

Love on the Spectrum: Djuna Barnes's Case Against Categorization in *Nightwood*

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Abstract

Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* is a challenging and beautiful text that continues to confound readers almost 100 years after its original publication. Though the text is often read as a "lesbian" novel, I consider the possibilities available when we read this text instead with a more open queerness in mind. By looking at the novel's treatment of image, time, history, gender, sexuality, and identity, a new way of reading is revealed which rejects moves of taxonomization and categorization. This thesis explores how Barnes challenges dominant modes of representation and understanding, not to be a simple contrarian, but to present a new form of affective realism which challenges readers' understanding of the world and those within it as clearly defined. Through *Nightwood*, Barnes rejects stability and finality and instead presents a text with ever-shifting meaning and identities which can serve as a guide to reading and living queerly.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Anti-Classification

*And must I, perchance, like careful writers, guard myself against
the conclusions of my readers?*

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 101

That's Not My Name

Djuna's Barnes's *Nightwood* is a beautiful but difficult text, one which neglects traditional elements of exposition and narrative in favor of an impressionistic, shifting landscape of characters and their relationships with themselves and one another. At its core, *Nightwood* seeks to trouble readers' understanding of both what they think they know and what they know they don't understand. By putting this aspect of the novel at the center of this analysis, much of the confusion and frustration about how she handles certain aspects of identity can be better understood and accounted for. With *Nightwood*, Barnes asks her readers to engage in a thought experiment in which they suspend their desire for categorization and elucidation. She asks readers to try to simply observe, experience, and accept people and concepts beyond their usual understanding. Though we are almost a hundred years beyond this novel's publication, Barnes's approach to identity remains subversive. This makes it all the more important for us to reconsider *Nightwood* as a novel which seeks to move beyond the bounds of categorization and clear labels. By questioning history as exact, time as demarcatable, and markers of identity as stable, the novel reveals an overarching philosophical concern with revealing that all means of categorization are unstable and suspect. Considering these elements on their own fails to reveal their interconnectedness, but by placing them in conversation with one another they

can be read as pieces of an overarching rejection of forces which seek to define and limit modern subjects.

Nightwood is often read as a lesbian novel, despite the refutation of Barnes, who repeatedly expressed discomfort with being identified as a lesbian. She reportedly told interviewers, "I am not a lesbian, I simply loved Thelma" (Michel 53). This comment is often written off as an example of internalized homophobia, an expression of Barnes's shame at her own non-normative identity, but I ask us to consider this statement in another way. I argue that Barnes is not making a homophobic denial and is instead asking to not be labeled in such a way because it makes her identity seem defined, legible, and static. She rejects the idea that loving women is constitutive of her identity. "Lesbian" is simply a term which is too rigid to account for the sort of queerness that Barnes felt herself to be a part of and seeks to represent in *Nightwood*.

When we apply the label of "lesbian" to *Nightwood*, or any such clearly delineated and defined label, we lose out on possibility. Specifically, the possibilities to view people as not being defined by their attractions, not trapped within specific categories of gender, or tied to prescriptive ways of being in time. Seeking to bind the novel within this category of being about women loving women disguises the moves Barnes is making to create a representation beyond binaries. *Nightwood* rejects the idea that everything either simply is one thing or another. Instead, it asks readers to open themselves to alternate logics, liminal spaces, and confusing, or confused, identities. *Nightwood* offers a mode of representation that does not rely on clear definitions or categorization. Not only does Barnes not gender

her characters quite as clearly as the label “lesbian” implies,¹ Barnes queers, or makes strange, almost all accepted binary notions of time and space: night and day, sleeping and waking, birth and death, togetherness and separation. As Brian Glavey states in “Dazzling Estrangement: Modernism, Queer Ekphrasis, and the Spatial Form of *Nightwood*,” “Queerness short-circuits the regenerative, linear logic of the social, a logic that continually defers meaning and wholeness” (759). Readers seeking closure will be sorely disappointed: *Nightwood* shows that there is instability in all things—time, history, and, especially, identity—through an engagement with particular ideological frameworks and movements of the Modernist moment.

Modernism as a movement is at its core a response to the conditions of modernity. These responses take various forms as they respond to different aspects of modernity. In *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* Marianne DeKoven claims that “At [High Modernism’s] center was a supreme self-confidence about continued linear progress, the development of scientific and technical knowledge, the expansion of production, the rational design of social order, the growing satisfaction of human needs, and, not least, an increasing control over nature (including human nature) commensurate with a scientific understanding of natural laws” (qtd. in Friedman 495). The Modernism Barnes engages with here in *Nightwood* is of another form: it questions the “supreme self-confidence” of High Modernism and demonstrates that neither social order nor nature can be controlled through intellectual mastery.

¹ Later in this paper, I will examine the gender fluidity of Robin Vote and the inability/refusal of other characters, as well as readers, to accept this aspect of her character.

Rather, *Nightwood* poses a challenge to readers who seek answers from the text. Filled with moments of extensive visual description and meditations which may feel more at home in a poem than a novel, the text presents obstacles to interpretation at every turn. As the novel's colorful pseudo-physician, Dr. O'Connor, says, "I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it" (Barnes 104). Drifting between various moments in time and locations in space, Barnes frustrates readers expecting a traditional narrative plot structure. In *Insane Passions: Lesbianism and Psychosis in Literature and Film*, Christine Coffman notes, "its departure from the conventions of narrative realism [...] defies any attempt to pin it down as providing a specific representation of 'lesbianism' as such" (Coffman 105). The impressionistic structure of *Nightwood* confounds attempts to "pin it down" as presenting readers with a specific, generalizable representation of not only lesbianism, but identity as a whole. Rather than presenting a stable, fixed depiction of its plot and characters, the world of the novel and the characters within it are shown to be always in flux, shifting and evolving throughout.

Even at the sentence level, it can be difficult to tell exactly what is going on, or how a certain phrase, sentence, or passage is meant to be interpreted. Often sentences are long, broken up into many confusingly linked clauses. This is not a failing of Barnes's writing style, rather it is a commitment to troubling the impulse to decode a text. In *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes Bewildering Corpus*, Daniela Casselli notes that through *Nightwood* Barnes rejects traditional conceptions of meaning as something specific and clear, arguing that instead, "Meaning is always part of a process, never definitive or final, and yet inescapable" (12). *Nightwood* is rich with opportunities from which to draw meaning. However, readers should be wary of deciding on any particular interpretation as

official, due to the risk of closing the text off from the opportunities of multitudinous interpretations. *Nightwood* is a novel of possibilities and alternatives to the strictly defined way of being in society that modernity imposes on its inhabitants.

In short, Barnes is not interested in providing her readers with answers to their questions about the “other.” She is not interested in justifying or accounting for non-normativity. Rather, she presents a world for consideration and re-consideration. She makes her readers work through digressions and divergences toward an uncertain and unsatisfying end which fails to close off the story, and instead leaves it open for continuance beyond the scope of the novel. In doing so, Barnes queers finality. Rather than providing a binary opposition between beginnings and endings, *Nightwood* leaves open a permeable barrier through which continuance, not conclusion, can be read.

In the following chapters I will interrogate how *Nightwood* challenges and queers the impulses of the moment to make clear delineations about ways of existing in time and individual identities. In this introductory chapter, “Anti-Classification,” I address some of the ways critics have attempted to read *Nightwood* and how the text itself resists being read as part of a particular category of text. This resistance makes itself evident in part due to the text’s creation of a new emotional space rather than fitting itself into existing spaces of clear linguistic categorization. The section “Slummer Renaissance” first explores how Barnes engages with and challenges the expectations of a particular genre common to the Modernist era: the slumming novel. In doing so, *Nightwood* rejects the premise of the slumming novel as a means to make clear an outsider population for the benefit of mainstream populations. “London Beckoned Songs Written by Machines: Resisting Imagisme” then places the novel in conversation with Ezra Pound’s tenets of Imagisme to

demonstrate how the novel provides indirect and imagistic, though not “imagiste,” presentations which reject the premise that a single image can reveal a stable truth. Instead, Barnes reveals that images are unreliable and imprecise. In the “Hooked on a Feeling” section I argue that the guiding forces of identification in *Nightwood* are based primarily on affective impressions rather than categorical or factual representations. This allows readers to identify with characters and their experiences but prevents an application of defined categories of identity.

In the following chapter, “The Times They are a Changin’,” I examine how the novel presents time in new ways, not tied to a linear sense of progression. I investigate the ways that the novel presents history as constructed rather than actual or factual in “The Neverending Story” section. In doing so, the novel compromises dominant narratives about the timeline of life and the validity of history. First it narrows the gap of distinction between birth and death and then contests the reality of history as a definitive account of truth. In the section “Hanging by a Moment,” I further develop analysis of the novel’s queer treatment of time through the use of ekphrasis and anaphora which slows time and makes it function non-linearly. The effect is a new perception of time which contradicts traditional understandings of so-called “normal” ways of being in time and space and reveals prescriptive ways of interacting with time to be another way for society to exert control on the individual.

In the third and final chapter, “Don’t You Know Who I Think I am?: Identities in Motion,” I interrogate how *Nightwood* comprehensively troubles seemingly “clear” aspects of identity. The section “Dude (Looks like a Lady)” demonstrates how gender in the novel is not represented as being either male or female and instead even the most seemingly

heteronormative characters are queered in ways that trouble our understanding of these categories as distinct. Featuring in particular the portrayals of Dr. O'Connor and Robin Vote, in the section "What's My Age Again?" I then further illustrate Barnes's comprehensive rejection of dominant understandings of sex and gender in the moment in which the text was produced. I appraise how Barnes presents alternate ways of approaching maturity through evocations of the uncanny and critiques of maturity as something which is valued and should be aspired to. Finally, I investigate how Robin Vote exceeds and transforms our conception of what it means to be a human, reconstructing and disputing the distinctions drawn between organic and inorganic and man and beast in the section "A New Way to be Human."

In this thesis's conclusion, I place these elements in conversation with one another to reassert the novel's fundamental overarching philosophical concern with troubling the idea of categories as being useful, stable means of understanding. Instead, *Nightwood* demonstrates that no category can truly encompass the reality of existence. According to the text, to attempt to confine experience or individuals within particular categories or prescriptive identities results in dissatisfaction and confusion rather than being an effective means of control. To set aside the desire to approach a text with definition in mind opens new ways of reading which could be valuable to exploring other works, especially those which don't obviously fit into dominant approaches to literature.

