"The Singular Falls Continually": Queer Bodies out of Time in *Nightwood*

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Abstract

This article argues that Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936), despite partly subscribing to a Freudian model of homosexuality based on inversion, simultaneously demonstrates a concept of sexuality and identity that gestures outwards. *Nightwood*'s characters display excesses of meaning and are located outside of—rather than arrested in—linear heteronormative time. The novel's sexual and identarian incoherencies create a sense of temporal dislocation and, in Barnes' dense stylistics, characters that verge on linguistic illegibility. This article analyses the dynamics of (sexual) identity in the novel, and in doing so, attempts to highlight the potentialities of *Nightwood* for contemporary feminist and queer discourses.

Both the queer body and the female body are in processes of reimagining in our contemporary political landscape. While this issue is called "Feminist Bodies," our article discusses more specifically queer female identity, and the interpenetration of sexuality and identity in Djuna Barnes' 1936 novel, *Nightwood*, canonical in lesbian literature for its portrayal of the love affair of Robin Vote and Nora Flood. After the novel's 'rediscovery' in the 1980s, it became part of an increasingly large group of modernist texts that were used to affirm the existence of homosexual culture before the Stonewall riots, commonly seen as the birth of the modern LGBTQ+ movement. Simultaneously, critics began questioning its emblematic status, criticizing the perceived homophobia of both the text and its author; some argue, for instance, that Barnes presents homosexuality only in terms of inversion, and therefore, in the discourse of Freudian psychoanalysis where queerness is seen as a pathology (Nealon 9). A striking aspect of *Nightwood* though, is how it presents such a reading while also demonstrating a concept of sexuality and identity that gestures outwards; the novel seems caught between the Freudian perspective, and a more open, diffuse sense of queerness. Barnes' characters do not ascribe to determined identity categories as much as they display excesses of meaning, sexual and identarian incoherencies that create both a sense of temporal dislocation and, in Barnes' dense stylistics, verge on linguistic illegibility. In this sense, Barnes' novel can be seen to reflect many aspects of our contemporary discourse on gender and sexuality, which is often motivated by conflicting desires to imagine the open potentialities of what 'queer' could mean while not forgetting the important political work that gender and sexuality categories have in the present. Fundamentally, much of contemporary discourse tries to grapple with the extent to which identity categories such as 'female' or 'queer' operate as both *effects* of power while also having the ability to serve as sites for the *subversion* of power.[1] It must be mentioned that Barnes' attempt to write queer bodies that do not fit into normative identity categories itself conflicts with *Nightwood*'s latent

[1] One need look no further than the recent work of Slavoj Žižek (2016), James Penney (2014), or even queer literary scholar Madhavi Menon (2015) to see how unresolved and contested such concepts are in contemporary critical discourse.

anti-Semitism and its occasional implicit homophobia. We propose an affirmative reading that, while not overlooking *Nightwood*'s problematic aspects, goes beyond such criticism to consider the text's disruptive and productive potential for voicing queer identity, and to demonstrate what can be learnt from *Nightwood* in a contemporary setting.

In 1936 when *Nightwood* was published, homosexuality was primarily conceptualised through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud read homosexual feelings as being caused by 'inversion,' a reversal of gender traits or gender identities. Identification and desire are crucial to his conception of sexual identity formation: homosexuality is, essentially, identification gone awry. In Freud's studies of inversion in women, such as *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905) and "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" (1920), female homosexuality specifically hinges on an allegory of the fall: a fall back into pre-oedipality, "secured through an identification with the father and a concomitant desire for the mother" (Fuss 42). Women *fall back* from oedipal desire for the father and direct it, instead, towards the mother or a series of mother-substitutes: homosexuality in women is persistently conceptualised in terms of backward motions (Freud 130), and "posited as regressive and reactive, primitive and primal, undeveloped and archaic" (Fuss 49). The Freudian model then, while not seeing homosexuality as a moral failing like previous sexologies, assumed homosexuals to be in a form of sexually arrested development, to be narcissistic, and most often to be suffering from gender identity confusion (Torton Beck and Stepakoff 478). Additionally, Freud saw homosexuality in women as a desire for motherhood, which relates to this notion of falling—"niederkommen" in German means both "to fall" and "to be delivered of a child"; to Freud, "the fall back into homosexual desire constitutes a kind of maternity" (Fuss 51). As a result, Freudian psychoanalysis posits that there is a tension between wanting to *be* a mother and wanting to *have* the mother, thereby conflating a woman's desire for another woman with a displaced maternity.

