

The Icono-Textual Celebration of the Woman in Djuna Barnes's Ladies Almanack

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No Country for Young People: American Writers Migrate to Paris

This article aims to offer an intermedial analysis of one of Djuna Barnes's most relevant works: Ladies Almanack (1928).

The research starts with a short description of immigrant American intellectuals' condition in Paris between the Twenties and the Thirties and then focuses on Djuna Barnes's particular case.

First of all, it briefly describes the writer's years in the French capital, underlining the importance of her friendship with the American poet Natalie Clifford Barney, a strong personality that inspired the drawing of the Almanack; afterwards it focuses on the communication strategies chosen by the author in her almanac.

The article's main goal is to show Djuna Barnes's peculiar poetic, made not only of complex narrations and cryptic descriptions, but that also consist in a significant number of hybrid frames that mix words and pictures. The essay also underlines how this text is richly pervaded by a deep sense of humor aimed at denouncing the women's marginalized condition. Using the tool of irony, Barnes is able to create a borderline text that lays between truth and untruth, reality and fiction, bringing often the reader to question about the veracity of her claims and, for this reason, making Ladies Almanack a fascinating text, something that still need to be explored in deep to understand the real condition of expatriate women and artists in Europe between the Two World Wars.

In the Twenties Paris was an attractive destination for many American personalities, in particular writers and artists. Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein were just some of the names that chose Paris as a place in which to develop their careers or simply to live far from the old puritanism of the United States. The reason why they chose France to expatriate is not clear yet, but many scholars hypothesize that it happened because of American traditionalism and Prohibitionism. Furthermore, American salaries were much higher than the cost of life in France and this gave to expatriate people the possibility to live abroad for long periods and without worries about expenses.

As a journalist Djuna could afford a flat in the city center (Boulevard St. Germain) after a brief period in a rented room at Hôtel Jacob.ⁱ In both cases she had Anglo-American people as neighbors (during the years in Paris Djuna Barnes will never be really far from her native country-she regularly returned to New York- and her close friends and her most important lover -Thelma Wood- were all American: *Your "friends" were all Americans [...] And all "the girls" you ever speak of are American [...].*ⁱⁱ

When she and Thelma moved from Boulevard St. Germain to an apartment at 9 in rue St. Romain, they once again shared the building with other Anglo-American personalities, the most relevant of which was the British poet and novelist Mina Loy, Barnes's acquaintance since the period of Greenwich Village (1912-1921) and one of her closest friends in Paris.ⁱⁱⁱ With Mina, Thelma and other expatriate personalities (such as Fox Madox Ford, Robert McAlmon, T.S. Eliot and Natalie Clifford Barney), Barnes shared not only her daily life and evenings at Parisian cafes, but also and especially literary and artistic experiences

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Modernist novelists, Imagist poets and avant-garde artists were no doubt Barnes's closest personalities, the ones who influenced her style and also made her grow as an independent author. This does not mean that Djuna Barnes's works only consisted in a collage of modernist and avant-garde experiments, but also in a personal processing of her own life experiences translated in a symbolic and (often) cryptic language. Thus, it is easy to understand how difficult it is for readers and translators to catch the meaning of stories and episodes narrated in her books, especially if they come from the elitist spaces she used to share with the others expatriate intellectuals.

Not long after her arrival in the French capital Barnes was in fact introduced by the British Imagist Fox Madox Ford to the sal n of American expatriate women lead by Natalie Clifford Barney.^{iv}Barney was a rich poet and playwright who had left her native country some years before Barnes to live in France. In Paris she was also known as *l'Amazone*, a nickname given her by the French Poet Remy de Gourmont, thanks/duo to her strong and independent character.^vIn 1927 she started her *Acad mie des Femmes*, a private and informal place that hosted personalities as Mina Loy, Colette, Gertrude Stein and Barnes herself. The academy was located in Rue Jacob, where Barney lived in her manor, constantly attended by her female lovers and friends. Inside the garden of her luxurious house, Barney positioned *Le Temple de l'Amiti *, a small, Greek-style building in which the members of the academy read their works or just/simply met. Barney did not open a proper school, but rather a place in which her friends could feel free to present and share their ideas and works.