Slummer Renaissance

*There is no truth, 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.*

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 145

Barnes's resistance to elucidation can be further understood through her engagement with and queering of the genre of slumming literature. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "slumming" as "to accept, temporarily and voluntarily, a standard (of living, travel, etc.) lower than that to which one is accustomed; to mix with one's inferiors." Slumming literature was a popular genre in the early twentieth century which operated on the premise of a writer entering the lower echelons of society and elevating its inhabitants for consumption by rendering them in text to make them visible and definable (Herring 2). In *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History*, Scott Herring argues that slumming literature was "designed to comprehend and codify social contact across borders segregating social classes, [...] and sexuality identity" (5). Traditional slumming literature was used to mark differences between social classes, genders, races, and sexual identities, to allow normative people to interact with the non-normative or perverse without any threat to their social standing or propriety. Slumming novels present their occupants for observation and understanding. They allowed upper-class readers to access to exotic underworld while preserving them from any threat it may present. Slumming literature presents its characters as if in a sort of zoo, bound in by the text so they may be observed, studied, and gawked at, without having to engage with the reality of the lived experiences of the subjects represented. These texts removed the "concretely indefinable" (of queers, nightlife, poor people, etc) from its original context and made it "concretely definable" through codification in text (Herring 7). While seeming to offer up such a text, filled with non-normative characters such as circus performers, queers, and fake aristocrats, Barnes refuses to engage in this practice and instead uses the text of *Nightwood* to characterize the underworld as unknowable.

It is a world that readers “could never touch, therefore never know” (Barnes 15). For example, Nora Flood and Dr. Matthew O’Connor engage in extensive discussions about the night and the character of Robin Vote, but they are never able to reach a conclusion. Rather than providing answers, they only raise more questions. Instead of using language to define reality, Barnes, through *Nightwood*, “suggests the impropriety of language to report on reality, where even linguistic crassness exceeds itself, and the schism between signified and signifier is never (able to be) closed” (Lynch 89). *Nightwood* requires readers to remain in the realm of what Lacan defines as the “imaginary,” unable to approach the “real” to which her significations refer, which prevents them being “knowable” as slumming literature requires. This is primarily accomplished by the use of two seemingly contradictory strategies: Barnes provides excessive detail, often describing small images or moments over the span of many paragraphs or even pages, and she simultaneously neglects to provide details readers have come to expect from narrative texts generally and slumming literature in particular, such as details about her characters’ backgrounds, histories, and motivations. Instead, Barnes primarily presents her characters through depictions which are affective in nature, tied to their emotional experiences and connections rather than actual facts about them and their position in the world. Instead of making her subjects clear to the reader, Barnes provides a depiction of them as they are—confounding and disorderly.

In doing so, Barnes directly challenges the early twentieth-century desire to gain control over society and man through increased understanding. In 1903, George Simmel wrote, “The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers

of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life" (51). Man versus society had become the dominant conflict of literature and art, as opposed to man versus nature, due to the increased urbanization and industrialization of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In a way, slumming literature functions as a means of removing the individual's autonomy by sanitizing or codifying their life for assimilation into dominant society through reading. While some Modernist writers worked to assert their power over the forces of society by providing their own fixed representations of being, Barnes's focus on the individual instead emphasizes the ever changing nature of being, the constructed nature of "historical heritage" and the futility of both society's and the individual's attempts to gain dominion through definition. Barnes refuses to prioritize the experiences of normative, accepted groups of people over the underworld occupants that she represents and creates an alternate modernist response to the imposition of society's control over the individual.

London Beckoned Songs Written by Machines: Rejecting Imagisme

Life is not to be told, call it as loud as you like, it will not tell itself.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 137

While modernist texts are often noted for their turn to the representation of new versions of verisimilitude, and many modernist writers expressed faith in the ability of language to capture and reveal truths of the world, Barnes "rejects T.E. Hulme's and Ezra Pound's illusion of purity and novelty" (Caselli 4). Rather than use precise language to lay bare reality for her readers, "The real is in Barnes always recalcitrant; it cannot simply be discovered, but needs to be read, and such readings are never definitive" (Caselli 11). It

could be argued that the realism Barnes is interested in is not traditional, concrete realism, but rather a concern with the affectively real, that is, with providing a text that the reader can feel through, potentially opening them to an understanding beyond what can be accessed through their own experience. As Leah Lynch argues in “Intemperate Time: Queer(ing) Temporality and Narrative in *Nightwood*,” Barnes “abandons a principle of verisimilitude” (84). Barnes does not concern herself with making a world which is recognizable as our own, bound by laws of time, space, and society. She instead challenges the reader’s desire for such bounds and exposes them as imagined and constructed, rather than real or natural.

The novel’s emphasis on description rather than narrative marks it as operating outside of the traditional novel form. It is in many ways, as noted by T.S. Eliot in the book’s original preface, a novel which “would ‘appeal primarily to readers of poetry’” (Barnes xvii). However, to understand how far outside the norms of canonical modernist literature this text is, and why exactly that matters, we must also consider the predominant ideas about modernist poetry, including Pound’s “illusion of purity and novelty” (Caselli 4). If we consider imagism to be simply about textual representations which focus heavily on visual elements, this is certainly an imagistic text. However, such a simplistic definition would disguise the way Barnes is responding to and resisting the aims of Imagisme as a movement. Ezra Pound wrote that the three central tenets of Imagisme are, “1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (n.p.). As this text is not a poem, we’ll ignore the third point for now, though it does seem fair to say that this novel is

participating in an attempt to challenge traditional syntactical structures, if not those of rhythm.² It is the first two points which Barnes most emphatically rejects, and the first which is most relevant to this paper.

Barnes directly refuses to provide “direct treatment” of her subjects (who are not treated as “things” but full, complex beings), whether that be by failing to provide them with a legible history (as with Felix Volkbein and Robin Vote), by naming them as liars, thereby calling into question every bit of their speech (Dr. O’Connor), or by showing them to be at least as confused by their circumstances as the readers are (Nora Flood). Furthermore, she definitely does not show herself to be a champion of imagist concision (point two of Pound’s). While the novel itself is fairly short, it is certainly not direct, and certainly not free of potentially excess words. Whole passages of text do nothing to illuminate the presentation of plot or character, rather focusing on small visual details in a manner resembling ekphrasis³ (Glavey 750), such as the multi-page description of Hedvig and Guido Volkbein’s home which helps to open the novel (Barnes 7-10) and the introduction of Felix himself (11). Each of these descriptions anchors the present to the past and points to the fragmentation and alteration of history as it is passed along through time. In Hedvig and Guido’s home, “The long rococo halls, giddy with plush and whorled designs in gold, were peopled with Roman fragments, white and disassociated; a runner’s leg, the chilly half-turned head of a matron stricken at the bosom, the blind bold sockets of the eyes given a pupil by every shifting shadow so that what they looked upon was an act of

² While this paper lacks the space necessary to provide analysis of how this novel’s syntax challenges traditional expectations of writing, further inquiry could connect this aspect of the novel to its larger concern with troubling categorization as a meaningful tool of social control. Form and content are inextricable from each other (in all cases, but especially in *Nightwood*).

³ This point will be expanded on further in the paper, in the “Hanging by a Moment” section.

the sun" (8). This informs the reader of their taste (gaudy and expensive) but hardly seems to contribute to our understanding of plot or motivation. The space is baroque, excessive, and indirect, as is the novel itself. It is a space that does not exist in the actual timeline of the novel, as Felix is only born, but never lives, there. In a way, Barnes seems to be asking, "What counts as not contributing to the presentation?"

Additionally, the text of the novel itself rejects the prospect of an image (whether literal or in text) being representative of any real truth of what it depicts. Felix laments to Dr. O'Connor about Robin, who has abandoned him and his child, stating, "If I should try to put into words, I mean how I did see her, it would be incomprehensible, for the simple reason that I find that I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time. I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties" (119). Image in *Nightwood* is not static or lasting. Instead, image is fleeting, an artificial presentation of stasis which disguises the dynamic, shifting reality it claims to present. Image is a security blanket for those unable to recognize or accept the world around them and the people within it as being constantly in flux, evolving, ever changing. The text directly discourages the impulse to try and make an image or direct treatment of its characters or subjects and encourages its readers to instead remain open to uncertainty. It is uncertainty which is revelatory, not classification.

Further, Pound writes, "I believe in technique as the test of a man's sincerity; in law when it is ascertainable; in the trampling down of every convention that impedes or obscures the determination of the law, or the precise rendering of the impulse" (n.p.). Barnes refuses to place her belief in the certainty of law, in the word as *logos* which lays bare its own meaning. This is evident through the novel's treatment of Nora, "By

temperament Nora was an early Christian; she believed the word” (Barnes 56). As both a journalist and “a religious woman,” (Barnes 66) Nora “puts her faith in a signifying Logos” (Caselli 178) and “is associated with logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence” (Coffman 108). Nora believes not only in the word of God, but in the power of language to make sense of the world around her. She is continually present and in motion, “the singular [which] falls continually and forever; a body falling in observable space, deprived of the privacy of disappearance; as if privacy, moving relentlessly away, by the very sustaining power of its withdrawal kept the body eternally moving downward, but in one place, and perpetually before the eye” (Barnes 57). Nora is fully herself, embodied and visible, clearly readable by those around her. She is in motion constantly, deprived of privacy and thus revealed to those around her. She functions as a presence, yes, and also an observer chronicling the people and events around her. However, through her particular dynamic presence and organizing faith, she manages to remain detached from her observations: “The world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem” (Barnes 59). Nora is a sort of worldly scholar, chronicling what she sees around her but remaining academically detached, “she recorded without reproach or accusation, being shorn of self-reproach or self-accusation” (Barnes 58).⁴

But “[t]hen she met Robin” (Barnes 59). Nora’s experience with Robin disrupts her ability to frame her experience within the phallogocentric framework, leaving her “without

⁴ In a way this feels to be a nod to Barnes’s career as a journalist, and an indication that one cannot report in such a detached manner about a community they feel themselves to be a part of. It suggests that Barnes could not use *Nightwood* to provide a traditional slumming narrative as she would be participating in a form of “self-reproach or self-accusation.”

the joy and safety of the Catholic faith" (Barnes 66). Impulses are by nature imprecise, Barnes seems to suggest, and to attempt to pin them into a precise framework can only be destructive. While Eliot called the text a novel which "would 'appeal primarily to readers of poetry'" (Barnes xvii), it reads more as a novel for readers of quantum theory and relativity, as it suggests there is no one "truth," only various possible interpretations. It is not using itself to make clear aspects of experience, rather it seeks to represent them in all of their confusion and uncertainty. It refuses to use language as a tool to define that which cannot be understood and instead presents life fully in all of its confusing multitudes.

Pound's emphasis on direct treatment through Imagisme can be linked to a larger social movement at this time aimed at controlling populations through categorization and taxonomy, which took many forms, the most notable and threatening of which was fascism. The success of fascism as a dominant ideology relies on the clear encoding of people as belonging or not belonging to certain groups. Fascism necessitates a clear framework of who is or is not part of less desirable communities, such as racial or ethnic groups, political parties or affiliations, and categories of gender and sex. As noted by Caroline Rupprecht in *Subject to Delusions: Narcissism, Modernism, Gender*, "The text's experimental, avant-garde form does matter, since it is too anarchic to allow for the kind of totalitarian vision one would associate with a fascist aesthetics" (96). *Nightwood* does not present any totalizing view. Often it is contradictory, such as when the doctor remarks, "There is something missing and whole about the Baron Felix" (29). By refusing to provide "direct treatment" of her subjects, Barnes challenges the centralization of knowledge necessary to ensuring hegemonic domination over all aspects of being.

