戲 劇 研 究　　第 17 期
Journal of Theater Studies
2016 年 1 月　　頁149-170
DOI: 10.6257/JOTS.2016.17149

Enacting Repulsive Bodies in Djuna Barnes's *The Dove*

Pao-hsiang WANG

Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University

Introduction: Post-Suffrage Sapphic Modernism and the New Woman's Repulsive Body

Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) was a fixture in the literary and artistic scenes in both Greenwich Village New York and Left Bank Paris in the 1920s,[1] and has always been acknowledged as a key figure in American, even European avant-garde modernism. Barnes's brand of modernism has been examined basically on dual poles, in light of her life and works. Despite her objections to being labeled as a lesbian, her dalliances with lesbianism and concentration on female characters have enlisted her in the ranks of "sapphic modernism" (Carlston, Collecott, Nair),[2] while her sardonic, paradoxical, and deliberately wayward, and obscure style, couched in "artificial, elevated language" (Wilson 109) has garnered her critical analyses under the rubric of "improper modernism" (Caselli), and "affective modernism" (Taylor).[3] The heady

[1] She befriends the bohemian literati in Greenwich Village, including Edmund Wilson, Eugene O'Neill, Berenice Abbot and was roommate with philosopher Kenneth Burke and literary critic Malcolm Cowley. In Paris she hobnobbed with the lesbian inner circle surrounding Nathalie Barney and the arts circle of Gertrude Stein. She interviewed James Joyce and Samuel Beckett well enough to be granted their handouts in times of need, as well as accepting patronage from Peggy Guggenheim.

[2] Barnes denied being a lesbian, claiming that "I just loved Thelma" (Frann 53), referring to her tempestuous affair with sculptor Thelma Wood, the real heroine of her *Nightwoo*d. Collecott focuses on the poet H. D. but also includes Barnes as one of the "women-identified writers" (42).

[3] "Sapphic modernism" obviously refers to the latent and manifest lesbian proclivities in many of Barnes's works, notably in her autobiographical novel *Nightwood*. Caselli acknowledges her "poetics of impropriety" and argues that her "inopportune modernism" has been left out the modernist canon due to its "inherent skepticism towards genealogy" (2). Taylor uses the "broken heart" quote from Nightwood as her point of departure to highlight the traumatic and affective "'bleeding' modernism" that circulates between bodies/corpuses of Barnes (1).

blend of homoerotic politics and modernist poetics in Barnes's works contributes to shaping what Shari Benstock has called "the excluded Other," woman modernists on which the predominant phallocentric modernism has defined itself and depended on (Benstock 186), which incorporates the sexually excluded other by cultivating her own space of eccentric deviants and sexual dissidents. In the words of her close friend Edmund Wilson, Barnes's works serves as "a prominent signpost" pointing to the alternative direction where American literature moves away from the well-traversed "action-and-dialogue adventure realism" embodied in Hemingway (Wilson 108).

Critical attention, however, has lavished mainly on her fiction, particularly her *roman à clef* novel *Nightwood* (1928), generally considered "a classic of Western modernism" (de Lauretis 121), having been publicly applauded by no less a figure than T. S. Eliot. Her associations with theatre, however, ran deep, with a number of New-York produced plays to her credit, and she was even involved with the Provincetown Players as an occasional actress.[4] Her dramatic output therefore deserves more scholarly attention,[5] especially in the way it will help shed light on how the body of the New Woman can be represented on the post-suffrage American stage.

After decades of sustained struggle to gain women's right to vote, American women were finally enfranchised in 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed. With the hard-won victory of the suffrage movement, women were granted greater access to public life. Now that women were liberated in the legal and political arena, how they were represented in the cultural arena, on the public stage, offered a good indicator of how political reform impacted on the private domain, enabling us to examine, in Caselli's words, "the politics of the private sphere" (33), and thereby deserved closer critical inspection.

No politics of the private sphere can evade the vexed issue of sexuality. Female sexuality, hitherto a taboo subject, began to assert itself since the 20s as a legitimate concern in the wake of the proliferation of Victorian sexuality studies and particularly the increased popularity of Freudian concepts. According to Mintz's recent studies on American adulthood (2015), with their number reaching an all-time high at the turn of the century, single women were stigmatized as "physically, psychologically, and sexually deviant" and associated with lesbianism by the 1920s (182). Social stigma cast a long shadow on post-suffrage sexual emancipation. Not only were single spinsters regarded as potential sexual deviants, so were the budding youngsters. The iconic image of American women in the Roaring Twenties remains that of the flapper girl,

[4] Despite their obscurity, Barnes' dramatic output of short plays was substantial. She had over eighteen plays published to her credit by 1926. She was also prolific as a drama critic (Clark 105). She was involved with the Provincetown Players from 1919 to 1921 (Clark 111).

[5] No monograph on Barnes has ever focused singularly on her dramas so far, and even for one of her two major biographies: Herring's Djuna, *the Dove* is not even mentioned. Julie Taylor's recent critical study of Barnes's works in relation to modernism also completely overlooks the play. The only academic paper devoted to the play is Penny Farfan's book chapter.

an epitome of the New Woman, liberated from the bourgeois moral norms by wearing loose garment with glittering beaded necklaces. Loosened garments imply on the one hand un-corseting from the patriarchy that has governed and restricted the roles of women to obedient daughters and wives, for the critics on the other hand, also denote loose morals.

Barnes goes beyond presenting loose limbs and loose morals by showcasing "the grotesque body," which disregards the norm, and presents "perverted, deformed and abjected instances of femininity" (Goody 165). However, in the following analysis of her play *The Dove*, I take cues from Barnes's early book of verse, *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915) and use instead "repulsive body" to represent her simultaneous fascination with and abhorrence of physical and psychic grotesquerie. As the obsession with "self-disgust, self-hatred, and the impetus to self-destruction" marks "the female Gothic" in twentieth century literature (Moers 140), I argue that repulsive bodies are fraught with ambivalence, and Barnes's eccentric reconfiguration or disfiguration of the bodies of "repulsive women" defies easy classification such as celebratory feminism or censorious lesbianism. She delineates in her dramatic work not merely a valorization of female solidarity, and a frontal portrayal of the female body as subversive and liberating, but also paints a bleak picture of fissured solidarity and abject body, re-inscribing in her obscurantist style a vision of female body as an impenetrable landscape of desire. I propose that though the repulsive bodies of New Women may be emancipated politically, they remain repressed internally, seeking avenues of continued liberation first through sexuality, then violence as a last resort. Medusa-like repulsion is adopted as a sobering stratagem to deter and repulse external advances, yet by regarding their own repulsive bodies, Barnes's feminine gaze is also repulsed internally by self-revulsion and self-loathing, revealing the contradictions and ambivalences of the newly enfranchised women's liberation.