Barnes was influenced by Freud, an influence acknowledged by her contemporaries; James Joyce, for instance, called her "Freudian" (Martins 111). Nightwood centres on the failed relationship between

Nora Flood and Robin Vote, and while Robin's character remains elusive, Nora's conception of the relationship reflects Freudian conceptions of female homosexuality. For instance, Nora's assertion that "[a] man is another person – a woman is yourself […] If she is taken you cry that you have been robbed of yourself" (129) very clearly fits Freud's model of homosexuality as narcissism. Additionally, the relationship between homosexuality and maternity is posited by the doctor, Matthew O'Connor, who asserts that "[l]ove of woman for woman, what insane passion for unmitigated anguish and motherhood brought that into the mind?" (68). Robin is often seen as childlike: she is initially described as a "meet of child and desperado" (31), and O'Connor says she looks "as if the hide of time had been stripped from her," with "a face that will age only under the blows of perpetual childhood" (121). Nora, meanwhile, is a woman "who should have had a thousand children," and according to O'Connor, Robin "should have been all of them" (90). These examples recall the Freudian theory of homosexuality as a desire for maternity, as well as the result of arrested development. Because of her reliance on a Freudian framework, Barnes' representations of same-sex desire and 'inversion' have been read as deeply problematic (Nealon 9).

However, although the relationship between Robin and Nora is often framed in terms of a maternal relationship, childhood operates as an affirmative space of indeterminacy in the novel. Childhood is presented as an ideal state of maturation: O'Connor is convinced that it is a "grave mistake of nature" that people "will not age into youth"; he believes that it would have been "more tidy […] to have been born old and have aged into a child, brought finally to the brink, not of the grave, but of the womb" (88). This undermines the idea that ideal progression moves towards reproduction and death: Robin may be childlike, but in this conception, her development is not arrested; instead, it is complete. O'Connor here reverses the Freudian theory of natural and unnatural development and attachment, by identifying heteronormative linear progression—instead of homosexual desire—as a mistake of nature.

This is part of a wider conception of queerness as existing outside, or challenging, the logic of natural progression. It is also visible when, for instance, O'Connor—identified with masculine pronouns throughout

Nightwood despite repeatedly identifying as a woman—thinks that she "was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps it's that memory that haunts me" (81). The idea that memories of past lives influence present identities disrupts a notion of heteronormative linear development that begins at birth. Time itself is unstable in *Nightwood* because its linearity is constantly disrupted. It might be helpfully understood as "queer time," a theoretical model developed by Jack Halberstam, who defines queer time "in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (1). Rather than natural progression, time is often interpreted according to a "logic of reproductive temporality" (4) and therefore "adjusted to the schedule of normativity without ever being discussed as such" (7). Meanwhile, queer temporality exists in "a 'moment,' a 'persistent present,'" with no guarantee of a future (11). *Nightwood* denaturalises time, by revealing the constructedness of natural categories of gender, sexuality, and temporality.

In *Nightwood,* the disruption of natural progression—including Robin's 'childlike' persona—challenges, rather than confirms, the Freudian theory of homosexuality as 'preoedipal' or regressive by locating it *outside* of time. For instance, for Nora, "the world and its history were […] like a ship in a bottle; she herself was *outside and unidentified*" (48, emphasis added). Robin likewise seems to be socially and temporally dislocated: when we first meet her, it is said that her "clothes were of a period that [Felix] could not quite place" (38), and that she is "the infected carrier of the past" (34). Moreover, Felix, who briefly marries Robin, felt while looking at her,

> that he was looking upon a figurehead in a museum, which though static, no longer roosting on its cutwater, seemed yet to be going against the wind; as if this girl were the converging halves of broken fate, setting face, in sleep, toward itself in time, as an image and its reflection in a lake seem parted only by the hesitation in the hour. (34)

Robin is out of place, belonging on the ship but existing in the museum. The museum, a space governed by notions of temporality, is an

institution displaying items of the past in the present, contributing to this out-of-timeness. Moving "toward itself in time" but otherwise "static," and parted from herself "by the hesitation in the hour," Robin challenges normative temporality and progression, as well as disrupting interpretations of progress and stagnation as binary opposites.