Even if the academy was reserved to intimate friends, many famous personalities visited it: Jean Cocteau, Fox Madox Ford, T.S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, Peggy Guggenheim and Isadora Duncan are just some of the names of these personalities.^{vi}Djuna Barnes, an immigrant from an old and conservative America, was positively impressed by Barney's libertine spirit and suddenly the *Acad mie* become one of her most relevant sources of inspiration. In honor of Natalie Barney and her sal n she will suddenly publish a book (more precisely an icono-text) destined to become one of the pillars of her poetry: *Ladies Almanack*. Djuna Barnes privately published the *Roman- a- Clef Ladies Almanack* (or, more precisely, *Ladies Almanack: Showing Their Signs and Their Tides; Their Moons and Their Changes; the Seasons as it Is with Them; Their Eclipses and Equinoxes; as well as a Full Record of Diurnal and Nocturnal Distempers*, Written & Illustrated by a Lady of Fashion)^{vii}in 1928, just a year after the official opening of Barney's *Acad mie*.

The book talks about Natalie Barney and her group of female writers and describes the personalities and activities inside the *Acad mie* using and enigmatic language. For this reason the novel results notoriously difficult to decipher.^{viii}The pages have an irregular structure: their layout is not fixed through the document, but rather free. As in Ryder, Djuna Barnes alternates words to drawings (made by herself), making a work that basically stands between art and literature. As an almanac, the book does not have chapters with proper names, but is divided in twelve months and every month starts with a drawing that is usually followed by a tale in prose, even if sometimes it is possible to find verses or songs. Each image and its own text are allegorical and referred to particular episodes of Djuna Barnes and her female friends' life at the *Acad mie des Femmes*.

The main character of the book is lady Evangeline Musset, Djuna Barnes's literary portrait of Natalie Clifford Barney. She is described and illustrated as a female knight (probably because of her nickname, *l'Amazone*)^{ix}. Barnes does not reveal her source of inspiration in portraying Lady Evangeline and her friends, but it is possible to understand the similarity if we know about the author's habits and daily acquaintances in Paris. The correspondences between salon members and characters in Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* are essential, and include key figures such as Natalie Barney (Dame/Saint Evangeline Musset), Radcliffe Hall (Tilly-Tweed-In-Blood), Una Troubridge (Lady Buck-and-Balk), Mina Loy (Patience Scapel), Dolly Wild (Dolly Furious), and Romaine Brooks (Cynic Sal).^x

The identification with Barnes's friends are only a part of the coded writing of the almanac: *the language is even more challenging as it relies on a mix of literary genres [...] and various form of archaic English*.^{xi}Djuna Barnes's choice to fuse different literary genres is an element that collocates her in Modernism's tendency to generate hybrid texts, highly influenced by the spread of the avant-garde (it is the case of Sonia Delaunay's *Alphabet* or Juan Mir  and Jean Dupin's painted poetries). Barnes perfectly follows Modernism's rules creating a text that shows the tendency to create hybrid volumes that contain images, texts, pictures and colored drawings. The fact that her source of inspiration is a group of women and friends makes her work totally different from her male contemporaries: she chooses to describe a world that is completely female and, in describing it, she uses an enigmatic language, as if only the group members had the possibility to understand the episodes narrated inside the *Almanack*.

