

THE BOOK OF REPULSIVE WOMEN:  
8 Rhythms and 5 Drawings  
Djuna Barnes

*With a Note by Douglas Messerli*

Originally published in the chap book series by Bruno of Greenwich Village in 1915, this renowned volume of poetry presented portraits of women of the period—a mother, prostitute, cabaret dancer, and others—which were wildly radical in their day, dominated as it was by Victorian mores. But there is still in these “rhythms” a seething beat of sexuality and vice, whipped up into a delicious sense of perversity by Barnes’s art.

On the evidence of Barnes’s numerous other works, most of which included art that was interleaved with her writing, Messerli has restored the drawings—which in the Bruno edition appeared in the back, after the poems—to the front of the book so that they can create an interplay with the texts.



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*Djuna Barnes*

The Book of

REPULSIVE  
WOMEN

*8 Rhythms and 5 Drawings*



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1994

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SECOND PAPERBACK EDITION

*The Book of Repulsive Women* was first published  
as a Bruno Chap Book (Vol. II) in November 1915  
First published in paperback by Sun & Moon Press in July 1989  
as No. 1 of the *20 Pages* series.

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### A Note

First published in the Bruno Chap Books series in November, 1915, *The Book of Repulsive Women* remains today Djuna Barnes's least known and, in terms of its content, most accessible of her writings.

Certainly, it was not a book that Barnes herself highly valued, and one suspects that she would have characterized it, as she had all of her early journalism, as juvenilia. Whatever her view, she successfully suppressed a 1948 pirated edition, published as *Outcast Chapbook No. 14*. Bern Boyle Books published a small edition in 1989, and Sun & Moon published an edition, based on the original, in July of the same year.

The Bern Boyle version, however, brought up several interesting editorial questions, one of which, in particular, had troubled me since first encountering the Bruno Chap Book while compiling my 1976 bibliography of Djuna Barnes.

Barnes's writing is almost all inextricably connected with her art. The vast majority of the interviews, essays on theatre and other journalistic pieces, the novel *Ryder*, the collection of stories, *A Book*, and her *Ladies Almanack* were all published side by side with her art. Even *Nightwood* is heavily reliant on the 18th and 19th century tableaux vivants, which she describes as "living pictures." One might go far as to say that Barnes's literary method is, in fact, an "emblematic" one, in that her writing generally relies on visual elements that supplement, intensify, and clarify aspects of the language. What critics such as Joseph Frank have described as "momentary stops" in the narrative action are actually related to this emblematic method of writing, wherein Barnes visualizes (with art or words) the moral or psychological condition of her characters before representing them in action.

How peculiar, then, that her first book segregated drawings that were so clearly intended to relate directly to her poetry. As Bern Boyle so astutely recognized, certain of the drawings appear to fit on the page perfectly with the text. Having published our own edition exactly as it appeared in the original

Bruno Chap Book edition, I determined that when we reprinted we would reset these poems, pulling the art from the back of the book to the front, attempting to place the art in correspondence with the writing. My arrangement is not that of the Bern Boyle edition. Without knowing Barnes's original intentions, I felt editorially more comfortable placing the art on facing pages of the poems rather than on the same pages. Moreover, the art seemed to relate, in my mind, with poems different from those Bern Boyle had chosen. Others, doubtlessly, will disagree with my choices and, perhaps, with Bern Boyle's as well. Nonetheless, the art/poem relationship feels, in both editions, much closer to a book by Djuna Barnes than the original had.

Djuna Barnes, if she were not in fury, might well have laughed at the whole issue. Or, more likely, she would have demanded that we immediately destroy all copies. Ultimately, it is for her readers to decide the importance of this literary and artistic contribution. It is our goal, in our on-going publication of the writings of Barnes, simply to bring the material to the reader's attention.

