

FICTIVE ELEMENTS WITHIN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PROJECT:
NECESSARY CONFLATION OF GENRES IN NIGHTWOOD BY DJUNA
BARNES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines a woman's attempt to come to terms with her own life and the relationship that most defined and influenced that life. In Nightwood, Djuna Barnes rejects conventional linear narrative structure in favor of Modernist experimentation with literary forms to tell the true story of her ruined love affair. In the book, she uses fictive devices which allow her not only to create an artistically compelling narrative, but also to reveal a more experientially accurate account of her relationship with Thelma Wood. Based on a close reading of Nightwood, both the published version and the original unexpurgated version, as well as interpretation of autobiographical and psychological criticism, this study explores Barnes's conflation of the genres of autobiography and fiction. The first section explains the background of Barnes's life and the effect of her traumatic childhood and her doomed love affair on the text. The next section establishes Nightwood as an authentically autobiographical project despite the author's experimentation with narrative form and textual construction via the inclusion of fictional elements. The final section examines not only how Barnes uses specific fictive devices in the text, but also her authorial motives for their inclusion. This examination proves the thesis that Barnes's use of fiction within autobiography serves to textually capture the emotional and psychological truth of the loss of her beloved and communicate her lived experience of that loss to the reader more effectively than more traditional forms of autobiographical writing.

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Thank you, Toby.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Sherry Niven, whose love and support have made everything in my life possible. Her approach to life is the example that I always try, though often fail, to emulate. She is the most extraordinary person I know and I want to be just like her when I grow up. Massive respect, Mom.

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of literary Modernism, as Ezra Pound defined it, was “Make it new.” This desire to break with traditional literary modes in the years following the first World War was pursued in myriad ways by the writers of the era. Critic Sabine Vanacker describes the central literary aim of the Modernist movement:

...the radical disruption of linear flow of narrative; the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause and effect development thereof; the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical meaning of literary action; the adoption of a tone of epistemological self-mockery aimed at naive pretensions of bourgeois rationality; the opposition of inward consciousness to rational, public, objective discourse; and an inclination to subjective distortion to point up the evanescence of the social world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

(Vanacker 188)

Experimentation with the thematic and technical elements of the novel resulted not only in redefining and broadening the genre, but also in providing a unique opportunity for women in the Modernist movement to write outside of traditional linear narrative structure.

Djuna Barnes was one of these female Modernists who employed a dramatically different and highly personal approach to reconfigure and fuse the genres of autobiography and fiction. In Nightwood, Barnes creates a subjective,

yet psychologically and emotionally autobiographical narrative written in her own “poetry-prose” style to examine her relationship with her lover Thelma Wood. By utilizing a radically unique structure and thinly fictionalized characters based on real people, the novel conveys with unflinching accuracy the painful interior truths of the actual relationship. Barnes employs fiction rather than adhering stringently to pre-Modernist, traditional modes of autobiographical writing to represent the experience and the impact of her affair with Wood and, in so doing, creates a conflation of the two genres.

In Nightwood, Djuna Barnes struggles with the dilemma inherent in the task of “writing” the woman with whom she is in love. The direct result of this struggle is that, as author, she must rob the loved one, the object of desire, of her subjectivity in order to capture her on the page. The author, although attempting to present an objective portrayal of her lover, can only express her as “the other.” This objectification necessarily distorts the actual woman by reducing her to a fictive construct. The fictional character of the lover becomes an ever-malleable conglomeration of various authorial motives and desires. Within the narrative, Barnes possesses the power to recreate, re-contextualize, and control her lover in all the ways she could not in their actual relationship.

This existential dilemma becomes more complex when we consider the nature of female subjectivity, or lack thereof, as outlined by Simone de Beauvoir in her classic feminist tome The Second Sex. De Beauvoir asserts that women are forever destined to be the second sex because they exist as the objectified “other” in relation to the male. Her theory is that human interaction is predicated

on the assumption that the male is the creator of meaning in his own life and possesses his own subjectivity whereas the female is permanently objectified and does not create meaning. The female's very identity is conferred on her by a society that privileges only that which is male.

This traditional existential model of personal subjectivity within a romantic relationship traditionally hinges on the interaction between a man and a woman to determine the distribution of power. In Nightwood, we see a very similar type of subject/object dynamic emerge in the narrative of the lesbian affair between the author and the woman who inspired the book. To explain how this classic gender-based mode of interaction and the resulting subject/object positions develop in a same sex relationship, it is important to link such interaction and development to the concept of authorial power and the incorporation of fictional elements into the autobiographical project.

In Nightwood Barnes strives to communicate the "facticity" of interiority and actual experiences by employing various fictive devices. An examination of this conflation of autobiography and fiction reveals that the privileged position of the author, as one who writes and therefore objectifies, resembles the gender-based model but with a significant difference: this model occurs not as the result of the power of the male relative to the female, but as a product of the power of the author over the text and its characters. This authorial position of privilege produces a narrative environment which is constantly moving back and forth along the continuum between fact and fiction. The narrative and those it represents occupy the position of objectified "other" relative to the complete

subjectivity of its author and is, therefore, constantly vulnerable to distortion.

Barnes, although attempting to faithfully portray her lover, also seeks to control her. This creates a narrative environment wherein it is impossible to write the character of the lover in any way that does not position her as “the other”.

Robin Vote, the character at the center of Nightwood, who Barnes based on her lover Thelma Wood, becomes a vehicle which allows the author, in the controlled setting of her own text, to explore her failed relationship from the inside out and confront not only her lost love, but also herself.

To further understand the intimate nature of the interaction between Barnes and her text, it is necessary to establish Nightwood as fully autobiographical and examine the function of the included elements of fiction, technically as well as thematically, within the narrative. Also necessary is an exploration of the reasons behind the author’s need to employ and manipulate the genres of autobiography and fiction via the examination of specific fictive devices and, most importantly, the position of power that the author occupies as sole creator and revisionist when writing autobiographically.

Chapter One: Situating Nightwood in Autobiography

Although Nightwood is the work for which Djuna Barnes is best known, she had in fact enjoyed a varied and highly successful artistic and literary career prior to its publication. In 1913, as a twenty-one-year old art student at The Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, she began to supplement her income by writing poems and stories for publication in the many local papers that existed at that time (Herring 74). Due to the almost immediate success of her published work, she left art school and was hired first by the Brooklyn Daily Eagle and then by the New York Press as journalist and illustrator. While working for The New York Press as well as freelancing for many other publications, Barnes quickly emerged as a fearless, stylish and completely modern woman. Her journalistic style displayed not only her lightning quick wit and dark humor, but also the jaundiced eye and jaded sensibility which would become the hallmarks of all of her later writing. She was equally well known for her illustrations, most of which were portraits done somewhat in the style of Aubrey Beardsley. Her drawings, like her reportage, displayed chic urban decadence and a sense of ultra sophisticated ennui as well as a flair for the grotesque. Barnes's work, even in this early phase of her career, shows not only her penchant for, but also her deft manipulation of, the aesthetic elements she would utilize so skillfully years later in Nightwood.

It was through her extremely lucrative career as a prominent journalist and illustrator that Barnes became a part of the upper echelons of New York's social and artistic circles where she made friends and established contacts with people such as Peggy Guggenheim and, most importantly perhaps, Berenice Abbott,

who would eventually play a vital role in the production of Nightwood (Herring 95).