I. Beyond Biography: Anti-Freudian Family Romance of Adoption

When *The Dove* premiered at the Bayes Theater in New York as part of the Little Theater contest in 1926,[6] it was considered a play "most estranged from commercial theater" (Clark 116), and greeted with blatant bafflement by the critics, who slapped it with negatives such as "puzzling" and "incomprehensible" (300).[7]

[6] *The Dove* was first published in 1923, and performed by students at Smith College "unsuccessfully" (Field 92) in 1925. It was produced in 1926 by the Studio Theater of Manhattan as their entry in the Fourth Annual National Little Theater Tournament.

[7] Labels such as "obscure," "esoteric," or even "obscene" were often heaped on her plays (Clark 115).

Amid the scathing reviews one critique deserves particular scrutiny, the comment that it is "filled with Freudian significance" (Barnes 300). By invoking the name of Freud, it assumes a deeper level of psychological truth waiting to be unearthed, hidden beneath the apparently befuddling plot or lack thereof. Perhaps the critic is led to draw such a conclusion based on the portentous non-sequiturs and murky psychological undercurrents threading throughout the play. However, I would argue to the contrary that despite such a psyche-driven façade that seems to invite more profound psychoanalytic explorations, the play in fact resists Freudian depth psychology by defying analytic excavation of interior motivation. As the title character puts it concerning pure rage, "I wish every man were beyond the reach of his own biography" (306). Any Freudian attempt to enter the deeper recesses of the character's biography, which would then be traced to parental origins, will be thwarted, and any attempt to access personal past in search of the ultimate answer is doomed to fail. Djuna Barnes seems to tarry with Freud's query about what women want by teasing out scattered clues without offering any single satisfactory answer. She seems to resist the voyeuristic inquiry of Freud's vexed query by setting the play in a space without men, stripped of any male intervention, leaving the question of female desire the domain of women alone.[8]

Her anti-Freudian slant can be seen in her prioritizing form over matter, a style that has been described by Teresa de Lauretis as "at once lucid and obfuscating, as if only style…could dress life in the garment of the unknowable" (122). Barnes believes that since we have no choice but come to terms with "the children of our hours of pain," it is only sensible to render artistic and literary representation of "personal… griefs" with as much "artificial beauty" as possible (299). Her advocacy of artificiality as a theatrical style is therefore borne more of lived experiences than aesthetic explorations, with aesthetics giving way to ethics in her philosophy of life and art.

Barnes's emphasis on style is realized in the scarcity of dramatic action and abundance of artificial dialogue. *The Dove* can be compared to the genre of conversation piece in painting, in which genteel people are portrayed engaged in polite conversation in a tastefully furbished parlor. Yet beneath the placid façade of gentility palpitates an irrepressible pulse of life and yearning for action. In the three-hander (Vera, Amelia, and The Dove) where next to nothing happens till the final moment, speech predominates action to the extent that it rivets the audience and critical attention throughout. Yet what appears at first glance to be a dialogic triumph on closer inspection proves deceptive, and turns out to be a deadly struggle all along between words and actions for supremacy, and by extension, a constant combat between volition and action, consciousness and body. In the following I will discuss how the body is explored first merely as an epistemological category, aestheticized almost as an *objet*

[8] Paralleling her practice would be that pioneered by Stein. In Elizabeth Frost's study of Gertrude Stein, she proposes that Stein advocates "a feminizing of the fetish" in order to resist "the masculinism" of Freudian psychoanalysis (qted in Goody 164).

臺灣大學學術典藏

d'art, before the repulsive body begins to assert itself, and efforts to subjugate its assertion trigger the final violent action that is revolutionary and revolting at once.

The curtain rises on a *tableau* of sharply contrasting visuals of action and inaction, as the polishing of a colossal sword by the tiny Dove is juxtaposed with Vera falling asleep on the divan reading a French novel. The aggressive act of weapon polishing, with its potential risk of triggering danger, the contemplative act of fiction reading, and the subsequent dormant act of sleeping, all serve to establish a power dynamic, with the armed Dove dominating over her unaware and defenseless mistress Vera, reversing their class hierarchy. The household in *The Dove* deliberately subverts and perverts the heterosexual bourgeois family of father, mother, and child in which the Freudian family romance thrives, by presenting a "would-be degenerate" family of two spinster sisters and one adopted maid child (39). The Freudian inversion becomes especially evident considering that the prototype of psychoanalytic family romance originates from a neurotic child's fantasy of an adopted family.[9]

The motif of adoption or unnatural birth is further reinforced in the stage directions of the living room, where only two pictures are prominent: one Madonna and Child painting, and the other "early English tandem race" (303). They establish a visual contrast of antiquity and modernity, painting and photography, the sacred and the profane; particularly when we take into account the fact that woman cyclist was frowned upon only about two decades earlier. The ultra-modernity of the cycling image throws into relief the ancient religious icon of Immaculate Conception, which is also a visual reminder of the adopted children of God, just as the Dove has been adopted by the childless sisters.

Adoption becomes a necessity with the sister's single status, and being single is borne of their being solitary and secluded. *The Dove* is structured as a conversation piece that never moves out of the confines of the New York apartment, whose setting alone offers a study in contrast of aestheticism versus asceticism. On the one hand, it is located "in the heart of the city" within the hustle and bustle of metropolitan New York, and decorated in "luxuriously sensual" colors such as red and pink (303), showing that it is surrounded by the vibrant pulse of urbanity and vivid colors of sensuality. On the other hand, the sisters shut themselves off from any direct contact with the world outside, shrouded in an aura of unrelieved anxiety, a gloom and doom atmosphere, "You have cut yourselves off—just because you're lonely" (306), as the Dove sharply nails the paradox facing them: The sisters crave yet dread human contact; their loneliness, instead of coaxing them out of their cocoon of isolation, only serves to strengthen their seclusion.

