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My History, Finally Invented:
Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Its Readers

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My History, Finally Invented:
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Report

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[W]riting is not 'the destruction of every voice' but the proliferation of possibilities of hearing.

Cheryl Walker, 1990

I am not a critic; to me criticism is so often nothing more than the eye garrulously denouncing the shape of the peephole that gives access to hidden treasure.

Djuna Barnes, 1917

Abstract

My History, Finally Invented:
Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Its Readers

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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In this report, I examine the reception of Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* (1936) from contemporary reviews in periodicals to twenty-first century online reviews. I am interested in how the novel has been situated in both historical and personal canons. I focus on how *Nightwood* has been read through the lenses of experimental modernism, lesbian feminism and postmodern queer theory, and how my own readings of it have changed over the years.

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Introduction

I do not remember where I first heard of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. The book appeared on my radar in high school or college, when I sought out queer fiction and novels by women. I did not read the book until a few months into my post-graduate life, but it was one of the few unread volumes I brought from my parents' house when I moved from Ohio to Seattle. I had a vague idea of *Nightwood* as a mysteriously surreal, profoundly poetic novel, as the Holy Grail of expatriate bohemian lesbian literature. I counted *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* among my favorite books, but Stein is so cagey about even depicting affection between two women; I was led to believe that Barnes was different. I dipped into *Nightwood* during breaks at my retail job, and was disappointed. After finishing the book, I wrote a review on the literary social networking website Goodreads in October 2006 that read, "This book is supposed to be brilliant, but I just couldn't GRASP any of it. It had a lot of those melodramatic outbursts that seem to come from nowhere and go nowhere."[1]

[1]Goodreads will be my main source for recent reviews by lay readers. Because Goodreads functions as a social networking site rather than an online bookstore like Amazon, the reviews tend to be more casually written, somewhere between a more formal review and a Facebook wall post (many users have their Goodreads accounts set up to post automatically to Facebook). The reviewers are a self-selected group of engaged readers. As of this writing, 1,990 had rated *Nightwood* on Goodreads's five star scale. Its average rating is currently 3.69 stars. I compared *Nightwood's* statistics to those of other books from the modernist and lesbian canon, and most books' star ratings tend to be around 3.7. The number of ratings for *Nightwood*, however, is miniscule compared to most of the other books I looked at: *The Great Gatsby* has been rated 707,818 times; *The Sun Also Rises* 87,434; *Mrs. Dalloway* 39,384; *Ulysses* 24,427 and *The Wasteland and Other Poem* 10,023. Of today's lesbian canon, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* has been rated 14,552 times; Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* 10,374; and Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* 9,897. Two texts that fall in the same ballpark statistically as Barnes's, right around 2,000 ratings, are the other most famous "lesbian" books of the 1930s, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:* these two and *Nightwood* are currently read by significantly fewer people than either more famous (and more widely taught) modernist works or more contemporary lesbian ones.

When I began graduate school a few years later, I encountered *Nightwood* again, on the syllabus of a course I was taking on the Modern American Novel. Suddenly determined to revisit and conquer *Nightwood*—perversely determined to like the book against all odds—I signed up to present a review essay on it. Reading *Nightwood* again was like reading a different book. This time, I had a newer copy, complete with Jeanette Winterson's 2006 preface, which guided my reading perhaps differently than T.S. Eliot's introduction had. And I had criticism, specifically two pieces by Teresa de Lauretis that I'll discuss later in this essay. There were still many things about the book that I could not explain, but this time, I felt more attached to *Nightwood*. It made sense to me in a way it hadn't four years before. Perhaps this new reading of the novel happened because I knew what I was getting into, and because I had a road map provided by professional critics. Perhaps it was simply due to life experience: in that time, I had learned to live on my own, in several different cities, had lived with a lover for the first time outside a college dormitory, and had felt that relationship change (though in a more positive direction that Robin's and Nora's). I'm sure I wanted to impress my classmates and professor with my insight into a difficult text, and I felt an imperative as a graduate student to say something, have a strong opinion about the book. Rather than thinking of *Nightwood* as part of a (potential) personal canon, I thought of it within a historical trajectory that went from Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).

I tell this story in order to foreground several related questions about reading, and about reading *Nightwood* in particular: How do books acquire reputations, contexts, and

baggage, and what is the relation between a book's reputation, its context and that of its author? Can our political investments as literary critics prevent us from seeing how books actually circulate in our culture, how they are actually being read? What do we talk about when we talk about *Nightwood*?

I set out in this essay to survey as broadly and closely as possible the panorama of responses readers—professional, academic and lay; receptive and resisting; male and female, gay, straight and everywhere in between—have had to *Nightwood* since its publication in 1936, in order to discover how scaffoldings get built around novels, who reinforces or tears down which assumptions about a book. First, I map how Djuna Barnes and others have thought about authorship in *Nightwood*, with some help from Michel Foucault's theory of authorship. Then I examine how the book's presentation has changed by comparing T.S. Eliot's 1937 introduction and Jeanette Winterson's 2006 preface. After that, I move to contemporary reviews to see how late 1930s readers thought about *Nightwood*, and how they compare to twenty-first century readers in online reviews. I survey how critics have written about *Nightwood*'s reception history, and how the book has been read and interpreted in the contexts of modernism, lesbian feminism and postmodern queer theory; I look at how it has been brought into both historical and personal canons. Finally, I examine my own invested yet skeptical readings of the novel. In each of the periods and contexts I visit, readers grapple with *Nightwood*'s difficulty, struggling to both account for that difficulty and get past it, to find reading practices that fit the book.

A Holy Spoon I: Nightwood Theorizes Itself

In the first of his many speeches in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, renegade doctor and noted soliloquist Matthew O'Connor explains the dichotomy between history, which he distinguishes as the stories of "the high and mighty," and legend, the stories of everybody else (18). Although it begins with an invocation of the House of Hapsburg, *Nightwood* does not purport to be history. Its only aristocrats are a handful of circus performers, a pair of secondhand portraits, and a half-Jewish boy who aspires to the priesthood. What Barnes offers instead is a cornucopia of legend: she piles up images and anecdotes of tattooed bodies, broken hearts, wild animals, cross-dressing unlicensed gynecologists, female princes and broken dolls, with dialogue like, "I have come to ask you to tell me everything you know about the night" (86). A few pages into his first conversation with (or soliloquy at) Felix Volkbein, legendary talker Matthew O'Connor imagines a Catholic mass:

> Go into mass at any moment—what do you walk in upon? Something that is already in your blood. You know the story that the priest is telling … . Because you are sitting there with your own meditations and a legend ... and mingling them both with a Holy Spoon, which is that story (24).

Story—the myth behind the ritual—Matthew figures as that which connects the present moment and the spectator to the forgotten archive of "legends" that "befall [man] without distinction of office or title" (18). Story is the meaning created when that past intersects the present, a meaning that is "already in your blood": something you cannot not know, although the origin of that knowledge may be obscured. Matthew asserts that story activates something in the hearer/reader: both her own individual frame of reference and

the collective memory of legend. Story's meaning is the solution of the two, mixed with, catalyzed by that story. This sounds a lot like literary theory, and offers an intriguing entrance into Barnes's text, especially in the context of its reception. What legends, what meditations does Barnes activate for readers? Although I do not want to insinuate that there is no difference between reading and hearing a story, I find that Matthew's depiction of a Catholic Mass describes quite accurately the experience of reading *Nightwood* or any text from the past, whether recent or distant. Whether or not the text is politically subversive, *Nightwood* is a narrative against normative narratives in the most literal, literary sense. For some authors, the antidote to monolithic narrative would be the production of alternative or counter-history, but Barnes just gives us legends around which other legends—modernist maverick! lesbian foremother! antifascist heroine! forgotten genius!—spring up like toadstools.

Nigh T. Wood, or The Life and Times of Djuna Barnes?

Barnes seems to have intended *Nightwood* both as an act of personal catharsis (and perhaps revenge) and as a timeless work of art, but historical documentation does not seem to have entered consciously into her production and revision of *Nightwood*, nor the work of her main editors, Barnes's close friend, the now-forgotten American writer Emily Holmes Coleman and another transatlantic author you may know, T.S. Eliot.[2] Yet to many readers, the question of historical reality is precisely where *Nightwood*'s value and/or its failure lie. In her essay "The More Profound Nationality of Their Lesbianism: Lesbian Society in Paris in the 1920's," published in the 1973 lesbian feminist anthology *Amazon Expedition*, novelist Bertha Harris describes how, in 1959, she shadowed Barnes around Greenwich Village, imagining that the famously reclusive and misanthropic author "would stop and take my hand to thank me for all the flowers I daily stuffed in her mailbox in Patchin Place and then tell me how it was to be a dyke in Paris in the Twenties" (Harris 77). Reading Barnes and other non-heteronormative women writers (Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein and Colette) was, for Harris, "read[ing] my censored history" and discovering "our family bloodline … these women our fathers stole from us" (Harris 78-79). Other lesbian readers express similar experiences. Literary scholar Elizabeth A. Meese registers both the rush of recognition in the text and its alienating style: "How could [radical lesbian writers] admire such a throwback to masculinist, repressive, negative images of lesbians … ? When I first read *Nightwood*, I was a lesbian

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[2]A detailed analysis of the work Barnes, Coleman and Eliot did to produce the published text of *Nightwood* can be found in Cheryl Plumb's introduction to *Nightwood and Related Drafts.*

without knowing it. But I recognized a world in it—a scene over the edge, the night world of the different, my world. I wonder if a lesbian exists who didn't, at one time or another, begin here" (Meese 46). Meese emphasizes both Barnes's negativity and her central place in lesbian canon (more on this below). *Nightwood* itself offers little in the way of scenery. Although they moved between cafes and bars in Paris and Vienna, the characters themselves dominate those places with their tormented conversation.

Djuna Barnes made no secret of the fact that she was writing about real people she actually knew, most obviously her former lover, the artist Thelma Wood, whose name is embedded in the novel's title[3] and whose reactions to both the novel, and her fictional avatar, Robin Vote, have been widely reported. In a letter to her close friend Emily Coleman, Barnes "referred to *Nightwood* as 'my life with Thelma'" (Plumb vii). Barnes's friend Dan Mahoney was also aware that he was the inspiration for Matthew O'Connor, and many have suggested that another acquaintance inspired Felix Volkbein.[4] Barnes herself expressed concern over the immediacy of *Nightwood*. In a letter to Emily Coleman, she wrote, "God knows who could have written as much about their blood while it was still running" (qtd. Plumb ix). However, Barnes acknowledges that blood as a font of creativity, writing, also to Coleman, that, "a great deal of my writing is intuition, remembrance of time and pain" (qtd. in Plumb xviii-xix). We shall see that readers from

[3]Though Barnes didn't recognize this until too late: she wrote to Coleman in October 1936, after the book had been published: "Nigh T. Wood—low, thought of it the other day. Very odd" (Plumb ix).
[4]In fact, all of Barnes's major works are more or less consciously autobiographical: both *Ryder* and *The Antiphon* caused controversy in her family, and everyone fictionalized in *The Ladies Almanack* seems to have been aware that they were the subjects of Barnes's more or less affectionate satire. For example, in her 1972 memoir *Paris Was Yesterday, New Yorker* journalist Janet Flanner writes, "I was devoted to Djuna and she was quite fond of me, too, in her superior way. She wrote a chapbook called *The Little Ladies' Almanac (*sic). ... I was one of a pair of journalists called Nip and Tuck" (Flanner xvii).

the 1930s to the present have found *Nightwood* simultaneously both too expressive *and* too cerebral. It is tempting to read *Nightwood* as some combination of revenge and catharsis for Barnes herself, although she clearly thought of it as something more. New Directions publisher James Laughlin, who reprinted *Nightwood* in 1946 in his New Classics series and kept it in print to the present day, remembers that the elderly Barnes “came into the ND office to tell me that the next printing of NIGHTWOOD was to be done on paper that would last for 1000 years. I called the dealers … but the best they could promise was 700 years” (Laughlin 19).