Between 1913 and 1921, as biographer Phillip Herring describes, “So successful was Djuna Barnes with her articles and drawings at evoking the New York scene that opportunity began to regularly stop at her door. It was McCall's Magazine that sent the twenty-nine-year-old Barnes to Europe in 1921“ (Herring 97). She was paid the hefty sum of fifteen hundred dollars per article to travel around Europe interviewing people such as the Duchess of Marlborough and Maurice Maeterlinck as well as anyone else she deemed “worthy of interest” to American readers (Herring 100). To Djuna Barnes, “worthy of interest” meant only one thing: artists—particularly writers. She interviewed most of the prominent members of the expatriate community in Paris while managing to establish herself in their midst.

Before departing for Europe, apart from her duties in New York as a journalist and illustrator, Barnes also wrote and produced plays alongside Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell as a member of the prestigious Provincetown Players and published her short stories and poems. In 1915 a chapbook of her illustrated poetry entitled The Book of Repulsive Women was published, and it was also during this period that several New York galleries held exhibitions of her drawings. Although for many years after she went to Paris Djuna was forced to earn a living as a reporter, it was very much as a fellow artist that she confidently situated herself amongst the expatriate elite.

It was in Paris in 1921 that Djuna Barnes met the woman who would change

her life and provide the inspiration for Nightwood. Thelma Wood was a nineteen-year-old St. Louis native whose hard drinking and wild carousing had earned her more of a reputation in the American circles she frequented than did her prodigious talent as a sculptress (Field 132). Many sources mention that she was also famous for driving her huge red Bugatti convertible, minus its muffler, at breakneck speed through the narrow streets and alleys of Montparnasse and the Latin Quarter. Thelma, according to all accounts, was an exceedingly striking young girl. She claimed to be part Native American and looked it, with her dark hair and eyes as well as her nearly six-foot height and muscular physique (Field 114). Thelma tended to dress in a simple, often sloppy, fashion that apparently did not hide her innate feminine allure. Many accounts of Thelma during her early days in Paris focus solely on this young girl's sexual magnetism (Herring 158). In 1933, one of Peggy Guggenheim's lovers remembered her vividly: "The obvious thing about Thelma was sexual vitality...she was just a strapping fucking wench" (Herring 159). And novelist Emily Coleman, who would become Barnes's closest friend in the 1930's and remain so throughout much of the rest of her life, recorded in her diary her own impressions of Thelma as well as a conversation with the writer John Holms:

I said, "What gave one the feeling that she lives for sex?" He said the way her eyes were set, and her face was coarse (which I couldn't see), and said she was made for fucking. I said, "But she has a damnably sweet, unaffected manner, something straightforward about her which, in someone with such a handsome face is most exciting physically. "If I had met her at

another time, I would have taken pains to see her again. But as it was I was too divided, my vanity and curiosity were stimulated (I felt she was slightly attracted to me)...I've never seen a more attractive woman, even on the stage, they don't often have such a compelling face as that. She makes one want to make love. But it isn't in obvious ways, that's what is moving. She *seems* to be interested only in what is going on. One feels that underneath that reserve there is a tremendous power...She hardly opened her mouth the whole evening, her reticence and shyness of course adding to the charm of her handsome face and bent-down head. Next to Thelma (that name!) Djuna appears, to the ordinary eye, quite unattractive. (Herring 160)

It's no mystery that Thelma Wood made quite an impression on Djuna Barnes when they were introduced at the Hotel Jacob in 1921 by Thelma's lover and Barnes's old friend from her Greenwich Village days, photographer Berenice Abbott. As Barnes would later quip, "Well I gave Berenice the extra 'e' in her name and she gave me Thelma. I don't know who made out better" (Broe 108).

Despite Thelma's apparently overwhelming sex appeal, the explanation for the searing intensity of the relationship, which developed almost immediately between Barnes and Wood, lies deep in what was, throughout her entire life, the most haunting and treacherous terrain of Barnes's entire psyche--her family and her childhood. Barnes would often remark that she loved Thelma because she resembled her grandmother Zadel Barnes. Due to the survival of overtly erotic correspondence between the adolescent Barnes and her paternal grandmother, it is possible to see that Zadel was undoubtedly the first great love—romantically

and sexually--of Barnes's life (Herring 145). Photographic evidence, however, clearly shows that there is not even a remote resemblance between Zadel and Thelma. It seems clear that the resemblance Barnes spoke of was far more significant than mere physicality.

To thoroughly appreciate Barnes' writing and her overwhelming need to write autobiographically, it is necessary to understand the extremely strange and abusive childhood that she was never able to come to terms with--either in life or in art. Barnes struggled with her personal demons in her art by including in nearly every one of her literary endeavors, the very same horrific tales of abuse and peculiar incest themes. She was compelled by her troubling childhood and adolescence to write of her abuse again and again. She wrote not only to understand herself--the woman who was formed from that terrible upbringing--but also, perhaps, to bear witness in print to the violation of her young self and the complicity in that abuse by those--such as her mother and grandmother--who should have offered her refuge and protection.

Djuna Barnes was born on June 12, 1892, in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, the daughter of Elizabeth Chappell and Wald Barnes. "Barnes" is the birth name of her paternal grandmother, Zadel Barnes Gustafson. It was under the influence of his strong willed mother that Wald changed his last name from his father's name, Buddington, to his mother's maiden name (Herring 24). Zadel Barnes was, for a time as a young woman, a prominent feminist writer who claimed acquaintanceship with Harriet Beecher Stowe and is mentioned in passing in the memoirs of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She was also a spiritualist, a

published poet, and a journalist. In London Zadel had achieved some small fame by publishing her feminist treatises and was a frequent guest at the fashionable literary salon presided over by Oscar Wilde's mother, Lady Wilde. Despite conflicting records, it is fairly certain that Zadel had been married and divorced at least twice before her granddaughter was born (Herring 23).

By 1900, at age 59, Zadel's dwindling literary career was the sole source of income for the bizarre household that had emerged at Cornwall-On-Hudson. Zadel was required to support her son Wald, his wife Elizabeth and their children as well as Wald's mistress Fanny and his children with her. The household numbered fourteen and was far from harmonious. Zadel doted on her son Wald. She was inexplicably convinced that he was a rare genius and, therefore, temperamentally unsuited to the constraints of conventional social mores as well as the quotidian demands of gainful employment. Not surprisingly, Wald did little except devote himself to a musical career that never materialized, write unpublishable tracts of his utopian social theories and, at every opportunity, practice the free love philosophy that his mother espoused (Field 184).

Djuna's mother had not adapted well to her strange domestic situation and had developed a severe nervous condition which rendered her incapacitated most of the time; and Wald's mistress Fanny—who had left a successful career on the stage to live with Wald—refused to do any housework (Herring 33). Consequently, the hard work required to run the large farm that sustained the two families fell to the children. Djuna, being the second oldest child, and the eldest female, was required to do an overwhelming amount of the day-to-day work and

was largely responsible for the raising of her younger siblings and half siblings. In addition to the staggering workload expected of the Barnes children, they were also required to participate in extensive nightly lessons, under the tutelage of Wald and Zadel. These lessons which ran the gamut from reading Shakespeare aloud to séances were, apart from her brief stint at art school, Djuna Barnes's only education. Wald believed that public school would be a damaging influence on his children and relied on his mother to take charge of educating them at home (Herring 40). Djuna was in effect a prisoner at the Cornwall-On-Hudson farm with virtually no access to the outside world until she was sixteen.

