

2012

# Spectacular Shadows: Djuna Barnes's Styles of Estrangement in *Nightwood*

Erica Nicole Bellman  
*Claremont McKenna College*

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## Recommended Citation

Bellman, Erica Nicole, "Spectacular Shadows: Djuna Barnes's Styles of Estrangement in *Nightwood*" (2012). *CMC Senior Theses*. Paper 353.  
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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**

SPECTACULAR SHADOWS: DJUNA BARNES'S STYLES OF ESTRANGEMENT  
IN NIGHTWOOD

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR JOHN C. FARRELL

AND

DEAN GREGORY HESS

BY

ERICA NICOLE BELLMAN

FOR

SENIOR THESIS

FALL 2011/SPRING 2012

APRIL 23, 2012

## **Abstract**

This paper examines Djuna Barnes's Modernist masterpiece, *Nightwood*, by exploring the author's particular styles of writing. As an ironist, a master of spectacle, and a visual artist, Barnes's distinct stylistic roles allow the writer to construct a strange fictional world that transcends simple categorization and demands close reading. Through textual analysis, consideration of how Barnes's characterization, and engagement with key critical interpretations lead to the conclusion that *Nightwood*'s primary aim is to present the reader with an image of his or her own individual estrangement.

## Acknowledgments

My year-long journey into the dark depths of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* has been alternately thrilling and challenging, enlightening and disorienting. I would like to express my gratitude to the individuals I feel were instrumental in the process of producing this senior thesis. After spending so much time with Ms. Barnes this year, I find I am sad to be saying goodbye to an ironic, witty, brilliant writer—for now, at least.

Thank you, Professor Farrell, for joining me on this quest for Barnes's elusive figure within what is, perhaps, one of the most difficult and rewarding works I have ever approached as a student of Literature. I have enjoyed laughing with you over Matthew O'Connor's hysterical humor and musing together on the meanings of loss and love as expressed in Barnes's work.

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for tolerating what I am sure were strange phone conversations as I attempted to explain this capstone project. I hope you enjoy the final product.

Thank you, Professor Lobis, for leading a truly marvelous group of Literature students in our senior thesis colloquium this year, and to my peers for providing such constructive and thoughtful critiques throughout the writing process.

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*“I...mourn for my spirit, and the spirits of all people who cast a shadow a long way beyond what they are, and for the beasts that walk out of the darkness alone; I...wail for all the little beasts in their mothers, who would have to step down and begin going decent in the one fur that would last them their time.”*

*--Dr. Matthew Mighty-Grain-of-Salt-Dante-O'Connor (Nightwood 112)*

## **Introduction: There Are Only Confusions**

To read Djuna Barnes's strange modernist *tour de force* is to embark on a difficult, often maddening journey through the grotesque demi-monde of Europe between the wars. Here, nothing is as it first appears: irony reigns, and initial impressions are never accurate. Barnes shows her readers the dark periphery of the bourgeois bohemian society many of her contemporaries—Gertrude Stein, Natalie Clifford Barney, and Janet “Genet” Flanner, to name a few—portrayed in a rosier hue. For Barnes, the desires to enact estrangement and challenge the status quo take precedence over abiding by the conventions of storytelling. Many have labored to pin *Nightwood* to a particular genre or writing style. T.S. Eliot, Barnes's close friend and the editor of *Nightwood*, even noted in his introduction to the novel that “only sensibilities trained on poetry” could fully appreciate the imagistic text (*N.* xviii). But Eliot's attempt to place *Nightwood* within a specific category of literature represents the most common error most readers make in their attempts to grasp the work. *Nightwood* is not truly a poem nor is it an Elizabethan or Jacobean tragedy, a satirical comedy, a Surrealist painting, or a circus performance. If the reader hopes to glean the rewards this mysterious gem of modernist literature surely contains, *Nightwood* must be approached with a more capacious and imaginative interpretive lens. We must wallow in the moments of total disorientation and relinquish all control to Barnes's acerbic wit and omnipresent irony in order to experience the text. We must resist the impulse to contain *Nightwood*'s strangeness within a succinct explanation, and instead embrace the feeling of total helplessness that comes with being

at Barnes's authorial mercy. After all, as the entertaining, oracular Dr. Matthew Mighty-Grain-of-Salt-Dante-O'Connor preaches, "there is no pure sorrow...there are only confusions" in the underworld *Nightwood* reveals (N. 25). The reader must walk directly into the Nightwood—the topsy-turvy world of confusion—of Barnes's text.

My reading of *Nightwood* will not draw heavily from the author's biography. The text bears the marks of satire, which has led many critics to directly associate Barnes's characters with real figures from the author's life. The loquacious Dr. Matthew O'Connor was likely inspired by Dan Mahoney, an Irish doctor from San Francisco who catered to the expatriate circle in Paris, administering everything from psychotherapy to abortions for his patients and confidantes (Kannenstine 110). Robin Vote is often considered a thinly veiled version of the American sculptor and silverpoint artist Thelma Wood, Barnes's longtime lover. Given Barnes's own bisexuality and her tumultuous relationship with Wood, critics and readers have assigned the author Nora Flood—the *salonnière* and circus promoter whose main flaw is her belief in humankind's innate goodness—as a literary doppelganger. A reading of *Nightwood* as Barnes's autobiography enveloped in satire, however, would overlook the author's stylistic nuances and the greater attention her work requires. While writing or reading in a void, isolating the text's language from its context and origins, is neither possible nor enlightening, I propose a consideration of *Nightwood* that relegates Barnes's own life to a minor level of importance. The author's earlier works, like her bawdy picaresque novel, *Ryder* (1928), and *The Ladies' Almanack*, a satirical chronicle of lesbian bohemia, are more explicitly tied to personal experiences and observations than *Nightwood*. Just as Eliot's suggestion that *Nightwood* should be read like a poem is far too restrictive, a reading of the novel as pure satire dismisses the

potential for deep engagement with the text. Though elements of Barnes's own experiences inevitably saturate the work, the reader should arrive in *Nightwood's* world with the intent of experiencing the text for him or herself.

A brief account of Barnes's life, as well as the development and critical reception of *Nightwood*, may still be useful in developing a comprehensive impression of the work. My work follows Phillip Herring's biography, *Djuna*. Born in 1892 in a log cabin on Storm King Mountain in Cornwall-On-Hudson, New York, Djuna Barnes was raised mostly by her paternal grandmother, the journalist, writer, and Women's Suffrage activist Zadel Turner Barnes. Barnes's father, Wald Barnes, was a mostly unsuccessful painter and composer who practiced polygamy. Though Wald married Barnes's mother Elizabeth, his home remained steeped in the atmosphere of "free love" he advocated; Fanny, Wald's mistress, moved in with the family in 1897. At the age of sixteen, Barnes was raped by a neighbor (apparently with Wald's consent), an experience that probably laid the foundations for the author's negative outlook on love. Barnes and three of her four brothers relocated to New York City with Elizabeth after she and Wald divorced in 1912. In the city, Barnes pursued her ambitions to become an artist by studying at the Pratt Institute but dropped out to work as a reporter in order to provide financial support for her family. Barnes's news stories, interviews, theatre reviews, and illustrations brought the young writer great success, and enabled her to move into her own flat in Greenwich Village in 1915. She became involved with the Provincetown Players, a popular theatre collective, and published *The Book of Repulsive Women*, a chapbook of "rhythms" and drawings portraying lesbian women of the period in what was shocking detail.

Barnes arrived in Paris in 1921 on assignment for *McCall's Magazine*, and immediately set about interviewing notable writers and artists of the Modernist movement. Known in the expatriate community for her black cloak and sharp wit, the writer became a member of influential salon hostess Natalie Clifford Barney's inner circle, which included the poet Mina Loy and the Dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who would become Barnes's dearest friends. With Thelma Wood, Barnes resided in a flat on the Boulevard Saint-Germain until Wood's interest in a monogamous relationship with Barnes waned and the couple separated in 1928. That same year, Barnes published both *Ryder* and *The Ladies' Almanack*. During the summers of 1932 and 1933, Barnes worked on her first draft of *Nightwood* at Hayford Hall (dubbed "Hangover Hall" by its spirited visitors), the manor rented by Peggy Guggenheim in Devonshire, England. On the poet Emily Coleman's advice, T.S. Eliot read Barnes's manuscript and began working with Barnes on edits to prepare *Nightwood* for publication. In 1936, Faber and Faber, Eliot's publishing house, published the completed work in London to surprisingly modest acclaim; in 1937, Harcourt Brace printed an edition in the United States. Though critics lauded *Nightwood* as a masterful display of artistry, the work did not circulate widely among the reading public. Barnes's depression, sadly, came to a head when she returned to Greenwich Village in 1940 and began to drink heavily. A notorious recluse who became increasingly unsociable as she aged, Barnes worked for Henry Holt for a short period before she was fired for her brutally scathing reports. *The Antiphon*, an angry verse play that drew heavily from Barnes's family history, was published in 1950.

Though *Nightwood* was considered a masterful, innovative work of Modernist fiction, Barnes's work did not produce the critical buzz the author and Eliot might have

anticipated. Barnes remains a relatively unknown member of the Lost Generation of writers and artists that came of age in Europe between the World Wars, and *Nightwood* is often shelved alongside more marginal works of Modernist literature. The text's obscurity and the laborious imaginative work it demands of readers may have contributed to *Nightwood's* lack of recognition, though this cannot be the entire explanation. *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* are certainly difficult works—and far longer than *Nightwood's* mere 180 pages, in Joyce's case, or laden with allusive references, in Eliot's—but these titles are considered touchstones of Modernism by academics and mainstream readers alike. Perhaps Barnes's own persona, her lack of bravado and distaste for the limelight, pushed *Nightwood* out of the Modernist spotlight. Other factors that may have led to *Nightwood's* anonymity include the work's depiction of bisexual and lesbian relationships, its generally gloomy (though peppered with wry humor) undertone, and the absence of a cohesive narrative in favor of the "confusion" Dr. O'Connor voices. All of the above are likely contributors to *Nightwood's* lack of appeal among readers, but the text's refusal to be contained within the traditional categories of critical interpretation, I will argue, is the chief reason for the exclusion of Barnes's work from the literary canon.

Nearly everything about *Nightwood* escapes the reader's immediate comprehension. Its genre is indefinable, which leaves the first-time reader helplessly flailing for guidance. Should Barnes's strikingly vivid images be considered as related parts of the larger work? Or should the images be imagined as discrete tableaux, as Eliot's remark about the work's poetic sensibility suggests? The text's general structure quickly departs from its initially chronological treatment of events, unraveling into longwinded dialogues between the characters, most often concerning Robin Vote. The

characters, too, are either untrustworthy or utterly unfathomable: Felix and Matthew O'Connor are habitual liars; Jenny Petherbridge poaches others' identities and lovers. Matthew O'Connor's sonorous voice can be heard throughout the text, intoning an amalgam of witticisms, anecdotes, nonsense, and wisdom about love, the "universal malady" to which all are destined to fall victim. The images described in Matthew's orations appear in shimmering relief against the chiaroscuro backdrop of *Nightwood*; a "heart on a plate" cries "'Love' and twitch[es] like the lopped leg of a frog," evoking a deep emotional reaction from the reader (*N.* 30). Despite Matthew's continuous presence throughout the text Robin, however, is the central enigma around which *Nightwood's* strange world revolves. Alternately called a woman and a beast, Robin evades even Barnes's highly descriptive language, which attempts but ultimately fails to conjure a clear image of her figure. All superficial appearances in *Nightwood* are masks for a hidden, inner self that cowers in fear of the reader's gaze. Barnes uses intoxicating language to both attract and confound the reader, who struggles alongside Felix and Nora as they wander, directionless, through the Nightwood searching for Robin. Although the text is rife with exquisitely crafted images—there are sumptuous Rococo interiors, lush jungle paintings by Rousseau, circus performers gleaming in candy-bright costumes—*Nightwood's* obsession with the visual is, at last, only a tease. As Robin leads her suitors into the depths of misery with her entrancing yet unobtainable love, Barnes lures the eager reader into the impenetrable landscape of her text. Only by surrendering our expectations and our desire for the author to reward our readings with a didactic, pleasurable, or straight-forward narrative may we gain access to the rewards Barnes's peculiar work offers.

The major critical approaches to *Nightwood* thus far fall into two camps: the form-oriented and the content-oriented. Joseph Frank's influential collection of essays, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (1945), cites Barnes's work as an exemplar of spatial form in modern literature. In his theory, Frank attempts to categorically explain the formal experiments avant-garde literary works like *Nightwood* undertook. Since a spatial rather than temporal mode of writing dominates Barnes's text, Frank believes a proper reading of *Nightwood* demands a paradigm shift in the way people approached the literary arts. *Nightwood*, then, should be read in a manner similar to the way one views a sculpture or a Cubist painting: with an awareness of the way the work occupies space, rather than assuming a linear sequence of events. Brian Glavey's response builds upon Frank's theory by adding the concept of ekphrasis—a literary work's formal imitation of a work of visual art—to the idea of *Nightwood*'s spatial form. Glavey proposes a “queer ekphrasis” at play in Barnes's text, a method of writing that allows the literary work to gain the permanence of an art object, thereby preserving the text from its original context (Glavey 751). Frank and Glavey are the major form-focused critics of *Nightwood*; the content-focused critical responses take diverse points of entry into Barnes's challenging text. Shari Benstock, in her survey of twentieth century women Modernists, attempts to dismantle “the myth of Djuna Barnes, ‘expatriate woman writer’” by illuminating elements of Barnes's personal life and literary work that diverged from the mainstream of bohemian Paris (Benstock 231). Benstock's reading, however, submits to the temptation to read *Nightwood* as a fictionalized version of Barnes's own life. Additionally, Benstock's perspective on the text is further limited when she identifies *Nightwood*'s central aim to be the assertion of women's rights to express their sexual identities within

the dominant patriarchal construct. Similar readings by Susan Martins, Jane Marcus, and Deborah Parsons, to name a few, focus too narrowly on women's issues, or on "queer" issues, and so neglect to see *Nightwood*'s potential for a deeper, wider-reaching relevance. Some critics have delved into Barnes's creative process, isolating and calling into question her mostly positive relationship with editor and friend T.S. Eliot.

