Philosophy &

THE TITLE OF THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS on the contemporary French novel* raises once again the very difficult problem of the relation between a novelist's philosophy and his art. It is a matter of historical fact that in times of settled beliefs men have tended to write well; that when traditional beliefs have been challenged and the stability of society threatened, they have gone out of their way to discover an alternative system of belief or a philosophy which would provide them with a framework, give unity and shape to their artistic experience. One of the most celebrated examples is Zola who swallowed philosophical determinism hook, line and sinker. While it is arguable that his theories of heredity gave him the staying power necessary to carry out his vast undertaking, it is clear today that he succeeded in spite and not because of the very inhibiting philosophy that he adopted. What is impressive about the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle is not the philosophy, but the *vision* of the Empire drifting slowly and relentlessly to disaster and finally collapsing in smoke and ashes.

Since Zola's time the position has steadily deteriorated. The writer is no longer able to put the whole of his creative powers into his work; he is obliged to expend his energies in trying to produce the conditions in which literature becomes possible. One of the main differences between writers studied here and their predecessors is that instead of adopting a ready-made system like Zola, they have either incorporated their own systems into their novels, or they have used the novel as an instrument for the philosophical investigation of experience. Dr. Cruickshank puts it cogently when he speaks, in his introductory essay, of their treating the writing of fiction as a "cognitive activity."

**The Novelist as Philosopher*. Studies in French Fiction 1935-60. Edited by John Cruickshank. Oxford University Press.

IN A STUDY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, Mr. Maurice Cranston throws some further light on the situation by an amusing comparison between the English and French attitudes to philosophy. In France philosophy is not a parlour game as it is in England; it is a serious—an almost tragically serious—business. Although David Hume was at least as much of an unbeliever as the French existentialists, he lost no sleep because reason failed to prove the existence of God and the Moral Law. He did not repose his head on the pillow of doubt, observes Mr. Cranston; he reposed it on the pillow of habit and custom and tradition. This, we are told, is where Hume and the British generally have the advantage over French philosophers:

> In a country where there is security, where the law is effectively enforced, and where convention upholds a decent moral order, it does not matter if the abstract truths of classical philosophy are found to be empty. But in a country where there is no political stability, where the Germans repeatedly invade one, and the franc does not hold, there is no refuge in habit, custom and tradition. If in such a situation the universe is found to have no rational order, the discovery will understandably be felt as a disaster."

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Martin Turnell

the Novel

It is evident that in the decidedly emotional climate of invasion, 'disaster' and falling money values described here logical positivism has nothing to offer the man or the writer, but that a *lebensphilosophie* like existentialism may bring succour to both. This is how Dr. Weightman summarizes Sartre's philosophy:

"All Sartre's fiction deals with the themes of his philosophy. It shows the human consciousness caught in an alien, ultimately incomprehensible world, of which the first manifestation is the body in which that consciousness finds itself. There is no God and, therefore, no universal, objective system of values. Nor can there be any given "system" of secular morality, such as humanist thinkers are fond of imagining. Each individual is faced with freedom of choice and is aware of his freedom and his contingency as anguish . . . "

Dr. Weightman goes on to show why this philosophy fits into the framework of the novel.

"Sartre," he writes, "is not the kind of philosopher whose work is diametrically opposed to novel-writing. He does not aim at devising a system of abstractions tangential to, or remote from, ordinary living. He does not meditate timelessly on Truth and Beauty, nor does he go in for circumscribed linguistic analysis. As a phenomenologist, his concern is to grasp situations in their concrete completeness. . . . When a philosophy tries to adhere in this way to the whole surface of existence, it is clearly not far removed from the literary approach. Indeed, we may ask whether the philosophers of the post-Kierkegaardian tradition should not be more properly termed philosophical literary men."

The argument of this book is that, owing to the breakdown of traditional values, sweeping changes have taken place in the French novel during the past twenty-five years. They affect both the novelists' subject-matter and their method. "The tradition of literary character analysis," says Dr. Cruickshank, "has been widely discredited . . . material objects seem to have occupied the scene more and more as the portrayal of character has become increasingly abstract and non-psychological." In short, people are "out" and metaphysics is "in."