Rejected by her distant, emotionally unstable mother who favored her sons, the young girl developed an especially strong bond with her grandmother. Most sources agree that she shared a bed as well as a sexual relationship with her grandmother from the time she was a small child until she left the farm at sixteen. Author Andrew Field in his biography Djuna, The Formidable Miss Barnes offers the following explanation to account for this shocking scenario:

As regards all the recognized statistically significant factors, there are deep potholes in [Barnes's] childhood: An eccentric family and a sense of social isolation and oddity. A negative attitude toward her father who appeared ever weaker as she grew into her teens. Strongly ambivalent feelings towards her mother for letting herself be a martyr in a ménage-a-trois situation. And finally, as a result of all this, a compelling need to achieve radical independence in every way—with grandmother Zadel there to serve as a role model. I am persuaded by the medical literature which indicates

that in such unstable family constellations there can frequently be observed a homospiritual arc or link between a such minded grandmother and a granddaughter.... (Field 179-180)

This link Field refers to would have been especially strong between Zadel and Djuna because not only did Djuna have a sexual bond with her grandmother but also saw her as the template upon which she would model herself. Zadel gave Djuna the love and approval she was unable to obtain from her distant mother and displayed all of the strength and intellect that her father lacked. Djuna was an extremely intelligent young girl eager to expand her own horizons and her charismatic grandmother's glamorous past as a successful, independent, and well traveled writer had a powerful affect on her developing sense of self and her own goals. Zadel was to Djuna at this time the love of her life as well as the representation of all she hoped to achieve herself. Djuna was in effect in love with the woman she was trying to become.

Until she fell in love with Thelma in 1921, Zadel Barnes remained the most important and beloved person in her granddaughter's life. Barnes always treasured the memory of her dynamic grandmother; yet her work shows that as time passed, she was as haunted as she was comforted by the memory of the strange, intense closeness they had shared. Later in life she often credited her artistic abilities to her grandmother's influence upon her. As her biographer points out, "Djuna Barnes sometimes wondered if she had not become her grandmother, so indelible was the imprint of the woman's influence and her fascinating life" (Herring 13).

Tragically, although Zadel shared a highly unconventional relationship with her granddaughter, she apparently felt no attachment deep enough to supplant her own desire to indulge her son Wald. When Djuna Barnes was sixteen, her father decided that in order to alleviate some of the family's persistent financial problems she should be married off to the Percy Faulkner, the 52-year-old brother of his mistress. Percy was wealthy and had expressed romantic interest in Wald's young daughter. Wald and Zadel saw this union as a way to ingratiate themselves with their future son-in-law in hopes of his financial support; and, as an added bonus, Djuna's departure from Cornwall-On-Hudson meant there would be one less mouth to feed (Herring 59).

Surviving correspondence indicates that Zadel wrote many letters to Percy assuring him that her seemingly distant granddaughter was indeed in love with him and eager to marry. There are no letters from Djuna Barnes herself to Percy. Barnes does, however, tell the story of her catastrophic marriage in every one of her major works. In her first novel Ryder (1928) and in her last major work, the poetic play The Antiphon (1958)—both of which focus on her childhood and family life—there are accounts of her marriage and wedding night. In her original draft of Nightwood, she also told the very same story as part of a section on Nora's—the character she based on herself—early life. However, under T.S. Eliot's editorial guidance, she allowed a full third of her original draft to be cut and the descriptions of Nora's family history and marriage were removed entirely (Nightwood: The Original Version xi). All of the deleted portions of Barnes's original text survive today as part of a restored, unabridged edition of the novel

Nightwood: the Original Version and Later Drafts published in 1995.

As all of the accounts of the marriage that Barnes wrote in her three major works so closely resemble, even in the smallest of details, the omitted material from Nightwood (originally intended as part of a conversation wherein Nora describes her life before coming to Paris) is worth quoting at length. In this chapter Nora has come to seek comfort from Dr.O'Connor after her lover Robin--the character she based on Thelma--has left her. During their lengthy discussion Nora describes her heterosexual romantic life in America before she met Robin and details the horrifying circumstances of her marriage to an older man when she was sixteen:

...and because he was a man who had held me on his knee when I was a child, and because I had a doll and ate caramels, and looked up at him and said "yes". He couldn't bear it. He thought that, perhaps, he was bored, but it was something else; he was an old man then and wanted something simpler and older, and took me away to a transient's hotel in Bridgeport, if you know what kind of hotel that is--. Men going upstairs panting, and women going up slowly, saying "For the love of God can't you wait." [It was] like that, and it frightened him still further, beyond endurance because I wouldn't cry, and he said, "Go back home and don't tell anyone." And I picked up the carving knife then....(Nightwood: The Original Version 216)

The relationship is not consummated in the hotel due to Nora's defiant attitude and her unwillingness to show what the older man considers proper feminine vulnerability and demure weakness in the face of his sexual advances.

Her response to his attempt to assert himself sexually obviously unnerves the older man and he is unwilling or perhaps unable to have sex with the young girl until their wedding night when she will, as his wife, be less threatening and his position of dominance will be reinforced by his status as her husband. Nora instinctively takes the knife as protection against the next inevitable sexual onslaught. However, by choosing the knife she is symbolically, at least, arming herself with a weapon not unlike that of “the enemy” and is, by this act, again refusing to accept the female role of submission and vulnerability.

After the older man’s failed attempt to deflower young Nora, she returns to her family’s house with the carving knife. However, she realizes as she walks home that, although she is disgusted by what has occurred, she has no choice--her father insists that she marry this man:

Because there is a big new deal my father had in his head. Then the ceremony beside the Christmas tree, when my father and grandmother stood by, and mother by the door in her apron, crying and thinking God knows what; and he put a ring on my finger and I kissed him. Before that, it must have been two hours, I had gone down on the floor and hugged my grandmother by her knees, dropping my head down, saying, “Don’t let it happen.” And she said, “It had to happen.”

And I was in bed that first night, and he said, “Christ! You don’t bleed much.” And I said, “It is all the blood it has.” And all before the door my mother had strewn flour—to give herself hope, hoping that there would be no foot-marks going my way. (Nightwood: The Original Version 217)

It is evident that Nora's betrayal by her grandmother is shattering to her. Although it is her mother who cries along with Nora and for Nora during the wedding, she is dismissed as peripheral and almost uninvolved. Nora shows no emotion towards her mother or any recognition of sympathy from her mother. It is the grandmother to whom Nora pleads and it is the grandmother whose decision it is to marry Nora off to this man for economic reasons.

As Barnes would attest later, the mother putting flour on the floor was not fiction. The explanation provides yet another clue to how deeply dysfunctional her family situation was. She explained that her own mother had put flour on the floor to detect any footmarks going towards the newly married couple's bedroom. This measure was intended to deter Wald from intruding on his daughter's wedding night. Her mother constantly feared that her oversexed husband had designs on his own daughter—a fear Barnes herself shared. It was, however, according to Barnes's own testimony in her later years, her older brother Saxon who had been placed, against his will, outside the window by Wald to witness and ensure the consummation of the marriage. The scene he witnessed concluded in a dramatically different fashion from any ordinary wedding night.

