***Modernist Wastes: Recovery, Re-Use and the Autobiographic in Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Djuna Barnes*. Caroline Knighton. London: Bloomsbury, 2022. Pp. 296.**

Reviewed by Daniel Raschke, Florida State University

Waste and its numerous synonyms are endemic to modernity's discourses—and are hardly ever put in a positive light. Alongside modernity's project of industrialization, optimization, and sanitation, waste came to be considered the universally unwanted byproduct of modernization.[1] In the Fordist and Taylorist factories, as regulated bodies became the norm, any excess motion was framed as wasted motion and, in turn, a waste of potential productivity.[2] As byproducts of both consumption *and* production, then, waste was relegated to an elsewhere—out of sight and mind—to produce a utopic image of cleanliness and proficiency.[3]

Those who could not, or would not, adhere to the new standards, or could not escape the waste-producing processes characteristic of modernization, were deemed inferior, filthy, and carriers of diseases. More often than not, and to little surprise in retrospect, those Othering "concerns" were in varying parts based on a distorted Darwinism and on pseudo-scientific classism and racism.[4] To equally little surprise, waste continued to be codified as distinctly feminine: the menstrual, "leaking" body was deemed inferior and regressive, in part due to the corporeal fluids that lay beyond patriarchal comprehension and control.[5] This corporeal

[1] See Suzanne Raitt, "The Rhetoric of Efficiency in Early Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 1 (2006): 835–51.

[2] See Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[3] See Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999); and Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away*, ed. Michael Southworth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990).

[4] See, specifically, Angelique Richardson, "The Life Sciences: 'Everybody Nowadays Talks about Evolution'," in David Bradshaw, ed., *A Concise Companion to Modernism* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 6–33; and David Bradshaw, "Eugenics: 'They Should Certainly Be Killed'," in Bradshaw, ed., *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, 34–55.

[5] See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); and Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2001).

approach was also extended to a rhetorical discarding of writing associated with femininity in early twentieth-century modernist movements: "the 'pulp' of popular sentimental nineteenth-century literary, the 'baggy' and 'fleshy' excess of a decadent overproduction."[6] After all, modern, "masculine" progress had to be made without wasted virtual potential and without "useless," "feminine" excess.[7] Progress comes at a cost, however, and even the classification of waste as such remains highly subjective; what is actually wasted for one person becomes virtually treasured by another.[8]

These subjective constraints and conflicts regarding social and historical value do not allow for a holistic depiction of historical circumstances and groupings. After all, as Hayden White famously argued, historiography and narrativization are deeply intertwined in the selection of recurring data points as part of a overarching argument.[9] Even in historicist literary criticism, we compulsorily recycle, critique, but ultimately reify preconceived frameworks and networks with one eye closed to peripheral matter. Marginal characters become equated with epistemological waste in scholarly processes that supposedly render the indeterminate determinate.[10] Therefore, it is far too common that crucial contributors to aesthetic or cultural movements are written out of the canon or sidelined as minor actants if they complicate scholarly narratives employing historical grand narratives. This, for instance, is what happens in Kenner's highly influential, hagiographic monographs on the so-called "Men of 1914," which framed modernism, to put it

[6] Caroline Knighton, *Modernist Wastes: Recovery, Re-Use and the Autobiographic in Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Djuna Barnes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 13. All subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically.

[7] For critiques of excess, see Zygmunt Bauman, "Excess: An Obituary," *Parallax* 7, no. 1 (January 2001): 85–91; and Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[8] See Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash: The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

[9] See Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

[10] See Myra J. Hird, "Knowing Waste: Towards an Inhuman Epistemology," *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 3–4 (October 2012): 453–69.

bluntly, as a white, Anglo-Saxon boy's club.[11] Per Paul Saint-Amour, this limiting approach to modernisms (a term better conceived in the plural)

> likely compounded baseline cultural and institutional prejudices in effacing writers who were women, sexual dissidents, disabled subjects, and racial others, or who identified with those minoritized subjects in their work, leaving it to later generations of scholars to attempt to undo that erasure through recovery projects.[12]

Or, as Aaron Jaffe puts it, "Waste, byproduct and fallout become alibis for invisible phenomenology."[13]