THIS VIEW SEEMS TO ME to call for one important reservation. It is suggested by Dr. Weightman's reference to Kierkegaard. The French situation is not so novel, the break with tradition not so recent, as these writers are inclined to suggest.

While there has undoubtedly been a widespread breakdown in traditional values, it did not occur suddenly in our own century. It was a much more gradual process and its origins must be sought in the eighteenth century. The determinism of the French *philosophes* of the Enlightenment undermined belief in the supernatural; the philosophical idealism which derives from Berkeley and Kant weakened man's conviction of the reality of the external world, while the two together ended by making him doubt the reality of his own existence. The French Revolution provided the driving power for the upheavals which followed.

These were the forces which went to the shaping of nineteenth-century literature. The century is divided by the conflict between scientific determinism and idealism. It is reflected in the literary order by the conflict between realism and roman-

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ticism. At the root of all modern philosophies there is a marked subjective element. We cannot say with certainty whether determinism asserted the existence of the external world with such vehemence in order to allay the doubts sown by idealism, or whether idealism was prompted by a desire to escape from a purely mechanical universe, but something of the kind undoubtedly happened in literature. The minute inventory of material things in the work of the realists and naturalists was part of an attempt to find something solid and enduring in a world of dissolving values, while the withdrawal of the writers who stemmed from the Romantic Movement into an inner world was equally an attempt to find a place for aspirations which were excluded from the world of naturalism. Nor must we forget that the Romantic Movement itself was in part the product of religious decline and provided a release for insights which were previously associated with institutional religion.

ALL TRUE IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE offers us an interpretation of reality. It is the result of what may be described as "insight" or "vision." The traditional novelist operates in a stable, or apparently stable, world; but he uses his insight, which may be religious or moral or psychological, or a blend of all three, to rearrange the raw materials of experience. "What distinguishes the modern from the classical sensibility," said Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "is that the latter is nourished by moral and the former by metaphysical problems." This observation occurs in an essay on Dostoevsky and points to the moment when the major change took place. In Jane Austen and George Eliot insight is primarily moral; in Henry James's anatomy of the corruption of polite society at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries it is both moral and psychological. There are profound religious, moral and psychological insights in Dostoevsky, but what gives him his enormous stature among novelists is his systematic investigation into the nature and structure of reality. In the last chapter of his book on him, Berdyaev calls him "the greatest Russian metaphysician." His influence has been immense. It is impossible to believe that without him Kafka, who himself has been one of the two most influential European novelists of the twentieth century, would have achieved all he did in the way he did, but the Dostoevsky breakthrough was not entirely the isolated phenomenon for which it is sometimes taken. Although Rimbaud was born more than thirty years later than Dostoevsky, his poetry was written in the same decades as some of Dostoevsky's major works. He proclaimed that the aim of poetry was not to "entertain" or "instruct," but to "change" life, to reach what he called "la vraie vie": the ultimate reality which was hidden behind the transitory world of appearances. The existentialists have paid tributes to Dostoevsky and Rimbaud. They have been less indulgent to Proust whose reputation has suffered from the discredit into which psychological analysis has fallen; but Proust echoed Rimbaud's phrase about "la vraie vie" in the great work which he described as "the story of an invisible vocation."

I do not want to exaggerate the similarities between Dostoevsky or Kafka and the French existentialists, but it is clear that in Dostoevsky metaphysics and prose fiction converged, that Dostoevsky and Kafka were the forerunners of the existentialists, and that there are undoubtedly similarities of theme, approach and method.

AMONG THE COMMONEST EXISTENTIALIST concepts are "alienation," the "absurd" and "anguish." The protagonists of Dostoevsky and Kafka, of Sartre and Camus, are often "alienated" creatures or "outsiders"—think of the unhappy protagonist of *The Castle* designated only by the initial K—who are wrestling with ultimate problems and racked by "anguish." One of the most obvious characteristics of any metaphysical discourse is *dialectic*. It is something that we find in all the novelists I have named. Dostoevsky's characters are endlessly preoccupied with the problem of the existence and nature of God. Kafka has been called the author of "metaphysical tales" rather than a metaphysical or existentialist novelist, but there is a highly personal dialectic—a dialectic of images rather than language—in K's continued comings and goings as he attempts to establish contact with "the castle"; the dialectic of

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Grace withheld in a new kind of Jansenist world. The French existentialists usually start from a position of absolute unbelief and the dialectic rotates round the problems of the "alienated" consciousness and freedom of "choice," but in an inverted way the "anguish" is nevertheless generated by the problem of the existence of God.