—Douglas Messerli  
Los Angeles

# BRUNO CHAP BOOKS

DJUNA BARNES

THE BOOK OF REPULSIVE WOMEN

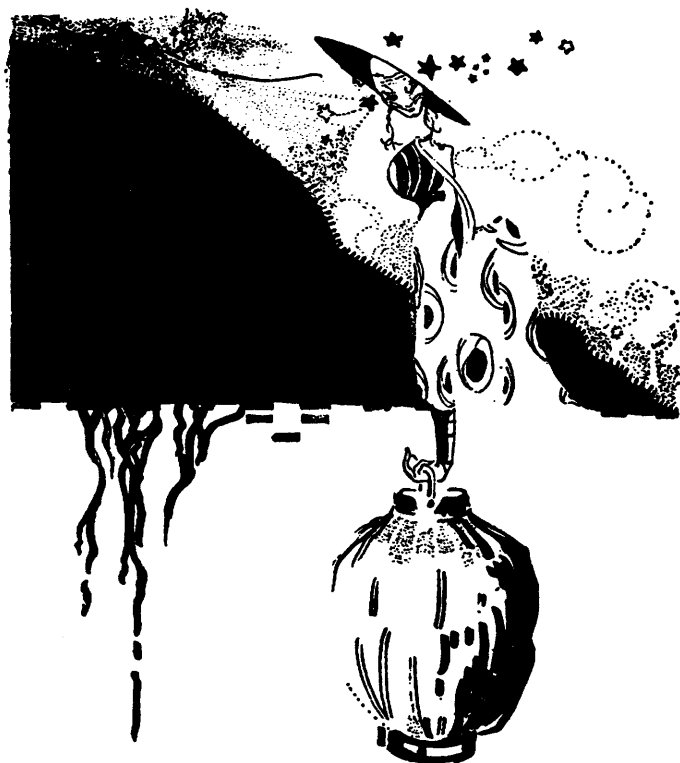
8 Rhythms and 5 Drawings

EDITED BY GUIDO BRUNO IN HIS GARRET ON  
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SPECIAL SERIES

TO MOTHER  
*Who was more or less like All  
mothers, but she was mine, and  
so—She excelled.*



*From Fifth Avenue Up*

SOMEDAY beneath some hard  
 Capricious star—  
 Spreading its light a little  
 Over far,  
 We'll know you for the woman  
 That you are.

For though one took you, hurled you  
 Out of space,  
 With your legs half strangled  
 In your lace,  
 You'd lip the world to madness  
 On your face.

We'd see your body in the grass  
 With cool pale eyes.  
 We'd strain to touch those lang'rous  
 Length of thighs;  
 And hear your short sharp modern  
 Babylonian cries.

It wouldn't go. We'd feel you  
 Coil in fear  
 Leaning across the fertile  
 Fields to leer  
 As you urged some bitter secret  
 Through the ear.

We see your arms grow humid  
 In the heat;  
 We see your damp chemise lie  
 Pulsing in the beat  
 Of the over-hearts left oozing  
 At your feet.

See you sagging down with bulging  
 Hair to sip,  
 The dappled damp from some vague  
 Under lip.  
 Your soft saliva, loosed  
 With orgy, drip.

Once we'd not have called this  
 Woman you—  
 When leaning above your mother's  
 Spleen you drew  
 Your mouth across her breast as  
 Trick musicians do.

Plunging grandly out to fall  
 Upon your face.  
 Naked—female—baby  
 In grimace.  
 With your belly bulging stately  
 Into space.

*In General*

WHAT altar cloth, what rag of worth  
Unpriced?  
What turn of card, what trick of game  
Undiced?  
And you we valued still a little  
More than Christ.



*From Third Avenue On*

AND now she walks on out turned feet  
Beside the litter in the street  
Or rolls beneath a dirty sheet  
    Within the town.  
She does not stir to doff her dress,  
She does not kneel low to confess,  
A little conscience, no distress  
    And settles down.

Ah God! she settles down we say;  
It means her powers slip away  
It means she draws back day by day  
    From good or bad.

And so she looks upon the floor  
Or listens at an open door  
Or lies her down, upturned to snore  
    Both loud and sad.

Or sits beside the chinaware,  
Sits mouthing meekly in a chair,  
With over-curved, hard waving hair  
    Above her eyes.

Or grins too vacant into space—  
A vacant space is in her face—  
Where nothing came to take the place  
    Of high hard cries.

Or yet we hear her on the stairs  
With some few elements of prayers,  
Until she breaks it off and swears  
    A loved bad word.  
Somewhere beneath her hurried curse,  
A corpse lies bounding in a hearse;  
And friends and relatives disperse,  
    And are not stirred.

Those living dead up in their rooms  
Must note how partial are the tombs,  
That take men back into their wombs  
    While theirs must fast.

And those who have their blooms in jars  
No longer stare into the stars,  
Instead, they watch the dinky cars—  
    And live aghast.

*Seen From The "L"*

SO she stands—nude—stretching dully  
Two amber combs loll through her hair  
A vague molested carpet pitches  
Down the dusty length of stair.  
She does not see, she does not care  
It's always there.

The frail mosaic on her window  
Facing starkly toward the street  
Is scribbled there by tipsy sparrows—  
Etched there with their rocking feet.  
Is fashioned too, by every beat  
Of shirt and sheet.