In *Modernist Wastes: Recovery, Re-Use and the Autobiographic in Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Djuna Barnes* (2022), Caroline Knighton engages in a project such as those which Saint-Amour describes, focusing on Elsa Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven and Djuna Barnes as part of a broader feminist archeological recovery. Knighton is particularly interested in the intimate friendship between Freytag-Loringhoven and Barnes, in their collaboration, and in their approaches to waste phenomenologies. It is a given that Barnes is now considered well-known, having been thoroughly re-canonized by the publication of Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism* (1999), whereas Bonnie Kime Scott, barely ten years prior, still felt the need to provide a rough contextualized sketch of Barnes in the feminist classic *The Gender of Modernism* (1990).[14] However, the same cannot be said about "The Baroness": she still remains a marginalized figure whose presence in and impact on modernism and the visual arts, Dada, and queerness have been largely erased. In comparison to Barnes, her impact and position have received limited scholarly exposure and were only traced

[11] See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1974), which is exemplary in this case.

[12] Paul K. Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 25, no. 3 (2018): 440.

[13] Aaron Jaffe, "Antihumanist Modernism in Biopolitical Junkyards of Controlled Remediation and Risk," *Textual Practice* 34, no. 9 (1 September 2020): 1528.

[14] Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1999); and Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

extensively in Naomi Sawelson-Gorse's *Women in Dada* (1999), and in Irene Gammel's 2002 biography—an exceptionally late recovery compared to other major twentieth-century avant-gardists. [15] Furthermore, the only available collection of her experimental works, *Body Sweats*, was released in 2011.[16] There are various reasons for this (un)critical omission, towards which Knighton gestures throughout *Modernist Wastes*; however, it is somewhat ironic that the same marginal position and untidy categorization also made the Baroness's impact recoverable through archival materials. Von Freytag-Loringhoven was not just *performing* Dada: she was *embodying* it as she "reproduced her own body as a living, moving and resolutely handmade Dada assemblage" (8) that left a lasting, repression-worthy impression on many of her contemporaries. Numerous allusions to her ideosyncracies performances can thus be found in the archived accounts of her contemporaries. For what Knighton terms her polysemic "body-work," the Baroness reused waste, organic and inorganic; her attires, artworks, and performances unapologetically combined languages in spoken and written frankness, while her sexual promiscuity and nudist extravaganzas threw shade on humble feminist activists. Her corporeality was deemed alienating to such an extent that it lead to an "over-identification of the Baroness *as* a polluting form of waste herself" (9, emphasis in original). Yet despite her well-known flashiness, she became ostracized for her unapologetically stereotypical Germanness during World War I and died in obscurity and poverty in 1927. And Barnes, herself a recluse in her advanced years, struggled to pay proper homage to her old companion in a biography that, occupying her from the early 1920s onwards, remained unfinished until her death in 1982, scattered across varying drafts.

As part of Bloomsbury's Historizing Modernism series, which seeks to promote work with primary materials, Knighton's project is a critical intervention in the

---

[15] Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, ed., *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), especially Amelia Jones "'Women' in Dada: Elsa, Rrose, and Charlie" (142–73) and Rudolf E. Kuenzli, "Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and New York Dada" (442–75); and Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

[16] Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*, ed. Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazlo (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011). The first collection of her writings, *Baroness Elsa*, ed. Paul Hjartarson and Douglas Spettigue (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1992), is no longer available.

treatment of both the Barnes textual corpus and the Freytag-Loringhoven papers held in the Special Collections at the University of Maryland. *Modernist Wastes*'s four central chapters give equal treatment to both artists, while also continuously stressing the intimate connections they shared in their practices of performative self-writing, their perpetual re-use of discharged materials (of both a physical and psychological nature), and the widespread criticism they received for their transgressive artistry. Knighton reframes this artistry as a critique of an allegedly efficient, purified modernity, and "as of central importance in crystallizing definitions of literary modernism, techno-industrial modernity and early twentieth-century commodity capitalism" (2). The Baroness's subversive use of biological waste, in particular, as both body décor and in juxtaposition to the technophilic Dadaist hegemony, "raises pertinent questions regarding the role played by notions of efficiency, unity, coherence and a rejection of waste in both its material and symbolic forms in the definition, regulation and digestion of modernist and avant-garde poetics" (8). Knighton thus creates a cogent framework for explicating the Baroness's continued containment at the margins of literary modernism and the twentieth-century avant-garde.