The excerpt from the unexpurgated version of Nightwood continues:

So I took the carving knife and leaned across the table, strong and blind with something coming up in me out of what my father had in his head for women and love, and for the Christmas tree, and the flour on the floor, and he jumped out of the window backward into the garden. And I wasn't crying. And I got thin and fell when I walked. And my grandmother came to me and

said, "What has happened?" And I told her. And that too was my childhood.

(Nightwood: The Original Version 217)

In a letter to Barnes after reading the original draft of Nightwood, Emily Coleman asked her if the frightful story of the marriage was true. Barnes assured her that it was a completely factual account. She also reiterated her deeply held conviction that giving the facts of one's life was essential for a writer. About her tendency to write autobiographically she simply stated that she always needed "...to be personal...[and that] everyone who writes well is" (Herring 81).

It is evident when comparing the many similarities among Barnes's three major works that her childhood and adolescence were never far enough from her thoughts to be excluded from her art. She was compelled to write the pain and the truth of the "facts of her life." Emily Coleman often remarked that, "Djuna "turns everything into a horror story" (Herring 156). However, it seems to have been exactly the opposite. In so many ways Barnes had actually lived a horror story and wrote in order to turn her dark reality into art. She was compelled to write and rewrite the story of her abusive upbringing in order to experience catharsis and achieve some form of closure. Nevertheless, where her family was concerned, these attempts were futile. Barnes was never able to escape through her art the damage done to her by her family.

It was nonetheless this compulsion to put the most painful events of her life into words which did indeed lead to catharsis and closure when she took up the autobiographical project based on her romantic relationship with Thelma Wood.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Positioning

Nightwood, with what one of its contemporary critics referred to favorably as its “lapidary language” and its “sheer unfamiliar brilliance” due to its “extreme decadence [and] lack of plot,” is the startlingly strange text that was indeed the literary vehicle for Barnes’s catharsis regarding her relationship with Thelma (Scott 68). The book is set mainly in Paris during the 1920’s and revolves around the ultimately doomed love affair between the characters of Nora Flood, an American circus promoter, and an enigmatic young woman named Robin Vote. Although Robin and Nora’s relationship is the undisputed focus of Nightwood, Barnes devotes less than eight pages of narrative description to the events of the actual affair—most of which describe Nora’s suffering as Robin begins to wander away from her. There are only two paragraphs which describe the relationship before the deterioration begins. Both paragraphs are largely filled with descriptions of the interior décor of Robin and Nora’s eccentric apartment . It is mainly through discussions by the characters that most of the details of Robin and Nora’s life together are provided.

The text of Nightwood consists mainly of a long series of conversations, in which Barnes’s deft use of poetic imagery creates a densely packed narrative. The characters converse in a highly ornate free association style and the narrative unfolds almost entirely through their dialogue rather than observed action. Nightwood explores the themes of loss and betrayal mainly through exposing the interiority of its characters. In the book, events which occur are rarely described or shown as points in a plot; rather the narrative emphasis is

placed on the effects of these events on the characters. The book is a meditation on emotional anguish and the focus of the text is the ceaseless, obsessive dissection and analysis of the internal states of the characters.

The novel illustrates Barnes's need to write about her love for Wood in a number of ways. The recurring obstacle in the book is Nora Flood's struggle to not only tell the story of her failed relationship with her lover Robin to the aging transvestite, Doctor Matthew O'Connor, but to try and create for herself some narrative of the events that have taken place that she can make sense of. She suffers brutally because of her own inability and, perhaps, unwillingness to understand the true nature of her disastrous romance. Robin, a character whose constant movement thwarts the attempts of other characters to possess her, is an object of desire. Barnes refuses to give the reader any stable representation of Robin. She is a character who is at turns everything and nothing depending on who is talking about her and under what circumstances. She has very little dialogue and virtually no will of her own. Her only volition is described as an almost unconscious need for others to see her as whomever they would like her to be. In essence, Robin Vote is literally in the eye of the beholder. Nora describes Robin as someone who, "couldn't do anything because she was a long way off waiting to begin...It's why she falls into everything like someone in a dream" (Nightwood 165).

Barnes's life, in particular the most traumatic events in her life, was always the primary element in her writing, and Nightwood was no exception. In a 1934 letter to her friend Emily Coleman, Barnes herself comments, "Suffering for love

is how I have learned practically everything I know, love of grandmother up and on” (Herring,73). It is no wonder then that Nightwood is a meditation on suffering for love and that its main theme is the actual betrayal by and loss of Thelma Wood who Barnes saw as a replacement for her grandmother. The pain Barnes experienced when she lost Thelma echoed the traumatic betrayal by her grandmother—it was a strike at what was perhaps the deepest wound in Barnes’s entire psyche. And it was this, the pain at the loss of the beloved, this time Thelma, that provoked Barnes to author her dark masterpiece. Nightwood is indeed Barnes’s autobiographical account of her failed relationship and she explicitly identified herself with the character of Nora Flood in frequent and unambiguous extratextual declarations. As paratext, especially in letters to friends and interviews, these declarations become an authorial admission by Barnes that, in her own unique way, in Nightwood, she was writing autobiographically.

All autobiography is inevitably tinged with semi-fictional, if not completely fictional, elements—either intentionally or unintentionally. The autobiographical act unavoidably renders not an objective documentation of absolute truth but the author’s own unique version of past events and is inevitably, as Louis A. Renza points out in “The Veto of Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography,” “definable as a form of ‘prose fiction’” (Renza 274).

The writer of autobiography always decides—whether she realizes it or not—what “truth” will be told because autobiography is always the author’s “truth” and as such is subjective. The autobiographer must rely on memories and

perceptions or what Barnes herself termed in Nightwood, “The priceless galaxy of misinformation called the mind...(Nightwood 159).” The author engaged in the autobiographical project must also contend with the lack of authorial objectivity and the inevitable tendency to place emphasis on events deemed important while neglecting or omitting other events altogether. The author places the chosen autobiographical elements in juxtaposition or harmony as she sees fit within the construct of the narrative she creates.

In Fictions In Autobiography Paul John Eakin addresses not only this central tenet of autobiographical writing but also describes changes that the genre underwent at the hands of experimental twentieth-century writers:

...[they] have shifted the ground of our thinking about autobiographical truth because they readily accept the proposition that fiction and the fiction-making process are a central constituent to the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life. Thus memory ceases to be for them merely a convenient repository in which the past is preserved inviolate...they no longer believe that autobiography can offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past; instead, it expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of the present consciousness. Autobiography in our time is increasingly understood as both an art of memory and an art of imagination. (Eakin 5-6)

As an artist and a Modernist, Barnes chose to exploit this inherent fiction within all autobiography in a more obvious, self-conscious way. Barnes’s

authorial approach to her text displays her desire to create an aesthetically and artistically interesting text as well as her compulsion to put into words the soul-shattering experience of her relationship with Thelma Wood. No simple linear detailing of events would suffice. With Nightwood, she is attempting to write beyond narrative as she sets her artistic instincts free and utilizes her vast repertoire of talents to help her more fully communicate the true story of her tragic love affair. Eakin describes the narrative obstacle within all autobiographical writing that Barnes, in her determination to write her own life in Nightwood, avoids via the inclusion of fictive devices:

The aspiration of autobiography is to move beyond its own text to a knowledge of the self and its world is founded in illusion...The referential basis of autobiography is, then, inherently unstable... and autobiographers try in vain to 'escape' the constraints of language; their 'reinscription' within the textual system is necessary and inevitable. (Eakin 186-7)

The autobiographer's task is to effect the textual capture of not only herself, but also of the others in her life as well as the events of that life and to affix the complexity of lived experience onto the written page. Nightwood, in common with more standard forms of autobiography, does depict actual facts and events refracted through the lens of Barnes's perceptions and memories.