There is, in fact, a recurring motif where movement and stability are constructed as entwined instead of opposite. We see this at one point shortly after meeting Nora, when the narrator reflects that

> There is a gap in 'world pain' through which the singular falls continually and forever; a body falling in observable space, deprived of the privacy of disappearance; as if privacy, moving relentlessly away, by the very sustaining power of its withdrawal kept the body eternally moving downward, but in one place, and perpetually before the eye. (46)

"The singular" here describes an individual such as Nora; like the word 'queer,' it can mean "strange, odd, peculiar" ("singular, adj. 13"); the two words recall each other, perhaps deliberately—for language, in Barnes' oeuvre, is "deceptive, unstable, temporary, and grotesquely and humorously duplicitous" (Caselli 14). On the one hand, the description echoes Freud's conception of homosexuality as a 'fall' and a movement downwards; on the other, it challenges the stability of identity categories, presenting identity as fluid and mobile. 'World pain' here refers to the concept of 'Weltschmerz': the belief that physical reality is never sufficient for the mind. In this instance, privacy is connected to disappearance, or death, which is then contrasted with the public nature of falling "in observable space" and "before the eye." We are perpetually moving towards this disappearance—we are falling internally—but our external identity remains trapped in place. We are trapped in 'world pain' because the fluidity of internal identity cannot be matched by the fixed nature of external identity. This excerpt, despite its surface connection to Freudian models of sexuality, voices the novel's ambivalence towards identity categories; a person's only stability is their exteriority. Bodies contain a meaning that exceeds discourse. Barnes makes

us aware that while the novel may repeat various stereotypes about homosexuality, it does not believe in an overarching, stable category of homosexuality. Meanwhile, Nora's enduring love for Robin cannot be adequately categorised because her eyes "report not so much the object as the movement of the object" (47). Given the implied stillness of external identity, we can say that Nora, when she sees the movement of objects, only sees, and is attracted to, the internal flux of people, not the external categories. This is where the novel positions queerness: outside of identity categories.

The excerpt also locates queerness outside of linear time: bodies fall "continually and forever," "eternally," and "perpetually." As in Halberstam's interpretation of queer time as a "'persistent present,'" Robin is disconnected from notions of progress and change, described as "the eternal momentary—Robin who was always the second person singular" (127). This echoes the previous excerpt—"the singular falls"—but is also a reflection on Robin's lack, at least in the novel, of an 'I.' In *Nightwood*, she is always perceived by others: she is the second person singular, the 'you' that speech or actions are directed *at*. This explains why she is "eternal": always seen from the outside, she appears stable, and her interiority is often neglected, particularly by Felix, Robin's husband. Felix seeks stability in Robin: he tells us that "our basic idea of eternity is a condition that cannot vary. It is the motivation of marriage. No man really wants his freedom. He gets a habit as quickly as possible—it is a form of immortality" (101). Eternity, a condition that cannot change, posits a stability across time, a sort of immortality of identity, which marriage represents. After this, Felix says that he was attracted to Robin because she "gave [him] a feeling that [he] would not only be able to achieve immortality, but be free to choose [his] own kind" (101). The promise of Robin then, is the promise of both endless stability and endless changeability: without 'world pain,' stable identity categories and freedom synthesised. Felix would be able to construct his identity anew and use this ability to reify the codified heteronormative family structure by relocating Robin in the logic of reproductive temporality, or normative (as opposed to queer) time.

