

DREAMING THE (M)OTHER:  
THE CARNIVAL IN DJUNA BARNES'S *NIGHTWOOD*

by

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Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

DREAMING THE M(OTHER): THE CARNIVAL

IN DJUNA BARNES'S NIGHTWOOD

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## ABSTRACT

As controversial now as it was in 1936 when it was first published, Djuna Barnes's novel, *Nightwood*, both invites and resists the reader's participation in the transgressive dream-logic of carnival. Employing various modernist strategies, Barnes devises a rebus-text implicating the reader in a narrative of narcissism which not only reinscribes the loss of the mother, but transgresses the social taboo which forbids access to her. Shifting and multiple perspectives, dream-figures, cryptic utterances, parataxis and rhythmic hypnotic language: all contribute to the emergence of a dream-logic which not only disorients the reader, but draws her into the textual reinscription of desire for a forbidden maternal territory. Through the creation of a dream-logic, the novel, which opens on the death-bed of the mother, Hedvig Volkbein, seeks to tell the story of that loss through the characters' desire for the elusive Robin Vote, a bisexual woman who repudiates motherhood. Through the figure of Robin Vote, who is never present and whom everyone desires but loses, Barnes accomplishes the encoding of the text with the trope of the "absent mother." On the other hand, Robin Vote, who enters into a fusion relationship with Nora Flood, serves paradoxically as the narcissistic child who, ultimately, must sacrifice her (imaginary) relationship to the mother. Neither wholly present nor absent, the figure of Robin Vote haunts the pages of *Nightwood*, drawing the reader into the novel's narcissistic narrative. When read as rebus, *Nightwood* can be seen to reconstitute the idealization of the gendered subject's relationship that binds him or her to the mother. The novel, I think, presents readers with so many problems because it returns the reader, to varying degrees, to the ambivalent site/sight of forbidden desire. Echoing with various permutations of Matthew O'Connor's roar, "It's my mother without argument I want!" (NW, 149), the novel consistently returns the reader to the threshold of desire and ambivalence where language and the subject are constituted at the mother's expense.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Why literature? ... Is it because, faced with social norms, literature reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth itself about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe? Because it thus redoubles the social contract by exposing the unsaid, the uncanny?*

- Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time" (KR,207)

*Where does it resist? Where does a text precisely ... make no sense, that is, resist interpretation? Where does what I see and what I read resist my understanding? Where is the ignorance - the resistance to knowledge - located? And what can I learn from the locus of that ignorance?*

- Shoshana Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education," (JLAI,80)

Although, in the above passage, Shoshana Felman is discussing what she considers to be crucial questions regarding the pedagogical implications of the teachings of Jacques Lacan, I appropriate it here because it speaks to my experience of reading Djuna Barnes's modernist novel, *Nightwood*. And because, for me, a reading of *Nightwood* "reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth ... about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe," I encounter(ed) the novel precisely at that "locus" which Felman describes. A reading of *Nightwood*, therefore, was problematic until I realized that hidden at the core of ignorance was "a certain knowledge," but one that remained 'unsaid' because it was 'forbidden'. I refer, here, to what I now perceive to be *Nightwood*'s central concern: the (erotic) desire and search for the lost mother; the desire for (the fantasy of) a maternal territory which precedes signification. I was drawn to the language of carnival not only as a way of articulating the novel's reinscription of the maternal through its exploration of the "homology between the body, dream, linguistic structure and structures of desire" (KR,48), but also because the language of carnival offered a way of articulating my own ambivalent

reading.<sup>1</sup> As I was to discover, an engagement with *Nightwood* led me often where I did not want to go. However, my desire to explore the "locus of that ignorance" now leads me here.

"Life is not to be told, call it as loud as you will, it will not tell itself" (NW,129), says Matthew O'Connor to Nora Flood. These words, intended to console Nora who seeks the comfort of a definitive answer to the break-up of her lesbian relationship with Robin Vote, could just as easily apply to my relationship with the text. O'Connor's comment can be understood not only as a meta-commentary on the text's indeterminacy but also as a caveat to the reader. For the reader, entering the world of *Nightwood* finds reflected in Nora's and the other characters' desires to possess the elusive Robin Vote, an image of her own desire for meaning which likewise eludes her definitive grasp.

*Nightwood* resists interpretation in that its concern lies more in the *conditions* that bring about 'reading' and 'representation' than in any referential exposition, conditions that concern not only the actual text but also the reader's role in the process of meaning-production. However, to read *Nightwood* is one thing; "to move from reading to criticism," in Barthes's words, is another: "It is no longer to desire the work but to desire one's own language" (Barthes in DIL,115). But how can a reader extricate herself from "the work" in order to speak of it when the work invites entanglement and resists separation? While I am in agreement with Sherrill Grace who comments, "*Nightwood* cannot, should not, be tamed" (Grace,141), I believe that her remarks indicate the critic's dilemma of engaging one's desires with the text's radical

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1. In this thesis I will be referring mainly to Julia Kristeva's discussion of carnival in "Word, Dialogue and Novel" as it appears in *The Kristeva Reader*. However, my use of 'Kristevan' carnival is informed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* and in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.



indeterminacy and then attempting to step back and identify them. I do not, however, agree with Grace when she says, "to attempt such a rational controlling is to reduce and explain away the power of the work" (Grace, 141-42). What she calls "rational controlling" I see as my necessary attempt to articulate the blurred division between reader and text from which the reader must necessarily extricate herself, if only provisionally, in order to communicate that experience. The problems facing the reader of *Nightwood*, in her effort "not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects" (Iser, 18) are compounded by the fact that Barnes's style imitates its subject matter. The reader's sense of identity becomes confused in her experience of a text which, in reinscribing the undifferentiated state of the maternal, invites 'border' problems since it blurs the distinctions between "reader" and "text." The complexity of these "conditions" are echoed in Nora's dismay over her inability to differentiate herself from Robin Vote. "She is myself. What am I to do?" (NW, 127). Nora's words, meant to articulate the dilemma created by her narcissism, parallels the reader's (con)fusion with a text which insists on reflecting what she might want to avoid: the extent and implications of her own narcissism. Since *Nightwood* draws the reader ineluctably and inexorably into the linguistic structures which recapitulate desire, I began to wonder what means were available to me to articulate my engagement with a text which would "not tell itself" and which seemed both to resist and to exceed interpretation.

Since I agree with Jane Gallop's suggestion that the text functions as "a mirror which constructs the reader," and the process of reading is similar to a transference such as is effected during analysis, I considered that my experience in this area might inform my reading. Because I was drawn to the novel for reasons I have yet to articulate, I found my initial reading of *Nightwood* left me not only confused but

curious about my confusion. What kind of response was this? There was something 'familiar', yet obscure; something which I could not *name* yet which I knew intuitively involved the nature of paradox. I was as "haunted" by the novel as was Felix Volkbein by the circus which inexplicably filled him with "longing and disquiet" in that it "was a loved thing that he could never touch, therefore never know" (NW,12).

*How* the reader interprets, for example, Robin Vote's silences as well as her absences, her "wanderings," and her actions in the controversial final chapter, "The Possessed" might well reflect something about ourselves. For example, what does Wallace Fowlie's 1948 interpretation of *Nightwood* tell us?

Here meet, in a wildly incongruous setting, the two forces which have waged the tragedy: on the one hand, the supernatural force of evil, expelled from Nora's dog and invested in the body of Robin; and on the other hand, the supernatural force of good drawing Robin to the altar before which literally she performs the antics of evil. (Fowlie,143)

Since any interpretation demands the selection of particular elements and the repression of others, do we not participate in the act of representation? And if so, are we not thus complicit in the result? Remaining as the sole witness to Robin's actions in "The Possessed," (it is unclear whether or not Nora is unconscious), the reader must acknowledge some responsibility in representing what is witnessed, since *Nightwood* makes us aware of how desire allots positions. If we will recognize that Robin Vote has, to a certain extent, resisted representation, we must ask ourselves how then shall we theorize the untheorizable? Although I address this issue in greater detail in Chapter III entitled, "Dialogics of Desire: Robin Vote as (M)Other," Wallace Fowlie's remarks, for example, are an indication of his desire to externalize "evil" through the formula, evil = beast = woman.

*Nightwood*, subversive of epic unity, causality and identity, is as elusive as Robin Vote—any attempts to interpret the text are blocked by the ambiguities, contradictions and multiple viewpoints which arise out of the narrator's and the characters' discourse. Narrative and narrator work in tandem to create, through shifting perspectives, ironically inflected voices, multiple digressions and the blurring of distinctions between subject and object, a dream-like atmosphere which not only confounds the reader's expectations and desire for linear narrative, but distorts her perceptions. Barnes's language, rhythmic and hypnotic, also works to subvert the symbolic order since it introduces "semiotic activity" into the text. Whereas "language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother" (DIL, 136), *Nightwood*'s poetic language invites the reader to return to that forbidden "relation" of which Kristeva speaks—'desire in language'.<sup>2</sup> Sherrill Grace notices that what she refers to as "the highly 'poetic' quality of key passages in *Nightwood* is a direct result of Barnes's stress upon the semiotic processes in language as opposed to its principal function of nomination and predication. Because of this semiotic stress, her language can be said to reactivate (as Kristeva argues) repressed instinctual drives, including incest and bestiality; certainly it is an appropriate vehicle for the subject of *Nightwood*" (Grace, 151).

One of the most significant moments in the text comes in "La Somnambule," where the reader first comes upon the supine figure of Robin Vote. The language used to describe her is both haunting and evocative and demonstrates the invitation which the text extends:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms  
and cut flowers, faintly oversung by the notes of unseen birds, which  
seemed to have been forgotten - left without the usual silencing

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2. See Julia Kristeva, "From One Identity to An Other," in *Desire in Language*, pp. 124-147.

cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives - half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and dishevelled. Her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance, the thick lacquered pumps looking too lively for the arrested step. Her hands, long and beautiful, lay on either side of her face.

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water - as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deteriorations - the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds - meet of child and desperado. (NW,55-56)

While this passage introduces Robin Vote to the novel it also provides the reader with insight into the way in which the novel induces the reader to participate in its dream atmosphere. For, "beneath the visible surface" of the text, the reader "sens[es] a frame, broad, porous and sleep worn ...." If we will ask of the discourse which is the drama of *Nightwood*, "who speaks?" then we must acknowledge, as Lacan suggests, that "language speaks!" And certainly, within the discourse of *Nightwood* can be heard, inducing the atmosphere of dream, the fluent and polysemic tongue of carnival.

That *Nightwood* is a novel influenced by carnival can be seen in the obvious carnival motifs: liminal characters (including lesbians, transvestites, poseurs, expatriates and circus people) exhibit eccentric behaviours and indulge in scandalous scenes.<sup>3</sup> However, it is not my intention to reduce the novel to a mere demonstration of carnival elements but, more importantly, to explain how I came to use the language of carnival as a way of articulating my engagement with *Nightwood*. Because I was

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3. See Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of carnival in literature in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 101-180.

intrigued by what I first experienced as the text's resistance to my understanding, I came to see that resistance as a subversion of my expectations as a reader. That is, I came to recognize through the struggle to produce meaning, a certain frustration which indicated the extent to which I expected the gratification of desire. However, it always seemed that I was "missing something" and that the resistance to my understanding seemed to increase accordingly with my efforts to overcome that resistance. Thus I could see that while my engagement with *Nightwood* was bringing to light the *longing* for understanding, that desire included resistance to the hidden wishes beneath my nostalgia.

Because resistance, which is often experienced as ambivalence, has its roots deep in the dark soil of forbidden terrain, the language of carnival, which favours ambivalence rather than univocity, seemed to offer a means of elucidating that experience. Initially, I became intrigued by a comment made by Julia Kristeva in "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in which she remarks that, "by adopting a dream logic, [carnival] transgresses linguistic codes and social morality as well" (KR,41). Even though I had noticed the proliferation of carnival tropes in *Nightwood*, including a pervasive circus motif, it was the novel's concern with sleep, dream and the unconscious which really caused me to reconsider the implications of Kristeva's remarks. While many critics have commented on the novel's dream-like atmosphere, few have broached the novel's "adoption" of a "dream-logic," through which the novel articulates a story of loss and forbidden desire.

Let us examine the implications of the oxymoronic phrase, "dream-logic." Since the dream uses both condensation and displacement to permit the entry of repressed elements into consciousness, the 'logic' it employs is contrary to that of traditional logic which adheres to causality. Since it transgresses prohibitions, dream-

logic likewise transgresses "linguistic codes" which appear at the level of the sentence in the form of "subject-predicate and grows by identification, determination and causality" (KR,41). Because the laws determining "social morality" depend on the foreclosure of the subject's imaginary relation to the mother, that term can be seen as analogous to "linguistic codes" which likewise require, for the subject's entry into the symbolic function, the "repression of the instinctual drives and continuous relation to the mother" (DIL,136). Interesting, then, that Kristeva would use the word "adopts" in this context since it implies the creation of a surrogate maternal relationship through the transgression of taboo. As I previously mentioned, the rhythmic, poetic language introduced into the text invites the reader's return to an instinctual, maternal space. Barnes's use of parataxis, inverted syntax, digression and, "an overwhelming superabundance of modifiers, metonymies, similes ... metaphors ... and cumulative right-branching clauses ... add further to the proliferating, destabilizing effect of the prose" (Grace,152-153). What Barnes's prose 'destabilizes' are notions of unity, identity and causality and especially the distinctions which arbitrarily determine gender and sexuality.

Linear chronology is interrupted since, in *Nightwood*, chronology often takes the form of palimpsest in which the characters' memories and speculations reflect on what has already happened. Time and space are relative constructions in that all the characters all have different perspectives, different memories, different speculations and so give the lie to any notions of origin. What emerges is a rebus text creating carnival time, the dream-logic of which draws the reader into an exploration of the relationship between desire and language and, therefore, between subjectivity and one's relationship to the mother.<sup>4</sup> Kristeva also discusses in "Word, Dialogue and Novel," the ways in

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4. Jane Gallop discusses the implications of "rebus-text" in *The Daughter's Seduction*, pp. 56-79. Also in *Reading Lacan* she discusses Muller and Richardson's notion of

which dream-imagery, daydreams, death and pathological states of the soul function textually. She says, "according to Bakhtin, these elements have more structural than thematic significance: they destroy man's epic and tragic unity as well as his belief in identity and causality; they indicate that he has lost his totality and no longer coincides with himself" (KR,53). I suggest that *Nightwood*, with its dream-like atmosphere and imagery, can reveal to the reader, who must work through her own transference and resistance, what the dream reveals to the dreamer: "Dreaming is above all the attempt to maintain an impossible union with the mother, to preserve an undivided whole ...."<sup>5</sup>

While I have begun discussing my particular, and perhaps (it may be argued), eclectic and idiosyncratic use of Kristeva's notions of carnival, I would like to address one aspect, which I discovered in retrospect, which informed the more personal side of my choice of this theoretical approach. I said that my initial experience with the novel was one of resistance, a resistance which I could not locate definitively. At first I put it down to my response to "textual indeterminacy" or, in the Kristevan sense, my confrontation with "that which resists representation but at the same time is only

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Lacan's writing as a "rebus ... because of their style" (RL,37). Gallop says, echoing Freud's notion, that "a rebus is a sort of picture-puzzle which looks like nonsense but, when separated into elements and interpreted yields sense; it is a sort of writing that cannot be read and yet which becomes intelligible through painstaking interpreting, through *another sort of reading*." This "other sort of reading," which Gallop refers to, is an associative one because we are reading "a writing that cannot be read." A writing such as this recalls Barthes's notion of the "writerly text" which, he says, is "ourselves writing" and, as I see it, involves us in plurality and plenitude. A reading, however, because it enacts the "desire to know" (KR,308), will be marked by ambivalence since the desire for 'knowledge' is underlined by the necessary separation from the object of that desire and carries with it profound implications.

5. See Stevan Gans's essay, "Levinas and Pontalis: Meeting the Other as in a Dream," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, pp. 83-90, where he discusses Pontalis' argument. Gans goes on to say that "this space [dreaming] is thought within the psychoanalytic tradition as the nucleus of infantile omnipotence and remains the primal core of all subsequent stages of subjectivity" (Gans,84).

thinkable within the symbolic order." A safe bet perhaps but I still felt as if I were avoiding something. But what was it? To answer I turned once again to the novel.

Because she appears to resist representation, appropriation, roles and the desires of others, the character, "Robin Vote," can also be seen, paradoxically, as representing textual indeterminacy. But now that "she" instead of "text" becomes the object of my speculation, I have merely substituted one term for another and so continue to construct "her," much as the characters do, in their own images. As object of desire/speculation, she becomes invested with their (and my) projected desires and is experienced as external to those desires. Yet resist them "she" does. She always eludes them because she, paradoxically, *is* them or, at least, what they desire. Resistance, therefore, signals desire. Iser's observation that "that which is not formulated by the text - is the reader's projection rather than a hidden content" (Iser, 17) gave me cause to examine my personal reasons for "adopting" carnival, especially in light of the fact that I was concerned with issues of ambivalence, representation and resistance. If the language of carnival presented a way of articulating the socio/cultural implications of these issues, I wondered what the more personal implications might be? Since I had perceived carnival, on the one hand, as setting up a challenge to authority and had seen *Nightwood*, on the other, as instigating a similar challenge by granting space to voices traditionally marginalized by patriarchy, I began to see a matter of personal relevance emerge.