Their habitual seclusion has been entrenched to such an extent that even the occasional excursions outside their home for necessities shopping hardly last more

[9] Freud claims in *Family Romance* (1909) that a child disillusioned by parental authority or frustrated by sibling rivalry often "finds a vent in the idea…of being a step-child or an adopted child" (74-78).

臺灣大學學術典藏庫

than an hour, because they are convinced that they "live dangerously" (303) in fear of "being infested" (307) so much so that Amelia would even carry a pistol just to "go around the corner for a pound of butter" (304). Yet ironically the irrational fear of putting their lives at risk, while contributes to their making themselves scarce from the external world, does nothing to help solidify their defense against intrusion from outside. As Vera outs it, "we can't even keep the flies out" (303).

Their paranoia and claustrophobia signal a paradoxical defensiveness and defenselessness, a contradictory mindset that not only renders them vulnerable to external intrusion, but also leads to their covert courting of being intruded. The ostensible fear of dangerous life bespeaks an underlying attraction to such danger, which Elizabeth Hardwick aptly sums up concerning Djuna Barnes's works as "relishing horrific incident," an unmistakable sign of "decadence" (Hardwick 112). The sisters' ill-concealed relish for horror enhances their Gothic propensity which obsesses with reproduction, of the stillborn kind, as evidenced in the fact that their deepened isolation breeds nothing but sterility.

II. "We'll Never Never Be Perverse": The Boudoir and the Arsenal

Decay and infertility are inextricably bound, creating a crisis of continuum for the Burgson family, to be defused only by introducing new blood; which parallels the dramatic impasse in the play, to be resolved only by ushering in a new character. The appearance of the Dove therefore promises resolving both the dramatic and dramaturgical deadlock first through sexuality, then violence. The Burgson sisters' decadence takes the curious form of weaponry collection. What makes it decadent is not their indulgence in playing with danger and violence, but the fact that they keep hoarding and polishing their cache of arms without any recourse to using it. The only practical function it serves is to "shoot our buttons off with the guns and cut our darning cotton with the knives," as Vera describes (203). Weapons are used for leisurely amusement, and appreciated as mere artifacts. Reducing functionality to the point of fetishism almost defines the spirit of decadence. Self-mockingly conscious of the irony of keeping weapons whose potency is incrementally made impotent, the sisters yet cannot come to terms with the painfully inadequate life they lead and the futility of knowing without doing. Violence is thus factored in at this point as a static, yet constant presence, its execution kept deliberately at bay, so as not to initiate, only to titillate.

The Bergson sisters have "made it our business to know- everything" (303), indulging in the ritual of naming things in different languages and in the avid accumulation of guns and swords. They collect without creating, talk without acting. They are equipped with ammunition but at the same time stripped of the will to take up

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

the arms. Longing for the spark of knowledge, the sisters, however, have all but lost the momentum to ignite action.

Fecundity of thought only serves to throw into stark relief their barrenness of action. The sisters' single-minded devotion to knowledge is always cultivated at the expense of action, *a modus operandi* that as the Dove pinpoints, looks like fortifying themselves with a stolid fortress, yet creates nothing but "two splendid dams erected around two little puddles" (306), because their interior reservoir has been drained. Beneath the intellectual plenitude lies a stagnant pool of spiritual void. As a consequence, the more they know, the less they are liable to act. Recalling Hamlet, their "native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," as excessive consciousness robs them of the ability to put anything into action or practice. Knowledge thus becomes increasingly divorced from action, to the point that it negates and neutralizes what's left of their agency for change. Knowledge eventually vitiates, rather than initiates action.

Mental activities lead not necessarily to physical action, and knowing without acting sets in motion its own ever paralyzing vicious circle. The sisters are only too aware that such an impasse has to be broken, and it will take an intruder no less to jolt them out of their existential predicament. As the only intruder that they take the initiative of inviting, the Dove serves as the only contact point they maintain with the external world,[10] the only agency possible to impact any change in the stiflingly oppressive milieu.

As the salvation promised by knowledge to propel action has instead deadened into looming damnation, the only hope for revival lies in the mediation between knowledge and action: sexuality. Vera articulates her awareness of the crisis of consciousness taking the place of physical action: "You know well enough— sitting here day after day, giving my mind everything to do, the body nothing" (305). This is a complaint or lament from a volatile body with its spark of inner combustion extinguished. The Dove from the outside world is regarded as possessing that sought-after "native hue," unspoiled and unadulterated, able to fill the void of their physical nothingness.

To redress the balance between the excess of mental activities and dearth of physical ones, carnal knowledge is initially employed to channel the sisters out of their existential dilemma. The first topic of the dialogue between Vera and the Dove touches unabashedly on the subject of sexuality, when Vera unexpectedly, without any foreshadowing, asks the Dove, "Shall I ever have a lover, do you suppose" (303)? To which she is answered in the negative. While reciting their daily ritual of gun maintenance, Vera makes it a point to contend that they are never "perverse" despite their physically charged education, which is all concerned with "knees and garters, and pinches on hindquarters" (303), euphemistic yet glaring indicators of school of the

[10] Only a mailman with dancing mice is mentioned, who has had contact with the Dove (307), but the sisters don't even dare let a grocer call on them (306).

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

flesh that immediately cancel out her earlier protests against perceived perversity.

Playing demure about not being "perverse," in fact, as has been noted, pinpoints "the aspirations to corruption and perversion of the Bergson sisters" (Goody 39). Sex education and flirtation for school girls yield to hands-on adult education, as Vera mentions their hobby of keeping animals, "hoping to see something first-hand" which in all evidence implies observing bestial copulation (303). As if that weren't explicit enough, she goes on to say that "our beds are full of yellow pages and French jokes as a bird's nest is full of feathers" (303).