*Nightwood* is often approached as a "lesbian novel," a category Barnes herself would have detested; the author famously avoided identifying herself as a lesbian or even as a bisexual.

It is my view that the reader should approach the text from a flexible, neutral viewpoint, thus avoiding the frustration that inevitably will plague a reader whose enters *Nightwood* with preconceived expectations for the reading experience. Louis Kannenstine's *Duality and Damnation* takes a more expansive approach to the author's work by addressing how form and content are inextricably linked in *Nightwood*, rather than privileging one category to the exclusion of the other. Kannenstine argues that style serves as the foundation for character, theme, tone, and meaning in *Nightwood*. A "transgeneric mode," Kannenstine holds, allows Barnes to draw upon a multitude of typically disassociated themes, narrative voices, and styles to create a mosaic-like text with illimitable possibilities for interpretation (Kannenstine 126). The more literal the reader's approach to *Nightwood*, according to Kannenstine, the less fruitful the reading experience. Like Kannenstine, Victoria Smith believes the narrative contents and formal structure of *Nightwood* reflect and enhance one another to create a purely tropological text, in which figurative language and literal significance are necessarily entwined. Smith considers *Nightwood* "a story beside itself," shaped around a false center or

absence (Smith 195). The novel, then, is somewhat like a black hole of language: the reader, hungry for meaning, consumes Barnes's profusion of tropes, motifs, and dialogue but only uncovers a narrative of loss.

My own reading of *Nightwood* is similar to Kannenstine's and Smith's in that I will argue for an interpretation that devotes equal attention to the experimental formal techniques and the substance or content of Barnes's work. Barnes's distinct use of a variety of styles—individual manners of expression—create her work's perplexing, intriguing visual and emotional effects. Reading *Nightwood* through just one stylistic lens would neglect the myriad of other interpretations Barnes's work not only suggests but demands the reader acknowledge. Ultimately, *Nightwood* is not a unified narrative in the typical sense; Barnes's work is an agglomeration of images, conversations, and character portraits, united only by the purpose they serve in achieving the writer's ambition for the text's overall impact on the reader.

The three styles I will identify in *Nightwood* by no means constitute an exhaustive list, but illuminate Barnes's major authorial strategies. First, I will add my belief that a fundamental irony underlies each of *Nightwood*'s dazzling surfaces. As the ironist who leads the reader into her text's mystifying terrain, Barnes maintains total control over what is known and what remains maddeningly unknown to each of her characters and to the reader. Using Norththrop Frye's definition of irony as a mode of tragic fiction, I will argue that the contest for an absolute, impossible knowledge of one another entangles *Nightwood*'s characters and engenders an endless cycle of suffering. Next, Barnes acts as the master of *Nightwood*'s omnipresent spectacle, the entrancing yet unattainable act the text performs as it eludes the reader's grasp. Barnes challenges the hierarchy engendered

by the spectatorial gaze, thus endowing the spectacle with the power to transcend repression. Finally, I will address *Nightwood's* painterly style and Barnes's pointed references to artistic movements and specific works of visual art. But these three styles are a mere few of the many Barnes employs throughout *Nightwood*. Each reader must independently explore *Nightwood's* complex and bizarre world to experience Barnes's astounding work firsthand. Any attempt to completely capture what is perhaps the most mysterious work of Modernist literature is, at last, a feeble attempt. Barnes holds *Nightwood* up to the reader like a distorting mirror, urging her readers to gaze into the text to identify the qualities that make each individual estranged from the so-called mainstream of society that is responsible for the suffering Barnes depicts in her grim text.

## Chapter 1: The Ironist

*Nightwood* presents a test to the reader's exegetical stamina. Time sequence is disjointed, sentences often run on for pages, and Barnes's images are surreal and difficult to conjure in the imagination. Stumbling blocks abound. Barnes raises questions about what constitutes and determines one's history, sexual identity, and ultimate fate. Despite its relative brevity, the process of reading *Nightwood* is like piecing together a shattered mirror: each shard reflects another, distracting and dizzying the reader who struggles to make sense of the whole. The true challenges of *Nightwood*, however, are its struggles for knowledge. Barnes toys with the reader's expectations, intentionally evading the norms of storytelling. The reader approaches the text for the first time with the assumption that the plot of *Nightwood* will be communicated in a linear, generally chronological order of events. A unified style and tone are presumed to dominate, at least somewhat in keeping with the three Aristotelian unities of tragic fiction: place, time, and action. Barnes's unity is instead achieved through what Louis F. Kannenstine calls an "associative resonance," in which the author uses images and sensations—rather than concrete ideas or standard movements of plot action and dialogue—to conjure a more fluid, associative understanding of characters and dominant themes (Kannenstine 87). The reader, unprepared for such atypical narrative techniques, is left to grasp for the luminous images and themes that glimmer throughout the text. This quality led T.S. Eliot, Barnes's editor and fellow modernist, to argue in his introduction to the novel that "only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate" *Nightwood* (N. xviii). Eliot's poetic

impression of *Nightwood*, however, is only one of myriad styles in which Barnes writes to develop her infinitely layered, complex work of Modernist literature.

Of the multitude of different styles Barnes employs, the style of the ironic narrator is most fundamental to the work. Irony, according to Northrop Frye, is “a technique of appearing to be less than one is”; in literature, irony is a method of “saying as little and meaning as much as possible, or...a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning” (Frye 40). Barnes uses irony to provoke and manipulate the human desire for knowledge. Both among her characters and between the reader and the text, Barnes purposefully stimulates curiosity throughout *Nightwood*. The enigmatic novel toys with the reader’s impulse to categorically understand the work’s structure, characters, and moral stance. But *Nightwood* is neither entirely tragic nor entirely comical, neither entirely serious nor entirely satirical. Barnes’s tone is both somber and mocking toward her grotesque characters, the bourgeois society she portrays, the reader, and even the text’s status as a work of fiction. In order to comprehend the strange world of *Nightwood*, the reader must consider the ironic potential each element of the novel holds. Barnes challenges the often delusional, fanatical quest for knowledge of the “other” in which human beings, particularly those blinded by love, engage. Knowledge comes at a severe cost: Felix Volkbein and Nora Flood must suffer emotionally and psychologically before they acquire any truly enlightened understanding. In keeping with the laws of irony, however, the knowledge attained in *Nightwood* is far removed from the reader’s and the characters’ expectations.

An all-consuming curiosity about the inner lives of others is the primary source of misery and conflict in *Nightwood*. Fueled by self-consciousness and anxiety, Felix, Nora, and Jenny Petherbridge relentlessly pursue Robin Vote, the mostly mute woman whose attractiveness is merely an effect of her inscrutability. The desire to truly, completely *know* Robin—rather than a genuine love for her person—is what captivates the other characters and causes their downward spirals into madness. Robin’s identity, private thoughts, and heart, however, cannot be possessed by any individual. Though the quest for knowledge of Robin is futile, Felix and Nora continue to pound upon the closed doors of her being until the end of *Nightwood*. Each of Robin’s lovers, too, seems fraught with irony: Barnes’s characters rarely, if ever, present the same personas to the public that they display in private, under the cover of night. Felix Volkbein, for example, conceals his Jewishness by constructing a fictitious “history” of royalty, hiding his heritage and deceiving every person he meets. As Dr. Matthew O’Connor notices, “there [is] something missing and whole about the Baron Felix,” even before he meets Robin, that has made him “damned from the waist up” (*N.* 29). By suppressing vital parts of his persona and his past, Felix makes himself miserable. Felix’s desire for Robin stems from his own insecurity, and his longing to join the ranks of the aristocratic nobility. In Robin, Felix sees only a “Baroness,” rather than a unique, independent woman with a complex history and personality of her own. Wearing his false title of “Baron” like a gleaming mask, Felix strives to bury his own inner life beneath layers and layers of artifice. As in much of *Nightwood*, there are elements both of comedy and tragedy in Felix’s attempts to conform to his perception of the status quo.

The most ironic character of all, however, is the effusive yet private Dr. Matthew Mighty-Grain-of-Salt-Dante-O'Connor. Eliot initially mistook Matthew for the text's central figure who "alone...gave the book its vitality" with his charismatic personality and wit (*N.* xviii). Though Matthew's monologues constitute the majority of *Nightwood's* speech, he is not the source of the novel's primary conflict; Robin Vote stands at the center of *Nightwood*, though she squirms to escape the spotlight. Matthew is simultaneously the most vocal and the most misunderstood character in *Nightwood*. Involuntarily and by default, Matthew becomes a confidante and advisor to the other characters; perhaps due to his title, or perhaps due to his air of world-weary wisdom, Matthew bears the burden of listening and responding to the other characters' helpless pleas for knowledge. Like Tiresias, the speaker of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Matthew "has foresuffered all," and so possesses the most extensive knowledge about humanity. Matthew's style as a speaker is improvisational and elaborate; he seems to serve as a sort of oracular medium through which a mixture of wisdom and nonsense flows. The reader quickly learns to take every word that escapes O'Connor's lips as his full name demands: with a mighty grain (or two) of salt. Within Matthew's outlandish speeches, however, the reader finds sparkling gems of deep insight, striking imagery, and sharp wit unmatched by any of *Nightwood's* other characters. Though many of Matthew's tales are riddled with fantastical lies or, at the very least, extreme exaggerations, Felix and Nora become addicted to hearing his advice. Felix and Nora trust Matthew, despite the often blatant untruths he spews; *Nightwood's* orator is beguiling to the other characters because he knows what they do not know.

But Matthew's words fall upon deaf ears within the bounds of *Nightwood* until it is too late for Felix and Nora to evade the misery that comes with their obsessive love for Robin. Though Felix and Nora incessantly pester Matthew for sage bits of wisdom, they choose to ignore his words. Before Felix ever meets Robin, Matthew names the fate he will soon suffer when the two meet. "You know what man really desires?" Matthew inquires of Felix. "One of two things: to find someone who is so stupid he can lie to her, or to love someone so much that she can lie to him" (*N.* 23). The reader might note Matthew's eerily shrewd comment is an allusion to Shakespeare's "Sonnet 138," which offers a cynical perspective on the nature of truth and flattery in relationships. Matthew, like Shakespeare, uses the very "to lie" as a double entendre to communicate the inanity of how humans comport themselves in love. Ironically, people like Felix tell lies to others in order to convince them they are worth loving—or "lying" with. If Felix had heeded Matthew's advice, perhaps the tragedy of *Nightwood* would have stalled in the first chapter. Felix proceeds to lie to Robin *and* to accept the lies she presumably utters during the married couple's vows of fidelity, fulfilling Matthew's prophesy.

Nora Flood remains similarly naïve about Matthew's character until the novel's fifth chapter, "Watchman, What of the Night?" Though she constantly beleaguers Matthew for news of Robin's whereabouts, the actual content of his words does not penetrate her consciousness. Nora temporarily satiates her craving for Robin by unloading her worries on Matthew, who suffers as a result of her emotional abuse. Nora does not realize Matthew is not who he claims to be—or who the other characters expect him to be—until she visits the doctor at his garret during the wee hours of the morning under the assumption that he will be at her disposal. She seeks someone to whom she can

vent her anxieties and fears about Robin, and she presumes Matthew will be ready and able to help. Nora's naïvely formed impression of Matthew is turned upon its head when she flings open the door to his quarters:

[Nora] had not known that the doctor was so poor... Hearing his 'come in' she opened the door and for one second hesitated, so incredible was the disorder that met her eyes. The room was so small... It was as if being condemned to the grave the doctor had decided to occupy it with the utmost abandon. (*N.* 84)

Barnes takes care to express Nora's ignorance of Matthew's financial state in the beginning of the chapter, revealing an incongruous relationship between Nora's level of comfort with Matthew and the extent to which she actually *knows* him. She has never visited his home before, yet feels at ease calling on Matthew at three in the morning. The reader senses that the "disorder" appearing before Nora's eyes when she opens the door is "incredible." This adjective describes an impression that is beyond belief, or of a degree surpassing what one would have *a priori* conceived as possible. Barnes evokes a sense of extreme closeness in Matthew's room, which she describes as being akin to a decadent grave. Matthew is not *destined* for the grave—as Barnes might say, all sentient beings are—but is, rather, "condemned" to occupy this ostentatiously macabre space.