Biographical criticism seems to be more or less anathema in academia these days (or such is the perception among the graduate students I know). Some of it seems to stem from the unspoken assumption that it is easy, not artistic, to simply write about yourself and your life—that obvious life-writing, at least in prose, requires less self-control, self-respect and artistry than more explicitly fictional or cerebral writing. Annette Kolodny registers or perhaps expresses these prejudices in her 1975 manifesto “Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism.'” The conflation of fiction and autobiography, used to dismiss works like Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, was troubling to feminist critics like Kolodny, struggling to expand the canon to include women writers among “serious literature,” “literature of merit,” high art. Kolodny contends that,

> The demand that the book finally be admitted as autobiography was, implicitly, an admission by these gentlemen that they could or would not easily accept the notion of females performing conscious and intentional creative acts. Thus, by attributing its narrative to 'autobiography,' the inherently sexist view might be maintained that women's productions are attributable to something less than fully conscious artistic invention (Kolodny 77).

Writing that is “just” autobiography need not be taken as seriously as high art. Art is supposed to be removed from life, Wordsworth's “excess of feeling recollected in tranquility” and filtered through the medium of capital-L Literature.

The most obvious biographical reading of *Nightwood* would be that it is essentially Djuna Barnes's breakup album. The palpable heartbreak in *Nightwood* has its real-life analogue in Barnes's actual loss of Wood. I am tempted to read the novel as the cathartic expression of its author's pain, her struggle to come to terms with the finality of their separation. That Barnes recognizes this finality may explain *Nightwood'*s enigmatic ending. She knows that her Robin will never literally return to her, but she cannot write this separation into the text. She cannot imagine any words either of them could say to make reparation. All she can do is have Robin get down on all fours and howl.[5] Thus the text functions more as an expression of the grieving process, struggling for closure, than of wish fulfillment.[6]

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[5]I have not yet found any critics who employ trauma theory in their interpretation of Barnes, although *Nightwood* seems ideal for it.

[6]Winterson, anyway, might vouch for this interpretation, and its value to the reader: she writes in her 2011 memoir, ““But Woolf and Stein were radical to use real people in their fictions and to muddle their facts—*Orlando*, with its actual photos of Vita Sackville-West, and Alice Toklas, the supposed writer, who is Stein's lover but not the writer ... For me, fascinated with identity, and how you define yourself, these books were crucial. Reading yourself as a fiction as well as a fact is the only way to keep the narrative open—the only way to stop the story running away under its own momentum, often towards an ending no one wants” (Winterson, *Why* 119).

The Author as Principle of Thrift

But the author is dead, right? Yet everywhere, she becomes the defining feature of the text. When we talk about canon, we talk as much about people as about books, even when we avoid overtly biographical readings. Readers' expectation that there is *some* relationship between the material, embodied identity of an author and the meaning of a text is what, in his 1969 essay "What Is An Author?" Michel Foucault terms the "principle of thrift" that constitutes part of "author-function." Cheryl Walker glosses Foucault's author function as that "which allows us to classify 'a Woolf novel,' for instance, as a different kind of entity than a novel by Jane Austen. The author-function is not a subjective presence but a signature" (Walker 551). Foucault's "principle of thrift" helps explain why, in the midst of deconstruction and postmodernism, authors' names still appear on book covers. By separating the idea of author-function—the implied or imagined author—from the historical person of the author, the author-function lives on within discourse and exerts a limiting effect on reading, providing a context for the text, locating it in time, space and genre, in effect and affect.

What is the principle of thrift Djuna Barnes provides? As we shall see, readers in different times, places and circumstances read *Nightwood* in drastically different ways. *Nightwood* is almost always read as a stand-alone work, not contextualized by Barnes's other writings. It has been read as a risky literary experiment, a subversive manifesto, an act of revenge or catharsis, a secret history, textual medicine, highbrow comedy—sometimes all of these at once. It has been read with other modernist novels, other lesbian novels, other writing by women. The Library of Congress catalogues *Nightwood* as a

book about "1. Lesbians—Fiction. 2. Sex addicts—Fiction. 3. Psychological fiction." A professor of mine told me she read it in a course on Alcoholism and Modernism. But in each reading, the principle of thrift functions differently. Different readers emphasize and ignore very different moments of the text, which is quite easy to do since, although it is a relatively short novel (around 200 pages in most editions), *Nightwood* is quite wordy. Its discourses jump from topic to topic with astonishing rapidity, its trains of thought often screeching into dead ends or jumping toward non-sequiturs. Different readings account for this manic style, this difficulty, in different ways.

Barnes pushes language past excess, to its limits and beyond. Language fails her characters time and time again. While Felix and Nora both come to Matthew with their deepest fears and desires, he never seems to answer their questions directly, speaking in circuitous abstractions, hallucinatory imagery and anecdotes that feel like red herrings.[7] On this point, Wayne Koestenbaum's arguments about logorrhea may be useful. Koestenbaum describes logorrhea as an old-fashioned style that has been devalued: "old-fashioned, purple, tumescent" flowing words, words "cloning or festering," "words breed[ing] words."[8] *Nightwood*, particularly as embodied by Matthew's speech, serves as a perfect example. Koestenbaum advocates for logorrhea's meaning, which he sees as contained in its very overproduction and saturation, which expresses, almost mimetically, "human productivity, human flaw and flow." A tumbling jumble of words may be dismissed as sound and fury, but "if you flow," he claims, "you inevitably stumble on the

[7]These conversations may, as many critics suggest, be Barnes poking fun at psychoanalysis and its "talking cure."
[8]The copy I have of this article doesn't have page numbers.

truth." Further, "Calling language logorrhea, we deny its depth, its codes. We deny that it is always a meaningful system, that it has the power to express" (Koestenbaum). Djuna Barnes's logorrhea may lead to the "murderous" conclusion that indeed, language is not always a coherent system. Traditional narratives and comfortable reading practices do not encompass or explain the flow of experience, the emotional eddies she wants to communicate. *Nightwood* works on a level outside subtext and concrete, interpretable meaning. But it still uses language to do its work. Its images are made of words. As critics like T.S. Eliot, Joseph Frank, Kenneth Burke and Teresa de Lauretis will all argue, *Nightwood* works poetically, not rhetorically. Its effect—I will not say meaning—cannot be paraphrased; it is irreducible, untranslatable, singular. As Barnes writes of Jenny Petherbridge in *Nightwood*, "Only severed could any part of her have been called 'right'" (71). Readers need a principle of thrift to rein in this proliferation of meaning, some sense of who Barnes was and what she meant to do in *Nightwood*, in order to categorize this textually polymorphous perversity, this text that Jan Hokenson calls "hybrid," "fugal" (where Koestenbaum says "fungal"), "insistently protean and indeterminate" (Hokenson 65).

Legitimating Documents: Winterson's "Preface" and Eliot's "Introduction"

An author-function does much of its work by dividing texts into genres and periods, providing the limiting effects of themes and reference points. This apparatus comes not only from an author's own biography or how she thought of her own work, but from everyone else who vets, packages or handles our reading before it gets to us: publishers, editors, journalists, advertisers, scholars, teachers, friends, and now online communities. The principle of thrift is equally institutional and diffuse, explicit and osmotic. Often, some limiting information is conveniently available in or on the book itself, and the mere fact that is has been published implies that someone professional has vetted the text and makes readers initially more open to reading it. In 2012, Goodreads user Jennifer Doerr wrote of *Nightwood*: "I fully admit that if this text were not bound with a cover illustration, championed by T.S. Eliot and published, it would never have passed muster in any of my writing workshops." The book's very book-ness sets it apart: this is not just writing. It is a book. And not just any book, but a book that comes with a seal of approval by one of the biggest "high" literary names of the twentieth century.

Readers do not need to know about Eliot's endorsement going in. His "Introduction" appears in most editions of the book. The current edition available in the United States, the 2006 New Directions, begins with a "Preface" by Jeanette Winterson, followed by Eliot's original 1937 "Introduction" and features a back-cover quotation from William S. Burroughs ("One of the greatest books of the twentieth century"). As reception studies scholar Barbara Hochman puts it, "Editions are no direct proof of

reading habits ... Nonetheless, prescribed modes of reading are useful indicators of a cultural climate, and when set in diachronic perspective they reflect changes in the literary marketplace as well as shifts in social and interpretive conventions" (Hochman 256).

The nesting of these two legitimating documents, Eliot's "Introduction" and Winterson's "Preface," illustrates the perhaps radical change in image that the novel has undergone in the past seventy years. Both authors write as fans as much as critics, lauding the tragic poetry of *Nightwood* as a spiritual balm, urging us to read and reread it—and both suggest that identity politics is not what's important here. However, Eliot's and Winterson's names alone represent two distinct genres, and when it comes to introductory materials, the names may be what really matters. In 1937, *Nightwood* was a modernist text, vouched for by the reigning modernist poet and critic. In the twenty-first century, it is a seminal lesbian novel, presented by one of the most respected lesbian novelists of our time—and another author associated with high art, who writes what is variously called literary fiction, postmodern fiction or experimental fiction.

Both Eliot and Winterson address reading practices. Eliot states that it took him many readings to "[develop] intimacy with" *Nightwood* and "come to an appreciation of its meaning as a whole" (xvii), which for him meant seeing that all the different chapters do belong in the same book and recognizing Matthew as the linchpin. This experience leads Eliot to contend that the book will "appeal primarily to readers of poetry" because "only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it"—*Nightwood* is not for the general public (xvii-xviii). Readers must be properly trained and they must be warned

against their own judgment of the characters, against “regard[ing] this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks” by focusing on their homosexuality, which would be to “miss the point” and “to confirm our wills and harden our hearts in an inveterate sin of pride” (xxii). In his 1949 “Note to Second Edition,” Eliot dismisses his earlier introduction as “pretentious” (xxiiI), a word I'll talk about in a moment. The older Eliot urges us to consider the “approach” he offered as “helpful for the new reader” while ignoring the “immaturity” and pretension of his younger self (xxiii).

Writing over a half-century later, in 2006, Jeanette Winterson agrees that *Nightwood* requires rereading and the kind of focus poetry requires. Winterson appreciates that the book forces readers to slow down, which we're increasingly disinclined to do in a fast-paced world focused on instant gratification (ix-x). In Winterson's eyes, *Nightwood* pays for the work it requires of readers. While “there is no consolation in *Nightwood* nor is the book “an escape text,” it is “a book for introverts, in that we are all introverts in our after-hours secrets and deepest loves” (x, xvi, xv). Winterson notes that that while this is not a positive view of lesbian love, “there is great dignity in Nora's love for Robin” (xiii).

Like Barnes (more on this below), Winterson is famously wary of being categorized as a lesbian writer. In the essay “The Semiotics of Sex,” from her 1995 collection *Art Objects*, Winterson probes this problematic. She begins and ends the essay with anecdotes about interactions with young admirers. First:

I was in a bookshop recently when a young woman approached me.

> She told me she was writing an essay on my work and that of Radclyffe Hall. Could I help?
> ‘Yes,' I said. 'Our work has nothing in common.'
> 'I thought you were a lesbian,' she said (Winterson, “Semiotics” 103).

Second:

> I was in a bookshop recently and a young man came up to me and said 'Is Sexing the Cherry a reading of [Eliot's] Four Quartets?'
> 'Yes,' I said, and he kissed me (Winterson, “Semiotics” 118).

Here and throughout her autobiographical writings, Winterson evinces a much stronger attachment to Eliot than any she might have to Barnes.[9] Eliot appears as a *deus ex machina* in Winterson's 2011 memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, right at the moment when the teenage Jeanette's religious fanatic mother has thrown her out for refusing to break up with her girlfriend. Winterson figures a line from Murder in the Cathedral as her own personal It Gets Better Project:

> I read: This one moment, / But know that another / Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy. I started to cry. … The unfamiliar and beautiful play made things bearable that day … I was confused about sex and sexuality, and upset about the straightforward practical problems of where to live, what to eat, and how to do my A levels. I had no one to help me, but the T.S. Eliot helped me (Winterson, Why 38-39).