While two readers might agree that *Nightwood* 'grants space to voices traditionally marginalized', their own relationship to the dominant social order will inform the differences in kind and degree of their perceptions. The reader's own conceptual system enters the reading in so far as the reader is compelled to take up various positions with the text and those positions will be informed by what one already



brings to the text. To become *aware* of what one notices in a reading is to recognize not only that which passes within the social order's system of representation and is usually taken for granted and considered "natural," but to recognize also one's relationship to that order. As readers we all agree that Matthew O'Connor's appearance in "Watchman, What of the Night?" is not a traditional one: "The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders, and falling back against the pillow, turned up the shadowy interior of their cylinders. He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted" (NW,79). Shocking? If so, in what way? *How* one perceives Matthew O'Connor dressed in his wig and "woman's flannel nightgown" will depend on one's own perception of oneself as a gendered subject, on one's own experience of his/her own sexuality and the relationship one has to the social order. This is not always an easy task since that order, which is internalized, functions often to name the other rather than the self. The image which the text, in part, presents, therefore, might be that of the reader. What I had to address took the form of an internalized social imperative demanding silence coupled with the struggle against it: a dyad, a double-bind which I was trying to accommodate in my reading of *Nightwood* and the carnival and to which I now turn.

According to Cixous, that which is "repressed ... ensures the system's functioning," and in the Freudian (and carnival) sense that which is repressed will inevitably return to exert pressure from within or upon the order wherein repression was first initiated. I suggest *Nightwood* addresses these concerns so acutely that it has, until recently, been subject to criticism which not only steadfastly ignores the significance of the lesbian relationships, but which also assigns to them dominant, heterosexual paradigms thereby erasing their difference. For example, Donna

Gerstenberger wields a remark made by Monique Wittig, herself a lesbian, in such a way that it appears a sleight-of-hand gesture intent on avoiding the issue: "Monique Wittig speculates, correctly I think, that 'Djuna Barnes dreaded that the lesbians should make her *their* writer, and that by doing this they should reduce her work to one dimension'" (Gerstenberger, 129). Gerstenberger's speculation implies, incorrectly I think, that the only reading worth entertaining is a 'heterosexual' one, especially since she has this on the authority of a lesbian. It was at this point that I wondered at my own critical position. How was I to articulate what I know, what my experience of the novel was? In an essay discussing H.D.'s *Hermione*, Susan Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis mention how the critic, Catharine Stimpson, has "explored the way the contradictory choice between 'public speech' and 'silence' results in the marginality of the lesbian novelist" (Friedman/DuPlessis, 9). Well, I believe the same holds true for the critic—for me.

I recall a discussion which opened the space for me to come to terms with these issues by setting into motion a few questions: The point was whether or not *Nightwood* was a "lesbian novel." What, if anything, constitutes a "lesbian novel"? If *Nightwood* is not a lesbian novel then what happens if a lesbian reads it? What happens in a reading that might make the difference between my "reading as a woman" and my "reading as a lesbian"? While I will address these issues in my concluding chapter, I would mention here that I began to wonder if this thesis did not constitute a carnival act in itself which, by virtue of my "speaking from the margins," as it were, grants subject voice to a lesbian experience. By refusing silence, especially that insidious internalization of homophobia, I was performing a carnival act by challenging "God, authority and social law" (KR, 49). I asked myself how I was going to speak of the politics of marginalization if, while masquerading Felix-like to avoid censure, I "bowed

down" to that which oppressed me. How was I going to speak of what I saw as the "sexual/textual" implications arising out of the lesbian relationship between Robin and Nora if I upheld distinctions between abstract theorizing and personal experience? Was it necessary, I asked, to declare *myself* a lesbian so as not to become complicit in the self-marginalizing gestures of which I have already spoken? If I assert that *Nightwood* is carnivalesque in that it challenges authority and provides a space for voices traditionally marginalized, I believe I must be willing to stand behind what I say, otherwise this endeavour would be, for me at least, meaningless.

As I mentioned earlier, Julia Kristeva says of carnival that it "challenges God, authority and social law; in so far as it is dialogical, it is rebellious" (KR,49). *Nightwood* accomplishes this challenge by presenting an ironic view of dominant moral (and monologic) imperatives. The novel blurs the distinctions which define gender and sexuality and, by foregrounding lesbian relationships, asserts the presence of an/other desire. *Nightwood* also examines the relationship between the "body, dream, linguistic structures and the structures of desire" and implicates the reader in this activity. *Nightwood* draws attention to these issues through *language*, language which exceeds interpretation and *encourages* ambivalence through the narrator's ironic inflections, social gossip, and O'Connor's inductive ramble. Through intense scenes foregrounding *dialogue* rather than action or character development, carnival presents itself as a way of discussing the text's ambiguities and the reader's ambivalence without reducing the essential implications of either.

However, it is not my intention merely to reduce *Nightwood* to a demonstration of carnival elements but rather to employ carnival as a lens through which to view the novel's concern with sleep, dream and the unconscious in order to articulate desire and ambivalence. In particular, I see the use of carnival as a way of addressing Barnes's

textual strategies which create a dream-logic thereby inscribing the maternal territory from which the reader must separate herself. I am concerned with tracing the strategy of writing which locates 'desire in language', and thus accomplishes the transgression of prohibition, particularly, the desire for the mother.

In Chapter I, "Dream-Logic, Carnival and The Reader," I will discuss how Barnes employs various narrative strategies to instigate the unstable conditions wherein the reader is compelled to enter the novel's "dream-logic." First, I will examine how Barnes's narrating voice(s) disorient(s) the reader's expectations and perceptions. I will focus on these unpredictable shifts as a technique which confers an unsteady point of view on the reader. Similarly, I will examine the narrator's ironically inflected voice as a strategy which draws the reader into contradiction and paradox thereby evoking ambivalence. Finally, in this chapter, I discuss the narratorial inscription of ambivalence as a way of reinscribing the desire for a maternal territory and the anxiety which accompanies its proximity when distinctions between subject and object dissolve, slip and shift.

In Chapter II, "'Watchman, What of the Night?': A Dreamer's Guide," I discuss the character of Matthew O'Connor as a dream-figure whose excessive discourse contributes to the transgression of (the mono)logic and whose digressive ramble, which makes a spectacle of language, also provides a place for carnival's dream-logic to speak. I explore the character of Matthew O'Connor, whose voluminous discourse serves as the locus of 'desire in language' and which, because it is digressive, metonymic and paratactic is marked by what Kristeva calls, "semiotic activity." In this chapter I also discuss how the reader's experience of this character parallels that of Felix Volkbein who, as Matthew O'Connor's bewildered interlocutor, serves as unsteady vehicle into the novel's emerging dream-logic.

Chapter III, "Dialogics of Desire: Robin Vote as (M)Other," is intended, in part, to discuss the implications for the reader who has been manoeuvred into taking up Felix Volkbein's perspective since it is through his *gaze* that we are introduced to Robin Vote and, through her, to the novel's concern with representation and desire. I argue that the figure of Robin Vote, characterized primarily by silences and absence, draws the reader into the desire which underlies signification and which includes the (narcissistic) search for a 'lost' maternal territory. In this chapter I suggest that Barnes's (re)presentation of Robin Vote paradoxically inscribes, through the characters' desire for her, that which, as Kristeva claims, "cannot be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies" (NFF, 137-138). Through Felix Volkbein and Nora Flood's desire for, and loss of, the elusive Robin Vote, I explore the textual implications for the gendered subject's relation to the mother and thus, to language. Finally, I examine the ways through which Barnes's writing, through the figure of Robin Vote, gains access to the maternal territory and to the sacrifice of it necessary for signification.

In Chapter IV, "The Possessed," I discuss the significance of this "sacrifice." If the final chapter of the novel "recapitulates the desires of Barnes's characters" (Singer, 72), it does so likewise with the reader's who finds herself implicated in this last dream-like sequence. In a ritual and textual spectacle, Robin Vote enacts the loss and recapture of the forbidden 'maternal'. In this chapter I argue how the reader gains access to the mother through Robin Vote as *text* and, finally, how a reading of this text transgresses prohibition and censorship.

## CHAPTER I

### Carnival Time, Dream-Logic and The Reader

*Desire and the desire to know are not strangers to each other, up to a certain point. What is that point?*

- Julia Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis and the Polis" (KR, 308)

*No other way leads to the understanding of this seemingly senseless dream than the addition of 'as the dreamer wished ...'*

- Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

"*Wir setzen an dieser Stelle über den Fluss,*" says Frau Mann, the trapeze artist, to Felix Volkbein prior to their attendance at Count Altamonte's party where Felix will meet with the quixotic Dr. Matthew O'Connor. "Tonight [she promises] we are going to be amused" (NW, 13). While Felix Volkbein appears unperturbed and in no way affected by Frau Mann's utterance, the reader finds reason to hesitate, if only momentarily. If Felix appears to sense no ambiguity in the utterance, the reader does. Paused in the "flow" of our reading, we hover at the break in the text: in a "place above the river." And, if we stop to ask, "what does she *mean*," we will have set out upon the vertiginous journey which is our "desire to know" and which will lead us circuitously through a text which, like a dream, often resists that desire. Textually, *Nightwood* functions much like a dream since it, too, through various narrative strategies, is "differently centered" and therefore, like a dream, can be approached, or read, associatively.<sup>1</sup> As is a dream, a reading is multiply-determined in that the reader brings experience which finds its way into the reading.

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1. I refer to Freud's discussion on the relations between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts in "The Work of Displacement" in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. A dream is "differently centered" because displacement and condensation ascribe to the dream a form which distorts the unconscious wish/desire on the part of the dreamer.

*Nightwood*, I think, confounds so many readers because it utilizes a "dream-logic" rather than "character" or "plot" development.<sup>2</sup> Replete with enigmatic utterances, distorted chronologies, digressions, multiple viewpoints, weird configurations of objects, and dialogues between characters who frequently seem like dream-figures, *Nightwood* creates a dream-logic which not only resists traditional forms of representation but also draws the reader into what I call its "associative space."<sup>3</sup> However, if the reader will allow that her relationship to the text is analogous to the dreamer's relationship to the dream, she will be able to read the text as a sort of rebus. Frau Mann, herself a hybrid, carnival figure, can therefore be understood to comment on the relationship which a reader will have to the text. Frau Mann's utterance resonates with the implications that the "we" she refers to includes "us," as readers, and suggests that our literal and figurative, temporal and spatial relationship to the text will be analogous to the characters' entry into the "carnival" present of the novel.<sup>4</sup> We have apprehensions for it seems, while we are entering unknown territory, it is also strangely familiar.

The reader will discover, however, that much like Felix, the further she ventures into the world of *Nightwood*, the more disoriented she becomes; and the more

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2. Here I remind the reader of my introductory remarks on my eclectic blend or "hybrid" carnival.
  3. By "associative space" I do not mean to discuss the narrative in the way that Joseph Frank seeks to understand the novel by substituting the concept of "spatial form" for linear narrative. Rather, I have in mind Freud's discussion on "The Method of Interpreting Dreams" where he mentions in a 1914 Footnote in relation to the "painstaking study of dream-interpretation as practised in the Greco-Roman World by Artemidorus of Daldis. The principle of his interpretative art ... is identical with magic, the principle of association. A thing in a dream means what it recalls to the mind—to the dream-interpreter's mind, it need hardly be said" (Freud, ID, fn 171).
  4. Donna Gerstenberger's essay, "Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," refers to the "circus present" of the novel in that she suggests that "trust in historical progression and in narrative as a means to a serviceable end has [by this time] undergone its initial destabilization ...." She does not, however, discuss what she means by the phrase.

disoriented one becomes the less certain one is of one's location *except* in the shifting relationship to a text which, like the river, refuses stasis. The reader soon begins to understand that if we cannot, as the saying goes, "step into the same river twice," the condition has less to do with the river than with the fluvial subjectivity of he or she who steps.<sup>5</sup> All of "us" who enter *Nightwood* are in a predicament similar to Frau Mann, Felix and the others.

Coming at a break in the novel's first chapter, Frau Mann's utterance is significant because, while it literally appears at a gap in the text, it figuratively suggests a disruption in the narrative time and space. Frau Mann's utterance completes the narrative's spiral into dream-logic which began its descent in the novel's opening paragraph.<sup>6</sup> This chapter will discuss the implications of the relationship of the novel's "dream-logic" to the reader's "desire to know," resistance and ambivalence, and examine the textual strategies which instigate the conditions wherein the reader is compelled to enter the novel's dream-time and space in the first place. The focus will be on shifting narrative perspectives that disorient the reader. Both narrative and narrator work in tandem to create, through shifting perspectives, ironically inflected voices, multiple digressions and the blurring of distinctions between subject and object, a dream-like atmosphere which not only confounds the reader's expectations and desire for linear narrative, but distorts the reader's perceptions of time and space as they are constructed in and by language.

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The unstable and uneasy subjectivity which the novel confers upon the reader

5. I have in mind here Julia Kristeva's notion of the "subject in process" and the relationship that subject has to the semiotic. I am drawing an analogy between the "we" who "sit in a *spot* over the *river*" and the constitution of thethetic subject who must break from the semiotic chora for signification to occur. Such differentiation says Kristeva, in "Revolution in Poetic Language," "lends itself to phenomenological, spatial intuition and gives rise to a geometry" (KR,93).
6. Each chapter performs a similar spiral into dream-logic.



can be understood to be a result of the shifting, plural perspectives which the novel undertakes and its subsequent resistance to "rational controlling" (Grace,142). Much of the confusion arises out of the novel's creation of multiple perspectives which, like a dream, often represent the "same material" from different points of view.<sup>7</sup>

The novel's central chapters are constructed so as to reproduce dream-like conditions in that, while they all represent various perspectives, they also all concern themselves with the elusive Robin Vote. The character of Robin Vote, I suggest, is so elusive and so enigmatic for the very reason that she, herself, is multiply-determined—that is, our perceptions of her are determined by the multiple points of view created by the narrator, the characters and ourselves. Our experience of the novel/text is as multiply-determined as are dreams which concern themselves with the "same material" and can be understood in light of Freud's comment on the means of a dream's representation: "...dreams may have sprung from separate centres in the dream-material, and their content may overlap, so that what is the centre in one dream is present as a mere hint in the other, and vice versa" (Freud,427). The "overlap" of which Freud speaks in regard to dreams which concern themselves with the same dream-material is analogous to the ways in which the *reader's* experience of *Nightwood*, through the mediation of the (absence of) the character Robin Vote, is determined by the overlapping points of view of both the narrator and the characters who reconstitute her in retrospect.

Beginning, "early in 1880," the novel locates its narrative and Felix's birth, tellingly, in the first stages of a transitional period, the *fin-de-siècle*. Set against the background of decadence, the narrative, rather than continuing with the chronological development which the opening phrase promises, spirals (or "falls away" as the Latin

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7. Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 427. Freud is discussing the ways in which dreams articulate the "same material" from different perspectives.

*de-cadere* suggests), from linear narrative into carnival time. While ostensibly locating the reader in linear chronology, the narrative suddenly jumps track, and the phrase, "early in 1880" appears as the site of the derailment. Soon, it and the independent clause, "Hedvig Volkbein ... gave birth," (NW,1) are swept up in a flood of sensuous detail describing not the Volkbein genealogy, as the reader might expect, but Hedvig's bedroom!

[where Hedvig,] lying upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valence stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin on which, in massive and tarnished gold threads, stood the Volkbein arms - gave birth .... (NW,1)

The cascade of subordinate clauses, which serve as both the opening sentence and the first *paragraph* of the novel, has an immediate effect on the reader's orientation. The proliferation of detail subverts the reader's expectations for narrative by spiralling her out of the familiar territory of linear chronology into the whirlwind of a digression, the destination of which is unknown. The reader's equilibrium, once unsettled, is further disturbed by the narrator's rapidly shifting perspectives which, cinematographic in their effects, forestall a stable point of view.

From abstract time, "early in 1880," the perspective shifts abruptly from the figure of Hedvig Volkbein, "lying upon a canopied bed," to the fine detail of her surroundings; from her feathered coverlet, to the gold *threads* of her coverlet. But the reader's perspective is further compromised in that the shift from the figure to the ground includes a shift in proportion which distorts the reader's perception and experience of her surroundings. The zoom-shot to the feather coverlet, for example, occludes perception of the room, of the woman, of the bed, even of the coverlet itself. We are reduced in size, much like Gulliver in Brobdingnag, in our apprehension of the "*massive* and tarnished gold *threads*" (emphasis mine). While this strategy disorients

the reader, it also diverts the reader's attention from Hedvig's death and continues to do so.