"Abandon," too, signifies Nora's overturned expectations; she judges that Matthew has lost his sense of self-worth and so has abandoned his standards of living. Nora does not realize that the version of Matthew she sees at night in the privacy of his home might be the genuine Matthew O'Connor. Ironically, Nora's judgmental criticism of Matthew's

private self only perpetuates the societal pressures that have condemned Matthew to his living grave.

But why must Matthew perpetually suffer? Though the reader is never given explicit answer to this question, Frye's concept of a *pharmakos* (or scapegoat), a character typical to tales of tragic irony, is helpful in understanding Matthew's function within the greater ironic context *Nightwood*. A *pharmakos* is neither wholly innocent nor wholly guilty. He is "innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes," and is "guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence" (Frye 41). Condemned to suffer interminably in a grave-like home, the isolation and torment that society and the other characters of *Nightwood* inflict upon Matthew constitutes undue punishment for the all-too-human past sins to which he alludes in his monologues. Matthew's position as a *pharmakos* presents another marker of *Nightwood's* irony. Furthermore, Barnes's portrayal of Matthew directs the reader's overall attitude toward the text. "Insisting on the theme of social revenge on an individual," Frye claims, "tends to make him look less involved in guilt and the society more so. The rejection of the entertainer... can be one of the most terrible ironies in art" (Frye 45). Rather than inspiring suspicion in the reader for his outlandish commentary, Barnes's doctor instead evokes *pathos*. While Felix's and Nora's suffering seems somewhat justified—Matthew warns both characters of the misery that inevitably accompanies obsessive love—Barnes's doctor is destined to suffer for inexplicable reasons. By characterizing Matthew as the *pharmakos* of *Nightwood*, Barnes guides the

reader's judgmental eye outward, toward the societal norms against which her marginal characters struggle.

Matthew's private life—the part of his identity he keeps under wraps until he is safe from the public eye—only mildly surprises the reader, who has become acquainted with the doctor through Barnes's narrative clues. Nora, however, is stunned when she enters his living quarters: her expectations for a clean, orderly space reflecting the doctor's professional, high-brow public persona could not have been more off-base. After the initial shock dissipates, Nora mentally catalogues the room's contents, noting the dust-covered and water-stained rubble that litters the doctor's tiny garret. There are “medical books, and volumes of a miscellaneous order” stacked to the ceiling, a single “barred window,” a dresser “certainly not of European make,” a “rusty pair of forceps,” and “half a dozen odd instruments that [Nora] could not place” (*N.* 85). Disorder and decomposition reign in Matthew's living quarters, where the doctor has surrounded himself with the artifacts of a strange existence. Every item is beyond Nora's recognition: the stacks of books seem to have been randomly selected and then neglected, the maple dresser is of an unknown origin, and the half-dozen medical instruments are foreign to Nora. The alienating environment Barnes depicts in Matthew's room reflects the lack of true knowledge Nora possesses of Matthew. Perhaps even Matthew is oblivious to the functions of the rusted tools that surround him, though he must have collected the items strewn about his living space. The disordered, degenerate place where Matthew spends his private time belies the polished veneer he displays during the daytime.

When Nora notices the women's undergarments and cosmetics strewn throughout the room, the irony of Matthew's persona becomes visibly apparent. Matthew's secret penchant for nocturnal cross-dressing is another way in which he toys with Nora's expectations for his character. Along with the "pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs" crowding the dresser's surface, Nora notices "laces, ribands, stockings, ladies' underclothing, and an abdominal brace" cascading from the drawers, all of which gives the impression that the "feminine finery had suffered venery" (N. 85). The items Nora sees are primarily used in the ritualized feminine process of beautification. The cosmetics symbolize the concealment behind layers of chemicals involved in painting one's face; Matthew's intentional covering up of his true identity parallels this method of disguising oneself. To "suffer venery" is to become degraded by way of the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Matthew's promiscuity is illuminated by these tattered feminine articles, revealing his alternative sexual preferences, previously unknown to Nora and to the reader. Brian Glavey offers the interesting concept of "queer ekphrasis," a tactic at work in *Nightwood* as a means of "dazzling estrangement" in Barnes's characters (Glavey 751-752). The feminine articles scattered about Matthew that Barnes catalogues are involved in the process of making a person's individuality "a thing, an objet d'art," a representational strategy that has both positive and negative implications for Matthew's character. While Matthew's "dazzling estrangement" is made beautiful through this illumination via description, this pointed objectification of Matthew in the entrancing objects "immobilizes [his] alienation" as a marginalized, even fetishized, figure (Glavey 752). Matthew's strangeness is no longer latent: his inner self is on display before Nora's eyes. Nora is left with the impression—it is not stated whether her impression, this time,

is valid or false—that the feminine items belonging to Matthew have “suffered ventry,” a judgment that insinuates Matthew’s status as a victim of some unnamed predator.

Ventry also refers to the sport of hunting wild beasts for game, using hounds to retrieve the killed animal. Barnes’s choice of ventry to describe the state of Matthew’s accoutrements contributes to the notion that the *pharmakos* of *Nightwood* has been victimized. Just as the other characters’ mistreatment of Matthew wears on his soul, the doctor’s “feminine finery” bears the marks of abuse. Additionally, the motifs of beasts, hounds, and hunting recur throughout *Nightwood*: Robin is characterized as “a beast turning human,” and Matthew presciently tells Nora that “one dog will find...both [Nora and Robin]” in the end (*N.* 113). But who is this omnipresent predator, constantly at the heels of not only Matthew but also the other characters? The beast at the door may represent society’s vicious, repressive attitude toward individuals who do not fit within its conventional norms. This beast annihilates individuality, driving people like Matthew O’Connor to hide in shame of their true selves from the brutal public gaze. Sure enough, Barnes notes that “every object seems to be battling its own compression” in Matthew’s garret (*N.* 85). Each item, including the doctor himself, seems to strain beneath the enormous pressure induced by layers and layers of concealment. To constantly repress one’s true self is exhausting and painful, so Matthew unleashes his “estranged” qualities under the cover of night. Nora’s intrusion disrupts Matthew’s liberation, and strips him of his only source of personal joy.

The doctor’s physical form is not described until the fifth paragraph in “Watchman, What of the Night?” Barnes’s description buries Matthew’s figure deep in

the decaying grave of his surroundings, making it difficult for Nora's eye (and the reader's imagination) to distinguish his form. "In the narrow iron bed, with its heavy and dirty linen sheets, lay the doctor in a woman's flannel nightgown," Barnes writes, exposing Matthew's form (*N.* 85). Barnes's inverted syntax reveals important details about Matthew's status within the text. In a single, sentence-long paragraph, Barnes slowly zooms in to focus on her subject. Placed at the end of the sentence in a passive, prostrate position, Matthew's posture reflects his helplessness at the mercy of the other characters. Matthew is situated in the tiny bed, beneath heavy soiled sheets, within the thick fabric of a flannel nightgown. Only after piling Matthew with oppressive layers of descriptive containment does Barnes grant the reader a vision of the doctor's physical presence. Matthew's figure is almost consumed by his deteriorating possessions, which encroach on his body and threaten to render him indistinguishable. Then, Nora and the reader are presented with an image of the doctor that is more like a machine than a man:

The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders, and falling back against the pillow, turned up the shadowy interior of their cylinders. He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted. (*N.* 85)

Matthew—like Robin—is depicted as being nonhuman, an object described at a distance with a perspective that is at once disgusted and fascinated. Glavey's argument for the "dazzling estrangement" of a character through these types of illuminating descriptions doesn't seem to hold up in this examination of Matthew's physical figure. Matthew is a spectacle, a monstrous product of an industrial society; Barnes's narrative eye dissociates

each part of his head, dismembering Matthew piece by piece. The “over-large black eyes” and “gun-metal” epidermis cannot possibly be natural human characteristics. The “cylinders” that comprise Matthew’s curled wig call to mind metallic pipes—this is surely a product of the degenerative urban industrial society in which Matthew is an unwilling mechanical cog. As the *pharmakos*, Matthew has been more deeply injured by society’s pressures than Nora or the reader could have expected, given his public persona as the talkative and congenial, yet undeniably eccentric, Dr. O’Connor. Barnes forces the reader to experience the irony of human impressions alongside Nora, who finally realizes that people are rarely, if ever, who or what we first imagine them to be.

The doctor scurries to cover the evidence of his hidden self, and pathetically struggles to greet his unanticipated visitor with the artificial decorum he exhibits to the public. Nora, however, is still shaken from what she has seen. “. . .[Nora] 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” (*N.* 86). Nora internally resents Matthew for revealing his true self, even within the private space of his own home during the early hours of the morning, when visitors do not typically call unannounced. Rather than feeling sympathy for the doctor, Nora remains self-absorbed; wondering at her own dismay, she struggles to understand her own judgmental reaction to seeing the doctor in his nocturnal state. Matthew’s irony is too much for Nora. Despite her plea that the doctor tell her “everything about the night” (and everything about the supremely enigmatic Robin Vote), Nora decides she would prefer to know nothing at all about the confessor she cruelly burdens with her anxieties (*N.* 86). While narrating the scene, Barnes uses irony to pose a challenge to the reader. The *pathos* felt for Matthew and the

loathing felt towards Nora leads the reader to examine his or her own manner of judging others and formulating impressions. By depicting Matthew O'Connor as a tragic *pharmakos*, Barnes's use of irony allows *Nightwood's* morality to seep through the text's often inscrutable lines.

Even Matthew's lengthiest monologue does not quell Nora's yearning for knowledge of Robin and of the night—perhaps even of the mysterious “Nightwood”—that stands between the two women. When Matthew later discovers Nora writing to Robin, he cannot help but interject his own philosophy, which borders on existential nihilism. “Now be still,” he beseeches Nora, “Now that you know what the world is about, knowing it's about nothing?” (*N.* 133). Matthew urges Nora to give up her futile quest for knowledge of Robin and of the world in its entirety. At first, this remark seems drastic even for Matthew; the hyperbole, however, makes sense if the reader considers that Robin *has become* the world for Nora. Matthew tries to convince Nora that both Robin and the world are meaningless in order to end the cycle of suffering her tireless pursuit perpetuates. Alternately pleading with Nora—“Can't you cut any of us loose?”—and brandishing his unofficial title as the “god of darkness,” Matthew desperately attempts but ultimately fails to satiate Nora's almost toxic desire for knowledge (*N.* 134). Contrary to his monologue in “Watchman, What of the Night,” Matthew's philosophical outpouring is, in this instance, voluntary. Along with the bits of memory and apparent nonsense that flow from Matthew's lips are threads of the doctor's private beliefs. If only Nora truly listened to Matthew, she would gain access to the knowledge she desperately needs to acquire: that her pursuit of Robin is doomed.

Matthew's diagnosis of Nora's situation is that she has attempted to immortalize Robin like a monument erected in ancient times to honor a goddess and thereby win her favor. Matthew scolds Nora, for she has "made [Robin] a legend and set before her head the Eternal Light" (N. 134). But even the monumental version of Robin that Nora worships will eventually crumble. Sarcastically suggesting that Nora should "make birds' nests with [her] teeth" rather than write letters to Robin, Matthew recalls a former love interest whose odd pastime tragically interferes with the natural course of life—the birds do not return to the nests after a human hand has interfered (N. 136). Matthew's anecdote is pertinent to Nora's plight: the moral reveals that meddling with others' lives can only lead to tragedy. Nora's efforts to construct a rigid vessel for Robin's identity by knowing every detail of her person are inadvertently destructive. Like Matthew's ex-lover, Nora struggles in vain: her attempts are futile. Matthew's frustration with Nora allows the reader to hear the doctor express his extreme cynicism about humankind's doomed existence. "Happy are they whom privacy makes innocent," Matthew murmurs under his breath (N. 136). Barnes intentionally neglects to name the source of this quote, leaving the reader to either search for its original context, or to simply ignore the unsettling comment—the path of ignorance Nora likely chooses. A comparison to *The Waste Land's* dense fog of literary and historical references is difficult to avoid. Like Eliot with his endnotes, Barnes refuses to act as an outright guide, but rather lets the reader's curiosity—ironically, his or her desire for knowledge—lead toward a deeper understanding of Matthew's commentary.

The words Matthew speaks were originally written by Sir Thomas Browne in his 1658 *Hydriotaphia, or Urn-Burial*, a meditation on the discovery of Roman sepulchral

urns near Norfolk. Barnes selected Matthew's allusion from the final chapter of Browne's melancholia-tinged text:

While some have studied monuments, others have studiously declined them, and some have even been so vainly boisterous that they durst not acknowledge their graves...*Happy are they whom privacy makes innocent*, who deal so with men in this world, that they are not afraid to meet them in the next, who, when they die, make no commotion among the dead... (Browne 52)

Browne's examination of the funerary urns led him to consider man's lifelong struggle with his own mortality. The construction of monuments and the rituals surrounding death cannot conquer the inevitable end to man's earthly, embodied existence. But Browne's meditation ventures a step further: he urges readers to opt for privacy, to choose blissful innocence over toiling to build "monuments" during or after the lives, in the forms of elaborate tombs. For Browne, the typical elements of a human life—interpersonal relationships, creative pursuits like artwork or poetry, the accumulation of possessions—could qualify as monuments. Matthew O'Connor's quotation of *Hydriotaphia* reveals his dark dogma about man's place in the world. At once marginalized as an outsider and involuntarily involved in the other characters' miseries, Matthew views Nora's attempts to understand and possess Robin as not only pointless, but also vainglorious. Browne's assertion that those who refuse to "acknowledge their graves" are vain applies, in this case, to Nora.

