

Backwards Ventriloquy: The Historical Uncanny in Barnes's *Nightwood*

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Not those who had seen him last, but me who had seen him best, as if my memory of him were himself; and because you forget Robin the best, it's to you she turns.

—The doctor to Nora, *Nightwood* (152)

In the midst of the baroque, the haphazard, the seemingly gratuitous flourishes of Dr. Matthew O'Connor, *Nightwood* foists upon its reader a set of propositions about same-sex love that could be understood as some of the most wretchedly homophobic in the canon of modernist literature. While the novel does not allow O'Connor's monologues the status of truth or even the slightest guarantee of reliability, *Nightwood* never contests what he has to say about the "invert"; rather, it bolsters his insights with a course of events that he foretells. That we can read O'Connor, like the narrative itself, as a parody of the search for authenticity, an allegory repeatedly undermining its own drive to explanation, does not exonerate Djuna Barnes from serious charges of homophobia (not to mention anti-Semitism and other problems): in her travesty of the truth quest, Barnes replaces any longed-for naturalness with prosthesis, a move that ultimately allies the "perverse" with garish spectacles of lifelessness, impotency, and inadequacy.¹ There are dolls standing in for the children lesbian couples cannot have and paintings portraying ancestors who never existed. In a peculiarly vivid displacement, the word *Desdemona* tattooed on a black circus performer's penis spells out for all to see the sexual threat that the

performer poses to racist society, but that spelling out renders the threat void: the offending object, naughtily visible but forever flaccid, is the sign of its own impotence (16).² Yet these displays serve an aesthetic purpose, deploying homophobia, misogyny, and racism as the means to something else entirely: the apprehension of the uncanny, the enactment of a perversity just beyond what language can symbolize. This something else has a role to play in history, not as representation but as an instigator, a rupture in causality, an unrecuperable figure that absconds from the scene.

I contend that Lacanian psychoanalysis offers a more compelling way to read *Nightwood* than the nostalgic and restitutive approaches offered by Jane Marcus and Victoria L. Smith, among others. Nostalgia would eulogize, holding tight to a lost otherness, while Barnes's novel celebrates that alterity's escape. Historical narrative that omits the unconscious—that closes the gaps, quiets disruption, and stops slippage—shuts itself to the mechanisms of social change. Committed to continuism, insisting that we can identify and thereby register the lost object, such narration either disallows the otherness that we cannot name or offers no means to acknowledge it. In *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec criticizes such contemporary historicist modes for reducing “society to its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge” (6).³ Historical explanations that reject the psychoanalytic concept of desire collapse society into its relations, failing to register the element that disrupts the self-reflexive closure of the system. Such self-enclosed relations, wherein everything can be named, nothing escapes, and power always meets a corresponding resistance, cannot account for what Copjec describes as “the pockets of empty, inarticulable desire that bear the burden of proof of society's externality to itself” (14). *Nightwood* is an historical fiction bedecked with emptiness, its excesses of articulation contorting the cause-and-effect linearity of chronological history—the straight face of narrative realism—with unaccountable laughter.

The *uncanny* is Freud's name for the irruption of the unconscious into social reality. Mladen Dolar asserts that “ideology basically consists of a social attempt to integrate the uncanny, to make it bearable, to assign it a place” (19). It is precisely such a place that *Nightwood* rejects, whether located in the masochistic comforts of mourning or in the affirmations of settled identity. Like *Nightwood*, Lacanian psychoanalysis rejects continuist consolation. It makes room for social change by considering how historical law, like all discursive structures, disappoints logical consistency.

And what eludes historical and narrative capture is desire.⁴ Psychoanalysis designates desire's correlatives—in full recognition of naming's inadequacy—as the uncanny, the extimate, the real, and jouissance. Usefully elaborating Freud's uncanny in terms of the extimate—what in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Jacques Lacan calls “the excluded interior” (101)—Dolar sees it as that which

points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The extimate is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; it is *unheimlich* [uncanny]. (6)

“In Lacanian terms,” Dolar asserts, the uncanny is “the eruption of the real in the midst of familiar reality; it provokes a hesitation and an uncertainty and the familiar breaks down” (21). The Lacanian term *real*, rather than referring to a world of objects existing independently of human subjectivity, refers to that which “can never be dealt with directly . . . it emerges only in an oblique perspective, and . . . the attempt to grasp it directly makes it vanish.” Paradoxically, however, the real can come close, even too close, shattering the subject's symbolic reality. Such intrusion Lacan calls jouissance, a joy pushed past subjective supportability, “the approach to a center of incandescence or an absolute zero that is physically unbearable” (*Ethics* 201). Slavoj Žižek elaborates: “*jouissance* does not exist, it is impossible, but it produces a number of traumatic effects” (*Subjective Object* 164). Reckoning with something irreconcilable to subjective existence is not just the trauma faced by the individual human subject: history too must encounter what it cannot subsume. History is extimate to itself, unable to master the trauma that propels it.