Still her clothing is less risky  
 Than her body in its prime,  
 They are chain-stitched and so is she  
 Chain-stitched to her soul for time.  
 Ravelling grandly into vice  
 Dropping crooked into rhyme.  
 Slipping through the stitch of virtue,  
     Into crime.

Though her lips are vague as fancy  
 In her youth—  
 They bloom vivid and repulsive  
 As the truth.  
 Even vases in the making  
     Are uncouth.

## *In Particular*

**W**HAT loin-cloth, what rag of wrong  
     Unpriced?  
 What turn of body, what of lust  
 Undiced?  
 So we've worshipped you a little  
 More than Christ.



### *Twilight of the Illicit*

YOU, with your long blank udders  
And your calms,  
Your spotted linen and your  
Slack'ning arms.  
With satiated fingers dragging  
At your palms.

Your knees set far apart like  
Heavy spheres;  
With discs upon your eyes like

Husks of tears;  
And great ghastly loops of gold  
Snared in your ears.

Your dying hair hand-beaten  
'Round your head.  
Lips, long lengthened by wise words  
Unsaid.  
And in your living all grimaces  
Of the dead.

One sees you sitting in the sun  
Asleep;  
With the sweeter gifts you had  
And didn't keep,  
One grieves that the altars of  
Your vice lie deep.

You, the twilight powder of  
A fire-wet dawn;  
You, the massive mother of  
Illicit spawn;  
While the others shrink in virtue  
You have borne.

We'll see you staring in the sun  
A few more years,  
With discs upon your eyes like

Husks of tears;  
And great ghastly loops of gold  
Snared in your ears.



---

*To a Cabaret Dancer*

A THOUSAND lights had smitten her  
Into this thing;  
Life had taken her and given her  
One place to sing.

She came with laughter wide and calm;  
And splendid grace;  
And looked between the lights and wine  
For one fine face.

And found life only passion wide  
'Twixt mouth and wine.

She ceased to search, and growing wise  
 Became less fine.

Yet some wondrous thing within the mess  
 Was held in check:—  
 Was missing as she groped and clung  
 About his neck.

One master chord we couldn't sound  
 For lost the keys,  
 Yet she hinted of it as she sang  
 Between our knees.

We watched her come with subtle fire  
 And learned feet,  
 Stumbling among the lustful drunk  
 Yet somehow sweet

We saw the crimson leave her cheeks  
 Flame in her eyes;  
 For when a woman lives in awful haste  
 A woman dies.

The jests that lit our hours by night  
 And made them gay,  
 Soiled a sweet and ignorant soul  
 And fouled its play.

Barriers and heart both broken—dust  
 Beneath her feet.  
 You've passed her forty times and sneered  
 Out in the street.

A thousand jibes had driven her  
 To this at last;  
 Till the ruined crimson of her lips  
 Grew vague and vast.

Until her songless soul admits  
 Time comes to kill:  
 You pay her price and wonder why  
 You need her still.



## *Suicide*

Corpse A

THEY brought her in, a shattered small  
Cocoon,  
With a little bruised body like  
A startled moon;  
And all the subtle symphonies of her  
A twilight rune.

## Corpse B

THEY gave her hurried shoves this way  
And that.  
Her body shock-abbreviated  
As a city cat.  
She lay out listlessly like some small mug  
Of beer gone flat.

## DJUNA BARNES

Long seen as a legendary figure by her admirers, Djuna Barnes has increasingly come to be recognized over the past few decades as a major American author. She is best known for her fictional masterwork, *Nightwood*, an anatomy; but she also wrote other works of fiction, *A Book* (reprinted as *A Night Among the Horses* and later, with new stories and substantial revisions, as *Spillway*) and *Ryder*. She also published an almanac, *Ladies Almanack*, and a drama, *The Antiphon*. Sun & Moon Press has published a selection of her early stories as *Smoke and Other Early Stories*, selected her theatrical interviews in *Interviews*, and brought together several of her writings on New York City in *New York*. Other books planned are *Poe's Mother: Selected Drawings*; *At the Roots of the Stars: The Short Plays*; *Collected Stories*; *Biography of Julie von Bartmann*; *Ann Portuguese*; and a new edition of *The Antiphon*.

With Eugene O'Neill and Edna St. Vincent Millay, Barnes was an early member of the Provincetown Players. Later, in the 1920s, she lived in Paris, where her wit and brilliant writing won her close friendships with T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Peggy Guggenheim, and other well-known American expatriates. When she returned to the United States, she wrote for *The Theater Guild Magazine*. She died in New York in 1982.