Hooked on a Feeling: Affective, not Effective, Identification

Their very lack of identity makes them ourselves.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 94

To say that Barnes does not provide “direct treatment” of her subjects is not to say that she does not provide comprehensive representations of the sorts of characters and relationships presented in the novel. However, the realism of *Nightwood* is more an affective than a concrete realism. In *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love identifies a “queer modernist melancholia” in early twentieth century works by queer writers (5). *Nightwood*, if it is said to have any structure around which it is based, is based around a “structure of feeling” (Williams, qtd in Love 11) specifically the “dark” feelings of loss and shame. Rather than these feelings producing distance between the characters, they function to bring them closer to each other and to make the characters more legible and relatable to the reader. While *Nightwood* does not present a clear picture of love, for example, through definition, —“the squatter” Jenny Petherbridge offering up an explanation, “Men never know anything about [love], why should they? But a woman should know—they are finer, more sacred; my love is sacred and my love is great!” only to be told by Robin, “Shut up, you don’t know what you’re talking about” (Barnes 82)—it does provide clearly legible descriptions of the affects produced by love: “Robin’s absence, as the night drew on, became a physical removal, insupportable and irreparable. As an amputated hand cannot be disowned because it is experiencing a futurity, of which the victim is its forebear, so was Robin an amputation that Nora could not renounce. As the wrist longs, so her heart longed” (Barnes 65). Nora and Robin’s connection is one that cannot be severed through physical distance

or displacement.⁵ It exists in a space beyond linear time, a continual existence outside the boundaries of beginning and ending.

The longing produced in Nora by Robin can be identified by the reader as love, but does not constitute Nora's identity. Rather, Robin produces a sort of anachronistic, timeless, affectual contagion within those she interacts with, "She who is eaten death returning" "is the infected carrier of the past" (Barnes 41). With Nora, Robin provides a "problem" for her "preoccupation" (59). She causes Nora to lose her focus on recording the present and instead endlessly circle around the past and their life together. With Felix, she causes him to "reiterat[e] the tragedy of his father" (48), "wrecking himself and his peace of mind in an effort to acquaint her with the destiny for which he had chosen her—that she might bear sons who would recognize and honour the past" (49). The error of Nora and Felix is the same: to believe that in identifying Robin they have discovered her identity. *Nightwood* suggests that identity is not so stable that it can be defined so clearly, and rather proposes "the possibilities of identification without identity, or forms of communitarianism that actually queer the identitarian grounds on which they would seem to operate" (Taylor 197). The guiding forces of identification within the novel are embodied feelings and relations, rather than linguistic or determinative identities. As the doctor states, "Too strong a sense of identity gives man an idea he can do no wrong, too little accomplishes the same" (Barnes 144). Nora and Felix are a part of a community of longing and disquiet, united not through their gender or sexuality, but through their desire to know and possess Robin whom they cannot restrain or limit through identification. Robin cannot be defined as wife, lesbian, woman, mother, or anything else so static and clear.

⁵ "Longing produces modes of both belonging and 'being long,' or persisting over time" (Freeman 13).

In providing images of her characters, Barnes frequently emphasizes their internal, affective experience through the use of similes which resemble Homeric similes, extensive and motion-filled descriptions that resist placing the characters in stasis. For example, she writes of Nora, searching for Robin,

If she was diverted, as was sometimes the case, by the interposition of a company of soldiers, a wedding, or a funeral, then by her agitation she seemed a part of the function to the persons she stumbled against, as a moth by his very entanglement with the heat that shall be his extinction is associated with flame as a component part of its function. It was this characteristic that saved her from being asked too sharply 'where' she was going; pedestrians who had it on the point of their tongues, seeing her rapt and confused, turned instead to look at each other. (Barnes 66)

Nora's internal emotional state of agitation is evident to those around her and contagiously commingles with their agitation such that she at first does not seem to be distinct from their group. Like a moth with a flame, she is unable to distinguish the danger from the necessity of her endless search for her lost love. She is losing herself in her quest to find Robin. Like the moth, she cannot rest. The palpability of her emotions both marks her as a part of the groups she finds herself within and identifies her as separate. The sight of Nora wandering frantically, looking for Robin, produces in others a reaction "as an animal will turn its head away from a human, as if in mortal shame" (Barnes 131). Notably, Nora though, does not express this feeling of shame of her actions. Instead, the shame of others, their resistance to looking at her straight on or challenging her motions, allows her to continue on her way, seeking endlessly.

So, even if we continue to treat Barnes's denial of the term "lesbian" as representative of her shame, we must consider how Barnes represents shame. Shame is not something which prevents people from engaging with their community or from being themselves. Notably, *Nightwood* presents shame not as something to be avoided or discarded. Rather, as Glavey argues in "Dazzling Estrangement, "Isolation and shame become catalysts for new forms of community without necessarily being transfigured into acceptance or pride" (760). This is clearly seen in the novel's first chapter, "Bow Down," when Felix accompanies the doctor to a party at the home of "the Count." Here, society's outcasts gather as they are, no need to disguise themselves, to dress or act appropriately according to the demands of the general public or polite society. The circus performers even assume the names of pseudo-royalty, "They took titles merely to dazzle boys about town, to make their public life (and it was all they had) mysterious and perplexing, knowing well that skill is never so amazing as when it seems inappropriate" (Barnes 14). Shame is something imposed on the circus by society, binding them together with each other, but not dampening their shine. Rather, they are elevated by it, using the shame of others to promote themselves and solidify their community. It also allows them to reach out and bring others into their circle even as they remain at a distance from outsiders, "The emotional spiral of the circus, taking its flight from the immense disqualification of the public, rebounding from its illimitable hope, produced in Felix longing and disquiet. The circus was a loved thing that he could never touch, therefore never know" (Barnes 15). Within their exclusion lies the possibility for alternative constructions of community that defy the expectations and requirements of normative society. Longing and disquiet are not negatives, rather they indicate a potential for something other than what currently is.

This sort of alternate community based around exclusion and societally-imposed shame is seen again later in the novel through the connections of “Doctor” Matthew O’Conner to Nora Flood and Felix Volkbein. It is their shame—the Doctor’s shame in his own uncooperative, improper body; Nora’s shame in her inability to keep hold of Robin; Felix’s shame in his illegitimate history and secretly Jewish bloodline—which allows them to understand each other, support each other, and to be present for and with each other. Shame is capable of producing new communities, despite the claims of some that shame is an obstacle to the unity that can be produced through pride.⁶ As Eve Sedgwick argues in “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity” “shame both derives from and aims toward sociability” (51). Sedgwick describes shame as performing a “double movement” “toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (51). Frustrated by her self-centeredness, “Why is it that you want to talk to me?” Dr. O’Connor asks Nora. “Because I’m the other woman that God forgot” he answers for her (Barnes 151). They are both excluded from their “rightful” positions in social order (as a lover and as a woman) and find connection with each other through their lack. Even possibly less-than-desired communities arise from shame, “‘In the end,’ Nora said, ‘they came to me, the girls Robin had driven frantic—to me, for comfort!’” (Barnes 160). The so-called “bad” affects of shame, loss, and longing produce opportunities for connection.

Importantly, at no point are any of *Nightwood*’s characters absolved of their shame, and there is no indication from the novel that they should be, “A man is whole only when he

⁶ “Originating as they seem to do in the shame of social rejection, those inveterate queer tendencies to disassociation and disidentification offer the greatest resistance to group cohesiveness, coalition building, political alliance, emotional and social support, erotic bonding, mutual appreciation, and queer solidarity” (Halperin and Traub 4).

takes into account his shadow as well as himself" (Barnes 127). Shame is not destructive to the self, rather it is a key component of the self. To heal from shame would be to have a sense of closure that the world of this novel does not present as possible. It would also suggest a fixedness that the novel rejects. Sedgwick describes shame as "flood[ing] into being as a moment, a disruptive moment" (50). *Nightwood* is a novel made up of such disruptive moments which destabilize seemingly fixed ways of being. If shame can be said to serve as a function which "makes identity" (Sedgwick 50), *Nightwood* reveals that identity too is momentary rather than stable. Not even the love lying beneath the shame of having lost love is in stasis, even as it is lasting. "You think I have always been like this" laments Nora to the doctor, "Once I was remorseless, but this is another love—it goes everywhere, there is no place for it to stop—it rots me away" (Barnes 161). Nora's love for Robin is inescapable not because it stays, not because it holds in place, but because it expands outward even as it constricts inward in decay. Nora's sense of identity is disrupted by Robin who reveals that Nora has reconstructed her identity through identification with Robin, "Have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?" (Barnes 161). Robin is "the eternal momentary—Robin who was always the second person singular" (Barnes 135). Robin is so lacking in identity that she is simply "you." "You" who could be anyone, who shifts from moment to moment.

Chapter Two: The Times They are a Changin'

Queer Temporalities

In this chapter, I examine how *Nightwood* challenges and queers traditional depictions and understandings of time. The novel is often noted as a difficult text, in part due to its disregard for normative narrative structures based in a linear, progressive temporality. "The Neverending Story" demonstrates this is a result of an overall rejection of linear time as natural or valid. *Nightwood's* treatment of history highlights "the performativity of language, narrative, and linear time" (Lynch 94). The novel instead shows that the timelines we accept as natural are in fact constructed by particular dominant groups and systems. These dominant systems legitimize history as it is traditionally known, but if one looks closely, history is recognized as just another form of legend. A perspective of history as ever-changing, rather than stable or fixed, results in a narrative that moves through time haphazardly and unexpectedly.

"Hanging by a Moment" further investigates the particular way time is represented in the novel, focusing specifically on formal techniques which queer the sense of time. In particular, the novel's frequent uses of ekphrasis and anaphora which slow time, stop time, or make time circuitous are brought into focus. Here the novel's form and content work together to reveal an overarching theme of time as malleable and inconsistent. Progress is not merely linear, sometimes it is cyclical or spiraling. Queer time in the novel challenges prescriptive ideas about how one should conduct their own life and rejects the imposition of society on the individual. It also serves to blur distinctions between seemingly opposite concepts such as night and day, birth and death. Time is treated as flexible to reinforce the fluidity of all things. Such fluidity further rejects the utility of providing "direct treatment"

of the subjects at hand, further pushing against both slumming literature and Imagiste literature, as demonstrated in the previous chapter.

The Neverending Story

One's life is peculiarly one's own when one has invented it.

