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The Play the Critics Could Not See: Djuna Barnes's The Dove

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Djuna Barnes's *The Dove*

ABSTRACT: Literary criticism on Djuna Barnes's *The Dove* has hitherto been lacking, both in quantity and quality. At least, if an astute observation has been made of the play, it has hidden itself as deftly as has *The Dove* its meanings from the majority of critics. Partly to blame for this is the fact that few critics have even attempted to analyze it in any depth. But any critic who has read *The Dove* and dismissed it as a witty but nonsensical exercise in anarchistic sadomasochism, has, to put it kindly, not read it closely enough. While exemplary literary writing is contingent upon the art of 'showing' rather than 'telling,' and tends to respect a relative preference of elusive dramatization over lucid exposition, works of literature are not always justified in the degree to which they conceal their meanings. Barnes's *The Dove*, however, is not enigmatic for the sake of being enigmatic. Rather, just as Vera and Amelia's lesbianism is repressed from their consciousness, so too are the meanings of the play repressed from the surface, and thus only perceivable on a level of which not even the characters—apparently, not even the critics—themselves are cognizant. As evidenced by clues provided in the set's artwork, the ribald paronomasia pervading the dialogue, and the ways in which Vera, Amelia, and The Dove are treated, the play's three women are best understood as members of an inverted trinity whose antithesis to divinity is characterized by the repressed lesbianism of the sisters as contrasted with the paradoxically dangerous passivity of the bisexual Dove, the tension between which culminates in an absurd act of violence exacted upon a painting—the façade behind which their true selves are veiled.

Literary criticism on Djuna Barnes's *The Dove* has hitherto been lacking, both in quantity and quality. At least, if an astute observation has been made of the play, it has hidden itself as deftly as has *The Dove* its meanings from the majority of critics. Partly to blame for this is the fact that few critics have even attempted to analyze it in any depth. But any critic who has read *The Dove* and dismissed it as a witty but nonsensical exercise in anarchistic sadomasochism, has, to put it kindly, not read it closely enough. While exemplary literary writing is contingent upon the art of 'showing' rather than 'telling,' and tends to respect a relative preference of elusive dramatization over lucid exposition, works of literature are not always justified in the degree to which they conceal their meanings. Barnes's *The Dove*, however, is not enigmatic for the sake of being enigmatic. Rather, just as Vera and Amelia's lesbianism is repressed from their consciousness, so too are the meanings of the play repressed from the surface, and thus only perceivable on a level of which not even the characters—apparently, not even the critics—themselves are cognizant. As evidenced by clues provided in the set's artwork, the ribald paronomasia pervading the dialogue, and the ways in which Vera, Amelia, and The Dove are traited, the play's three women are best understood as members of an inverted trinity whose antithesis to divinity is characterized by the repressed lesbianism of the sisters as contrasted with the paradoxically dangerous passivity of the bisexual Dove, the tension between which culminates in an absurd act of violence exacted upon a painting—the façade behind which their true selves are veiled.

The relationship between Amelia, Vera, and The Dove can be best understood as an inverted trinity, wherein the familial relationship is, rather than between father and son, between sister and sister. As Amelia is dominant over Vera, the former can be seen as the more fatherly element thereof, the latter as more like the son. The Dove is to be understood as the Holy Ghost.

In John 1:32 of the King James Bible, John reports, “I saw the spirit descending from heaven like a dove.” In Luke 3:22, Luke reports, “And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him.” Not only does the bible liken the Holy Spirit, in more than one place, to “a dove” (KJB 1:32; 3:22), but the Holy Spirit is also represented as a dove in much religious art, such as in Corrado Giaquinto’s *The Holy Spirit*, and in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Dove of the Holy Spirit*. In the Christian Trinity, whereas Jesus and the Heavenly Father are conspicuously masculine, the Holy Ghost is sexually ambiguous. So too, in *The Dove*’s trinity, are Amelia and Vera, though lesbians who wish to be male, fixed as females, whereas The Dove, who is bisexual, is able to seamlessly move between the masculine and the feminine. Moreover, the Father and the Son are more or less removed from the human flesh of others—the Son is the Father in his own human flesh—whereas the Holy Spirit actually moves from human body to human body and is even that sexual force which impregnates Mother Mary in the New Testament. Likewise, Vera and Amelia have no contact with other bodies, whereas The Dove has a promiscuous past. The Dove, when she says of herself, “my brothers were fond of me—in a way, and my father—in a way—” (*The Dove* 357), even alludes to a time when, as is strongly suggested by the pauses in her speech, she was sexually abused by her father and brothers, the previous trinity-like system of which she was a part.