Desired but frustrated sexual perversity, or more simply put by the student reviewer of its first production at Smith College in 1925, "their desires to be wicked" (Clark 117), needs a partner in crime. However, boasting of her credentials in the ways of the flesh seems to have left the Dove unimpressed, an indifference Vera tries to explain away for the adopted youngster as being "a strange happening" (304). However, Vera's sexual provocation of the Dove does leave its imprint, making its impact incrementally, gathering enough momentum for the eventual violent release.

The path toward the secretly desired physical consummation is repeatedly detoured, interrupted by metaphysical digressions in Vera and the Dove's desultory conversation while they await the return of Amelia from her brief routine shopping. Following up on her initial general question of whether she should take a lover, Vera inquires the Dove whether she loves both sisters. The potentially erotic and physical question again slides back into the metaphysical realm as the Dove gives the unexpected response that she loves their "religious natures" (304).

By religion, however, she by no means refers to the conventional devoutness to divinity, but as she claims, to their feverishly charged "imagination," which she regards as "the growth of ignorance," yet remains worthy of her affection because "it goes farther than knowledge" (304). Here knowledge is posited as an advanced stage of imagination borne of sheer ignorance, a metaphysical creation *ex nihilo*, detached from the empirical reality to be felt and experienced. Simply put, what appeals to her is their moving beyond the confines of knowledge, an implicit advice for them to take concrete actions that has yet fallen on deaf ears.

Vera ignores her kindly hint because she expect the sexual promise brought by the Dove to compensate for their inadequacies. The sisters imagine her as the embodiment of worldly knowledge they have only read about, and of adventurous action they are content to fantasize, assuming that she "should know—everything" and has lived "all that we pretend we have" (304). Here knowing everything implies more than the desire to acquire knowledge, as has been proclaimed by Vera, but points to knowing in the Biblical sense, the carnal knowledge that keeps tantalizing the sisters to put into practice. Tired of living in a world of make-believe sophistication, the sisters have handpicked the Dove as the designated performer of all the worldly experience denied them, and through her try to experience vicariously.

The juvenile outsider is thus required to play along with their voracious craving for vicarious experiences, such as Amelia's fantasy scenario of removing "blood stains"

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

on the sword that are simply non-existent (304). Mocking her sister's grand illusion, Vera dismisses Amelia that she is afraid even to "cut her chops" with the sword, let alone shedding blood with it. She rubs it in by adding that though "an enormous blunderbuss" stands at the corner in her room, all she finds on her bed is nothing but a "Parisienne bathing girl's picture stuck full of pin holes" (304).

The seemingly facetious image reinforces the subject of violence as a consequence of sexual suppression, puncturing soft-core erotica with sadistic vandalism. The juxtaposition of a huge gun muzzle and a raunchy girlish pin-up, besides the obvious phallic connotations, is also significant firstly in its visual incongruity, suggesting a conflict between regulated discipline by force and unbridled abandon by will; secondly, in its gender confusion of masculine bravado and feminine intimacy. Juxtaposing the arsenal and the boudoir in one single space thus puts into relief the violent and the erotic underpinnings suppressed by the sisters. The ritual of arms collection and maintenance reveals a frenetic hunting for an outlet to unleash their storm of pent-up desires. Sex and violence co-exist, albeit rife with uneasy tension, seeking to accommodate each other before one manages to get the upper hand.

III. "I Let Everything Go On": The Surreal Unholy Trinity

As if echoing the earlier objections about tracing Freudian biography, the brief retrospect of her past offered by mysterious girl simply called the Dove reveals nothing that could shed light on her impenetrable psychological makeup: born into a family with a seemingly caring father and brothers, she comes to New York and works as a painter of china, when she chances on the sisters in the park (Barnes 304).

What deserves close analysis is how she encounters the two sisters: separately, as if by coincidence, in different parts of the park: Vera regards her as an object of desire, "you looked at me a long time," says the Dove, while to Amelia, she has bowed "in an almost military fashion" with heels close together (304). The glaring discrepancy in the power dynamic of their first encounters, with Vera trying to dominate her, and she submitting to Amelia, establishes the unbalanced *ménage a trois*, while the gaze and the salute anticipate the erotic and the martial/violent aspects that will come to characterize and define their convoluted relations.

The duality of eroticism and violence that marks their initial contact may seem unbridgeable poles apart at first, but gradually spirals into an intertwined symbiosis. The lonesome sisters become so desperate to bring a dose of vitality to their moribund life of bourgeois ease and sophistication that they pin all their hopes of reform on the rustic outsider. She is destined to be all that they are not or cannot be, expected to be "wild, insane," a sort of savage noble they pick up to coach them in the ways of unbridled pleasures and untamed desires. Drug addiction thus signals an alternative experience they crave and dread: "Have you ever taken opium or hasheesh?" Vera eagerly inquires (304), to which the Dove responds, not exactly to the question, but

diverting into sundry dreams of laughter and weeping.

True to the seemingly casual manner with which all conversation in this obscure play is conducted, the interlocutors in the play never pursue any question to its logical conclusion. Consequently Vera, instead of wresting a definitive answer from the enigmatic Dove, plays along with the freshly improvised scenario as if it were a newly invented game, launching into an extended narrative about her dream of being a wind-borne Dresden doll blown to smithereens, with her porcelain skirt intact but turned soft like lace (304-305). Through her dream, Vera conducts a feeble attempt of self-analysis, but pointedly not the Freudian kind, as she only goes as far as describing her bones as something "sophisticated" barred from "expressing themselves" by the flesh. Again, almost as a benign jab at psychologizing, the Dove quips that in fact the very opposite is true (305), without giving her autobiographical account of personal experience, as a dutiful patient in a counseling session should, thus bringing the potential talking cure to an abrupt and aborted closure.

Vera's dream phantasm of the broken Dresden doll, besides invoking the Dove's stated former occupation as a china painter, readily recalls the surrealist environs with which Barnes was intimately associated in Paris, and the mixture of eroticism and violence that has characterized much of the surrealist works also corresponds to the underlying interplay of the trio of characters.[11] Failed attempt at Freudian psychoanalysis as it may seem, Vera's dream work does bring up the crucial issue of self-expression through her body, which she feels has been kept in check. Unable to liberate herself, it is the Dove she turns to for freeing her body from oppression, or in her own metaphor, the bones from the flesh.

