

Erasing the Grotesque

An Analysis of Djuna Barnes' Detestation for *The Book of Repulsive Women*

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The Book of Repulsive Women is a collection of eight poems and five drawings by Djuna Barnes first published in 1915. Despite the fact that this was Barnes' first publication of what she considered to be her "serious" work, she later hated the book and wished to repress the fact that she had written it at all. Barnes left the book off of lists of her collected works, consistently referred to it incorrectly as "that book of repulsive women," and when Oscar Baron sought to republish it in 1949 she wrote him: "I categorically forbid you to make such publication, and [...] if you proceed with such publication it will be at your own risk and peril" (Hardie 120, 119). The book was republished by Baron despite Barnes' disapproval, and has been republished three times more since her death. Contrary to what the title may suggest, *The Book of Repulsive Women* is an intriguing work; Barnes uses the visual and textual to function as one cohesive narrative and the book as a whole engages the reader in its striking imagery. By merging poetry and illustrations, Barnes attempts to create a new space for feminine discourse. While many critics have maintained that the poetry in this book is simple and even "thin," in actuality the language holds many complex layers of meaning regarding the marginalization of minorities suffering within the controlling dominant American culture (Benstock 240). Yet Barnes' adamant detestation for her own work implies issues greater than merely tiring of an early style. In order to further investigate the possibilities for Barnes' self-hatred, I will first examine how the visual and textual function together in *The Book of Repulsive Women* as well as provide a close reading of some of Barnes' poetry and images, including Barnes' interesting use of pronouns. I will then discuss the ambivalent position between attraction and repulsion that the reader is placed in when engaging with the book, and use this to examine Barnes' own ambivalence regarding her work and her bohemian image. Finally, I will place *The Book of Repulsive Women* within the historical context and cultural climate during its first publication, which lead to misinterpreted readings that provide insight into the disconnect between Barnes' intentions and the book's reception.

In examining the book as a whole, it is important to analyze the function of both Barnes' poetry and her illustrations because "[a]s both a visual and verbal artist, Djuna Barnes demands a dual literacy" (Martyniuk 1). Ideally one medium would not stand out more than the other, and the two would join together to form a cohesive narrative. The implications of illustration extend much further than simply

supplementing the text or even representing it; rather, merging the visual and textual should be taken seriously as an alternative feminine discourse to provide space for otherwise silenced women. It is neither Barnes' poetry nor her drawings separately that creates this space, but "the combination that makes them disquieting" and the work as a whole "an unconventional book" (Martyniuk 2). It is difficult, however, to genuinely read Barnes' work in this way because of our culture's general conception that any visual image serves to supplement a text. While it may be true that *The Book of Repulsive Women* attempts to "break the binarism of word/image" and thus provide a defamiliarizing effect in interaction of the two traditionally opposing mediums, it is important to keep in mind the traditional function of images within books as less than words, meant to enhance the message of the text rather than produce its own message (Martyniuk 2). The binary between word and image interestingly echoes the binary between masculine and feminine, in which patriarchal discourse (and all discourse is patriarchal) eclipses the visual discourse that might be considered more abstract, supplemental, and feminine. These parallels between the two binaries demonstrate what *The Book of Repulsive Women* seems to try to deconstruct, and the issues that arise in this attempt are caused by the very eclipsing nature of the word and the masculine. In other words, there is little space for mobility between visual and textual when placed within a reader's perspective coming from a historical context embedded in the textual as primary.



Fig. 1
visual and verbal words" (Martyniuk 3). This format has

been changed throughout the book's history of republications, most recently in the 1994 Sun & Moon edition, which matches the images with certain texts differently than the same attempt done by the 1989 Bern Boyle Books edition (Martyniuk 3). It is difficult to truly view *The Book of Repulsive Women* as an incorporation of simultaneous image and text partly because of these contradicting layouts. This confusion can be traced back to Barnes' original intentions for incorporating the visual. While her placement of the illustrations at the end of the book may have been trying to achieve a sense of separation so that the visual and textual could stand to represent themselves without overshadowing one or the other, the result is a disconnect between the two and the perception of the illustrations as an afterthought to the text. The issue is not solved, however, when the images are interspersed throughout the book. By associating certain illustrations with certain poems, the idea of each representing its own story to complete a whole is lost (see fig. 1). Since text is more valued as a representation of narrative in our culture, this layout also ends up undermining the illustrations as mere complements to the poetry.