Nightwood's historian is Dr. Matthew O'Connor. For Dr. O'Connor, himself a connoisseur of the Parisian pissoir, the “invert” is just one more “splendid and reeking falsification” (11):

The last doll, given to age, is the girl who should have been a boy, and the boy who should have been a girl! . . . The doll and the immature have something right about them, the doll because it resembles but does not contain life, and the third sex because it contains life but resembles the doll.⁵ (148)

To call male homosexuals and lesbians immature is to rehearse a homophobic equation of emotional development with the achievement of heterosexual genitality, a narrative teleology that can be found, among other places, in Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. In this notoriously self-contradictory text, where Freud writes that "all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in the unconscious" (11n1), he also speaks of a "normal sexual aim and object" (27) and asserts that "[e]very pathological disorder of sexual life is rightly to be regarded as an inhibition in development" (74).

Yet there is more to O'Connor's rhetoric than homophobia. In "The Uncanny," Freud writes that an "[u]ncertainty whether an object is living or inanimate" (230) becomes frighteningly uncanny when it entails "the phenomenon of the 'double'" (234): although O'Connor apparently proposes the interchangeability of doll and invert in order to emphasize the third sex's sterility, his extravagant comparison begins to suggest what the novel elsewhere more forcefully instantiates, that inversion offers entry to an experiential intensity only accessible in the upending of the ordinary. Freud defines his titular term as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220); just so, the invert uncomfortably calls to mind an abandoned childhood toy. In *Nightwood* the sodomite commits "the unpardonable error of not being able to exist," and the lover finds "a dummy in [her] arms" (93), albeit a dummy somehow able to orchestrate her movement with invisible strings, a backwards ventriloquy. For Freud, the uncanny ensues when "the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (244), when borders lose definition and force. The so-called third sex not only upsets the neat demarcations of gender and sexuality but also the familiar sense of what it means to be alive.⁶

Barnes's homosexuals cannot reach the fulfillment they so ardently desire because they have based their demand on "the sweetest lie of all," a "miscalculated longing" that, by definition, thwarts its own resolution (137). The entry into language—the lie—severs the subject from what she or he would desire at the very moment it stamps desire's indelible imprint on the flesh. In a moment of desperation, the lesbian character Nora Flood exclaims, "Doctor, I have come to ask you to tell me everything you know about the night" (79). Presumed to possess a dark knowledge that other characters seek, O'Connor displaces desire in whirlwinds of verbiage, never resolving their urgent perplexities.⁷ If access to the lin-

guistic realm itself suffices to separate the subject and fulfillment for Dr. Lacan, Dr. O'Connor appears to require narrative.⁸

Very well—what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance we ever read. The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace—neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan! We love them for that reason. We were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in a boy or girl. . . . They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting; it was inevitable that we should come upon them, for our miscalculated longing has created them. (136–37)

This formulation of desire as retrospective and narcissistic mirrors Lacan's; as *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book 1* has it, the "exact equivalence of the object and the ego-ideal in the love relationship is one of the most fundamental notions of Freud's work" (126). On the imaginary level, the ego, constructed of impossible ideals, projects those images on some loved object, usually some other person. *Nightwood*, however, will punish Nora for her unwillingness to let go of a cherished image. The impaled subject goes forth in quest of what never was and cannot be.

Robin Vote is the woman at the heart of Nora's longing. It is precisely in the depiction of Robin, then, that the novel circles closest to its unspeakable interest: not simply the love that dare not speak its name but the absolutely unnameable jouissance indistinguishable from death, the encounter Robin alone does not fear—and that she thereby comes to figure.⁹ Robin at first seems innocent of subject position, as though she had never coalesced into a person: when the doctor advises Nora that Robin "can't 'put herself in another's place'" because "she herself is the only 'position'" (146), he suggests that she stands outside of the relational imaginary that makes subject positions possible.¹⁰ More accurately, though, Robin alights precariously on the outskirts of subjectivity, for the doctor qualifies: "a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain."

What monstrosity she augurs is approachable only by circumlocution:

“The almost fossilized state of our recollection is attested to by our murderers and those who read every detail of crime with a passionate and hot interest,” the doctor continued. “It is only by such extreme measures that the average man can remember something long ago; truly, not that he remembers, but that crime itself is the door to an accumulation, a way to lay hands on the shudder of a past that is still vibrating.” (118–19)

The novel here indicts the reader’s voyeurism, but hardly lays hands on Robin. She brushes by the court of judgment, outside of “damnation or forgiveness,” the narrator informs us, because “those who cannot conceive a bargain cannot be saved or damned” (47).¹¹ She is on the far side of the ethics of constraint. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan voices constraint’s command: “As far as desires are concerned, come back later. Make them wait” (315). From the perspective of traditional morality, “jouissance is evil” (184), an unbearable intensity that would shatter the egoic subject and push aside such commonplace values as modesty, fairness, compromise, and moderation. That Robin betrays her lovers one by one, that she seeks out every experience of depravity, that she refuses to wait, evidences her amplitude: as the doctor maintains, “[c]orruption is the Age of Time. It is the body and the blood of ecstasy, religion, and love” (118).