What role the Dove then would assume in carrying out her designated duty as an emancipator of sisterly suppression? Peace and violence always share equal claims to possible means of liberation. By the token of her name, the Dove seems born to offer the olive branch of peace, an impression reinforced by being called as such by the sisters due to her supposed gentleness, and small stature, "so little it's almost immoral," Vera blurts out, before she checks herself at "you make me feel as if —" (305). What's left unsaid can only be left to one's conjecture, but it is reasonable to conclude based on her meaningful gazing and verbal innuendo that she desires the Dove physically, since there's nothing essentially immoral about being small, except in the eyes of the one who perceives it.

However, the Dove's presumed immorality does not drive her into any immoral act. On the contrary, she refrains from taking any concrete action, moral or immoral. In Vera's words, her "terrible quality (was) not on of action, but just the opposite, as if you wanted to prevent nothing" (305). Vera's judgment gives her initial immorality a whole new meaning, which is the absence of moral intervention in the face of other's crisis. Vera finds it terrible that the Dove feels at ease to stay above the fray observing

[11] Barnes's novel *Nightwood* has been generally acknowledged not only as a work of pivotal literary modernism but also surrealism. See Schroeder, James, and Bunzamnn.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

their unfolding crisis yet "prevent(ing) nothing" (305). Instead of being immoral, the Dove is more akin to being amoral, detached from any moral concerns whatsoever. As the Dove puts it herself, "I let everything go on" (305).

On appearance, letting everything happen denotes the ultimate peaceful approach, a *laissez-faire*, anything-goes stance which tolerates and condones whatever is considered even immoral socially. Yet, in view of the complete absence of action on the part of the sisters, it gives little room to exercise and exhibit such permissive latitude in the first place. Adding to the already impassive duo, the Dove forms with the "advanced virgins" a trio of maidens with their bodies trapped in the high altar of excessive consciousness disabling any will to take actions.

Consequently, what the Dove actually offers is a conniving passivity easily misconstrued as a pacific overture, which rules out the peace option, and reveals another level of meaning of the Dove to be the third party of the Christian Holy Trinity: the Holy Ghost. Hunting for a place to rest, the Dove descends upon the Burgson sisters. But just like the inverted Freduian family romance, she constitutes a perverted version of Holy Trinity: non-peaceful, and decidedly secular, if not profane alliance with the sisters, forged in the secluded sanctuary of the New York apartment. Rather than being picked up almost like a foundling, the Dove has found her chosen nesting place of her own accord. If the Dove is true to her name, she is there only to make her immaterial presence felt, invoking spiritual awareness, rather provoking practical action.

As a result, the Dove "never meddle(s)," and "disturbs nothing" since it is not in her nature to do so (305). To test the extent of her passivity, Vera proposes the fantasy worst-case scenario that Amelia shoot herself, to which the ever unflappable Dove calmly responds that not only will she not interfere should it occur, but she will also make sure that "you wrung your hands as much as possible, and that Amelia had gotten all there was to get out of the bullet before she died" (305). Her response is as shocking as it is succinct, making no secret that she insists on exploiting her immense capacity of apathy under any circumstance, regardless of others' despair or even death.

Instead of the agent erotica that the sisters have imagined, the Dove plays no agent provocateur of any sort; and rather than endowed with divine sympathy, the unholy Ghost exhibits little human empathy whatsoever. Vera finally buckles under the young girl's unrelenting indifference, and despairs: "…but why don't you do something?" (305), which comes as a plea as much as a query. Unable to maneuver out of the stalemate of their own doing, now they look upon the Dove as their only hope not only for solution, but for salvation.

The permissive savior, however, does not offer any magical panacea to remedy their ills. The Dove is content to let things run their own course without any intent to intervene, which, for the sister, being all permissive proves the most punitive. Instead, she acts like a shrink tossing the big question back to the client for answers, posing the question just asked by Freud to Princess Marie Bonaparte in 1925, the year the play had premiered at Smith College, about what she wants. Vera dismisses the conventional

answers such as taking a lover or owning a home, contending that, “I have imagined myself beyond the need of the usual home and beyond the reach of the usual lover” (305). Her aspirations point again to the inversion of a Freudian family romance in imagining a family of adoption, with her as the foster parent rather than the adopted child. By referring to taking an unusual lover, Vera could have hinted at her lesbian proclivities. However, the erotic realm is pursued no further by the Dove, who persists in her original line of questioning about what a woman wants, and finally manages to tease out an answer from Vera, which is to find “a reason for using one of these pistols” (305).

The dramatic reversal from the erotic to the violent in fact constitutes a logical transition, following its initial polarity to gradual integration. The more the sexual release has failed, the more violent its suppression becomes. Vera’s response precisely lands at the heart of the matter, a key question she has been trying to evade: how to take the sovereignty of her own body, even her own life, into her own hands. She’s been hard pressed to rationalize (“a reason”) the seemingly irrational option (pistol/violence), but has come to terms with its possibility, if not sheer necessity, now that the likelihood of erotic emancipation has been dashed.

Violence, therefore, now looms large as an appealing alternative to sexuality in liberating the Burgson sisters to initiate transformative actions. However, Vera parries the challenge to use the pistol right away, as if parrying a feint from the Dove. Like a feint move in fencing, the sisters’ possession of arms has always worked more as a deceptive assault to fend off potential foes, as well as to fortify themselves mentally against their own ill-concealed self-loathing for being “advanced virgins” (304). Now their double-dealing trick has been called the bluff by the Dove, who dares Vera to materialize her claim that “anything is a reason for using a pistol, unless one is waiting for the obvious, and the obvious has never been sufficient reason” (305). Again, justification by motivation or by logic is ruled out as sufficient ground to fuel action, taking over one’s own sovereignty over the body and the selfhood doesn’t entail sufficient self-rationalization. As Vera immediately proves, indulging the Hamlet-like “pale cast of thought” can only lead to being “hopeless” all round (305).