—Barnes, *Nightwood*, 125

Nightwood resists not only labels of sexual categorization, but seeks to unravel the understanding of anything as fixed or stable. This is made immediately clear through its treatment of history and time. Time in *Nightwood* does not progress linearly. Chapters may fast forward through thirty years in the span of a page, or an hour long conversation may take up thirty pages. The instability of time is introduced at the very start of the novel: the history of Felix Volkbein is recounted, with incredible amounts of detail about his parents, who are already dead at this point, and his birth, but then jumps ahead in time and space from Vienna, 1880 to Paris, 1920. In the opening pages, it is revealed that Felix's history is a fiction: the portraits he has of his "aristocratic" parents were bought by his father, Guido, "when he had been sure that he would need an alibi for the blood" (Barnes 10). Again, image is shown to be not representative of reality. Drawing the reader into the world of the novel, Barnes writes, "What had formed Felix from the date of his birth to his coming to thirty was unknown to the world" (10). The illegibility of Felix's history, it is suggested, is not merely an authorial omission, but rather representative of the reality of Felix as somehow disconnected from history and the linear development of maturity over time. This functions to establish origins as constructed, not actual.

The novel's opening initially complicates or queers the reader's sense of time through its treatment of Felix's birth. Felix's birth rejects, complicates, and transforms the

heteronormative structure of time which posits human existence as a linear progression from birth into life to maturity which, eventually, ends in death. In doing so, it troubles the sense of history as something neat and easily understood. Instead of Felix's birth marking a moment of happiness or hope, his birth is preceded by death (that of his father, Guido) and concluded with death, of his mother, Hedvig, who "gave birth, at the age of forty-five, to an only child, a son, seven days after her physician predicted she would be taken" (Barnes 6). Birth is not a moment of purely generative creation, rather it is marked by death, signaling that "birth is the point at which death begins by way of deterioration" (Rupprecht 104). This birth-through-death calls normative understandings of time and history into question by demonstrating that beginnings are not as neat as we may be led to believe.

Felix's birth elicits "the double sense of the word 'birth' (the act of being born and family lineage)" (Derrida 193). Felix is an always-already orphan, untethered from his parents, untethered from his own history and becoming. His own knowledge of his origins, which the narrator relays to the reader, are only known to him through the recountings of his aunt. Readers are told that Guido embellished, and invented, his own history, which is then redistributed by the aunt to Felix. Felix assumes this false history as his own, "Felix called himself Baron Volkbein, as his father had before him" (Barnes 10). In "The Logic of the Living Feminine" Jacques Derrida claims, "the name, to be distinguished from the bearer, is always and a priori a dead man's name, a name of death" (187). This is truer than most for Felix, whose only connection with his father is the assumed title he bears. As a true aristocratic title would be inherited, Felix has inherited the title of Baron from his father, but it is a false title, signifying no "real" signifier. Barnes suggests that not only is Felix's history false, but that it reveals the inherent construction of "real" aristocratic

history more generally. Characters who assume “aristocratic names and characters who pretend to be something they are not reinforce the instability at the heart of representations of subjectivity and power” (Potter 72). A title does not indicate any real truth or substance, rather it is something assumed by even its most legitimate holder. The retelling of Felix’s parents’ history by his aunt grants it legitimacy, but the legitimization is faulty: it is the historicization of legend, “the best a poor man may do with his fate” (Barnes 18), not fact.

Using Felix, Barnes does “not aim at mastering tradition but at exposing its impure history—its potentially fake nature” (Caselli 3). The paintings which supposedly depict Felix’s parents speak to the “impurity” and “potentially fake nature” of history. Though the portrait of his father “had a remarkable resemblance to Guido Volkbein,” “The likeness was accidental. Had anyone cared to look into the matter they would have discovered these canvases to be reproductions of two intrepid and ancient actors. Guido had found them in some forgotten and dusty corner and had purchased them when he had been sure he would need an alibi for the blood” (Barnes, 9-10). Through painting, the imaginary is made real. Guido’s portrait provides “evidence” of his Baronage as well as of his heritage of Christian whiteness, neither of which he truly possessed. Portraiture is an art not necessarily aiming toward verisimilitude—even if these paintings were of Felix’s parents, portraits are typically idealized representations of a person, emphasizing their best features, concealing those they dislike or are ashamed of, sometimes altering their features altogether to represent the beauty ideals of a particular moment in time. Portraits may serve as a record, but that record is not accurate. A painting signifies its subject, but also functions as a signifier of itself. When the subjects of the painting are unknown or assumed the painting

loses its ability to function as a signifier of a known signified. What remains is a reference to nothing, or a reference only to itself. The painting can no longer serve as evidence of legitimacy, only as evidence of its own existence.

The novel's subsequent jump forward in time—"At this point exact history stopped for Felix who, thirty years later, turned up in the world with these facts, the two portraits, and nothing more" (Barnes 10)—places the reader in the same uncertain position as Felix, disconnected from a sense of history as defined. Even "exact history" feels like a joke of the novel, what precedes is by no means "exact." The OED provides a definition of history as, "A written narrative constituting a continuous methodical record, in order of time, of important or public events, esp. those connected with a particular country, people, individual, etc." Through Felix, the "story" of history is revealed. History in *Nightwood* is neither continuous nor methodical. It is disjointed and chaotic and its legitimacy is suspect.

The novel suggests Felix's Jewish identity is central to his unbelonging in history, "the Jew seems to be everywhere from nowhere" (Barnes 10). In "The Fact of Blackness," Franz Fanon writes that "every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society" (795). To colonize, to civilize, is to disconnect being and origin from each other. One cannot simply "be," rather that being must be codified according to the ideology of the society one exists within. Fanon specifically speaks to the contradictory position of the Jew in colonized civilization, "the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness. He is not wholly what he is," that is, he is not necessarily visibly marked as "other" in the way blackness marks its bearer as "other" (798). Felix spends much of his time trying to pass as having aristocratic, white, European heritage, the same heritage that has robbed him of his own true heritage. The text states that "Felix clung to his title to dazzle his own estrangement" (Barnes 15). He

recognizes his status as disconnected from the larger society he operates within. By assuming a title, he assimilates into a culture that does not accept him and seizes control over his estrangement. The title separates him from others in a way that is valued by the dominant systems which oppress him.

Through Felix, *Nightwood* challenges the assumptions of Western, Christian Europe about the position of the Jew in history. When the novel was written, the fascist crusade against European Jews was already ongoing and rising in force. Propaganda against Jews took on the guise of historical fact. Barnes writes, “It takes a Christian, standing eternally in the Jew’s salvation, to blame himself and to bring up from that depth charming and fantastic superstitions through which the slowly and tirelessly milling Jew once more becomes the ‘collector’ of his own past” (13). Christian narratives often erase the fact that Jesus was indeed a Jew working against the dominant organizing system of his own time (the Roman Empire). Christian colonization and dominance relies on the separation of oppressed groups from their own history in service of hegemonic control. In doing so, the Jew is then forced to look through the pieces of accepted historical “fact” to try and pull out the truth of their own past. Jewish experience is not given the same value as Christian experience, and the dominant narratives do not display Jewish life in its fullness. Barnes here is pointing to the illegitimacy of narratives surrounding Jewish identity, pointing out that it is not the Jew who is secretive or deceptive about their history, but rather “The Christian traffic in retribution [which] has made the Jew’s history a commodity” (13). “Civilized” Christian society must separate the Jew from their history and lineage in order to proliferate its own antisemitic rhetoric and to assert its own superiority.

This is reinforced with the early description of Felix's father, Guido, who could be "seen carrying in a conspicuously clenched fist the exquisite handkerchief of yellow and black linen that cried aloud of the ordinance of 1468, issued by one Pietro Barbo, demanding that, with a rope around its neck, Guido's race should run in the Corso for the amusement of the Christian populus" (Barnes 4). He explains to Hedvig, his wife, that he carries the handkerchiefs "to remind him that one branch of his family had bloomed in Rome" (Barnes 6). To "bloom" evokes a sense of growth, life, and beauty, but instead this evokes the bloom of a bloodstain spreading across a pierced breast. While history may remember the edict as giving rights to Jews by allowing them to participate in the races, the description of the handkerchief here makes clear that this was something the Jews participated in not willingly, not for their own amusement, but due to threat or force for the benefit of the dominant Christian populace. Guido's possession of the handkerchiefs is an embodied practice of the way that the Jewish person is forced to "collect" their past.

Civilized society not only separates Jewish people from their history, but seeks to erase the historical evidence of other oppressed or minoritized groups. What gets written down is not the reality of mass experience, but the selection of particular narratives which benefit the dominant group and power structures. History is not neutral or objective, rather it is a carefully constructed, goal-oriented narrative. The goal is always to ensure power remains invested in the "proper" hands. Investing certain histories and lineages with legitimacy ensures the repetition of oppression and exclusion. By pointing out the constructed nature of these histories, how they are stories just as much as any fiction, *Nightwood* reveals the valuing of history over legend is not deserved.

Hanging by a Moment

An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 119

The chaos of time is seen not only in moments of extreme forward movement, but also in moments when time feels as if it has slowed or stopped completely. As Glavey points out, Barnes extensively utilizes a “strategy of queer ekphrasis: a tense and trembling vibration between motion and stasis that aestheticizes moments of loss and withdrawal” (750). Ekphrasis typically refers to a description of some visual element, such as a painting or sculpture (as in John Keats’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn”). However, Barnes uses ekphrasis also to describe her characters, who “develop more like Polaroids than people” (Glavey 754). This has the effect of not only preventing the novel’s readers from gaining a sense of true understanding of the characters being described, but also 1) prevents them from being understood within the novel by the other characters and 2) removes them from time, creating moments of stasis within the novel, isolating them as image rather than being. While these exercises in ekphrasis construct moments of stasis in time, they are shown to be illusory. A picture only captures an instance, not the thing itself. The moment after a picture is taken, the scene it captures is changed. Stasis is not lasting, everything is in motion, shifting and reconfiguring from moment to moment. Robin Vote is the clearest example of this, as Felix directly laments to Dr. O’Connor, “I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time. I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing” (Barnes 119). Felix has artificially imposed his perception on Robin as if his perception is her. Robin is never fully fleshed out within the text, given no history, no backstory. She barely even speaks for herself. She is the ultimate representation of refusal/resistance to being known, to being restricted to a category or label.

When the novel first introduces Robin, her unintelligibility is immediately made clear. Felix and Dr. O'Connor first encounter her unconscious, she "had fainted and could not be brought out of it" (Barnes 37). When they enter the room, a full page is spent describing the appearance of her room and her body within it, "Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room" (Barnes 38). Robin (or at least the other characters' perception of Robin) blurs the lines between image and reality, society and nature, human and animal, life and death:

Her perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. (Barnes 38)

Robin seems to exist between life and death, as a mushroom or sleep does. It is fitting that she is first encountered unconscious, more like an object or prop than person, because this is how she remains throughout the novel. The novel, unlike with its other characters, provides no backstory for her, does not tell from where or whence she came, or what her motivations and desires are. She is an image to be projected onto by the other characters, who all try to know her and love her, to subject her to a "stricture of acceptance (by which what we must love is made into what we can love)" (Barnes 40). What can be perceived of Robin is contradictory and uncertain, confounding. So too are her words: "She said, 'I was all right,' and fell back into the pose of her annihilation" (Barnes 39). Clearly,

she is not “all right” in any typical sense, but Robin is most at peace when she is asleep, out of consciousness.