Barnes's choice to employ overtly fictive elements serves several distinct purposes. Most importantly this fusion of art and fact enables her to convey the psychological and emotional truth of her experiences within the demands of a narrative. Fictive devices further augment Barnes's authorial power over her text

and free her from the constraint of facticity which is associated with more conventional autobiographical writing. The included fictional elements provide the author the safety of greater distance and control when dealing with the brutal psychological and emotional truth of the subject of the text. These elements are fundamental in enabling her to render her experience of deep personal betrayal by her beloved in such a textually powerful fashion. It is this need to control real life by placing it in fiction which is at the core of the complex matrix of both Barnes's autobiographical intentions and her absolute need for the distancing safety of fiction within that autobiography that underlies the unique construction of Nightwood.

Barnes's method of conveyance of the autobiographical events in Nightwood required the conflation of the genres of autobiography and fiction. It is this incorporation of fiction which allowed Barnes not only to create a work that is aesthetically interesting and displays her artistic talent but also makes it possible for her to approach the traumatic events which are the subject of Nightwood. The complete authorial power that the author of fiction enjoys provided Barnes, within her text, absolute control and the safety of distance as she wrote the traumatic story of her lost love.

Barnes uses fictive devices to enable her, on her own terms, to more fully inhabit the painful emotional landscape she must return to in order to convey actual events. The enhanced authorial power that fictional elements provide, as well as the fictive remove which gives Barnes the safety of distance, makes it possible for her to more fully immerse herself in her past as she puts ink to her

suffering and affixes it to the page. This enhances her ability as an author to get so close to the lived experience of these painful events (and to not merely describe, but to concretize them within her text) that the dark atmosphere of hopelessness and loss which permeates Nightwood is more powerfully conveyed to the reader. Barnes eschews the traditional linear autobiographical construct to instead write from deep within her own interiority with the intention of reaching that same place in her reader. Critic Jeanette Winterson describes this effect of Nightwood on the reader: “reading it is like drinking wine with a pearl dissolving in the glass. You have taken in more than you know, and it will go on doing its work. From now on a part of you is pearl-lined” (Nightwood ix). To fully appreciate the way in which Barnes conflates the genres of autobiography and fiction in order to more thoroughly convey her lived experience it is necessary to examine in detail the fictive devices she employs and how they function within Nightwood.

Chapter Three: Aesthetic Approach and Fictive Devices

In Nightwood Barnes employs two key elements which provide the foundation technically and thematically for the text. Her heavy use of the late nineteenth century Decadent aesthetic and the Modernist movement's experimentation with literary forms are the paradoxical underpinnings of this text. She combines the past, which so informed and shaped her artistic sensibility, with what were, in the 1930's, some of the newest, most avant-garde approaches to literary form to construct the framework of Nightwood.

The Decadent movement, which occurred primarily in France and England in the late nineteenth-century, is regarded as a transition between Romanticism and Modernism. Decadence is defined not only by veneration of the movement's own particular aesthetic criteria but also by the veneration, in general, of aesthetic matters above all else and is thus very much associated the attitude of "art for its own sake".

Features of the Decadent movement in literature and the visual arts include perversity, degeneration, decay, celebration of the unnatural, admiration of the grotesque, and an obsessive devotion to artifice. A fascination with ennui, incompleteness, nostalgia, loss, and alienation is also prevalent in the work of the Decadents. Excessiveness is especially important to all facets of the Decadent movement. At the height of the movement in the 1890's, its adherents often espoused the Blakean belief that "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" as their motto. Decadence also encouraged excessive experimentation in life as well as art. This was the attitude adopted by such well-known

Decadents as Oscar Wilde and Arthur Rimbaud who were as radical in their defiance of social conventions as they were in their defiance of artistic conventions. This Decadent tendency toward 'life as art' combined with the aforementioned aesthetic criteria is explained by critic John R. Reed :

The pain, tension, and irresolution of Decadent art are not simply willful but result from its transitional, ambiguous nature. No state is permanent; all is open to rearrangement. Life is a form of art but one that can never be completed. Decadent art balances between linearity and spatiality, between explicitness and suggestion, between harmony and discord, between tradition and innovation, between story and image. Hence many of its topoi emphasize ambivalence-sphinxes with their mixed bodies and dangerous mysteries, hermaphrodites, beautiful but evil women, and so forth. (Reed 17)

Reed goes on to emphasize that the ambivalent and transitional elements within Decadent art render it, "inherently performative" which will soon be shown in an examination of specific fictive devices used by Barnes (Reed 19).

In Nightwood Barnes relies heavily both thematically and aesthetically on the tenets of the Decadent movement . The text's elaborately worked poetry/prose style, its endless detailing of decor and costume, its string of nonevents in favor of its reliance on its cast of morose "degenerates" to endlessly drain themselves of emotional bile to form the narrative, takes the practices and preoccupations of this movement to an extreme.

Although the aesthetic of the text is steeped in Decadence, the technical

construction of Nightwood shows Barnes engaging in a thoroughly Modernistic project. As a Modernist Barnes attempts to smash prevailing literary as well as autobiographical forms in her endeavor to reveal more of her truth within the text because, as she once explained, ““There is always more surface to a shattered object than a whole.” (Herring 117)

The term Modernism refers to the radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in art and literature after the First World War. The movement marks a distinctive break with Victorian bourgeois morality and it presents a profoundly pessimistic view of a society in disarray. In literature, the movement is associated with the works of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, H.D., and Franz Kafka.

In their attempt to subvert the realism which was prevalent in literature and reinvent narrative forms, these writers introduced a variety of literary tactics and devices as critic John Barth describes in "The Literature of Replenishment":

The radical disruption of linear flow of narrative; the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause and effect development thereof; the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical meaning of literary action; the adoption of a tone of epistemological self-mockery aimed at naive pretensions of bourgeois rationality; the opposition of inward consciousness to rational, public, objective discourse; and an inclination to subjective distortion to point up the evanescence of the social world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

(Barth 206)

Barnes, as artist and creator of meaning within her own text, rejects conventional modes of literary expression to suit her needs. She incorporates technical and thematic characteristics, which are at odds with what traditional literature, prior to the Modernist movement, had privileged as indicative of “good writing.” A defining aspect of Nightwood, is the abolition of reason. Barnes achieves this, just as Barth describes, by the eradication of a fixed linear explicative narrative. She refashions even the most basic elements of traditional literature, plot and time, by denying the reader a coherent chronological text.