As the reader soon discovers, orientation in the world of *Nightwood* is not easy. Unpredictable shifts in perspective confer an unstable subjectivity upon the reader in that we can find no stable or central point of view from which to orient ourselves. We are often called upon to occupy multiple and contradictory sites as the narrative point of view vacillates between distant and proximal relationships, between direct observation and hearsay. For example, the narrator tells us later, in "La Somnambule," that

Sometimes, late at night, before turning into the *Cafe de la Mairie du VI*, [Matthew O'Connor] would be observed staring up at the huge towers of the church which rose into the sky, unlovely but reassuring, running a thick warm finger around his throat, where, in spite of its custom, his hair surprised him, lifting along his back and creeping up over his collar. Standing small and insubordinate, he would watch the basins of the fountain loosing their skirts of water in a ragged and flowing hem, sometimes crying to a man's departing shadow: "Aren't you the beauty!" (NW,30)

The reader's point of view is uncertain here. Are we located *above* O'Connor observing him "staring *up* at the huge towers" (emphasis mine) or do we join him from below *looking up*? Here our perceptions are split in that we are liminally aware of the presence of another observer whom we are unable to locate. The passage reveals, in one of many instances, that the narrator's point of view is questionable since what is narrated here appears to be the perceptions of some unknown person or persons who are merely alluded to in the observation as observers. The "would be observed" construction has the effect of decentring the narrative in that the subject of the action, or the agent, is absent and is merely inferred by the narrator's recapitulations.

Moreover, the construction now distorts our experience of time, as in the novel's opening, in that the narrator refers to an unspecified time and then proceeds to

immerse the reader in it as if it were the present. The boundaries which delineate our reading-present from an unspecified past shift with the narrator's sleight-of-hand and the reader moves in to observe Matthew O'Connor from a vantage point which, as far as this narrator is concerned, never existed. The reader scarcely has time to reflect on this when the cinematographic effects resume to disturb what tenuous position we might occupy. Our point of view shifts suddenly from its vertiginous location, either high above O'Connor looking down, or far below the tower staring up, to focus on the grotesque image of O'Connor's "thick warm finger" and a close encounter with "his hair [which] surprise[s] him [and us], lifting along his back and creeping up over his collar." No sooner does the narrative offer the reader one perspective than it lurches to another, often grotesque, extreme.

Elsewhere, the narrator employs another version of the "would be observed" construction, where the subject or agent of the action is absent from view. In telling us that Felix Volkbein "was usually seen walking or driving alone" (NW,8) the narrator implies an observer; and recalling Guido Volkbein's past the narrator informs us that "walking in the Prater *he had been seen* carrying in a conspicuously clenched fist the exquisite handkerchief of yellow and black linen ..." (NW,2, emphasis mine). The use of the passive voice, as I have already suggested, deletes the subject or agent from the act of seeing and renders that subject to the "unseen," or the "unlocatable." This has the uncanny effect of suggesting a textual level which is beyond, or exceeds, this representation because it always occurs "elsewhere." Sherrill Grace attests to the reader's experience when she says, "the most unsettling thing for the reader of [*Nightwood*]" is that she, "like the woman in the *douanier* Rousseau's *The Dream* (1910), with whom Robin Vote is compared ... may also feel bewitched, or trapped in the set, the property of an unseen *dompteur*, half-lord, half-promoter" (Grace,142). It is the contradictory presence of the "unseen" or the unlocatable which underlies

*Nightwood* and grants it its evocative power. For example, the reader's perspective collapses in on itself in "Where the Tree Falls" where Felix Volkbein searches for Matthew O'Connor and is dismayed "to observe, in the few seconds before the doctor saw him that he seemed old" but that, when he "hailed him, ... the doctor threw off his *unobserved* self" (NW,110, emphasis mine). The reader's tolerance for contradiction is stretched tight when, in another instance, the narrator, who is discussing Guido Volkbein's anxiety in his relationship to Hedvig, tells us, "Guido had shaken with an unseen trembling" (NW,4). The paradoxical quality of this utterance is obvious—and profoundly unsettling—as it simultaneously affirms and denies an image. Not an 'either/or' but a 'both/and', it splits into presence and absence. If Guido's trembling is "unseen," then who sees it?

While this "unseen" position is generally reserved for an omniscient narrator, *Nightwood's* narrative gives the lie to that notion. Much of the narrative reveals itself to be based on hearsay or on gossip and reveals itself to be a retelling of an unknown other's observations or speculations. These unknown others haunt the peripheries of this narrative and their voices are heard only as echoes. For example, the narrator tells us that when Felix's name was mentioned, "three or more persons would swear to having seen him the week before in three different countries simultaneously" (NW,7) and, "how he mastered seven languages and served that knowledge well *no one* knew" (NW,8 emphasis mine). Of O'Connor we are told that the doctor "had been seen ordering details for funerals" and later that, "he was seen coming at a smart pace down the left side of the church ..." (NW,29). Implicit in *this* narrative are the multiple *unheard* voices of its social construction and the *unseen* multiple viewpoints it represents rather than a single omniscient one.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Patricia Spacks has written about gossip as a "social entity." She notes, "when information comes by means of gossip, one can hardly avoid noticing that it has

The reader, recognizing that the narrative is "overpopulated with the intentions of others," faces the necessity of "having to choose a language" or, perhaps more to the point, "must actively orient [herself] amidst heteroglossia, [she] must move in and occupy a position ..." (DI,295). However, as the reader will discover, to "move in and occupy a position" is not any easy task in that to enter *Nightwood* is to enter the ambivalent world of carnival. How, for example, does the reader orient herself amidst the multiple voices of gossip? I think if we consider Michael Holquist's comment that "what interests Bakhtin is the sort of talk novelistic environments make possible, and how this type of talking threatens other more closed systems" (DI,427), we have a passageway into the carnival "environment" of *Nightwood*.

To begin with, the narrator's remarks are intended to display their double-voicedness and their "hybrid" constructions thus giving the lie to notions of univocal utterance. Consider again the narrator's opening remarks in light of the preceding comments: "Early in 1880, in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race, Hedvig Volkbein, ... gave birth." If we consider the phrase, "in spite of," we are alerted to what Bakhtin calls a "pseudo-objective motivation" which, in the construction of an utterance functions as "one of the manifold forms for concealing another's speech" in that the phrase reveals the "current opinion" which informs the utterance. Thus, the hybrid construction shows that it is "double-accented" in that, while it appears to belong to a single speaker, it is actually motivated by social opinion. That is, the phrase, "in spite of," signals the reader that the clause which follows, "a well-founded suspicion," has its origins in the social sphere rather than originating with the self-sufficiency of an omniscient narrator. Furthermore, we become aware that the narrator intends to make the reader complicit in the double-

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been filtered through *multiple consciousnesses*" (emphasis mine) (Spacks,9).

voicedness of the narration. By setting off words or phrases in quotation marks the narrator/text thus draws the reader's attention to ironic utterances. The irony, for example, cannot go unnoticed in the narrator's discussion of the way in which Hedvig Volkbein believes Guido's assurance that he was a Baron "the way a soldier 'believes' a command" (NW,5). Because the word "believes" is here "displayed as a thing," attention is drawn to it and the reader is called upon to wonder not only, "How *does* a soldier believe a command?", but also what does it mean to believe anything?<sup>9</sup> Because the power of an utterance lies in the perception of those immersed in the belief system which the utterance articulates, that power can remain intact only as long as it gives the appearance of knowledge and authority. In this instance, the text draws attention to the arbitrariness of belief systems precisely by decontextualizing the word and displaying it in an alien context and by using a strange analogy to draw attention to the motivation behind any utterance. While the narrator/text demonstrates how the speech of another simultaneously conceals and reveals the desire of the speaker, the gesture reminds the reader that she is entering ambiguous territory and she might find occasion to question what she already "believes," even if it be belief itself. The narrator who makes the reader an accomplice in ironic utterances and perspectives can soon take the reader unawares.

Throughout the first chapter, "Bow Down," the narrator makes the reader complicit in taking an ironic view of Felix Volkbein, a view which will prove to be the reader's undoing. Initially, the narrator sets the reader up for a fall by first constructing an image of Felix as "other" to the reader. Felix Volkbein is a man obsessed with order, with tradition, with identity: a Jew who, in his attempts to hide

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9. In Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*, a "word displayed as a thing" is a word "reified. It involves a manipulation of context in such a way that the word is stripped of those overtones that enable it to be perceived as natural. A word is *pokazano* when it is put in quotation marks, for instance" (DI,427).

his "otherness," takes up a false genealogy and calls himself Baron Volkbein, "as his father had done before him" (NW,8) in order that "the great past might mend a little if he bowed low enough, if he succumbed and gave homage" (NW,9). But Felix's "homage" takes the form of "an obsession for what he termed 'Old Europe': aristocracy, nobility, royalty" (NW,9). Felix's efforts to maintain his "remorseless homage to nobility" makes him as obsequious as his father before him who was "tormented into speaking highly of royalty, [and who flung] out encomiums with the force of small water made great by the pressure of a thumb. He had laughed too heartily when in the presence of the lower order of title, as if, by his good nature, he could advance them to some distinction of which they dreamed" (NW,4). Replicating his father's "preoccupation," Felix would listen "with an unbecoming loquacity to officials and guardians for fear that his inattention might lose him some fragment of his resuscitation" (NW,9). In creating an ironic view of Felix, the narrator sets the reader at odds with this character. The reader finds herself unwilling to identify with a character who epitomizes bathos rather than pathos: we see Felix

[B]owing, searching with quick pendulous movements, for the correct thing to which to pay tribute: the right street, the right cafe, the right building, the right vista. In restaurants he bowed slightly to anyone who looked as if he might be "someone," making the bend so imperceptible that the surprised person might think he was merely adjusting his stomach. (NW,9)

Apprehending Felix through the narrator's ironic perspective, the reader is put in the position of denying sympathy to a character who, in his search for legitimation, appropriates to himself, as did his father, a ludicrous genealogy. Both Guido's and Felix's claim to nobility takes the form of two portraits, of which the narrator tells us: "Had anyone cared to look into the matter they would have discovered these canvases to be reproductions of two intrepid and ancient actors. Guido had found them in some forgotten and dusty corner and had purchased them when he had been sure that he



would need an alibi for the blood" (NW,7). Even if we, as readers, had not "cared to look into the matter," we are now, thanks to the narrator, privy to the Volkbein family fiction. The reader, however, who identifies with the narrator's perspective need not consider the implications of this information, if unlike the Volkbeins, she assumes she does not "need an alibi for the blood." Perhaps, at this point, if we can avoid identifying with the Volkbeins, we need not look too closely at ourselves. For example, we need not perceive ourselves to be like Hedvig Volkbein who, in seeking "assurance" from Guido that he is who he claims, is actually hoping to keep intact a fiction of herself. The suggestion, however, resonates liminally that we are in the same "predicament" as Hedvig, believing in familial and personal fictions "as a soldier 'believes' a command" (NW,5). By identifying with the narrator's perspective rather than with Hedvig, or the other Volkbeins, we seem to be able to avoid the "apprehension" and the "anxiety" which she experiences.

By viewing Felix in an ironic light, the reader attains an equally uneasy vantage point. By identifying with the narrator's point of view we become aware of double meanings, of dualities, contradictions, and paradox. No ironic distance affords relief from the ambivalence which accompanies this recognition. To identify with Felix is not merely to be naive, it implies danger in that we might be led to question our own "identities," our own family "histories." What if we were compelled to acknowledge our own inauthenticities? Our own "fictions"? To avoid this discomfort, we are compelled to accept the unstable perspectives offered by the narrator/narrative and, paradoxically, to seek safety in ambivalence. Most readers of *Nightwood* do this implicitly, in regard to the Volkbein family, to varying degrees. While some, like Wallace Fowlie, see Felix as a tragic figure who is "unable to bridge the gap between his race and the aristocracy of Europe" (Fowlie,140), others, like Donna

Gerstenberger, say that "the price of Felix's obsession is the self." Citing the narrator's comments as evidence, Gerstenberger claims that Felix is "a man so uninhabited by self" that "three or more persons would swear to having seen him the week before in three different countries simultaneously" (Gerstenberger,132). And, I wonder at the complexity of the slip made by Ulrich Weisstein who, in discussing *Felix's* "blind eye," refers to Hedvig Volkbein as Felix's *wife!*<sup>10</sup> As a *reader*, Alan Singer's perceptions of Felix most closely resemble mine, in that Singer says, "in the throes of his idolatrous love for Robin Vote, Felix Volkbein embodies the risks inherent for character and reader alike in any judgment of meaning that does not include the complete mediation of *its own desire* for meaning" (Singer,76). These are the textual/narrative *conditions* by which the reader comes to see not only Felix Volkbein, but the other characters as well, embodying, as Singer suggests, "the risks" of interpretation. The risks, as I see them, are deeply personal as well as social, in that "the reader" may well discover that she is not only "reading a book," but "reading herself."

As we are compelled to take up Felix's point of view, we are enabled to perceive what amounts to a double-edged metacommentary; on the one side, the characters serve to comment on the text itself as literary production and the reader's relationship to the text as literature. On the other, perhaps darker side, the characters function like figures in a dream: they speak what the dreamer wishes to hear. Felix's observation that "an image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties" articulates the complex relationship which a reader will have to the text and which must include the reader's desire for meaning. The strategies which the narrative employs first

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10. Ulrich Weisstein, "Beast, Doll, and Woman: Djuna Barnes' Human Bestiary" in *Renascence*, Vol XV, No. 1, Fall, 1962, pp. 3-11). Interestingly, the editor of this journal also let this "slip" pass.

creates ambivalence in the reader and, secondly, situates the reader in a relationship to the text which demands the reader become cognizant of the play of her own desires. The narrator makes the reader privy to the double meanings of utterances and, in that the reader does not share Felix's naïvete, comes to view his posturings as bombastic. However, through a series of narrative twists and turns, the reader becomes uncertain and disoriented and, finally, is unable to take up a stable position with Felix as its other. Once this is accomplished, the reader finds herself, through the orchestrations of various narrative strategies, in yet another ambivalent and disconcerting position of having to occupy, or to identify with, Felix Volkbein's point of view while already having repudiated it.

Having accepted the invitation to take up an ironic view of Felix and the Volkbein family, the reader will discover that irony is a double-edged sword which will cut both ways. Through a series of nearly imperceptible linguistic shifts, the narrator manoeuvres the reader into taking up Felix's perspective which, in turn, becomes not only the locus of resistance and ambivalence, but also the unsteady vehicle for the entry into the novel's dream-logic. While the narrative serves to disorient the reader through cinematographic shifts in perspective, and to frustrate the reader's expectations for linear narrative, the most subtle shift in perspective is made in the blurring of the "inside-outside" distinction. The narrating voice(s) shift(s) the reader's perspective from one of observation to one of identification by momentarily eroding the borders which mark the distinctions between observation and subjective experience. At times the narrator's objective perspective, which the reader has taken on, shifts and merges with that of the *characters'* subjective experience and a subtle fusion is accomplished which draws the reader into the conjunction. Subtly fusing the reader's perspective with that of the characters', the narrator manoeuvres the reader out of the "safety zone"

of observation and implicates the reader, as in a dream, in *their* subjectivities. The text then becomes for the reader the place of the Other in which she can see refracted and reflected in her *reading* the constitution of the subjectivity of one-who-reads-while-being-read. But it is the subtle manoeuvrings of the narrator which conditions this relationship.

In describing Felix Volkbein's activities, the narrator/narrative performs the sleight-of-hand necessary for the blurring of the distinctions between 'inside'/'outside':

He was usually seen walking or driving alone dressed as if expecting to participate in some great event, though there was no function in the world for which he could be said to be properly garbed; wishing to be correct at any moment, he was tailored in part for the evening and in part for the day. (NW,8)

The narrative here accomplishes two things. While it locates the action of observation in the past, it foregrounds Felix's activity in a past-present which anticipates a future. But once again we are caught in the realm of shifting appearances. The "as if" clause, which claims authority by its inferential quality, locates the narrator's perspective, and the reader's, significantly, in the realm of speculation. Much like the scene where Matthew O'Connor is staring up at the tower (and which echoes the etymology of "speculation" from the Latin *specere*, look=image, *specula*=watch tower), the reader is given a perspective. However, as with the tower scene, it is an unpredictable one; for in it we recall that Felix himself is involved in a form of speculation as was his father Guido, who himself managed "by various deals in household goods, by discreet buying of old masters and first editions and by money changing to buy a house" (NW,5). If we can appreciate the subtle analogy created here, we can appreciate the implication that speculation, of any sort, always involves the risk of loss and recalls my previous discussion of the risks of interpretation. In having no other point of view but the narrator's "as if" speculations, we will have entered the realm of the hypothetical

which is, as I mentioned in my introduction, "to move from reading to criticism" and which demands separation from the "work."

