suspects on conference programs and syllabi. Those of us who remain invested in Barnes's obscurity, however, can take comfort in the fact that, over the course of her long life and comparatively short career, Barnes produced an unruly body of work that is unlikely to be canonized. Indeed, Barnes's reputation has changed: once treated as one of modernism's interesting background figures, fodder to fill out the footnotes of her more famous male colleagues, she has now become instead a single-work author, a one-hit wonder. And no wonder; the rest of her oeuvre is made up of journalism, a Rabelaisian grab-bag of a novel, seemingly slight poems and stories, a Jacobean revenge drama, and an alphabetic bestiary. These works have, of course, been read in interesting ways by various critics. Scott Herring's wonderful *Queering the Underworld*, for example, considers the journalism and stories with as much sensitivity as *Nightwood*. For the most part, however, these other texts have played only a minor role in Barnes's recent critical apotheosis. And while this can be chalked up in part to unjust neglect, the relative invisibility of the rest of Barnes's corpus also raises interesting questions. Unlike *Nightwood*, the intransigence of these texts cannot be mitigated by labeling them masterpieces. Instead, it often remains unclear whether their brilliance is overwhelmed by clumsiness, simplicity, insignificance, or ineptitude. Such derogatory terms have, of course, appeared often in the reception of *Nightwood* itself. But in light of her entire literary production, one gets a clearer sense that flirting with, and possibly wallowing in, this sort of failure is in fact central to Barnes's project.

Now that scholars and presses are beginning to shake off their resistance to single-author monographs, Barnes's career thus provides an especially interesting case study. Two interesting book-length works, *Djuna Barnes' Consuming Fictions* by Diane Warren and *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus* by Daniela Caselli, tackle the challenge of an immersion in Barnes's confounding body of work, and a third work, *Modernist Articulations* by Alex Goody, situates this oeuvre within a constellation that also includes Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein. All span the length of Barnes's career, beginning with intelligent and overlapping analyses of the early journalism and its interrogation of publicity and

spectacle. All recontextualize the specific challenges posed by *Nightwood*, highlighting in particular the pervasive ambivalence about the possibility of resistance or subversion. And most interestingly, all three use their exploration of Barnes's texts as an opportunity to pose questions about context and intertextuality. Despite their many similarities, however, these volumes' understanding of intertextuality, and of what it means to study a life's work, could not be more different.

The central text in Warren's study is not *Nightwood* but *Ryder*, Barnes's unlikely, though admittedly short-lived, bestseller of 1928. Warren takes her cue from Sophia, the novel's matriarch, who passes on to her daughter numerous outlandish lies about her family history, "calm in the wisdom that realism is no food for a child" (18). Coupled with a chapter title from later in the novel ("Julie Becomes What She Has Read") this deprecation of realism becomes for Warren a key to Barnes's philosophy of fiction. Framed as a defense of lying, this philosophy is much closer to eighteenth-century fabulation than any high modernist convictions about crystallized moments or mythic methods. Other modernist critiques often displace realism not because of its ideological mystifications, say, but because it simply isn't real enough, thus working to replace it with some more accurate version. Barnes's qualms, however, are not so much epistemological as alimentary. Fiction not only has the capacity to shape readers in fundamental ways, it is in a sense is the very raw material out of which they develop. You are what you read, according to *Ryder*, and realism is of questionable nutritional value.

Sophia's wisdom, then, suggests a reparative understanding of reading at the heart of Barnes's oeuvre. Fiction is a mode of invention—of making things up—and, as Warren makes clear, such invention can be an important tool for survival, particularly for those marginalized or oppressed. Certain stories are more nourishing than others, and one of the projects of Barnes's early work is try to "create the possibility of more self-affirming cultural paradigms" (61). Tracing webs of intertextual connections, Warren shows how early works like *Ryder*, *The Ladies Almanack*, and various short stories rewrite other texts into potentially more capacious and sustaining lies. Some of these echoes—Rabelais, Fielding, and so on—have been noted before, but new connections are suggested as well. What binds Warren's investigations is a sense that, for Barnes, conversation among texts is especially crucial as a way of re-envisioning origin narratives. Thus *Ladies Almanack* returns to Plato's *Symposium* and reinvents its story of the invention of love in order to make room for female desire. In another chapter, *Ryder* is revealed to be not only a "female *Tom Jones*," as Barnes once noted, but also a response to *The Women's Bible*, a bestselling nineteenth-century compilation of feminist readings of the Bible. Fictions like these are motivated, Warren suggests, by a fascination with beginning and beginning again.

The reparative revisions Warren locates in works like *Ryder* and the *Almanack* only tell part of the story of Barnes's storytelling. The subject of her book is not consumable but *consuming* fictions, and the power of narrative to sustain the imaginations of its readers is situated against the threat that stories might swallow them whole. Barnes's attitude toward the discursive construction of identity is, according to Warren, deeply ambivalent. Although this ambivalence is present throughout Barnes's career, it is possible to recognize in her attitude toward these issues a particular narrative trajectory. Barnes begins her career feeling confident in the subversive powers of parody, pastiche, and the flouting of boundaries. However, by the late 1950s, Warren argues, she had become much more skeptical of iconoclasm in general, and *The Antiphon* reveals a much more pessimistic sense of the inexorability of violence and the necessary resilience of cultural boundaries.