This feature is not new in Djuna Barnes's poetic: she had done something similar in *Ryder*, the novel dedicated to Thelma Wood^{xii} and written just some months before the *Almanack*. *Ryder* talks about Djuna Barnes's early life in the U.S.A., while the *Ladies Almanack* narrates her contemporary life in Paris. The continuity between her most relevant works of 1928 is provided by a poetic made of irony and enigmatic episodes combined to drawings (often caricatures) usually sketched by Barnes herself. Using the tool of irony, she was able to create a borderline text that lays between truth and untruth, reality and fiction^{xiii}, bringing often the reader to question the veracity of her claims. The pictures inserted into the narration follow the poetic of the text showing irony and mysteriousness as well. Djuna Barnes will preserve the habit of mixing text and images at least until the Thirties, the years of *Nightwood*, the novel in which pictures disappear to give space to a narration made of images.^{xiv}

An Untranslatable Text

In 1928 Djuna Barnes gave birth to the *Ladies Almanack*, privately printed thank to Robert McAlmond, who supported the publication costs. The copies of the book mostly circulated in the streets of Paris, but were also smuggled in the United States.^{xv} The volume was written as a *divertissement* for Thelma, hospitalized in a Parisian clinic after an accident.^{xvi} The relationship between Djuna and her lover was not going well and, some months later, the sculptor will leave Paris and Djuna to go back to New York with her new lover Henriette McCrea Metcalf (the woman portrayed as Jenny Petherbirdge in *Nightwood*).^{xvii}

Probably because of the end of Barnes's most important love story, the *Almanack* will be her last book set in a positive and warm atmosphere. Her masterpiece, *Nightwood*, will instead present darker elements that closely associate it with the Gothic or quasi-Gothic literature.^{xviii}

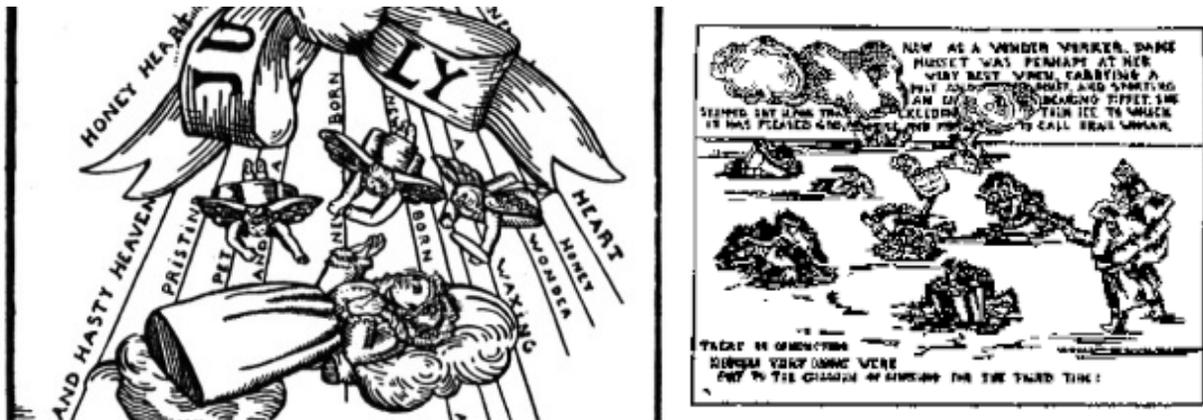


If Djuna Barnes were still among us, it is not certain that a new edition of *Ladies Almanack* would be seeing print. She claimed to have written it "in an idle hour" as a "jollity" for a "very special audience".^{xix} During the writing of her *Almanack* Djuna was still part of Natalie Barney's academy, an elitist group of female artists and writers among which she felt free, protected and appreciated. *Ladies Almanack* is the book that celebrates Natalie Barney as a strong and independent leader, but also the others female personalities (Mina Loy, Romaine Brooks, Radcliffe Hall...). The volume is divided in twelve chapters; each chapter is devoted to a different month, as in the real ancient almanacs. The text is always accompanied by drawings made and colored by Djuna Barnes herself with the help of her Polish friend Tylia Perlmutter and Mina Loy's daughter Fabienne.^{xx} The whole text is strongly pervaded by irony, starting from its cover image with the writing *The Book Alla Ladies Should Carry* (it is known that the book is only understandable by a small group of Barnes's friends) going to the title itself *Ladies Almanack: Showing Their Signs and Their Tides; Their Moons and Their Changes; the Seasons as it Is with Them; Their Eclipses and Equinoxes; as well as a Full Record of Diurnal and Nocturnal Distempers, Written & Illustrated by a Lady of Fashion*.^{xxi} The text and its pictures marginally speak about nature (references to plants, sky or animals lie on the background); they rather illustrate the life and main events of Dame/Saint Evangeline Musset, a fantastic figure similar to Nataly Clifford Barney. Dame/Saint Evangeline Musset always occupies a relevant role from the first lines of the introduction:



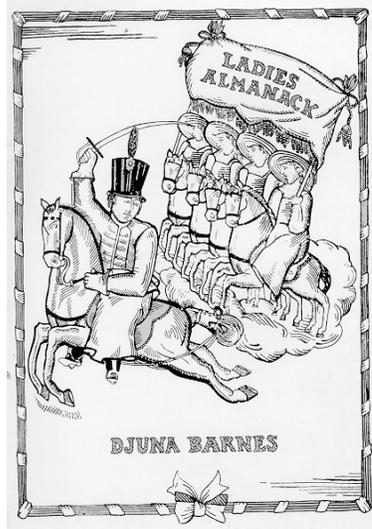
Now this be a Tale of as fine a Wench as ever wet Bed, she who was called Evangeline Musset and who was in her Heart one Grand Red Cross for the Pursuance, the Relief and Distraction, of such Girls as in the Hinder Parts, and their Fore Parts, and in whatsoever Parts, did suffer them most, lament Cruelly[...].^{xxii} After the brief introduction the book goes on talking about Evangeline Musset and her friends. Even if the Dame is not always the protagonist of the chapters. She always lies on the background or converses with the others characters. *Ladies Almanack* does not make a schematic narration of Evangeline's life neither claims to illustrate Natalie Clifford Barney's one. *Ladies Almanack* is something more complicated. It lies between the narrative text and the descriptive one, but presents also a prose that closely assimilates it to novels^{xxiii}. There is a beginning (with Evangeline's birth) and an end (with the protagonist's death), but the central part consists in a conglomeration of words, songs, verses, letters and pictures, often indecipherable and that cause several interpretative problems.^{xxiv} January, April, May, July, August, November and December present a quite regular scheme with: an opening picture (feature common to all chapters), the name of the month and the numbers of its days, a subtitle and the proper corpus of the chapter.

In the pages of February and March Barnes creates two texts that occupy the same page, placed in two different columns^{xxv}. February also consist in a love letter (probably dedicated to Thelma herself or to one of Barney's lovers) and it is accompanied by a small paragraph that summarizes and celebrates the protagonist's life and her most relevant feats; March portraits two main characters (Lady Buck-and-Balk alias Una Troubridge and Tilly-Tweed-In-Blood alias Radcliffe Hall),^{xxvi} but also contains a paragraph with a brief description of the zodiac signs and a miniature containing a pentagram with the notes of a song (Lullaby for a Lady's Lady, probably referred to the convalescent Thelma). June is divided in two parts: the first one is a poem; the second a small chapter titled The Fourth Great Moment of History that contains references to the Old Testament. A similar scheme characterizes September and October with the text interrupted by the poem List and Likelihood in September and by the insert Spring Fevers, Love Pulters and Winter Feasts in October. *Ladies Almanack* is not only an illustrated book inspired to ancient almanacs (such as Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's *Almanack* or the eighteenth-century magazine *The Ladies Diary* or *The Woman's Almanack*).^{xxvii} It is something more complex. To use W.J.T. Mitchell words it is rather a mixed media,^{xxviii} an icono-text in which pictures and words closely lay one beside the other. In Barnes, the interaction between words and pictures is so articulated that she is also able to create frames in which the reader/observer finds different kinds of media (such as music and drawings in the picture Lullaby for a Lady's Lady) living together. In another words the author represents metapictures.^{xxix}