But another slippage is evident here in that the conditions of the work seem both to invite and resist the reader's separation from it. We simply do not know where we are. When we are told that Felix "had been seen" walking or driving, we take up positions as observers of his activities and are located outside of his experience. However, the narrative shifts perspective once again as we slip into the realm of Felix's desires. The displacement which occurs as a shift in perspective is accomplished in the participle phrase, "wishing to be correct at any moment," where we are subtly manoeuvred out of the role of observer into the subjective realm of motivation, desire, wish. As the narrator's and the characters' perspectives momentarily coincide and interpenetrate one another, the reader is drawn into the brief conjunction. The congruence is momentary. Along with the narrator we soon separate, emerging once again in the position of observer in which "he," Felix, the subject of the action "was tailored in part for the evening and in part for the day," (NW,8) becomes once again the direct object of our gaze. With shifts of perspective such as the ones I have just mentioned we can appreciate that we are being led, once again, into a territory where boundaries dissolve and shift and where the exterior may be interior and the interior, exterior. By the time Felix attends the party at Count Altamonte's, in the company of Frau Mann, these distinctions are thoroughly confused. For the reader, however, the situation is compounded by the fact that the narrating voice of this unusual event will provide but one position for the reader to assume: Felix's, as the enigmatic Dr. Matthew O'Connor's bewildered interlocutor. With this meeting Felix learns the meaning of disquiet and with this disquiet comes the irrevocable shift into *Nightwood's* dream-logic.

## CHAPTER II

### "Watchman, What of the Night?": A Dreamer's Guide

*"Have you ever thought of the night," the doctor inquired ....  
"Yes," said Nora, ... I've thought of it, but thinking about something  
you know nothing about does not help."  
- Matthew O'Connor to Nora Flood (NW,80)*

*[T]here is no direct way.  
- Matthew O'Connor to Nora Flood (NW,97)*

In the labyrinthian design of our dreams, we often meet with enigmatic dream-figures who seem to serve not only in the capacity of guides in our nightly journeys through the underworld, but also, paradoxically, to baffle us by their strange characteristics and cryptic utterances. As Felix Volkbein, and the reader, will discover, the loquacious Dr. Matthew O'Connor is such a figure. Self-described as "Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor," he functions as a composite or "collective figure," often displaying features of various *personae*. His utterances, digressive, paratactic and often epigrammatic, leave both character and reader bemused and contribute significantly to the novel's dream-logic. While he often acts as a catalyst, or as someone who mediates between the characters, he himself is never directly involved in their relationships but rather offers voluminous and cryptic commentary on them.

But O'Connor's role exceeds that of confidant. Since his hyperbolic, inductive ramble serves to foreground discourse rather than "character" or "plot" development, it provides the place for the dream-logic of carnival to speak. Consider, for example, O'Connor's remark to Nora Flood's anguished, "What am I to do?" when she seeks a

definitive answer to the enigma of her failed relationship with Robin Vote. O'Connor's response, "Make birds' nests with your teeth," (NW, 127) not only conveys the notion that definitive answers and absolute solutions, such as Nora expects, are impossible but it also points to the limits of (mono)logic discourse which depends upon causality and identification. Nora's *perceptions*, and thus her experience of herself in relationship, are indicated in the structure of her discourse, a structure which wobbles with the seismic implications of O'Connor's remarks. The reader who shuttles between the two finds her expectations of dialogue increasingly subverted. Oscillating between Nora's questions and O'Connor's wildly disparate responses, the reader finds the gap widening between the two perspectives and as (mono)logic falters, is led further, and deeper, following on the heels of O'Connor's discourse, into the novel's dream-logic. Because he already speaks from a carnival place, Matthew O'Connor, a disenfranchised doctor, homosexual and cross-dresser, sets a challenge to the monologic since his discourse transgresses linguistic codes by escaping linearity and proceeds by analogy rather than causality.

We first come upon Matthew O'Connor, who "was telling of himself, for he considered himself the most amusing predicament," (NW, 15) at Count Altamonte's party. Felix Volkbein has arrived in the company of Frau Mann, whom the narrator now refers to as the "Duchess of Broadback." O'Connor is "taking the part of host" and Felix is drawn to him by his first utterance, "we may all be nature's noblemen" (NW, 15). Although the narrator describes O'Connor as being "a middle-aged 'medical student' with shaggy eyebrows, a terrific widow's peak, over-large eyes, and a heavy way of standing that was also apologetic" (NW, 14), O'Connor's excessive monologue, which eventually takes over the textual space, soon displaces the narrator!

Since O'Connor's discourse, which is digressive and paratactic, preempts the

narrator's voice, it creates yet another shift in time and space in that neither Felix Volkbein nor the reader can orient themselves in the face of it. While his monologue looms large on our perceptual screen, it displaces the novel's "present" and compels the reader to enter, in the company of Felix Volkbein, the novel's dream-logic. The reader is soon compelled to take up Felix's perspective, since O'Connor's rambling monologues are so disorienting, the reader must use Felix as a point of reference. Even though she once repudiated his point of view, his growing "disquiet," his disorientation parallels her own when confronted with O'Connor's barrage. Felix, who appears momentarily in the gaps of O'Connor's discourse, provides the reader, paradoxically, with the only available "point" of view.

Throughout the course of the party, the reader has been coerced into taking on Felix Volkbein's perspective. Barnes accomplishes this effect through a series of subtle manipulations wherein the reader becomes as disoriented as Felix Volkbein. The narrator's role in describing Matthew O'Connor is vastly diminished and limited to instances of "he was saying," or "said the doctor" or "he went on." The narrator's description of Felix Volkbein, on the other hand, is emotionally charged and we readers are compelled to take up his bewildered perspective as Matthew O'Connor's interlocutor. While we see Felix becoming increasingly "uncomfortable," or "bending forward, deprecatory and annoyed," or "feeling that the evening was already lost, seeing that as yet the host had not made his appearance and that no one seemed to know it or to care and that the whole affair was to be given over to this volatile person who called himself a doctor," (NW,17) we are given scant insight into O'Connor's emotional state except as it is uttered as dialogue. We might overlook the fact that Felix, who is disturbed by "this volatile person who called himself a doctor," is a man who "called himself Baron Volkbein" (NW,8). If our memories are short, the fact remains that we, along with Felix Volkbein, become increasingly enmeshed in attempts



to follow the course of the doctor's exclamations. Neither Felix nor the reader can follow O'Connor's circuitous reasoning. When, for example, he turns his eyes upon Frau Mann and seems to notice "her and her attire for the first time," his associative leap leaves us all bemused:

Well, but God works in mysterious ways to bring things up in my mind! Now I am thinking of Nikka, the nigger who used to fight the bear in the Cirque de Paris. There he was, crouching all over the arena without a stitch on, except an ill-concealed loin-cloth all abulge as if with a deep-sea catch, tattooed from head to heel with all the ameublement of depravity! Garlanded with rosebuds and hackwork of the devil - was he a sight to see! Though he couldn't have done a thing (and I know what I am talking about in spite of all that has been said about the black boys) if you had stood him in a gig-mill for a week, though (it's said) at a stretch it spelled Desdemona. Well then, over his belly was an angel from Chartres; on each buttock, half public, half private, a quotation from the book of magic, a confirmation of the Jansensist theory, I'm sorry to say and here to say it. Across his knees, I give you my word, "I" on one and on the other, "can," put those together! Across his chest, beneath a beautiful caravel in full sail, two clasped hands, the wrist bones fretted with point lace. On each bosom an arrow-speared heart, each with different initials but with equal drops of blood .... (NW, 16)

O'Connor is "here to say it," indeed. A long passage, I include it to this extent in order to demonstrate how O'Connor's discourse seems to fill our perceptual screens displacing all else—the party, Frau Mann, Nora Flood—all vanish—and we are caught in the metonymic whirlwind of his digression.

This scene is significant because it introduces O'Connor to the novel. Furthermore, it creates a dialogic (and associative) space through which the reader is compelled to actively enter the novel's signification, even though it means profound confusion. As readers, we are provided only with the evidence of the displacement from O'Connor's "register of thought to a neighbouring register" (Lemaire, 33). Thus we are led into an act of interpretation because we can only surmise the substitution O'Connor makes in either his train of associations or in his leap of contiguity. Our

exclusion from O'Connor's experience compels us to substitute our own associations since we, like Felix, do not know what he means. Through this condition of discourse we come to understand how the novel succeeds in creating a dream-logic since it often proceeds "*cryptonymically*."<sup>1</sup> The reader's confusion emerges out of the fact that O'Connor's associative path is concealed.

By displacing the narrating voice O'Connor's discourse serves as yet another marker of the novel's descent into dream-logic. Because it privileges digression and deferral, it breaks with rational, linear discourse and makes a spectacle of language. I agree with Karen Kaivola's suggestion that the "theatricality" of *Nightwood's* language "leaves us with a signifying surface that, because so transgressive and astonishing, fractures our expectations of how language represents the world" (Kaivola,67). If *Nightwood's* language is, indeed, "theatrical," then Matthew O'Connor's monologues occupy centre stage. The part he plays is not simply parodic either, for his discourse bears elements of both comedy and tragedy: witness the scene with Matthew O'Connor in the chapel where he exposes himself and, holding his limp penis, which he has named "Tiny O'Toole" asks, "What is this thing, Lord?" (NW,132). O'Connor's discourse epitomizes what Kristeva refers to as "the double character of language" which, "syntagmatically" and "systematically" lends itself to the creation of the

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1. I refer to Nicolas Rand's discussion of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* where he is discussing their notion of cryptonymy through which they re-read Freud's work with Sergei Constantinovitch Pankeiev, the Wolf Man. As Rand notes, Abraham and Torok demonstrate that the "Wolf Man is himself only when he creates himself as enigma .... The fundamental query is in short: What leads a person to make himself unintelligible?" (Rand,lix). Abraham and Torok suggest "the only pertinent answer seemed as follows: It is not a situation comprising words that becomes repressed; the words are not dragged into repression by a situation. Rather, *the words themselves, expressing desire, are deemed to be generators of a situation that must be avoided and voided retroactively.*" Rand understands cryptonymy to "inhibit the process of definition or meaning by concealing a segment of the associative path that normally allows one to move freely from one element to another in a verbal chain."

"novel's ambivalent space" (KR,39). Moreover, O'Connor's discourse foregrounds the dilemma of the speaking subject who must yield to the knowledge that language, to which he/she is subject,

is structured as an endless deferral of meaning, and any search for an essential, absolutely stable meaning must therefore be considered metaphysical. There is [and I suggest we realize this through O'Connor's attempts to explain anything,] no final element, no fundamental unit, no *transcendental signified* that is meaningful *in itself* and thus escapes the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference" (Moi,9).

Although O'Connor frequently appears to realize the implications of this predicament, Felix apparently does not. While he staunchly attempts to 'keep everything in place', his meeting with O'Connor has something of a fated quality about it in that it places the scene of the "drama" in language. By recalling Kristeva's views on carnivalesque discourse which, she suggests is "symptomatic" of the "space in which language escapes linearity (law)," the reader of *Nightwood* can appreciate the tensions implicit in the scene depicting the meeting between Felix and O'Connor. Their dramatic encounter recalls Kristeva's notions as to the conditions created by the eruption of carnivalesque discourse where, she says, "such a scene is the only place where discourse attains its 'potential infinity' (to use David Hilbert's term), where prohibitions (representation, 'monologism') and their transgression (dream, body, 'dialogism') coexist" (KR,49). Their encounter enacts such a "scene," wherein prohibition and transgression emerge, personified.

As it is represented in and by Felix Volkbein, we have come to perceive the rigidity of the phallogocentric "I," the subject of rational discourse. But, as Felix will discover when confronted by O'Connor's inductive ramble, which exceeds the boundaries of rationality and which activates repressed meanings, something has to give. Through O'Connor's discourse, we come to understand how Felix's anxiety is

generated; for while Felix is a man who cleaves to the notion that meaning is prior to his existence, O'Connor's monologues demonstrate how "the free play of signifiers will never yield a final, unified meaning that in turn might ground and explain all others" (Moi,9).

O'Connor's response to a question posed by Felix, "are you acquainted with Vienna?" (which is intended to solicit a *particular* response), reflects the dynamics of this situation:

Vienna, ... the bed in which the common people climb, docile with toil, and out of which the nobility fling themselves with dignity - I do, but not so much that I remember some of it still. I remember young Austrian boys going to school, flock of quail they were, sitting out their recess in different spots in the sun, rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, with damp, rosy mouths, smelling of the herd of childhood, facts of history glimmering in their minds like sunlight, soon to be lost, soon to be forgotten, degraded into proof. Youth is cause, effect is age; so with the thickening of the neck we get data. (NW,17)

Both analogic and metonymic, O'Connor's response evokes, in Felix, a certain tension. Felix's reply, "I was not thinking of its young boys, but of its military superiority, its great names," indicates that his desire to have everything 'mean' according to pre-existing conditions has been frustrated. Felix's response to O'Connor suggests he is somewhat piqued since he has *anticipated* a particular reply which will confirm the pious attitude *he* holds towards "great names" and "military superiority." Because O'Connor acts as foil to Felix's pre-conceived notions of truth, he poses a threat to Felix's fixed notions of identity which, while they are carefully contrived, are vulnerable in the face of anomaly. The meeting between the two suggests how the novel concerns itself with conditions which call into question, and thus subvert, the pious attitude of monologic discourse which, as Kristeva suggests, is "smothered by a prohibition, a censorship, such that this discourse refuses to turn back upon itself, to enter into dialogue with itself" (KR,47).

Because Felix takes pains to deny his own otherness, he is threatened by it in an/other. And, Matthew O'Connor, who is already 'out of order', appears as a threat in that his discourse serves as the locus of what is repressed in Felix's: sensuality and plurality, perhaps even homosexual desire (remember that Felix is attracted to Robin, the "tall girl with the body of a boy"). Felix must be forever vigilant to preserve the 'truth' about himself and, whether or not he is aware of it, must set up boundaries and prohibitions. O'Connor's discourse exceeds those boundaries which serve to sustain order. Felix's profound anxiety in response to O'Connor reflects what Bakhtin says of the carnival sense of the world where "there is a weakening of its one-sided seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism" (PDP,107). And as both Felix and the reader will discover, their emergence into carnival time is signalled by the failure of these elements.

### **Fiction and The Reader: Felix's Deliverance**

*At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face.*

- Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning"

*Everything is permitted.*

- Ivan Karamasov in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamasov*

*"Everything is permitted" does not mean that nothing is forbidden.*

- Camus, "The Absurd Man"

Textually, the exchange between Felix Volkbein and O'Connor signals not only the dissolution of linear time but the eruption of the carnivalesque into the novel. Felix will discover, much to his chagrin, that his emergence into the "living *present*" (Bakhtin's term for carnival time), brings with it a profound anxiety, for Felix has been

living within the rigid parameters of a fiction. His encounter with the quixotic Matthew O'Connor, "whose interest in gynecology had driven him half around the world," overturns his "one-sided seriousness," upends his "rationality," punctures his "dogmatism" and, finally, serves as his 'delivery' out of his self-enclosed fiction, into the zone of immediate time and space. But the passage, as Felix will discover when the breach appears in his preconceived notions, is not easy.

On the one hand, we have the monological element, as represented by Felix Volkbein's pious attitude towards tradition and, on the other hand, we have the pressure exerted upon the prohibitions of the monologic by the plurivocal discourse of Matthew O'Connor. If we consider O'Connor's discourse in light of Lacan's notion that "style is the man to whom one addresses oneself" (Gallop,23), then we can understand, and perhaps identify with, Felix's consternation at not being able to recognize himself in what O'Connor says. Under such pressure, Felix's control slips. No longer able to repress his rising hysteria, he breaks

into uncontrollable laughter, and though this occurrence troubled him the rest of his life he was never able to explain it to himself. The company, instead of being silenced, went on as if nothing had happened, two or three of the younger men were talking about something scandalous, and the Duchess in her loud empty voice was telling a very stout man something about the living statues. This only added to the Baron's torment. He began waving his hands, saying, "Oh, please! please!" and suddenly he had a notion that he was doing something that wasn't laughing at all, but something much worse, though he kept saying to himself, "I am laughing, really laughing, nothing else whatsoever!" He kept waving his arms in distress and saying, "Please, please!" staring at the floor, deeply embarrassed to find himself doing so. (NW,19)

While Felix will never be "able to explain it to himself," what has occurred is the breakdown of the prohibitions which functioned previously to keep 'everything in place'. That is, to the extent that Felix Volkbein relies on rational discourse to define himself, he is profoundly threatened by the "scandalous and eccentric in language"

(KR,53) because these slippages in signification signal slippages in his identity. In short, they do not conform to his carefully constructed fiction of himself. The reader, who has already been manoeuvred into taking up Felix's perspective, finds herself once again resisting it but there is no other available point of view to assume. Drawn into the current of his hysteria, the reader has no choice but to share in Felix's loss of control.

The absurdity of the situation is heightened by the fact that although Felix is out of control, "the company went on as if nothing happened" and the Duchess, who was proclaiming "in her loud empty voice was telling a very stout man something about the living statues." The dream-quality of the scene is obvious since the elements comprising it appear incongruous: a man whose propriety slips begins laughing "uncontrollably"; his sense of the absurd increases when he perceives the indifference of the "company" to his distress because his behaviour and theirs are at odds. In fact, Felix's "torment" only increases when he realizes that no one is paying any attention to his predicament but continues to act as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening. Their apparent indifference seems ludicrous when juxtaposed with Felix's full-blown hysteria and with the overdetermined proclamations of Frau Mann (the Duchess who is not a Duchess), who adds her "loud empty voice" to the scene while talking to a "very stout man."