The dialectical movement produces a certain similarity of form: the great monologues of Dostoevsky's characters, particularly those of Ivan Karamazov and the protagonist of *Memoirs from a Dark Cellar* (American title, *Notes From Underground*) who is pleading before an unseen audience whom he addresses as "gentlemen"; the "philosophical diary" of Antoine Roquentin in Sartre's *La Nausée*; the monologue-confession of the judge-penitent in Camus's *The Fall* arguing his case to an anonymous acquaintance whose replies are suppressed, or the monologue addressed to us, the readers, in Cayrol's novel with its striking title: *On vous parle* ("Somebody is Speaking to You").

When we turn to the concept of the "absurd," we find that though the "absurd" of Dostoevsky is very far from being identical with that of Kafka or the French existentialists who in any case differ from one another, there are nevertheless very marked affinities. The concept of the "absurd" is fundamental in all the writers I have mentioned and it is clear from *The Myth of Sisyphus* that, in spite of the differences we find in Sartre, Camus, Queneau and Beckett, it stems from Dostoevsky. When Dostoevsky's characters settle for a godless universe, life suddenly appears meaningless and absurd to them; it generates "anguish" which in the case of Kirilov leads to a particularly horrifying suicide. In Kafka the ordinary course of life is interrupted when one man is appointed to the post of surveyor but is unable to make any contact with his employers; when another is arrested, tried and executed for an unspecified crime; or again when the laws governing ordinary life are suspended and another character is suddenly changed into an insect. Life is turned upside down; irrational forces are unleashed, creating the twofold sensation of "absurdity" and "anguish." We can perhaps say that one of the principal differences between Dostoevsky or Kafka and the existentialists is that while in Dostoevsky and Kafka the "absurd" is created by something that happens in the novels, in the existentialists it is the starting point. An initial intuition that "there is no God and, therefore, no universal, objective system of values" reduces life to meaninglessness and creates the tragically "absurd" situation in which "consciousnessness" finds itself. We can go on to observe that there is an intimate connection between the "absurd" and the dialectical movement which gives the novels their power and intensity. In many of their works, particularly in *The Trial*, *The Outsider* (American title, *The Stranger*) and *The Fall* not merely the individual characters, but Man himself is "on trial," trying to justify to himself or others a real or imaginary infringement of arbitrary, inexplicable or possibly non-existent laws, while in *The Castle* and *Waiting for Godot* he seems to be trying to make contact with the law-giver, to find a meaning, even where he does not believe that there is one, which will transcend and resolve the "absurdity" of life. In either case, dialectic is the means that he uses in the attempt—the vain attempt—to extricate himself from the "absurd" situation.

In a treatise which she called, somewhat grandiloquently, *Existentialism and the Wisdom of Nations*, Simone de Beauvoir remarked that the contemporary novelist discovers "truths whose appearance he did not recognize beforehand, questions to which he has no solution. . . . He must ask new questions, run risks; and thus, when he has completed his novel, he will view it with astonishment and will be unable to translate it into abstract terms because it will have taken on its own meaning and form in a single operation."

The problem that we have to solve, the problem that Dr. Cruickshank and his team are all trying to solve, is the precise nature of the insight which distinguishes the French existentialist novelists and the sense in which they can rightly be described as novelist-philosophers, or their books metaphysical novels. The best way of tackling it is to examine one of the central passages—it must inevitably be a long passage—

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from *La Nausée* which is not merely one of the most successful works produced by the group, but is really the type of contemporary existentialist novel.

The novel opens with these words:

"The best thing would be to write down events from day to day. To keep a diary in order to understand them."

This recalls Simone de Beauvoir's observations on the aim of the contemporary novelist, and suggests the way in which the actual writing of the novel becomes a method of philosophical investigation.

