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Beyond the “Glass Case of Tradition”:

Depicting the Beauty and Power of Marginalized Groups through Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*

The flux of life is pouring its aesthetic aspect into your eyes, your ears—and you ignore it—because you are looking for your canons of beauty in some sort of frame or glass case of tradition—Mina Loy (“Gertrude Stein”)

Mina Loy’s quote above describes exactly the manner of thinking which Modernist writers like Djuna Barnes attempt to change through their work. In her novel *Nightwood*, Barnes calls for readers to look beyond the traditional frames of normalcy for beauty and ability. Through the examination of marginalized groups, specifically transgender individuals, this paper will analyze how *Nightwood* is a defiant response to the industrialization of gender and normalcy. Barnes’s greatest tool is her androgynous Tiresian figure, Dr. Matthew O’Connor, who dually demonstrates the destruction that sexually ambiguous individuals endure as a result of society’s patriarchal and capitalist ideals and the powers that transgender and otherwise “abnormal” groups hold. Barnes displays unusual characters of the underground in a gritty world full of melancholy as an unapologetic declaration that the marginalized do exist. As Jane Marcus describes, Djuna Barnes brings “all the wandering Jews, blacks, lesbians, outsiders, and transvestites together in a narrative that mothers the Other” (94).

Leslie Feinberg takes a closer look at the reasons behind societal oppression of marginalized groups in her book *Transgender Warriors*, which follows Feinberg’s endeavours to trace the history of transgender individuals and to find the beginning of their oppression. As a transgender lesbian, Feinberg’s personal accounts provide concrete evidence of the rigid institutionalization of gender, such as a 1960s Buffalo law dictating that women must wear at least three pieces of “women’s clothing,” and vice versa for men. Refusal to do so was cause for arrest (8). Not surprisingly, Feinberg wished to question the purpose of the institutionalization of gender (as well as of race, religion, and sexuality) and came to the realization that it is a strategic design, caused primarily by capitalism, “to keep us battling each other, instead of fighting together to win real change” (11).

Similarly, Djuna Barnes also questions society’s gender barriers and inquires why we are startled to see, for example, a man in a dress. The dress has long been worn by all, including “infants, angels, priests, the dead” (Barnes 86), so why do we reject the idea so vehemently? The history of androgyny is long, and, in actuality, cross-dressers, and people of androgynous gender were not always so negatively judged. Two-Spirits, individuals present in many First Nations populations who do not assume a specific gender and exhibit both masculine and feminine traits,

are held in very high regard. In the past, Two-Spirits were sought out for important advice, much like shamans, and held positions of honour within tribes (Feinberg 23). Similarly, Joan of Arc dressed in men's attire and fought as a warrior, which was strictly a man's post, and was "worshipped like a deity by the peasantry" (36), although she was abhorred by the Church. It is evident, then, that while transgender individuals have demonstrated positions of great power in the past, society's attitude toward difference has changed over time. Feinberg argues that the reason for this shift is that in the past "people worked cooperatively with collectively owned tools and other materials" (122). She insists that "eliminating the race for profits from manufacture and exchange," is what is needed to remove "the motives for pitting people against each other" (122).

Nightwood's vital character, Dr. Matthew O'Connor, is another representation of a powerful transgender figure. Based on Greek mythology's blind prophet Tiresias, as well as T. S. Eliot's character of the same name from his poem "The Waste Land," O'Connor is described as the "old woman who lives in the closet" (Barnes 146) and as being "born as ugly as God dared premeditate" (163). He is a homosexual man who cross-dresses, but O'Connor is also specifically transgender because of his struggle with gender identity. He is perpetually haunted by the memory of having once been a girl, and feels disconnected to the man that he is in the present, feeling as though he has "turned up this time" a man, "as [he] shouldn't have been" (97). He longs for the physical aspects of being female, "a womb," but also for the corresponding societal roles and activities like motherhood and "knitting" (97).

Keeping in line with Tiresian characteristics, the doctor also acts as an advisor to the other characters, displaying a clairvoyant talent of predicting their futures. Upon first meeting the Baron Felix, the doctor correctly predicts Felix's eventual take to "[drinking] heavily" (130) despite Felix's insistence that he does not drink. It is as if the doctor knows the devastation that Felix will endure over the course of the novel, but also that he knows all too well the despair that life often brings. As Phillip Herring says, "since [the doctor] has lived as both man and woman [he] is condemned to see all and to explain all in the terrible world that *Nightwood* evokes" (Madden 178). Consequently, O'Connor's character foreshadows the novel's peculiar ending, predicting that Nora and Robin will indeed be reunited when "one dog will find them both" (Barnes 113).