In juxtaposition, the elements which comprise this scene evoke an overwhelming sense of the absurd. Even though the reader has been coerced into identifying with Felix, her confusion increases with the discovery that the trigger which sets off Felix's hysteria is the seemingly innocuous phrase, "time crawling." If Felix Volkbein has, for a moment, been catapulted beyond the confines of the fictional time *he* inhabits, where does that leave the reader? If, with that slippage in signification, Felix realizes the

inherent fictionality of *all* constructions of time, including his perceptions of "past" and "future," then he must question the authenticity of the subject who imagines them. The implications for the reader who can see her predicament mirrored in Felix's are obvious.<sup>2</sup>

Although we already know that Felix has a consciously appropriated history and a fictional identity, his descent into hysterical laughter suggests that he has come to realize, momentarily, that the self who would contrive to fictionalize is as much a fiction as the one he *believes* is consciously constructed and rationally directed. I suggest that Felix's "torment" is so intense (as is the reader's desire to abdicate her identification with him) because he is, as it were, possessed by an irrational force which, while it exceeds the narrow confines of rational discourse erupts (echoing the novel's opening caveat) "in spite of" any attempts at rational control. While Felix's appeals, "Oh, please! please!" are directed to no one in particular, they indicate the degree of his helplessness while he struggles to maintain his decorum. Moreover, the reader who has been manoeuvred into taking up his point of view, realizes that she, too, is subject to the "return of thoughts that are under repression" and that she, too, depends upon the adoption of certain 'fictions' which, at any moment might collapse.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, feeling as disoriented as he, the reader remains in sympathy with Felix

2. Jane Gallop's discussion of Lacan's notion of the mirror stage elucidates the predicament within which Felix and the reader find themselves. "The mirror stage," she says, "is a decisive moment. It produces the future through anticipation and the past through retroaction. And yet it is itself a moment of self-delusion, of captivation of an illusory image. Both future and past are thus rooted in illusion" (Gallop, 80-81). Because the mirror stage is the "founding moment" in the "belief in a projected image," it can be understood as the "classic gesture of the self: meconnaissance, misprision, misrecognition" (Gallop, 81). Out of this process emerges the fiction of the self which "is constituted through anticipating what it will become, and then this anticipatory model is used for gauging what was before" (Gallop, 81).
3. See Freud's discussion of laughter as "motor discharge" which he suggests becomes necessary when a defensive struggle occurs with repressed thoughts. In "Primary and Secondary Processes," p. 765.



Volkbein. When the guests have been abruptly ejected from the party on what appears to be a whim of the Count, and O'Connor makes the remark, "he put us out for one of those hopes that is about to be defeated," the reader is entirely given over to Felix's whispered, "what do you mean?" (NW,25).

While O'Connor's inductive ramble often seems cryptic and overdetermined, it demonstrates to both characters and readers alike, the impossibility of ever acquiring a single, substantive truth. His comment to Nora Flood, "I have a narrative but you will be put to it to find it," implies Nora's attempts to come to terms with his digressive and paratactic style and the problems facing the reader. If, for example, we examine his apparently straight forward remark, we will understand that it does not mean merely that his narrative is hidden or even multiple. Rather, O'Connor's remark reflects the *condition* of *Nightwood* in that narrative can not simply be located objectively but is generated in the dialogic space *between* the "I" and "you" to which O'Connor refers. Moreover, his comment implies that the space between these pronouns is not only intersubjective but impossible to locate definitively: the "I" of which O'Connor speaks is part of the "he" he is for the reader. His utterances, built upon multiple digressions, suggest more the condition of subjectivity as being "in process" rather than static or fixed. Ours is the "middle condition" and the novel, I believe, is problematic in that it is marked by a lack of division between pronouns and names through which "I" am trying to place myself as a reader.

O'Connor's "I," and the reader's experience of it, is further complicated by the fact of his questionable gender. Biologically male, Matthew is the "last woman left in this world ... the bearded lady" (NW,100). His remarks recall the poignant existence of yet another carnival figure and social anomaly whose appearance as a 'freak' in a side-show, as an object of morbid curiosity, implicates the subject of that gaze in a

moral universe which is dominated by clear divisions in gender. However, while Djuna Barnes appears to call those divisions into question, she does not leave it at that since, as Karen Kaivola points out, it is O'Connor's desire to be a woman which is a traditional one and which reflects patriarchal notions of femininity and what it means to be a woman: "No matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months" (NW,91). The irony is double-edged since the reader cannot conceal his or her own moral imperatives as they are reflected in the way Matthew O'Connor is perceived. When O'Connor says, Proust-like, to Nora Flood, "the wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future, and am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king's kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner?" the reader's response to that "I" will be determined by his or her relationship, as a gendered subject, to the dominant order. The reader is asked in her engagement with *Nightwood* to identify herself in the dialogic space between pronouns, where "self/other is a relation of simultaneity" (Holquist,19). In determining the "I" who speaks, the reader might well see reflected the "you" who reads.

Significantly, if to read O'Connor's ramble is to adopt another's "I," it is to recognize that one's own "I" is already divided in spite of the monolith of unity the pronoun presents. Sherrill Grace's comments on the novel's radical indeterminacy reflect the complexity of the reader's experience:

[F]ew texts have sustained as many conflicting interpretations or caused so many genuine problems for their readers. Where is the centre of *Nightwood*, which chapter, which character or consciousness, which issue or theme? Who is Robin anyway, and what is the significance of the chapel scene at the end, with Robin on her hands and knees beside Nora's dog and before an altar? How

does one make sense of, or even respond to, the apparently disordered and proliferating images, not only in Dr. O'Connor's monologues, where the linguistic flights could be attributed to his drunkenness or inspiration, but also in passages of third-person narration? Of course, these kinds of questions reflect the reader's desire to order the text, to make sense of it, to explain either what it means or how it works, and this desire, problematic as it may be, is at least more legitimate than cursory dismissals of the novel as incoherent or degenerate. (Grace,142)

This "desire" of which Grace speaks is the very one which entangles the reader in the process of endless signification.

As Grace suggests, *Nightwood* evokes questions, not answers. If the reader will pursue her desire "to order the text, to make sense of it," she will, as O'Connor suggests, "be put to it." Moreover, she will have to proceed, echoing the novel's opening lines, "in spite of a well-founded suspicion" that the task will always exceed her desire.

O'Connor's discourse bears witness to the reader's experience of the novel's resistance to interpretation in that she can see her own experience mirrored in the way that his attempts to explain *anything* veer off into associative rambles. In the same chapter, for example, O'Connor, who has been trying to explain to Nora the diverse nature of night, repeatedly entreats her: "Wait!" and "Wait a minute!" He pleads, "It's all of a certain night that I'm coming to, that I take so long coming to it," only to race headlong down another path of digression which leads by association in yet another direction.

As deferral follows upon deferral, characters and readers alike are swept away in the flash flood of O'Connor's densely structured monologues. O'Connor's discourse not only resists linear, rational thought but also reflects the *text's* radical indeterminacy which includes the reader's dilemma in trying to articulate it. The reader can see reflected in Matthew O'Connor's predicament her own double-bind. While both she

and O'Connor desire to provide an exegesis of (the) *Night(wood)*, she comes to realize that that moment cannot but be "infinitely deferred."<sup>4</sup> O'Connor's words to Nora on the nature of "the tree of night" have particular resonance for the reader in that they can also be understood to describe the implications of an engagement with *Nightwood*:

To think of the acorn it is necessary to become the tree. And the tree of night is the hardest tree to mount, the dourest tree to scale, the most difficult of branch, the most febrile to the touch, and sweats a resin and drips a pitch against the palm that computation has not gambled. Gurus, who, I trust you know, are Indian teachers, expect you to contemplate the acorn ten years at a stretch, and if, in that time, you are no wiser about the nut, you are not very bright, and that may be the only certainty with which you will come away, which is a post-graduate melancholy - .... (NW,84)

Because it bears the weight of connotation, O'Connor's discourse is both evocative and disturbing. His suggestion is also paradoxical. How, for example, are we "to mount" the "tree of night" if we have "become" it? And, if we ask, "*what is 'the tree of night'?*" we become entangled in *one* of the many webs of associative thinking which the novel encourages: night—tree—forest—sleep—dreams—the unconscious. Similar or contiguous associations and images form in our minds so that we, in effect, do "become the tree" because we would "think" of a single word or phrase, the "acorn."

However, if we wish to discuss *how* O'Connor means anything, we must turn our attention to how his discourse contributes to the novel's dream-logic and how it affects the reader.

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4. From Jane Gallop's discussion on the anxiety inherent in the mirror stage wherein the subject who anticipates a future success, or "self-mastery" is predicated upon an illusion. Commenting on Lacan's "illusion of unity," Gallop suggests that "to 'master' the self, to understand it, would be to realize its falsity ...." The anxiety which underlies interpretation has its roots, I think, in this process in that a reading of *Nightwood* enmeshes the reader in indeterminacy—desire and deferral.

## The Subject of Desire: The Reader and Matthew O'Connor

*Delirium is a discourse that has supposedly strayed from a presumed reality. The speaking subject is presumed to have known an object, a relationship, an experience that he is henceforth incapable of reconstituting accurately. Why? Because the knowing subject is also a desiring subject, and the paths of desire ensnarl the paths of knowledge.*

- Julia Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis and the Polis"

*It's my mother without argument I want!*

- Matthew O'Connor to Nora Flood

In her analysis of Céline, Julia Kristeva suggests that his discourse is characterised by a displaced element and thus wields the power of attraction and repulsion. An utterance, therefore, becomes charged with semantic value and accrues tension because the discourse bears "the speaker's emotive attitude and his moral judgement" (Kristeva,315). Thus the "logic of the message," or the way the message is articulated, dominates over that which is articulated. The reader perceives a particular and peculiar tension operating in Matthew O'Connor's monologues and it is this semantic tension to which the reader responds. The response, however, is characterised by ambivalence because the tension which resonates through the utterance represents a threat as well as an attraction; a threat constituted by the apparently unstable nature of language as a result of its, and the reader's, resistance to repressed meanings. Therefore, what is caught up in the text is, as Céline himself calls it, an emotion, or as Kristeva suggests, "drive" and "its most radical component, the death drive" (Kristeva,315). As Céline's work functions to provide the "locus of emotion" and is "resistant to logico-syntactic naming," so does Djuna Barnes's, especially through the rambling discourse of Matthew O'Connor.

The net effect of O'Connor's discourse is to weaken the rigid and monolithic barriers imposed by the symbolic function of language which, as Kristeva suggests,

"constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother" (DIL,136). O'Connor's utterances, however digressive and paratactic, metaphoric and metonymic, are marked by what Kristeva calls "semiotic activity" in that they demonstrate how "the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language (for whom the word is never uniquely sign) maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual, maternal element" (DIL,136). The reader who takes part in this "reactivation" experiences profound confusion and ambivalence since "poetic language would be for its questionable subject-in-process the *equivalent of incest*" (DIL,136). O'Connor's monologues are characteristically wandering and lead both character and reader alike to the threshold of what is both desired and forbidden.

As a result, the reader experiences a similar displacement, a kind of hysteria or delirium, since the reader is returned and reunited with "what denies, exceeds and excites [her]" (KR,318). And so, the reader is alternately attracted and repelled by the lure of the text which essentially echoes with a "feminine-maternal resonance that threatens identity itself" (KR,318). O'Connor's discourse, in other words, resonates with the desire to re-unite with a pre-syntactic (prehistorical) origin even though, as Kristeva says, "this motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory; what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the *relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized" (KR,161). Although this desire is forbidden, it pervades the novel, appearing through the narcissistic relationships between the characters and Robin Vote and is constructed in the reader's relationship to the text. Moreover, I suggest that the novel so invokes this desire that readers will go to great lengths to avoid its acknowledgement. However, as I will demonstrate, *Nightwood* is a text which manages to articulate, by the adoption of a dream-logic, this forbidden desire implicating both

characters and reader alike.

If readers find the doctor's discourse unsettling, his appearance is, at times, no less unusual. Arriving at his lodgings at three in the morning, Nora Flood, who has come seeking his advice, finds him lying in a flannel nightdress, "heavily rouged and his lashes painted," his head "framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig" (NW,78). The thought which "flashes" through Nora's mind upon her discovery of O'Connor has the cryptic quality of dream-language: "God, children know something they can't tell; they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed!" (NW,78). In this context we are not surprised to hear that Nora has come "to ask [O'Connor] everything [he knows] about the night," for such is a question asked of dream-figures by the dreamer. Who, we might ask, is this quixotic figure, whose composite character eludes us and whose presence recalls features of Tiresius, Cassandra, Socrates, Nietzsche, Matthew of the Bible, even Sigmund Freud?<sup>5</sup> When it comes to Matthew O'Connor, the reader will discover that she, when confronted with a character whose utterances exceed denotation and defy rational understanding, is often as much 'in the dark' as Nora Flood and as "disquieted" as Felix Volkbein. It is the connotative weight of his discourse which produces a kind of dream-logic and the overdetermined and hyperbolic style of his delivery which grants him the status of dream-figure.

Because O'Connor's discourse subverts linear narrative, it epitomizes Kristeva's notion of how the transgression of linguistic codes succeeds within the dream-logic of carnival in that "it accepts *another law*. Dialogism is not 'freedom to say everything',

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5. See Jane Marcus' essay, "Laughing at Leviticus" in *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe. Marcus argues that *Nightwood* is "a brilliant and hilarious feminist critique of Freudian psychoanalysis and a parody of the discourse of diagnosis of female hysteria." She says that "*Nightwood's* project is to expose the collaboration of Freudian psychoanalysis with fascism ... and, [i]n this reading Nora is the archetypal Dora or female hysteric, and Dr. Freud is brilliantly parodied in the figure of [Matthew O'Connor]."

it is a *dramatic* 'banter' (Lautreamont), an *other* imperative ..." (KR,41). O'Connor's discourse is, indeed, "dramatic banter" in that it is often parodic and self-referential. It succeeds in unsettling both Felix Volkbein and the reader since it invokes the desire to know and simultaneously resists it. Through his discussions with them, O'Connor draws the characters into the realm of the dialogic in that he frequently confounds their desire to live according to "pre-conceived notions of truth." In one instance he tells Nora Flood that "there is no truth ...." He suggests that her mistake in her relationship with Robin Vote is that she has been "unwise enough to make a formula; you have [he tells her,] dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known" (NW,136).

Giving the lie to the notion of the transcendent subject in control of language and meaning, O'Connor's discourse also serves to point out the risks in interpretation. While one who undertakes the task of interpretation will find her experience reflected in the desires of the other characters for the elusive Robin Vote, she will also see mirrored in O'Connor's predilection for digression, her own struggles to render a reading of the novel intelligible. A meeting, therefore, with the quixotic Dr. O'Connor will be cause for reflection in that it implicates both character and reader on the "pathways of desire." At the party at Count Altamonte's, Felix Volkbein, who becomes O'Connor's bemused interlocutor, learns the meaning of disquiet when he meets, in the person of O'Connor, that which he represses.

With the introduction of Robin Vote we are moved into one of the novel's larger issues which concerns itself with (the act of) representation and desire. The narrative moves us, ineluctably, through a dialogic relationship not only with the text, but with ourselves. Through it the reader comes to realize that her relationship to the text parallels that of the characters to Robin Vote and that her desire to "interpret" the text is analogous to the character's desire to *possess* Robin Vote.



## CHAPTER III

### DIALOGICS OF DESIRE: ROBIN VOTE AS (M)OTHER

*In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.*

- Julia Kristeva, "Woman Can Never Be Defined"

*The very Condition of Woman is so subject to Hazard, so complex, and so grievous, that to place her at one Moment is but to displace her at the next.*

- Djuna Barnes, *Ladies Almanack*

*If I should try to put it into words, I mean how I did see her, it would be incomprehensible, for the simple reason that I find that I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time. I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties.*

- Felix Volkbein to Matthew O'Connor, *Nightwood*

While, in the above passage, Felix Volkbein is attempting to explain to Matthew O'Connor his impressions of Robin Vote, his estranged wife, his words could just as easily echo the reader's attempts to "put into words" her encounter with Robin Vote and *Nightwood*. If, by the end of the chapter, "Bow Down," the reader of *Nightwood* is not feeling as disoriented as Felix Volkbein, she is at least as "tipsy" as Frau Mann. Compelled to take up Felix Volkbein's point of view as a refuge from the extreme shifts in narrative perspective, the reader finds her bewilderment increasing when, in the role of Matthew O'Connor's interlocutor, Felix's carefully contrived composure slips and he reels into "uncontrollable laughter" which, the narrator confides, was "something that wasn't laughing at all, but something much worse" (NW, 18). As Felix's "disquiet" causes him to lose control the reader finds herself equally bemused since she has been subtly manoeuvred into taking up a relationship with a text which,

like a dream, simultaneously invites and resists interpretation. Moreover, she realizes, as the chapter "La Somnambule" unfolds, the implications which are taking shape through the emergence of *Nightwood's* dream-logic, an effect which is achieved through the deployment of various modernist techniques.