In the pictures above is it possible to see how Barnes combines words and drawings in the same space. Sometimes she also decorates the frame itself, creating a metapictures inside pictures. The frames are not only the illustrated pages in which she draws the world of Evangeline Musset and her friends, but also the several, meticulous descriptions included into the narrative flow. In September, for example, Barnes makes a long account (a kind of stream of consciousness) about the woman: *The very Condition of Woman is so subject to Hazard, so complex, so grievous, that to place her at one Moment is but to displace her at the next. In Youth she is comely, straight of Limb, fair of Eye, sweet back and front; tall or short, light or dark--somehow or somewhat to the Heart. Yes it is not twelve span before she sags, stretches, become distorted. Her Bones dry, her flesh melts, her Tongue is bitter, or runs an outlawed Honey.*

Her Mind is corrupt with the Cash of a pick-thank existence. Life has taught her Life. She hath become Friends with it, nor hath she lain long enough upon her Back—thought she hath lain so half her duration, to prefer the Coin on Ether. She was not fashioned to swim Heaven, she is a Fish of Earth, she swims in Terra-firma.^{xxx}



Barnes's short excursus has not only the aim to describe something, but also stresses her conception on women's state. In effect, *Ladies Almanack* is a great example of feminist work: on the one hand because it celebrates woman's independence; on the other because it denounces her difficult and painful condition (*this poor condition^{xxxi}*). Generally, the frames dedicated to women in this volume are all characterized by a stinging irony, the same used in *Ryder^{xxxii}* and (later) in *Nightwood*. However, *Ladies Almanack* is considered a positive novel, a book that celebrates friendship and the years in Paris. In the Thirties Barnes's literature will suffer a substantial change and the lively story narrated in the almanac will be replaced by the theme of loss^{xxxiii} in *Nightwood*.

The reasons of this change can be found in particular in the end of the relationship with Thelma Wood. During their years together Wood, as a sculptor, decided to adopt the silverpoint technique, "writing" pictures on paper with a small pen. Her choice was widely influenced and supported by Barnes, who saw the silverpoint as a sort of common medium, the way of juncture between her visual poetic and Wood's written images. The end of the relationship with Thelma Wood will inscribes a lack in Barnes's life in her writing too. From this point the pictures are translated in a new poetic made of images.

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Notes

ⁱ PHILLIP HERRING, *Djuna, The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes*, Penguin Books, New York, 1995, p. 133.

ⁱⁱ Emily Coleman to Djuna Barnes, 3 August 1936.

ⁱⁱⁱ SANDEEP PARMAR, *Reading Mina Loy's Autobiographies*, Bloomsbury Academy Publishing, London, 2013, p. 173.

^{iv} SALVATORE MARANO, *Il Canto delle Sirene* an Introduction to the Italian Edition of *The Ladies Almanack*, Quattroventi Edizioni, Urbino, 2014, p. XII.

^v SUZANNE RODRIGUEZ, *Wild Heart: A Life: Natalie Clifford Barney and the Decadence of Literary Paris*, Harper Perrenial, New York, 2003, p. 191.

^{vi} Ivi, p. 246-247.