Robin, however, is no criminal. The doctor, responding to Nora’s request to know about the night, contrasts the Frenchman, who in his untidiness “can trace himself back by his sediment, vegetable and animal, and so find himself in the odour of wine in its two travels, in and out” (84–85), with the American, who separates night and day “for fear of indignities, so that the mystery is cut in every cord; the design wildcats down the *charter mortalis*, and you get crime” (85). To wash away, strip off, cut the strings of, or repress the night is thus the genesis of crime; but Robin never engages in such disavowal. Beyond the realm of the sin and the good deed, she embodies an entirely different movement.

Uncanny creatures of nightmare lend their features to Robin’s discernibility: animate dolls, “living statues” (13), and the half-human, half-animal:

Sometimes one meets a woman who is a beast turning human. Such a person’s every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange

blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey. (37)

Marriage, with its fantasy of turning two into one, here reveals its uncanny underside: cannibalistic incorporation, sanctified bestiality. Connecting myth with desire, the latter figured as "hunger," this passage also reveals the volte-face of seemingly innocent fantasy, for the "unicorn" turns out to be "human hunger pressing its breast to its prey," not the impossible ideal it so often symbolizes.¹² The doctor exclaims elsewhere, "a value is in itself a detachment!" (89) To retreat into the ideal is to lose hold of something truly more valuable, a withdrawal he diagnoses as "the literal error," the whitewashing of inexorable night, a gesture that Robin does not make. Robin's liminality signifies more than her status as a member of the "third sex": poised between day and night, character and myth, identity and its negation, she signals a numinous possibility too terrible to tame.¹³ To borrow a formulation from Joan Copjec, Robin's is "a surplus existence that cannot be caught up" for long "in the positivity of the social" (4).

When Felix Volkbein first encounters and becomes entranced with Robin, he sees, looking into her eyes, timelessness "behind the lids—the long unqualified range of the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye" (37). Because he will never quite comprehend Robin's consent to marriage, nor even entirely believe in its consummation, Felix relinquishes her with relative ease.¹⁴ At this point already having learned that "he was not sufficient to make her what he had hoped," knowing that "her attention, somehow in spite of him, had already been taken by something not yet in history" (44), he acquiesces to Robin's rejection of their newborn boy and to her slapping his face:

He stepped away; he dropped his monocle and caught at it swinging; he took his breath backward. He waited a whole second, trying to appear casual. "You didn't want him," he said. He bent down pretending to disentangle his ribbon. "It seems I could not accomplish that." (49)

Felix later begs the doctor for an explanation of Robin, yet he recognizes immediately that any effort at her recovery will be futile. Instead, he takes solace in raising the feeble child, whom she has also abandoned.

In contradistinction to Felix, Nora refuses to disentangle herself. Initially described by the narrator as "a preoccupation without a problem" (53), Nora finds what she terms a "secure torment" (151) in Robin, who is "a preoccupation that was its own predicament" (47). They first meet at the circus. After a caged lioness unaccountably narrows her eyes on Robin and proceeds to bow down, Nora, unsettled by the animal's gaze—by the recognition it implies—suggests a hasty retreat.

In the lobby Nora said, "My name is Nora Flood," and she waited. After a pause the girl said, "I'm Robin Vote." She looked about her distractedly. "I don't want to be here." But that was all she said; she did not explain where she wished to be. (55)

In the passage immediately following, the reader learns that Robin "stayed with Nora until the mid-winter. Two spirits were working in her, love and anonymity. Yet they were so 'haunted' of each other that separation was impossible" (55).

Nora finds Robin's ambivalence, her desire both to have a home and to abandon home—*heimlich* and *unheimlich*—intolerable.¹⁵ Robin, after spending her days with Nora, goes out at night to meet other women and enjoy unspecified drunken adventures. Nora's unappeasable will to possess Robin becomes "analogous in all degrees to the 'findings' in a tomb" (56): "[t]o keep her . . . Nora knew now that there was no way but death. In death Robin would belong to her. Death went with them, together and alone" (58). After Robin deserts her for Jenny Petherbridge, Nora turns to the doctor for an explanation. Jenny is hideous and uninteresting, and Barnes assassinates no character in *Nightwood* with quicker severity: "Only severed could any part of her have been called 'right'" (65), "She defiled the very meaning of personality in her passion to be a person" (67), and most importantly,

When she fell in love it was with a perfect fury of accumulated dishonesty; she became a dealer in second-hand and therefore incalculable emotions. As, from the sordid archives of usage, she had stolen or appropriated the dignity of speech, so she appropriated the most passionate love that she knew, Nora's for Robin. She was a "squatter" by instinct. (68)

The doctor asks Nora to recognize that it is with just such an unlikely partner, really the simulacrum of a lover, a sort of dummy who mouths

someone else's words, that Robin can effect the consummate betrayal.