It is through this strategy that the reader is ineluctably drawn through the first layer of the novel's sexual and textual concerns, the relationship between representation/"story" and desire, and into the novel's primary concern with what has been "left out, de-emphasized, hidden, or denied articulation within Western systems of knowledge"; namely, the (textual) search/desire for the (lost) maternal body (Jardine,65). The chapter, "La Somnambule," is significant since it introduces Robin Vote, the character whose elusiveness and silence reflect on the one hand, the novel's concern with representation, specifically, "how a woman is narrative's problem, ... how a woman is the object of the subject-in-narrative's quest" and, on the other hand, how that concern is shaped through the subject's desire for an "erotic merging with maternal boundaries" (Jardine,237). Through Robin Vote in "La Somnambule" and subsequent chapters which carry on the dream motif, the novel inscribes the ambivalent desire and search for the mother (whose loss was depicted in *Nightwood's* opening paragraph). Through the characters of Felix Volkbein, Nora Flood, Jenny Petherbridge and Matthew O'Connor, *Nightwood* explores the (gendered) permutations of this desire as it takes shape in heterosexual, homosexual and lesbian relationships. Finally, through the novel's emerging dream-logic, Djuna Barnes succeeds in inscribing the 'lost maternal territory' and, in the process, illuminates the parallels between (feminine) writing and the writing/reading subject's ambivalent desire for a continuous and incestuous relationship with the 'mother'. *Nightwood's* dream-logic blurs the arbitrary distinctions between the sacred and the profane, between nature and culture, between

humans and beasts, between masculine and feminine and, in the process, draws the reader into a region "unmapped and forgotten-or better yet, repressed-by culture" (Kaivola,68).

In developing the atmosphere of dream, "La Somnambule" takes up where the hypnagogy of "Bow Down" leaves off. The narrative once again manoeuvres the reader's point of view to coincide with that of Felix Volkbein and it is through his gaze we first come upon Robin Vote, perhaps *Nightwood's* most controversial figure. Characterized primarily by her absence and silence, she figures not only as the elusive object of erotic desire but also, significantly, the mirror of those desires. Because the figure of Robin Vote serves for both character and reader alike as the surface upon which desire is both projected and reflected, she can be understood to function as the (shifting) locus of the text's concern with representation and desire and the processes which underlie signification. The reader's relationship to the text, therefore, is analogous to the character's with Robin Vote.

In "La Somnambule," the reader, who has been manoeuvred into taking up Felix Volkbein's perspective, is made aware of this situation in that he/she, like Felix, is complicit in textual production in making Robin Vote/text the object of our gaze. Moreover, the reader is warned of this situation by the narrator who tells us that "the woman who presents herself to the spectator as a "picture" forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger" (NW,37). While the narrator's words appear to address the role the object plays in representation, they also implicate the (gendered) spectator in that "arrangement."

Robin Vote's first utterance occurs when Dr. O'Connor and Felix attend her bedside where she has been found, significantly I believe, unconscious. In this chapter,

"La Somnambule," which introduces her, the reader is made aware of Robin Vote's 'otherness' and her proximity to the unconscious. Rudely awakened by having water thrown in her face, she opens her eyes as if "a spasm of waking moved upward from some deep-shocked realm" (NW,35). Forced into consciousness (the symbolic?), Robin declares, "I was all right," falling immediately back onto the bed, "into the pose of her annihilation" (NW,35). Her use of the past tense, "was," is unusual since it implies that when she is conscious she is not "all right" and that, for her, sleep and thus unconsciousness are more desirable than waking. The narrator's term, "annihilation," used to describe her condition seems, at first, to corroborate Robin Vote's utterance. Yet, we are told, it is a "pose," thus alerting the reader to the process of composition which is being enacted and in which she participates. As the term "pose" suggests an "attitude" or a "pretence," the reader realizes that she has become complicit in the process of mimesis which, as fabrication, construction, creation, invite her to see her own desires reflected in textual production.<sup>1</sup> However, as in a dream, many of those desires, because repressed, are unconscious. The figure of Robin Vote, or the image which emerges of her, is one which leads the reader, especially in the final chapter

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1. My use of the pronoun "her" is obviously intended to designate myself as reader. I suggest, however, that *gender* and sexuality play a vital role in reading since the reader's response to the novel will be predicated upon their relationship/position to a dominant heterosexual paradigm. When I state that the reader is constructed in Felix Volkbein's "image," I suggest that his/her *experience* of that construction will reflect their own psycho/ sexual/social experience. I agree with Teresa de Lauretis who suggests that one's experience of "social reality ... derives from [gender construction]" (de Lauretis,20). For example, Alan Williamson's claim that *Nightwood's* figures are "doomed" because their lives "constitute a revolt against the *very facts* of their physical being" (Williamson,61, emphasis mine), reveals the pervasiveness of a deeply-ingrained biological essentialism, a notion that is reinforced by Williamson's discussion of the character Wendell, in Djuna Barnes's *Ryder*, whom he sees as "being essentially weak, shiftless and *feminine*" (emphasis mine). On the other hand, Jane Marcus suggests that "by centering the marginal, *Nightwood* provides a spectacle of human bondage that articulates the angst of the abject so well that the absent upright, the pillars of society, are experienced unconsciously by the reader as the enemies of the human spirit" (Marcus,232).

where we stand with Nora Flood in the doorway of the ruined chapel, to the threshold of unconscious desire and thus to the forbidden elements which underlie it.

Robin Vote is "La Somnambule," a term which not only identifies her as a principal dream figure, but indicates her close congruence with unconscious processes. Even her physical presence suggests we are in the presence of the "uncanny":

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water - as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deterioration - the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two words - meet of child and desperado. (NW,34-35)

This passage indicates that Robin Vote, "the born somnambule," is not merely a figure to be equated with sleep, dream and the unconscious. The passage itself manifests the semiotic component of language. Rhythmic, hypnotic, evocative, the poetic quality of the language is obvious and suggests both the correspondence between the image of Robin Vote, which is evoked through language, and semiosis, and the emergence of this force at a textual level. While the images the language evokes are extravagant, sensual and provocative, the highly poetic quality of the passage provides the way for the semiotic processes of language to enter the text, indicating an underlying resistance to, and subversion of language's "principal functions of nomination and predication" (Grace,151). Accordingly, since the introduction of the "sleep-worn frame" of Robin Vote is coincidental with both dream and marked semiotic activity, it signals the entry of the "equivalent of incest" (DIL,136) into the text since, as Kristeva suggests, it is "poetic language" which reactivates "this repressed instinctual, maternal element"

(DIL,136) and, as Pontalis argues elsewhere, "dreaming is above all the attempt to maintain an impossible union with the mother to preserve an undivided whole" (Gans,83).

This notion is confirmed by Nora Flood's experience when she says of Robin Vote, with whom she has had a lesbian relationship in which each of the women becomes lover, mother and child to the other, "Robin is incest too; that is one of her powers" (NW,156). While the "sentential rhythms" of the passage resonate in the reader's un/consciousness they reinstate the 'maternal territory' and, demonstrating the way in which 'style' and 'theme' coincide to the extent that the latter is produced by the former, induce the reader to participate in the "passage into and through the forbidden."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Barnes's writing transfers her subject matter into her style, a technique which succeeds in reinscribing the 'lost mother' at the textual level.

Through Robin Vote, and Felix's apprehension of her, Barnes locates the reader at the (dialogic) site/sight of desire. However, the reader who becomes complicit in (the act of) representation soon recognizes her predicament, since the novel also enacts the resistance to representation. Similarly, through the absences and silences of the elusive figure, Robin Vote, Barnes accomplishes the "impossible" task of representing the unrepresentable.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that the figure of Robin Vote simultaneously embodies and resists representation, she serves as the instigator of the ambivalence which the novel evokes in the reader. The figure of Robin Vote illustrates

the discrepancy, the tension, and the constant slippage between Woman as representation, as the object and the very condition of representation, and, on the other hand, women as historical beings,

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2. See Kristeva, p. 140, in *Desire in Language* where she is discussing the "unsettled, questionable subject-in-process of poetic language."
  3. See also Fran Michel in "Displacing Castration: *Nightwood*, *Ladies Almanac*, and Feminine Writing" where Michel discusses this issue in the context of "Barnes's inscription of gender and sexuality."

subject of "real relations," are motivated and sustained by a logical contradiction in our culture and an irreconcilable one: women are both inside and outside gender, at once within and without representation. (Jardine,10)

It is the "discrepancy" of which Jardine speaks, which serves as the novel's underlying ontology and draws the reader into its "middle condition"—the term is O'Connor's and calls attention to the novel's concern with the perpetual flux of experience. While Barnes's concern with indeterminacy, flux and representation appears to be modelled upon Keats's notion of "negative capability," an example of which can be heard echoed in O'Connor's words that one is on the "grim path of 'We know not' to 'We can't guess why'" (NW,101), her project extends to include 'negativity' as a condition of woman within the phallic model of desire and signification. If the reader recalls Felix's words earlier on that "an image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties" (NW,111), she will hear echoed there the novel's concern with the paradoxical conditions underlying its own textual production. That is, the novel enacts, through the re/presentation of Robin Vote, the unresolvable dynamics of a paradox wherein "woman is unrepresentable except as representation" (Jardine,20), yet continues to resist representation's appropriation.

The representational paradox, in which the elusive figure of Robin Vote appears to be neither 'present' nor 'absent', presents the reader with a problem in interpretation because it draws the reader into the operation of its "endless commutability,"<sup>4</sup> and subverts the possibility of closure. While Robin Vote speaks less than a dozen times in the novel, yet is 'central' to it, she is present as a character/signified only as she appears in the discourse of the other characters *about* her. The novel's structure draws attention to the ways in which the reader is given multiple views of her primarily

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4. Kaja Silverman discussing Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic scheme in *The Subject of Semiotics*, p. 15.

through the others' *memories* of her. For example, Chapters 3, 4 and 5—"Night Watch," "The Squatter" and "Watchman, What of the Night?"—all offer different perspectives of the events leading up to and including the night Robin Vote returns, with Jenny Petherbridge, to the garden outside Nora's apartment. "Night Watch" presents Nora Flood's distress at seeing her lover appear in the arms of another woman, while "The Squatter" presents the events leading up to that moment and "Watchman, What of the Night?" offers a view of Matthew O'Connor's involvement in the affair even though he is mistaken about his role in it. Subsequent chapters present further reminiscing. In "Where the Tree Falls" Felix Volkbein's admission that he "never did have a really clear idea of [Robin Vote] at any time" and that what he knew of her he "had gathered" from O'Connor and "later, after she went away, from others" parallels the reader's experience especially since, as Felix says, "the more we learn of a person, the less we know" (NW,111). In "Go Down, Matthew," Nora Flood is able to give a perspective on her relationship which her narcissism had previously denied her. In all of these chapters, Robin Vote appears—but only as she is represented in the discourse of others. Robin Vote is, except through *inference*, primarily absent from the denoted level of characterization and remains essentially unlocatable. In this way she represents, paradoxically, "that which cannot be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies,"<sup>5</sup> even though it is desired.

However, because "she" 'appears' in discourse *about* her, and primarily in the form of memory, she offers the reader problems of interpretation on still another level since she recalls, in Lacanian terms, the function of the "phallic mother" without 'whom' the speaking subject could not enter signification. Jane Gallop says: "In Lacanian terms, the silent interlocutor, the second person who never assumes the first

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5. Julia Kristeva in an interview entitled, "*La Femme, ce n'est jamais ça*" in *New French Feminisms*, p. 137-138.



person pronoun, is the subject presumed to know, the object of transference, the phallic Mother, in command of the mysterious processes of life, death, meaning and identity" (DS,115). Her discussion echoes O'Connor's remarks about Robin Vote, whom he refers to as "the eternal momentary— ... the second person singular" (NW,127) and who, as the object of the characters' desire serves as "the object of transference" much in the same way as "she" does, in the form of "text" for the reader. Moreover, it is "the silent interlocutor" who serves as a hypothetical place or space, in which is "constituted the I who speaks with him who hears" (KR,100). Robin Vote, "the second person singular" certainly serves as this locus for the reader as well as the characters yet "she" remains inaccessible, an aporia. The phallic mother, as it were, is indispensable to subjectivity and language, yet attempts to fix her in representation ultimately fail. For example, Felix's naming of Robin Vote, "you are a Baronin now" have little or no effect on her since she not only continues her wandering but repudiates the role Felix wishes to assign her.

The way Felix attempts to "fix" Robin Vote according to his own image, by naming her, is analogous to the reader who, faced with the novel's indeterminacy, attempts to exert control over the "text"/"her" by calling it/her "the phallic mother." This gesture recalls what Toril Moi says of naming: "[It is] not only an act of power, an enactment of Nietzsche's 'will to knowledge'; it reveals a desire to regulate and organize reality according to well-defined categories" (Moi,160). To name "her" is to attempt to impose order on that which resists representation and to do so is to enter into another, yet related area of the text's concerns with mimesis/ representation. Interpretation leads one into a necessary dilemma of extracting from a "reading" certain elements and suppressing others. A reading, therefore, is provisional, becoming "an image which is the stop the mind makes between uncertainties" yet, because it attempts

to name the "unnameable," it becomes "a fixed dismay," which is what Nora says she was to Robin when she tried to impose her moral code on her. Thus does the figure of "Robin Vote" become analogous to "(indeterminate) text" since, in attempting "to put into words" her reading of the novel, the reader comes to understand that her experience of the novel parallels Felix Volkbein's, "who never did have a really clear idea of her at any time."

The figure of Robin Vote causes readers so much consternation since she simultaneously occupies multiple, shifting and often contradictory positions. On one level, she functions as character, the elusive object and reflection of the characters' desires as well as recalling the way one posits subjectivity (through language) in the place of the other: a mirror image, a reflection. In *Nightwood*, Robin is, in Lacanian terms, both "other" and "Other." However, while as character she functions as a "presence" or the 'object' of the others' desire (and the reader's), she simultaneously appears, paradoxically as an absence. In this way, Robin Vote plays a dual role of character and sign. Lawrence Schehr's insight into textual production elucidates this notion. He suggests:

[W]e avoid the ambiguities of the text [if] we choose to believe, *a priori*, that we are dealing with characters. Robin, however, is the ultimate reduction to an absurdity of the situation: the presentation of Robin shows what price we pay for making the facile interconversion from semiosis (or diegesis) to mimesis and back again, as if the two processes were somehow equivalent. Death is at the center, and we cannot get from one to the other without passing through death. In other words, if we choose to ignore the mutually exclusive nature of sign and referent and choose, on the other hand, to make an equivalence or adequation between them, we must commit the ultimate violence. This violence produces death, which is both the founding point of origin of the equivalence and the absolute point past which we cannot go. In the crystallization of Robin the stakes are at their highest, and the mechanism is at its barest: sign can be exchanged for character and character for signs, but only if there is a sacrifice. (Schehr,44)

It is this "sacrifice" of which Schehr speaks which lies at the heart of the novel's concern with mimesis and representation. It also reflects how "language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the *cost* of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother" (DIL,136, emphasis mine). As in the final chapter, "The Possessed," the novel leads the reader to the (ambivalent) site/sight of that "sacrifice" where Robin Vote's enactment of a ritual mimetically re/presents the conditions underlying subjectivity. The reader need only ask, "what sacrifice is she (Robin) making?" to hear echoed its inverse construction: "What sacrifice makes me?!"

Since signification can be accomplished only through the subject's repression of the (erotic) desire for the mother, it is maintained "at the cost" of repressing the "continuous relation to the mother" (DIL,136).<sup>6</sup> Thus are desire for the mother, subjectivity and sacrifice inexorably linked yet they take the form of paradox since this

motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory; what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the *relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized - an idealization of primary narcissism. (KR,161)

While "La Somnambule" introduces Robin Vote to the novel, it sets the stage to explore the "fantasy" of which Kristeva speaks and draws the reader along with it. Through the characters' desire for the elusive Robin Vote, *Nightwood* explores the "idealization of the relationship that binds us to [the mother]," since the characters' (and the reader's) desire for Robin Vote is primarily narcissistic. Nora Flood's agonized, "She is myself, what am I to do" (NW,127), poignantly reflects the dynamics of this desire and depicts the precarious condition of the subject of discourse who can be constituted only through the "loss" of the mother, or the loss of that "relationship."

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6. I am suggesting that Kristeva's notions provide a lens through which to view the novel.

In the world of *Nightwood* everyone, including Felix, Nora and Jenny, "loses" Robin Vote and through each of their relationships the novel explores the gendered subject's relationship not only to the (archaic) (m)other but, through language, to the (phallic) (M)Other; that is, the text investigates through heterosexual, homosexual and lesbian desire the constitution of subjectivity through that subject's relationship to the (lost) mother. In marrying Robin, Felix "reiterat[es] the tragedy of his father." His attempts to name Robin a "Baronin" indicate that he wishes her to take his mother's place in that "tragedy" as Hedvig "had become a Baroness without question" (NW,5). Nora's narcissistic desire, while similar to Felix's in that she wants to transform Robin into her own image, is different in that, as she puts it, "a man is another person—a woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own" (NW,143). While both Felix's and Nora's desire for her deny Robin her own desire, they each reflect different relationships to the mother as primary object of desire. Felix's efforts "to acquaint [Robin] with the destiny for which he had chosen her—that she might bear sons who would recognize and honour the past" (NW,45) replicate the Oedipal contract in which Felix stands to marry his mother by proxy. His desires stand in contrast to the lesbian-fusion relationship between Nora Flood and Robin, a relationship which recalls the mother-daughter dyad and echoes Jane Gallop:

To say, 'Mother, I prefer a woman to you' is naively to believe one could ever totally separate the woman from the mother .... It is naively to believe that one could ever separate the daughter from the mother, secure their separate identities. It is to deny that one's mother is a woman, to deny any identification with one's mother ... The relation to the other woman only approaches its full complexity with some recognition that the 'other woman' as well as oneself is and is not 'Mother'. (DS,116)

While Felix and Nora desire Robin for apparently different reasons, each of their relationships are predicated upon a desire for the mother who always eludes them.