- ^{vii} DJUNA BARNES, *Ladies Almanack*, Martino Publishing, Mansfield, 2016.
- ^{viii} AMY WELL-LYNN, *The Intertextual, Sexually Coded Rue Jacob: A Geocritical Approach to Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, and Radclyffe Hall*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2005, p. 82.
- ^{ix} SUZANNE SUZANNE RODRIGUEZ, *Wild Heart: A Life: Natalie Clifford Barney and the Decadence of Literary Paris...op. cit.*, 2003, p. 84.
- ^x *Ivi*, p. 85.
- ^{xi} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xii} MARY LYNN BROE, *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, Board of Trustees, Southern Illinois University, 1991, p. 165.
- ^{xiii} ANNA KATHARINA SCHAFFNER AND SHANE WELLER, *Modernist Eroticism-European Literature after Sexology*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012, p. 153.
- ^{xiv} The picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break or tear. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survive its destruction – in memory, in narrative, in copies and traces other media. from W.J.T. MITCHELL, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Image and Science*, in *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetic*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, p. 3).
- ^{xv} Djuna Barnes to Natalie Barney, 8 January, 1929.
- ^{xvi} PHILLIP HERRING, *Djuna, The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes...op. cit.*, p. 152.
- ^{xvii} SALVATORE MARANO, *Il Canto delle Sirene an Introduction to the Italian Edition of the Ladies Almanack...op. cit.*, p. XIII.
- ^{xviii} AVRIL HORNER, *European Gothic: A Spirited Exchange 1760-1960*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002 p. 230.
- ^{xix} SUSAN SNIADER LASNER, *Introduction to DJUNA BARNES, Ladies Almanack*, New York University Press, New York, 1992, p. xv.
- ^{xx} PHILLIP HERRING, *Djuna, The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes...op. cit.*, p. 152.
- ^{xxi} DJUNA BARNES, *Ladies Almanack...op. cit.*, p. 3.
- ^{xxii} *Ivi*, p. 6.
- ^{xxiii} SALVATORE MARANO, *Il Canto delle Sirene an Introduction to the Italian Edition of the Ladies Almanack...op. cit.*, p. XV
- ^{xxiv} KATHRIN R. KENT, "Lullaby for a Lady's Lady": Lesbian Identity in the Ladies Almanack, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Chicago, 1993, p. 1.
- ^{xxv} SALVATORE MARANO, *Il Canto delle Sirene an Introduction to the Italian Edition of the Ladies Almanack...op. cit.*, p. XXIII
- ^{xxvi} SUZANNE RODRIGUEZ, *Wild Heart: A Life: Natalie Clifford Barney and the Decadence of Literary Paris...op. cit.*, 2003, p. 84.
- ^{xxvii} SALVATORE MARANO, *Il Canto delle Sirene an Introduction to the Italian Edition of the Ladies Almanack...op. cit.*, p. XIV-XV.
- ^{xxviii} In *Picture Theory* W.J.T. Mitchell analyzes the meaning of media arguing that all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes.
- ^{xxix} Sometimes we encounter a picture in which the imagine of another picture appears, a "nesting" of one image inside another, as when Velasquez paint himself in the act of painting in *Las Meninas*, or Saul Steinberg draws the figure of a man drawing in *New World*. In Nicholas Poussin's *Adoration of the Golden Calf*, we see the image of a desert landscape with the Israelites dancing around the calf, the high priest Aaron gesturing towards it, and Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai, about to break the tablets of the law in anger at this lapse of idolatry. This is a metapicture, in which an image in one medium (painting) enframes an image in another (sculpture)[...].Metapictures are not especially rare things. They appear whenever an image appears inside another image, whenever a picture presents a scene of depiction or the appearance of an image, as when a painting appears on a wall in a movie or a television set shows up as a prop in a television show. The medium itself need not to be doubled (e.g., paintings that represent paintings; photographs that represent photographs): one medium may be nested inside another, as when the Golden Calf appears inside an oil painting or a shadow in cast in a drawing. (from W.J.T. MITCHELL, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Image and Science*, in *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetic...op. cit.* p. 9).
- ^{xxx} DJUNABARNES, *Ladies Almanack*, Martino Publishing, Mansfield, 2016, p. 55-56.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxxii} JULIE TAYLOR, *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012, p. 98.
- ^{xxxiii} VICTORIA L. SMITH, *A Story beside(s) Itself: The Language of Loss in Djuna Barnes' Nghtwood*, Modern Language Association