As these excerpts suggest, Winterson's preface works not to correct Eliot's introduction, but to corroborate it. Winterson and Eliot share a belief in the value of poetry and the slow, difficult reading it demands. The two pieces overlap in their insistence that *Nightwood* requires a slow, sustained reading practice and is best digested over multiple re-readings. One wonders if Winterson's preface was added in 2006 in New Directions'

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[9] This is not to say that Winterson does not identify with or value other non-heterosexual female artists. In both her 1995 essay collection *Art Objects* and her 2011 memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Winterson waxes poetic about Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf, albeit as artistic models more than queer foremothers.

hope that Winterson's name might address a market demographic over whom T.S. Eliot's name has no sway, either because they have not heard of him, or because they associate him with things they have no interest in reading (Modernism, high school English class, dead white males, Anglophilia, Catholicism, etc.). As much as Winterson herself might wince at the thought, her name immediately suggests that the book has some sort of queer or feminist bent and that it is, if nothing else, artistic in an interesting, contemporary way. In her preface, Winterson voices the conventional wisdom about how *Nightwood* is read in the twenty-first century: "more people have heard about [*Nightwood*] than have read it. Reading it is mainly the preserve of academics and students. Others have a vague sense that it is a Modernist text … that the work is an important milestone on any map of gay literature—even though, like all the best books, its power makes nonsense of any categorization, especially of gender or sexuality" (ix). Winterson maps the major categorizations placed onto *Nightwood*—Modernist, gay—but contends that anyone who actually reads the book will recognize that it is more than a gay novel or a Modernist text.

New and Nasties: Early Reviews of *Nightwood*

Even *Nightwood*'s strongest advocates have found it difficult to swallow wholesale or recommend without qualifications. And that includes the friends who surrounded Barnes as she drafted the book. Emily Coleman, *Nightwood*'s most steadfast champion and Barnes go-between with her publisher and editor Eliot, wrote in her diary while editing the drafts that "most of the book is sentimental shit of the worst kind … then these wonderful truths" (qtd. in Plumb viii). John Ferrar Holmes, to whom the book is dedicated (along with his lover and Barnes's lifelong champion Peggy Guggenheim), told Coleman of the manuscript: "Its *awful*. Its impossible. I ought to do something to it. I cant. I *cant* (sic)" (qtd. in Plumb x).

Late twentieth-century feminist critic Jane Marcus implies that the number of contemporary reviews of *Nightwood* demonstrate the book's perceived importance in its moment, writing that ""it was given the kind of press coverage which only cookbooks get today, from serious intellectuals who took reviewing seriously and wrote elegant, if often malicious, essays for an enormous reading public" (Marcus, "Mousemeat" 195). While it would be nice to think that *Nightwood* made a huge splash, a bit of archival research suggests two things: that any book from a major publisher in the 1930s received wide, high-quality press on both sides of the Atlantic (including many books that have completely disappeared) and that much of this attention was the result of hustling on the part of Barnes and her friends. Barnes' letters to Charles Henri Ford and Lady Ottoline Morrell, now at the Harry Ransom Center, evince an obsession with getting *Nightwood* into the hands of reviewers.

In what is widely regarded as the first book-length study of lesbian literature, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956), Jeanette Foster notes that women authors were often dismissed or judged harshly due to their gender, but some "sex variant" women authors did better because their writing was perceived as masculine: "Some few project themselves with comparative success into tolerant studies by women whose mental idiom and emotional outlook is somewhat masculine. Djuna Barnes … fared rather well at the hands of reviewers" (Foster 351). Foster and others suggest that Barnes received the breadth of critical attention she did because she writes like a man. However, in her moment, Barnes was reviewed along with many other women writers (see Burra's review below). Critics compared her not only to Joyce, but also to Woolf, a comparison she was ambivalent about. By the fifties and sixties, Nathanael West and Malcolm Lowry became common touchstones for *Nightwood*, and these days it is rare to see mention of her without one of the following: Joyce, Eliot, Stein, Radclyffe Hall, Colette, and sometimes Woolf.

With all the wit and panache one might expect from Dylan Thomas, his review, published in the Oxford and Cambridge journal *Dark and Light* in May 1937, encapsulates all the major themes that appear in the early reviews of *Nightwood*. He writes:

> There should be two reviews of this book, and both written with the intention of selling it: the first to attract the intellectual flippity-gibbits, who read everything new and nasties have read it before (sic); and one to attract by quotation, the honest people who like beautiful writing. The first review should say what an evil book it is, that it's about homosexuality, and that it's very bawdy; also that Mr. Eliot, certainly not new or nasty, has written an enthusiastic preface to the

> American edition. This review for chi-chi people could have any sort of title like "A Bible of Evil" … and it would sell several hundred copies in Cambridge. The second review, is, I think, this review. "Night Wood" was turned down by every publisher in America. It can't be called a novel, because it only has a sort-of-a-plot; the characters don't as in the actual life of fiction, develop and change from mood to mood, sentence, etcetera; they talk witty, passionate dialogues on dirty mountaintops (making, that is, the comparative unimportance of the fact of level dirt into mountainous truth). It isn't a lah-de-dah prose poem, because it's about what some very real human people feel, think, and do. It's "Nightwood," by Djuna Barnes, and one of the three great prose books ever written by a woman
> (Marcus, "Mousemeat" 199-200).

What the other great prose books by women are, Thomas does not say. He does, however, touch upon the novel's homosexual content, its bawdiness and/or moral implications and its realness, all of which recur throughout reviews from 1936 and '37, and even reverberate in contemporary online reviews.

On Modernism and Its Difficulties I: Contemporary Critics and Cleverness

In her preface, Jeanette Winterson acknowledges that "There is no consolation in *Nightwood*" (Winterson, "Preface" x), a sentiment that early reviewers of the novel tend to agree with. Peter Quennell, a well-regarded literary figure in his time, reviews the British edition of the novel for the leftist weekly *New Statesman and Nation* in October 1936 and has quite a visceral reaction. He begins by assessing *Nightwood* as "not exactly a book one would read for pleasure" and continues,

> No, Night Wood is not a comforting book to read. Imagine the worst of hangovers, complicated by acute remorse and extreme retrospective jealousy—thickened into a view of modern civilization and contemporary social life that, for bitterness and crazy violence, leaves the darkest chapters of Ulysses far behind (Quennell 592).

For Quennell, *Nightwood*'s unpleasantness derives equally from the "crazy violence" of its events, the bitterness of its or its characters' philosophy, and, he suggests, the emotions it represents or evokes. He asks us to "imagine" the bad hangover, without explaining whether this is what the actual reading experience will literally feel like, or just what the book itself "looks" like. Although he finds the novel "neither direct nor unpretentious" (Quennell 592), one thing Quennell does not find it is boring.

Readers who do find a definitive message, philosophy, or effect in *Nightwood* often find that message, philosophy, or effect itself disagreeable. Philip Rahv reviewed the book for the American Marxist magazine *New Masses* in 1937, and his response demonstrates how the novel has always been especially problematic for radical readers, who either explicitly or implicitly expect an experimental novel about lesbian love to be

more oppositional. Rahv writes, "That 'to think is to be sick' or, for that matter, that to be alive is to be dead, is the intrinsic meaning of this novel, which reads like the transcript of a nightmare. Once we plunge into its chaos and lunatic humors anything becomes possible—except, of course, the objectively real" (Rahv 32). To Rahv, *Nightwood* depicts "the shifting sands of decadence at its most absolute" (Rahv 32). The novel's negative message and its unrealistic, decadent style go hand in hand for Rahv. "Decadence" ambiguously describes both a literary style associated with European writers like Baudelaire, Huysmans, and Wilde; and the idle, privileged bohemian lifestyle of Barnes's characters. Literary and literal decadence are equally undesirable in a 1930s socialist context, where, judging by *New Masses'* content and advertisements, readers' main concerns were assumed to be the Spanish Civil War effort, the rise of fascism in Europe and economic conditions in the United States. Many twenty-first-century readers repeat similar, albeit less nuanced versions of Rahv's criticism of *Nightwood*'s decadence. Sonya Feher writes on Goodreads in 2010 that she tried to read the book but "It didn't work. Too white. Too privileged." Other present-day readers also share Rahv's concern with the novel's negativity. Dan Schank muses on Goodreads in 2012: "i'm not entirely sure why this book didn't knock my socks off, exactly. i'd say it's the pre-occupation with existential nothingness (decidedly NOT the way i look at the world)."

Even readers who like *Nightwood* find it difficult to recommend, exactly. As someone writing on the book, I have this experience a lot. On the telephone with my mother recently, I told her about my project and she asked, of *Nightwood*, "Would I like it?" How do I even begin to answer that question? Peter Burra, in the *Spectator* in 1936,

offers one perspective. He reviews *Nightwood* along with six other new novels, most of which are even less remembered today.[10] Burra devotes roughly two-thirds of his one-page review to Barnes. Although conscious of *Nightwood*'s limited popular appeal, it stands head and shoulders above the rest in its complication and ambition:

> One cannot recommend Nightwood indiscriminately to the novel-reading public any more than one can describe it plainly as a novel. But almost everything else in this list is the nice comfortable version of normal existence, where nature has a nice motive in every passion. The players have their ups and downs, it is true, but we are allowed to remain on the level without being required to disturb our posture or rearrange our way of thinking (Burra 962).

In Burra's opinion, *Nightwood* does the opposite. It is noteworthy precisely because it is scary and difficult, because it defies expectations and challenges assumptions. Burra here iterates a deeply modernist sentiment that many *Nightwood* fans will echo into our present moment: the book is not for everyone. It is for Certain People, Good Readers, for initiates, for, in Burra's vision, readers who are not afraid to face some ugly truths about life.

Many readers have found Barnes's difficulty tedious and self-aggrandizing rather than enlightening, suggesting that her ambition is greater than her skill.[11] These readers often use that old chestnut "pretentious" to describe *Nightwood*. In a 1936 review in the *Post* of London, Osbert Burdett complains that the book is "Written in pretentious and sometimes meaningless prose" (qtd. in Marcus, "Mousemeat" 196). To call a book

[10] *Foster-Girl* by John Metcalfe, *Song of Friendship* by Bernhard Kellerman, *Somewhere in Silence* by Patrick Brand, *Level Crossing* by Phyllis Bottome, *Cross-Double-Cross* by Lewis Masefield and *Two Exiles* by Julian Hall, if you're interested.

[11] Even when talking about "difficult literature" the word *difficult* connotes a certain willful orneriness. Think of Elizabeth Wurtzel's 1998 title, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women.*

pretentious is to suggest that it is clear, often from the writing itself, that its author takes it quite seriously and imagines her work as important or groundbreaking (that Barnes herself did is indisputable), but that it misses the mark, that it is overly stylized and ornate with too little attention to the nitty-gritty of story, substance and meaning. To be pretentious is to be more invested in impressing the literati and in making a name for yourself than in creating real art.

One of the most lucid explications of the problematic of pretension, and one of the best-written negative reviews of *Nightwood*, comes from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Van Doren, writing in *The Nation* in 1937. While Van Doren praises Barnes's prose, he wonders about the novel's substance and the "nourishment" it offers readers:

> [F]or its brilliance and formal beauty few novels of any age can compare with it. But one must also say how desperate it is. Mr. Eliot condemns in advance any reader who feels superior to the three chief persons of the narrative, all of whom belong to the third sex. That, however, is not the point. The point is that Miss Barnes has strained rather than enriched our sensibilities. 'Nightwood' is more fascinating than interesting. ... 'Nightwood is mouse meat at which we nibble page after page with a special kind of joy. But great fiction is more ordinary than this, and ultimately more nourishing. Beefsteak and apple pie (qtd. in Marcus, "Mousemeat" 199).[12]

Van Doren hints that one possible message of the book might be to enlarge the reader's sympathies toward "the third sex," in which he lumps "the three chief persons" of the novel.[13] Like many 1930s reviewers, Van Doren assures us that he does not turn his nose

[12] Van Doren takes the phrase "mouse meat" from *Nightwood*: Matthew informs Nora that she is just one of the "women who have looked about with lamps, like you … Like a thousand mice they go this way and that … still approaching or leaving their misplaced mouse-meat" (99-100).
13 (I assume he means Robin, Nora and Matthew. Or Jenny? Why does everyone forget about my favorite, Felix? There is a whole other section, or maybe a whole other paper, to be written just on how people summarize *Nightwood*, who they think the protagonist is, etc.)

up at the characters' sexual orientation(s). Instead, his critique hinges on the idea that Barnes asks a lot of her readers: that reading *Nightwood* takes work, but it doesn't pay off. Van Doren comes to *Nightwood* with the idea that good fiction is “nourishing” and “enrich[es] our sensibilities.” Although he devours the novel with “a special kind of joy,” it is the shallow, hollow joy of sensual pleasure, of “fascination” rather than a slower, less flashy “interest.”[14] What Van Doren feels for *Nightwood* is not true love, but fleeting infatuation. As one Goodreads user named Summer put it in 2007, “The prose is beautiful and I read this book in one sitting, but I still didn't take much from it.”

