

The Parises of Djuna Barnes

Margaret GILLESPIE - Université de Franche-Comté

"Montparnasse has ceased to exist. There's nothing left but a big crowd," observed the American writer Djuna Barnes in 1931 (Bald, 74). Horror at the gawping droves invading Paris's Left Bank in search of the Lost Generation was a sentiment shared by many of her compatriots such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, who two years earlier had noted "something sinister about the crazy boatloads, [...] fantastic Neanderthals who believed something, something vague, that you remember from a cheap novel" (Cowley, 240) or Hemingway, for whom frequenting the quarter's *Rotonde* café, fast becoming a major tourist attraction, was tantamount to going "into the birdhouse at the zoo." It was a feeling also echoed in Wambly Bald's celebrated *Chicago Tribune* column. Of Man Ray's former *égérie*, the model and singer Kiki, Bald wrote, "the focal interest of Montparnasse was becoming unreal. Tourists sitting in her crowd would stare at the lady and play guessing games as to her past" (Bald, 18).

Yet if by the end of the twenties, American visitors were coming to Paris in unprecedented numbers — some transatlantic liners holding well over a thousand passengers — the scourge of the uncouth tourist was hardly a new phenomenon. As early as 1869, Mark Twain had satirised the capital's new world sightseers in *The Innocents Abroad*. Indeed, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw many a renowned American author trying their hand at travel writing, popularizing and mythologizing Paris to an extent hitherto unknown¹, making it already very much of an "unreal city" well before the term was coined in Eliot's "Wasteland" of 1922. However, it was the publication of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926 that for many transformed the French capital into the mandatory destination for Americans fleeing America: "the novel served as a guidebook and manual on how to behave like lost-generation expatriates: where to drink, what to drink, how to drink" (Bruccolli, xvi).

Both bohemians and their emulators had good reason to leave. Of little use to the expanding American economy and morally suspect, art was relegated to the bottom of the social ladder, together with other leisure activities such as tourism (Rotily, 215)². This particular equation may go some way to explaining why artists felt such a need to draw a clear line between the two categories. It was also a time when modernism, of which Paris was arguably the self-appointed fulcrum, was intent on proclaiming its high calling. Art had to be saved at all costs from trivialisation and vulgarizing imitation at the hands of the "Apes of God" as Wyndham Lewis termed them, playing at bohemian existence in the artists' quarters. And yet, just as the modernist aesthetic pilfered from the popular genres it purported to deride — the use of advertising-style slogans by the Vorticist and Futurist movements is a notable example — so were many expatriate writers unable to remain

¹ Fenimore Cooper, *A Residence in France* (1836); Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Our Hundred Days in Europe* (1887); William Crary Brownell, *French Traits* (1889); Richard Harding Davis, *About Paris* (1895); Theodore Child, *The Praise of Paris* (1893); Frank Berkley Smith, *The Real Latin Quarter* (1901).

² See Barbara Rose: "Comme tout pays neuf, l'Amérique s'était donnée une culture orientée vers le travail bien plus que sur les loisirs. Elle ne possédait pas d'aristocratie; elle ne possédait pas d'amateurs des arts de génération en génération. Peu d'Américains disposaient de temps ou d'argent à consacrer à l'art'. *La peinture américaine*, 41.

indifferent to the already-mythologized charms of Paris, to forgo the textual paradigms beloved of low-brow tourist literature or to control the commodification to which they or their works would consequently fall prey. Finally, for the less affluent players, commercial journalism, much of which involved popularizing the artistic community for consumption by a broader public, provided a valuable source of income that would go towards subsidizing more avant-garde projects.