Irony, again, is at play in Barnes's work. Nora's obsession with Robin prevents her from understanding Matthew's omniscient, albeit grim, worldview. If Nora could

relinquish her endless grasping for possession of Robin, perhaps the cycle of suffering that binds the characters of *Nightwood* to a doomed existence might be broken.

Matthew's clairvoyant knowledge drives him to the brink of sanity; despite Nora's impenetrable ignorance, the doctor cannot help but offer his knowledge that her efforts to construct a "monument" to Robin will only lead to further misery. As though he cannot stop himself, Matthew spews words of warning at Nora, attempting to break through the opaque barrier of irony that divides his wisdom from Nora's naïveté. Finally, Matthew's diatribe stalls: he circles back to his initial argument that mankind's eternal quest for knowledge, productivity, and meaning are ultimately just feeble attempts to circumvent death. "You are still in trouble," Matthew sighs, exasperated. "...I might have known better, nothing is what everybody wants, the world runs on that law" (*N.* 137).

"Nothing," in Matthew's grim system, stands for man's toils on earth, which the doctor knows are devoid of any positive value or meaning. Read as a bawdy pun in the vein of Shakespearean drama, "nothing" may also refer to the female genitals. Barnes's possible use of double-entendre speaks to the doctor's cynical attitude toward love, and echoes his repeated warnings to Nora. But even when confronted with the tragic irony of her futile pursuit, Nora cannot cease obsessing over Robin. She has "dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known," an error Matthew considers the fundamental trouble at the source of all human agony (*N.* 145). Succumbing to so-called law of human nature—the inclination to perpetually chase "nothing"—Nora's instinctual obsession leads her to fulfill Matthew's prognosis. This is Barnes's tragic irony at its most blatantly painful.

Matthew's character enables Barnes to uphold the tragic irony in which *Nightwood* is steeped. From serving as the *pharmakos* figure, unjustly alienated by

society for his “dazzling estrangement,” to his role as the voice of the agonizing, ironic pursuit for meaning in a fundamentally meaningless world that plagues not only Nora, but all humankind, Matthew is tragic irony personified. Louis Kannenstine’s assertion that “character and theme are inseparable” is particularly pertinent regarding the greater part Matthew plays in Barnes’s multifarious text; the reader cannot consider Matthew’s “magnified choral role” without contemplating the all-too-human paradox he represents on all levels of the narrative (Kannenstine 110). Matthew cannot reveal his true, inner self to the world without risking destruction by the judgment of others. Even when he takes up the burden of misery Nora and the other characters load upon his conscience, the sage advice and prophetic wisdom Matthew offers goes unacknowledged. ““To be utterly innocent... would to be utterly unknown, particularly to oneself,”” Matthew concludes, articulating the only solution to the conundrum at the heart of *Nightwood*’s tragedy (*N.* 147). The purgatorial region Matthew, Nora, and the other characters inhabit is Barnes’s perspective on humankind’s mortal dilemma. Trapped between a desire for knowledge, meaning, and love and the inevitability of death, man’s essential situation is brutally and inescapably ironic.

But why does Matthew possess the omniscient perspective unavailable to Felix and Nora? Wisdom only comes with death in *Nightwood*’s world. ““You know what none of us know until we have died,”” Nora observes toward the end of the novel. ““You were dead in the beginning”” *N.* (161). Matthew’s clairvoyance could signify that he is either dead or immortal. Perhaps Barnes’s claim in *Nightwood*, then, is that all mortal human beings are destined to suffer the same fates as Felix and Nora. The human perspective is inherently subjective and selective; it is impossible to objectively look at the world and

understand the inner lives of others. Matthew O'Connor's oracular presence in the text serves as a reminder that humans should recognize the irony implicit in all experiences, and resist the urge to strive for an impossible, total knowledge of the ultimately enigmatic.

## Chapter 2: The Master of Spectacle

The world Barnes evokes in *Nightwood* is an isolated yet highly visible space, similar to a vaudeville stage or a circus ring. Informed in part by her experiences as a journalist documenting urban fairgrounds like Coney Island for *Vanity Fair* and New York's *Morning Telegraph*, Barnes constructs in *Nightwood* an urban underworld in which spectacular performance is the favored mode of popular entertainment. Populated by grotesque figures that evoke opposing emotions of repulsion and fascination, *Nightwood*'s world is at once alien and uncannily familiar to the reader. Barnes portrays the European demimonde as a spectacular arena, inviting the reader to gaze upon a cast of eccentric, entrancing characters. Does Barnes's authorial spotlight empower or exploit her strange subjects? *Nightwood*'s treatment of the "other" as fodder for public entertainment is meant to inspire critical reflection about what constitutes "freakish" or "queer" in modern society. To read *Nightwood* is to participate in the act of marveling at a spectacle. Barnes's language creates a metaphorical circus of modern urban life; the reader, by engaging in the act of reading, becomes entangled in the visual and ethical implications of beholding Barnes's "strange" performers. Spectator and spectacle merge, invoking the notion that the perception of an individual as "other" may merely be a reflection of mainstream society's normative values and traits—the "black backside," as Matthew O'Connor would say, of the status quo. Marginalized figures typically condemned to the alleys and backrooms avoided by the bourgeoisie are hyper-visible within the circus ring of *Nightwood*, a position that empowers even as it objectifies the

performers. The “freakish” becomes a centripetal force that draws the spectator ever closer to the recognition that the spectacular “other” beneath the spotlight’s glare is merely a latent or disguised version of the self.

Though *Nightwood* may be read as a spectacular text metaphorically comparable to a vaudeville performance by grotesque characters, the circus also figures into the novel as a setting for narrative action. Additionally, the circus serves as one of Barnes’s most memorable and vivid backdrops against which she portrays her tragicomic characters. Felix, the self-dubbed baron, is hopelessly drawn to the circus for reasons distant from the typical audience member’s desire to be awed and entertained. Felix finds in the circus a strange yet sensational release from the personal shame and alienation he feels:

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. (*N.*15)

Barnes describes the circus as an emotional vortex that acquires energy from its exclusion of the public. Audience members at *Nightwood*’s circus become entranced and obsessed with the performers, who are inhabitants of a mysterious underworld—or “other”-world—that viewers may *see* but not enter. In this manner, Barnes challenges the traditional hierarchy of a dominant audience situated above a cast of subjugated performers. Though the audience is armed with a relentless gaze and the vital capital of ticket money, the ostracized “freaks” of the circus actively cause viewers to experience a sense of “disqualification.” Additionally, Barnes cites an “illimitable hope” that causes a

“rebounding,” a renewal of vigor. Both the source of this hope and the object that is “rebounding” as a result of this energy are ambiguous: Barnes uses the opaque personal pronoun “it” when referring to this “illimitable hope,” leaving the reader to halt and ponder the exact cause of the circus’s allure. Is it the *public* that rebounds with hope acquired from the circus? Or is it the *circus* that is fueled by the public’s wistful gaze? Both possibilities must be true, for both entities must be present in order to sustain the “emotional spiral” of the circus that produces an intense yearning in Felix. Felix yearns to engage with the circus on a physical level, but this tangible interaction is out of his reach. He must remain apart from the object of his longing. Felix may never fully understand the spectacular space he haunts throughout the course of *Nightwood*.

Felix’s ultimately insatiable desire to understand the enigmatic leads him to obsessive inclinations outside the space of the circus. A yearning to know Robin, the ephemeral American woman with whom Felix envisages fabricating a bourgeois future, possesses Felix. When Felix first gazes upon Robin’s unconscious figure in the *Hôtel Récamier*, he sees her not as an independent woman but as a spectacle. She appears to be a “‘picture’ forever arranged...a woman who is beast turning human” (N. 41). Rather than considering her a woman in her own right, Felix regards Robin as a sort of bizarre, living objet d’art, like a *tableau vivant* or a circus animal. Barnes warns the reader that this fixed, aestheticized image of Robin constitutes an “insupportable joy” that cannot last (N.41). Robin is a living being, regardless of whether she is beast or human, and therefore cannot remain frozen, forever pinned beneath Felix’s gaze. Deborah Parsons claims this type of objectification, specifically of the female figure, has negative repercussions for the subject. “It is the paradox of the eroticization of the female body,

and yet rejection of its physical actuality that results in women's destructive self-hatred," Parsons remarks (Parsons 274). But sexuality does not seem to play a major role in Felix's fascination with Robin. In fact, Felix refuses to acknowledge Robin as a physically real human being. Upon seeing Robin, Felix instantly appropriates her form like an object he can add to the collection of props coloring his artificial, fabricated existence—the circus of his own life. Felix's attraction to Robin is tied to the identity he imagines for her: Robin is American, beautiful, unmarried, and appears to fit nicely into the set of Felix's world. Though Felix's obsession with Robin is not fueled by sex, his desire to possess her still has dire consequences for her well-being. Robin marries Felix and unwillingly becomes the mother of his child, which leads to serious depression, or melancholia. She develops a penchant for wandering and disappears for days at a time before finally escaping the domestic prison of Felix's home and finding a different type of lover in Nora Flood.

Jenny Petherbridge displays a similar fanaticism for spectacular performance, a fixation she transfers to Robin once the two meet. Jenny, perhaps the novel's most distasteful demi-monde creature, is characterized by her superficial worship of performers and actors. "[Jenny] had endless cuttings and scraps from...old theatre programmes, haunted the *Comédie Française*, spoke of Molière, Racine, and *La Dame Aux Camélias*," Barnes writes. "She sent bushel baskets of camellias to actresses because she had a passion for the characters they portrayed" (N.73). Jenny lavishes gifts upon actresses not for their talented performances but because she adores the characters they embody on stage. Just as Felix falls for Robin because of the role he envisions for her in the theatrical performance of his own life, Jenny becomes mesmerized with the

spectacular actresses of the *Comédie-Française*. Barnes's allusion to *La Dame Aux Camélias* is significant; the novel by the younger Alexandre Dumas contains traces of of *Nightwood's* main themes. Social pressures to conform, nontraditional relationships, and doomed love, for example, appear in both works. Stage adaptations of Dumas's novel—including Verdi's *La Traviata*—depict narratives with content similar to *Nightwood*. Dumas's protagonist, Marguerite Gautier, is a female concubine “kept” by various lovers who falls in love with the young bourgeois Armand Duval. The tale ends tragically: Duval's father, anxious about the scandal of such illicit love, convinces Marguerite to leave his son, and the heroine soon dies of tuberculosis. Despite the tale's agonizing ending, Dumas paints a favorable portrait of Marguerite and Duval. The two lovers suffer not because they are immoral but because the unyielding social order of their times refuses to recognize their relationship. Perhaps *Nightwood's* characters, like Marguerite and Duval, are inhibited from experiencing blissful love because their preferences do not fit within the conventional categories accepted by the dominant society. But Barnes's impression of illegitimate love seems far more cynical than Dumas's. By alluding to *La Dame Aux Camélias* within the context of Jenny's ludicrous notion that the actresses she adores *are* the characters they impersonate, Barnes undermines Duma's romanticized vision of forbidden love. Jenny's worship of the theatrical spectacles these women embody on stage is fueled by fantasy rather than true love (if such a thing exists), just as Felix's attractions to the circus and to Robin are merely superficial.

*Nightwood* portrays love as a hollow, insubstantial emotion, grounded in the spectator's covetous gaze rather than in his or her genuine attraction to another individual. But Barnes's generally cynical impression that love is merely a performance

does not entail that the spectacle herself—Robin, namely—is entirely helpless. Robin seems wholly cognizant of her status as the spectacle at the center of *Nightwood*'s circling, and is able to manipulate her viewers by playacting, temporarily, in the roles they select for her. The “paradox of eroticization” Parsons cites is double-sided because, as Barnes conveys in her characterization of Robin, the object of the spectator's gaze is far from powerless. Robin is aware of her position and the power she acquires over her spectators:

In the tones of this girl's voice was the pitch of one enchanted with the gift of postponed abandon: the low drawling 'aside' voice of the actor who, in the soft usury of his speech, withholds a vocabulary until the profitable moment when he shall be facing his audience. (N.42)

Barnes's choice of the word “enchanted” to describe the pitch of Robin's voice offers two possible meanings. Enchantment could signify that Robin is blessed with a desirable, almost magical quality that grants her a certain authority over those who are drawn to her presence. Alternatively, Robin's comparison to “one enchanted” could be a nod to her existence as a bewitched, passive medium through which another power is working. The reader rarely hears Robin's voice directly; the other characters, like ventriloquists working a dummy, speak *for* Robin when they talk about her with one another. It is likely that Barnes intended Robin to be viewed as both favorably and adversely charmed; Robin is a Janus-faced character who inspires both love and suffering in others. But what, exactly, is this gift Barnes mentions? It is difficult to fathom an abstract quality like “postponed abandon,” let alone imagine hearing it in the tones of another individual's

voice. Both words have negative connotations, of delayed action and of relinquishment. A sense of loss is present in this gift with which Robin's voice has been endowed. Abandon, however, could also signify the freedom to exercise one's will. Though this freedom has been "postponed" and is therefore not yet at Robin's disposal, Barnes alludes to a latent potential power within her captivating character. To deliver a convincing performance that enraptures an audience requires a great deal of skill, practice, and rigorous self-control. Robin's "gift" may very well be her ability to act, a talent that allows her to captivate her audience while subverting their expectations for her character.