He counsels Nora to forget Robin, through exhaustive analogy after analogy, and to no avail. "There is no truth," he says, "and you have set it between you; you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known" (136).¹⁶ Nora's insistence on confessing the truth about her love (constantly rehearsing it to a doctor, even though he makes no secret of his distaste), illustrates Michel Foucault's point about how modern society constitutes sex as a problem of truth. In *The History of Sexuality* he asserts that "[t]he confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex" (63). But more than exemplifying a Foucaultian truism, Nora's incessant redramatizations of the past, which apparently have no therapeutic effect, show how the uncanny involves compulsive repetition. Claiming that "Robin is incest too" (156), Nora frequently alludes to Robin's power to serve as a double. In "The Uncanny," Freud writes that when "there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self," "there is the constant recurrence of the same thing" (234). "For it is possible," he theorizes, "to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' . . . a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character" (238). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud identifies repetition compulsion as a manifestation of the death drive; and in its "daemonic character" it involves Lacanian jouissance. The terminal position of Nora's love is thus a will to death. The only alternative to forgetting Robin is to love her to death—and either way, Robin escapes.

In the figure of Nora, *Nightwood* punishes the politically well-intentioned, and the reader who seeks narrative redemption, metaphysical comfort for whatever thematic purpose, the confirmation of a progressive cause, will likewise find disappointment. However, there may be no other way to recuperate Barnes for the important politics of lesbian literary history than to approach the novel from Nora's position, that of a woman remembering loss. Carolyn Allen traces the influence of Barnes's pioneering representation of complex lesbian intersubjectivity on more recent lesbian novelists. *Nightwood*, she writes, "takes up 'the dark side' of women's erotics," offering an "intense rendering of loss" (16). Allen traces how Nora's search for Robin produces "neither narcissistic identification nor radical alterity, but a doubled subjectivity of resemblance" (22–23). The reader who recognizes a part of herself in this production, Allen sug-

gests, may experience and may be led to reproduce a Barthesian pleasure of the text. My interest, however, concerns Barthes's other operative term, *jouissance*, to which I give a Lacanian inflection. This project should not contradict Allen's but complement it; she acknowledges that the novel takes "other narrative directions" than the one she pursues (24).¹⁷

Victoria L. Smith's reading is more problematic. Smith claims that the

narrative shapes itself around a blank space, an absence, that outlines the loss of access to history, to language, and to representation in general for those consigned to the margins of culture because of their gender, sexuality, religion, or color—an awful fate indeed. (194–95)

Here the blank space fills too quickly, the absence erased. For Allen, the signal quality of Nora's relation to Robin is loss; for Smith, Barnes's entire project is a compensation for loss: "the internalization of and identification with a lost object," she writes, produces "an excessive narrative" (196). *Nightwood* would itself be a reparation for the lost object. Barnes would thus affirm the positive character of lesbian eroticism by dwelling on its absence. Smith understands the position of Nora to stand for the narrative as a whole—Nora's loss synecdochically represents the larger work—because Smith makes "an analogy between ego and narrative, both as memorials of loss" (196). Nora is no doubt a moral masochist. Her masochism, however, the not-so-secret luxuriation in her own suffering, which O'Connor exposes to her in vain—that is, her libidinal satisfaction in continuing to suffer—satisfactorily accounts neither for the novel as a whole nor for lesbian erotic possibility.

While Nora indeed exemplifies what Smith terms "the process of melancholia" (196), *Nightwood* is more than a melancholic text. Dr. O'Connor criticizes Nora's obsessive grieving, taking pains to show how her narcissism is unhealthy; and although Nora proves recalcitrant to his advice, the novel itself, I would argue, sides with him. An analogy between the stance of the doctor and the stance of the narrative itself offers a less mournful, less nostalgic alternative to Smith's reading. Because *Nightwood* moves repeatedly to confound its decipherment in the terms of essentialized gender, perhaps the assumption that its putatively lesbian author voices her entire perspective through an inverted woman character, and not at all through a male transvestite playing doctor, limits the play

of inversion. I agree with Smith that Robin functions "to remind us of forgotten experience, an insupportable joy" (200). Yet *Nightwood* demands something different from the reclamation of "the position of loss for Nora, for homosexuals, and, by extension, for marginalized groups whose losses of history are effaced" (202). There is more to *Nightwood's* intervention in history than the registration of loss, and it has precisely to do with "insupportable joy."