It will be remembered that Antoine Roquentin is living in the town of Bouville-sur-Mer working at the municipal library on a biography of an eighteenth-century Marquis de Rollebon. Sartre for his picture of Bouville-sur-Mer drew on his own stay at Le Havre where he was professor of philosophy. The invented name contains allusions to the French words *boue*, "mud," and *bovin*, which can mean either "bovine" or "cowherd." The inference is that one of the novelist's aims is to attack a typical French, middle-class, commercial city. It is "Mudtown-on-Sea"; a town of "bovine types," animals. The brilliant account of the Sunday parade of the locals provides an opportunity for an onslaught on the commercial middle-class; they are like the local "worthies," whose portraits he inspects in the art gallery, examples of the existentialists' "bad faith." Now Roquentin is continually overcome by a sensation of "nausea." The feeling is always identical, but it seems to be provoked by a variety of different circumstances such as the sight of boys making stone ricochet on the sea, a glass of beer, or the purple braces of the *patron* of a cheap restaurant. He is trying to explain its nature and meaning to himself. The meaning suddenly becomes clear to him when he is sitting one day in the public gardens:

"I cannot say that I feel better or satisfied; on the contrary, I am overwhelmed by it. The only thing is that I have reached my goal: I know what I wanted to know; I understand everything that has happened to me since January. The feeling of Nausea has not left me and I do not think that it will do so in the immediate future; but I am no longer subjected to it; it is not an illness or some passing indisposition: it is I.

"A few minutes ago, then, I was in the public gardens. The root of a chestnut tree was thrusting into the ground just below the bench on which I was sitting. I no longer remembered that it was a root. The words had evaporated and with them the meaning of things and the way of using them, the feeble signposts that men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, a little hunched up, with my head lowered, alone in front of the black, knotty, brute mass which frightened me. And then I had the illumination.

"It took my breath away. Never, until these last few days, had I had any inkling of what was meant by "existing." I was like other people, like people walking along the edge of the sea in their spring clothes. Like them I said: "the sea is green; the white speck up there *is* a seagull," but I did not feel that it existed, that the gull was an "existant-gull"; in the normal way existence is hidden. It is there, around us, in us, it is we; we cannot say a word without speaking of it, and ultimately, we do not touch it. When I believed that I was thinking about it, it must be assumed that I was thinking of nothing, that my head was empty, or that at most there was a word in my head, the word "be" . . . And then, all at once, it was there, clear as daylight: existence had suddenly been unveiled. It has lost the harmless appearance of an abstract category: it was the very stuff of things, and that root was embedded in existence. Or rather the root, the railings in the gardens, the scanty grass of the lawn, had all disappeared; the diversity of things, their individuality, were nothing but appearance, a varnish. The varnish had dissolved; there remained soft, monstrous masses in disorder—naked with a frightening, obscene nakedness . . . I realized that there was no half-way house between non-existence and this swooning abundance. If we existed, we must exist *up to this point:* to the point of mouldering, of bulging, of obscenity. In another world, circles and melodies retain their pure, rigid contours. But existence is degeneration. . . .

"The word Absurdity falls from my pen now; a few minutes ago, in the gardens, it did not come to mind, but I was not looking for it either; I did not need it: I was thinking *about* things *with* things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head or the whisper of voices, but the long dead snake at my feet, a wooden snake. Whether it was a snake or claw or root or vulture's talon matters little. And without formulating anything precisely, I realized that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my attacks of Nausea, to my own life. In fact, everything that I have since been able to grasp can be reduced to this fundamental absurdity. Absurdity: another word; I wrestle with words; down there I touched the thing itself. A movement, an event, in the little coloured world of men is never anything more than relatively absurd: in relation to the circumstances which accompany it. The babble of a madman, for

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example, is absurd in relation to the situation in which he happens to find himself, but not in relation to his madness. But a few minutes ago, I experienced the absolute: the absolute or the absurd. There was nothing in relation to which the root was absurd. Oh, how can I find the words to express it? Absurd: in relation to the pebbles, the tufts of yellow grass, the dried mud, the tree, the sky, the white benches. Absurd, irreducible; nothing—not even the profound and secret frenzy of nature—could explain it.