Reception scholar Leonard Diepeveen examines critiques and parodies of modernist literature to demonstrate that critics thought about reading, and the relationship between reader and text, in quite a different way than the modernist writers did. Their critique had an ethical dimension, one deeply invested in the idea that books should be sincere and serious—that they should communicate substantial truth to the reader. Even (especially) if a literary writer wrote fiction, readers expected her to be honest and serious about the truths she expressed. If the text revealed signs of its own deliberate construction, its artifice, “One need not engage because trust was not possible. For these readers, trust was the opening gambit in any aesthetic experience;” “Reading *began* only in the presence of sincerity” (Diepeveen 169, 166). Modernist experimentation, with its attendant self-consciousness, “was not just an aesthetic failing. It was an *ethical* failing for its fraudulence, its mechanical and deliberate character … conventional

[14] It would be interesting to read a lot of other reviews and find out which books Van Doren thinks of as “beefsteak and apple pie.”

understandings of sincerity and seriousness ran aground on modernism'" (Diepeveen 168). Although of course most literature throughout history has been deliberately constructed, and authors have probably always been conscious of their goals for their own projects, early twentieth-century readers did not want this to be apparent in the text itself. A text that presented itself as Art in too obvious a way risked that cardinal sin, pretension. Or, in the words of many reviewers at the time, being too clever: "Deliberate works could not be 'rich': they could only be 'clever'" (Diepeveen 166), not beefsteak and apple pie, but marzipan flowers, maybe?

Many reviewers consider lack of substance to be endemic to difficult or experimental writing. One writer, reviewing Barnes's 1962 *Selected Works* for *Time* magazine, contends that, "even *Nightwood* suffers from that most irritating offense of difficult writing—the mysterioso effect that hides no mystery, the locked box with nothing in it" ("Lost"). Even for reviewers writing in the 1930s, this sense of substanceless difficulty is associated with modernism as a genre. By 1936 and '37, when the book was released in the UK and the US, respectively, high modernism was considered somewhat dated. It had had its moment, but that moment was past. As I have already noted, for leftist critics, literature worthy of attention consciously moved away from art for art's sake toward a concern with material and political reality as the Depression wore on and political upheaval began fomenting in Europe. Burra favorably compares Barnes with old-school modernism, arguing that "one can safely say that she belongs temperamentally to the elder generation of living writers who present life in its essential nakedness and seeming hopelessness, rather than the younger ones who are

bravely trying to dress it up in a colored shirt" (Burra 962). For him, Barnes's nihilistic decadence is preferable to the more self-consciously realistic writing of her contemporaries. Others, like Rahv, view her modernist sensibility as regressive:

> Miss Barnes belongs to the more esoteric wings of the aesthetic modernists who at one time were in virtual control of all 'new' and experimental writing, but who have since lost all hold on literature. Unlike many of her colleagues … Miss Barnes chooses to remain within her trance, and there is something pitiful and quixotic in her attempt to resurrect certain moods of the 1920's, moods that are truly gone with the wind (32).

Barnes consciously imaged her work as hearkening back to a seriously artistic tradition. In a 1934 letter to her friend Charles Henri Ford, Barnes laments the difficulty of publishing *Nightwood*: "No news about my book at the third publishers—too frank to get a publisher no doubt—really beastly stuff like 'The Postman Always Rings Twice' is being taken seriously, people even daring to talk of his dialogue as being better than Hemingways (sic)—and when a country can go that far it is all over with belles lettres."[15] Barnes uses a classic modernist—Ernest Hemingway—to represent good writing and James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (which I, for one, prefer over Hemingway) to represent the bad, and she imagines herself as part of Hemingway's tradition, a writer of *belles lettres*, of high art, not popular "stuff." In these lines, Barnes differentiates the frankness of her project from the frank violence and (hetero)sexuality of Cain's novel. In this late 1930's moment, Barnes's invocation of modernism no longer resonates with the avant-garde "make it new!"-ness of the 1910s and '20s, but feels

[15] DB in a letter to Charles Henri Ford, 17 March 1934

nostalgic, backward-looking, an attempt to continue a movement that was, by definition, temporary and of a particular moment.

Nightwood itself is saturated with images of arrested development, regression, devolution, from the first description of Robin to the dolls she and Nora collect to Guido's sickliness and Catholicism. Heather Love argues that this backwardness is counter-intuitively endemic to the idea of modernity, especially in the early twentieth century. She asserts that,

> The idea of modernity—with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance—is intimately bound up with backwardness. The association of progress and regress is a function not only of the failure of so many of modernity's key projects but also of the reliance of the concept of modernity on excluded, denigrated, or superseded others (Love 5).

Modernism is bound up with backwardness both in its relentless need to differentiate itself from the bad past and in its perpetual failure to accomplish its own goals. Love ties modernist backwardness particularly to queer people who are, in this modernist moment, at once regarded as something new, the products of bourgeois decadence and "as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up ... Perverse, immature, sterile and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow also recall the past. They carry with them, as Djuna Barnes writes of her somnambulist heroine Robin Vote in *Nightwood*, 'the quality of the "way back"'" (Love 6).[16] Queer people in this formulation are non-modern, regressive, arrested, and all too modern: decadent, excessive and sterile in their degeneracy

[16] NB: Robin is, arguably, neither a somnambulist nor a heroine.

(logorrheic, perhaps?). Robin herself becomes emblematic of backward queer. It is significant that, in this moment in the novel, the reader does not yet know that Robin loves women. We only know that she is a woman, being seen through a man's—Felix's—eyes.

Nightwood dramatizes modernity's failure and degeneracy and, in many readers' views, is itself a failure as a modernist novel. They are quick to categorize it within that genre, sometimes favorably: one 2012 Goodreads user calls it "queer *Ulysses*"[17]—sometimes not. Another Goodreads user, Zach Gillan, quips in 2010, "I suggest that future printings of this book be given the subtitle 'I am a bourgeoisie, and I am in a cafe, and I am sad (because of love).'" Most readers bring at least some vague sense of modernism to their reading of *Nightwood.* This expectation provides a context for the book, even if that context is just an image of American writers sitting around in Paris cafes, drinking endless bottles of wine and wearing berets (as depicted in Woody Allen's 2011 film, *Midnight in Paris*). To some, this means that the novel should be good, or at least stylish, possibly strange and experimental. The modernist tag also situates *Nightwood* among "the classics," the heavy-hitters of twentieth-century literary canon. On the website Literary Manhattan, Eric Chase writes, "In my mind there are three seminal novels of the Lost Generation: Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes. … Comparatively, *The Sun Also Rises* & *The Great Gatsby* are safe novels" (Chase). Chase begins his campaign to convince us to read *Nightwood* by invoking two other modernist expatriate novels we

[17] Richard, Goodreads, 19 February 2012.

have probably read, and have definitely heard of. In addition to a broad chronological association, the three books share at least one theme: the not-totally-requited passion of main characters for a complicated woman. Chase then asserts that *Nightwood* distinguishes itself from *Sun* and *Gatsby* because it is less "safe." He goes on to explain that Barnes takes risks both in her direct portrayal of woman-woman relationships and in her prose style and form.

On Modernism and Its Difficulties II: Why Is This Book So Hard to Read?

In the final lines of his 1978 essay "On Difficulty," George Steiner asks whether difficulty will simply be the state of the art in literature after modernism: "It is, as yet, impossible to say whether the hermeticism of so much in the modernistic movements is a transient phenomenon or represents some ultimate break in the classic contract between word and world" (Steiner 47). Literature has always been difficult, Steiner suggests as he sets about categorizing difficulty. There is the kind that requires homework: "Homework: mountainous, and becoming more so as our twentieth-century brands of literacy recede from the vocabulary, from the grammars, from the grid of classical and biblical reference" (Steiner 26). Readers are increasingly dependent on footnotes in older works or, these days, on having an internet connection handy so they can access Wikipedia. Glosses of individual words and allusions only go so far, since confusion often comes simply from reading a text outside its historical or geographic context: "'Looking things up' does not stop because the context pertinent to a major poem or poetic text is that of a whole ambient culture, of the whole history of and in the language, of mental sets and idiosyncrasies in contemporary sensibility" (Steiner 26). Even on this level, *Nightwood* is difficult. If Barnes expects any single reader to understand even the surface of the novel (and her own writings suggest that she does), it is not enough for that reader to know about Paris in 1920s and Americans in the 1920s. She must also recall details of fifteenth century Roman anti-Semitism and medieval literature, casually read a sentence in French and German, intuitively understand Matthew's euphemisms for sex and penises, and

know the geographies of Paris and Vienna. The New Directions edition, the most widely available, contains no annotations.[18] The first bar to access for the casual reader or struggling student is just to understand the literal meaning of the words on the page.

Few twenty-first century readers, either on Goodreads or in literary journals, concern themselves overmuch with Barnes's dense allusions. Today's readers are most likely to express frustration with *Nightwood* because, on the most basic level, it is difficult to tell what is happening. Tyler Burton, writing on Goodreads in 2009, sighs, "Problem was: too much style, not enough substance. … Maybe I'm just not one for oblique turns of phrase anymore (god forbid); but personally I find it comforting to know at least something of what is going on line by line." When Burton complains about Barnes's emphasis on style over substance, he is not demanding the kind of nourishment Mark Van Doren requested of his novels. Burton just wants to know who the characters are, what the story is. Why is that so difficult?

Both Matthew and the narrator of *Nightwood* often speak figuratively, speculatively, assessing people using curious metrics and illustrating abstract ideas with bizarre metaphors. An obvious example of this comes in that famous first description of Robin Vote as "[a]n eland in a bridal veil." Even if you know what an eland is, Barnes is asking you imagine something quite strange, a combination you would probably never think of otherwise. And once you have the visual image, you must take it a step further: what does it mean about Robin? What does it mean to be "the infected carrier of the

[18] An annotated edition is available from the Dalkey Archive, edited by Cheryl Plumb and published as *Nightwood and Related Drafts.* That title is available only in hardcover, for a cover price almost twice that of the New Directions paperback.

past," and are we supposed to think of her this way, or to judge Felix negatively for doing so? And this difficulty is not limited to the narration. Steiner might diagnose the ponderous discourses between Matthew and his friends in *Nightwood* as a case of modernist "tactical difficulty," that is, intentional obfuscation in the service of unsettling readers' expectations, because "the authentic poet cannot make do with the infinitely shop-worn inventory of speech, with the necessarily devalued or counterfeit currency of the everyday" (Steiner 34). The poet must defamiliarize language, make it her own, in order to use it effectively. Poets find it imperative to make it immediately apparent that their work is not ordinary language, to set it apart from everyday forms of language. While Steiner distinguishes between poetry and prose, virtually every reader since T.S. Eliot has identified *Nightwood* as a novel for "sensibilities trained on poetry and many agree with Eliot's argument that we should read *Nightwood* as we read poetry, rather than expecting it to be a typical novel. Therefore, Steiner's theories apply to *Nightwood* more apparently than they might to another novel.

Writers' conscious construction of texts as singular aesthetic experiences, set apart from "real life" and spoken language, leads to what Steiner calls "contingent difficulty." This is the sort of difficulty that underscores the difference

> between surface-understanding paraphrase on the one hand, and penetrative comprehension on the other. … We have done our homework, the sinews of the poem are manifest to us; but we do not feel "called upon," or "answerable to," in both of which tags the primary bonds of interaction between the poem and its listener or reader are active. And it is just because this failure of summoning and response can lie wholly outside the categories of "liking" or "disliking: that it is not, or not only, a question of taste (Steiner 29).

Steiner cannot fully account for this difficulty that, "arise[s] from the obvious plurality and individuation which characterize world and word" (Steiner 33). It is intimately personal, this way texts have of interpellating readers. There is only so much work a reader can do. Wanting to understand or like a book is not enough. Steiner implies that only certain texts fit into this category due to some quality of the writing. I would argue that almost every work of literature calls upon and/or is answerable to some, not all, readers, and that writing itself is not the only factor in this failure of penetrative comprehension. The author-function and its attendant assumptions about genre, period, nationality, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. all combine with past reading experiences and readers' assumptions about themselves, both in a typical identity politics sense and in what kind of readers they imagine themselves to be, to make certain readers more open to seduction by certain texts. The context of reading itself may drastically change the valence of a text, as I discovered in my own reading of *Nightwood*. Reading a text for its historical significance can have a vastly different effect than reading for its personal significance.