The intelligibility of this trajectory becomes one of the overriding concerns of Warren's monograph. "It is important to acknowledge," she proposes, "that a clear conceptual development is visible across the oeuvre" (x). Like any hypothesis, this reading of Barnes's career is itself a consuming fiction, one that subsumes individual texts produced over decades and rewrites them according to a master theory. Warren's particular theory does have its explanatory strengths. It helps provide a broader context, for instance, for reading the ambivalences that structure *Nightwood*. Nonetheless, the reliance of Warren's study on its particular teleology at times seems to obscure some of its more interesting insights. For instance, it places what seems to be an unreasonable stress on the final chapter of *Nightwood*, which is read as the pivot between Barnes's early subversions and later skepticism. Though this chapter is clearly an important interpretive crux, it seems strangely reductive to treat the final ten pages of a novel as the tipping point of an entire career. Texts are subordinated to the study's master narrative as though their primary function was to signpost what was to come later in Barnes's career. Thus, the story collection *Spillway* "prepares the reader for the gloom and isolation of the later works" (116) and *Nightwood* itself "is the work that makes the transition" to the bleakness of the late work possible, that "begins to move the reader toward *The Antiphon*'s assessment of the inherently violent nature of society" (117).

Caselli's *Improper Modernism* not only avoids this sort of teleological development, but makes the refusal of development one of its guiding themes. Whereas Warren demystifies the apparent chaos of unruly texts by placing them within an intelligible oeuvre, Caselli's study attempts "to avoid turning Barnes's bewildering corpus into a beautiful body" (33). The difference between *oeuvre* and *corpus* is significant: rather than differentiating a logic to the work from the author herself, Caselli emphasizes the metaphorical corporeality of Barnes's texts to suggest that such demarca-

tions are ultimately unsustainable. In her view, intertextuality is not a way of making sense of Barnes's work, but rather of insisting that it never will. "Intertextual references are not a way of rejecting or incorporating nourishment from the past," Caselli argues, since Barnes challenges precisely this notion that we can understand our history in order to pick and choose how we are to interact with it (259). Rather than offering interpretive keys, then, intertextuality is the means by which Barnes divests both text and tradition of their authority. The result is an emphasis on the allusive, "second-hand" character of language itself, which, in Barnes's hands, is forever "oscillating between being a cast-off and antique, worthless and precious" (17). The appropriate metaphor for understanding Barnes, according to Caselli, would have more to do with suffering than sustenance. Underlining the way that pain transforms one's experience of temporality, Caselli reads Barnes's corpus as a sort of phantom limb that pains one even though it is no longer there (258). By arguing for an understanding of Barnes's work that insists upon the melancholic dilemma of not being able to let go of what is unquestionably lost, Caselli underlines that Barnes's career will not cooperate, it will not cohere, and yet we cannot be rid of it.

One might expect Caselli's reading of the ways Barnes's texts resist critical mastery to translate into another account of Barnes's subversive aesthetic, of the way her texts heroically resist our attempts to categorize them. But the thoroughgoing skepticism she emphasizes throughout undermines certainties of all sorts, including those that underwrite self-congratulatory assessments about the power of art to resist the critic's gaze. The true difficulty surrounding Barnes's texts is not that they challenge representation, trouble gender, or dismantle authority. Her bewildering impropriety, according to Caselli, runs deeper than that:

Barnes's modernism is improper not because it jolts us from lazy realist conventions or ideological assumptions, but because it does not let us wallow in our complacent and appropriately transgressive reading practices. Barnes's disenchanted texts are neither marginal nor subversive because by tirelessly interrogating conceptual antithesis . . . they tread the uncomfortable line between ludicrous failure and original work of genius, always including the angle of vision as part of the object framed. (259)

Caselli thus avoids the pitfalls of the sort of typological readings that treat early texts as though they always pointed forward to later ones. The spatial logic of her study is not narrative progression but lyric stasis and stalemate. Her favored trope appears to be *oscillation*.

The central text in Caselli's reading is not a novel but, arguably,

The Ladies Almanack, a text dedicated to the intersection of quotidian and seasonal rhythms. According to Caselli, the *Almanack* constructs its own unreadability, not as a typical modernist commentary on the ineffable so much as an exploration of the relation between meaning and pleasure. Contrary to what we might surmise from decades of literary criticism propelled by a hermeneutics of suspicion, the pleasures to be had from reading do not all revolve around the demystification or mastery of texts. And yet Barnes is savvy about our inevitable desire for such mastery. Thus, a work like *Ladies Almanack* vibrates between different irreconcilable possibilities, driving its readers back and forth between its words and its images, encouraging us to hunt for the door that might be opened by its *roman à clef* only to frustrate such a quest. Shuttling between public and private, coterie and mass, elite and popular, it thus engenders a particular “oscillating melancholy pleasure” (65). The ultimate lesson of such works is not epistemological. Instead, they play upon a reader’s will to know in order to “seduce us into loving forms of linguistic and affective beauty which border on the monstrous” (260).