Barnes adds yet another layer of comparison to her description of Robin's voice when she introduces the "low drawling 'aside' voice" of an actor. Given a clue as to the range of Robin's voice, the reader can at last imagine what this character may sound like: deep, murmuring, inaudible to the other characters. The actor to whom Barnes compares Robin is using an "'aside'" voice, a dramatic device used by stage actors performing monologues or soliloquies. The audience tends to consider an aside as being representative of the speaker's true thoughts, to which the other characters may not be privy. Barnes seems to be toying with the reader's expectations in this description of Robin's speech: the reader never hears Robin, the actor onstage before the eyes of both Felix and the reader, actually speak in this scene. Just as Robin quickly dismisses Felix and Matthew from her chamber, Barnes "withholds" Robin's speech from the reader. Barnes's use of the word "usury" to refer to the anonymous stage actor's voice hints that a speech act could be used to one's personal advantage. Barnes grants Robin a "gift" of her own: the ability to control her personal actions and therefore manipulate her audience.

The spectacle, in this instance, pushes back, meeting the spectator's gaze with power of her own. Barnes may have intended a meta-commentary on the act of reading: the reader essentially shares Felix's position. By subverting all expectations for Robin's behavior in this scene, Barnes implicates the reader in Felix's guilt as an avaricious spectator with unreasonable demands for the performer. That the reader feels teased by Robin's behavior in the *Hôtel Récamier* inspires reflection on the act of viewing a performance or of reading *Nightwood*, which incorporates spectacular performance as a theme and as a style of narration. What are the ethics and consequences of beholding the spectacular? In *Nightwood*, viewing in a void is impossible: every gaze erects a mirror-like, reflective surface between the spectator and the spectacle, the reader and the text. Once the reader identifies with both the viewer and the object—with Felix and with Robin—it becomes difficult to distinguish which character represents the "other." Perhaps Barnes means to render this system of categorization obsolete by forcing her readers to recognize the strange spectacular qualities present within each human being but hidden from the public's judgmental eye.

A closer look at Felix's first sight of Robin may provide an entry point into the larger textual significance of spectacular performance. The circus in *Nightwood* is undoubtedly a charged space, with "freakish" performers and the "normal" audience divided yet comingling beneath the tent. But critics have argued that gender distinctions add another stratum of tension to the site of the spectacular. Parsons sees the potential for transformative change in the female performers, who "disturb and challenge the normative notions of femininity" as "grotesque freaks who combine spectacle with transgression" (Parsons 274). Jane Marcus takes the feminization of the circus ring in

*Nightwood* a step further, urging the reader to identify with the performers rather than with the audience members. Marcus proposes a “sisterhood under the skin” with the female performers—and with Robin, who is a performer not by trade but by her position within the context of the novel—and urges readers to relate to the female “other” on a more personal level (Marcus 228). Marcus cites the “uncanny feeling of your own eyes looking up at you from the page” while describing the sensation of reading *Nightwood* with one’s gender in mind (Marcus 244). These readings speak to the transgression Barnes enacts on various levels in *Nightwood*. Robin defies the normative categories of sexuality, attracting and engaging sexually with both men and women, though her homosexual relationship with Nora is certainly more deeply passionate than Robin’s loveless, pallid relationship with Felix. In 1937 and today, bisexuality—or even asexuality—constitutes a rebellion against the status quo. But *Nightwood* is not only about sexual orientation; Barnes’s characters are physically extraordinary, too. Robin’s body seems to dismiss traditional notions of being: she is “a beast turning human,” perpetually in the process of shifting her form, eluding even the most basic categories of representation (*N.* 41). Both Parsons and Marcus gloss over the complexity of the transgression Barnes stimulates; *Nightwood* is not the tale of woman versus man, or “other” versus “normal.” Barnes urges the reader to examine and identify with the spectacle in order to understand our shared experience; whether man or woman, regardless of sexual orientation, all human beings must inevitably struggle to conform to or breach society’s expectations. In *Nightwood*, no character—or reader, for that matter—is safe from the stage or the circus ring. Barnes creates a space in which all must confront and display the qualities that make one estranged or different from the mainstream.

A close inspection of a female circus performer's physiognomy may shed light on the social implications of Barnes's detailed descriptions of the spectacles in *Nightwood*. Frau Mann (also known as the Duchess of Broadback) opens a portal for Felix to engage more intimately with the spectacles that draw him repeatedly to the circus arena. Barnes dissects Frau Mann's physical form to paint an odd image of the trapeze artist's body:

She seemed to have a skin that was the pattern of her costume: a bodice of lozenges, red and yellow, low in the back and ruffled over and under the arms, faded with the reek of her three-a-day control, red tights, laced boots—one somehow felt they ran through her...and the bulge in the groin where she took the bar...was as solid, specialized and polished as oak...She was as unsexed as a doll.  
(N.16)

Frau Mann's body has become indistinguishable from her costume, a hardened, almost armor-like ensemble that divides her nakedness from the audience's gaze as she flies through the air above the circus ring. Frau Mann seems to have built up a repellant outer shell, made of hard candies, garish ruffles, a chemical odor, and combat-style boots that render her entirely unnatural and undesirable. She has become "unsexed as a doll" as a result of her years performing in the circus and appears to have acquired a sort of groin protector, or perhaps a chastity belt. Frau Mann's body has adapted to her trade: her physical body has changed as a result of her status as a spectacle. Barnes, however, takes care to inform the reader that Frau Mann's lack of sexuality has not made her impotent. In this instance, the doll is compared to Frau Mann for her total lack of sexuality; the

inanimate, feminized toy does not represent Frau Mann's helplessness but is a symbol of her willful self-containment. "The needle that had made [the doll] the property of the child made [Frau Mann] the property of no man," Barnes explains, concluding her description of the aerial performer's body (*N.* 16). Her work in the circus has allowed Frau Mann to evolve, acquiring a defense mechanism to stave off the relentless, potentially damaging quality of her spectators' gaze. To appear sexless, then, is safer than openly flaunting one's sexuality within the realm of the circus.

Through Frau Mann, Barnes suggests a transgression of normative categories of gender and sexual orientation more radical than the subversion of "female otherness" Parsons and Marcus propose. In the world of *Nightwood*, the spectacle's sexuality is a weapon she may use to combat the spectator's intrusive, acquisitive gaze. Frau Mann's apparent asexuality, a constructed identity she dons like a chainmail suit, allows her to escape being objectified and possessed by her audience. Barnes's attitude toward Frau Mann, however, is not entirely serious; like most of *Nightwood's* characters, the trapeze artist is depicted in a comic and grotesque light. Both names Barnes cites—Frau Mann and the Duchess of Broadback—could be read as puns that toy with the character's sexual identity. The reader is never quite sure whether Frau Mann is female with masculine attributes or whether she is a male masquerading as a female. Frau Mann's costume prevents her spectators from reading her physical form and passing judgment about her sexual identity. Barnes's teasing narrative again evokes a spectacle that both captivates and disappoints the spectator; all attempts at judgment, then, are stopped short. When Felix first meets Frau Mann, he naively misinterprets the trapeze artist's Barnesian sense of humor for bourgeois seriousness. "'The Count is something that must be seen,'"

Frau Mann wryly remarks before a dinner party hosted by another member of the demi-monde's "royalty." "[The Count] is found of impossible people, so we are invited," Frau Mann teasingly remarks before a party hosted by another member of the demi-monde's phony nobility. "He might even have the statues on...The living statues, he simply adores them" (N. 16). Felix, of course, regards all forms of spectacle with awe; Frau Mann, well-aware of the power she holds, considers her position as an "impossible" person a great boon. The paradoxical "living statues" Frau Mann mentions bring to mind street performers who dazzle their audiences by holding still for extended periods of time. Felix is entranced by such performances, but does not realize he is at the mercy of the "living statues"—Frau Mann, Robin, Matthew O'Connor—with which he surrounds himself. By sustaining the joke she plays on her readers by subverting their expectations throughout the course of *Nightwood*, Barnes creates a dark comedy of errors, in which the spectator—rather than the spectacle—becomes the unwitting subject of farce.

Frau Mann deftly deflects the spectatorial gaze and uses her status as the object of the audience's attention to engage in an act of civil disobedience. Flaunting a garish yet impenetrable costume and a set of stage names that further confuse the audience's perception of her true identity, Frau Mann is able to perform her rigorous nightly routine as a member of the Denckman circus. Her strange, "unsexed" appearance empowers her; as a willing member of a cast of "grotesque freaks," Frau Mann engages in an act of transgression by wearing her own estrangement like a costume. While Robin manipulates her voice in order to attain power over her beholders, Frau Mann employs her status as the spectacle to mesmerize her audience and seize their oppressive gaze as a weapon for her own authoritative control. By sacrificing her sexuality (at least in the public arena of

the circus), concealing her flesh, and continuing to perform as a spectacle, Frau Mann maintains control over her own body. The circus is merely an act, fueled by the crowd's ticket purchases and their fascination with the "emotional spiral" that repeatedly draws Felix to its spectacular space. Frau Mann not only attains power by toying with her audience's expectant gaze; she also profits from her position as one of the circus' primary spectacles. The spectacular performers of Barnes's world are endowed with a great deal of social power.

The contained space of the circus ring, isolated from the outside urban environment, allows for the creation of a transporting experience for viewers. Partitioned from the modern melee outdoors by the billowing folds of the tent, the audience temporarily enters a secret world that seems surreal, or even imaginary. But this appearance of unreality is another of the circus's cunning tricks; although its fantastical quality and seclusion make the circus seem illusory, the performers, viewers, and the consequences of each group's actions are inescapably *real*. Perhaps the most significant instance of the circus's permanent impact occurs when Robin and Nora first meet. Barnes relates the story of the lovers' first interaction in the narrative style of a bard; the reader can almost hear the aural tones of Barnes's voice reading the story aloud. "Nora went [to the circus] alone. She came into the circle of the ring, taking her place in the front row," Barnes writes in easily flowing prose (*N.* 59). Depicted as a puritanical, good-to-a-fault woman with attitudes based in what Barnes seems to consider naïve compassion, Nora's involvement with the circus as a publicist does not directly impact her until she meets Robin, the most enthralling of *Nightwood's* strange performers. Barnes writes that, at this point, Nora "came into the circle" of the circus, a gesture symbolic of her entrance into

the spectacular culture of the modern urban underworld and into an intense emotional and sexual relationship with Robin. The “circle” may also symbolize a woman’s womb, a warm, hidden space that, like the circus, is both within and apart from the chaotic outside world. In any case, Barnes’s choice of the circus as the site for Robin and Nora’s first meeting signifies the beginnings of intimate contact between spectacle and spectator within the ring.

The overpowering charge that occurs when Robin and Nora—the two magnetic poles creating the “emotional spiral” of *Nightwood*—meet in the front row evokes energy so remarkable it even entrances the circus animals. Barnes’s prose acquires a halting, almost hesitant quality as she describes the series of movements involved in this interaction. “[Robin]... took out a cigarette and lit it; her hands shook and Nora turned to look at her; she looked suddenly because the animals, going around and around the ring, all but climbed over at that point,” Barnes writes, gradually turning the reader’s gaze upon the two women (*N.* 59). Barnes situates the reader with Nora at the center of a whirling vortex: the animals maniacally galloping around the ring create a centrifuge that guides Nora’s and the reader’s gazes towards Robin, who quakes with withheld energy. The women are, truly, contained within a circle—they have become performers in the circus. But is Robin the spectacle in this instance, or has Nora at last left the audience’s ranks and joined the circus of *Nightwood*? The latter seems more plausible, especially when considered alongside Barnes’s choice of words. The series of “turns” Barnes includes are like stage directions, controlling the potent gaze—the “orbit of light” that “seemed to turn on [Robin]” (*N.*59). Nora does not seem to be acting of her own will. She

cannot help but turn to look at Robin, an initial gaze that will open a gateway to the passion and suffering that absorb most of the subsequent narrative.

Barnes introduces the motif of animals or “beasts” with conspicuous frequency in relation to Robin and Nora’s relationship. Most explicitly, O’Conner presciently remarks that “one dog will find” both women in the end, alluding to the eerie climactic incident detailed in the novel’s final scene. When Nora and Robin meet for the first time, however, the beasts involved are not hounds but lions performing in the circus. Immediately after the women lock eyes, Barnes lets her lions, “ponderous and furred...their tails...dragging and heavy” out of their cages and into the already dynamic setting, which makes “the air seem full of withheld strength” (N. 60). The lions, like the whorl of animals before them, encircle Robin and Nora and pressure the women to meet, thus igniting the grandest, most devastating yet vitalizing spectacle of *Nightwood*: love. The air of “withheld strength” these lions stimulate adds another layer of tension to the already high-pressure atmosphere surrounding Robin and Nora. One lioness, in particular, bizarrely approaches the couple:

... [The lioness] turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface. At that the girl rose straight up. Nora took her hand...Nora took her out. (N.60)

Robin is, again, the object of the gaze; without Robin’s presence, the lioness would not have approached the bars dividing the circus from the audience and delivered the

smoldering gaze Barnes describes. The lioness's tears are trapped beneath the surface, an almost unfathomable image Barnes likens to a surreal phenomenon taking place within the lioness. Are the lioness's tears of joy or of despair for the two women? Would she, the lioness, applaud the ignition of the couple's love, or would she offer her empathy as a fellow female spectacle? Barnes does not explicitly state the fate of Nora and Robin's love, and leaves the reader to interpret the lioness's strange expression. Based on Barnes's description of the great beast's movement and the foreboding ambience of the scene, the reader is likely to sense the aching sadness and doom foreshadowed in the lioness's tears.