Smith follows Jane Marcus's 1991 essay "Laughing at Leviticus" in drawing out a political lesson about abjection. This interpretative mode not only smoothes over the uncomfortable aspects of *Nightwood* but also forestalls consideration of the reasons for disquiet. In the attempt to bring the excluded into the historical record, this mode, in the final analysis, cannot but repress Robin, of whom the narrator states:

[s]uch a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers. (37)

A past unsavory in the strongest sense is evaded, a past beyond all salvific piety. The attempt to draw moral lessons from the study of *Nightwood* may serve to obscure the novel's more radical consequences. While it is surely worthwhile to show how Barnes's work has contributed to the emergence of a lesbian literary tradition, we do Barnes an injustice when we fail to interrogate the significance of defilement.

"[D]etermined to recover what has been hidden," Dianne Chisholm asserts,

critics—particularly feminist critics—read Barnes's obscenity for signs of forbidden being; they "out" a whole carnival of transgressive and/or abject sexualities—lesbianism, homosexuality, sadomasochism, vampirism, transvestism, bestiality, pederasty, incest. (171)

Chisholm shows that such recuperative efforts fail to register the shock of profanity, and she postulates that Barnes uses "eros to invoke and release the revolutionary energies concealed in the detritus of industrialist-capitalist society" (172). "Dispelling any liberal illusions we may have cultivated about modern sexuality and progressive society," Barnes deploys profanity "as the wrench that jams the works of social reproduction"

(186). For Chisholm, "*Nightwood* neither names nor celebrates lesbianism. Instead, it articulates a queer antidiscourse" that she aligns with Walter Benjamin's project of aesthetic negation.

Chisholm argues that a "psychoanalytic focus would obscure the political component [of the novel] by highlighting the symptomatology that signifies transhistorical war between civilization and libido" (185). Yet, without psychoanalysis, Chisholm can only conceive Robin's perversity as an undertheorized "psychosis" (185). Recognizing that Robin serves as the object of "uncanny perception" (184), Chisholm too quickly harnesses an aesthetic device to a particular political program, thus committing a version of the historicist error for which she excoriates other critics. Revolutionary release may be more the effect than the impetus of Barnes's writing. However, there is ample evidence for her interest in aesthetics; and I would argue that Barnes's target is at least in part artistic intensity. (For Chisholm, one must choose between aesthetics and "revolutionary nihilism" [180]. When the aesthetic is no longer defined pejoratively, however, the binary opposition disappears.) What *Nightwood* negates may be less the aesthetic than the perquisites of a stable identity and a settled past. Of the night that Nora seeks to comprehend, the doctor exclaims,

Let a man lay himself down in the Great Bed and his "identity" is no longer his own, his "trust" is not with him, and his "willingness" is turned over and is of another permission. His distress is wild and anonymous. (81)

The night provides no anchor for the self. The antagonism *Nightwood* presents is not so much between civilization and libido as between a fiction that historicizes conformity and what the doctor calls a "legend" (15) that undoes it, a legend at once familiar and yet utterly strange.¹⁸ Barnes parodies the tendency of historical narration to domesticate its subjects, to read every empty spot as an obscenity over which it has to write polite euphemisms. It is with the empty spot that we might see Barnes aligned with Benjamin: both emphasize that part of the past is always at risk of vanishing. As Benjamin writes, to "articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' . . . It means to seize hold of memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger" (255). Robin is the precise figure for such danger. With the historical, we should not make what Dr. O'Connor terms "the literal error."

Chisholm quotes Barnes speaking of beauty, yet dismisses the aesthetic in *Nightwood*. My psychoanalytic reading, in contrast, it provides a means to theorize this crucial part of Barnes's endeavor. For Barnes participates in the project of modernist aesthetics; and whatever criticism we wish to make of that project, we should acknowledge that Barnes's participatory critique precedes our own. Furthermore, if we engage modernism as queer scholars, we do a great disservice to our history when we dismiss the category of the aesthetic and neglect to consider how artists like Barnes reworked it; we thereby forfeit the means to apprehend the achievements of the queer past. Part of that achievement we could glibly designate as the queering of the past, the ongoing effort to demonstrate that history is not as straight as it so often has been taken to be, neither in the sense of being resolutely heterosexual nor in terms of traveling in a straight line.¹⁹