Djuna Barnes (1892-1982), who lived and worked in the Paris of the 1920s and 1930s and numbered among the hallowed figures of Lost Generation *literati* stands as a particularly salient case in point. For the touring *cognoscenti* of the twenties, the sophisticated Barnes numbered among the figures who authenticated Left-Bank topography. In the following passage for example Harold Loeb, founder and editor of *Broom* magazine, describes his arrival in France with fellow passengers the poet Alfred Kreymbourg and his wife. Just as the country itself gratifyingly lives up to the expectations of the metonymical travel narrative, so Barnes herself is evoked as a prototype of the modern and the bohemian:

The *SS Rotterdam* dropped us off at Cherbourg. The Kreymbourgs were delighted at being in France, and thrilled to discover that French workmen actually wore blue pants and French houses had blue shutters. We reached Paris at dusk. The four of us crowded into a taxi and headed for the Hotel Jacob on the Left Bank. [...] Djuna Barnes was staying there [...] Sherwood Anderson had just left for England, and Man Ray was expected any day. (Loeb, 12)

Famed for her acerbic wit and stunning looks, she was not only “considered to be the most important woman writer of the Paris community” (Benstock, 236), but arm in arm with her sculptress lover, Thelma Wood, cut a dashing unconventional figure on the capital's boulevards — a winning combination of talent and bravado which led her to be deemed “an ultimate reflection of the times” (O'Neal, 106). But if Barnes the “legendary personality”³ (Hemingway's term) embodied the *outré* audacity of inter-war Paris and made her way more or less surreptitiously into many an expatriate memoir or novel — Sylvia Beach's *Shakespeare and Company*, Paul Bowles' *Without Stopping*, *The Sun Also Rises* and *Finnegans Wake* to name but a few — it also added symbolic capital to the writer's own journalistic output (Elliott & Wallace, 122-140).

A regular contributor to *McCall's*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue*, but also a serious experimental poet and novelist, her work, much of which takes the City of Lights as its setting or inspiration, has always resisted clear-cut categorisation. One of the most striking ways in which such hermeneutic ambiguity is to be felt is precisely in her various readings of, and writings on Paris — a city, she once complained, that had been too much reported and, in a phrase that would seem to anticipate Walter Benjamin's work on the ills of mechanical reproduction, whose “multiplication had been its destruction” (Barnes, 1974, 19). Whilst Barnes's magazine pieces fed into, and indeed contributed to, mythologizing the conventionalized compositions of expatriate lore (“James Joyce” [1922], “The Models Have Come to Town” [1924]) and Gallic sophistication (“Nothing Amuses Coco Chanel After Midnight” [1931]), they simultaneously questioned and undercut such hackneyed constructions.

³ Cf. Philip Herring, *Djuna, the Life and Work of Djuna Barnes*, New York : Penguin, 1995, p. 134. In an editorial column in Ford Madox Ford's *Transatlantic* (April 1924), Hemingway referred to “that legendary personality that has dominated the intellectual night-life of Europe for a century is in town. I have never met her, nor read her books, but she looks very nice”.

“Vagaries Malicieux,” first published in *Double Dealer* in 1922, treads just such a generically equivocal line, right from the “mischievous caprice” of its bilingual title. Posturing as an embellished autobiographical voyage of discovery, though classed as fiction when re-published in 1974, the tone of the first-person narrative, wavering as it does between world-weary ennui, awestruck candour, and *outré* allusion generates a text which, **written against the grain of the hackneyed travelogue**, discursively enacts the very impossibility of capturing Paris's elusive essence. Seen through Barnes's sophisticated eye, the French capital becomes the chimerical sum of its contradictory textual representations — or as the narrative's opening gambit puts it, “for years one has dreamed of Paris, just why, no man can tell!” (Barnes, 1974, 5)

“Vagaries Malicieux” continues with a series of reflections on the edifying value of Parisian sightseeing, but tuned just a little too high to be credible:

No one dares have a fixed opinion on life, love or literature until he has been to Paris, for there is always someone at his elbow to hiss, 'Have you visited the Louvre? Have you reacted to Giotto? Have you run your hand over the furniture of the fifteenth century? Seen the spot where Marie Antoinette became most haughty? No? Well then, my dear friend, keep in your place' (Barnes, 1974, 5)

The voyage embarked upon, the tone plummets swiftly into bathos, as a first illusion — the glamour of travel — is shattered by the mundane and impecunious reality of the other, far from illustrious passengers: “It was a one-class boat [...]. The cargo was chiefly disappointed teachers from the Middle West who sat on deck eating gift fruit sarcastically” (5). Disillusion persists on arrival in France, which initially appears less one of the great cultural hubs of Europe than a very poor imitation of America:

Le Havre lay before us. Two little French children stood at the extreme end of the jutting point of land, and called out to the pilot boat, which was just pushing off. Behind them a blank wall reared up and an enormous but shabby sign announced some inferior make of French soap [...].
Gare St. Lazare! A strange tongue, but no florists' booths, only one boot-blackening parlour; and soda water and chewing gum noticeable for their absence. (Barnes, 1974: 7, 9)

An overriding sense of the artificiality of Paris permeates much of the account, giving, from our contemporary perspective, a sense of the city as a post-modern simulacrum of sham emotions and factitious monuments:

It took me some days to get over the sensation of dangerous make-believe, and as a matter of fact I am not yet quite sure that a Frenchman's not gaming when he talks to me, and I am almost ready to swear that the Bon Marché is a fraud, and that the Louvre is a somewhat flawless production of something French. (10)

Not surprisingly, then, the narrative voice remains stolidly circumspect in the face of sightseers' Paris: the Luxembourg gardens are “all that I had imagined, but not quite what I had hoped”; the flower market “left me comparatively cold” whilst theatres stand as “very dull, neither naughty nor nude” (20, 21).

Moments of Benjaminian “profane illumination” do occur, however, in the form of the unexpectedly tawdry cameo. At these points in the narrative, something approaching “the true face” (Benjamin, 121) of the city *is* fleetingly proffered to the reader, and stands in stark contrast to the gilded hyperbole of the guidebook Paris of the period as exemplified

by Arthur Phillips' ebullient "Gay Paris: Guide to Fun of the Fair in Paris": "If you have even the slightest taste for beautiful architecture you will stand in reverent awe as you face this famous cathedral; if you are not thrilled, not all the elegies of the world will help you" (xii).

"Vagaries Malicieux" on the contrary pays little heed to such admonitions: indeed, it is not the cathedral itself but an old woman selling acid oranges in its shadow that occasions self-recognition on the part of the speaker, come initially to visit the monument — "on this unnecessary I came into my own" (11) —, whilst the image of tramps shaving each other "dipping the rusty razor into a shallow bowl of dark water" causes a French companion's commentary to pale into vapid insignificance: "the professor was wiping his moustache with an immaculate handkerchief and he was saying 'As for those theatres you know, they always take out the gestures during the hot season.' But I was thinking of the two men who shaved one another while the world went by" (21).

Above all, however, the city of "Vagaries Malicieux" appears as a feminized and lubricious space. Here again, literary cliché — this time, the metaphor of Paris as a whore — is both entertained and undermined. A platitudinous *clin d'œil* once more sets the initial tone: "I was told that the real French chic was only to be seen in carriages with drawn blinds" recounts the narrative voice, before evoking another famous adulteress: "I found myself stepping out of the carriage with a feeling probably no less vital than Anna Karenina" (16). Invited into a plush French boudoir, the speaker seems to be witnessing the uncanny enactment of both a personal and collective fantasy:

How many years of my life had gone into picturing just such a room! [...] On the satin covered walls, hung hundreds of gilt frames, in which winsome women of an earlier age put up their black hair for someone and still others half disclosed such busts as are dreamed of only by starved lithographers. (16)

When Madame finally appears, however, embodying an unlikely combination of shoddy posture and beautiful French — "those little 'differences' one craves in a 'same' life, the bad taste, the restraint where one least expected it" (18) —, she works to render strange the seemingly familiar Parisian décor and releases the text from the hackneyed confines with which it is initially engaged. The figure of the daughter is similarly deployed: initially the picture of prim and bridled innocence — "a child with dark hair braided, drawn back, and fastened with discreet bows of black satin,— a very baby in short skirts" (18) — with the singular, shocking valediction "I hope you will suffer prettily in Paris" (19), she is swiftly revealed as old beyond her years. Here again, the staid French professor's tritely formulaic pronouncements function as a foil to the narrator's maverick proclivities. If the family are primly despatched as "adorable," so Paris itself is a city of civic virtue and artistic propriety: "'Here,' the Professor of Romance Languages said, 'vorticism, free verse and all this modern riff-raff, needs no expression. Our city is paved with good intentions, with this difference—the citizen fulfils them at every step.'" (19).