Despite the lioness's ominous gaze, Robin and Nora decide to leave the circus together. From this point on *Nightwood* becomes occupied with the love that dangerously blossoms between these two women. After their introduction, the only sentiment Robin expresses to Nora only illuminates her chronic restlessness. "I don't want to be here," she murmurs (*N.* 60). Even Nora's love—perhaps the most "real" love of *Nightwood*—cannot tame the beast that strains within Robin and yearns to escape her spectators' brutal gaze. The greatest spectacle of *Nightwood* is the spectacle of impossible love, a tragicomic performance in which each of Barnes's characters is an actor. Like the lovers of *La Dame Aux Camélias*, *Nightwood*'s characters must suffer not for their own wrongdoings but for the unreasonable expectations of a conformist society. Barnes never allows Nora and Robin to achieve the blissful love they desire and deserve; the happy ending the reader might expect never arrives, and there is surely no sadistic pleasure derived from viewing the agony Nora and Robin suffer.

Nora suffers because she, like Felix and Jenny, succumbs to an obsessive type of spectatorship that aims to appropriate Robin's figure rather than love her like a flesh-and-blood human being. Matthew O'Connor, who retains a relatively objective perspective throughout *Nightwood*, admonishes Nora for treating Robin as a spectacle rather than a woman. "[Robin] saw in you that fearful eye that would make her a target forever," he exclaims. "The uninhabited angel! That is what you have been hunting!" (N.157). When Robin realizes that Nora's love has disintegrated into obsessive spectatorship, Matthew argues, she has no choice but to disappear from sight. Matthew accuses Nora of "hunting" Robin with the weapon of her "fearful eye"; spectatorship, once again, becomes an aggressive, deleterious act for both the performer and the viewer, one that negates any potential for true love.

In *Nightwood*, spectacular performances are the sites of pleasure and anguish, love and obsession, empowerment and domination. The gaze acts as a medium through which the spectator and the spectacle engage in a vital interaction. Though the viewer first gazes with a possessive desire, he or she must arrive at the realization that the performer is merely a human being, with the same dazzlingly strange qualities that are latent in each individual. As the master of *Nightwood's* spectacles, Barnes urges her readers to identify with both the viewer and the viewed, considering the common struggle all humans face when confronting the qualities that isolate them from the status quo. In order to emphasize the cycle of misery a conformist society creates in making individuals feel the need to suppress their inherent differences, Barnes turns her narrative spotlight upon the distinctive personal qualities that exist within her characters and separate them from the mainstream they long to join. Though the outcome is ultimately dismal for all,

the reader learns that Barnes believes we are all spectacles, and should opt to flaunt our own eccentricities rather than gaze desirously at others' displays of spectacular strangeness.

### Chapter 3: The Visual Artist

*Nightwood* is, most perceptibly, a text made of images that read like works of art, painted or sculpted by Barnes's abstract yet deeply moving language. Each individual image appears in the mind's eye in painterly detail. Barnes's highly visual vocabulary and style create a shadowy background against which her surreal characters are depicted. Reading *Nightwood* can seem like a stroll through a meticulously curated collection of artwork, with each distinct piece's impact contributing to the overall impact of the viewing experience. From the ornate whorls of the Rococo design, to the radical Surrealism of early twentieth century Paris, Barnes's work brims with references to myriad artistic movements. Barnes incorporates visual artwork into the text on multiple levels. Visual artworks appear in tangible, immediate forms within the narrative, but also serve as metaphors for characters' emotional and physical states of being. Barnes's structure and style are primarily spatial and aesthetic rather than temporal or plot-based. Critics have often explored the dialogue certain modern writers have created between the visual arts and the literary arts, most notably Joseph Frank in his treatise on spatial form. The principle of *ekphrasis*—a device by which a literary work of art imitates a work of visual art—also relates to *Nightwood*'s style. Though its vivid images are surely dazzling, *Nightwood*'s abstract, disjointed tableaux are famously befuddling. This extreme visual confusion and lack of a cohesive narrative are among the reasons for *Nightwood*'s relative obscurity as a work of modern literature. Why would Barnes choose to foreground often abstract images rather than a cohesive narrative at such a cost? The

author's decision to emphasize the visual allowed her to produce a work of fiction that transcends the conventional distinction between the literary and the visual arts and allows the writer to achieve transgression on yet another level.

*Nightwood* is a decorative text from the beginning. In the first chapter, "Bow Down," Barnes describes the home of Guido and Hedvig Volkbein—the phony baron Felix's mother and father—in sumptuous detail. The house is likened to a "fantastic museum of [the couple's] encounter," with "long rococo halls, giddy with plush and whorled designs in gold" and "peopled with Roman fragments, white and disassociated" (N. 7-8). Guido goes to extreme lengths to conceal his Jewish heritage; his marriage to Hedvig, a member of the Austrian nobility, is founded upon an exquisitely fabricated lie. Like his identity, Guido's home is filled to excess with décor acquired from disparate, unknown sources. The "Roman fragments" are "disassociated" and unrecognizable, placed randomly about the house to take up space and lend an air of greatness. Barnes's authorial eye glances upon each broken sculpture, providing the reader with an overview of the decadent home Guido has adorned. "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 the sun," Barnes catalogues (N. 8). The Roman sculptures are incomplete, and of unknown origins; Barnes makes no attempt to illuminate the works' specific artists, materials, or dates of creation. The sculptures' only purpose in the house is to support the illusion of opulence Guido constructs in an attempt to divert visitors from inspecting their host's character too closely. The sculptures' blind eyes are devoid of expression and constantly change with the position of the sun, a mutable appearance similar to Guido's own surface-level

manipulations. Every appearance in the Volkbein household is merely an “act of the sun,” a fleeting illusion caused by the play of light across the exterior layer of each sculpture. Guido compulsively collects such relics to provide “an alibi for [his] blood,” markers of prestige that allow Felix’s father to hide within a “museum” of artifice (*N.*10). By maintaining a decadent, carefully curated home, Guido strives to uphold an aristocratic façade.

Barnes’s explicit reference to Rococo architecture and design is useful in examining not only Guido’s construction of his facade, but also *Nightwood’s* greater style and structure. The lavish eighteenth century artistic movement is known for its gold and pastel enamels, its often garish motifs, and its multitude of ornamental mirrors. The Rococo arabesque emphasizes patterns of images—typically of animals, seashells, plants, and flowers—to achieve a florid, almost ostentatious aspect. Guido’s adornment of his pseudo-identity is Rococo: the fake baron’s aim is to give the superficial impression of wealth. Moreover, *Nightwood* itself shares Rococo’s circularity and repetitiveness. A Rococo menagerie of beasts—like dogs, hounds, lions, and elephants—populate the novel, and the characters seem to be hopelessly trapped in a Rococo whorl of unrequited love. “It achieves a fictional quality of space reminiscent of the effect attained by use of multiple mirrors in rococo architecture,” Louis Kannenstine has observed of *Nightwood*. This spatial quality of a “constantly changing infinity ordered by the balanced central structural elements” is fundamental to both Barnes’s literature and Rococo design (Kannenstine 101). The concept of a “constantly changing infinity” brings to mind the text’s stymying yet entrancing ephemerality. Though the repetition of gestures like the act of “bowing down” and the choral monologues of Dr. Matthew O’Connor create the

illusion of a unified narrative, the reader becomes caught in a Rococo arabesque of references. Kannenstine observes “transcendence through decadence” at play in *Nightwood’s* visual culture, a concept essential to understanding the relationship between Barnes’s text and Rococo design (Kannenstine 100). The emergence of the more frivolous Rococo style after the early Baroque period’s dramatic sensationalism is similar to Barnes’s playful, piled-on use of descriptive language. *Nightwood* presents an inundation of images and reflective surfaces that challenges the reader to discern what is real and what is artifice, included only to decorate a fictional space.

The visual culture of *Nightwood* is hardly limited to the eighteenth century. The text brims with references to later artistic movements, including allusions to specific artists and artworks, each bearing a particular significance to the novel. When Felix first sees Robin lying unconscious in her hotel room, she appears in the form of a painting by Henri Rousseau:

Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of an unseen *dompteur*, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to see the strains of an orchestra...which will popularize the wilderness. (*N.* 38)

Barnes not only compares Robin’s posture and setting to a Rousseau painting, but seems to place Robin within the frame of a particular work by French Post-Impressionist artist. A language of containment and suppression dominate Barnes’s description of the hotel room. Within a jungle that is “trapped” within a room so stifling even the walls have

“made their escape,” Robin’s figure is arranged. The viewers—Felix, Matthew, and the reader—experience the sensation of gazing upon a two-dimensional painting. The subject, Robin, seems to exist in another dimension: the flattened, isolated world of a Rousseau painting. Viewers cannot touch Robin, but may observe her from a distance; this detachment makes her figure all the more fascinating. Furthermore, the room is likened to a “set,” presided over by an “unseen *dompteur*,” or tamer: the artist behind-the-scenes, painting each visual element into existence. But why would Barnes choose to portray Robin in such precise, painterly terms at this moment in the text?

The genre of the portrait-landscape, which Rousseau claimed to have invented during the late nineteenth century, may be helpful in determining what Barnes could have intended by describing Robin as a work of the great artist (“Tate Modern: Henri Rousseau”). The portrait-landscape typically contains a central subject defined by his or her surroundings. Rousseau’s *Myself, Portrait-Landscape* (1890), for example, depicts the artist scaled to a monumental height against the backdrop of modern Paris, complete with a hot air balloon and the Eiffel Tower, symbols of the technological revolution. In Rousseau’s self-portrait, as in Barnes’s portrait of the unconscious Robin, the context is inextricably linked to the viewer’s understanding of the central subject. Without Barnes’s references to the elements contributing to the scene’s ambience—the jungle, the “carnivorous flowers,” the *dompteur*, and the orchestral strains—the reader would only imagine a peculiar yet beautiful woman asleep on a divan. The background, in both the artwork and the literary work, is vital to the viewer’s experience of the scene. Later Rousseau paintings include the artist’s famous jungle environments Barnes mentions in her description of the hotel room, and incorporate the portrait-landscape style the artist

championed in his earlier works. *The Dream* (1910) seems almost identical to what Robin's setting must look like to her spectators: a nude female subject reclines on a plush velvet couch, almost overtaken by a dark, almost menacing mass of botanicals and exotic animals. The nude figure is awake and responsive to her surroundings; she extends an arm toward her animal spectators, and defiantly returns their gazes. Robin is unconscious—perhaps adrift in her own dream world—when Felix and Matthew first see her figure, but she soon awakens to expose a pair of mysterious blue eyes. She has presented herself to her spectators as “a ‘picture’ forever arranged,” which Barnes informs the reader is “for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger” (N.41). *The Dream* was undoubtedly a familiar painting to Barnes, who resided in Paris for most of the 1920s, and may very well have inspired her depiction of the hotel scene. By placing Robin within the confines of a Rousseau painting, Barnes informs the reader that, although her captivating female character is trapped within her context, the beholder is ultimately in the vulnerable position.

Barnes's allusions to and imitations of both Rousseau's painting and Rococo design constitutes a literary device called *ekphrasis*. Ekphrastic writing attempts to portray a particular work of visual art by reproducing the original piece's form, subject matter, and tangible qualities using vivid descriptive language. Brian Glavey outlines two different possible authorial aims behind the use of *ekphrasis* in literature. “Modernism's desire to endow literature with the spatiality of an art object is typically read as an attempt to preserve text from context,” Glavey suggests. “Though... *ekphrasis* could just as easily be seen as literature at its most mimetic, as a copy of a copy, an imitation with no original” (Glavey 751). Barnes's language not only refers to artistic movements and

specific works but also serves as an art implement with which the writer paints—or sculpts, or shapes—her characters into a visual world. Glavey argues that *Nightwood* is ekphrastic in the less conservative, hyper-mimetic sense. As with most of Barnes’s stylistic choices, her use of *ekphrasis* in *Nightwood* achieves the writer’s authorial goals on multiple levels. By mimicking works of art, Barnes’s characterizations of Robin, Guido, Felix, and the others become contextualized and are more easily visible to the reader. Additionally, *ekphrasis* allows Barnes to comment on the often torturous relationship between the viewer and the viewed in visual art. *Nightwood* is ultimately a text of entrapment: the characters, the narrative plot, and the reader become helplessly ensnared in a Rococo whorl. Perhaps, then, Barnes’s use of *ekphrasis* is in part an ironic move by the author; by painstakingly crafting a literary work into a veritable gallery of artistic images, Barnes simultaneously attracts and ensnares the reader. For Barnes, Glavey writes, *ekphrasis* is “a form that emphasizes the impossibility of coherence and identity even as it testifies to the power of their appeal” (Glavey 751). Felix—and the unsuspecting reader of *Nightwood*—make the fatal mistake of contemplating a “‘picture’ forever arranged,” rather than a living, dynamic, transient subject that cannot be contained within a frame.