Robin refuses as well to conform to society’s rules about time, how time should be used, what times are the “right” times. She has “the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds” (Barnes 38). While today scientists and the general public alike have an understanding that people have different sleep-wake schedules, called chronotypes, this was not always the case. Even with today’s increased knowledge, there is still evidence of stigma against so-called “night owls.” According to a study conducted by Jessica Dietch et al., “participants perceived night owls as significantly more lazy, unhealthy, undisciplined, immature, creative, and young” than early birds (33). These attitudes aren’t based in any real data, however they are a natural consequence of life in a society which places moral value on rising early, working through the day time, and resting at night, rather than wandering the streets in the dark. The seeming universality of these attitudes arises from what Dana Luciano calls “chronobiopolitics,” “the sexual arrangement of the time of life” of a population (qtd. In Freeman 3). Chrononormativity, as defined by Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, is “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (3). During the Modernist period, the factory schedule had become the norm, no longer does the sun’s rise and set dictate the lives of ordinary people. Rather, life is now organized around clocks and work schedules. Freeman explains, “Chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (3). She continues,

In chronobiopolitics, this process extends beyond individual anatomies to encompass the management of entire populations: people whose individual bodies

are synchronized not only with one another but also with larger temporal schemata experience belonging itself as natural. In a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals. (Freeman 4)

Robin, by living her night life, challenges this mechanism of control, revealing that the insistence on living life only in the day is not a natural fact or way of being, but something which is imposed by society. Robin rejects the schemes of events dictated to her, leaving her marriage, rejecting her child, asserting that “I didn’t want him!” (Barnes 53). Even her participation in such events is queered outside of the normal presentation. When giving birth to Guido, the text states, “Amid loud and frantic cries of affirmation and despair,” like those of a newborn, despairing at having left the comfort of the womb, affirming its presence in this new world, “Robin was delivered” (Barnes 52). She is the one born new through this experience, but emerges from it “lost, as if she had done something irreparable” (52). Again, as with Felix’s birth at the beginning of the novel, birth indicates a deterioration of life, not a growing or new start to life. Rather than marriage and reproduction providing her with a strategy for living well, they leave her disoriented and disconnected from her proper way of being.

Robin’s inherent anachronicity is visible to those around her: “People were uneasy when she spoke to them; confronted with a catastrophe that had yet no beginning” (Barnes 53). She carries with her and presents to others the feeling of an event: she is the night and

she is “the eternal momentary” (Barnes 135). In “Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Redressing for Female Modernists,” Susan Gubar argues that Robin “represents the night denied by day-time consciousness” (500). The novel proposes that not only is the night its own sort of life, it can infect and overpower the day-time consciousness of those who spend too much time in it, just as spending too much time with Robin disrupts Nora and Felix’s ability to be happy as they once were. Dr. O’Connor explains to Nora,

And it’s the same with girls, [...] those who turn the day into night, the young, the drug addict, the profligate, the drunken and that most miserable, the lover who watches all night long in fear and anguish. These can never again live the life of the day. When one meets them at high noon they give off, as if it were a protective emanation, something dark and muted. The light does not become them any longer. They begin to have an unrecorded look. It is as if they were being tried by the continual blows of some unseen adversary. (Barnes 101)

Nora, who enters the novel as a journalist, a recorder, in her repeated searches for Robin becomes one of those who cannot properly inhabit the day. She becomes unrecorded, untethered. She can no longer participate in her daytime, waking life, haunted by Robin and the night. She circles around, searching, writing, longing for Robin, unable to progress forward with her life as long as Robin remains lost to her. Freeman argues, “This stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as in the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) is a hallmark of queer affect: a ‘revolution’ in the old sense of the word, as a turning back” (8). Nora seeks to be able to turn back to the time when she and Robin were together, even though she now has the understanding that she never really possessed Robin at all. Nora desires the impossible: to

both have Robin and retain her old conception of the world, where there was a clear, defining logic she could use to make sense of things. Nora, who longs so dearly for a clear understanding of the world based in text, has “made her a legend and set before her head the Eternal Light” (Barnes 134). Robin, who carries the night within her, is made by Nora into a revelatory figure, as she is made into an image in Felix’s first apprehension of her.

The text’s ekphrastic moments are not the only occasions we see time slow. In other cases, Barnes utilizes speech to queer the flow of time. Most notably, Dr. O’Connor frequently utilizes anaphora which results in the feeling of time repeating itself, thereby being slowed from its forward movement (Lynch 92). For example, in “Watchman, What of the Night?,” the word “night(s)” is used 72 times in 29 pages, mostly by the doctor. Their conversation circles over and over around the night, and as he discusses the night, Nora’s understanding of it shifts, reflecting Felix’s comments about not knowing Robin because all he had of her was an image, “I’ve never known it before—I thought I did, but it was not knowing at all” (Barnes 88). Nora here does not gain an understanding of Robin directly, but increases her understanding by recognizing what it is that she does not know.

The doctor’s rambling, circuitous speech keeps Nora from her endless wandering of the streets, looking for Robin. Of course, Nora’s mind cannot be kept away from Robin, and she continues to try to bring the conversation back to her. In doing so, Nora begins to collapse established binaries as well. She asks him, “I never thought of the night as a life at all—I’ve never lived it—why did she?” (Barnes 89). Rather than answering her question, he directs her back to the night generally, “I am telling you of French nights at the moment” (Barnes 89). In a way, by telling Nora of the night, he is revealing Robin to her. He is also revealing some of the flaws in her way of thinking of the world as being made up of

opposite and clearly definable concepts. Again, he does so using anaphora which prolongs the conversation and causes it to circle, queering time, sometimes in the content of his speech as well as in its syntax, such as when he tells her, “Life, the pastures in which the night feeds and prunes the cud that nourishes us to despair. Life, the permission to know death” (Barnes 90). The novel does not hold life and death as opposites, rather as two parts of the same thing. Life is constantly intermingled with death, whether in the birth of Felix, in Robin’s faint, the description of Jenny Petherbridge (“she was born at the point of death, but, unfortunately, she will not age into youth—which is a grave mistake of nature” (Barnes 105)) or here, in the doctor’s speech. As Dr. O’Connor’s speech keeps Nora trapped in a holding pattern, so does life trap us all in a hold, broken intermittently by sleep, but ultimately releasing us in death.

Chapter Three: Don't You Know Who I Think I am?

Identities in Motion

It is easy to read the novel's position on categorization as being simply contrarian. However, its anti-authoritarian philosophy actually aims to allow greater possibilities for being which do not require being subsumed into socially acceptable modes of existence. As discussed earlier in "Hooked on a Feeling," in *Nightwood* affective identification reigns supreme over taxonomic, categorized identity. In the previous chapter, the novel's portrayal of time as fluid and non-linear was explored to demonstrate the novel's lack of faith in defined history and timelines. With history, lineage, and time itself revealed to be unstable and constructed, identity itself becomes suspect. While I have already addressed some aspects of identity, particularly related to Felix's ethnicity and supposed aristocratic background, in this chapter, I look more closely at how particular categories of identity are revealed in the novel to be fluid and fluctuating.

The following three sections each address one seemingly stable aspect of identity that the novel reveals to be fluid and dynamic. Gender is explored in "Dude (Looks Like a Lady)" where I first establish that even the most heteronormative characters are queered beyond what is typically understood as "male" and "female." I then look to more obviously transgressive characters, Dr. Matthew O'Connor and Robin Vote, to explore how Barnes challenges traditional understandings of drag, gender, and sexuality.

From there, in "What's My Age Again?" I contend that Barnes disputes Freudian models of maturity, in part by engaging with the Freudian uncanny. Instead of depicting the queer characters as fundamentally misaligned with proper development, the novel suggests that it is society which misunderstands their development and prevents them

from reaching a state of full maturation. The novel even questions whether such maturation is desirable or even truly valued by society. Maturity is shown to only be desirable if it results in particular, heteronormative ways of being in the world.

Finally, in “A New Way to be Human” I demonstrate that not even humanity is established as a fixed way of being in *Nightwood*. Instead, humanity itself is shown to be an artificial distinction aimed at promoting the superiority of certain ways of being over others. Through Robin, the novel reveals that the seemingly clear distinctions between organic and inorganic, growth and decay, human and beast are not nearly as stable as one may assume. Once again, the novel rejects linear progress and demonstrates the generative possibilities of existence beyond the bounds of logos and order.

Gender, maturity, and humanity are all shown to be far more varied and fluctuating than prescriptive categories of identity allow for. To be undefinable is a threat to dominant social order. The characters in *Nightwood* are allowed to remain uncategorizable, but they are still recognizable. Again, identification is shown to be separate from identity. By setting aside a reliance on stable taxonomization, the novel presents new possibilities for being and frees the individual from the restrictions of society’s understanding.

Dude (Looks Like a Lady)

Misericordia, am I not the girl to know of what I speak?
—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 97

Nightwood challenges and reframes our understanding of ways of being, including gendered ways of being. First, the novel queers our understanding of the gender of even the most seemingly normative characters, such as Felix’s parents. The novel opens with Felix’s birth, and though Hedvig would be the pregnant one, describes the buttons on

Guido's clothes as "marking the exact centre of his body with the obstetric line seen on fruits" (Barnes 4). He, as "both a gourmet and a dandy" (4), contains a sort of excess associated with femininity. Meanwhile, Hedvig is portrayed masculinely and assertively. She is described in terms of war: she has a "goose-step of a stride" (6), "When she had danced, a little heady with wine, the dance floor had become a tactical manoeuvre; her heels had come down staccato and trained, her soldiers as conscious at the tips as those which carry the braid and tassels of promotion; the turn of her head had held the cold vigilance of a sentry whose rounds are not without apprehension" (7), she "had played the waltzes of her time with the masterly stroke of a man" (8). Even in giving birth and dying, she is masculinized, "with the gross splendour of a general saluting the flag, she named him Felix, thrust him from her, and died" (3). Gender is not so stable as essentialist perspectives claim them to be. These presentations challenge the validity of sexual categorization.