The ultimate outcome is a failure to communicate the dual nature of the visual and textual appropriately in order to "create a mode of expression that is more inclusive and thus more able to articulate women's experiences" (Martyniuk 4). The problem, then, is the paradox of intention versus the reader's inevitable perception; no matter how the poems and illustrations are placed within the book, the desired message of their cohesion is impossible to attain.

Whether or not the attempts of Barnes' eight 'rhythms' and five drawings in *The Book of Repulsive Women* were successful in their endeavor to function as a distinct discourse, their individual presence offer narratives that we should closely examine. While "[b]oth the verses and the illustrations that accompany them are clearly derivative of fin-de-siècle styles," the irregular rhythms and imagery subvert this style and offer something strangely crossed within the spheres of traditional and modern (Hardie 121). Each poem delves into a different world of feminine repulsion, all told from the perspective of an outside observer. The use of pronouns is one of the most intriguing aspects of the collection because they function to position the subject of the poem and the reader at juxtaposing points within the world of the book. For example, Barnes' use of "we" in the first poem, "From Fifth Avenue Up," places the reader in direct relation

to the woman in the poem, who is addressed as “you.” This relationship between “we” and “you” creates a barrier separating the repulsive woman in the poem from the outside world, thus emphasizing her marginalization from the normative culture. Yet it also makes the “we” a perpetrator of this marginalization, thus engaging the reader in the creation of the woman’s repulsive qualities. The repulsion is created in the fact that “We see your arms grow humid / In the heat” and “We see your damp chemise lie / Pulsing in the beat” (Barnes 14). In other words, the poem seems to suggest that the observer is the cause of the woman’s displacement because it is only because we “[s]ee [her] sagging” that she sags (Barnes 14). At the same time, placing the reader in the position of “we” attracts the reader through inclusion. What is created, then, is a realm of ambivalence for the reader who simultaneously participates in the repulsive nature of the woman, thus excluding her from the reader’s “we,” while also being attracted to these repulsive qualities that caused her separation. As Hardie proposes in her speculation regarding why a book of repulsion was attractive to publishers decades later, “repulsion, irrespective of its valence, does suggest the positionality of reader; it is an orienting term even in its antipathy” (126).

While this tug and pull between attraction and repulsion may have been a reason for the book’s popularity, perhaps it also contributed to Barnes’ eventual hatred for it. That is, perhaps Barnes’ audience was attracted and repulsed for the wrong reasons—reasons opposed to her authorial intentions. While her precise intentions for *The Book of Repulsive Women* are uncertain, it is likely that the literary world and her readers misconstrued its meaning at the time of its first publication. Critics at the time devoted attention to Barnes’ archaic style and skirted around the content or message of her poems, but “[r]ather than being a tactic intended to divert attention away from the subversive subject matter... this critical move suggests that readers did not understand the subject matter” (Benstock 244). There are several possibilities for this disconnect between Barnes and her readers. First, she was writing explicitly about lesbianism to the point where it was impossible for a reader to ignore or misinterpret the imagery, unlike other modernist writing that tackled such subjects more covertly. Since Barnes’ homosexual themes had to be acknowledged, the literary world avoided embracing them by “reading Barnes’s texts as confirmation of the degradation and innate depravity of homosexuality, turning these texts against themselves” (Benstock 244). They

refused to connect Barnes’ writing with her personal sexuality, viewing her as a heterosexual because “it was inconceivable that a woman as beautiful as Barnes might be lesbian” (Benstock 244).

This reading is clearly problematic in light of the fact that Barnes was a lesbian, despite her later denial of this (she is famously quoted as saying “‘I’m not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma’” [Benstock 245]). Or perhaps she denied her own sexuality because of this reaction from the public; after all, Barnes had a difficult time being accepted into the ranks of other modernist writers like Eliot and Pound, and being perceived as heterosexual would have been an easier platform from which to gain notoriety. To explore this, it is necessary to examine Barnes’ image as a writer in Greenwich Village during the early years of her career. She was seen as glamorous and exotic, and the climate of Greenwich Village as a getaway for Manhattanites to visit and exploit the lifestyle of the art world contributed to Barnes’ image as a romanticized bohemian. Barnes’ use of grotesque images in *The Book of Repulsive Women* was most likely not an attempt to commercialize the Village, as will be discussed shortly. However it seems that since that was the reading Barnes’ audience desired it would be difficult for these readers to conceive of Unger’s contemporary interpretation that “Barnes’s portraits of bohemia...betray her disillusionment with the Village under the influence of mass consumerism” (22). With the insight of this argument, however, we are able to better understand the disconnect between Barnes’ intentions and the public’s reception. This divide was made wider by the fact that the book was first produced as a cheap chapbook, and coupled with its appealing images of the grotesque, it “was the perfect trinket of the bizarre lifestyle [outsiders] fantasized about and ultimately patronized” (Unger 28). Thus, in the hands of the public, her book became a souvenir for readers, and not the space for silenced women’s voices that feminist criticisms label it as today.

