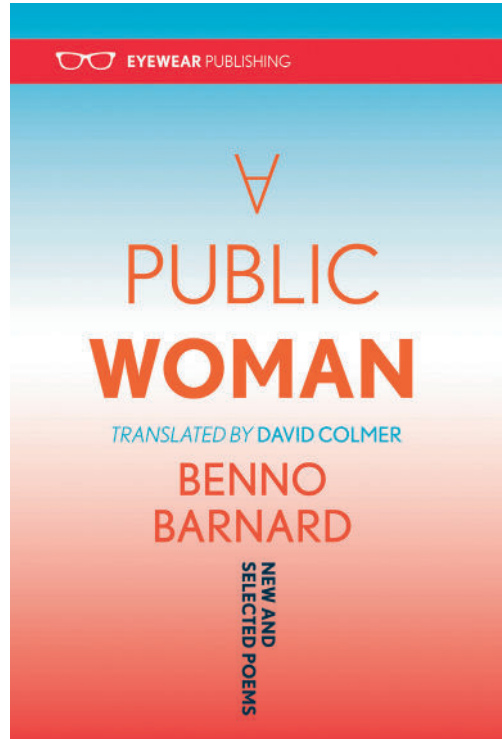


## Passionately Aware of Past Civilisations

Poems by Benno Barnard

'Before we wrote, there was no humanity. / Before we read, there was no humanity. / Humans existed, but that's a different story.' So reflects sixty-year-old actress Coco, in the eponymous verse-drama which is her self-analytical monologue. Her lines give us an important truth about Benno Barnard himself (born in 1954). He is as passionately aware of past civilisations, of earlier testaments to the complications of being alive, as his felicitously ubiquitous mentor, T.S. Eliot. Sumerian myth, Homer, Talmudic Judaism, the whole corpus of Eliot's own work, Maximilian Schell's documentary about Marlene Dietrich, all unflaggingly suggest themes and images. But Barnard is also disturbingly aware that beneath literature, beneath all artefacts, whether from antiquity or our ontologically tortured present, lies Ur-consciousness, fed by the non-human, allied to all natural denizens and constituents of our planet. In one of his finest short poems - which make up the first section of this continuously thought-engaging volume - Barnard declares: 'The lake inside of me flows from another lake / that's down below.' Yet this poem ends not with primeval scenes but with a human affirmation: 'Your name, / written in water, is valid all the same.'

This is a gentle reminder that morally we have no alternative; whatever our feelings of existential confusion, we must attend to, even treasure, the fellow humans alongside whom we find ourselves, whether those present at our initial stage of life - Coco, even at sixty, is still emotionally mindful of Mama and Papa - or the serendipitous folk met during the seemingly random course of our social lives. The central poem sequence of this volume, 'The Castaway', whose affinity to *The Waste Land* is made explicit in its first eight lines: 'Madame Sosostris let a card / she'd kept for me since 1922 / slip through her jewel-encrusted fingers', proffers us a diversity of citizens past and present of a richly



evoked Antwerp, but is also a tribute to an outsider, an outcast (its dedicatee, Eusebio G), a seaman from the Canaries, whom the poet honouring him never knew well, who came to live in Antwerp, spending his years 'from forty-six to sixty-four' (at which age he died) on its comparatively obscure Left Bank.

The short poems - which may, in their deliberately errant pursuit of a central metaphor, remind readers of Paul Celan, whose work Barnard has translated - are informed by the writer's personal difficulties in maintaining steadiness of relationship with the world outside himself, including cherished family members (mother, father, wife, son) with truth-seeking awareness of both death and chaos. In 'A Telephone Conversation with a Friend Who Has Cancer' each three-line stanza intensifies the agony of the title's situation until the poet pro-

tests: 'Death is an awkward solution for the riddle of time. / Death is a cack-handed remedy.' Even his own stoically practised art now appears doomed to failure, an attempt to 'hum postmodernism's / incoherent swan song'. Nevertheless in both of the two long poems the very process of artistic confrontation of existence becomes - no matter what exclamations of distress we hear - a kind of guarantee of telluric meaning, of some shape to life discernible, if only occasionally and then dimly.

For all the longevity of its traditions, the grace of its historic monuments and the liveliness of its current activities, the Antwerp that provides the context for Eusebio B contains much that is sombre - the proximity of Breendonk, the Nazi concentration camp with its horrors of the recent past, and the tawdriness of present-day mores: the red light district, fish and chip stands on a splendid river front, derelict lives in high-rise blocks. But somehow the feeling nature of so many even casual encounters, the constant going out of heart to heart succeeds in redeeming all these.

As for the monologue *A Public Woman*, it is at once a technical *tour de force* and a masterpiece of concentrated experience, surely surpassing many a contemporary novel in the vividness with which episodes and relationships are rendered, and the way the passing of time is conveyed. In Part One - for the retrospection of which the brilliantly rendered 'blank verse' (iambic pentameter) is the perfect vehicle - Coco gives us her early years of unsatisfactory parents (Mama self-absorbed, Papa happier with his stamp collection) and an education (Catholic, bourgeois) which never appealed to the whole of her personality, to that in her which would realise itself (but how completely?) in the classic dramatic roles, Medea, Jocasta, for which she earned fame. In Part Two - for which freer verse is employed - she takes us through her marriage to a conventional but admirable (and admiring) businessman husband, whom she (if not at the deepest level) betrays, and through her psychic identification with Marlene Dietrich. In Part Three Coco confronts death itself, as it visits both her parents, as it

must visit her. She has played so many archetypal roles, but 'I've never died in my life before.'

David Colmer worked with Benno Barnard, a kind of metric mentor for him, for many years before preparing this representative selection of his work. His empathy with the poet shows here in every supple line, whatever the particular verse form in which it appears. Coco's daughter is called Marina and we who, like Barnard, revere Eliot, recall the daughter in the most beautiful of his *Ariel Poems*, with its homage to what is 'more distant than stars and nearer than the eye'. It is a measure of Barnard and Colmer's achievement that we can without strain place *A Public Woman* in the company of Eliot's 'Marina'.

PAUL BINDING

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