Barnes's own avant-garde writing, written staunchly against the populist grain, certainly treads a more stridently alternative path only hinted at in "Vagaries Malicieux." The privately published *Ladies Almanack* for example, which lampoons the Paris-based *Académie des Femmes*, "Amazon" Natalie Barney's lesbian salon, is written in an arcane and bawdy style reminiscent of Joyce and went on to become one of the best-known pieces of countercultural "coterie" literature of the period. Yet if Barnes's most famous work, the astonishing and brilliant *Nightwood* (1936), is now "regarded as a seminal twentieth-century text" (Loncraine, 297), it first gained notoriety as a "cult guide to the

homosexual underground nightworld of Paris” (Benstock, 235). Inspired in part by Barnes's own tempestuous love-affair with sculptress Thelma Wood — Barnes even referred to the novel as “my life with Thelma” in correspondence — *Nightwood's* most memorable character remains a certain “Dr Matthew mighty-grain-of-salt O'Connor,” a cross-dressing back-street abortionist of more than dubious credentials. Functioning as a little-paid yet loquacious guide to the night pleasures of Paris and the meaning of bohemian life (his “favourite topic” of conversation [Barnes, 1995, 68]), this mock-Tiresian anti-hero was also based on one of Barnes's closest acquaintances, the Irish American Dan Mahoney. Described by the writer John Glassco as the “most-quoted homosexual in Paris, a man who combined the professions of pathic, abortionist, professional boxer and quasi-confessor to literary women” (Glassco, 24), Barnes called him her “copy” (Herring, 212) and carefully took notes when he spoke. Salacious semi-autobiographical *roman à clé* *Nightwood* then most certainly is, but to ground the novel doggedly in the mundanely biographical — “some of the descriptions act as a travel guide to Barnes's old Parisian [...] haunts” explains one critic (Devore, 73) — is surely a mistake.

A staple of the newly “refigured” and feminized modernist canon, this challenging text, now recognised as a modern classic, is also haunted by other literary, historical and aesthetic references and spaces — “it is not just the Paris of the 20s and 30s but the whole world which makes its way into *Nightwood*”⁴ as one French critic put it (Béranger, 376). Barnes's highly original Paris goes by her own admission far beyond the limits of the conventional memoir, working to de-familiarize the setting: “I want to live ... in the Hotel Recamier where in my book Robin lived — though Thelma never put her foot, in reality, over its steps — I haunt the Place St. Sulpice now because I've made it in my book into my life [...] I love what I have invented [...] so I am able [...] to put Thelma aside because now she is not Robin”⁵ explained Barnes in 1936, just before the novel was published. Here is part of the resulting, densely poetic, description of Robin, “beast turning human,” who has just fainted in her room at the Hotel Recamier:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic plants and cut flowers [...] lay the young woman, heavy and dishevelled. Her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance, the thick lacquered pumps looking too lively for the arrested step. Her hands, long and beautiful, lay on either side of her face.

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded sleep, incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life [...] the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds — meet of child and desperado (34).

Later, Emily Coleman, Barnes's confidante and literary agent, would qualify her friend's vision of Paris as unreal, utterly divorced from the city's immediate reality: “it's the past and your past [...] you don't feel pressed upon in France because you are not in the least aware of the French life that is going on around you” (Herring, 133).

For many, however, Barnes was to be appreciated for her drolerie, and the essentially decorative role she might play at the expense of being accorded true writer's status: “Djuna is far too good-looking and witty not to command fondness and admiration from me [...] but in writing she appears to believe she must inject metaphysics, mysticism and

⁴“Ce n'est plus seulement le Parisien des années vingt et trente, mais le monde entier qui s'infiltré dans *Nightwood*”.