Perhaps the most important disconnect between Barnes and the public came from her reputation as a journalist during this time. Barnes’ early writing before *The Book of Repulsive Women* most came in the form of “‘participatory’ journalism,” in which she wrote pieces for newspapers after involving herself directly with the public (Benstock 237). Some of her stunts included being force-fed, jumping from a skyscraper, and putting herself in a gorilla’s cage. These acts and articles brought attention to Barnes because this kind of

journalism “was rare in that time and was virtually unheard of for women” (Benstock 237). Her reputation as a daring, amusing, fun-loving bohemian became her public persona because of these experimental articles. In light of this, it was not a big step for readers to assume that the publication of her first book of poetry, *The Book of Repulsive Women*, came from the same persona and was meant to be read in the same way as these commercialized pieces. Barnes, however, most likely did not want or anticipate that kind of reaction despite her journalism. The disconnect here lies in the fact that “for Barnes, journalism was only a means of maintaining herself in order to write poetry and plays of a more demanding and less compromising nature” (Benstock 237). Unlike many of her contemporary Greenwich Village writers and artists, and unlike her public image led one to believe, Barnes “never experienced financial security” and struggled to get by as she “managed to give the impression of elegance and financial stability” (Benstock 237-238). In other words, after moving to Greenwich Village Barnes took on the task of radical journalism not because this was her style or how she wanted to be perceived, but because she needed to pay rent. And so while Barnes considered her work to be “divided between the professional and public (journalism) and the private and creative (poetry and painting),” the public would not have necessarily been able to make this same divide between work Barnes did to make a living and work Barnes took seriously (Benstock 238). While it seems that Barnes certainly wanted the public to take *The Book of Repulsive Women* seriously, especially because it was her first collection of poetry and illustrations, instead it was treated as a commodity like her other early pieces. It seems that this disconnect was unavoidable given Barnes’ image and the impossibility of controlling a public’s perception, but it certainly helps to explain some of Barnes’ resentment for the book.

There are parallels between the ambivalence a reader of *The Book of Repulsive Women* is placed in as an involved “we” in the text, and Barnes’ ambivalence regarding her bohemian image and her “serious” work as an early modernist (and lesbian) writer. Barnes seemed to resent her public image, especially later in her career as she continued to try to be taken seriously and ebb her way further into the higher ranks of the literary world and “[t]he desperation behind this public persona and the irritation with the superficiality of social popularity” frustrated her (Benstock 238). At the same time, the extent to which Barnes was personally affected by

how others regarded her is unclear. On the one hand, Har- die states that “her manipulation of old genres and styles... led to her perception as an oddity within modernism” and “haunted her career” (122). But since Barnes’ use of this style was intentional, impressing or fitting in with the modernists might not have been her priority. Rather, it seems that whatever statements Barnes was trying to make through her more serious work were for her own benefit as an artist, and not to gain clout in the art world and among the public. That she deliberately chose a style and subject matter that would not have been well received in the mainstream during this time speaks to her purposes in publishing works like *The Book of Repulsive Women* and her priorities as a young writer in the early modernist period. After all, “Barnes rarely spoke of her writing, did nothing to increase her literary reputation, and made no compromises in either her subject matter or her style to attract a reading audience” (Benstock 236). Nevertheless, *The Book of Repulsive Women* was exceedingly popular, and remained so in the first republication and in the later ones after Barnes’ death.

Perhaps, then, Barnes’ hatred for the book and attempt to erase its existence was in part due to this mainstream popularity and the public’s misguided interpretations. If *The Book of Repulsive Women* is Barnes’ first publication that she herself took seriously and she chose to write about the marginalization of women in American society using explicit lesbian images and themes, then it would appear that her intentions for the book—her audience, criticisms, and the effect on the public—failed. Barnes knew how to give the people what they wanted, as seen by her skill at writing journalism she knew she would be paid for in her times of financial need. It appears that Barnes did not write *The Book of Repulsive Women* with the intention of providing the same effect as her earlier pieces and of other art and writing “produced in the Village’s bohemian culture [that] fueled a greedy, exploitative, and ultimately destructive consumerism” (Unger 27-28). She probably would not have chosen to overtly write about homosexuality if these were her intentions, yet the public nevertheless turned Barnes’ work against her in order to see what they wanted. It is here that the derivation of Barnes’ self-hatred seems to fit; why she “seemed apprehensive about the efficacy of her own writing”; why she fought against the book’s republication (Unger 28). It is also here that Barnes’ personal ambivalence about her sexuality and about her (lack of) power as a woman writer echoes the images and voices of the women she draws and writes

about in *The Book of Repulsive Women*.