IV. “This Is Obscene!”: The Virgin and the Courtesan

Now that violence emerges as a valid approach to activate their hopelessly dormant doldrums, it remains a matter of when and who to its resort. The Dove is thus looked upon to consummate the violent act after the sexual option is depleted. She anticipates the dramatic figure of the intruder as messianic liberator to be found later in Harold Pinter’s plays.[12] But instead of being invested with Pinteresque encroaching

[12] For the role of intruder as liberator in Pinter, see Wong.

臺灣藝術期刊資料庫

menace, she embodies on the contrary a becalmed standoffishness, deliberately distancing herself from whatever occurs around her, and accepting any condition in good measure, as she puts it, "I've never held anything against hopelessness" (305). Her adamant refusal to interfere and intervene, however, grows strangely disturbing, and drives the sisters to the brink of breakdown.

However, at the dramatic juncture of Vera's nearing despair and Amelia's imminent return, the Dove makes an about-face, adjusting her strategy and adopting the persona of an evangelist, preaching the urgency of unmediated, rather than premeditated actions. This kind of actions are not spurred on by articulated reason but by nameless inner drives, such as "causeless anger": "Why don't people get angry at each other, quite suddenly and without reason?" (306) Not only is the Dove convinced that emotional outbursts need not to be justified at all, she advocates against any Freudian justification for emotional expression by resorting to their biographical roots for a rationale, as she puts it, "to have a reason is to cheapen rage" (306).

Such an unapologetic advocacy of unmediated spontaneity recalls the "psychography" of Surrealist automatic writing, with its anti-causality non-sequiturs which openly denigrate logic and what the Dove has dismissed as "necessary continuity" (306). It can be easily written off as the fancy of "an idiot" as in Vera's assessment, yet it can also be considered equally as the work of "a saint" (306). The Dove thus plays the part of a holy fool whose utterances can be embraced or repudiated for the same reason.

The sisters are not unaware of the inherent duality of the Dove when they invite her to move in, and it is exactly the synthesis of the opposites they find in her that tickles their jaded imagination and world-weary outlook. By naming her the Dove they ironically sense her "the most dangerous thing (they) ever knew" (306). The danger at first appears to the tantalizing risk of eroticism which in a seemingly peaceful dove can only lie in its docility, yet the erotic promise has not been fulfilled when she turns out to be more stubborn than submissive. The Dove is "precariously misnomered" (Clark 118) in another department, looked on ironically as a hawk expected to trigger a war, bringing about extensive overhaul, or even massive destruction of their current disaffected selves. Vera sums up their hidden expectations best when she comments that her appearance has turned their mere collection of "butter knives or pop guns" into a real "arsenal" (306).

The transformation of the aesthetic collection into real firearms lies in the promise of its execution, the expectation that the newcomer will do more than polish and appreciate the swords and knives as *objets d'art*, but bring the weaponry to their genuine function, its likelihood of destructive revolution to their true fruition.

A dash of savagery is what's urgently needed to administer a shot in the arm to help mobilize them out of their rarefied malaise, having been accustomed to the ways of civilization to the point of inertia. Amelia, the other sister who doesn't put in her appearance until three fourths of the short one-act play, is a perfect token of that civilized, cultured urban bourgeoisie: She is dressed smart, sings Italian *canzone*,

plays the violin, drinks red wine, and appreciates Renaissance art. She remains mostly absent, but makes her presence felt throughout the dialogues between Vera and the Dove. Yet when she finally returns from her errand, her sister Vera makes her exit ostensibly to uncork the bottle of red she has just bought, leaving her and the Dove in the brief but climactic exchange.

Amelia's absurdly belated appearance in the play, rather than a dramaturgical malapropism, signals the hopeless decadence of the Burgson family, accentuated by Amelia's indulgence in aesthetic hedonism, implying that she is not to be expected to enact the direly needed ultimate change. Though the Dove has confessed to Vera her love for Amelia, they hardly ever carry what can be called an intimate *tête-à-tête* conversation, except when Amelia asks the Dove whether she has been held in the arms of the one she loves, to which she is given a non-committal answer of "who knows" (307). Their brief interplay is dominated lopsidedly throughout by Amelia, who broaches only two subjects in what can be called her monologue: one is a gallery of animals, the other a reproduction of Carpaccio's painting. The menagerie catalogued by her includes flies, bats, monkey, and mice, all pointing to one thing: unlike Amelia, they're all unexpected intruders who enter and exit at will.

Echoing the flies that freely flutter in and out at the beginning of the play, the motif of liberation and indulging in beastly instincts returns at the end. The other topic of their brief exchange, Vittore Carpaccio's Renaissance painting *Les Deux Courtesanes Venetiennes* (ca. 1500) almost plays a character, albeit a mute one, in the drama. The picture exhibits as much as it frames; it exhibits the desire for *vita activa*, a lust for life suppressed by the sisters, who relish yet frame their sexual desire *à la courtesane* of yore. Though the title seems to spell out the métier of the two Venetian ladies as prostitutes, originally it was simply entitled, *Deux dames vénitiennes*, or two Venetian ladies, it was only in the nineteenth century, when it aroused a major revival of interest, that English art critic John Ruskin found it lascivious and labeled the ladies as two courtesans, a stigma-carrying re-christening that still sticks today.

The two spinster sisters correspond with the two Italian ladies/courtesans with the Janus-faced duality of Madonnas and whores[13]. At first sight they seem to incarnate the paragon of womanly virtue, following the straight and narrow moral codes of Victorians in practicing sexual abstinence. Their unsullied virginity yet implies barrenness and absence of marriage, evoking not the intact pristineness that one easily associates with young maidens so much as untapped resources laid to waste, an embarrassment of riches crying out to be explored. Under such circumstances, their earlier foreswearing of being "perverse" through sexual celibacy ironically brings about their perceived perversity in maturity, an impression reinforced by their constant flirtations and sexual fantasies.