This innovative approach to writing and her distinctive literary voice enable Barnes to recreate, very effectively, the people and themes which not only mirror her own life but are also the focus of her text. It is these “recreations”—the themes and people—and the way in which Barnes writes them which are an affront to the bourgeois sensibilities which Modernists sought to challenge. In Nightwood the characters are occupants of what would have been considered the degenerate fringes of contemporary society in the 1930’s. But rather than treating them in a more traditional fashion by either condemning them for their deviation from social norms or relegating them to the margins of the narrative Barnes places them center stage. She displays no authorial disapproval or judgment of lesbianism nor does she treat lesbian love as an aberration. To Barnes, within the text, love is love and gender is irrelevant. Nightwood is the story of the loss of the great love of one woman’s life and the fact that she loved

another woman is not depicted as perversion. Similarly, the Doctor's transvestism and the seemingly endless parade of various lovers taken by all of the characters are also never condemned by Barnes. Themes that would have been a mockery of bourgeois rationality are portrayed in the text simply as traits or tendencies of the characters.

Barnes method of composition and use of fictive devices is as bold as her choice and treatment of themes and characters. Nightwood is written in highly stylized poetry-prose. In fact nearly all of the original draft of the work that eventually became Nightwood was written as a poem. However, with Barnes genre was not a fixed element. Often her projects would begin as creative experimentation in one genre only to turn out as completed products in an entirely different genre. A striking example is the last major work Barnes would produce. During the 1940's she had started writing a conventional and purposefully tawdry tell-all autobiography about her childhood intended to humiliate and punish her mother. However, her need to revenge herself on her mother was eventually tempered by her unwillingness to publish anything that was not interesting or fulfilling to her as an artist, and so the vengeful autobiography became the searing autobiographical play The Antiphon, which was published and produced, to much critical acclaim in 1958 (Herring).

Considering Barnes's absolute lack of artistic inhibition where literary forms were concerned, it isn't surprising that Nightwood, the epic, autobiographical, poem eventually became a work of prose. Nevertheless, Barnes the poet is still very evident within the final prose text. In his 1937

introduction to the novel, T.S. Eliot characterized Barnes's prose as, "A prose that is altogether alive [and] demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel-reader is not prepared to give" (Nightwood xviii). He was adamant that "only sensibilities trained on poetry can fully appreciate it" (Nightwood xviii).

The language is densely packed and quite Byzantine. Barnes's penchant for the Decadent movement's tendency to use language for purely aesthetic reasons as well as her Modernist tendency to construct linguistic labyrinths packed to brimming with references both Biblical and classical can make Nightwood a challenge for any reader. As Jeanette Winterson explains, "Nightwood is demanding. You can slide into it because the prose has a narcotic quality but you can't slide over it. The language is not about conveying information; it is about conveying meaning" and it serves as a unique and important fictive element within the text (Nightwood x). It is this conveyance of meaning over information that Eliot admires when he describes Nightwood as a triumph over "prose that contains whatever reality it has from an accurate rendering of the noises that human beings currently make in their daily simple needs of communication" (Nightwood xviii).

When we first meet the character Robin Vote, she is passed out, sprawled, across a divan in a seedy hotel room. However, Barnes's first, description of this girl is one of a compellingly enigmatic figure and an exquisite, almost otherworldly creature:

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 a phosphorous glowing about the circumference of a body of water—as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deteriorations....(Nightwood 38)

This incredibly sensual description displays not only Barnes's deft use of poetic imagery but also hints at Robin's ability to provoke almost spellbinding fascination as well as the danger of her inner "decay." This passage also conveys the physicality of Robin. Barnes's description offers the reader an almost tangible experience: we are meant to know her smell, to imagine the feel of her skin. It is as if Barnes wants us to almost be able to taste this compelling character. The language of Nightwood is indeed "narcotic" but then so is Robin. She is alluring, addictive, and destructive to everyone she touches. Barnes conveys this impression of not only Robin's sensual power but also provides a glimpse at some of the internal traits which will emerge as important elements in the story.

It is particularly impressive that Barnes's unique use of language and poetry-within-prose narrative technique enables her to communicate such a powerful impression of a character without describing what that character looks like or giving her any dialogue or action that may provide information to the reader about who she is. The effect is both tantalizing and foreboding. Robin is

already sensual and dangerous and she hasn't even woken up yet.

One of the most interesting and even, at times, exuberant ways that Barnes employs her poetry-prose style in Nightwood is through the incessantly loquacious character of Doctor Matthew O'Connor. The Doctor plays a unique and complex role as a character and a fictive device. He functions as a narrator, a sort of Greek chorus, a link between all of the characters and, quite often, as comic relief. His epically long soliloquies are frequently used by Barnes to achieve distance or as a diversion. However, it is the colossal amount of dialogue that she gives him that often threatens to completely steal the narrative focus. It is impossible to appreciate the use of Barnes's stylized prose approach without an excerpt from at least one of the Doctor's innumerable soliloquies. The character of the Doctor is capable of any and every narrative demand an author could possibly make on a character. His musings run the gamut from scatologically crude to sagely philosophical while hitting every conversational stop in between via the most imaginative verbal tangents Barnes's formidable artistry can provide for him.

In one scene Nora, heartbroken and inconsolable over the loss of Robin, has come to see the Doctor in the middle of the night. She comes to him frantically to find out about the nature of 'the Night' and people, like Robin, who inhabit the night. Nora becomes even more anxious, confused, and her agony becomes more acute--almost to the point of self-inflicted emotional masochism--as she persists in trying to understand people whose motivations and actions she cannot comprehend. The scene becomes more intense, more oppressive and

almost excruciatingly raw as Nora, half crazed with grief, presses the doctor on and on to talk, and keep talking until he can explain the darkness inside Robin and the darkness Robin seeks in others as she wanders at night. The Doctor says to Nora:

We look to the East for a wisdom that we shall not use—and to the sleeper for the secret that we shall not find. So, I say, what of the night, the terrible night? The darkness is the closet in which your lover roosts her heart, and that night-fowl that caws against her spirit and yours, dropping between you and her the awful estrangement of his bowels. The drip of your tears is his implacable pulse. Night people do not bury their dead, but on the neck of you, their beloved and waking, sling the creature, husked of its gestures. And where you go, it goes, the two of you, your living and her dead, that will not die; to daylight, to life, to grief, until both are carrion.

(Nightwood 95)

In Nightwood conversations between characters comprise almost the entire narrative and this passage illustrates how Barnes retains the integrity of her poetic prose throughout the text. Her strange, intense imagery is not exclusive to description and third person narration. Her characters converse in poetic prose and are almost crushed by the densely packed weight of their own dialogue. It is at the moment when Nora is sinking deepest into her own anguish that Barnes puts these strange words about the night people into the Doctor's mouth. The speech evokes the horrific image of the death of Nora's relationship with Robin and emphasizes that she will suffer the burden of that death as long as she lives.

The intricate language almost completely encrusts these dark scenes of hopelessness and pain, striking just that perfect note of ornate, overwrought beauty and despair that the Decadent movement clung to as its own aesthetic.

Barnes's poetry-prose style serves another very important function besides evoking intensely communicative imagery and meeting her own aesthetic demands—it is one of the fictive devices that she uses for its distancing effect. The “lapidary language” and the genesis of the book's narrative in poetry preserve the fictive remove which allows her the safety to draw upon her own excruciating pain and devastation as her subject matter. Although she writes her most intense suffering on the page, each experience, each emotion is wrapped inside the poetic images and decorative language over which she exerts the complete control of the poet. Her experiences are not written in the naked confessional style of more conventional autobiography; therefore the autobiographical project is enhanced by Barnes's ability to use this fictive remove to enable her to delve deeper into and write more fully the emotional truth of her own traumatic experiences. The way in which Barnes uses language in Nightwood removes the constraints of conventional poetic forms as well as more conventional prose forms. By examining the text purely from a linguistic point of view, we see that Barnes's need for absolute artistic control results, even at the linguistic level, in genre conflation.