Returning to the content of the book, we see throughout it how Barnes defines the parameters placed around her subjects by outside forces and then describes how they suffer within them. As the first poem in the collection, “From Fifth Avenue Up” sets the tone for the rest of book and exemplifies the lack of freedom provided for the repulsive women within the space allotted them. The poem “is typically cited for a bold suggestion of lesbian love-making,” and the imagery in the poem suggests that the space for this is incredibly limited; that the woman is literally pushed to the boundaries and is spilling over past them (Scott 2). Since she does not fit within the space constructed for her, she is left “oozing” and “bulging” beyond these confines (Barnes 14). The woman’s ambivalence about her identity is seen from the contrasts of the world she was “hurled” into with her “legs half strangled / In [her] lace” and her resulting struggle released in “short sharp modern / Babylonian cries” (Barnes 13, 14). Her body is grotesque because there is no place for it, and this coupled with Barnes’ imagery of birth and fertility throughout this poem demonstrates the impossibility for reconciliation between nature and culture’s construction. The result is pieces of her escaping, such as her “soft saliva, loosed / With orgy” dripping and her “belly bulging stately / Into space” (Barnes 14, 15). On the one hand, that this woman is restricted due to the realms of culture, the imagery supports Scott’s argument that Barnes “breaks with binary tradition by calling attention to impositions of culture, including its rules of gender upon nature” (1). However, when this poem and the others are placed in the physical culture as a published piece in the hands of the public, the woman and the message of the poem are problematized further. The restrictions that Barnes sets up for the woman in the poem are pitted against the real-world restrictions of American culture, and the result is an erasure of space altogether.

The same result occurs in Barnes’ use of visual pieces, which try to function within the collection as a creation of space for these women and also illustrate this idea individually. The drawings interestingly act by providing a literal visual space for women while simultaneously creating borders for the women in the very fact that drawing within a space highlights the limits of that space. In this sense, Barnes’ illustrations function similarly to her text in that each medium reflects the same ambivalence between confinement and expansion, as well as paralleling the tug and pull between at-

traction and repulsion. One illustrated woman who appears to be walking pets along a street is literally confined within a black box that creates a border around her (see Fig. 2). Although she looks as though she is just about to step beyond this border, the stillness of the image does not allow us to see what will happen to her when (or if) she does indeed cross the barrier.



Fig. 2

her body and clothes are her limitations.

Each of these examples are again complicated when placed within the physical book. The drawings cannot exist without being a part of a page, another barrier and construction, and must then exist physically in the hands of a reader.

In both Barnes’ poetry and her drawings, the women she tries to represent can only exist as a text to be examined by a reader, and this is why Barnes’ attempts with this book are impossible to attain. According to Unger, “for Barnes, poetry serves as a space in which her *Repulsive Women*—or any disabled or non-normative subject—can exist without the pressures of a standardizing American System” (16). Ironically, and detrimentally, the physical book can only exist within the same pressures and standardization that Barnes was trying to escape. Regrettably, it seems as though Barnes herself was also unable to exist without the pressures that Unger describes. While the conflicts Barnes faced regarding her first book existed because of outside forces and not because of shortcomings in her work, this was perhaps more frustrating for Barnes as a writer early in her career. Her hatred of the book, then, while never articulated by Barnes, seems to stem most likely from the book’s failure as her first experimentation involving silenced women and combining the visual and textual. It makes sense that the very existence of the book unnerved her, and that she so adamantly regretted her initial attempt and did not want it to re-exist in another edition.

Another illustration shows a woman who has no border around her, but exists within the white space of the page (see fig 3). In this case, the woman herself creates the borders that she exists within; the lines of