Unfortunately, *The Dove*’s meanings are so repressed from the surface as to have eluded many critics; but because of the coherence with which the system of signification operates within the play, as is evident upon a sufficiently close examination thereof, this fact is not a shortcoming on the part of Barnes, but rather a testament to her artistic ingenuity. Particularly, the clues provided in the set’s paintings have been overlooked. In *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation*, Kannenstine writes that, “[b]esides the obligatory frills, the room

contains abundant firearms and two suggestive pictures, one of an early English tandem race, the other of a Madonna and child” (136), without elaborating any further on what it is the pictures suggest. In “Djuna Barnes, 1892-1982,” Cheryl J. Plumb writes nothing more about the paintings than that the “picture of *Deux Courtesans* both symbolizes their desire for a wider life, i.e. to express their sexuality, but at the same time it prevents a wider life” (353-54). The artwork in *The Dove* is hugely important in elucidating the fact of their being an inverted trinity. In the first scene, “[o]nly two pictures are evident, one of the Madonna and Child, and one of an early English tandem race” (*The Dove* 355). Both paintings illustrate, at least ostensibly, twosomes rather than threesomes. The picture of an early English tandem race reflects not only the sisterly twosome of Vera and Amelia, but also the romantic same-sex twosome that exists as an incestuous possibility between them, and as a quasi-incestuous, age-inappropriate possibility between each sister and The Dove. The picture of the Madonna and Child is actually an elusive portrait of The Dove, since, in Christian doctrine, the Holy Ghost impregnates Mary in order to give birth to the Child. Skeptics might wonder whether, if there is any historical truth to the biblical account to begin with, Mary might have become pregnant naturalistically out of wedlock and claimed she had been impregnated by God rather than a man to whom she was not married, in an effort, apparently a rather successful one, to exculpate herself from the charge of infidelity. So too can it be said of The Dove that her innocent appearance is a kind of façade for a dangerous promiscuity that burns beneath her deceptively doll-like flesh. But whereas the Dove’s façade is a natural one not of her making, Vera’s and Amelia’s façade is an artificial one which they have constructed so as to conceal their lesbianism by ostentatiously feminizing and heterosexualizing their appearance and behavior.

The third work of art to appear in the play is conspicuously the most significant, encapsulating as it does the entire play itself. When Amelia enters the room, the first thing she says is this: “You should come and see Carpaccio’s *Deux Courtisanes Vénitiennes* now, the sun is shining right in on the head of the one in the foreground” (*The Dove* 360). The courtesan who is sitting in the foreground represents Amelia: just as the sun is shining on the former’s head, the spotlight is shining on the latter. The other courtesan is to be understood as Vera, the boy as The Dove. The columns serve as a kind of prison for the courtesans, the female body from which the men within Vera and Amelia are unable to escape, whereas the boy is able to fit through the space between the columns with ease, just as The Dove is able to seamlessly slip between masculinity and femininity, precisely what the sisters wish—but are unable—to do. In the painting, the courtesans are conspicuously female, the one in the foreground, just like Amelia, more ostentatiously so than the other, whereas the boy is androgynous, being as he is feminine but with the potential to grow into a man. The Dove regularly realizes that potential Amelia and Vera are unable to realize in themselves: she is able to consummate her bisexual desires, assume a feminine role one moment, a masculine role the next, and appropriate patriarchal power for her own purposes while retaining her feminine qualities of beauty and smallness. The boy within Amelia and Vera, on the other hand, will never grow into a man because he is so resolutely repressed by the women whose souls he inhabits.

Interestingly, as Yvonne Szafran verified in “Carpaccio’s ‘Hunting on the Lagoon’: A New Perspective,” the painting itself is actually part of a larger painting, the other fragments of which were discovered centuries afterwards. The other panels complete the picture to show that the two women are waiting for their husbands to return from a hunting trip. This parallels the absence of the masculine from Vera and Amelia’s lives. Though Vera and Amelia are not

waiting for their husbands, since they have none, they are, in a sense, waiting for the men within them to emerge to the surface—perhaps they are condemned to wait forever. Moreover, both the Venetian courtesans and Vera and Amelia keep a superfluity of pets at their place. The animals represent the bestial perversity within them, the birds their spiritual longing to break free from their physical cages. The birds, who can fly, are trapped within an apartment, just as the men, who wish to fall in love with women, are trapped within the bodies of Vera and Amelia, and thus unable to do so, restricted as they are by a debilitating fear of consummating their, at the time, socially unacceptable desires. In the end, what prompts Amelia's hysterical tirade is the revelation that an entire ecosystem is gradually making its way into their apartment, a metaphor for the bestial perversity, which, no matter how hard they try to purge from their souls, will inevitably find its way into their apartment.

Contrary to the opinion of many critics, practically every line in *The Dove* is infused with meaning. Several critics have made arguments to the effect that *The Dove* is more or less about nothing, others that it is about something it is not. In *Djuna*, Andrew Field ironically says the “Barnes characters live near death and violence; this and not sex is her true subject, though frequently the fact is well enough concealed” (95). Nothing could have been added to that sentence to make it a more unlikely reading. All the so-called violent imagery in *The Dove* is undeniably sexual metaphor. A close enough reading of the dialogue reveals a plethora of sexual puns, none of which are as abstruse as their apparent imperceptibility would suggest. In fact, almost every single line of *The Dove's* is a reinforcement of her bisexual promiscuity and the superiority of her carnal knowledge over the lack thereof in Vera and Amelia, nearly every one of whose lines, in turn, is a reinforcement of their repressed lesbianism. Reflecting on her childhood, *The Dove* says, “I became fond of moles—it's so daring of them to be in the darkness