"It was an extraordinary moment. I was there, motionless, paralysed, plunged in a horrible ecstasy. But in the very depths of this ecstasy something new had made its appearance: I understood Nausea; I possessed it. To tell the truth, I did not express my discoveries in words. But I think that at the present moment it would be easy to put them into words. The essential thing is contingency. I mean that by definition existence is not necessity. To exist simply means *to be there;* existants appear, can be *met*, but we can never *deduce* them. I think that there are people who have understood that. The only thing is that they have tried to overcome this contingecy by inventing a necessary being who is self-caused. Now no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a false appearance, an appearance which can be removed; it is the absolute, and as a result perfect gratuitousness. Everything is gratuitous—the gardens, the town, and I myself.

"Existence is not something which can be thought about at a distance: it has to invade you suddenly, come to a halt on top of you, weigh heavily on your heart like a large, motionless beast—otherwise there is no longer anything at all."

Antoine Roquentin's account of his experience of "existence" conveys better than anything else in the book the peculiar quality of Sartre's fiction. The most important single word in the passages that I have quoted is the word "illumination." Whatever we may think of the findings, it is clear that what is at work here is metaphysical insight of the kind that we observe alike in Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. It is not philosophising or argument: it is a direct perception of "existence" as a soft, gluey, amorphous, obscenely naked mass, a "swooning abundance" invading and overwhelming the protagonist, obliterating the individuality of the objects of common experience. There is no necessary being; the "absurd" is the absolute; everything is contingent.

THE MOST STRIKING THING about the illumination is that it is a vision of complete negation. The weakness of this personal philosophy is not merely that it is far more inhibiting than Zola's crude determinism. It is that compared with the power of the metaphysical disaster, which is the core of the novel, the postives are distressing in their poverty and their puerility: the gramophone record of the jazz song, "Some of these days / You'll miss me honey," which is "young and firm like a pitiless witness" and whose authors, a Jew and a negress, because they are presumed to be dead, are "saved, washed clean of the sin of existence"; or Roquentin's decision to write a novel which will shed a "faint radiance" over his past life.

I think we must add that though the *mode* of Sartre's experience is similar to Dostoevsky's the actual experience is as far removed as it could be from the creative experience of a Dostoevsky. It does not open up fresh perspectives; it is of its nature destructive and can only lead to a dead end. *La Nausée* is not what is ordinarily meant by an "autobiographical novel," but it is clear that there is a good deal of Sartre the Philosopher in the protagonist. Now the central experience cannot be repeated or extended any more than a philosopher can go on writing "systems." This explains the failure of most of Sartre's other fiction. *Huis clos* is a brilliant tour de force and the *Chemins de la liberté* contains occasional insights, but in the main the later novel gives the impression of dispersal and dilution. It is an attempt to extract themes and ideas from his philosophy and put them into a novel.

WHAT I HAVE SAID about the mode of Sartre's experience in *La Nausée* brings out one of the main differences between him and other members of the group. What is impressive about his achievement in *La Nausée* is the fusion of metaphysical and artistic vision. In the novels of Simone de Beauvoir there is no necessary connection between the philosophy and the novels. She uses the novel-form to propagate ideas which are not an organic experience as a novelist. Camus differs from both Sartre and Mme. de Beauvoir. It has been said of him that he is a moralist rather than a philosopher, a "philosophically-minded" novelist rather than a novelist-philosopher. In his best work we find moral and philosophical in-

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sights illuminating experience, but nothing in the nature of Sartre's vision of existence. The moral-philosophical approach has its own dangers. If *The Outsider* and *The Fall* are two of the most accomplished short novels written in our time, *The Plague* seems to me to be the most over-praised work of fiction which has appeared since the war precisely because it is really a moral tract masquerading as a novel.