Modernist Wastes is interested in the "textual mess" of the Barnes corpus and in its dismissive treatment by contemporaries and by more recent scholars, which Knighton critiques through her archival analyses. Barnes had an exceedingly disorganized and reticular way of archiving that was both highly accumulative and retentive: she wrote on anything in a strictly non-hierarchical manner, to the effect that mundane writings became permeated by materials for poetry and fiction. This approach made archival and linear processing of her writings largely impossible, due to the inability to distinguish between waste and arche-writing. Appearing only as an overproduction of material to the outside observer, the corpus was also subject to the critiques of both Emily Holmes Coleman and T. S. Eliot. As Knighton showcases, Barnes had a tendency continuously to revise material in subsequent drafts, while also destabilizing the printed page: a tendency "to intervene, interrupt and rupture her own texts and letters she received through dense and detailed annotation" (4). But waste is significant not only on a materialist level, but also, as Knighton shows, on a thematic level in Barnes's personal and fictional writings as the refusal to discard littered material and psychological pasts.

Situating Barnes and the Baroness in the in the discourse of their historical moment in her introductory chapter, Knighton thus critiques a residual, faux-coherent concept of modernism. She sees waste as "instrumental in shaping aesthetic or ideational categories of the early twentieth century, and […] as a disruptive textual strategy in relation to them" (5). Waste becomes a particularly effective means of "addressing the processes of containment and exclusion that shaped (early, male-centered) modernist canons," and "a way of complicating early critical formulations of modernism as a closed or internally coherent system" (5).

To Knighton, waste thus offers feminist scholars a means for critiquing the processes of containment epitomized by Ezra Pound's editing of *The Waste Land* (1922). In crossing out ostensibly wasteful sections in Eliot's manuscript, Pound's pen worked to "disinfect wastes coded as feminine and to minimize excess" (14).[17] Pound's dismissive limerick in one of his letters to Eliot—"There onct [*sic*] wuzza lady named Djuna / Who wrote rather like a baboon"—summarizes his narcissism and misogyny quite accurately in this context.[18] But in contrast to the seemingly well-intentioned Eliot, in whose own work waste becomes a metaphor for the transcience of modernity, Knighton is more interested in the critical intersection at which refuse is transformed into a subversive, hegemonic refusal: "the Barnes corpus refuses to 'make it new' but returns to the used and devalued, to the wastes of literary tradition and history" (11), and in that way, "if 'modernism' is the system here, Barnes's impropriety disrupts the principles of its operation and complicates its coding" (15). Drawing on Kristeva's theory of the abject and on other Lacanian theories addressing the "containment and expulsion that maintain and police boundaries, bodies, and texts," Knighton posits that waste in particular "continuously challenges the stability of these illusory boundaries" (24). She thereby argues that an inquiry into these regulating processes can "provide an illuminating model for exposing the methods and motivations of gendered processes of marginalization, regulation and 'containment' imposed on the bodies,

[17] See T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot, rev. edn (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

[18] Ezra Pound, letter to T. S. Eliot, January 1937, in *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, ed. by D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 377.

texts and subsequent critical histories of certain modernist authors and avant-garde practitioners" (26).