Sexology as a study had begun in the mid-nineteenth century and interest in the study of sexuality rose as the twentieth century began and progressed. This interest in increasing a "scientific" understanding of sexuality "represented modernity's answer to sexual problems, public health issues, morality, and population control through the codification and classification of individual and collective behaviors in a context that was strongly influenced by theories of degeneracy, forensic medicine, and venereology" (Giami and Levinson 7). The assumptions of early twentieth century sexologist about non-normative expressions of gender or sex are largely based around a sense of non-normative people as inherently disruptive to society, in a similar way to how criminals disrupt society. This was a "part of a more general movement toward the abstraction and taxonomizing of human qualities, the reification of both space and time, that began with industrial

capitalism” (Freeman 7). To control the population, which is ever increasing during this time, it is necessary to define what is “other.” Barnes’s queer descriptions of her characters challenge the validity of such abstractions. Categories aren’t quite so clear as they claim to be, they suggest. Gender is not stable or inherent, it is constructed and interpreted, sometimes incorrectly.

Barnes further challenges reader’s understanding of gender by refiguring common understandings of drag. While the text does not use this word, critics have used the term “drag” or “cross-dressing” to describe Dr. O’Connors appearance in women’s clothing (Lynch 93, Gubar 493). Drag is traditionally considered to mean dressing in a manner which represents a caricature of gender—either hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine attire and makeup—for the sake of performance. Drag is often associated with cross-dressing but is not necessarily such. Most important to to our discussion is that drag is an act of performance, and therefore the Doctor is not in drag. The Doctor is not performing for anyone in his women’s clothing; he is not assuming the guise of being woman, rather he is expressing himself as woman. Nora, even in her shock at the sight, realizes this, “She wondered why she was so dismayed to have come upon the doctor at the hour when he had evacuated custom and gone back into his dress” (Barnes 86). It is not the dress, the wig, and the rouge which constitute drag for Dr. O’Connor, it is his ordinary “masculine” presentation which is drag. The Doctor constantly performs as a man, disguising his own femininity through the wearing of proper masculine clothing.

Gender is always performative and is particularly bound by historical and cultural context. People assume certain postures, costumes, and behaviors as a way of acting out their gender in specific contexts. Heels used to be worn by men, pink was a boy’s color, and

men in many cultures wear what might be described in the west as a “skirt.” In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler describes bodies not as “a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (190). People and their bodies do not simply exist in space and time, they are in many ways dependent upon the values and opportunities available to them in the moment. Traditional Western gender hierarchies place women in a subjugated position to men. People expressing “abnormal” or non-conforming genders are placed below even women and are often subject to extreme discrimination or even violence. People take on “gendered bodies” as one may take on an outfit, they are “styles of the flesh.” Butler writes, “These styles [are] all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as *a corporeal style*, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 190). When *Nightwood* was originally published in 1936, homosexual and effeminate men were being specifically targeted socially and legally (Giles 340). For men especially (lesbianism wasn’t subject to the same sort of legal codification, though it was not approved of), visible queerness was a danger. Dr. O’Connor does not have the opportunity to express himself as herself, she is “the other woman that God forgot” (Barnes 151). He is a “permanent mistake” relying on the “Book of Concealment” to survive (Barnes 141). In public, in the daylight, he must conceal himself, disguised as a man, continually constructing an identity that fits in with what is expected of him. He allows himself to be mistaken, in presentation and in speech, “no one ever knew what was truth and what was not” (Barnes 168). He feels it necessary to confound with his speech because

he cannot be him(her)self and thus present himself honestly in day- or street-light. Though his fellow barmates do not understand him, he says directly, speaking to God, "I talk too much because I have been made so miserable by what you are keeping hushed. I'm an old worn out lioness, a coward in my corner; for the sake of my bravery I've never been the one thing that I am, to find out what I am!" (Barnes 172). While he seems to be rambling nonsensically, we can hear in this the lament of one longing to be honest, to present as he feels himself to be. He does not intend to be deceptive in any malicious sense, he merely allows himself to be misperceived as a man. It is only at night, when unobserved, that "He dresses to lie beside himself, who is so constructed that love, for him, can be only something special; in a room that giving back evidence of his occupancy, is as mauled as the last agony" (Barnes 87). Only in private can he exist as himself, only in the night, protected, can he live his life. Even then, his very space is "mauled" as he is by his inability to present himself in a manner which aligns with his own internal identity.

It is not only his dress and visible presentation which conceal his true nature. One may understand his masquerade as a midwife/gynecologist as a sort of sublimation of his desire for womanhood. He tells Nora, "no matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting" (Barnes 98). While he cannot literally fulfill this wish of housewifery for himself, through midwifery he can participate in the process of heterosexual reproduction without actually engaging in the act. O'Connor seems aware of how he would be condemned by society for not being as he is expected to be, asking Nora, "am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have been?" (Barnes 97). His speech bears striking resemblance to modern discourse about trans identities, which often refer to being "born in the wrong body." Conservative pundits today often try to portray transness

as something new, something which has arisen out of cultural decline and immorality. While evidence of trans and gender non-conforming people exists from the point of even the earliest recorded civilizations, the term “transgender” only gained traction in the 1990s, after displacing “transsexual” which had gained prominence in the 1960s (Boslaugh 22). Like many terms used to describe sexuality and gender, it has its roots originally in the medical field, where it was used to classify certain types of gender expression. The term then entered common parlance and began to be used by gender-queer identifying people to describe themselves. The relative newness of the term can provide the mistaken impression that trans identities are also new. However, as seen in *Nightwood*, this is not the case, it is just that in times past different terms or ways of thinking about gender identity were used.

One such term found within *Nightwood* that has since faded out of common usage is the term “invert.” This is a term that was gaining in popularity and usage during the early twentieth century as interest in sexual classification rose. As with the term “transgender,” it has its roots in the medical and psychoanalytic fields. The OED defines “invert” as a psychological term to describe, “A person with sexual feelings or other psychological characteristics regarded as contrary to those considered normal or typical for their sex, or as characteristic of a person of the opposite sex; spec. a homosexual person, esp. a man.” The OED notes that “Late 19th- and early 20th-cent. descriptions and discussions of ‘the invert’ by psychologists frequently dealt with feelings and behaviour that would now be related to questions of gender identity rather than sexual orientation, but for much of the 20th cent. the word in this sense was often used—particularly by non-specialists—to refer to homosexual men and women.” While Barnes likely understood that her audience would

likely associate the term with homosexuality, the text indicates that she used the term to discuss gender identity directly. This is an example of those within the community having a better understanding of themselves than those outside of the community, who wish to use terms of classification in order to make the unfamiliar less unknown. By using this term to describe gender, Barnes confounds these attempts at understanding. After asking, “Very well—what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl?” (Barnes 145), Dr. O’Connor goes on to remark,

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 love of that last doll was foreshadowed in that love of the first. 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. (Barnes 157)

Here it is clear that Barnes seeks to mark both the term “invert” as referring to one who is gendered beyond the binary. They are a “third sex,” something other than “male” or “female.” That Nora, who is the only character shown to have consistently homosexual relationships, is not described as an invert—while Robin and Dr. O’Connor are both described as such—further makes clear that the term is intended as a description of gender. To maintain an assertion that “invert” here is describing sexual orientation rather than gender identity is to assert that those within the period do not have an enlightened understanding about gender, that in our moment we are more knowledgeable and understanding. It is an assertion of contemporary superiority over those in the past, which plays into the idea of knowledge being subject to linear progress. It is true that sexologists of the period primarily used “invert” to describe sexual attraction and relation, but its use

in the novel demonstrates that the medicalized use of this term did not properly account for the practical use of the term by those within the community. The sexologists are performing a faulty slumming: they have misidentified what they claim to explain. In using the term, knowing it will probably be misunderstood by heteronormative readers, Barnes again subverts readers' desire for and expectation of clarity and classification.

What's My Age Again?

So about the Baronin there was a destiny, not of age, but of youth.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 127

It is a misreading to assume, as does Merrill Cole for example,⁷ that the Doctor's description of the third sex is an exhibition of homophobic tendencies of the novel. If we read "immature" as "Having or showing an emotional or intellectual development not befitting or characteristic of a mature person; juvenile, childish; silly" (OED) this may appear to be a Freudian claim about queer peoples development, that they are queer due to some sort of arrested development or trauma which prevents them from maturing. However, I don't read this judgment into O'Connor's speech. Rather, I think he's using a slightly different definition, "Of an immaterial thing: not fully formed or perfected; recent, new; incomplete" (OED). For one, in the text, Robin is fairly immaterial. As previously established, she is at least as much, if not more so, defined by her absence as her presence. She is intangible, especially to Nora. Additionally, this definition makes more sense when we consider the novel's relationship to time. Barnes repeatedly challenged teleological development, especially as conceived through heteronormative frameworks. It doesn't

⁷ Cf. Merrill Cole "Backwards Ventriloquy: The Historical Uncanny in Barnes's *Nightwood*"

make sense, then, to read this as a condemnation of Robin or a marking of her having not developed to adulthood. Instead, she (and the Doctor) are immature because they are improperly formed, incorrectly assigned to their bodies, prevented from maturing into wholeness. They are “living dolls” in this way, prevented from engaging in life as they seem to be built to do because of the very ways they have been built.

To get a better sense of what the Doctor means by “resembles the doll,” it is helpful to refer back to the argument being made about the use of the term “drag” as it relates to his own gender presentation. Like a doll, he and Robin both exist under a sort of disguise which conceals their otherness. As inverts, they are each like the trapeze artist from the beginning of the novel whose “stuff of [her] tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll” (Barnes 16). They operate outside the bounds of binary sex, beyond being marked by their genitalia. They each possess a sense of the uncanny about them. Freud describes the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (60). The uncanny is something which resembles the familiar or known, but which possesses some alteration which allows it to resemble, but not be, the familiar thing. Its combined resemblance and difference gives it a sense of danger and/or discomfort. Robin is not only an “infected carrier of the past” (Barnes 41), she is also “a tall girl with the body of a boy” (50). In each of these descriptions, she seems to refer to something familiar without being that familiar thing. She is not “an emblem of woman as she has been defined by patriarchy” (Gubar 498), but an emblem of those inverts who are misunderstood by the dominant patriarchal systems which force inverts into a specific, binarily gendered category. She is disruptive of time and gender merely in existing.

Meanwhile, Dr. O'Connor wears the guise of doctor without being one, the novel introduces him as "a middle-aged 'medical student' [...] whose interest in gynaecology had driven him half around the world" (Barnes 17). He speaks as if assuming the guise of a prophet or philosopher, but "no one ever knew what was truth and what was not" (Barnes 168). He pretends, when being observed by others, to be a man, to be youthful and upright, though "his unobserved self" is worn down "as if he were dragging water" (117).

Meanwhile, Robin's uncanniness is clear from the moment she is introduced and is reinforced throughout the novel. In her introduction, she is described as having "the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds" (Barnes 38). Sleepwalkers violate our sense of familiarity and expectation, disrupting the perception of unconsciousness as inactive and unknowing, peaceful and contained within itself. Sleepwalkers imitate waking life without truly participating in it, much as Robin appears to be "always holding God's bag of tricks upside down" (Barnes 120). She appears to violate the laws of time and nature and being, as if she were not really properly occupying her place in the world. Again, this is not an intentional deception on Robin's part. She merely exists as she is, confounding and out-of-place. Those who attempt to fit her into their own perceptions find that she cannot be limited by their categories or images of her.