Although I resist Chisholm's formulation of Robin as psychotic, there is a psychoanalytic argument that can be made in this regard. Tim Dean writes that for Lacan, the psychosis of the subject involves "a question of the real that is too proximate, a real from which sufficient distance has not been obtained" (98). The Lacanian real, as Žižek, Dean, and others have argued, marks the point of rupture in any symbolic structuring of reality. It cannot be integrated into subjectivity. To apply Dean's formulation to Robin, however, is to psychologize her; and *Nightwood* persistently frustrates this move. It is not only that Nora's interminable complaint allegorizes the failure of turning Robin into a person. Georgette Fleischer observes that the novel grants access to Robin's interiority in "only one instance" (424); and T. S. Eliot finds Robin "puzzling . . . because we find her quite real without quite understanding the means by which the author made her so" (xiv). Going too far in trying to see Robin as a person obscures the textual function she performs. Dean, following Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, argues that the trauma of historicity involves an absent cause only accessible in textual form. Robin figures this trauma:

She was gracious and yet fading, like an old statue in a garden, that symbolizes the weather through which it has endured, and is not so much the work of man as the work of wind and rain and the herd of the seasons, and though formed in man's image is a figure of doom. (Barnes 41).

Chisholm shows that *Nightwood* parodies not only the juridico-medical discourses that established the invert as a pathological category but also what Foucault calls, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, the “reverse” discourse that affirmed the identity thereby constructed (101). Through this double parody, it seems to me, the novel short-circuits an entire modern discursive formation, in Foucault’s terms.²⁰ Barnes’s narrative excesses, mostly focused on the figure of Robin, and often voiced by the doctor, would have us recall a bloody past preexisting “the measured consanguinities of civilization” (Grossman 244) so important to her editor, T. S. Eliot, and to high modernism in general. This past never was. It is not prehistory, but what eludes historicist capture: the real in its Lacanian sense. It eclipses the narrativization of history in much the same manner as *Nightwood* cuts across the conventions of novelistic realism. *Nightwood* remarks an outside of history that is also most intimate to it, even if disavowed—an uncanny other scene, what in Lacanian terms is the extimate. What the doctor calls “the shudder of a past that is still vibrating”—what we cannot truly remember—is history’s absent cause, as elusive as Robin.

The reader first encounters the doctor in the middle of an impromptu performance where he has commandeered the part of host for an absent Count Onatorio. In words that help to frame all that follows in the novel, he says:

“but think of the stories that do not amount to much! That is, that are forgotten in spite of all man remembers (unless he remembers himself) merely because they befell him without distinction of office or title—that’s what we call legend and it’s the best a poor man can do with his fate; the other”—he waved an arm—“we call history, the best the high and mighty can do with theirs. Legend is the unexpurgated, but history, because of its actors, is deflowered.” (15)

The raunchy humor of the final metaphor obliquely indicates something at stake in *Nightwood* other than an earnest and straightforward recovery of history’s forgotten actors. It is the shock, the unbearable pleasure, of what we cannot but fail to grasp. “Legend” may be “unexpurgated,” but it is also that which is “forgotten in spite of all man remembers.”

Without denying cultural situatedness, and beyond nostalgia for an imaginary origin, Barnes remarks an ecstatic priority too terrible for

any character but Robin to endure and for any continuous narrative to make fully legible.²¹ *Nightwood* would have us remember something that, properly speaking, is not a memory at all. It would derange the sequential registration of meaning indispensable to the progression of traditional narratives, as well as to their reception, in order to contrive an altar to the unspeakable. Barnes inscribes the memory of intensity alongside the homoerotic means to it, a legend of same-sex love that acknowledges mortality, loss, misunderstanding, and rapture. A highly allegorical text that requests, but then wholly resists, the imposition of an underlying message or moral, *Nightwood* leaves space for "something not yet in history," something not yet realized, to emerge.

Nightwood perverts novelistic realism from the inside out: unlike many other signal modernist novels such as *Ulysses*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *The Waves*, *Nightwood* does not so much discard traditional narrative architecture as bend it beyond the point of recognition or comfort.²² Each chapter commences a narrative exposition that would lead us to expect the conventional sequence of complication, development, climax, and denouement—a continuity largely frustrated by the monologues of the doctor. Rather than advancing the plot, forging links between cause and effect as characters do in realist fiction, his monologues abscond with the scene of representation, are pyrotechnic digressions that often outsparkle the ostensible story line. In the monologues of the doctor, *Nightwood* recasts early twentieth-century homophobia in all of its obscenity and meanness. The novel's fantastic twist is to compel this discourse to shriek and wail with homoerotic affect. The supersaturation of religious allusion, far from lending a moral or epistemological framework to the novel, scaffolds tableaux of shocking desecration.²³ However, as Felix comes to discover, the "unendurable is the beginning of the curve of joy" (117).