Fig. 3

Barnes' self-hatred for this work most likely came from her perception of it as a failure, and this is because her intended audience was the homosexual community. As someone who in early years "refused to make concessions to either publishers or the public in the choice of subject matter or style of her serious writing," she must have anticipated *The Book of Repulsive Women* to be her first step into the art world beyond her superficial image as a journalist (Benstock 238). Instead the book was graciously welcomed into the heterosexual community, used to further exploit homosexuality, and in the end became silencing for the very people she was trying to provide with voices. Her use of the fin-de-siècle style must have been intended to represent her adamancy against the culture she was criticizing, and the desired effect may have been a "code: available to those who 'know,' unavailable to those who do not" (Benstock 245). Unfortunately, those who did not know controlled the reputation of the work, as well as its message. According to Benstock, "[t]he text has been likened to a woman's body whose envelope (style or code) must be broke in order for the substance to be recovered and explained. Reading is rape, a submission of the text (woman) to patriarchal (critical) priorities" (246). And so Barnes' presentation of these women was doomed to be ridiculed by the heteronormative patriarchy in its very creation and publication. Interestingly, Barnes seems to allude to this self-destruction in the final poem of the collection, "Suicide." In this poem, the reader is removed from direct participation with the subjects as the pronoun shifts to "they" for the first time. The descriptions of the treatments of Corpse A and Corpse B, in which "They brought her in, a shattered small / Cocoon" and "They gave her hurried shoves this way / And that," respectively, seem to perfectly fit the result of the book in the hands of the public (Barnes 35-36). It is as though this final poem tells the readers what they have always already done to destroy the space Barnes created.

"Suicide" represents the inevitability of this situation—not

just for *The Book of Repulsive Women*, but for women writers in general. There was nothing Barnes could have done to prevent the misconstrued reception of her work, and so in the work's creation its self-destruction was also born. Indeed, "Suicide" seems to be speaking about the book itself when presented to the public—the people represented by "they" in the poem. This collective "they" seems to shift perspective from the earlier "you" that was involved in the marginalization process. As the last poem in the book, "Suicide" speaks to the actions the reader has just completed when engaged as the previous "you." With the shift to "they," the book's code is disguised once again as it passively resigns to its fate, no longer concerned with including the reader in its final demise. Yet in this passivity the reader still remains a perpetrator, having already finished engaging with the rest of the book and now forced to witness the results. Those who "don't know" the code believe they are truly removed from these suicides when in reality the "they" consists of precisely these people. By believing themselves separated, those who "don't know" are simultaneously involved in that separation and fail to recognize their role in this process. What remains is a book "[w]ith a little bruised body like / A startled moon" (Barnes 35). In Corpse A, "all the subtle symphonies of her" are "A twilight rune," indicating that the book's quiet and veiled messages should be able to speak powerfully within their code, but instead remain as cryptic as a "rune" to the average reader and thus are stifled to the point of death (Barnes 35). Corpse B's demise is even colder, as it results in her body "lay[ing] out listlessly like some small mug / Of beer gone flat" (Barnes 36). In this case, the beauty beneath the code is not even acknowledged; the way they "shove" her suggests that they do not respect her death, just as they did not respect her when she lived.

If *The Book of Repulsive Women* is destined to suffer the fate of Corpse B, and Barnes is perhaps acknowledging her awareness of this through "Suicide," then it seems as though there is no space for this work or similar works by women. Once published, the work must suffer by its very existence within the climate of the public. Since there is nowhere else for the work to exist, creating the work in the first place may have seemed futile to Barnes in retrospect. Just as other women authors and artists have similarly regretted creating their work, Barnes wished the book's presence could be physically erased because she was unable to reconcile its existence in the tortured middle space it was forced to occu-

py. While Barnes' motivation for her frustrations is certainly understandable, simple nonexistence seems just as unavoidable as the book's fate. The fact is that Barnes did write and illustrate *The Book of Repulsive Women*, and ignoring this is playing into the patriarchal culture's desire. As the word "suicide" implies, the book's death is blamed as its own fault, when it is actually the result of this culture. These poems and illustrations need to be preserved because beneath the pain and death, or within it, Barnes' work contains "the subtle symphonies" that do give voice to those silenced and marginalized who would otherwise not be heard.

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CAPTIONS FOR ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. This drawing was paired with Barnes' poem "From Fifth Avenue Up" in the 1994 Sun & Moon edition, problematizing Barnes' intention for the visual and textual to stand separately. Barnes, Djuna. *The Book of Repulsive Women: 8 Rhythms and 5 Drawings*. 1915. Drawing. UPenn Digital Library. Web. 30 Nov 2013.

Fig. 2. This drawing illustrates the confinement of Barnes' repulsive women through the visual representation of a border. Barnes, Djuna. *The Book of Repulsive Women: 8 Rhythms and 5 Drawings*. 1915. Drawing. UPenn Digital Library. Web. 30 Nov 2013.

Fig. 3. Since Barnes surrounds the woman depicted here with white space, the woman's clothes and skin become her border. Barnes, Djuna. *The Book of Repulsive Women: 8 Rhythms and 5 Drawings*. 1915. Drawing. UPenn Digital Library. Web. 30 Nov 2013.