⁵ Letter from Djuna Barnes to Emily Coleman, 22nd July, 1936. Quoted by Phillip Herring, *Djuna, the Life and Works of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Penguin, 1995) 217.

her own strange version of literary quality into her work” commented Robert McAlmon the publisher of *Ulysses* for example (232). In 1967, Barnes bitterly noted in a letter to Natalie Barney, whose Paris salon she had attended years before, “everybody seems to be ‘remembering’ us — that’s a fine state of affairs we’re in.”⁶ In the meantime, *Nightwood*, Barnes’s darkly baroque modernist masterpiece, had mysteriously annexed itself from its creator: “there’s not a person in the literary world who has not heard of, read and some stolen from *Nightwood*, [but] not more than three or four have mentioned my name. I am the most famous unknown of the century!”⁷

Ironically enough, it is renewed interest in the works of Djuna Barnes that has put the writer herself more firmly back on the higher-brow tourist map in more recent times. Whilst the late seventies and early eighties saw the first full-length critical analyses and the first literary biography devoted to Barnes, it was groundbreaking yet accessible feminist studies such as Shari Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank* (1987) — itself presented in a guidebook format,⁸ organising each chapter around the streets of St. Germain where the female artists and publishers it discusses all resided — that brought Barnes more fully back into the public limelight. Vulgarized elements of this hybrid approach can be found in handbooks such as *Paris-The Woman’s Travel Guide* (1993), whose pages on Barnes combine potted personal history, textual quotation and topographical cross-reference (Cullen, 137-138).

For most travel guides, however, it is the enchanted aura of the literary in all its de-historicized factitiousness that takes precedence. The *Financial Times* travel section for instance breezily merges edifying past and bathetically pragmatic present in its guide to the top ten Parisian cafés and bars: “2. Les Deux Magots: Rival to the neighbouring Flore as the rendezvous for the 20th-century intellectual élite. Hemingway, Oscar Wilde, Djuna Barnes, André Breton and Paul Verlaine were all regulars [...] Similarly pricey, with outside tables facing the boulevards and the square.”⁹ “Paris and Her Women,” a walking tour currently advertised on the “parlerparis.com” website invites the literary traveller to go beyond the fallacious, masculinist trope of “Paris-as-a-woman” to discover the authentic lived experience of the female artist:

Writers have always romanticized the City of Lights as a woman [...] and yet throughout time, there have always been the real women of Paris, those writers whose stories have become part of the very make-up that has made writing in France’s capital such a fantastic myth. [...] our two-hour tour takes you to the places loved by a handful of women writers who flocked to Paris throughout the 20th century. We look at the lives of Colette and Natalie Barney, visit the café where Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* was set, the home of New Yorker correspondent Janet Flanner, and more.¹⁰

A curious yet revealing ambiguity can be discerned here: which narratives are at issue, the women writers’ literary production, or the fictions and fables surrounding their

⁶ Djuna Barnes, letter to Nathalie Barney, September 10, 1967, Djuna Barnes papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, series II, Box 1, Folder 46.

⁷ Djuna Barnes, letter to Nathalie Barney, May 31, 1963, Djuna Barnes papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, series II, Box 1, Folder 45.

⁸ The French academic Jean Méral makes a very similar analogy: “pris dans son ensemble, le phénomène de Montparnasse, au sens large, s’impose de manière si nette à la lecture des textes qu’il paraît indispensable d’envisager jusqu’à sa topographie et ses points de repère principaux”. Jean Méral, *Paris dans la littérature américaine* (Paris: CNRS, 1983) 187.

⁹ <http://news.ft.com/Arts/Travel>

¹⁰ <http://www.parlerparis.com/guidedtours/literary.html>

personal lives? The example of Djuna Barnes would seem to be a case in point: from Ernest Hemingway's oft-quoted put-down ("never met her, nor read her books, but she looks very nice") to the politically correct re-visiting of Lost Generation haunts featured in contemporary travel literature, Barnes has served as a facile synecdochic embodiment of expatriate Paris by admirers and detractors alike, whilst her own elusive, discursive figurings of the city, from early journalistic pieces such as "Vagaries Malicieux" to the late modernist *Nightwood*, have gained less attention. Barnes's writing nevertheless subtly engages with the travel genre, camping its modes as it empties them of their legitimacy, shunning the predictably derivative, and exposing the limits of representation, opening a space of experimental literary production with Paris as its modernist muse.

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