While Barnes does not idealize the lesbian relationships in the text, she does, however, grant space to an *other* desire. In disordering cultural attributions of gender and sexuality the novel transgresses social morality and by implication, linguistic codes through which social morality is inscribed and enacted. Accordingly, when "ordered systems of representation and thought" are disturbed, monologism falters. Out of the disruption a dream-logic emerges which indicts the dominant order by granting space to what is marginalized. Significantly, it is the emerging dream-logic which returns the reader to the site/sight of repressed desire. Stephen Gans's comments elucidate the implications underlying the novel's dream atmosphere:

In the essay, "Between the Signs," Pontalis retrieves Merleau Ponty's gesture towards psychoanalysis in his last writings in the *Visible and Invisible*, saying 'it was as if in the end, the *paradigm of perception were dreaming and the original perception an oneiric one*' (emphasis mine). He then concludes that, 'Following this line of thought, one can claim that all dreams are images of the mother, or that the mother is a dream'. Resonating to Freud's thesis that all dreams are wishes, Pontalis argues that 'Dreaming is above all the attempt to maintain an impossible union with the mother to preserve an undivided whole, to *move in a spacing is above all the attempt to maintain an impossible union with the mother to preserve an undivided whole, to move in a space prior to time.* (Gans, 83-84)

It is to this end that *Nightwood* creates a dream-logic. In this way Barnes inscribes, through writing which breaks through the "laws of language censored by grammar and semantics" and which calls attention to its role in representation, the body/territory of the lost mother and the ambivalence which accompanies this inscription.

## Reading the "Hieroglyphics of Sleep"

While most critics, until recently, have tended to dismiss the significance of *Nightwood's* "dream atmosphere," I suggest it is of the utmost importance since it is this trope which permits the writer/reader/dreamer passage into forbidden territory.<sup>7</sup> When in "Watchman, What of the Night?" Matthew O'Connor tells Nora Flood, "the sleeper is the proprietor of an unknown land" (NW,87), the reader can hear echoed in this remark one of the novel's fundamental concerns with the "unknown" or unnameable or, as in the case of dreams, the repressed. O'Connor's subsequent remarks to Nora Flood further elucidate this notion.

We wake from our doings in a deep sweat for that they happened in a house without an address, in a street in no town, citizenized with people with no names with which to deny them. Their very lack of identity makes them ourselves. For by a street number, by a house, by a name, we cease to accuse ourselves. Sleep demands of us a guilty immunity. (NW,88)

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7. Judith Lee, however, sees Nora's dreams as representing "a narcissistic denial of separation" and where Nora, as dreamer, "has the power to make her grandmother present over and over again" (Lee,213). While Jane Marcus asserts, "it is a house of incest," Alan Williamson's suggestion that "Nora's memories and dreams are the primary key to the subconscious forces which are driving her," ends up begging the question since he goes on to claim that "from Nora's memories we learn that her grandmother, whom she 'loved more than anyone' (NW,148), was a *disturbed personality with Lesbian tendencies*" (emphasis mine), a remark which, I believe, says more about him than about the novel. While Judith Lee sees Nora's dreams and her memory of her grandmother as being linked and repeatedly articulating "the pain of her loss and separation," Williamson's suggestion that "Nora's relationship with her grandmother established a primary pattern for her subsequent love-relationships," falls into moralizing essentialism since he claims that Nora's "sexual role is thus active and masculine, and her Lesbianism is its natural consequence" (Williamson,70). Elsewhere, Louis Kannenstine notes the dream-like quality of the scene where Robin is revived from sleep saying, "the image of the eland is dreamlike"; while he *mentions* that "the references to 'an image of a forgotten experience', ... that enclose ... [the image] form part of a movement that will culminate in Nora Flood's nocturnal obsession ..." he goes no further seeming to avoid explaining not only what he understands by the phrase, "an image of a forgotten experience" but also what he means by Nora's "nocturnal obsession" (Kannenstine,88).

In the above passage O'Connor's utterance implies the process by which the dreamer, through various unconscious processes, circumvents censorship allowing repressed elements entry into the dream-content so that "we cease to accuse ourselves."<sup>8</sup>

While O'Connor's remarks describe the dream process, the reader can perceive the way in which her relationship with the text parallels the dreamer's relationship to the dream. As does a dream, the novel proceeds in an imaginary space which precludes objects and physical geography, "annul[ling] 'presence in order to arrive at 'representation'."<sup>9</sup> As in a dream, the figures/characters in the novel carry the weight of both social/cultural "meaning" and personal "significance."<sup>10</sup> While figures in a dream appear to represent others, they actually serve to contain the *dreamer's* associations, wishes and desires which, because they are repressed, appear in the guise of an/other whose "identity" is but a construction of the dreamer's. As in a dream, the novel too, is "citizened with people" whose "very lack of identity *makes them ourselves*" (emphasis mine). Like the dreamer, the reader is "the proprietor of an unknown land" and, like the dreamer whose desires are "transposed ... into the language of dream-thoughts" (ID,381), the reader perceives those desires "transposed"

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8. I refer to the primary processes of condensation and displacement. Elizabeth Grosz says in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, "the unconscious wish may use secondary revision to blur the status of what it has expressed. This consists in various statements or thoughts, usually stated in the form, 'it is only a dream'. They enable the unconscious content which has inadvertently breached the barrier of censorship to be left unscrutinized by consciousness. The dream's content has been rendered acceptable only by a retrospective judgement diminishing its status or coherence" (Grosz,89). Later she says, "[the images used in the dream] provide the dream with a bland or confusing appearance which protects unconscious wish(es) from detection" (Grosz,89).

9. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim, (NW Haven, 1953), III, p. 307.

10. Wolfgang Iser suggests, "meaning is the referential totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading. Significance is the reader's absorption of the meaning into his own existence" (Iser,151).

onto the "surface" of the text and experiences them as being "out there."<sup>11</sup> The implications of this multiple-mirroring effect can be seen reflected in O'Connor's remarks to Nora Flood in "Go Down, Matthew" where he tells her that "Robin is not in your life, you are in her dream, you'll never get out of it" (NW, 146).

Much of *Nightwood*'s evocative power comes from its ability to implicate the reader in an "incessant process of exchange" which occurs in the 'space between' subjects and which most resembles the relationship the dreamer has to the dream. While it is this process which draws the reader into the dynamics of representation, it seems intended to confuse arbitrary borders between self and other, between reader and text and, between reader and writer. In the process the novel implicates the reader in the production of its meaning or, in other words, in its "writing." As the dreamer, who is the absent "author" of a dream, gains "disguised" access to repressed elements, so too does the reader of *Nightwood* who is drawn into its dream-logic and who, like the dreamer, must "read" the text like a rebus. In establishing a dream atmosphere, the novel works to implicate the reader not only in the production of meaning, but in the transgression of social censorship. Nowhere is the strategy more evident than in the chapter "Night Watch," where Nora's dream appears amidst all the novel's other phantasmagoria as a dream within a dream, which not only articulates the novel's concern with the lost mother but also provides its own metacommentary on the analogous links between the processes of writing/reading and dream-logic.

Agonized over the loss of Robin Vote, Nora Flood falls "into a dream which she

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11. Kristeva says, the reader represents "a doubly oriented entity: signifier in [her] relation to the text and signified in the relation between the subject of narration and [her]self" (KR, 45). That is, constructed as the "other" to the author, the reader as addressee performs a similar gesture in relation to the text and, in this coming and going movement constructs an "author" whose "text," like the dream, reflects the permutations of her own desire.



recognized ..." (NW,62), a dream which is central to the novel and which reinscribes the "original moment of traumatic loss" (Kaivola,89). In her dream, Nora is standing in her grandmother's room at the top of a stairwell and looking "down into the body of the house, as if from a scaffold," she sees the "upturned face of Robin, who had the smile of an 'only survivor', a smile which fear had married to the bone" (NW,62). From her position at the top of the stairs she calls Robin to her saying, "'come up, this is Grandmother's room,' yet knowing it was impossible because the room was taboo" (NW,62).

There are few critics, until recent feminist criticism, who come near to broaching the subject of Nora's "nocturnal obsession" and who suggest any link between the dream and (taboo) desire for the (lost) mother and women's writing. Nora's dream, however, provides the reader not only with the novel's underlying concern with "traumatic loss," separation and desire but locates these concerns at a textual level where the process of writing/reading parallels that of dreaming and, where the links between metaphor and metonymy, and condensation and displacement become evident as a means of articulating the forbidden. While the text serves as a surface for the reader's projections, it simultaneously comments on the process underlying its own textual construction which, like a dream, is comprised of elements which are "'drawn upon' as a prehistoric ruin is drawn upon, symbolizing [in the case of Nora's grandmother,] her life out of her life" (NW,63).<sup>12</sup> In Nora's dream "the figure of her

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12. While it is not my intention to equate Barnes's work with autobiography, this element certainly plays a part. As Nora's grandmother is "drawn upon" from life to create the dream figure, one cannot ignore the significance of Djuna Barnes's own grandmother, Zadel. See "My Art Belongs to Daddy: Incest as Exile, The Textual Economics of Hayford Hall," by Mary Lynn Broe in *Women's Writing in Exile* where she discusses the role played by Zadel Gustaf Barnes, Djuna's paternal grandmother, in Djuna's life. See also Louise A. DeSalvo's essay, "To Make Her Mutton at Sixteen," where she discusses *The Antiphon* in the context of the sexual abuse suffered by Djuna Barnes. As well see Andrew Field's unauthorized biography where he discusses Djuna Barnes's experience with sexual abuse.

grandmother who was not entirely her recalled grandmother," is a product of condensation and displacement since she is a composite figure who displaces that of the mother who is noticeably absent yet implied. The grandmother, dressed as a ring-master, "appeared to Nora as something being done to Robin, Robin disfigured and eternalized by the hieroglyphics of sleep and pain" (NW,63). This "something being done to Robin" implies Nora's unconscious processes whereby she can gain access to the mother by having Robin stand in for herself as daughter. If Robin is "disfigured and eternalized" it is only because Nora's unconscious has "drawn upon" her figure to serve as a rebus figure of loss—in "the hieroglyphics of sleep and pain" (NW,63). As a writer, Barnes employs strategies similar to Nora's dream and the reader, who sees herself reflected in Nora, finds herself not in Nora's dream but in Barnes's text where the "something" that is "being done" to Robin in Nora's dream appears uncannily similar to what is "being done" to *Nightwood* in a reading. Text and dream interweave and the distinctions between writer/reader and dreamer collapse in the process. O'Connor's comment to Nora, "Robin is not in your life, you are in her dream, you'll never get out of it" (NW,146), takes on greater significance since it describes the incestuous relationship with the maternal body which both writer and reader desire and which, since taboo, can be accomplished only through the dream or through *writing*.

While O'Connor's utterance can be understood to shed light on the profound narcissism<sup>13</sup> which underlies the relationship between the two women, Robin Vote and

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13. While I will be using the term "narcissism," I am aware of the variety of meanings attached to it and that it can be used to describe, as Alice Miller in *The Drama of The Gifted Child* suggests, "a condition, a state of development, a character trait, an illness. Yet, [she says,] when used in its adverbial and adjectival forms, the word becomes more precise ..." (Miller,xvii). In this thesis I am using the word in two ways. The first, when I am referring to the "fusion-delusion" relationships between the characters in which "the individual blunts and distorts his own awareness of separateness, creates the illusion of fusion, and is precariously gratified on an imaginary basis in a fusion relationship with the other person ..." (Fierman,208). Secondly, when I am referring to the reader/text configuration

Nora Flood, it can also be seen to articulate the reader's experience with a text which reconstructs the narcissist's dilemma and which can be heard echoed in Nora Flood's, "Matthew, have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?" (NW,152). Nora's utterance reveals her con/fusion between subject(s) and the object of her desire; "someone" becomes "it" and "it" reveals itself to be one's own projection: a fantasy where subject and object are fused. While fusion is a delusion, its function is to avoid the experience of separateness, of separation from the (fantasy) mother in order to maintain an illusion of unity and thus to avoid death.

In becoming an "object" of the reader's interpretive speech, the text reconstitutes "the [subject's/reader's] desire to return to the archaic mother who is resistant to meaning" (KR,311). Nora Flood's relationship to Robin Vote is both narcissistic and incestuous and mirrors the reader's attempts to place the "unnameable" or the "archaic mother within the order of language" (KR,311). In *Nightwood* this is all 'done with mirrors' since Robin Vote and Nora Flood simultaneously occupy the dyadic roles of mother and daughter each mirroring the other but refracted by the reader's perspective. When Nora says of Robin, "I saw her always as a tall child," her utterance is marked by what she doesn't say; that the role of child necessitates that of mother and in Nora's case, an indulgent one since, as she says, Robin "would sit at home all day, looking out of the window or playing with her toys, trains, and animals and cars to wind up, and dolls and marbles and soldiers" (NW,147). However, while Robin plays "child" to Nora's "mother," she serves as (archaic) "Mother" to the

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where a "reading" of *Nightwood* implicates the reader in what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "a mimesis of process" where the reader as "co-creator" of the text has demands placed upon her for "intellectual and affective responses" which, in turn, are "shown to be *part of* [her] life experience" (Hutcheon,5). Taken in tandem, the two "forms" of narcissism have their roots in the speaking subject's *fantasy* of a continuous relation to the mother, a fantasy which, culturally, forms the basis for the incest taboo.

reader's narcissistic "child"—a complex situation which can be heard to echo in Nora's confused, "she is myself; what am I to do?" (NW,127). This utterance indicates the recognition of a fusion relationship, one which replicates the mother-daughter dyad since Nora realizes that her "lover," who is also her "child," is an idealized version of herself. The reader's con/fusion with *Nightwood's* multiple-mirroring results in the reconstitution of the phenomenology of narcissism since the reader comes to recognize that the "text" she is reading is, in fact, a version of herself. When Nora Flood says of Robin, "I thought I loved her for her own sake, and I found it was for my own," the reader comes face to face with the reflection of her own narcissism as it is reconstituted in Nora Flood's desire for Robin Vote and replicated in her relationship to a text which acts out, or *inscribes*, rather than *describes* this desire. Because the reader's *relationship* to the text parallels the fusion relationship between Nora Flood and Robin Vote, *she* realizes that she is unable to articulate that experience since fusion invites "a discourse of delirium when it forecloses its object" (KR,308).

While a fusion relationship grants one the illusion of unity, it is an analogous return to the "unnameable," the fantasy of a continuous relation to the mother. Nora's utterance, however, is in retrospect and reveals that she has already become conscious of her relationship as a projected fantasy bond. She is able to articulate, or rather to offer an *interpretation* of what she previously enacted unconsciously. Thus the reader can see reflected her own attempts to interpret the text as a necessary separation from the fusion relationship which the text offers and which, in effect, reinscribes the lost maternal territory. As Nora and the reader discover, interpretation means separation, and separation not only means the dissolution of fantasy but sacrifice.

## CHAPTER IV

### "THE POSSESSED"

*Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me - the other that I am and am not .... In the past, when carried to a rather spectacular degree, it was called "possession." Being possessed is not desirable for a masculine imaginary, which would interpret it as passivity - a dangerous feminine position ....*

- Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," (p. 86)

*Here everything is unexpected, out of place, incompatible and impermissible if judged by life's ordinary, "normal" course.*

- Mikhail Bakhtin on Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*

*Ritual itself constitutes an instruction.*

- Matthew O'Connor to Nora Flood, (NW, 150)

Only four pages in length, *Nightwood's* final chapter, "The Possessed," is possibly its most disturbing and its most controversial. As readers we are witnesses to the bewildering return of Robin Vote, the novel's "wanderer," to Nora Flood's ruined chapel where, in a sequence which most resembles a dream, she begins to perform an unusual ritual: "On a contrived altar, before a Madonna, two candles were burning .... Before the image lay flowers and toys. Standing before them in her boy's trousers was Robin" (NW, 169). Interrupted by Nora Flood's abrupt entry, Robin slides down to floor level with Nora's terror-stricken dog. When the dog begins to bark and to howl, Robin Vote joins him in the cacophony, "bark[ing] also, crawling after him - barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching" (NW, 170). As witness to this incident, the reader who asks, "what ritual is Robin about to enact?" finds herself facing the riddle which this rebus-text presents. What is the significance of this profoundly dream-like scene with Robin on all fours laughing, crying and barking with Nora's dog? Since Nora Flood's response to Robin is never revealed, the reader finds herself assuming

what *might have been* Nora's liminal position at the jamb of the chapel door. Left to puzzle over the scene, the reader finds herself implicated in the 'sacrifice' in which Robin enacts the dual roles of celebrant and victim. However, while Robin Vote figures in the sacrificial role of scapegoat, it is the reader who, finding her own reflection in the spectacle, must come to terms with the implications of who or what is "possessed." If the final chapter "recapitulates the desire of Barnes's characters" (Singer,72), it does so likewise with the reader who finds herself implicated in this last dream-like sequence in a ritual and textual spectacle which, paradoxically, enacts through the figure of Robin Vote, the loss and recapture of the forbidden 'maternal'. Since the figure of Robin Vote serves as both celebrant and scapegoat, she is, indeed, "meet of child and desperado"—and thus, for character and reader, bears the weight of the burden of representation and mimesis, of innocence and guilt, of repression and desire. Finally, it is through the figure of Robin Vote that the triadic combination of reader and text, writer and text and, finally, reader and writer, interpenetrate and "meet" at the "dwelling place of the other" and, being "possessed" of one another, become complicit in the reinscription of the lost mother.