At the end of *Nightwood*, Nora literalizes how the desiring subject is "impaled" by "the sweetest lie of all," plunging "into the jamb of the chapel door" (169), as she stumbles onto the ultimate spectacle. Evoking religious worship, this final tableau stages the fabled meeting of child and saint, of the beast and the innocent, drawing power from sacrilege:

On a contrived altar, before a Madonna, two candles were burning. Their light fell across the floor and the dusty benches. Before the image lay flowers and toys. Standing before them in her boy's trousers was Robin. Her pose, startled and broken,

was caught at the point where her hand had reached almost to the shoulder, and at the moment Nora's body struck the wood, Robin began going down. Sliding down she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out, and [Nora's] dog stood there, rearing back, his forelegs slanting; his paws trembling under the trembling of his rump, his hackle standing; his mouth open, his tongue slung sideways over his sharp bright teeth; whining and waiting. And down she went, until her head swung against his; on all fours now, dragging her knees. The veins stood out in her neck, under her ears, swelled in her arms, and wide and throbbing rose up on her fingers as she moved forward. (169)

The image of Robin Vote as a distracted young boy—"[t]he girl lost, what is she but the Prince found?"—quickly gives way to something less accountable within the discourse of sexual inversion. When Robin barks at the dog "in a fit of laughter," the narrator characterizes her action as "obscene and touching" (170). We cannot be certain what happens next, neither how seriously Nora has been wounded nor what exactly Robin does to the dog, and we are left with the uncanny concatenation of botched lover's reunion, bestiality, and blasphemy.

In the figure of Robin, *Nightwood* offers up an image of same-sex desire so perverse as to be unforgettable. While she seems to allow everyone else to manipulate her—Felix, the doctor, Nora, Jenny Petherbridge—Robin is the novel's sovereign power, shaping the destinies of those around her, the dummy that makes the ventriloquists speak, though a cause absent even from herself. Nora personifies the novel's will to memory, her moral masochism contriving the shrine that Robin ultimately haunts without inhabiting. For Allen Grossman, Hart Crane finds in stylistic defilement the sole guarantee of authenticity, and in *Nightwood* a magisterially orchestrated desecration would lead us to the verge of the real.²⁴ In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan says of paganism that "[t]he numinous rises up at every step and, conversely, every step of the numinous leaves a trace, engenders a memorial" (172).²⁵ Such a memorial is Barnes's novel. Robin, as the doctor notes, goes "backwards through the target, taking with her the spot where she made one" (95).

Notes

1. Julie L. Abraham reads the opening narrative of the novel, which concerns the concealed Jewish heritage of Felix Volkbein, "as a paradigm of Barnes' understanding of the relation of the powerless to the record of the 'high and mighty'" (255). While I do not have space here to problematize Abraham's reading in all its complexity, I would point out that the "racial memories" (2) that the narrator of the novel speaks about, and that Abraham mentions, directly recall the discourse of anti-Semitism. Other phrases in the narrator's voice, such as "the sum total of what is the Jew" (2) and "racially incapable of abandon" (38) carry the same baggage. Even where we can read such language as parodic, I would suggest that the relation of *Nightwood* to Jewishness is every bit as messy and complicated as its relation to homosexuality. And here, too, we would do well to register the shock value of Barnes's formulations.
2. This insight owes a debt to Jane Marcus. However, as will become apparent, I interpret Barnes's signifiatory play quite differently.
3. Copjec primarily targets Foucault and his followers.
4. We could say that other phenomena that insist in the unconscious—phenomena that Freud attaches to the death drive rather than the libido, like trauma and repetition compulsion—also elude capture. I have argued in *The Other Orpheus*, however, that Freud's separation of the two drives is untenable (17–38).
5. In a parallel passage, the narrator describes the groin of the circus performer the Duchess of Broadback:

The stuff of her tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as undersexed as a doll. The needle that made one the property of the child made the other the property of no man. (13)

Like the invert, the Duchess serves as a liminal figure. Here as elsewhere, the novel insinuates a connection between homosexuality, the circus, and life outside the boundaries of social convention.

6. In his introduction to *Nightwood* T. S. Eliot observes that "[s]ometimes in a phrase the characters spring to life so suddenly that one is taken aback, as if one has touched a wax-work figure and discovered that it was a live policeman" (xiv). Eliot, however, takes pains to dissociate the novel from the aesthetic and social taint of homoerotic extremity. He writes:

the book is not a psychopathic study. The miseries that people suffer through their particular abnormalities of temperament are visible on the surface: the deeper design is that of human misery and bondage which is universal. (xv)

7. Thus O'Connor becomes for Nora, in Lacanian terms, the subject presumed to know.

8. The operation that O'Connor describes is symbolic castration in Lacanian terms.

9. "Destiny and history," the doctor advises, "are untidy; we fear memory of that disorder. Robin did not" (118).