Although Caselli’s study would benefit from a more explicit consideration of affect theory, its focus on melancholy and pleasure is one of the strains that puts it in conversation with recent queer criticism. Her understanding of queerness seems especially indebted to Lee Edelman’s critique of reproductive futurity, which resonates with her vision of Barnes as an author who “unfathers” (34) texts and resists development narratives of all sorts. An important chapter on several of Barnes’s short stories, for instance, manages both to shed light on the controversy surrounding the possibly incestuous eroticism suffusing the letters Barnes’s grandmother wrote her and to provide a compelling consideration of the queerness of childhood that intersects with Kathryn Bond Stockton’s exciting treatment of *Nightwood* in her study *The Queer Child*.

Improper Modernism describes the way that readers are pulled into uncomfortable but potentially transformative collusions with Barnes’s works. This vision of her literature’s affective gravitational pull is a claustrophobic one. Alex Goody, in her *Modernist Articulations*, presents a similar account of the cultural and hermeneutic dynamics at work in reading Barnes, but gives the collapse of critical distance the opposite momentum. Goody suggests that Barnes manages to “set in flight a literature of mobile and nomadic possibilities” (206). Her book is not solely devoted to Barnes’s oeuvre—it divides its chapters among Barnes, Stein, and Loy—but it also surveys her work from the early journalism onward. Like Caselli, Goody seeks to avoid explaining away the “sui generis status” of Barnes’s texts by taking seriously the way that her “sources, influences, styles and modes seem to contradict and cancel each other out” (2). Barnes’s difficulty resists definition, a resistance that prevents her works from ossifying into any stable

“other” modernism, whether it be queer, feminist, or oppositional.

Particularly valuable in this account is a consideration of the specific definitional crises surrounding recent work in modernist studies alongside the particular quandaries prompted by Barnes. One version of Barnes’s challenge to critics centers on the question of how one might attend to the specificity of cultural phenomena while remaining sensitive to the conceptual violence that any critical vocabulary necessarily entails. The study of twentieth-century literature has long been torn between conflicting intuitions that the term “modernism” is either too restrictive or too expansive. Goody attempts to experiment with rather than resolve this constitutive dilemma. Her interest is in thinking through the way that the work of her three subjects intersect with one another and with their various cultural contexts, but without assuming that any of these texts or contexts are stable or immutable.

Goody’s title signals her chief methodology: relying on a Gramscian notion of articulation allows her to stitch together various provisional assemblages of literary and cultural materials. Although the central concept of articulation and, in particular, the Deleuzian vocabulary with which it is elaborated, seem at moments to overshadow the book’s particular arguments, its theoretical sophistication enables it to move nimbly between productive insights. A discussion of the complicated in-betweenness of the young girl in Barnes’s stories, for instance, suggests the possibility of a non-Oedipal model of desire not organized around lack, a model that gestures toward the possibility of an escape from the dramas of recognition and aggression enacted by the psychoanalytic subject. The early journalism becomes especially interesting within the various webs of connection Goody traces between New York Dada, popular entertainment, and technologies of mass-production. And a final chapter on a wide range of modernist treatments of Jewishness illuminates Felix Volkbein’s role in *Nightwood*. The structure of the volume, however, with its tripartite cast of characters and insistence on mobility, results in a breadth that is at times purchased at the expense of depth. At just the moment in which a suggestive reading of one author or concept begins to emerge Goody moves on to examine the issue from another angle. Readers interested in her discussion of Barnes and “becoming animal,” for instance, will find more detailed accounts in excellent recent books by Justus Nieland and Dana Seitler. But the overall effect of her examinations is a fluent demonstration of the many ways in which Barnes’s work is woven into the shifting tapestries of the culture of the twentieth century.

All of these studies offer illuminating readings of the texts they consider and all would be a valuable resource for readers first approaching Barnes’s work. Of the three, however, Caselli’s is by far the most ambitious and thorough in its treatment of Barnes. Each chapter draws extensively not

only on the primary texts but on letters and notes pulled from the archive, and even the underscored passages and marginalia in Barnes's personal copies of Proust, Pascal, and many others. It also provides an impressive consideration of her visual art. All of this makes *Improper Modernism* an exciting resource that will have a lasting and propulsive influence on Barnes scholarship. The authority it achieves might seem a little ironic given Caselli's over-arching thesis. This irony, coupled with the fact that several intelligent and extensive studies could survey the same texts and produce such different readings, suggests in the end that Barnes's generative obscurity is not really in danger.

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