Early critics of *Nightwood* are nearly unanimous in assigning a pejorative form of the term "possessed" to Robin Vote, whom they see as depraved, fallen, and bestial and who, in this capacity, serves as a 'scapegoat' figure. Joseph Frank calls the final chapter "a strange and horrible scene" (Frank,48) in which the events "clearly indicate ... that Robin has abandoned her efforts to rise to the human and is returning to the animal state" (Frank,49). Earlier, Frank calls Robin "an amorphous mass of moral possibility" (Frank,34) but that "she is both innocent and depraved - meet of child and desperado - precisely because she has not reached the human state where moral values become relevant" (Frank,33). These sentiments are echoed later by Louis Kannenstine who suggests that "Robin is [shown to be] ... distanced from humanity by the

description of her flesh as of the texture of plant life ... (Kannenstine,116). While Kannenstine's remarks recall Freud's discussion of the uncanny, they also suggest Kannenstine's view is staunchly logocentric since his remarks appear predicated upon the opposition of culture and nature and give priority to the first term while the second term marks a fall. Kannenstine's assertions also follow closely along in Joseph Frank's moral footsteps when he claims, "[t]here is salvation in her ultimate damnation ... [where, he claims, Robin] becomes one with Nora's dog" (Kannenstine,116). This remark is significant because he does not say *who* attains "salvation in [Robin's] ultimate damnation," yet, tellingly, he continues, "when she goes down with the frantic dog in Nora's chapel, she is wholly possessed ..." (Kannenstine,118). Because he sees *Robin* as "wholly possessed," he implies that she, as surrogate victim, serves as the container for whatever "evil" must be expelled in order to attain "salvation."

René Girard's discussion of "possession" in *Violence and the Sacred*, which echoes Cixous's, is relevant here, since Robin Vote is seen as the one "possessed" and who, therefore, 'stands in place of' the reader, taking on the surrogate role. She therefore comes to be seen as the *externalized* "apparition of the monstrous double [which, while it] cannot be verified empirically ..." appears in ritual during "hysterical mimesis" when the subject of the action (although here it is Robin), *seems* to be responding to some outside influence (emphasis mine) but is responding to the phenomenon of "double vision" wherein the subject

two series of images as exterior to himself .... A moment later one of the two ... is perceived as "not me," and the other as "me" .... The subject watches the monstrosity that takes shape within him and outside him simultaneously" [and, subsequently] "feels that the most intimate regions of his being have been invaded by a supernatural creature who also besieges him without. Horrified, he finds himself the victim of a double assault to which he cannot respond. Indeed, how can one defend oneself against an enemy who blithely ignores all barriers between inside and outside? (Girard,164-165)

In "The Possessed," the reader's complicity in the ritual manifests itself in her experience of the shifting signification of the figure of Robin Vote who emerges, as "writing," to occupy "the dwelling place of the other in me." In the uncanny space between reader and text emerges the multiply-determined figure of Robin Vote who permits the reader access to the 'ritual' since she appears, on the one hand, to be the subject of the action who is "possessed" and whom the reader perceives as 'external'. As "The Possessed," it is Robin Vote who "seems to be responding to some outside influence" and, is *seen* as being the "victim of a double assault" and in the throes of an "hysterical mimesis." Yet, on the other hand, Robin Vote paradoxically becomes the manifestation of the reader's "double vision" and, as her "monstrous double ... takes shape within [her] and outside [her] simultaneously ...," surrogate positions double and shift to the extent that if Robin Vote is "The Possessed," so, too, is the reader.

While both Joseph Frank and Louis Kannenstine appear fixated on distinctions which separate the 'human' from the 'beast', and which designate Robin Vote as a scapegoat figure, their assertions appear as the diluted form of an earlier critic's allegations. Wallace Fowlie asserts that the "theme of bestiality and demonic possession in *Nightwood* rises clearly, for the first time, in these last five pages."<sup>1</sup> When he goes on to say, "here meet in a wildly incongruous setting, the two forces which have waged the tragedy: on the one hand, the supernatural force of evil, expelled from Nora's dog and invested in the body of Robin; and on the other hand, the supernatural force of good drawing Robin to the altar before which literally she performs the antics of evil" (Fowlie, 143) the reader can detect the gesture which formulates the equation, woman = beast = evil. These critics' choice of the terms, "salvation," "ultimate damnation," "antics of evil" and "human state" demonstrate the

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1. Actually, the New Directions edition of *Nightwood* in which "The Possessed" appears is four pages in length.



highly charged moral assumptions behind their assertions. Moreover, they resonate with the implications of Toril Moi's claim that "what is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies" (Moi, 166). It is no coincidence that Robin Vote, a bisexual woman who rejects marriage and motherhood, becomes, for these readers a scapegoat, whom they perceive as literally 'going to the dogs'. While these comments betray the aesthetics they espouse, they can also be seen to be reflected in the puritanism practised by Nora Flood whose conceptual view not only creates 'perversion' and 'depravity' but projects it onto another so that it is experienced as external to one's self and need be 'sacrificed', or expelled, in the form of a scapegoat or surrogate victim.

While more recent feminist criticism seeks to provide an alternative view to dominant, moral paradigms it, too, has its problems. For example, I find interesting but problematic, comments by critics like Shari Benstock who suggests that Robin Vote is "Our Lady of the Wild Things, savage Diana the huntress with her deer and dogs, the virgin Artemis ..." (Benstock, 255) and Jane Marcus, who claims that "*Nightwood* is the sacred grove of Diana" and that the ending is a "triumphant ... rite of female connection between the mythological Diana and the Madonna before whose altar Robin bows down" (Marcus, 7). While I understand the critics' concern to read *Nightwood* in a feminist mythological context, I find readings such as these problematic for two reasons. The reader merely substitutes one myth for another. Although the desire to read *Nightwood* as a "triumphant ... rite of female connection" appears positive, the reader is relieved of the burden of examining this *desire*. Moreover, this critical gesture tends to idealize the lesbian relationships and thereby to deny the problems inherent in the narcissistic, fused relationships which the novel addresses, as well as the social significance of those relationships. In this instance, I agree, to a certain extent,

with comments such as those made by Teresa de Lauretis who

find[s] it impossible to share some women's belief in a matriarchal past or a contemporary 'matristic' realm presided over by the Goddess, a realm of female tradition, marginal and subterranean and yet all positive and good, peace-loving, ecologically correct, matrilineal, matrifocal, non-Indo European, and so forth; in short, a world untouched by ideology, class and racial struggle .... (de Lauretis,20)

I do not, however, ascribe completely to de Lauretis's materialist point of view since I also perceive it as a way of denying what Jane Gallop describes as the uncanny effects of the text—effects which are often difficult to articulate since they involve resistance and repression. Robin Vote's actions *are* disturbing; in fact, they are painful, but not necessarily because they present *her in extremis*, but because they serve as the container for the reader's unacknowledged fears that whatever "possesses" Robin Vote might surface to take "possession" of them. In "The Possessed," Robin Vote's actions are irreconcilable with "normal" experience. She appears, like Felix at Count Altamonte's party, in "Bow Down," out of control, irrational, "possessed." As Cixous asserts, "being possessed is not desirable for a masculine Imaginary, which would interpret it as passivity - a dangerous feminine position ...." Robin Vote is, therefore, not to be identified with, unless at great peril. To avoid identification with Robin, the only "other" who is present and with which the reader can identify is Nora's dog since it is unclear if Nora has gone unconscious or not! Judging by the many similar responses to this chapter in which Robin is depicted as "seemingly bereft of human consciousness" (Gerstenberger,137), many critics seem adamant in their attempts to disassociate themselves from the woman who "on all fours [is crawling along the floor] dragging her knees ... barking in a fit of laughter" (NW,169-170). Since they seem intent upon maintaining a safe, rational perspective, they often appear, much like Nora's dog, on the defensive and seem, like him, to be "backed into the farthest corner

... as if to avoid something ..." (NW,170). However, to avoid participation in a sacrificial ritual is a "criminal" act, it is the reader who must come to terms with the terms of her avoidance.

More recent criticism, while decidedly feminist, presents a riddle of another kind. If it mentions the final chapter at all it does so almost as an adjunct, a fact I found puzzling.<sup>2</sup> I thought at first that early Barnes criticism reflected dominant, Western ideological values, was largely unexamined and was, since it was done predominantly by male critics, frequently a projection of their misogyny. Why, then, does not more recent feminist criticism examine this chapter in more detail? Surely, I reflected, it cannot be that these critics find the chapter uninteresting? I wondered, at first, if perhaps their silence was not strategic. Were certain feminist critics resisting theorizing about Robin Vote because they thought "to have a theory of woman is already to reduce the plurality of woman to the coherent and thus phallogocentric representations of theory" (DS,63)? Or could it be that their silence is a *bona fide response* to the fact that the final scene leads the reader, like Nora Flood who may or may not stand in the chapel doorway, to the threshold of the unspeakable, the unnameable, the forbidden?

As a reader who has speculated for long periods of time over Robin's actions in "The Possessed," I must admit that in spite of constructing various theoretical

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2. The recently published (1991), *Silence and Power A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe, contains eighteen essays on works by Barnes, *Nightwood* included. Not one of the essays discusses the final chapter. Karen Kaivola's recent *All Contraries Confounded* (1991) mentions the final scene saying, "what occurs between Robin and the dog is alarming, frightening, a spectacle produced by a warp in the representational fabric of language" (p. 66). Although she mentions earlier that the prose in this chapter "foregrounds rhythm and cadence" to the extent that as "the clauses become shorter and shorter [they] produce a sense of sexual intensity" she neither locates it nor discusses it any further, although her remarks seem intended to implicate Robin and the dog sexually.

scenarios, *I do not know* what she is doing. However, this statement needs some qualification. When Donna Gerstenberger says that "the reader who comes wholly to *Nightwood* must be willing to pay the same price O'Connor has paid for his, at best, contingent wisdom" and, "... for many readers the price has been unthinkable" (Gerstenberger, 137), she is broaching the subject for, when Robin Vote 'goes to the dogs' barking, laughing and weeping, she is somewhere *outside* language and that "price," certainly, is "unthinkable." Although Gerstenberger does not elaborate on what she means by "paying the price" for "contingent wisdom," I believe her assertions are based upon the fact that since the novel leads the reader to confront his or her own fictions of 'knowledge', the implications for one's notions of identity and subjectivity are likewise "unthinkable."<sup>3</sup> For example, when I say, "I do not know" what Robin Vote is doing, I am acknowledging that whatever I say about her is a provisional 'construction' and, that any desires I may have for an 'absolute truth' are based upon a fantasy of wholeness—of unity—and are bound to be frustrated.

Unable to enter the forbidden territory of the mother without paying an "unthinkable price," the reader encounters resistance and relies upon Robin Vote to act as a surrogate subject who, as a child regains access to the "mother" but in turn, must pay the price which the reader both fears and desires. However, the final scene is

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3. I am alluding here to Jane Gallop's discussion of the "mirror stage" as it relates to the constitution of the subject. She quotes Lacan: "This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Ascent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety (Lacan, "Some Reflections on the Ego," *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* 34 (1953), p. 15. Gallop goes on to elucidate Lacan's comments: "The 'maturation of the power' which the infant anticipated now has a new name: 'self-mastery'. Yet the "self" that must be mastered is the product of an anticipatory illusion. To "master" the self, to understand it, would be to realize its falsity, and therefore the impossibility of coinciding with one's self. But that moment would also be the revelation of the meaning of the past (the future perfect), and so the acquisition and comprehension of the past are also infinitely deferred" (Gallop, 84).

paradoxical because it depicts not an 'either/or' situation, but a 'both/and' since, through the mediation of Robin Vote, the reader transgresses the taboo and, simultaneously, gains access to the forbidden mother while commemorating her loss. The tension in the scene is obvious and the crisis swift to come. But how does the novel bring this about?

The fact that Robin Vote has been interrupted in a ritual indicates that far from being "crippled" in her "motive power" as the narrator suggests, she is about to perform a deliberate and symbolic act, an act in which she, as "meet of child and desperado," is both celebrant and victim. Although she appears as the figure who is "possessed," it is apparent that she has some particular end in sight since she has, in fact, "contrived" an altar and placed upon it sacrificial objects. While these "surrogate objects" (Girard,2) serve in sacrifice to 'take the place' of something else, in *Nightwood* they also recall how language, and thus mimesis, function textually as surrogates for the reader and writer. For Robin, these objects function associatively and recall her (incestuous) fusion relationship with Nora Flood in which she was 'child' to Nora's 'mother' as well as the heterosexual relationship she had with Felix Volkbein in which she becomes a biological mother but repudiates her child. Before the image of a Madonna, (which recalls O'Connor's remarks to Nora, "You almost caught hold of her, but she put you cleverly away by making you the Madonna" (NW,146)), Robin has placed both "flowers and toys" and she, herself, is standing before them, a celebrant, dressed "in her boy's trousers" (NW,169). By placing these "surrogate objects" before an image of the Madonna, Robin appears to be enacting, or mediating, a ritual sacrifice commemorating her dual role of child (daughter) and mother. Since the rite she performs is, like all sacrifice, based on substitution, she is both celebrant and sacrifice and becomes thus, for the reader, a "meet" of innocence and guilt

corresponding, in degree and kind, to the reader's own. Since the toys which she places on the altar recall her own narcissism, and the Madonna figure her idealized relationship to Nora Flood, the ritual appears to move in two directions. On the one hand, the objects commemorate the *loss* of the idealized mother and, on the other hand, the figure of Robin Vote, as (the reader's) surrogate (victim), and double, seeks access to her. Moreover, the sacrifice which she performs is replicated at the textual level and is one in which the reader, to a greater or lesser degree, participates. Since, in this chapter at least, Robin Vote appears not as "sign" but as "character," this process of "exchange," in which the reader participates, demands, as Lawrence R. Schehr points out, a "sacrifice":

[I]f we choose to ignore the mutually exclusive nature of sign and referent and choose ... to make an equivalence or adequation between them, we must commit the ultimate violence. This violence produces death, which is both the founding point of origin of the equivalence and the absolute point past which we cannot go. In the crystallization of Robin the stakes are at their highest, and the mechanism is at its barest: signs can be exchanged for character and character for signs, but only if there is a sacrifice (Schehr,44).

Although the "exchange" between character and sign requires a sacrifice, this process does provide the reader and writer with a passport through forbidden terrain since it is the *passage, per se*, that *signifies* what is "untenable" in the symbolic function.<sup>4</sup> If the reader will recall Nora's words about Robin, "[she] is incest, too; that is one of her powers" (NW,127), she will find articulated the *modus operandi* of a text which "possesses" her in reinscribing the desire for (the fantasy of) a lost maternal territory. But since Robin Vote appears as 'character' in the exchange, she doubles as

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4. Julia Kristeva recalls the terms of this exchange in which "symbolic and social cohesion are maintained by virtue of a sacrifice ... so that only thus are signifying and social structures clinched even though they are *ignorant of this sacrifice* ..." (DL,138, emphasis mine). The "ignorance" of which Kristeva speaks serves as a warning device located at the site of resistance and repression and signals the approach to forbidden territory.

the reader's double and this 'manifestation' serves to contain and also to reflect the reader's ignorance of her own 'sacrifice'. Thus does 'ignorance' reveal the 'forbidden' at its core and thus does *Nightwood* through inversion inscribe the story of loss and forbidden desire. O'Connor's warning to Nora Flood, "be careful of the minds you get into," could thus just as easily serve as *caveat* to the reader of *Nightwood* who learns that the "mind" she gets into is her own, and that who she has "desired" all along is herself.

## CONCLUSION

### nightwood (3)<sup>1</sup>

this place is between anything you like  
the back which, for them is always the front;  
of course the silk passage  
a forgotten path  
half-men in half-light in fixed orbit : certain envy  
ineluctable dark elle penumbral (a-not pha-speak,  
aphatos  
this is between anything you like (twice  
two-half turns portrait of an eel eclipse  
this is between anything you like  
there's no  
getting out of it.

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1. An earlier version of this poem appeared in HOW(ever), Vol. 6, No 2, October 1990.



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