In his discussion of the uncanny, Freud notes that "children have no fear of their dolls coming to life, they may even desire it. The source of uncanny feelings would not, therefore, be an infantile fear in this case, but rather an infantile wish or even merely an infantile belief" (69). Barnes challenges Freud's idea that this wish/belief must be outgrown by having Dr. O'Connor speak not of having "fear" but instead about "the love we have for the invert" (Barnes 145). Simply stated, the novel does not buy wholesale into

Freud's position on maturity and development. As the doctor explains, "The love of that last doll was foreshadowed in that love of the first" (Barnes 157). Time again is not linear, we cycle back to the love of childhood. The explanation for the love of the invert is not teleological, not concerned with purpose. It points to the cause of the love, not its end result. There is a lack of fear because that love has not been neglected, transformed into something more "appropriate" or adult. The sort of proper "maturity" that Freud discusses does not take into account the way that queer bodies and minds mature outside of the bounds and scripts of heterosexual paths of birth, life, reproduction, death.

"Maturity" the novel suggests, is overrated. This is made clear through the doctor's description of Jenny Petherbridge: "Yet what she steals she keeps, through the incomparable fascination of maturation and rot. She has the strength of an incomplete accident—one that is always waiting for the rest of it, for the last impurity that will make the whole; she was born at the point of death, but unfortunately, she will not age into youth—which is a grave mistake of nature" (Barnes 105). As with the "mistake" of the doctor being endowed with a man's body, nature is shown to not be necessarily correct, its order is not right. This conflict between nature's order and experiences of those in the novel is again brought up as Felix and O'Connor discuss Felix and Robin's young son, Guido, who "is not like other children, not cruel, or savage. For this very reason he is called 'strange.' A child who is mature, in the sense that the heart is mature, is always, I have observed, called deficient" (Barnes 123). Each of these passages propose maturity is both not something that one should necessarily aim toward and that maturity is not actually appreciated as much as one would expect. They also make clear that temporality is disrupted and discontinuous. Maturity may not be arrived at toward the end of one's life, it

may be present from the beginning, achieved or lost at any point in time. Maturity is not stable in either expression or valuation.

New Way to be Human

Cannot a beastly thing be analogous to a fine thing if both are apprehensions?

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 133

Robin Vote not only queers understandings of time and life cycles, she queers our understanding of what it is to be human altogether. Earlier in this paper, I mentioned that George Simmel claimed “The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life” (51). The Modernist individual struggles to assert their individuality against the forces of society which threaten to absorb them into a larger system which erases their personhood in order to make them fit into certain prescribed roles. With Robin, *Nightwood* rejects understandings of time and gender as clearly delineated, challenging societal impositions on the individual. Robin also allows for a reappearance and reconfiguration of the conflict between man and nature by troubling the seemingly clear distinctions between humans, beasts, and even inanimate objects.

First, Robin’s relationship with time and nature queers our understanding of humans as beings who act, rather than who are acted upon. Early in her relationship with Felix, he describes her as follows: “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 45). This description troubles distinctions between organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate. Like the statue, Robin shows evidence of having been created by nature, of carrying in her the evidence of time's passing. Her existence elicits almost a memento-mori of sorts: decay is coming for us all, nature will not show us favor as she wreaks her destruction. As a statue, she is unmoving, but is moved upon by natural forces. This passage brings to mind an earlier description of Robin⁸, as possessing "the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi" (Barnes 38). In both passages, decay is depicted as a living process. They each draw attention to the interconnectedness of life and death. Life is not only forward motion but also backwardness and change that isn't tied to "progress." Robin embodies the past as an ongoing, living thing. While the past is dead, it lives on, bringing with it decay and devolution. The decay associated with Robin results from her innate being, which is always in motion, not from any intentionality on her part. Nora states this another way, "In her, past time records, and past time is relative to us all" (166). She not only queers the understanding of relationality between present and past—the past is present in her—but also makes time something which relates to others. Her relationality is not based upon blood but on the sense of time carried within her. Time seems to not only be a part of her, but acts upon her in a way that obscures her humanity and emphasizes her connection to nature.

When Robin is introduced in the novel, the narrator remarks,

The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a 'picture' forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger. Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person's every

⁸ Which I discussed in further depth in "Hanging by a Moment."

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. (Barnes 41)

Again, here Robin is marked as uncanny. The “forgotten experience” that she elicits reads like a form of *déjà vu*: an image of something that one cannot really remember, but feels themselves to be re-experiencing. Earlier, this paper discussed the fallacy of believing that an image is directly representative of a truth. Felix is one such “contemplative mind” who finds himself trapped in unsuccessfully trying to maintain his image of her. Even as this description mentions being “forever arranged,” the image is described both in terms of motion and as not being true, it is a “mirage” or a “vision.” She reaches both backward in time to the “mirage [...] cast on the racial memory” and forward to “the trepidation of flesh that will become myth.” She elicits a sense of fear of the unknown, of what is to come. She is out of place, “an eland,” an African antelope decked out for a wedding, combining images of pre-European history with European social custom. While the passage notes the elicitation of “racial memory,” the mix of locations suggests that this is not a particular race’s memory, but rather the memory of the “race” of humanity. In “*Nightwood’s* Humans,” Rachel Potter notes that by “imagining the beast prior to separation and the geographically dispersed locations of *Nightwood*” Barnes “posit[s] the shared commonality of those on the outside” (71). The separations between races are not natural, but are artificially

constructed. These distinctions are then circulated to the point that they begin to feel innate. Robin challenges the legitimacy of these categories and points to the shared history of all humans which is omitted from history as written. She is somewhere between past, present, and future, between man and beast, or between society and nature.

Readers should be wary of ascribing negative associations to the use of the word “beast” here and elsewhere to refer to Robin. In a 1935 letter to Emily Holmes Coleman, Barnes wrote that she was dismayed by the “debased meaning now put on that nice word beast” (Barnes qtd. in Potter 69). Beast does not necessarily mean lesser, it gains that attribution when we assume a superiority of society or civilization over nature. *Nightwood* suggests that there is not an inherent hierarchical relationship between the world of humans and natural order. Humans are not the rulers of the dominion of nature, rather they are a part of nature, as much as an animal is. Robin being marked as a beast speaks to her existing outside of the bounds of human order and limitations. In her discussion of this passage, Rachel Potter explores the Derridian conception of beasts as existing in a “place where the law does not appear, or is not respected, or gets violated” (64). If we understand taxonomization to be a function of the law as an expression of faith in an all-encompassing logos, Robin disrespects and violates the law by not being able to be appropriately categorized within dominant cultural systems. As far as fitting into the larger constructed logos of society, as an invert, she is excluded from “the thoroughly contested category of the human [which] was a site both for the assertion of strict boundaries of exclusion *and* for emancipatory narratives of universal rights” (Potter 63, emphasis original). Describing people as beasts or as being animalistic is a key tool of dominant, persecuting groups, such as the fascist governments rising at the time of the novel’s writing. Queers, Jews, Blacks,

and, sometimes, women, are often described as being not entirely human in order to justify their mistreatment. However, Barnes does not excuse Robin's mistreatment, she just points out its origins. To think of creatures as being less deserving of respect is an assertion of superiority which is not reasonable, though it is legitimized through dominant discourse. The language of "beast" or bestial alludes to a sort of primitivism, pre-humanness. Here, once again, temporality, understood as linear progress, is intrinsic to the logic of codification of the "other." These minoritized groups, especially women, are often presented as having a more primordial relationship with their bodies and emotions: they are often represented as chattel, mere movable property. The logic which identifies them as "other" engages in a sort of colonizer logic: they are not properly evolved or civilized. Robin's association with decay suggests a backward evolution, a reconnection with the past as valuable and ever-living.

Robin, according to the text, is not a woman, she is "outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin" (Barnes 155). Robin is emblematic of the queer who has been misdefined as woman by patriarchy and hetero-compulsory culture. She is "outside the 'human type'" not because of deficiency within herself, but deficiency in understanding what she is, what she can be. The human type is defined, constructed, and unnatural. Those around her seek to categorize her to make her better fit their own understanding, for their own comfort rather than for her benefit. It is not only men or outsiders who seek to place her in the category of woman, even Nora sees her as such. Nora tries to understand Robin as a woman and cannot seem to figure her out.

Trying to subsume Robin into this category is part of what leads to their estrangement. As Nora remarks, "I thought I loved her for her sake, and I found out it was

for my own" (Barnes 161). This quote challenges Gubar's claim that "Robin [...] is enacting and sanctifying the myth of herself as an invert who recaptures the physical, the bestial, that has been debased by culture" (500). Certainly, Robin can be read as embodying such a recapture, in many ways representative of a sort of return to pre-industrial ways of being. However, Robin does not actively participate in being made into a myth. The novel does not really show her acting out this myth or really acting out much of anything at all. She is a character whose presence is defined most by her absence: be that her literal, physical absence, or her absence of history, or her general absence of speech. This silence is responded to by the other characters as allowing them license "to interpret the image she presents in order to control her" (Glavey 757). In a novel where people are constantly talking, it's not a small thing that Robin is never an active participant in conversation. Most of what we hear Robin "say" is actually reported through Nora. The longest quote of Robin directly is her telling Jenny, "Shut up, you don't know what you are talking about. You talk all the time and you never know anything. It's such an awful weakness with you. Identifying yourself with God!" (Barnes 82). Robin rejects the attempts of those around her to make general, defining statements about her or the world around them. To her, disorder is not a threat. Disorder is part of life and to pretend otherwise is to live dishonestly. Generalized statements do not provide a useful framework for interacting with the world, they cloud judgment and misrepresent knowing.

Robin rejects the impulse to make sense out of everything. Rather than sanctifying herself as myth, she rejects those who wish to integrate her into their own mythological schemes. The doctor tells Felix, "Destiny and history are untidy; we fear memory of that disorder. Robin did not" (Barnes 126). Robin does not try to fit herself into a tidy timeline

or presentation. She, as invert, possesses, “The blessed face! It should be observed only in profile, otherwise it is observed to be the conjunction of the identical cleaved halves of sexless misgiving! Their kingdom is without precedent” (Barnes 157). Looking at her straight on, viewing her in full, it is clear that she does not belong to either of the sexual categories that are allowed by society. As chrononormativity “is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (Freeman 3), so does the taxonomization of sexuality and gender serve to reify those definitions as natural modes of being, rather than actually recognizing the various ways of gendered being one may inhabit naturally. Robin does not engage in her own myth making, rather, “Robin’s silences destabilize the idea of self-realization through language or community” (Potter 66). She reveals that self-realization is not possible through direct linguistic encoding. Instead, affective understanding is more important to understanding one’s self and others. Robin moves through the world as she pleases, as is right for her, and refuses to allow herself to be pinned down by a particular encoding of her being. In doing so, Robin represents possibility beyond prescription. It is easy to condemn her for being “other” but the novel does not support this condemnation.

