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| Beach, Sylvia (1887-1962) |
| Nancy Woodbridge Beach |
| Sylvia Beach was an American expatriate best known as the owner of the iconic Shakespeare and Company bookstore, located at 8 rue Dupuytren until 1921, and then at 12 rue de l’Odéon in *La Rive Gauche* of Paris’ River Seine. The popular bookstore and lending library was a point of convergence for many modernist writers and artists in Paris’ thriving arts community, including Ernest Hemingway, André Gide, André Maurois, Robert McAlmon, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Joyce. A supporter of James Joyce, Beach was the first publisher of Joyce’s *Ulysses*.  Born Nancy Woodbridge Beach, Sylvia Beach spent much of her youth distancing herself from a household made uneasy by the tense marriage of her mother, Eleanor Thomazine Orbison, and father, Sylvester Beach, a Presbyterian minister who served several parishes in New England, including the prominent Princeton, New Jersey community. Beach’s early refusal of material wealth was often at odds with her father’s attempts to gain social status among affluent Princeton parishioners. However, Beach found some hope for her ambition of becoming an independent woman during a year spent in Paris in 1902, during which her father served as Associate Pastor of the American Church of Paris (Fitch 1983, p. 24). This period helped develop Beach’s love for Paris, its artists, and its liberal atmosphere. |
| Sylvia Beach, an American expatriate who renamed herself Sylvia as an adolescent, is best known as the owner of the Shakespeare and Company bookstore, located at 8 rue Dupuytren until 1921, and then at 12 rue de l’Odéon in La Rive Gauche of Paris’ River Seine. The popular bookstore and lending library was a point of convergence for many modernist writers and artists in Paris’ thriving arts community. Many were also expatriates, seeking the freedom of Paris’ liberal social mores.  Born Nancy Woodbridge Beach, Sylvia Beach spent much of her youth distancing herself from a household made uneasy by the tense marriage of her mother, Eleanor Thomazine Orbison, and father, Sylvester Beach, a Presbyterian minister who served several parishes in New England, including the prominent Princeton, New Jersey community. Beach’s early refusal of material wealth was often at odds with her father’s attempts to gain social status among affluent Princeton parishioners. However, Beach found some hope for her ambition of becoming an independent woman during a year spent in Paris in 1902, during which her father served as Associate Pastor of the American Church of Paris (Fitch 1983, p. 24). This period helped develop Beach’s love for Paris, its artists, and its liberal atmosphere.  File: Beach1.jpg  1. Sylvia Beach in Shakespeare & Company (Freund, G n.d. *A Portrait of the Owner*). http://www.towntopics.com/mar1605/art.jpg. Accessed 15 August 2012.  In 1916, after returning to America for almost fifteen years, Beach set out again for Europe with her mother, briefly stopping in Madrid before settling in Paris in 1917. Following her service in varied war efforts, Beach’s interest in French literature helped situate her in the city’s avant-garde Left Bank community. A year after her initial arrival, Beach’s life took yet another turn when she found herself standing outside a small French language bookshop owned by Adrienne Monnier.  The relationship that developed between Beach and Monnier was immediately defined by mutual respect and admiration. Both women possessed a love for literature and soon found that each complemented the other, both enjoying the knowledge the other provided in regard to the writers from their respective nations. However, companionship was only a portion of what Beach’s partner brought to her life. On November 19, 1919, with the help of Monnier and a three thousand dollar loan from her mother Eleanor, Beach first opened the doors to Shakespeare and Company, her American bookstore and lending library — a plan that she had maintained since adolescence and had originally intended to undertake in New York (Fitch 1983, pp. 32-40). Almost immediately, Shakespeare and Company provided a hub for many of the city’s Modernist artists and writers. Monnier’s friends quickly ensured the small bookstore’s unforeseen success, enlisting memberships from such names as Ernest Hemingway, André Gide, André Maurois, Robert McAlmon, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Joyce.  File: Beach2.jpg  2. Joyce and Beach outside of Shakespeare and Company (Freund, G n.d. *Untitled*, 1925). http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/JJ\_shakespeare.jpg. Accessed 16 August 2012.  Beach’s work with Joyce, the writer that she claimed as the ‘most illustrious member’ of the Shakespeare and Company family, contributed to establishing her role in literary history (Beach 1959, p. 40). In the spring of 1918, after a halt in the serial publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Beach requested that Shakespeare and Company be allowed to publish the novel’s first single-volume edition. As a result, Beach made history as the private publisher of what many consider the most important novel of the twentieth century.  However, both *Ulysses* and Joyce proved to be trying projects. The novel’s progress was plagued by Joyce’s failing vision, and Beach often found herself exhausting the coffers of Shakespeare and Company to accommodate the author’s living expenses. Nonetheless, on 2 February, 1922, Beach presented the first copy of the iconic blue volume to Joyce as a birthday gift (Beach 1959, p. 84). Soon afterwards, regular sales copies were released. Beach continued both her business and friendship with the author until his death in 1941.  The doors of Shakespeare and Company were ordered shut in December of the same year when a Nazi officer was reportedly denied Beach’s only copy of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (Fitch 1983, p.393). Regardless, Beach maintained her role as a prominent supporter of the Paris literary scene, and she was instrumental in the research conducted by Joyce scholar Richard Ellmann. Exhibits of Beach’s 1920s mementos have been celebrated in exhibits across Europe and the United States, and in 1958, her Joyce collection was purchased by the University of Buffalo, the same university that presented her with an honorary doctorate of letters the following year (Fitch 1983, p. 413). Nonetheless, despite her later returns to the United States and the suicide of Monnier in 1955, Beach remained in Paris until her own death in 1962. |
| Further Reading:  (Beach)  (Fitch)  (Graham)  (Joyce)  (Schiller)  (The Woman Who Published Ulysses, Self Portrait) |