Bestial desires and savage violence, as a result, leave their marks on their

[13] The concept was first brought up by Freud, who claimed that men who could only love without desire or desire without love suffer from classifying women only as Madonnas or whores.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

repulsive bodies which they simultaneously loathe and long for. Amelia's seemingly random and unrelated topics of animals and art in fact map out the spectrum of the sisters' dual obsessions: beastly instincts at one pole, and cultivated artifice at the other. They stand apart like opposed magnetic fields pulling the sisters to win the tug-of-war, under the aegis of the Dove.

The fortress of civilized artifice where the sisters are firmly entrenched may crack only through the revolutionary storming of external forces. They themselves lack the necessary will power to enact the sea change. As Amelia again resorts to beastly metaphor, her mere aspiration is to metamorphose into a bat which has roamed every corner of the world but "never having hung over anything but myself" (307), an analogy that neatly encapsulates her paradoxical desire and fear of self-liberation.

While Vera only tries to rationalize for a reason to resort to violence, Amelia toys with putting her thought into action. Like the "excellent arrangement of catastrophe" in Barnes's late comeback to the stage *The Antiphon* (1958), such an arrangement has already been anticipated in *The Dove*, and pre-echoed in Amelia's exasperated cries of "Disaster! Disaster! Wherever I go— disaster!" (306). Forebodings of a disastrous outcome, however, keep Amelia from materializing her planned action, again leaving the Dove to set it in motion and let it take its own course; only this time not as an observer, but as its sole participant, its catastrophic martyr. Sacrifice is required at the altar of decadence presided over by the craven sisters who can do no more than crave.

Like Nora rehearsing the *Tarantella* at the end of *A Doll's House*, Amelia has to build herself up into such a frenzied dance so as to induce herself to take the final action of suicide, which, however, remains a fantasy scenario just as in Ibsen's play. Instead of the courageous exercise of self-will in the style of another Ibsenite heroine, Hedda Gabler, Amelia only goes as far as asking, "Give me the sword," in as grandiloquent a fashion as Cleopatra's "Give me my robe," but with much less determination to take her own life.[14]

Style and artifice thus triumph over content and action to the bitter end. As exhibited in her admiration of the bat, Amelia has always harbored a desire for vampirism, and the ultimate ritual of vampiric vicariousness is to be staged by the Dove, when she bares Amelia's left shoulder and breast and sinks her teeth in, before she exits the room with the pistol to shoot herself dead, completing the rite of self-sacrifice by taking her life in place of the sisters. By her sacrifice, the Dove brings to bear her declaration that "a person who is capable of anything needs no practice" (305), and by acting on impulse, without any rehearsal, she achieves the spontaneity perennially yearned for yet beyond reach by the sophisticated decadent sisters.

The physical bite signals not only the aggressive, life-depriving mark of vampirism, but also an *imago* of Madonna breastfeeding the Child, a nurturing act that

[14] The parallels between *The Dove* and Ibsen's play have been drawn consistently, and comprehensively in Farfan (73-77).

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

gives life, which further mirrors the Madonna and Child picture hanging in the room. The Dove finally succeeds in enacting the ritual vampirism Amelia secretly desires and fears, with Amelia playing the life-giving Madonna role, drawing her ever closer to the real life she longs for. Yet it remains a mere simulation of life, another rehearsal of willed action such as the one that Vera has fantasized about Amelia shooting herself, not much improved on the game of pretense that the sisters have always indulged in. The Dove's ultimate act is introduced with the solemnity of a ritual and executed with the resolution of a military action, by saluting Amelia with "a deep military bow" (307), echoing the military salute she gives her on their first encounter. Before she shoots herself, she utters her farewell: "For the Bergson sisters!" (307), rendering her shot tantamount to firing a gun salute, in the hope of redeeming the hopelessly decadent sisters, after failing to activate Vera through the pistol, and Amelia through the sword, weapons that remain disarmed and aestheticized from beginning to end.

The Dove plays the angel of salvation masked as the angel of death, and with her own death hopes to kick-start the ultimate liberation of the sisters. Yet the sisters remain the same old ossified aesthetes mummified in their own decadence. Despite Amelia's ostensible display of misanthropy and self-loathing, as demonstrated in her final outburst, "I hate you. I hate Vera. Most of all, I hate myself" (307), she does little to attempt reconfiguring her body by changing her lifestyle or disfiguring her body by ending her life.

The Dove may have hoped to instill the germ of action into Amelia's blood by her vampire bite, but Amelia's un-sanguine response to her suicide shows her hope dashed and its possibility deferred: "This is obscene!" (307). Amelia's final line of stunned disbelief and dismissal seems to echo the ending of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, when Judge Brack utters incredulously to Hedda's suicide, "People don't do such a thing!" Ob-scene literally means what is off the stage and therefore not presentable, which is exactly what the Dove has done. Yet her tragic off-stage blood-letting not only fails to move Amelia emotionally, let alone moving her to actions, but also fails to remove her from her firmly entrenched bourgeois certitude, which may have been temporarily disturbed, before swiftly settling back into the complacent norms.

With her final utterance, Amelia presents the picture of *Two Venetian Courtesans* shot through by the fatal bullet. Her last comment of obscenity, if directed at the Dove's suicide, shows her bourgeois apathy and complacency emerging completely intact from the death; and if directed at the painting vandalized, shows her to remain a decadent aesthete who craves yet fears catastrophic change. Yet it could also be the Holy Spirit of the Dove shooting through the profane picture of courtesans, the energy stored in the repulsive body transforming itself, immersing profanity with sanctity. The energy and velocity of the repulsive body finally impacts itself on the ultimate symbol of exalted art by destroying it, claiming its triumph by re-inscribing the body of art. Amelia directs her concluding comment as if directly addressing the audience, to the girl students at Smith College in 1925, and to the urban sophisticates of New York City in 1926, and just as Barnes' resistance of Freud's inquiry of women's

wants, still refuses to offer a satisfying answer.