The kinds of readers who seek out or stumble upon *Nightwood* today tend be aware that they are "supposed" to recognize difficulty as the mark of literature's merit. In 2007, Stephanie writes on Goodreads, "it gets four stars simply for existing as it does, and telling a story (though i'll admit, i had to work to get the story, moreso than i ever did with, say, the benjy section of faulkner) (sic)." Many readers who fail to comprehend *Nightwood* locate that failure in themselves rather than in Barnes. My friend Sheena wrote on Goodreads in 2008 that "you should read this book if you need to be reminded

that you are not nearly as smart as you think you are. (it took me FIVE years to read this book. that's all i'm saying.).” Rob writes in 2011, “There's a lot in this book that I just completely failed to grasp, and I think I need to return to it when I'm a better reader, but even I can appreciate the beauty here.” Others blame the book itself. Philip Lane writes in a 2012 Goodreads review: “Well perhaps I am just an ordinary novel-reader but I just found it too difficult to enjoy. I do feel any writer needs to take the reader into consideration and I am not quite sure what is the juatification (sic) for making meaning so obscure that only an elite group of academics or intellectuals can access it.”

The Story of the Wreck: A Received Reception History of *Nightwood*

Since its initial publication, *Nightwood*'s advocates and even its detractors have described the book as forgotten or ignored, underappreciated, misunderstood, although the book has been hiding in plain sight for most of the seventy-five-plus years since that publication. As we have seen, it was widely reviewed and read among the literati of its day. However, only a few scholars dared interpret it in depth in literary journals and critical monographs. The earliest critics of *Nightwood* read the text as modern and/or modernist (experimental?) literary writing, examining its formal and symbolic properties for their aesthetic meaning and value. In 1957, twenty years after the book's first printing and a decade after it was re-released by New Directions in its New Classics series, Walter Sutton introduces the novel as a "neglected masterpiece" (Sutton 113). Sutton revisits both *Nightwood* and one of its earliest scholarly critics, Joseph Frank, who in his 1945 essay "The Idea of Spatial Form," published in the *Sewanee Review*, analyzed Barnes's novel as a representative of the new "spatial form" in literature. Frank was one of the first literary scholars to really tackle *Nightwood*. He sees Barnes's novel as the perfect example of a modernist movement away from thinking of literature as a temporal form to seeing it as a spatial one. Frank argues that, while *Nightwood* "lacks a narrative structure in the ordinary sense," it "does have a pattern—a pattern arising from the spatial interweaving of images and phrases independently of any time-sequence … it carries the evolution of spatial form in the novel forward to a point where it is practically indistinguishable from modern poetry" (438, 456). Frank is more interested in form than in meaning, although he states that *Nightwood*'s central question is Robin: "Will any of

[the other characters] be able to give her a sense of identity—to raise her to the level of the human?" (441). The answer is ultimately no. The tragic doom he sees in the novel only increases Frank's admiration for Barnes's accomplishment. His unqualified enthusiasm for the book is unparalleled in any academic critical analysis until the 1990s, when, as we still see, Barnes is valorized for her alleged subversiveness. Frank describes *Nightwood* as a work of "compelling intensity, [of] head-and-shoulders superiority ... to most of the work that currently passes for literature" (Frank 434).

In 1962, Barnes's *Selected Works*, one volume that included the full text of *Nightwood*, was published by Farrar, Straus and Cudahy. This publication meant a flurry of press on "The Barnes," as she told reporters she liked to be called. One *Time* magazine reviewer summed up her literary reputation like this: "Djuna Barnes has long been the dark lady of the New Directions anthologies, and in the '30s, when difficult writers were in vogue, her shadowy short novel *Nightwood* won the loftiest of testimonials. Every earnest Lit. undergraduate read the New Classics edition, with its foreword by T. S. Eliot" ("Lost"). *Nightwood* is "difficult" and "shadowy," which this writer assumes makes it all the more appealing as an accessory denoting one's literary sensibility and high-minded taste. In the *Village Voice* review of Selected Works, Roger Shattuck makes a similar, though less judgmental claim: "In some circles just before World War II, you had to have read two underground novels to establish your literary culture: Nathanael West's 'Miss Lonelyhearts' and Djuna Barnes' 'Nightwood'" (Shattuck 10). Novelist John Hawkes, writing in the *Massachusetts Review* in the same year, elaborates on the similarity between Barnes and West, listing them along with Flannery O'Connor, as

inspirations. He writes, “these three disparate American writers may be said to come together in that rare climate of pure and immoral creation—are very nearly alone in their uses of wit, their comic treatments of violence and their extreme detachment,” and goes on to argue that, in their attention to the “meaningful psychic paradox” of the relationship between unconscious desires and external reality, Barnes, West and O'Connor serve “the true purpose of the novel” (Hawkes 786).

The widely read and highly influential critic Kenneth Burke devotes an entire chapter to the novel in his 1966 collection *Language as Symbolic Action*. He reads *Nightwood* as a modernist text, comparing Barnes to Faulkner and Joyce. Burke places *Nightwood* in the tradition of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which he calls the “Bible of Aestheticism.” That novel, he argues, makes the case for an aesthetic that “"'arrests' the reader, rather than moving him as either the 'pornographic or didactic' might do … closer to a Poetic than a Rhetoric” (Burke 241). Like Eliot before him, Burke reads *Nightwood*, like *Portrait of the Artist*, as poetic, not rhetorical. He “approach[es] the work as a set of devices ultimately designed to make lamentation a source of pleasure for the reader” (Burke 241). Burke's poetic reading entails an intense linguistic analysis of Barnes use of various “-verse” words: perversion, inversion, conversion. Of course, “verse” comes from the Latin for “turn,” so Burke also examines images of turning in the text to follow its “transcendence downward” (Burke 244). According to Philip Herring and others, Barnes found Burke's “misreading” so egregious that she refused to allow him to use direct quotations from *Nightwood* in the book version of this essay.

In 1975, Douglas Messerli published a book-length bibliography on Barnes. Messerli introduces the text by writing that “I see this bibliography … not as another attempt at 'rediscovery,' but as a statement of Barnes' great artistry. For what Djuna Barnes has written is in one sense 'undiscoverable'” (xvi). Messerli suggests that Barnes is, in fact, being rediscovered with some regularity, as his bibliography demonstrates. However, he also describes Barnes as a “shadowy figure,” and “a legend who is unknown” (xiv). He contrasts Barnes's early notoriety among expatriate writers with her current reception or lack thereof: “Janet Flanner's 1972 assessment of Barnes as the most important woman writer in Paris in the 1920's is strangely incongruous with the fact that, even in universities, few have ever heard of Djuna Barnes or know anything of her rich career” (xiv).

By the early seventies, academic silence was changing rapidly as radical professors began expanding their canon. Writing in *College English* in 1971 and 1974, respectively, Elaine Showalter and Ron Schreiber share their syllabi for women's and gay literature courses that include *Nightwood*. Both instructors state that these courses are necessary because their students do not see themselves represented in traditional humanities curricula. Showalter's course is taken by women only, while Shreiber's, at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, ends up serving the multiple purposes of educating gay and lesbian students about gay and lesbian history and providing a safe space for these students to be openly gay, while exposing straight students to gay literature and gay people in an explicitly gay context. Both courses take their inspiration from feminist consciousness-raising groups, recognizing the academic uses of personal identity,

personal narrative and subjective response to culture or, as Showalter and Schreiber might put it, recognizing that identity politics and subjective response have hitherto gone unacknowledged in the supposedly objective university. As we have already seen, perhaps the one demographic for whom Barnes was already a household name by the 1970s was lesbians like Bertha Harris, reading outside of universities.

The most important Barnes-related publication of the 1980s was probably Andrew Field's *Djuna: The Formidable Miss Barnes* (1985). Field was one of a handful of young men who befriended Barnes during her last years—when, according to legend, she was rejecting lesbian admirers like Bertha Harris. Field attempts to write the first Barnes biography based on his own experiences, interviews with Barnes's acquaintances, and some archival documents. Surveying her strange career, Field contends that Nightwood is "still a novel known to all serious writers and poets [that] eventually achieved the considerable distinction of managing to stay in print for nearly fifty years as a result of a small but steady cult demand of several thousand copies a year" (Field 20).

In 1991, the definitive critical collection on Barnes arrived: *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, edited by Mary Lynn Broe. *Silence and Power* contains many of the most famous feminist critical statements on Barnes as well as reminiscences from several of Barnes's friends, excerpts from her letters, and images of her artwork. In her introduction, Broe asks, "Who was this 'famous unknown' whose cultural portrait is so legendary, yet whose place in literature has been until recent years a long ellipsis?" (Broe 3) and contends that Nightwood "had been canonized as the emblematic male modernist text" (Broe 7). What she means by this is not entirely clear, but what is clear is

that Broe and her fellow critics intend this volume as a corrective, with their "reevaluation" working in Barnes's favor. They imagine themselves as feminist knights, (posthumously) rescuing a damsel in distress. Broe continues, arguing that

> much contemporary criticism still privileges Barnes' production of writing over her radical sociopolitical views. … For more than fifty years since the appearance of *Nightwood*, personal legends coupled with an impoverished critical representation have fixed an obsolete image of Djuna Barnes, praising her for a limited but influential role in modern letters. Early notoriety, forty years as a recluse, a scrappy publication history, and reduction to either stylistics or canonical echoes by the literary world (Broe 7-8).

Like many other feminist critics, Broe is especially impressed by Jane Marcus's essay, "Laughing at Leviticus" (more on that piece below). Broe writes of that essay that "Marcus challenges any residual notion of *Nightwood* as a lesbian cult novel or as a text of high (male) modernism. Instead, she reads it as a powerfully antifascist text" (Broe 19). While it is important to these 1990s critics that we situate Barnes within a lesbian context, it is also crucial that the text have a more general—while still radical and leftist—political message. This leftist recuperation may be particularly important since *Nightwood* is often paired in critical analyses with that other lesbian touchstone, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall. Although much beloved by lesbian readers, Hall's novel is closely associated with upper-class British aristocracy, medicalized homosexuality (while Barnes is introduced by T.S. Eliot, *The Well of Loneliness* begins with a blurb by sexologist Havelock Ellis, the major theorist of "inversion") and a more conservative

political bent.[19] Barnes offers at least the possibility of something different, although as we have seen, today's readers often find the "decadence" and seemingly aristocratic positioning of *Nightwood*'s characters equally off-putting, and those who know a bit of Barnes's biography will know that the novel's writing was bankrolled largely by Peggy Guggenheim, which is why she dedicates the book to Guggenheim.

In 1995, Phillip Herring published what he hoped would be the definitive Barnes biography, drawn largely from her archive at the University of Maryland. Herring is a literature professor who added Barnes to his syllabus in an attempt at canon expansion, "when, in 1988, I was looking for more novels by women for my Modernism course. I wanted to teach *Nightwood* but felt frustrated by my futile attempts to understand it; before I could understand the novel, I believed, I had to understand Djuna Barnes. … The writing of this biography thus springs from my own ignorance and confusion" (Herring xv-xvi). Herring consciously writes against the existing secondary sources on Barnes. Without naming other critics and biographers directly, though he does include them in his archive, Herring dismisses Field's biography as "disorganized, incomplete, and conceptually flawed" and obliquely addresses *Silence and Power* when he argues that, "[i]n view of the Barnesean politics being generally offered, I was unable to account for her brilliantly satirical description, which seemed to have as its objective its own brilliance rather than the subversive strategies for which Barnes was becoming famous"

[19] Although I haven't researched this in depth, Heather Love states that Hall flirted with fascism in her later life.

(Herring xvi). Herring grasps, perhaps futilely, for an unmediated Barnes.[20] Like many readers have over the years, he distinguishes himself from other readers by his ability to pick up Barnes's humor.