Barnes’s largely critical use of an ekphrastic style in *Nightwood* has led some critics to believe the work is devoid of deep artistic meaning. Joseph Frank’s argument for a spatial, rather than temporal, understanding of modern literature suggests that *Nightwood* ignores the world outside its fictional bounds. “We are asked only to accept the work of art as an autonomous structure giving us an individual vision of reality,” Frank proposes. “The question of the relation of this vision to an extra-artistic ‘objective’

world has ceased to have any fundamental importance” (Frank 30). Frank’s reading, however, approaches *Nightwood* with an extremely limited lens; the critic entirely dismisses Barnes’s implication of the reader and the veiled critique of modern society she puts forth in *Nightwood*. The notion that “the naturalistic principle has lost its dominance” does not necessarily signify that the novel lacks relevance to the “objective” world (Frank 30). Frank compares Barnes’s break from verisimilitude in her often fragmented, abstract descriptions to the art of the Fauvists—the so-called “wild beasts” of early twentieth century painting—and the Cubists, whose works were at first incomprehensible to viewers. But Frank neglects to distinguish between verisimilitude and naturalism: though *Nightwood* is surely a non-naturalistic text, its content, however strange, resonates with the contemporary reader and bears moral significance. Matthew O’Connor, in one of his effusive yet sage orations, utters something similar to what Barnes may have intended by using a non-naturalistic visual style in *Nightwood*:

Listen! Do things look in the ten and twelve of noon as they look in the dark? Is the hand, the face, the foot, the same face and hand and foot seen by the sun? For now the hand lies in a shadow; its beauties and its deformities are in a smoke—there is a sickle of doubt across the cheek bone thrown by the hat’s brim, so there is half a face to be peered back into speculation. (*N.* 92)

Matthew’s diatribe is directed to Nora, who has fallen to the same peril as Felix: she has fixed Robin’s image in her consciousness, and has fallen in love with an image that is only an illusion. Like naturalism in painting and realism in literature, Nora’s imagination has constructed an impression of Robin that cannot possibly account for the emotional

and psychological complexities of her character. Robin will never look at noon as she does at midnight; her persona will never be fully visible to Nora, who longs to attain a static, portrait-like version of Robin to possess for eternity. Matthew, like Barnes, begs Nora and the reader to adopt a more capacious perspective that accounts for the simultaneity of experience and the constantly shifting nature of the human identity.

Barnes's call for a less limited interpretive lens while reading her literature is linked to the dissatisfaction with naturalism's restrictions that fueled the evolution of Modernism in art, literature, and ideology. In his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton urged his fellow artists and writers to venture outside the "boundaries [that] have been assigned even to experience," and to allow "the eye [to] exist in an untamed state" (Breton). Barnes, who for most of the 1920s resided in Paris on the Boulevard Saint-Germain with her lover, the American sculptor and silverpoint artist Thelma Wood, would have been steeped in the revolutionary atmosphere of Surrealism. Though *Nightwood* certainly differs from the automatic writing favored by Breton and other poets of the time, the text features stylistic elements reminiscent of Surrealist painting. Matthew O'Connor's character is reminiscent of a Surrealist leader, particularly in his spontaneous, unrestrained monologues. The often nonsensical yet strikingly emotional speeches seem to draw on a bottomless supply of inspiration; as each remembered or invented image emerges, it becomes part of the shimmering quilt of Matthew's own Surrealist discourse. Matthew parcels out Robin's figure with his language, individually illuminating "the hand, the face, [and] the foot" before shifting his focus to "the cheek bone," "the chin, "the eyes," and the "ponderable hair" that crowns Robin's head (N.92). The reader sees a fractured version of the human figure as a result of Matthew's verbal

dissection of her body. Each dissociated part exists as an independent object in Matthew's depiction of Robin, which permits the reader to access an entirely new vision of the total subject. By defamiliarizing Robin's figure, Matthew urges Nora and the reader to acknowledge the utterly unknowable nature of the human identity. Matthew's insistence that Nora espouse an alternative manner of seeing—one that can disengage from the instinct to develop an immutable image of “the other”—evokes the goals of the Surrealist movement.

The backdrop of *Nightwood* Barnes paints with her language is vaguely Surrealist, too. Yves Tanguy's 1926 oil painting, *Storm (Black Landscape)* presents a vision of what the Surrealist landscape of *Nightwood* might have looked like as a Surrealist painting. *Nightwood's* terrain is impenetrably dark, shot through with carnival-bright colored objects, indistinguishable yet eerily familiar. A “sickle of doubt” has been cast over the modern city Barnes portrays, an intentional obfuscation with the aim to disorient and challenge the reader. Tanguy's painting contains elements individually manageable—pieces of dying coral or tree branches might account for the wavering strips in the bottom left-hand corner; the milk-white puffs in the upper right-hand corner could easily be clouds or the remnants of industrial smoke. But these are only suspicions; it is ultimately the viewer's imagination that determines the contents of Tanguy's world and the significance (or lack thereof) the painting bears. In *Nightwood*, Barnes strives to achieve a similar indeterminacy and flexibility of interpretation. Kannenstine refers to the “surface mutability...marked by approximation or equivalence [to reality]” that characterizes *Nightwood's* visual culture. Barnes takes care to leave ample room for the somewhat magical process of free-association that occurs within the reader's mind while

struggling to make sense of the text's images. This intense imaginative work is precisely what Surrealism sought to stimulate. The aim of Surrealism was to exercise the "unbridled imagination" present in the human consciousness (Bouvet and Durozoi 247).

Surrealism's lack of a unified style—as opposed to the visually and technically related artworks of Impressionism, for example—contributed to the movement's initial exclusivity and a critical reception that prophesied the movement's short-lived appeal. "Surrealist painting cannot go very far," Maurice Raynal predicted, "because it is conceived without reference to any concern for style, composition, architecture or form" (Bouvet and Durozoi 247). Raynal asserted that the status quo of naturalism would ultimately displace Surrealism, but failed to consider the motives behind the peculiar, even hallucinatory works of artist like Yves Tanguy, René Magritte, and Max Ernst. Raynal seems to have made the same mistake as Nora and Felix: he argues against the freedom of imagination Surrealism represented, and allows the conventional forms of realism and naturalism to maintain a dominant position in the hierarchy of artistic seriousness. If *Nightwood* is included in a consideration of Surrealist works, Raynal's initial reaction helps account for the novel's lack of popularity relative to other Modernism works of fiction. *Nightwood*, like Surrealism, lacks an immediately coherent, pleasurable form; Barnes includes a multitude of styles in her work, and constantly asks her readers to reflect on their own experience of seeking meaning in the work. Just as Surrealism frequently induces nothing but head-scratching in more conservative viewers, *Nightwood* could make a reader seeking an entertaining or at least discernable narrative structure frustrated and dissatisfied. By thwarting viewers' and readers' expectations, however, *Nightwood* and Surrealist artwork transcend categorical containment and gain

access to a truly liberated mode of expression. If the reader is able to endure the trials of reading Barnes's text, the rewards include a rejuvenation of the imagination and a thoroughly modern way of perceiving. Despite its painterly style, *Nightwood's* medium is literature; even a hyper-mimetic use of *ekphrasis* cannot lift Barnes's work out of the binding and onto a canvas. Surrealist artists like Salvador Dalí achieved immense fame and visibility, and were welcomed into the popular canon of artwork that deserves close study. The act of reading, by nature, requires patience and self-discipline; the act of seeing a two- or three-dimensional artwork, however discomfiting or surreal, is far less difficult. Thus, Surrealist works of literature like *Nightwood* are relatively unknown and unread outside of academic circles.

Barnes's overall aesthetic outlook, however, is far less subtly expressed than the stylistic nods to Surrealism she includes in *Nightwood*. Felix Volkbein may have served as a mouthpiece for Barnes's own meditations, a medium through which the author aimed to express her somewhat contradictory attitudes toward society's relationship with the visual arts. To Barnes, the imagination has the potential to be either a positive tool that endows its holder with a godlike creative power or a consumptive machine that destroys a given subject's individual reality. Shame for his Jewish heritage and a precedent for lying—habits bequeathed to him by his father, Guido—predispose Felix's imagination to becoming an agent of destruction. Barnes notes that Felix is "astonished to find that the most touching flowers laid on the altar he had raised to his imagination were placed there by the people of the underworld" (*N*.34). Upon the altar of his imagination, Felix develops an artistic reproduction of Robin to serve the purpose of filling in the negative spaces of his own invented identity. Alan Williamson describes Felix's image of Robin as

“a museum piece somehow endowed with life”; in Felix’s imagination, Robin’s figure is unnaturally preserved behind glass, a living artifact forever trapped in the phony Baron’s version of reality. When Felix finally recognizes the impossibility of possessing an eternal, static picture of Robin’s character, he is at last able to relinquish his obsession. “...I find that I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time,” Felix admits to Matthew. “I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties...The more we learn of a person, the less we know” (N.119). It was never the flesh-and-blood version of Robin Vote that captivated Felix; it was his own uncertain mental image of her figure. Barnes’s cynical outlook on love—an intoxicating yet doomed “universal malady” to which *Nightwood’s* characters fall victim—contributes to her portrayal of the visual imagination’s destructive potential. Love is the corrupting agent that invades the imagination and leads Felix and Nora (and even Guido Volkbein) to the brink of sanity.

Despite the novel’s ekphrastic style and artistic allusions, *Nightwood’s* moral stance toward a predominately visual culture is one of suspicion and hesitation. *Nightwood* may be read as a warning from Barnes to her readers about the perils of visual culture. Felix and Nora, maddened by their love for Robin, are driven to the sort of manic attitude toward images Barnes feared. Using their visual imaginations like industrial machines, Felix and Nora attempt to devour and process the dynamic entity of Robin’s identity to produce a static image of her character. At its most injurious, the visual imagination can become a device of commodification: the raw material of the individual, inimitable human character is converted into a solid art object sapped of its vitality. Walter Benjamin’s notes on the mechanical reproduction of artwork reveal a similar

skepticism of visual culture, particularly in the age of industry. “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it appears to be,” Benjamin writes (Benjamin 220). As a subject reproduced repeatedly by her admirers throughout *Nightwood*, Robin has lost her ability to express her emotions—perhaps she has lost all sense of her own true identity—and therefore cannot return the love Nora and Felix feel for her. Benjamin suggests that the “aura” of a work of art is what withers when a plurality of copies take the place of a single unique entity (Benjamin 221). Robin’s aura, like a Platonic Form degraded by mimesis, has been extinguished in the process of image production in the minds of others. Nora, like Felix, realizes the torture she has been inflicting too late to protect Robin and salvage the couple’s chances for building a blissful relationship. “[I] have tormented them with my tears and my dreams: for all of us die over again in somebody else’s sleep,” Nora reflects, after recognizing the pain she has caused the people she has loved and lost in her lifetime. “And this, I have done to Robin: it is only through me that she will die over and over...” (N.158). The authentic Robin “died” at the moment Nora first gazed upon her form at the circus; Robin also died when Felix first saw her body sprawled amid the jungle of plants in her hotel room and fixed her forever in his mind’s eye like a Rousseau painting. Robin only exists as a cheapened version of herself, an artwork reproduced with diminishing loyalty to her authentic form in her admirers’ imaginations each time they dream of her.

*Nightwood*’s appeal to the reader’s own visual mind can thus be considered yet another ironic or satiric move initiated by the author in an attempt to challenge conventional methods of representation in art. Rather than using *ekphrasis* as a defense

mechanism to protect *Nightwood* from the toll time often takes on non-canonical texts, Barnes mockingly imitates the visual arts in order to comment on the iconophilia she felt plagued her society. But to consider the visual culture of *Nightwood* entirely ironic is to dismiss the potential for artistic representation to hold any real value. Does Barnes consider all artistic endeavors futile or, even worse, destructive? As *Nightwood* approaches its final, climactic episode, the author seems to step outside her pessimistic view of the arts to consider a somewhat radical alternative. In Matthew O'Connor's final monologue, delivered to the Parisian bourgeoisie gathered at the *Café de la Mairie du VI*, the doctor lays bare the not-so-well-hidden artistry he uses when crafting his personal history through fantastic lies. In response to the inquiry an "unfrocked priest" makes about Matthew's wife, the doctor replies truthfully, at last:

When I laid her down her limbs were as handsome and still as two May boughs from the cutting...I imagined about her in my heart as pure as a French print, a girl all of a little bosom and a bird cage, lying back down comfortable with a sea for the background and a rope of roses to hold her...Who says she might not have been mine, and the children also? Who for that matter...says they are not mine?  
(N.169)

Matthew reveals that much of what he has iterated about his own past has been a product of his own imagination. He describes the process of "laying down" the limbs of the fictional wife as though she was a sculpture, or a building created in Matthew's artistic design. The verb "imagine" is a crucial component in Matthew's confession in the café: although lying is a sin in the Catholic faith, Matthew shows no remorse and asks for no

forgiveness from the unfrocked priest. Matthew's invented wife is "as pure as a French print," an impossible vision. She consists of a "little bosom and a bird cage," unnaturally perched upon a "rope of roses" against a seascape for a background. This vision of a woman, described in precise painterly detail, cannot possibly represent a real human being.