Instead, those who attempt to possess Robin by way of fitting her into their own boxes and scripts for living are shown to be engaging in a futile task. In the novel’s final chapter, Robin and Jenny Petherbridge arrive in New York, Nora’s home state. While there, Robin renounces the order that she has found for herself as Jenny’s partner and as one who “had taken the Catholic vow long before” (Barnes 176). Interestingly, as she enters a church to light a candle for what she has lost, “the motive power which had directed Robin’s life, her day as well as her night” (176), she moves “like a housewife come to set straight

disorder in an unknown house" (Barnes 177). The disorder she rights is the disorder of her being placed in a static position. Her proper order is to be fluid, shifting, unbound to any one person or way of being. Those around her who seek to keep her bound within their perception are unable to cope with this, "Because Robin's engagements were with something unseen, because in her speech and in her gestures there was a desperate anonymity, Jenny became hysterical. [...] She did not understand anything Robin felt or did, which was more unendurable than her absence" (Barnes 177). Robin is seemingly incomprehensible, but were it not for trying to make Robin's identity stable, this may not be the case. Robin is not entirely without identity, her identity is shifting and in motion.

In this final chapter, she makes herself at home in nature, separated from society. She circles around Nora's home as Nora once circled around the streets of Paris at night, searching for Robin. Nora had earlier told the doctor that "I can only find her again in my sleep or in her death; in both she has forgotten me" (Barnes 137). In the moment of their reunion, Nora is asleep, knocked out "blindly, without warning, [because she] plunged into the jamb of the chapel door" (178). Robin then takes on the guise of the dog, playing or fighting with him on all fours, "representing the culmination of a narrative falling away from the humanist narrative of subjective self-realization" (Potter 66). It is not necessary to the novel for readers or the characters themselves to feel that they have a clear understanding of the identities of the characters. Instead of delivering a neat, orderly, wrapped up conclusion, the novel leaves itself open to possibilities. Through Robin, the conclusion presents possibilities for ways of being beyond the bounds of history, categorization, tradition, and laws of human making. Identity, be it defined through gender, maturity, or humanity, is not static or exclusionary but fluid, fluctuating, and ever evolving.

Even what seems like devolution—crawling on all fours and barking like a dog—can be a form of (non-linear) progress, by which one is connected back to the core of their own nature from which they have been separated by society's encoding of their identity as a stable, defined category.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

*Can't you be done now, can't you give up? Now be still, now that
you know what the world is about, knowing it's about nothing?*
—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 132

Nightwood is certainly a challenging text, especially if one reads with a desire for clarity and neat conclusion. It is a fragmentary novel representing characters in fragmentary presentations. Devoid from a sense of linear history or background, *Nightwood* reveals that all seemingly fixed ways of being are artificial. The rejection of each category explored here—slumming literature, Imagisme, history, time, gender, maturity, and humanity—on their own appear to be a simple contrarian approach to well defined and accepted ways of being. However, when these categories are placed in conversation with one another, the overarching philosophical concern of the novel is made clear. Overall, the novel's rejection and reinscription of each of these operates in conversation with the others to challenge particular historically situated perspectives and dominant narratives.

Nightwood is a novel “born unprovided for, except in the provision of [it]self” (Barnes 58). To read it as one reads any other novel, expecting a plot that neatly moves from beginning to ending, which provides background and motivation for each of its characters, will be a frustrating and fruitless task. Daniela Caselli argues “Barnes’s inopportune modernism has never been fully absorbed within the literary history of the twentieth century because of its inherent scepticism towards genealogy and timeliness” (2). Though many modernist texts are fragmentary, Barnes’s rejections of linear progress and history mark this text as operating outside of the mainstream canon of modernist literature, which posits itself as directly evolving from a defined lineage of literature. Instead, this novel sidesteps around tradition and literary inheritance, refusing to identify

itself as participating in a specific genre (such as slumming literature) or aesthetic ideology (like Imagisme) of the moment. However, I argue that the novel is not entirely outside the bounds of the modernist canon. Barnes is responding to and interacting with the same systems and evolutions as other star figures of the moment, such as Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce. She is taking a different approach, responding to the conditions of modernity in a new way, a queer way, but to segment the text off as simply being “queer literature” allows readers and critics alike to disregard how Barnes takes aim at the narrative of progress as a linear process. It is a queer text, but it is modernist indeed, just oppositionally so.

The characters and their lives and loves are recognizable but cannot be placed within the bounds of any particular identity. By reading against categories, rejecting the idea of any definition being sufficient to represent the complex lives and beings of individuals, readers can access the affective truth at the heart of the novel. The lives of these non-normative characters are equally valuable as those of the normative individuals most commonly represented in novels. While novels are often considered the genre of the middle class, both in terms of readers and the characters depicted within them, *Nightwood*'s characters are all marked as operating outside of the middle class, excluded due to either actual class status (Dr. O'Connor in his dilapidated apartment), ethnicity (Felix as the semi-hidden Jew), or due to their queerness (Robin and Nora). It is also not catering to a middle-class readership. Barnes refuses to fit the novel within what is expected of a slumming novel by refusing to mark the “underworld” of the novel as being any less valuable than normative society. These characters are not defined for the benefit of middle/upper-class readers. Readers cannot come to this text and say, “Now I understand

queerness, now I have knowledge of the underbelly of society.” *Nightwood* marks the queer underworld as “a loved thing that [readers] could never touch, therefore never know” (Barnes 15). One may access this underworld through the novel, but it will not be sanitized or placed in terms that are clearly comprehensible by those in dominant social circles. Instead, readers must allow themselves to read and accept the depiction presented by the novel as simply one depiction, not a defining example. It is complex, confounding, and emotionally powerful, providing an accurate representation of life, though differing in many ways from the verisimilitude readers may expect.

Despite the assertion of Ezra Pound that it is necessary to provide direct treatment of the thing, to bring an image clearly into focus, Barnes here reveals that images are deceptive in that they suggest a permanence that they do not actually represent. A moment in time is simply that, a moment, here and then gone again. Images are useful for capturing an atmosphere, but this too is impermanent. In the world of the novel, meaning is continually deferred. Finality is rejected in favor of transience. The novel suggests that we should not seek to push beyond transience in search of finality. Images are deceptive if we believe them to be fully representative. If we take them for what they are, mere snapshots, instances, they can be informative and valuable. *Nightwood* challenges readers to be comfortable with dynamic movement and to not seek stasis. The novel models the possibility of rejecting definition and accepting impression. Counterintuitively, by rejecting the desire for strict definition allows for more accurate interpretations. Definition narrows meaning into one form, one presentation, but meaning is so much more vast than that. By not seeking to place boundaries around characters or concepts, readers can experience a new way of reading.

Though presenting a new mode of literature not directly aligned with novels as understood either in the past or within the modernist moment itself, the novel provides within itself a model for how to read it, if one sets aside their expectations to appreciate it simply as it is. The novel is guided by an affectual framework which urges a reading that focuses on the emotional atmosphere created by the relationships between characters and between the characters and themselves. It is a text “devoted at once to recognition and obscurity” (Glavey 750). Form and content work together to unravel a sense of stability. Queer lives are represented through queer narratives and syntax which rejects traditional narrative expectations. The novel does not aim to present these lives in a way which fits the prescriptive models of heteronormative, chrononormative existence prescribed by modern society. It also does not aim to make these lives understandable through the terms defined by dominant groups. Instead, it turns the categories as defined inside-out, revealing them to be constructions which fail to accurately encompass and represent the realities of the people and lives they describe.

Nightwood queers everything it presents: gender, time, history, identity. It encourages readers to look beyond essentialist understandings and to question whether what they believe to be “natural” is indeed natural or if it is a societally constructed narrative. The novel encourages readers to question the purpose of those constructions. Are we told to marry and have children because it will make us happy? No, it is a mechanism to ensure we are properly subjugated to our societal positions. Are people forbidden from expressing their gender beyond the sexual binary because being gender-nonconforming is unnatural? No, people embodying alternate genders are harder to control within society. It is actually quite natural to not be strictly gendered feminine or

masculine. As we see with the more “normative” characters, like Guido and Hedvig, even “normal” gendered persons embody aspects of the opposite gender. Queering time reveals how time has been manipulated by modernity into a means of controlling the lives and movements of a population, rather than just being a marker of the earth’s rotation.

Queering history points out the ways in which certain dominant narratives are constructed and perpetuated in service of the oppression of particular groups of people. Queering identity reveals that no one is static, the ways we interact with ourselves and the world—the ways we define ourselves—are always shifting, evolving, taking on new forms. Nothing lasts forever, not life, nor love, nor even meaning. *Nightwood* challenges its readers to accept, and even value, the beauty of impermanence.

Epilogue: New Ways of Reading

This reading of *Nightwood* not only presents new ways of understanding the novel, but also presents a new way of reading that can be brought to other texts, particularly those which do not seem to fit neatly within accepted modes of understanding. This novel exists both in an alternate temporality, where the progression of time is not linear, and in the particular historical context of the Modernist literary movement. It both depicts recognizable queerness and refuses to define it as any particular form of queer embodiment. Above all, it relies on affectual understanding and an acceptance of all people as dynamic, shifting beings. To approach other texts with this guiding philosophy in mind can open new possibilities for understanding non-normative being and representation.

As stated at the beginning of this essay, we are in a moment where such an approach to identity remains subversive. *Nightwood* instructs us on how to read against the grain and we can heed its lesson. To approach a text without trying to make its representations fit within specific categories can allow for a more accurate understanding of the text, wherein accuracy is defined by affective experience rather than factual taxonomization. Through *Nightwood*, we can be trained to read differently, opening endless possibilities for new interpretations and understandings of even texts that seem to be already well-defined.

Instead of taking characters for granted, simply believing what the writer or narrator states about the character, *Nightwood* encourages readers to draw their own conclusions based on the impressions they gather from the text. The text itself is to be read as an image: a representation of a particular moment. Like an image, which always shows the same instance but can be interpreted differently depending on the context and moment in which it is viewed, so can the novel be read differently upon each approach. Just as one

cannot step into the same river twice, one cannot read the same novel twice. The text may be fixed, but the reader is not.

Finally, the novel encourages readers to be wary of the consequences of definition. Definition leads to a false sense of mastery and understanding. It gives way to codification, which then leads to legislation. To seek to define is to seek to control. Meaning always exists in multiplicity. Relying on one particular interpretation—be that of a text, person, gender, or history—prevents rather than promotes understanding. *Nightwood* models what it means to not define and to instead just appreciate.

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Vita

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