Barnes also uses fictive devices to serve pictorial and performative functions within the narrative. She has a natural flair, as a former playwright, for incorporating theatricality into her narrative. The performance of scenes and the

placement of characters within the narrative, at times, seem to be more the work of a stage manager than that of an author. Barnes also brings her skills as a visual artist to bear and she tends to describe—with excessive attention to every detail—many of the scenes almost as tableaux.

Setting the scene, with vivid descriptions of opulently grotesque locations, ornate furniture, and all manner of exotic visual details prior to the continuance of the ‘action’ of the scene is an especially important element within the narrative structure. The flow of the narrative seems to cease as Barnes takes the time to depict the visual settings in her highly stylized poetic prose. Then, as if a curtain had opened on a stage set for a play, the characters appear and the activity resumes. The effect is of a staged, performative, fictional setting as a backdrop or framing device for the true story of her relationship with Thelma.

Another striking example of Barnes’s use of this tableaux technique occurs at the beginning of the fifth chapter “Watchman, What of the Night?”. Nora, missing Robin desperately, and needing advice, pays a surprise visit to the seamy room of the transvestite Dr. Matthew O’Connor late one evening. It is an impressively bold artistic choice that Barnes—who illustrates this scene as if she were putting every detail onto canvas—takes such a long break from the narrative flow to describe what is essentially an extremely brief moment. At the beginning and at the end of the quote she points out that Nora hesitated only for a brief second yet Barnes chooses to pause at length to ‘paint a picture’ which will convey to us as well as to Nora the Decadent grotesqueness and disturbingly perverse setting which is not only the interior of the Doctor’s room but also an

illustration of interiority of the Doctor himself:

...[Nora] opened the door and for one second hesitated, so incredible was the disorder that met her eyes. The room was so small that it was just possible to walk sideways up to the bed; it was as if being condemned to the grave the doctor decided to occupy it with the utmost abandon.

A pile of medical books, and volumes of a miscellaneous order, reached almost to the ceiling, water-stained and covered with dust. Just above them was a very small barred window, the only ventilation. On a maple dresser, certainly not of European make, lay a rusty pair of forceps, a broken scalpel, half a dozen odd instruments that she could not place, a catheter, some twenty perfume bottles, almost empty, pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs. From the half open drawers of this chiffonier hung laces, ribands, stockings, ladies' underclothing and an abdominal brace, which gave the impression that the feminine finery had suffered venery. A swill-pail stood at the head of the bed, brimming with abominations. There was something appallingly degraded about the room, like the rooms in brothels, which give even the most innocent the sensation of having been accomplice; yet this room was also muscular, a cross between a chambre a coucher and a boxer's training camp. There is a certain belligerence in a room in which a woman has never set foot; every object seems to be battling its own compression—and there is a metallic odour, as of beaten iron in a smithy. In the narrow iron bed, with its heavy and dirty linen sheets lay the doctor in a woman's flannel nightgown.

The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendant 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....[the glimpse] was of but a second's duration as she opened up the door...(Nightwood 78-79)

The effect Barnes creates by taking such a long narrative break to describe the Doctor is to overwhelm the reader with the chaotic, excessive, and bizarre disorder of the Doctor's room just as Barnes intends for the character of the Doctor, throughout the entire novel to overwhelm the reader with the chaos of his endless, excessive, tangential verbiage. The room is as Decadently excessive and grotesque as the doctor himself. Only after an elaborate scene has been set of the disarray inside the doctor's room, which corresponds perfectly to the disarray which doctor himself embodies, does Nora enter and begin to speak. With this description, Barnes not only conveys as much about the doctor as she does about the room, but also provides a very vivid illustration of the setting for the entire chapter—which aside from the above description consists entirely of a conversation about Nora's loss of Robin.

Oddly enough, Dr. O'Connor was based, very closely, on an actual person--Dan Mahoney--a bizarre habitué of the Paris scene who was written about by many expatriates including Robert McAlmon and Janet Flanner. According to all accounts, Djuna took very little artistic license when she created this larger than life "character." Dan Mahoney was indeed a transvestite as well

as an amateur abortionist. He claimed to have had medical training, but the claim could never be proven because, according to several sources, he never told the same story of his origins twice. He was a great friend to many of the expatriates and was so inclined to philosophize outrageously that Barnes got in the habit of actually taking notes when Dan began to talk (Herring 228).

Another very effective use of this tableaux technique precedes the first description of Robin Vote as she lies sleeping. In this scene the Doctor who is drinking with the character Felix is summoned out of the bar by a bellboy to attend to an unconscious woman in the hotel across the street. When the two men arrive, it is a astonishingly odd and elaborate scene (with Robin in it, of course) that they discover. Barnes elaborately sets the stage for Robin's entrance into the narrative. Never mind that Robin enters sleeping, she is nonetheless given a luxuriant setting which, as with the doctor, Barnes uses to hint at some aspect of her character. In this description Barnes juxtaposes the blandness of a world without Robin in it by describing the sheer ordinariness of the hotel with the lush, sensual, and exotic atmosphere of the room which Robin inhabits:

On the second landing of the hotel (it was one of those middle-class hostelries which can be found in almost any corner of Paris, neither good nor bad, but so typical that it might have been moved every night and not have been out of place) a door was standing open, exposing a red-carpeted floor, and at the further end two narrow windows overlooking the square. On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms, and cut

flowers, faintly-oversung by the notes of unseen birds, which seem to have been forgotten—left without the usual silencing 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....Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room...[she was] thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of an unseen *dompteur*, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-winds render a serenade....(Nightwood 37-38)

The scene underscores the extraordinariness of Robin not only by the décor of her room, but also in the quick aside describing her birdcages. It is made plain that the inhabitant of this room is not to be mistaken as one of those “good housewives.” However, Barnes’s use of this sort of description reaches beyond décor and simple description. This scene foreshadows deeper themes which will emerge. Robin who is referred to often in Nightwood as a “beast turning human” is shown here in a lush, cacophonous, tropical jungle setting—sprawled like an animal--within a room in a nondescript Paris hotel.

This description of Robin goes beyond mere tableaux and blurs into another closely related fictive device that Barnes’s employs so skillfully in Nightwood. Robin is, in the above description also referred to being in a stage set and even the suggestion that one might expect to hear the music of wood-winds swelling as one comes upon this scene reads almost like stage directions in a

play. Barnes also uses fictive devices in Nightwood which harken back to her years in the theatre to infuse the text with performative and theatrical elements. The ways in which she does this are often unexpected and uniquely Barnesian in their narrative function.

An example of a unique way in which Barnes uses theatricality is at the end of the chapter entitled "The Squatter." Almost the entire chapter is devoted to description of the character Jenny Petherbridge--the rich widow who steals Robin away from Nora and takes her to America. The actual person the character of Jenny is based on was named Henriette Metcalfe. She is described in Nightwood, as far as verifiable facts are concerned, quite accurately and the circumstances of her relationship with Thelma do generally parallel those of Jenny and Robin in the book. She was a very rich widow who became involved with Thelma just as the relationship with Barnes began to collapse. And immediately after Thelma split with Barnes, Henriette took her to America.