Matthew, however, poses some of the questions Barnes must have been contemplating about her own creative process while at work on *Nightwood*. Who is the judge of what is real and what is fiction? Are the imagined worlds of visual art, literature, and Matthew's own past any less significant than the extra-artistic world? "Even your friends regret weeping for a myth, as if that were not practically the fate of all the tears in the world!" Matthew exclaims (*N.* 169). If all conceived notions of reality are just subjective myths generated and perpetuated by each individual, then the visual and literary arts should be considered legitimate modes of expression and representation. Though Barnes's overriding tone as she depicts the perils of the visual imagination remains pessimistic, Matthew's final monologue constitutes a caveat to the author's warning. *Nightwood* presents the reader with a worst case scenario of the human imagination, coupled with intense desire, maniacally reproducing image after unauthentic image of another human being, Robin Vote. Barnes uses *ekphrasis* to transform her entire text into a visual work, containing references to a postmodern amalgam of artistic styles and movements. Readers of *Nightwood* cannot help but use his or her own imagination to envision the world Barnes creates and reflect upon the experiences of making and viewing art. If Matthew's belief that "all the tears in the world" are wept for myths—embellished, fictitious versions of reality—is true, then *Nightwood* should not be

dismissed. The typical reader's reaction to *Nightwood* is that the text is an agglomeration of disparate yet exquisite images, a visual artwork masquerading as a novel, or vice-versa. Despite the lack of a traditional narrative structure, however, *Nightwood* leads the reader to contemplate the ethics of representation in the visual and literary arts.

### **One Dog Will Find Them Both: *Nightwood*'s Strange Conclusion**

Barnes's manipulation of style to create *Nightwood*'s extraordinary world is perhaps most manifest in her controversial concluding chapter, "The Possessed." In literature and in music, the conclusion typically serves as a final flourish that leaves the reader feeling at least somewhat satisfied with the work. This does not entail that a conclusion is always positive—death and destruction constitute most tragic endings—but the reader is usually made to feel a sense of harmony or unity has been achieved in the work. In some cases, a conclusion contains redemption for a wrongful act committed, or the narrative action might fulfill a prophetic vision expressed earlier in the tale. The author's conception of the characters' fates is realized in the conclusion, leading to a sense of inevitability or rightness as the reader turns the final pages. *Nightwood*, however, does not provide the sense of gratification the reader might expect. After struggling to imagine Barnes's world for 180 pages, the anticipation of a lucid ending—a prize for the endurance a full reading of *Nightwood* demands—may lure the reader onward. Just one moment of clarity would justify the relentless discomfort and disorientation that accompanies a journey through *Nightwood*. This reader would be misguided: Barnes provides no such indulgences, even at her work's close. If the reader clings to the hope that *Nightwood*'s pervasive irony may falter in the tragicomic final scene, giving way to convention, then shame on him or her, Barnes seems to laugh mockingly from her position behind the narrative.

Barnes remains committed to her authorial aim of transgressing narrative norms by offering a brief yet jarringly bizarre final tableau. Nora and Robin's reunion in the decrepit chapel on Nora's property in rural New York contains perhaps the most ambiguous, perplexing moment in *Nightwood*. If the reader has not yet grasped the extent to which Barnes will obfuscate her narrative in order to challenge the conventions of storytelling, "The Possessed" serves as a final explosion of estrangement that cannot be ignored. In perhaps the most unfathomable scene of *Nightwood*, the three major narrative styles I have outlined each contribute to the intense emotional and visual imprint the work makes as a whole. The ironic withholding of knowledge, the performance of spectacle, and a surreal visual culture dominate the scene Barnes depicts. Before Nora and Robin's rendezvous, however, Barnes permits her loquacious doctor a final word of wisdom.

The penultimate chapter, "Go Down, Matthew," contains the beloved doctor-seer's most heart-rending outburst. Though Barnes and the reader bid the hysterical Matthew *adieu*, his final diatribe offers no sense of closure. Matthew, spewing prophecies until the end, seems to break through the text to address the reader directly:

'Now that you have all heard what you wanted to hear, can't you... let me go? I've not only lived my life for nothing, but I've told it for nothing...I know, it's all over, everything's over, and nobody knows it but me...' He tried to get to his feet, gave it up. 'Now,' he said, 'the end—mark my words—now *nothing, but wrath and weeping!*' (N.175)

With Matthew's last warning, an impending doom settles over the ever-darkening world of *Nightwood*. Matthew finally escapes the page: after begging Barnes and the reader to release him from his miserable role as chief confessor and the choral voice that loosely binds the pieces of the text, he bows out of the narrative. His last words, however, hardly seem gratifying: in the end, he promises, there will be "*nothing, but wrath and weeping.*" Matthew's prophecies, the reader learns throughout the course of the text, are never erroneous. The excruciating cycle of love and despair Barnes's characters suffer will not end; there will be no happy ending, despite Nora's and the reader's wistful hopes. As the lights go down on Matthew's exhausted, pathetic figure in the bar, the reader prepares for the most nightmarish fates Barnes can possibly conjure for her characters. The permeating grimness of *Nightwood*, manifest in Matthew's final words, overtakes any optimistic view of Barnes's world the reader might have retained. Despite its moments of acerbic humor, *Nightwood* is a dark, pessimistic text that denies the possibility of a truly happy ending for its characters.

"The Possessed," unlike the novel's earlier chapters, contains no dialogue between characters. Only Barnes's narrative voice sustains the text, causing the reader to become hyperconscious of the narrator's total authority over the work. Like a cinematographer, Barnes opens the chapter with a wide-angle view of Robin, "wandering without design" through the countryside, stopping in "out-of-the-way churches" and sleeping in the woods among the wild animals (*N.* 176-177). Barnes's incantatory narrative reads like a fairytale: the sentences are easily comprehensible and flow almost musically from a storyteller's lips. "Robin now headed up into Nora's part of the country," Barnes tells the reader, "she circled closer and closer" (*N.* 177). Barnes's use

of the time indicator “now” invites the reader to track Robin’s travels and gaze expectantly as she roves the country like a wild beast, drawn by instinct, it seems, to Nora’s property. After listening in horror to Matthew’s final warning, the reader feels privy to what Robin and Nora do not know: that “*wrath and weeping*” will inevitably accompany the lovers’ imminent reunion. Personally invested in the fated ending, the reader can only gaze expectantly at the scene Barnes depicts.

A distinct change in Barnes’s style occurs at the moment both women—Nora sitting at home, Robin hiding half an acre away in the decaying chapel—hear Nora’s dog frantically barking. Using semicolons to string together details about the scene, Barnes arouses a sense of apprehension and dread that overcomes both Nora and the reader. “The dog was running about the house; she heard him first on one side, then the other; he whined as he ran; barking and whining she heard him farther and farther away,” Barnes haltingly writes (*N.* 178). The dog, a recurring motif throughout the work, recalls Matthew’s earlier prediction that “one dog will find” both Nora and Robin in the end. Nora’s dog, like the Grim Reaper, bears the fates Barnes envisions (and Matthew foretells) for the two lovers. The dog may possibly constitute a device of authorial intervention—another instance of Barnes acting as the master of spectacle in *Nightwood*. Barnes, incarnate in Nora’s dog, reaches into the scene and draws Robin and Nora together.

When Nora arrives at the chapel, she stumbles upon a spectacular performance or ritual that features Robin as the central attraction. Barnes methodically notes Robin’s costume, the space’s lighting, and the arrangement of props in the chapel:

On a contrived altar, before a Madonna, two candles were burning. Their light fell across the floor and the dusty benches. Before the image lay flowers and toys. Standing before them in her boy's trousers was Robin. Her pose [was] startled and broken. (N.178-179)

The description of the scene at the chapel reads like stage directions from Barnes to Robin. The altar is “contrived,” which entails the setting is artificial or forced; Robin is caught in the act of posing in an unnatural gesture. Her pose, meanwhile, is “startled and broken,” evoking the wisdom Felix gleaned from his agonizing experience as one of Robin's obsessive spectators: that an image is merely “a stop the mind makes between uncertainties,” an insupportable figment of the viewer's imagination (N. 119). Nora cannot avoid confronting the exceedingly strange spectacle before her, just as she must meet the fate Barnes has imagined for her. When Nora sees Robin, however, Barnes's narration loses its clarity and becomes fragmented and abstract. Upon entering the chapel, Nora's body “[strikes] the wood,” and she disappears from the narrative altogether. But what has happened to Nora? She may have been knocked unconscious, or even perished from the shock of seeing Robin in this state. In either case, Nora has been physically and emotionally floored by the sight of Robin. *Nightwood's* most desired spectacle thus asserts her full power in the chapel; not a trace of passivity or impotence plagues Robin as she performs before Nora's awestruck gaze.

At the very end, the only figures left standing in *Nightwood's* world are Robin and Nora's dog. The gesture of “going down” Barnes has woven throughout the text—two of the chapters are entitled “Bow Down” and “Go Down, Matthew”—recurs in the

almost choreographed motions of Robin and the dog upon the stage-like space of the altar. Frank's idea of *Nightwood's* spatial form seems most evident in Barnes's use of directional words: Robin "slide[s] down," the dog "rear[s] back," "spring[s] back," Robin "come[s] forward" (N.179). Robin's stage directions are "down" and "forward," while the dog's movements are almost exclusively "backward." Barnes makes it difficult to determine whether Robin's visceral dance with Nora's dog is aggressive, erotic, or both. Additionally, the repeated references to "going down" create the impression that *Nightwood's* conclusion *does* bring Barnes's work a form of narrative coherence, however strange. Barnes's depiction of the surreal dance Robin performs with Nora's dog is in keeping with her critical use of a highly visual language throughout *Nightwood* to challenge the notion that art, whether literary or visual, can capture any objective truth.

But what actually transpires between Robin and the dog? The reader can only speculate, thus endowing the scene with his or her own subjective interpretation. Barnes's narration shrouds the scene in mystery, leaving ample room for the insertion of the reader's own private, even perverse musings:

Then [Robin] began to bark also...barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry then, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her...He ran this way and that, low in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, her faced turned and weeping. (N.179-180)

Just as Barnes avoids explicitly mentioning lesbian sexual intercourse in *Nightwood* she artfully dodges naming the interaction between Robin and the dog as an act of bestiality.

Barnes does, however, describe Robin's eerie laughter as "obscene and touching," a more pointed reference to sexuality than the author provides in most other scenes of intimacy. Alan Williamson reads Robin's act as "disintegration into total animality and a masochistic atonement for the guilt she feels" towards Nora, but I believe this reading is far too limited, especially in light of the precedents Barnes has established throughout *Nightwood* (Williamson 74). Williamson assumes both Robin and Barnes are concerned with conventional ideas of innocence and guilt, penance and forgiveness. I believe Robin's physical—and, quite possibly, sexual—domination of Nora's dog represents her ultimate and complete transgression of all norms and expectations. Robin, heretofore largely the subject of others' oppressive gazes, forces both woman and beast to submit; Nora and her dog both lie prostrate in the chapel by end of "The Possessed."

Robin also collapses, exhausted and sobbing, in the very last lines of Barnes's extraordinary text. Barnes leaves no character standing; the "universal malady," love, has obliterated her entire eccentric cast. The "*wrath and weeping*" of Matthew's apocalyptic vision have certainly been realized, but the overall impression the reader attains from the scene is ultimately left his or her own imaginative design. In line with Barnes's consistently ironic narrative style, "The Possessed" teases the reader, refusing to offer a single satisfying morsel—a moral maxim, a concrete image, a moment of mutual love between Robin and Nora—as a reward. To breach from her ironic style at the very last instant would be to dismantle the entire world Barnes has built for the reader with painstaking layers of representation, painterly language, and disassociated tableaux. We must accept the utterly unknowable and become comfortable with our own estrangement in order to appreciate the rewards of *Nightwood*. We must allow ourselves to be

“possessed” by Barnes’s bizarre work, and give up our alignment with the status quo’s brutal, judgmental gaze. Though *Nightwood* presents a vision of human love that is, at times, overwhelmingly tragic, the wry wit, gorgeous imagery, and intense emotions the Barnes evokes through her masterful use of style justifies a careful reading.

In addition to the styles of irony, spectacle, and visual imagery I have explored in this paper, I hope my readers will seek out the larger array of styles Barnes uses to achieve *Nightwood’s* effect. Barnes wants her readers to experience discomfort and disorientation while experiencing her work: if we feel hopelessly lost stumbling through *Nightwood*, Barnes’s aim has been achieved. I argue that we should embrace the sense of loss—of love, of personal identity, of intelligibility—that is fundamental to Barnes’s text. *Nightwood* is not a poem, nor is it a stage performance, nor is it a thinly veiled memoir—it is a collage of distinct styles that transcends precise categorization or containment. Barnes’s use of a medley of styles directs the reader’s consciousness away from the impulse to impose a traditional narrative upon *Nightwood*, and instead contemplate the text’s extradiegetic gestures. *Nightwood* is a text that refuses to be ignored; from Matthew’s emotionally charged speeches to the suffering that comes with Nora and Robin’s impossible love, the reader cannot help but respond to the painful, grim work Barnes presents. When we emerge from the text, we should see, as in a distorting mirror, grotesque and bizarre images that are ultimately versions of ourselves. Barnes urges us to recognize humankind in the spectacular shadows that populate *Nightwood’s* forbidding, fantastic world. To read *Nightwood*, then, is to confront our deepest fears and insecurities about our personal identities and that “universal malady”: love.

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