This inevitably fails because of Robin's persistent attempts to resist territorialisation and reification. After marrying Felix, Robin quickly grows bored, and is consumed by desires that are unknowable because they cannot be accounted for within societal constructions: she is "listening to the echo of some foray in the blood, that had no known setting," and, even when she is pregnant, she is "aware of some lost land in herself" (40-1). Motherhood does not lead to a reintegration into heteronormative temporality: she is still out of place, and after she delivers her baby, "[s]huddering in the double pains of birth and fury," she is still "crying like a child" (43). For Felix, a child is a connection to the future as well as a way to "recognize and honour the past" (40); Robin, however, merely feels "as if she had lost something" (43). She is a mother "with the body of a boy" (41), often described as wearing "boy's clothes" (133), always somewhat ambiguously gendered and aged. Unhappy in motherhood and her marriage, she leaves Felix for Nora, but she too wants to control Robin: "Nora's heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity […] Robin was now beyond timely changes, except in the blood that animated her" (51). O'Connor points out that Nora's love poses a threat to Robin:

> She saw in you that fearful eye that would make her a target forever. Have not girls done as much for the doll—the doll—yes, target of things past and to come? The last doll, given to age, is the girl who should have been a boy, and the boy who should have been a girl! […] The doll and the immature have something right about them, the doll, because it resembles, but does not contain life, and the third sex, because it contains life but resembles the doll. (133-4)

The doll is sexless (12), neither man nor woman. However, "given to age," the doll might be misidentified. Robin, who is identified with childhood, can remain genderless or genderfluid, but becomes a "target" for those who, in love with her, seek to define her. While all characters seem to have identities fluid and untethered, Robin's fluidity leads the other characters to want to mould her, to construct something

concrete, to find stable territory. However, they inevitably find that Robin fails to be codified: she always exceeds her imposed identity categories.

O'Connor finds the origin of sexuality in narrative, asking Nora:

> what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read. The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? […] We were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in boy or girl, for in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince. (123)

Gender, in this excerpt, becomes "exclusively relational" (Caselli 186): the girl is the prince, but she also *makes* the prince a prince; both are constructed by each other. The relational construction implies an identity borne performatively, in relation to the society that surrounds it, while also positioning this performance as *real* since it is the only frame through which we can have any concept of identity: we are "impaled" on this relational artifice. This is Freudian in the sense that it implies we learn roles in childhood that are relationally determined and define our later sexual understandings of ourselves. At the same time, this story is "the sweetest lie," because it pretends to be true in some transcendental sense. O'Connor alludes earlier that language itself creates liars because it "dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known" (123). Yet while language belies reality in this sense, the 'relational' character of gender relies upon language because it relies on such narratives: the unknowable can only be known by being put in "the garments of the known." To put it in more phenomenological terms, this reality "is independent [of discourse], yet it *becomes* such only at the very moment of its discursive 'creation'" (Zupančič 83). Therefore, in Barnes' novel, the performance of the gendered, sexualized identity is born in relation to an Other that actualizes it at the same moment that this relation reveals the artificiality of such an identity. The prince and the girl mutually construct each other while also revealing an interdependency that

leaves such relations fragile and fluid. Moreover, Nora's love for Robin now finds its origin in romance: her sexual identity is, then, the product of culture, not nature, contradicting essentialist readings of gender and sexuality.

In conclusion, by challenging notions of stability, mobility, and progression, *Nightwood*—despite occasionally adhering to Freudian logic—also works to undermine constitutive and binary identity categories structured around gender and sexual orientation. *Nightwood* is, in many ways, a product of (the prejudices of) its time, and some views of gender and sexuality expressed in the novel are outdated: Barnes' latent homophobia (as well as her anti-Semitism) are troubling and perhaps alienating for some readers. However, the novel also provides us with ways of writing the gendered body *differently*. In the present political climate, as the binary view of gender is becoming increasingly contentious, *Nightwood* teaches us how to read the gendered body cautiously by subverting expectations, treating gender and sexuality as cultural and discursive constructs instead of natural facts, while also making us aware of how such discursive formations actualize gender and sexuality in the present. It teaches us to be suspicious of language, to be aware of how the way we use words shapes our views of identities and bodies and imposes categories—imposes, in other words, an ever failing absolute. These continue to be important lessons. Such an affirmative reading does not override more critical readings, but it shows what this work can offer us despite its occasional reactionary tendencies: this article is a way to keep the conversation going, and an attempt to work *with* instead of *against* novels or authors that hold ideologically impure views.

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Biography

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