underground. And then I like open fields, too—they say there’s nothing like nature for the simple spirit” (*The Dove* 357). Here what she is ostensibly saying is not at all what she actually means. She is saying she became sexually fond of men—as metonymically represented by their genitalia, which are metaphorically symbolized by “moles” for whom “it’s so daring [. . .] to be in the darkness underground” (*The Dove* 357)—but also of women, similarly represented by their genitalia as symbolized by “open fields” (*The Dove* 357). “Moles” even sounds like ‘males’ (*The Dove* 357), “fields” like ‘females’ (*The Dove* 357). Vera replies by saying, “Yes, and I’ve long had my suspicions about nature” (*The Dove* 357). Here Vera is admitting that she is suspicious—distrustful of, hostile towards—her own nature: the sexual orientation and gender identity which nature has bestowed upon her. Thus, The Dove’s line, “they say there’s nothing like nature for the simple spirit” comes to have more than one meaning (*The Dove* 357), one of which being that the simple spirit—the Holy Spirit that is The Dove—is able to accept her nature, whereas Vera, a complicated spirit, is unable to do so.

Throughout their dialogue, Vera’s imagination is contrasted with The Dove’s comparative activeness, which undermines many critics’ misreading of The Dove’s so-called passivity. Vera relates one of her dreams thus: “I dreamt I was a Dresden doll and that I had been blown down by the wind and that I broke all to pieces—that is, my arms and my head broke all to pieces—but that I was surprised to find that my china skirt had become flexible, as if it were made of chiffon and lace” (*The Dove* 358). Here Vera relates a dream in which she is physically smashed to pieces, but wherein her china skirt has become “flexible” (*The Dove* 358), as if concealing a male erection. In other words, in her fantasy, she breaks through her feminine body, which is a kind of porcelain shell, into the form of a male. Fittingly, in her dream, Vera is blown down by the wind—a kind of mystical image, wherein the wind, being as it is ethereal, can be

taken as euphemistic for some mysterious spiritual force. The Dove responds by saying, “Yes, there are many dreams . . .” (*The Dove* 358). The Dove is always emphasizing the fact that there is more than one x —which reflects how there is, in The Dove’s view, not just one gender to be, and to be interested in, but two. Vera asks The Dove, “have you ever felt that your bones were utterly sophisticated but that your flesh was keeping them from expressing themselves?” (*The Dove* 358). The difference between the skeletal frame of a man and that of a woman is not so obvious as the difference between the external frames, flesh included, of a man and that of a woman. Internally, Vera feels she is a man, but her female body prevents her from expressing herself as she truly is. The Dove, always happy to duplicate matters, responds by saying, “Or vice-versa?” (*The Dove* 358). When Vera tells The Dove that The Dove frightens her, she emphasizes that it is The Dove’s passivity that is so terrifying. The Dove is, in actuality, “delicate as china” (*The Dove* 355), and thus is ever on the verge of being shattered in the same sense in which Vera is only in imagination. Vera is terrified of the way in which The Dove does not repress her desires but merely is as she is. The Dove, in being attractive and bisexual, threatens Vera’s ability to repress her own lesbian feelings: The Dove’s so-called passivity, the most active force in the play, teases Vera with the ever-imminent possibility of physical romance being consummated between them, an unbearable and yet irresistible force which has an even deeper impact on Amelia, as is evidenced in the play’s conclusion.

Random as the play’s conclusion may appear, it does not manifest without having been foreshadowed several times. That Amelia, according to Vera, habitually pokes pinholes into “some Parisienne bathing girl’s picture” (*The Dove* 357), suggests her wish to penetrate the female body, something she is both psychologically and physiologically incapable of doing. This act of penetrating two-dimensional representations of women impotently with a pin in the

seclusion of her bedroom is a kind of warm-up to the devastating bullet hole The Dove puts through the *Deux Courtisanes Vénitiennes*. Moreover, the flies in their apartment symbolize the aftermath of a death so written into the fabric of their destiny as to transcend linearity by foreglimpsing itself: the flies foreshadow the gunshot, which could be interpreted either as a literal suicide, or else as the figurative death of repression. Where the bullet hole goes is unknown. To Andrew Field, it does not matter, because the assertion, “This is obscene!” is “not flung against art or its destruction but at those who content themselves with experiencing nothing more than pretty pictures” (*The Dove* 362; Field 95). Neither his conclusion nor the straw man argument he rejects in his implicit dichotomy is convincing. Rather, the bullet hole, if it is placed in Amelia’s shoulder, may represent the violent manner in which The Dove’s bite has penetrated Amelia’s façade—not only her flesh, but her soul. What is “obscene” is that Amelia has been penetrated (*The Dove* 362), and she is thus destined to be more ‘open’ in the future. Wherever the bullet hole goes, the ostensible act of violence must be seen as a sexual act of penetration through the two-dimensional surface beneath which the men within Vera and Amelia hide—that is, until the curtain closes.

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