In the first two chapters of *Modernist Wastes*, Knighton focuses on exactly those critical histories and containments in the case of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Indeed, as Knighton explains, "her contemporaries seem more preoccupied with reconstructing her as a stunning subject of their own narratives than developing serious discussions of her explosive Dada poetry or intriguing found-object constructions" (32). In contrast to the trans-corporeal assemblages of Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, and other New York Dadaists, the Baroness's sensationalist body performances stood out. In response, those other Dadaists fetishized her performances, containing them in their framing gazes, and processed them in their memoirs as, in Knighton's words, "neatly disorderly" (36). Hart Crane called her a "flamdoodle" (33), and her boyish physique, garnished in refuse and vegetables "like an empress from another planet" (32), continued to be an object of fascination for Georges Hugnet and for George Biddle, who refers to her repeatedly in *An American Artist's Story* (1939).[19] In turn, Mary Butts, Ben Hecht, and Charles Brook re-encoded her as vile and demonic in their fictions. But among those contemporaries with whom Knighton engages extensively, William Carlos Williams had an especially complicated relationship with the Baroness: her syphilis-infected corporeality, aggressive sexuality, and simulacra Europeanness unsettled the middle-class physician striving for a vital American poetics. And yet, at the same time, he could not help but be obsessed and horrified by her, as seen in their interactions and erotically charged repartee.[20] Knighton consequently makes the compelling argument that the Baroness "stalks the shadowy edges of modernist memory" in that her "grotesque body never disappeared entirely from modernist mythology and memoir—albeit in the materially marginal form of unpublished manuscripts, letters, memoirs and footnotes" (36). Contrary to

[19] For an analysis of the blending of organic and inorganic in the Baroness's work, see Irene Gammel and J. Wrighton, "'Arabesque Grotesque': Toward a Theory of Dada Ecopoetics," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 4 (1 December 2013): 795–816.

[20] See Eric White, "The Early Career of William Carlos Williams: A Critical Facsimile Edition of His Uncollected Prose and Manuscripts: Introduction," *William Carlos Williams Review* 30, no. 1 (2013): xi–139. For the Baroness's retorts, see Freytag-Loringhoven, *Body Sweats*, 291–312.

Gammel, however, Knighton reads the Baroness less as a representative of modernist fragmentation, and more as explicitly employed "in the maintenance of modernist myth-making" (36), through which the regulation of her fragmented untamed nature takes precedence over her Dada experimentalism in the form of a "double marginality" of women in the avant-garde.[21] Therefore, Knighton cautions us not to simply reinsert the Baroness into the canon, and invites us to channel her radical disruptive potential in the self-chosen margins to challenge canonicity and its histories at large.[22] At the same time, Knighton still convincingly traces the Baroness's proximity to and influence on Duchamp and the Readymade. Her own handmade sculptures—vanished mixed-media assemblages of used and recovered materials—encourage us to rethink the historical privileging of mechanomorphic feminine fetishization in the wider history of Dada and the early twentieth-century arts.[23] Indeed, in juxtaposition, it becomes clear that the Baroness's untamed, autobiographical, boundary-transgressing, *Fasching* motifs and modeling feature prominently in the visual subtext of various canonical New York Dadaists and artists.[24] In tracing this history, Knighton offers many close readings of the Baroness's autobiographic experimental poetry and of personal correspondences from the archive, prominently featuring fragmented observations paced via en-dashes. Knighton thus presents an intriguing narrative of transgressive refusal to separate the art from the embodied experience of the artist and, moreover, of refusal to separate art from refuse.

In the second section, Knighton argues that this approach is echoed in Barnes's writing practices. In this context, patterns of recovery, repetition, and revision

---

[21] For an extended analysis of double marginality, see Susan R. Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[22] See James Martin Harding and John Rouse, ed., *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2006).

[23] For pertinent examples, see proto-Dadaist journal 291 (1915-16), edited by Alfred Stieglitz. International Dada Archive, University of Iowa, http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/-291/index.htm.

[24] For a feminist critique of autobiographic writing, see Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

challenge notions of linear textuality. In both content and form, Knighton sees waste in Barnes's autobiographic poetics as a mode of modernist refusal. Based on her study of various published and unpublished materials in the Maryland archive, Knighton suggests "that the autobiographic is deeply woven into the textual fabric of Barnes's literary production" (162), which links her with the autobiographic method of the Baroness and sets her apart from Eliot's dictum on impersonality and from Pound's attempted poetic purification. It is an embrace of a messy, incomplete ambiguity, rather than traceable genealogy, and it is paired with a refusal to accept narrowing external readings, particularly biographical readings, as seen in Barnes's annotated letters in response to various critics. Knighton persuasively argues that this goes together with a critique of male-coded subjectivity in the autobiographic mode, achieved via Barnes's refusal to close the bleeding textual wound: "Barnes refuses the promise of textual disclosure that the genre purports to provide just as her texts consistently frustrate the biographic readings that they appear to invite" (171).