Conclusion

Decades of political and social agitations for women's suffrage culminated in the 1920 triumph of women enfranchised, followed by the exhilaratingly liberating Jazz Age when women's roles seemed to have expanded from the domestic sphere into the public arena. In the wake of such unprecedented dramatic upheavals in American women's lives, public and private alike, plays about women by women deserve particular critical attention as a stage weathervane pointing to the uncharted directions the newly rising inner whirlwind might have propelled them beyond the visible signals of social and political storms. With modernist and feminist Djuna Barnes' play *The Dove*, I have demonstrated that the psychological mindscape that the trio of female characters inhabits is rife with distortions and contradictions, where they repel what they find repulsive, yet their own repulsive bodies attract what they eventually find obscene. Withholding a pat answer to the voyeuristic patriarchal query into feminine innermost needs, Barnes repudiates any facile Freudian analysis and sets the women in the play on an exploratory quest to probe their own internal ambivalences. Though coming up with no single gratifying resolution either, through the alternatives of sexuality and violence, they channel and marshal their own psychic fears and physical desires in such a way that being enfranchised goes beyond the pale of political emancipation, and reverts to its original meaning in French of being *enfranchir*, to be set free, and only by being unbound from the shackles of aestheticized knowledge to explore and enact what they viscerally desire, can post-suffrage women stand a better chance of finding true inner freedom.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

情動惡女身：株娜邦斯之戲劇《白鴿》

王寶祥

國立臺灣大學外國語文學系副教授

一九二十年所謂的「爵士年代」美國婦女終於贏得投票權，成爲政治上獲得解放的「新女性」，但幽微的心靈，甚至禁錮的身體解放課題，仍有待文學作品展演。邦斯這位標竿性的美國現代主義／女性主義作家藉由短劇《白鴿》以隱諱的象徵手法探討公領域解放後，女性私領域尚未解放的身體，如何成爲權力與慾望抗衡的新戰場。藉由在紐約大都會蟄居的一對未婚姊妹，汲營蒐集知識／武器，卻荒廢探索慾望／身體，收養了神秘年輕號稱「白鴿」的外來女客，視其爲救贖她們「惡女」怪誕身體的契機，來企圖探討女性身體自發的能動性，能否打破知與行，權力與慾望的二元對立僵局。我將以反現代主義優深層於表面之偏好爲切入點，用邦斯「背佛洛伊德」的反深層心理分析觀，來探究本來無底層的情慾無底洞，點出中產階級對於背德之恐懼嫌惡，與其共生之反面吸引關注，此僵局端賴缺乏行動的語言分析並無法獲致救贖，對身體的自我禁錮及嫌惡，終究導致暴力宣洩的毀滅。

關鍵字：美國女性戲劇　株娜邦斯　莎孚文學　反佛洛伊德　現代主義

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Enacting Repulsive Bodies in Djuna Barnes's *The Dove*

Pao-hsiang WANG

Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University

1920s marked the unbridled Jazz Age when American women were finally empowered to vote after decades of struggles. Universal suffrage emancipated women on the political and public front, but whether they were liberated in the private and psychological realms remained to be investigated in literary works. The fraught issues of sexual and psychological emancipations are addressed implicitly in Djuna Barnes's play *The Dove*, in which the quintessential modernist/feminist writer configures the newly enfranchised women's bodies as a new battleground of power and desire to inscribe self-defense as well as self-hatred. The grotesque bodies, which borrowing from Barnes's poem I call "repulsive bodies," are liberated politically yet sexually charged, and embodied by the spinster sisters in *The Dove* who thrive on accumulating knowledge/weapons yet skimp on exploring their desires/bodies. Through the introduction and intrusion of an enigmatic figure called the Dove into their exclusive and reclusive lives, the sophisticated Burgson sisters expect to find salvation out of their impasse of sterile knowledge and futile desiring, first through sexuality, then through violence, both enacted on the repulsive bodies. I adopt Barnes's distinctive modernist yet anti-Freudian approach to explore the limits of psychoanalytic language in dealing with the ambivalence of sexual fear and desire, and examine the options of sexuality of self-loathing and violence of self-destruction as possible means of women's darker inner liberation.

Keywords: American drama by women Djuna Barnes Sapphic literature anti-Freud modernism

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Works Cited

Barnes, Djuna. "The Dove." *Modern Drama by Women, 1880s to 1930s.* Ed. Katherine E. Kelly. London: Routledge, 1996.

Benstock, Shari. *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987.

Bunzmann, Katharina. "Djuna Barnes' Queer Surrealism: An American Woman in Paris." *The Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature*. Ed. Claire Buck. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1992.

Carlston, Erin. *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Caselli, Daniela. *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus.* Burlington: Ashgate, 2009.

Clark, Susan F. "Djuna Barnes: The Most Famous Unknown." *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*. Eds. Kim Marra, Robert A. Schanke. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002.

Collecott, Diana. *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism 1910-1950.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

De Lauretis, Teresa. *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Film.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Farfan, Penny. *Women, Modernism, and Performance.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Field, Andrew. *Djuna: The Life and Times of Djuna Barnes.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1983.

Frann, Michael. "'I just loved Thelma': Djuna Barnes and the Construction of Bisexuality." *Review of Contemporary Fiction: Djuna Barnes* 13.3 (1993): 53-61.

Freud, Sigmund. *Collected Papers 5.* Trans. & Ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 1959.

Goody, Alex. *Modernist Articulations: A Critical Study of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, and Gertrude Stein.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Hardwick, Elizabeth. *American Fictions*. New York: The Modern Library, 1999.

Herring, Phillip. *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes.* New York: Viking, Penguin Group, 1995.

James, Baird. "Djuan Barnes and Surrealism: Backward Grief." *Individual and Community: Variations on an American Theme in American Fiction.* Eds. Kenneth Baldwin and David Kirby. Durham: Duke University Press, 1975.

Mintz, Steven. *The Prime of Life: A History of Modern Adulthood.* Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Moers, Ellen. "Female Gothic." *Literary Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Nair, Sashi. *Secrecy and Sapphic Modernism: Writing Romans à Clef Between the Wars*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Schroeder, Richard Arthur. *Surrealism, the Surrealist Novel, and Djuna Barnes' Nightwood*. Dissertation. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1964.

Taylor, Julie. *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Wilson, Edmund. *Arts and Letters*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004.

Wong, Jane Yeang Chui. *Affirming the Absurd in Harold Pinter*. London: Palgrave Pivot, 2013.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

臺灣大學學術
期刊資料庫