In each of these biographical, bibliographical, pedagogical, and critical interventions, readers are invested in the idea of rediscovery and/or recovery. They seek to bring Barnes to a wider, younger audience or to rescue her from the errors of other readers. This discourse has recurred in every decade since the novel's publication, albeit more slowly in the '40s and '50s, which suggests that, however much critics like to think of themselves as saving an author from obscurity, they recontextualize more than they rediscover.

Like professional critics, today's lay readers still fret about erroneous readings, particularly the limitations of identity politics and a minoritarian canon. Eric Chase of the website Literary Manhattan laments of *Nightwood* that "[r]egrettably once you begin mentioning cross dressing and homosexuality it is easy for a novel to be instantly compartmentalized, to be shuffled away to the LGBT section of the library, once a dark and dusty corner of the basement—anyone daring to explore these offensive tomes is eyed with suspicion and disdain." (Chase). A 2007 Goodreads user named jesse shares Chase's sentiments: "this book has the worst description attached to it ever. screw TS Eliot & lesbian literature: the book is just crazy awesome without any qualifiers or

[20] Although he expresses his own strong opinions. He and some of the feminist critics have a brief debate in *New York Times* letters to the editor over whether or not Barnes was definitely sexually abused by her father. Many of the essays in *Silence and Power* take this as a given, basing their belief in the implications of Barnes's novel *Ryder*, while Herring takes Barnes at her word that her father simply married the teenage Barnes, maybe against her will, to a friend his own age.

canonical approvals needed." Both these readers agree that the novel is more than the sum of its parts. Chase prophesies that "In 20 years I suspect that *Nightwood* will be more commonly read, taught and appreciated by a wider audience. I challenge you to become one of the readers to help bring it back to the prominence it greatly deserves" (Chase).

One of Us: Feminists, Lesbians and Djuna

Although *Nightwood*'s difficulties are legendary, many mid- to late-twentieth century readers have still eagerly sought the novel out for what they hope will be its verisimilitude. Critics since the 1970s have focused on the novel's insightful representation of gender and sexuality. Many of these critics come to the novel as lesbians seeking their own representation, excavating a lesbian and/or female literary history that has been largely ignored by the stewards of canon. They imagine *Nightwood* as a document revealing not only the hidden world of 1920s and '30s lesbian life in Paris, but also a representation of a more or less transhistorical lesbian subject. Some contend that the novel's homosexual content provides a key to interpreting its codes. Annette Kolodny argues in 1975 that *Nightwood* might be considered a seminal feminist novel because its defamiliarizing, surreal prose presages similar confusion in novels by Margaret Atwood and others. Kolodny writes

> [I]ronically, *Nightwood* is a novel which probably places its readers in precisely that situation in which the main characters of more recent women's fiction find themselves: that is, embroiled in the hopeless task of trying to decode or decipher a strange and incomprehensible reality. More and more, women writers are presenting us with female protagonists who experience the world as an immense hieroglyph, needing to be deciphered-but offering little in the way of clues or coherent patterns (Kolodny 82).

Some of today's readers account for Barnes's difficulties in a similar way. Keith Michael writes in his 2010 Goodreads review that

> [T]he novel builds up this oppressive atmosphere where men are omnipresent … all of this creates a deafening noise around Nora & Robin's relationship … Barnes keeps the reader off-balance throughout … . in every positive sense, this is certainly a woman's text; it completely lacks the linearity and rationalism and

> aggression of a man's approach to writing. it's clever and prismatic, a truly indescribable reading experience (sic).

As a woman writer representing "inverted" love and other kinds of outsiderness, Barnes recognizes within *Nightwood* the failure of existing history and language to account for her characters. Of her wandering Jew, she writes, "From the mingled passions that made up his past, out of a diversity of bloods, from the crux of a thousand impossible situations, Felix had become the accumulated and the single—the embarrassed" (11). Speaking of both male and female inverts and those who love them, Matthew says to Nora, "What do they find then, that this lover has committed the unpardonable error of not being able to exist—and they come down with a dummy in their arms … And it's the same with girls … those who turn the day into night … . The light does not become them any longer. They begin to have an unrecorded look" (100-1). In her fascination with the distinction between history and legend, the singularity of the individual versus the totality of culture, Barnes constructs a perfect text for future critics interested in marginalized and oppositional literatures as well as in decoding an opaque, decadent text.

Some feminist critics were not interested in recuperating or re-evaluating *Nightwood* precisely because of its opacity and decadence. Although they felt obligated to mention the novel in their surveys of lesbian representations and women writers, Jane Rule in *Lesbian Images* (1976) and Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1977) decree the book "pretentious and embarrassing" (Rule 192) and "no longer ... so impressive a work" (Moers 108). Rule registers the "decadence" issue, at once activating its class and generic connotations, writing that, "There is no mystery about why it should have found

acceptance, for its decadent elegance removes it far from ordinary experience." (Rule 191). Both Rule and Moers recognize *Nightwood* as significant in its moment, but they do not see a place for it in their present-day canon construction projects. For them, *Nightwood* is not a representative but an outlier.

As second-wave and/or lesbian feminism grew, more and more women began to imagine themselves as part of a community of women and/or lesbians with a history and culture distinct from the male-dominated narratives they had been taught in school and by the mainstream media. As Meese puts it, looking back in 1992, in order to imagine how to be a woman, a lesbian, "I need a long catalogue of women's names … My history, finally invented. A lesbian genealogy" (Meese 46). By the early 1970s, feminist bookstores appeared in most major U.S. cities, and readers could order books from them through the mail from catalogues like First Things First, available in the feminist magazine *Off Our Backs*, which advertised *Nightwood* as a "Classic Lesbian novel. Very sophisticated language." Seeking a mirror for their own ordinary experience, women came to *Nightwood*. Even if it was not quite what they expected, the book represented something important to young mid-twentieth century lesbian writers like Bertha Harris, who we met earlier, and Lee Lynch. Lynch also visited Barnes's Greenwich Village doorstep. In her 1990 essay "Cruising the Libraries," Lynch explains why Nightwood is important to her, even if it is not her story:

> Although her lesbians were remote to me … as distant in terms of class as Radclyffe Hall's—Barnes's writing was brilliant. If I couldn't imagine knowing her characters, or creating a world like hers when I became a writer, I could at least dream, in adolescence, of writing as poetically. Though Barnes was later to

> deny her lesbian sexuality, at least I had someone to idolize when it counted (Lynch 45).

Even if Barnes did not consider herself a lesbian (as I'll argue below, what she denied was lesbian *identity* rather than "lesbian sexuality"), she artistically depicted lesbian experience in way that inspired Lynch, made her feel that her experience was valuable, worth putting down on paper. For her, Barnes's text has a personal and stylistic value even if it doesn't work as a historical document.

Harris acknowledges the class issues that Lynch registers, but her utopian sense of universal lesbian identity ultimately overrides any distinction of class or nation:

> I was poor and grubby; naïve, emotional, sweaty with lowerclass (sic) need ... and my ancestors, I learned, as I read my censored history, were rich or nearly rich ... our family bloodline, the common identity among us, would always be nothing more, nothing less, than our common need for the word of consequence: will always be my acknowledgement of these women, despite all material difference between us, as my first ancestors, the women my father stole from me. Like every other dyke with a book in her hand, I know that these are the women our fathers stole us from. Know thy women: know thyself; and the miracle of changeling into hero is accomplished. They were American and English and French but mostly American but with the father's nationality in effect wiped out by the more profound nationality of their lesbianism (Harris 78-79).

To both Harris and Lynch, Barnes's and *Nightwood*'s lesbian-ness are obvious upon first reading. Other bibliographers were more specific in defining lesbian authors and lesbian texts. Jeanette Foster, in *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956), mentioned above, is most interested not in sexuality per se, but in affective bonds between women. She writes, "This study is concerned with certain types of emotional reaction among women as these appear in literature. Its primary aim is neither psychiatric nor critical … Its purpose is to trace historically the quantity and temper of imaginative writing on its

chosen subject from earliest times to the present day, on the assumption that what has been written and read for pleasure is a fair index of popular interest and social attitude from one century to another" (Foster 11). Foster hopes to trace women's ambiguously erotic but certainly emotional relationships, without the assumption that all the writers or texts she analyzes are self-consciously lesbian or that "sex variance" in itself is a psychological condition or a political orientation. Foster's concern is to locate lesbian emotional orientation in history in order to increase visibility and public understanding of woman-loving women, and she needs imaginative literature to do it, because, she suggests, traditional historiography and sexology have not documented these relationships or attitudes toward them in realistic or useful ways.

A few decades later, the prevailing sentiment was that, while some romantic friendships might mask lesbian tendencies, for an author to be considered lesbian, some sexual and political components, some consciousness of one's lesbian identity, must be present. Catharine Stimpson states this explicitly in her 1981 essay "Zero-Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English:"

> My definition of the lesbian—as writer, as character, and as reader—will be conservative and severely literal. She is a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying. Of course a lesbian is more than her body ... but lesbianism partakes of the body ... . That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy with homosexuals and from affectionate friendships ... . Lesbianism represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast, and bone (Stimpson 364).

Even if Barnes disavowed her lesbian identity on the surface, she somehow fits into both Foster's and Stimpson's rubrics. Both list *Nightwood* as one of the "richer" lesbian novels of the modernist period, and read the book as a poetic novel grappling with Otherness and

inversion. However, both suggest that *Nightwood* is not accessible to everyone. Foster contends that ultimately “Miss Barnes' work is intelligible without a key, her kinship being perhaps closer with T.S. Eliot [than with Stein or Joyce]” (Foster 317). The book is not for everyone, but you can read this if you understand modernism and distinguish between poetry and prose as Eliot himself suggested you should. Stimpson, like biographer Herring, counts herself among those initiates who recognize *Nightwood*'s dark humor: “It is a satire, often elaborate, even grotesque and baroque, that ultimately adorns rather than mutilates its subject” (Stimpson 378).

Understandably, *Nightwood* particularly frustrates many readers who come to it expecting liberation or validation. Not only is it a dense, confusing text, but also readers are hard-pressed to find anything unequivocally empowering or uplifting about it. When it comes to identity politics, experimentation and irony only confuse things. Lillian Faderman writes in a 1981 history of lesbian literature that *Nightwood* reifies outdated stereotypes: “The nineteenth-century views of lesbian narcissism and frustration are delivered up whole here” (qtd. in Meese, 44). Faderman includes a long excerpt from *Nightwood* in her exhaustive 1994 lesbian-lit anthology *Chloe Plus Olivia*. The book is divided into thematic sections organized to tell a teleological narrative about how Western Society has moved from discourses of romantic friendship and inversion to the “Amazons” of lesbian feminism and the “Flowerings” of the present day. Faderman places Barnes in the middle, in the “Carnivorous Flowers” section, which she defines as “the literature of exotic and evil lesbians,” texts in which “inevitably, the lesbian's wicked ways destroy not only others but herself also” (Faderman xiii, 297). Like Moers and Rule

in earlier decades, Faderman includes *Nightwood* in her canon not as a good example but as a cautionary tale, as an example of the bad old representation that is finally being redressed in the 1990s. For Faderman, texts like Barnes's bear witness to the existence of lesbians in the past and to the preferability of the present.

While these allegations may be justified, it's not so clear in the end that Barnes is representing the stereotype of the tragic lesbian. Faderman's criticism refers mostly to *Nightwood*'s tone, as embodied in the Nora-Matthew dialogues. In terms of plot and character, the novel is less dark. Barnes's woman-loving women survive the novel more or less intact (and not one of them ends up married to a man). Nora and Robin may be melancholy, but no more so than anyone else in *Nightwood*. So they end up heartbroken? So do Jake Barnes and Jay Gatsby. In her preface, Winterson argues that although “It is a bleak picture of love between women ... *Nightwood* has neither stereotypes nor caricatures; there is a truth to these damaged hearts that moves us beyond the negative” (Winterson, preface xi-xii). The idea of realness (not necessarily being realistic, but certainly being authentic) is, for many readers, the primary factor in deciding whether *Nightwood* is a negative representation, a bad memory to get beyond, or an important text to keep on the lesbian bookshelf.