Drawing on various commentaries by contemporaries and by more recent scholars, Knighton also creates an intricate image of Patchin Place, the cul-de-sac in Greenwich Village where Barnes lived from 1941, filling her living space with piles upon piles of notes, drafts, and revisions.[25] Reading against the grain, Knighton suggests that critics have thus far been too preoccupied with textual products and sequential thinking, not paying close enough attention to the non-linear "complex system of retention, return and reclamation at play across Barnes's 'bewildering' corpus," a system that approaches writing from a perspective not of refinement but of recovery and regeneration (180). Here, Knighton's argument oscillates between the edited versions published in the *Collected Poems* (2005) and various drafts in the archives, showcasing Barnes's continuous reworking of sequences and imagery.[26] By higlighting the intertextuality of these artifacts, irrespective of their "finished" and "unfinished"

[25] See Nancy J. Levine, "Works in Progress: The Uncollected Poetry of Barnes's Patchin Place Period," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 3 (1993): 187–200.

[26] See Djuna Barnes, *Collected Poems with Notes towards a Memoir*, ed. Philip Herring and Osías Stutman (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2005).

status, Knighton's lens productively illuminates the larger multi-directional circularity operating across Barnes's textual corpus.

In her fourth and final chapter, Knighton critiques Hank O'Neal's assessment that the aforementioned incomplete "Baroness Elsa" manuscript was a sore spot in Barnes's overly cluttered apartment.[27] Knighton reconfigures this unfinished manuscript as part of an "open wound" textual framework, and she positions it as an object of powerful renewal that offered inspiration to Barnes in a space of continued collaboration between her and the Baroness long after the latter's passing. Writing in defiance of the fictionalized pseudo-biographical musings in von Freytag-Loringhoven's first husband's novels,[28] Barnes and the Baroness explicitly tried to shatter the containment that exploited and enframed the Baroness, then still known as Else Plötz, in the "fallen woman" trope, since this trope completely erased her radical potential, experimental artistry, and New Woman energies. This recovery process also included a linguistic resistance to restrictive grammar and a preference for what the Baroness termed "interpunction", a subversive, dash-focused style. The asterisks and other challenging aspects of Barnes's style in *Ryder* echo Elsa's mother's needlework and prefigure her engagement with waste. Combined, Knighton puts these experiments in logical conversation with well-known subversive, feminist lines of inquiry regarding hegemonic structures.[29] Special attention is also given to the interwoven presence of the autobiographical, waste, and thematic recycling in *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*, which Knighton skillfully reads in conversation with Barnes's appraisal of Alexis Carrel's theory of "inner time," as developed in his Eugenicist classic *Man, the Unknown* (1935), and with the disruptive, asynchronous potentiality "of the Baroness's extreme modernity paired with

[27] See Hank O'Neal, *"Life Is Painful, Nasty & Short—In My Case It Has Only Been Painful and Nasty": Djuna Barnes, 1978-1981: An Informal Memoir* (New York: Paragon House, 1990).

[28] See Paul Hjartarson and Tracy Kulba, ed., *The Politics of Cultural Mediation: Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Felix Paul Greve* (Edmonton: Alberta University Press, 2003).

[29] See Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); and Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019).

crumbling antiquity" (221).[30] Knighton closes her study by emphasizing the radical potential of the margins and of waste, as well as their potential to transform modernist studies in the future.

In conclusion, Knighton's *Modernist Wastes* invites a fresh framework for reading a largely understudied textual corpus. It offers a complex overview of and engagement with both Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Djuna Barnes, and especially with their underexposed, if not neglected, artisanal processes. Waste, reconfigured as transformative and radical in its subversion of canonical stability, is shifted from unproductive excess in the modernist space to productive abject. Given that its feminist political organology is of potential interest to a variety of readers, *Modernist Wastes* can thus be wholeheartedly recommended.

[30] The Maryland archival correspondences suggest that Carrel's work appealed to Barnes more than the then-dominant Bergsonian frameworks.