10. I use *imaginary* in Lacan's sense of the term. In "The Mirror Stage" he defines the titular concept as a

drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality. (4)

Identifying with the mirrored image, the infant conflates the totality it sees with itself. In his first seminar, Lacan elaborates that this imaginary relation requires assuming the position of the other: "the sight alone of the whole form of the human body gives the subject an imaginary mastery over his body" (79). If "the human ego is founded on the basis of the imaginary relation" (115), then O'Connor would seem to be confirmed in his diagnosis: Robin perches "outside 'the human type'" (146).

11. In an earlier scene, before Robin's entrance into the novel, the doctor informs Felix that "[m]an has no foothold that is not also a bargain" (32).

12. Without speculating on Barnes's historical relation to Freud's writing, we can find a parallel operation in Freud's demystification of seemingly innocent dreams. Cf. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, especially chapter 6, "The Dreamwork," 311–546.

13. Katharina Bunzmann argues that Robin's "close association with animals and plants" is "a frequent trope regarding women in [French] Surrealism" that "is questioned, if not reinterpreted, in *Nightwood*" (84).

14. "When he asked her to marry him it was with such an unplanned eagerness that he was taken aback to find himself accepted, as if Robin's life held no volition for refusal" (42–43). This points to an irony of Robin's last name, Vote, as she apparently has none. According to Freud, the unconscious knows

nothing of negation: in *The Interpretation of Dreams* he claims that there are "no means of expressing a relation of contradiction, a contrary or a 'no'" (361).

15. *Heimlich* and *unheimlich*, derived from the German word for home, mean canny and uncanny respectively. Yet one meaning of *heimlich* is *unheimlich*. Cf. Freud's "The Uncanny."

16. In the opening scene of the chapter "Watchman, What of the Night" Nora surprises and embarrasses the doctor, who is expecting someone else:

In the narrow iron bed, with its heavy and dirty linen sheets, lay the doctor in a woman's flannel nightgown.

The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders, and falling back against the pillow, turned up the shadowy interior of their cylinders. He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted. (79)

As Andrea L. Harris observes,

Matthew's metaphor of "dressing the unknowable in the garments of the known," as formulaic as it may seem, brings together all the uncertainty and undecidability surrounding gender in this text. First, it is a self-conscious remark in that it refers to his own transvestism in an almost literal way. Although Matthew claims that it is an error to "dress the unknowable in the garments of the known," isn't this what he himself attempts to do by means of his transvestism? . . . In his eagerness to be a true woman, or a woman in truth, Matthew has mistaken the feminine masquerade for the essence of woman. Removing the garments from Matthew would simply reveal an aging man, not the beautiful young woman he longs to be. In a similar way, his ambiguous gender, "the third sex," is fundamentally "unknowable." (254)

17. Allen's reading may seem redemptivist in precisely my terms, yet the redemptive quality she finds in *Nightwood* manifests itself not so much within Barnes's text as in the way that other women writers have learned from it—that is, in how the novel has been used creatively. While I hold up Allen's reading as exemplary, I wish to distance myself from any pretension to an exclusively correct reading of the novel. *Nightwood* allows interpretations that could be seen as mutually exclusive, but it would be better to see them as testaments to its astounding richness.

18. Consider for example the relationship between O'Connor's transmogrified fairy tales and their originals.

19. Although this is not the place to elaborate the idea, I would like to suggest that the long-standing cultural equation of artfulness with homosexuality is more than a homophobic construct. It is time to reopen the question of how nonnormative sexuality relates to artistic creativity.

20. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault writes:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements . . . a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*. . . The conditions to which the elements of this division (objects, modes of statement, concepts, thematic choices) are subjected we shall call the *rules of formation*. The rules of formation are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division. (38)

Thus the discursive formation, according to Foucault, governs what it is possible to say at a given time in history.

21. Of course, we should imagine scare quotes around *character* when we use the term to describe Robin.

22. While these three other novels have aspects of traditional structure, the innovation of stream of consciousness makes them arguably quite different from anything appearing before Gustave Flaubert and again different from Flaubert. Stream of consciousness, it seems to me, makes new demands on the reader.

23. Laura J. Veltman argues that "O'Connor has a complicated function in the novel in that he both inscribes and explodes notions of patriarchal authority" (219), in particular the model of patriarchal authority embodied by the Roman Catholic Church.

24. The magisterial orchestrator is encoded within the text:

Like a painting by the douanier Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, property of an unseen dompteur, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strain of an orchestra of wood-winds render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness. (35)

It is tempting to read this paragraph as a parodic commentary on the novel as a whole, with Barnes as the concealed director of its scenes. I do not agree with

those critics who see the doctor as fully taking over the role of narrator from the author.

25. I have avoided theorizing the noumenal—ultimately a word derived from Immanuel Kant's usage—in this essay. While I am not altogether satisfied with how Slavoj Žižek reworks the concept in *The Ticklish Subject*, I do not as yet have an alternative elaboration.

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