Barnes's most problematic quality, outside of her negativity, for these lesbian critics, is *Nightwood*'s lack of overt or coherent politics. Lesbianism (or a broader queerness) as a political identity can certainly be read into the novel, but nowhere in the book does Barnes deliberately express a political message. The simple fact that Barnes is a woman, and a woman writing about same-sex romance, means that she is automatically

lumped in with feminists, to the degree that Henry Raymont can casually refer to Barnes in the *New York Tim*es in 1971 as “an author who was a feminist and a rebel against Puritanism before Kate Millett and Germaine Greer were born” (Raymont). For lesbian feminist critics, particularly, it was imperative that *Nightwood* be read as foregrounding issues of gender and sexuality in order to it fit into the lesbian/feminist archive. “Lesbian” for these critics stands in for “lesbian feminist,” a label that describes an oppositional political position and not just the sexual and emotional happenstance of loving other women (Meese 46). Readers should note that Barnes herself might have identified with this latter category.

Although she was open about her relationships with women and her place in Natalie Barney's social circle in Paris, and her most famous works (*Nightwood* and *Ladies Almanack*) unequivocally reflect this comfort, Barnes refused to label herself, famously stating, “I am not a lesbian, I just loved Thelma” (Martins 108). This line is quoted in nearly every piece of scholarship written about Barnes since the 1990s, whether critics deploy it as an expression of Barnes's repression and shame or of her radical queerness and her refusal to accept existing identity categories and labels. Was Djuna Barnes “really” queer? Was she “really” “a lesbian”? Did she use these words? She used “invert,” but not with pride. At some moments, she suggests that her discomfort is more about public identification than anything else. In her letters to Charles Henri Ford in the mid-1930s, Barnes worries that her drafts of *Nightwood* are too “invert” for a major publisher, but shows no intention of censoring the text. After the book's publication, she writes to Lady Ottoline Morrell in a letter dated 12 November 1936: “I was not offended

in the least to be thought lesbian—it's simply that I am very reticent about my personal life, a little English perhaps."[21] Barnes loved and slept with men (several of whom she and they identified as "homosexuals") and women in nearly equal numbers, as far we know, at least in her younger years. As Herring puts it, "When she arrived in Paris in the early twenties, she told her friend the poet Mina Loy that she had had nineteen lovers, and that women were better in bed than men" (Herring 74). So perhaps she was simply being honest in her refusal of lesbian identity: bisexual might be a more accurate descriptor. There is a tendency within gay and lesbian criticism to assume that authors and historical figures who express homosexual desire or who can be proven to have had same-sex relationships must "really" be gay, and if they still maintained some degree of heterosexuality or heteronormativity, they do so because they are embedded in heterosexist ideology. Bisexuality (and/or pansexuality) may be a practice, but it is not an identity. Which might be more like the way Barnes imagined her own sexuality, not as a "tribal allegiance" or a "social identity" but just as something she did (Doughty 149). By stating that she is "not a lesbian" even as she writes powerfully of love between women, Barnes struggles to maintain control over her own image and to define herself as a serious writer like Joyce and Eliot rather than as a curiosity defined by her inverted sexuality.

This is not to say that queer readers should not claim Barnes, even if, in her lifetime, Barnes might not have wanted to be claimed, but it is to say, as Heather Love does of Willa Cather, that "she is 'one of ours' but she is not our own" (Love 25). As we

[21]Barnes's Anglophilia was perhaps not an affectation, since her mother was English.

read queer canon, we must remember to ask, along with Love, “'Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?' or even, perhaps, 'What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?'” (Love 31) and with Carolyn Dinshaw, “How can we know them [these objects of queer history]? And thinking we know them, what do we know?” (Dinshaw 12). For lesbian readers like Lynch and Harris, knowing that a woman wrote a weird, poetic novel about her love for another woman in the 1930s was revolutionary enough. Her existence proves there is a place for them, a model, that they are not crazy or sick. Validation can be complex, can originate in the reader's need as much as in the text itself. To return to Steiner's terms, texts call out to readers, but readers also call out to texts.

When Lesbians Get Queer: Post-* Readings of *Nightwood*

Within the context of the "linguistic turn" in theory and the rise of Queer Studies and/or Gender Studies as opposed to Gay and Lesbian Studies and/or Women's Studies, Barnes does not seem so strange. The critics of the 1980s and '90s eagerly rehabilitated *Nightwood* in part because it *is* difficult. With its dense verbiage, arcane allusions, its queer and otherwise marginalized characters, its gender play and its intense emotional tone, *Nightwood* has proven a tantalizing, nearly inexhaustible playground for the poststructuralist, deconstructionist and psychoanalytic methodologies favored by late-twentieth century queer and feminist critics. Jan Hokenson, Teresa de Lauretis, Jane Marcus, Judith Lee and Elizabeth Meese each argue that *Nightwood* dramatizes something about subject formation, whether it is the instability or alterity of the subject, and its relation to language. All these critics contend, in one way or another, that to read this novel is to recognize reading as destabilizing the subject and unhinging identity. It forces readers to relinquish preconceptions and experience defamiliarization.

In her 1988 essay "The Pronouns of Gomorrha (sic): A Lesbian Prose Tradition," Jan Hokenson situates Barnes among everybody's favorite literary modernist queer women—Woolf and Stein—to argue that these authors, along with Barnes and Colette, deploy modernism in specific ways to strategically encode their queerness. Hokenson contends that she considers these authors together not because of their sexual orientation, rather because they "resemble one another as genre anarchists far more than they resemble their male counterparts working in the same genres" (Hokenson 62). Regardless of their personal identification, these writers all write queer texts: non-linear,

experimental texts that go against the rules of language and narrative (like logorrhea). Queer texts require queer readings that go against the grain of conventional interpretation to discover their coded messages.

In her 1988 essay, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," Teresa de Lauretis acknowledges the importance of *Nightwood* in the lesbian canon. De Lauretis sees the novel as emblematic of the problem of lesbian representation, explaining its complexity as Barnes's howl of "resistance to what *Nightwood* both thematizes and demonstrates, the failure of language to represent, grasp, convey her subjects" (160). According to de Lauretis, Barnes uses language to show that language cannot describe what she is trying to describe: the previously untold tale of lesbian desire. In doing so, *Nightwood* reveals the failures of language to represent more generally.

Jane Marcus and Judith Lee provide the fullest analysis of *Nightwood* in *Silence and Power*. Like de Lauretis, Marcus and Lee argue that Barnes foregrounds difference, although they take this premise in divergent directions. In "Laughing at Leviticus," one of the most often cited essays on the novel, Marcus reads *Nightwood* as an overtly political, antifascist text. Modeling her analysis on Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais, she argues that *Nightwood* draws on the French tradition of ribald, carnivalesque, subversive literature. Like many critics before her, Marcus suggests that *Nightwood*'s broad readership does not recognize the humor in it. Marcus focuses on the image of the tattooed black circus performer Nikka as an image of Barnes's criticism of Levitical prohibitions against writing on the body, which prohibitions she sees as a form of gender policing. In its radical hybridity, exemplified by Nikka and the queer characters,

Nightwood challenges Leviticus, and in doing so, challenges the ethics of separation at the heart of Hitler's fascism. She synthesizes this critique with Barnes's parody of psychoanalysis to contend that *Nightwood* levels a charge against these master narratives and thus against all civilizing, normalizing forces, which Barnes figures as "inhumane." Marcus concludes that, "*Nightwood* reminds us that the human condition is a sister- and brotherhood of difference, and that ideologies that seek to erase those differences and define only themselves as human are indescribably dangerous" (250). This reading is well founded and plausible, but Marcus's certainty about the focus of Barnes's critique gives me pause. Marcus, like Stimpson, takes for granted that lesbianism is inherently a political identity, and that any writer representing marginalized characters must have some polemic intent. While Barnes foregrounds the historical, racialized nature of Guido Sr.'s melancholy, Nora's pain comes from a kind of heartbreak that is to some degree universal. Nora laments, "Love is death, come upon with passion; I know that is why love is wisdom. I love her as one condemned to it;" "I can't live without my heart!" (146,165). Nora's angst isn't overtly based in angst over her identity, although it may include her concerns about sexual difference. She asserts that loving women is a special kind of pain because, "A man is another person—a woman is yourself … on her mouth you kiss your own" (152). These characters' otherness is, however, emphasized by the other parts of the novel: Felix's rootless Jewishness, the gender ambiguity of the circus performers, and the detailed description of Nikka's tattooed body. The convergence of these various others suggests that Barnes was concerned with marginalization and outsiderness—this is obvious to almost anyone who read *Nightwood*. Must queer characters (and Jews) always

represent all marginalized people? Or is Barnes trying to suggest something universal about Otherness: that these eccentric others who wear their differences on their skins are just externalizing the internal experience of the human condition, whatever it is that makes Winterson say “we are all introverts”?

In “The Sweetest Lie,” also in *Silence and Power*, Judith Lee argues that *Nightwood* “exposes the inadequacy of our cultural myths” by troubling the (Freudian) narrative of sexual difference as the fundamental experience of difference (208). Barnes deconstructs sexual difference, Lee contends, “because it does not define the most fundamental experience of difference: the difference between the identity one imagines (the self as Subject) and the identity one experiences in relationship with someone else (the self as Other),” which she says Barnes defines as both mother/child and the relationship between lovers (208). Thus, unlike both Freudian psychoanalysis and assimilationist minority literatures, *Nightwood* describes the struggle not “to overcome difference to the struggle to establish difference” (Lee 212). While Lee sees a lot of promise in this trajectory, she is not satisfied by the novel's conclusion. It ends “with Robin's silence replacing Matthew's speech and her lack of differentiation prevailing despite his experience of separation” and so, according to Lee,

> Barnes completes her story with a scene that represents Matthew's final vision of “nothing but wrath and weeping” ... . She exposes the failure of values embedded in the masculine, and yet she does not counter that failure, for she denies that her “feminine” text has meaning beyond itself ... . Nightwood is designed to thwart interpretation, to resist becoming in the reader's mind something other than what Barnes wants it to be ... it remains a virtuoso performance that denies, in the end, the possibility of giving voice to (feminine) silence (Lee 217).

Here Lee makes a move that seems irresistible to critics of Djuna Barnes: she demands a moral, a message. Lee, unlike many others, admits that Barnes has thwarted her in this. The text refuses to provide an obvious hero, role model or a model for political change, utopian romance or self-actualization. Although Lee finds this disappointment more interesting than many critics have, she suggests like many that *Nightwood* is a "virtuoso performance" without a "meaning beyond itself," that the novel's difficulty is intended to draw attention to that performance itself without offering the reader anything in return. Lee implies that the experience of reading *Nightwood* is dominated by the implied author, since the reader's attention is constantly drawn back to the writing itself.

If symptomatic readings like Marcus's and Lee's are useful, they are useful as an excavation of the unintended meanings embedded within a text, the unspoken assumptions and anxieties that underlie the acts of writing (and reading), the shared concerns it activates or subtle influences it might have transmitted over time. These are effects we can only speculate upon. What is the use of readings like Marcus's that suggest that *Nightwood* is a subversive text if no reader has consciously recognized its subversiveness until over a half century after its initial publication, and only in a highly theoretical academic setting, focused on literary, not personal, history and significance? Or can we count readings like Harris's and Lynch's as essentially saying the same thing as Marcus, but in more personal, experiential terms? Literary criticism and theory like Marcus's suggests, to me, that these texts, like the fiction they analyze, imagine themselves to have an almost homeopathic, trickle-down effect, a far-off echo, if they

find any resonance outside academic enclaves (perhaps the nano-effect Winterson was talking about).

Elizabeth A. Meese, in her 1992 monograph *(Sem)erotics*, argues that a writer like Barnes does not want to make a *political* difference, but a “textual” one. Barnes is an ideal subject for an experimental critic like Meese, who writes what she describes as “erotic criticism ... rather than critical eroticism,” interspersed with love letters and autobiographical asides, foregrounding her own lesbian identity and her affective identification with the writers she studies (51). Theoretically, Meese seeks to explore the possibility of making “criticism that is about textual relations rather than 'meaning'” (51). She is not fazed by her confusion with *Nightwood*, she is excited by it: “Once I understand it, it seems, the textual relation will no longer be new. What is it ... that exposes the terror? Therein lies the brilliance of Djuna Barnes. She writes what we had never known we felt before. She faces it down. And lives” (52). Meese's most focused analysis applies to the representation of Robin, particularly at the end of the novel. *Nightwood*'s final chapter title, “The Possessed,” Meese argues, describes Robin's possession of her*self*. Her beastliness is the mark of her unintelligibility, even to Nora, and it allows for imaginative play rather than reifying a concrete identity. Meese finds this exciting, writing that “such a characterization of Robin leaves the issue of lesbian representation open ... Only 'becoming' lesbian rather than 'being' lesbian, written in a grammar terrifying to those, like Nora, who need to know or believe they do” (61). This terrifying grammar, Steiner's contingent difficulty, is necessary to prevent meaning and identity from getting fixed, being rather than perpetually becoming. Thus in Meese's

reading, *Nightwood* must privilege style over substance, image over meaning, even as it calls out to readers, particularly lesbian ones, and invites them to know what they had never known they felt. A paradox is the only way Meese can account for the simultaneous terror and recognition she feels when she reads the novel, the sense that meaning and identity are perpetually deferred within its pages.