The preoccupation with negation, the absence of genuinely creative approaches and the tendency, in their later work to substitute moralising for perception on the part of a number of the writers studied in Dr. Cruickshank's volume, gives a particular interest to Mr. Carlos Lynes's essay on a novelist who is still comparatively unknown outside his own country. Although Jean Cayrol has denied that there is any such person as "the Catholic writer" and has asserted that there are only Catholics who write, he is for most of us a Catholic novelist with a difference. In a number of ways his world resembles that of Sartre and Camus. Like them he is concerned with the theme of "alienation" in a "world in ruins." He is as hostile as they are to the staleness and deadness of this world where things have lost their meaning, and the protagonist of his first novel, *On vous parle*, is not without affinities with Camus's Meursault in *The Outsider*, but his ultimate vision is as different from theirs as it could well be. The central image in his early work—the poetry as well as the fiction—is the raising of Lazarus. For in his work man starts as a "dead" man, as an outsider, an alienated consciousness in a world of concentration camps, but he is not satisfied with anything like Roquentin's ambition to write a novel which will shed a "faint radiance," as he waits "with rounded shoulders" for the train that will carry him from Bouville to Paris. In place of the "absurd," the "anguish" leading to "rebellion," his essential themes are "reconciliation," "renewal" and "hope." The novels end with the word "tomorrow" and the faint gleam of dawn breaking, but in none of them are there conversions or violent changes of direction in the lives of the characters. The endings are deliberately pitched in a soft key of hints and hopes and gleams, but these gleams are the forerunners of something more real and more substantial than Roquentin's "peu de clarté."

In his introduction Dr. Cruickshank states firmly that the ten novelists discussed in the book do not form a "distinctive school or movement," that there are considerable differences of artistic achievement and temperament between them. All he claims for them is a "family likeness" which he thinks could not easily be extended to Gide and Mauriac, but might include Montherlant and Julien Green. The procession is headed by Bernanos and Malraux. They are the "precursors" who describe "the fermentation of a Christianity in decay" and "the hopeless estrangement of man in a post-Christian world." Their "successors," in addition to Sartre, Camus, Simone de Beauvoir and Cayrol, are Queneau, Beckett, Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet. For reasons that I have already given, it seems to me that the "family likeness" would have to be extended to cover novelists belonging to other generations and other countries. It is easy enough to recognize the "family likeness" in Sartre, Camus and Mme. de Beauvoir, or again in Queneau and Beckett, but there are moments when it grows a little faint. One has the impression that the common factor is the situation in which the novelists find themselves—the sensation of being at grips with "the human condition"—rather than a similarity of approach. This, at any rate, seems the only possible connection between two novelists as different as Malraux and Robbe-Grillet, or Bernanos and Cayrol who in other respects are almost as far removed from one another as it is possible for two writers to be who share the same faith.

MARTIN TURNELL, *one of the ranking authorities on French literature, has published four major works of literary criticism* (The Classical Moment; Baudelaire; The Novel in France; The Art of Fiction in France), *a monograph on* Jacques Riviere, *and the recent* Modern Literature and Christian Faith. *He lives in London.*

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GALERIE RELIGIEUSE
by Djuna Barnes

The blood of the Lamb and the oriflamme
Wax and wane in the raked heart's core.
Hell flowers lightly; an angel slain
And cropped of earth, twines with the twain.
Above the arc of the icy laces,
In long sheaved wings, the heavenly choir,
With lambent, fourfold, impending faces
Shout upward through the motes of prayer,
Shaking the ranks of stately lilies,
In *Saint Denis,* where His Love is spent,
Dwindling on the mouth of Time,
Spiked on the votive thorn of Lent.

DJUNA BARNES *has been acclaimed by T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Edwin Muir, and Wallace Fowlie as one of the greatest stylists of the Twentieth Century. A painter, poet, fictionist, and dramatist, Miss Barnes was one of the most legendary Expatriate figures of the 1920's. A woman of arresting and "Junoesque" beauty, she was one of the original Provincetown Players and acted in the early O'Neill plays. Her masterpiece, the novel* Nightwood *(1937), is one of the seminal works of the Twentieth Century: its influence can be seen upon Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, Malcolm Lowry and many younger writers. A recent collection,* The Selected Works of Djuna Barnes *(Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962), contains her short stories* (Spillway), *her chief novel* (Nightwood), *and a verse drama* (The Antiphon). *She lives in New York.*

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