Near the end of "The Squatter" chapter, which is written from a more conventional, third person narrative perspective as opposed to the rest of the book which relies on conversations between characters, there is a very dramatic scene--dramatic in a very traditionally literary, novelistic sense. The omniscient narrator describes an outing which includes Jenny, Robin, the Doctor, and a few insignificantly minor characters. It is almost as if these minor characters, which are barely more than listed and described as only types, "several actresses ...two gentlemen...a little girl," are intended as 'extras' to flesh out the scene which takes place. They are there but have no action and virtually no dialogue.

(Nightwood 76)

Jenny, who is desperately trying to monopolize Robin's, attention calls for carriages so that the party can take an evening ride in the Bois. She contrives, with much effort, to be seated in the same carriage as Robin. This carriage also carries the Doctor, "an English girl", and the small child. Not surprisingly, as the carriages depart, the Doctor begins one of his long soliloquies—which in this case is made even more comical by the fact no one is listening to him. The characters around him keep asking, "What?" and "What's that you're saying?"

(Nightwood 80) because everyone in the carriage—except the Doctor—is riveted on the power struggle between Jenny and Robin.

Jenny becomes increasingly frantic in her attempt to attract Robin's attention. However, the more frantic Jenny becomes the more Robin ignores her and whispers and giggles with the little child and the English girl. Before very long the tension in the carriage erupts into violence: "Then Jenny struck Robin, scratching and tearing in hysteria, striking clutching and crying. Slowly the blood ran down Robin's cheeks as Jenny struck repeatedly...." (Nightwood 82) After this bloody scene Robin collapses on the floor of the carriage.

The last two paragraphs of this chapter are significant for several reasons—most notably they incorporate the performative, theatrical fictive devices Barnes uses elsewhere but in a very unique way. The chapter ends:

The carriage at this moment drew smartly up into the Rue du Cherche-Midi. Robin jumped before the carriage stopped, but Jenny was close behind her, following her as far as the garden.

It was not long after this that Nora and Robin separated; a little later Jenny. and Robin sailed for America (Nightwood 83).

This is in stark contrast to the tableaux of the Doctor's room, Robin's hotel room, and every other locale, object and person in the book—all of which are described at great length and in exhaustive detail. Here though, Barnes devotes only one brief declarative sentence to what is essentially Robin's exit, on page eighty-three—well before half of the text has even unfolded—from Nightwood. Others talk about Robin endlessly after this scene but she is not present and does not actually reappear until the last five pages of the text.

It is as if Barnes, after telling this story of graphic brutality between the woman who represents her beloved and the woman who stole her away, had come as close as she could to the pain this story represents. Barnes uses this chapter to savagely attack the woman she blamed for stealing Thelma and indulges in imagining the kind of depraved relationship that Robin/Thelma would prefer over the love that Barnes/Nora offered. If we consider the wounds inside the author's own tormented psyche that this imagined scene reveals, it's not difficult to understand why Barnes suddenly "lowered the curtain" on the entire scene. The necessary plot details are given and in quite an inverted example of what is normally thought of as "theatricality" Barnes, craving distance from the ugly scene she has created, becomes not unlike the director of a play who calls "cut" when she wishes the action on stage to cease immediately. The ability to "end the performance" of this scene, as if lowering a curtain at the end of an act in a play, is a very unique example of the way Barnes did not hesitate to use

fictive devices in any way she pleased, to enhance her authorial power. Quite often, as in this case, she is able to translate much of her brutal emotional terrain into words because of the control and distance that fictive devices provide.

“The Squatter” chapter is the only part of the text which was not written as part of the original poem that was the genesis of Nightwood. Barnes later returned to her manuscript and inserted an entire chapter of venomous invective towards the woman for whom Thelma had betrayed her. There is none of Barnes’s poetry prose style and the narrative seems, again, to stop while the author devotes page after page of hateful description to Jenny/Henriette. Barnes picks apart every facet of Jenny’s personality, her looks, and even her psyche. She virtually rips Jenny to shreds with her description :

She had a beaked head and the body, small, feeble, and ferocious, that somehow made one associate her with Judy; they did not go together. Only severed could any part of her have been called “right”....she writhed under the necessity of being unable to wear anything becoming, being one of those panicky little women who, no matter what they put on look like a child under penance. (Nightwood 71-72)

Although Barnes returns often throughout the chapter to viciously dissect Jenny’s physical appearance, it is the personality--the very nature of this woman, this “Squatter”--that receives the most damning portrayal:

Her walls, her cupboards, her bureaux, were teeming with second-hand dealings with life. It takes a bold and authentic robber to get first-hand plunder. Someone else’s marriage ring was on her finger; the photograph

taken of Robin for Nora sat upon her table. The books in her library were other people's selections....The words that fell from her mouth seem to have been lent to her.....She had a continual rapacity for other people's facts...She defiled the very meaning of personality....When she fell in love it was with a perfect fury of accumulated dishonesty; she became instantly a dealer in second-hand and therefore incalculable emotions...she appropriated the most passionate love that she knew, Nora's for Robin. She was a "squatter" by instinct. (Nightwood 74-75)

For Barnes, who was a defiantly unique woman, losing Thelma to someone she considered a pitiful scavenger of second-hand emotions and whose very identity was appropriated would have added serious insult to injury. There can be no doubt that in writing "The Squatter" chapter, Barnes was exercising her authorial power to return the insult. This chapter is both her emotional response to losing Thelma as well her revenge on the woman she blamed for causing that loss.

The function of this chapter within the larger framework of the text is as an intermission of sorts--a break from Nora's pain, the Doctor's monologues, and the poetic flourish which characterizes the rest of the book. Until the carriage ride at the end of the chapter, every other character is removed from the narrative. Jenny is the lone character on Barnes's literary stage. "The Squatter" is a verbal assault on one woman by another in plain language. It is as if Robin, as well as the rest of the decadently bizarre menagerie of characters, warrants Barnes's poetic descriptions whereas Jenny does not.

It is impossible to read this chapter without perceiving the unmasked rage

which is poured out onto the page as Barnes seeks catharsis through her art. Her facility with language is still quite evident in “The Squatter” chapter; however, here she employs biting wit and well crafted insults that are more akin to verbal daggers than poetic phraseology.

Conclusion

In Nightwood, Djuna Barnes is concerned with putting into words how it feels to lose the beloved. While endeavoring to rid herself of the painful scars of her failed relationship with Thelma Wood she creates a dark meditation on loss and betrayal. However, it is in this act of creation that she manages to achieve catharsis by recreating her real-life lost love on the page. Nightwood, with its strange mix of poetry, images, and reality communicates the psychological and emotional truth of actual events refracted through the lens of the author's own perceptions and memories.

Barnes also utilizes a unique technical structure as well as fictional elements within Nightwood to facilitate the capture of the interiority of the characters and the conveyance of emotions, moods and atmospheres. She chose to employ fictional elements in order to more effectively convey the actual experience of these events and memories as opposed to a simple descriptive linear narrative. This use of fiction was also integral in allowing her to write the story of such a deep betrayal and its lasting effects. The use of fictive devices gives Barnes the enhanced authorial power of a writer of fiction. This fictive remove provides Barnes with the necessary distance and control over her text and allows her to traverse the brutal psychological terrain she covers in Nightwood. It is this conflation of autobiography and fiction that ultimately enables her to render her lived experiences in an aesthetically interesting and psychologically powerful way.

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