Twenty years after "Sexual Indifference," Teresa de Lauretis returns to *Nightwood* to similarly advocate the novel's open-endedness and the de-mastering[22] reading practice it requires. In "*Nightwood* and the Terror of Uncertain Signs," de Lauretis fleshes out her reading, and concludes that the novel represents not specifically lesbian sexuality, but sexuality in the abstract. She is forthcoming about her own initial resistance to *Nightwood*, articulating her frustration in poststructuralist terms:

> I approached this text several times over the years, but it was not until I read Barthes that I understood why I could not go on reading *Nightwood*: the narrative anchorage eluded me, was too weak or too dispersed; the chain of signifiers would not halt, would not find a resting point where meaning could temporarily congeal. And it was not until I read de Man that I could let myself sustain the traumatic process of misreading—not looking for the plot that is, for narrative or referential meaning, but going instead with the figural movement of the text and acquiescing to the otherness in it, the 'inhuman' element in language (118).

In her description of *Nightwood* as "figural movement," de Lauretis echoes Felix's description of Robin in "Where the Tree Falls." He tells the doctor, "I find that I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time. I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties" (119). De Lauretis finds a language to describe and explain *Nightwood*'s images in the terminology of

[22]I take the term de-mastery from Sandra K. Soto's book *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-mastery of Desire* (2010).

psychoanalysis. She contends that both “night” and Robin personify not a specific kind of sexuality, but sexuality as a “drive,” a force unattached to objects or bodies, as a “traumatic, unmanageable excess of affect leading to abject degradation” (de Lauretis, “*Nightwood*” 120). De Lauretis uses similar diction to describe this drive and her experience reading *Nightwood*.

This chaotic center necessitates the novel's impenetrable, meandering style. It can only circle around and stab at its meaning. De Lauretis focuses on the moments where Robin interacts with animals—the lioness at the circus, the dog at the end—as “expressive less of conscious emotions than of intensities of affect ... entirely outside the symbolic and imaginary registers” (126). In other words, these images are written to convey an emotional charge even though they cannot be explained. Why does the lioness cause Robin to leave the circus with Nora? What is going on with the dog in the final scene? These are questions that cannot be answered in words. Although some would argue that the novel has its own symbolic language, for de Lauretis, it is a series of intentionally disconnected, diffuse images that do not cohere, that have no internal logic but deploy a similar charge. Reading in this way, de Lauretis mimics Nora's “reading” of the opera in *Nightwood*:

> in her eyes ... that mirrorless look of polished metals which report *not so much the object as the movement of the object*. As the surface of a gun's barrel, reflecting a scene, will add to the image the portent of its construction, so her eyes contracted and fortified the play before her *in her own unconscious terms* (57, my emphasis).

While her Freudian framework is limiting, and she clings to the reductive belief that *Nightwood* must represent one specific idea, de Lauretis outlines a productively

idiosyncratic reading practice that accounts for the peculiar structure and difficulty of Barnes's text, a difficulty most critics elide. In order to really read the novel, de Lauretis must relinquish her expectations for lesbian texts and her image of herself as a good reader who can master any text. She must admit to the readers of *Critical Inquiry* that she really didn't know what she was talking about in her earlier published criticism on *Nightwood*, and she must surrender to "traumatic misreading." But she needs other readers, other critics, to help her do this. She needs to read the same text in a new context.

A few lay readers share de Lauretis's feeling that the proper way to read *Nightwood* is to drop your expectations and surrender to it. Jamie begins her 2010 Goodreads review,

> Can't quite speak to why I loved this book. The reviews on here don't appear too kind; likewise, my classmates were befuddled and frustrated by Nightwood. Admittedly, it's sort of amusing to watch a group of budding-scholars with the arrogance to believe they can dissect any text ... encounter one that leaves them cross-eyed and faint. Which isn't to say that I wasn't often confused, but that when I realized it was pointless to try and 'answer' what this novel was trying to articulate, I decided to sit back and enjoy the ride.

As Jamie observes, *Nightwood* makes palpable the gulf between fiction and criticism, between different kinds of reading. There are certain things novels can do or say that criticism cannot. Barnes seems to have taken to heart the dictum of "art for art's sake." Literature *must* do something that more evidence-based genres cannot. It must draw attention to or somehow engage the idea of itself as subjective, expressive, affective. In doing so, it can question the possibility of "understanding." It can work as the "holy spoon," the ritual performance that mixes individual emotions with legend.

A Holy Spoon II: My Own Readings of *Nightwood*

And so we come back to Matthew's formulation of history, legend and story. He suggests that to hear is to interpret, to mix the priest's story with anonymous, collective legend and our own singular meditations. Legend and meditation are intertwined, symbiotic, mutually constitutive, but the resulting story is individual. Even within one mind, both legend and meditation mutate and flow, never the same from moment to moment, sometimes barely conscious. A thought may appear suddenly, as it does to Nora when she bursts in on Matthew in drag: “'God, children know something they can't tell; they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed!' But this thought, which [is] only the sensation of a thought, [is] of but a second's duration” (85). Although Nora has come to Matthew concerned about Robin's waking nights, he gets to the root of her problem in his description of sleep as the secret country of the individual:

> The sleeper is the proprietor of an unknown land. He goes about another business in the dark—and we, his partners, who go to the opera, who listen to gossip of cafe friends, who walk along the boulevards, or sew a quiet seam, cannot afford an inch of it; because, though we would purchase it with blood, it has no counter and no till. She who stands looking down upon her who lies sleeping knows the horizontal fear, the fear unbearable ... . For the lover, it is the night into which his beloved goes that destroys his heart (93-94).

No one can really know what strange bedfellows her lover enjoys, what terrible crimes she commits in her dreams. Even if Robin slept in her arms all night every night, Nora could never entirely possess her. While night may be the realm of the unbounded unconscious or the libido, its terror for Nora comes not from its chaos or its transgressiveness, but from its definitive *enforcement* of the *boundaries* of the self. These boundaries are what make love, sex and conversation—and reading!—exciting and

even possible, but also frustrating, miserable, and tragic. While Nora argues over and over that Robin is herself, this is Nora's subjective experience of selfhood she and Matthew are talking about (136). Nora is not Robin's self. Nora comes to Matthew seeking an explanation for Robin, but she receives only a disquieting reflection of herself. While it may seem at first glance that the sleeper Matthew describes is Robin, it is Nora who stays at home sleeping. It is Nora who dreams of incest and death.

Another lover of Robin, Felix Volkbein, emerges from out of an overdetermined past. His father, suffering under the "racial memory" of brutal anti-Semitism, constructs a false genealogy and names himself a baron, but Felix emerges "unaccumulated and single." In spite of his best attempts to write himself into history, he remains outside of it. He cannot be a representative of Jew or a typical aristocrat. He is just himself. He dreams of a son who "would feel as he felt about the 'great past'" (42) but the son he gets is even odder than Felix himself: a sickly, dreamy boy who shares his mother's predilection for Catholicism. This isolating single-ness, this singularity, troubles all the characters in the novel. But still they talk to, or try to talk to, or talk past each other in the only language they think they have.

The moments of most intense communication in *Nightwood* are, *for its characters*, unmediated by language. Although readers experience them though the words on a page, Goodreads' reader Gravity Goldberg writes in 2007 that, "there are these scenes that transmit themselves directly from the page and into the creative subconscious." Nora first meets Robin at the circus, when she watches a lioness prostrate herself before Robin, looking at her "as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her

eyes flow[ing] in tears that never reached the surface" (60). This moment of intensity is the catalyst for their love, but it's a moment that they each experience individually. There is no official interpretation. The same could be said of the "obscene and touching" final scene, when Robin returns to Nora and literally behaves like a dog (179). These scenes stand out blunt and absurd against the rest of the novel, with its overabundance of metaphor, analogy and allusion. Instead of telling their meaning, these animal gestures rely on the emotional intensity they seem to carry, and thus on their subjective effect on the reader. As de Lauretis asserts, the novel works, if it works, by "figural movement." Myth and legend, as defined by Matthew, work on the level of the individual: they cannot offer one definite, stable meaning immediately and equally accessible to every listener. As Matthew himself says later, "One cup poured into another makes different waters; tears shed by one eye would blind if wept into another's eye. The breast we strike in joy is not the breast we strike in pain; any man's smile would be consternation on another's mouth" (35-36). The same gestures mean differently on different bodies, read differently to other eyes.

Barnes focuses on language itself, pushing on its potential and limitations. Its excessive speech, its logorrhea, ends in an impasse, an untranslatable moment of nonverbal communication (communion?), illustrating the limits of language even as it relies on language as a medium. It demands an idiosyncratic, subjective, experiential reading practice. People who love *Nightwood* love this about it. See Coleman, Thomas, Burra, Harris, Lynch, Meese, de Lauretis, and these Goodreads users: "It's modernist, it's insane, it's poetic ... it's elusive. This book, a cult classic of modernist and lesbian

literature, defies categorization. The characters seem to be nothing more than hallucinations, and yet they are somehow very real, very believable. It's mysterious. You should read it" (Abby Farson, 2011); "I'd say don't force it if you don't like it; when NIGHTWOOD is ready to be of use to you in your own life's narrative, it will make itself very clear. And if not, that's obviously OK, too" (Elizabeth Watson, 2012).

I first read *Nightwood* outside the classroom, for pleasure, as a queer modernist woman's novel, and hardly understood or appreciated a word of it. It was only when I accepted that the book would not validate me in the ways I initially wanted it to that I really experienced what it could do. It was only when I approached the book as a graduate student and a scholar that I really got inside the text. Although no critic or reviewer offers a completely satisfying reading, discussions with classmates and friends, and this project itself have enriched my reading of the novel, given me—an appreciation? an understanding? a sense? no word seems quite correct—of *Nightwood* that reading in a vacuum did not. Other readers have provided me with multiple, conflicting principles of thrift through which to test on Barnes's novel. While Jeanette Winterson argues for *Nightwood* as an "introvert's book," the critical conversations around it evince the necessity of collaborative reading, of multiple perspectives—something the novel itself offers in Barnes's own utilization of multiple strategies: free indirect discourse in the Felix sections, the dialogic style of Matthew and Nora's conversations (although it's hard not to read them as ultimately soliloquies, talking past each other as they do—and as readers of the novel often seem to), the strange moments of animal communication. The wide variety in readings and their changes over time demonstrate the degree to which a

reader's approach, her relationship to the text and its context fundamentally alter that text. A leftist male journalist in the 1930s and a lesbian aspiring writer in the 1950s will differ so vastly in their readings that we wonder if they read the same book. The synopses given by brainy twenty-somethings in 2010 will describe the same novel in terms that sound completely incommensurable. All of them read with their own ideas about who Djuna Barnes was, what she meant to say in *Nightwood*. The struggle for me, in both reading and writing on the novel, has been to keep all of these perspectives in play while trying to allow the text itself to exceed their limiting effects, to let my own peculiar image of Barnes emerge.

I am a graduate student of literature. I know all about the death of the author and the intentional fallacy, but reading the Barnes archive in biographies, letters and other people's memoirs, it is so, so heartening to find the ways she is like me: actively bisexual but terribly shy about it, auburn-haired. I know it's silly. I know it means nothing. But it means something. Doesn't it? We read as we dream, alone. But we read with the uncanny feeling that there is someone else in the room, in our heads. Someone who looks like the author, but is not quite her. Someone who looks like us, but is not quite ourselves.

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