As previously remarked, Dr. Matthew O'Connor has been considered to be Barnes's take on T. S. Eliot's androgynous character Tiresias in "The Waste Land." Similarities in both authors' use of these characters are evident; for instance, Ed Madden argues that Eliot's Tiresias is also a sexually confused figure, a representation of "sexual and poetic anxiety" (Madden 112). Moreover, "The Waste Land" also demonstrates themes of gender imbalance through several significant scenes. One such scene is the allusion to Philomel, the princess of Athens who was

raped by her brother-in-law and then had her tongue cut out to silence her; she was then turned into a nightingale by the gods. Eliot references the damaged nightingale's attempt to sing with the haunting sound "Jug Jug," implicating the reader who has heard, with "dirty ears," this indecent act (II. 103). The reader is called out for being aware of the maltreatment of women and for sitting idly by as such maltreatment takes place. Additionally, the pub scene in "The Waste Land," which recounts Lil's dilemma of losing her teeth after taking pills "to bring it off" (II. 159) and abort a pregnancy, as well as the scene of mechanical, emotionless sex between a typist and a clerk, further depict Eliot's representation of gender imbalance. Madden argues that it is Tiresias's job "to unite and transcend these figures: to 'see' the sexual that cannot or should not be seen, to participate in some capacity, and to reproduce that sexual experience as truth: what he sees, after all, is the 'substance' of the poem" (117). This is also true of Barnes's O'Connor; what he *sees*, the misery of the people and also the power that their difference holds, is the substance of *Nightwood*.

Although Dr. O'Connor is the prominent representation of the outsider in *Nightwood*, he is far from being the only one. The character of Robin Vote, "a tall girl with the body of a boy" (Barnes 50) is symbolic of a third-sex. She is constantly represented as encompassing a liminal space; she sleeps with both men and women alike and she cannot be rightly explained by the other characters. She is the "troubling structure of the born *somnabule*," or sleepwalker, who "lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado" (38). Even her dress is unexplainable: "her clothes were of a period that [Felix] could not quite place" (46). Just as homosexual, cross-dressing, and transgender individuals are displaced within societal notions of gender, so is Robin Vote. She is "taken by something not yet in history . . . listening to the echo of some foray in the blood that had no known setting" (48), suggesting that within the institution of gender there is "no known setting" for the ambiguous third-sex. Society as a whole has no designated place for those who do not meet the specifications for normalcy. This rejection is also mirrored in the character of Frau Mann. As her name suggests, she is yet another symbol of ambiguous gender in *Nightwood*. Her "span of tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll," and being thus unsexed, she is "the property of no man," suggesting that an ambiguously gendered woman will not be loved, especially not by a man (16). Barnes once again demonstrates society's abhorrence for the unknown and how, as a result, the marginalized are left feeling "monstrously alone" (155).

The plight of individuals who do not fit into societal roles is not only depicted by the androgynous characters in *Nightwood*, but also by other unusual characters such as Felix's son, Guido, who is born "mentally deficient" (114). Guido differs from other children in that "he is very sensitive to animals" and is "not cruel, or savage," and Felix remarks that it is, "for this very reason that he is called 'strange'" (123). Once again, we see that there is some spectrum in which

normal behaviour resides and any behaviour that is not within this spectrum, even a good behaviour, is considered abnormal. That which makes the boy “strange” is, in actuality, more humane than the “normal” child. Barnes suggests that just as transgender individuals have been depicted as having powers of healing and clairvoyance, it is these positions *outside* the bounds of the institutions of gender and normalcy, that possess extraordinary qualities or abilities. The character of Dr. O’Connor relates this argument, in reference to Guido:

“His sanity is an unknown room: a known room is always smaller than an unknown. If I were you,” the doctor continued, “I would carry that boy’s mind like a bowl picked up in the dark; you do not know what’s in it. He feeds on odd remnants that we have not priced; he eats a sleep that is not our sleep. There is more in sickness than the name of that sickness. In the average person is the peculiar that has been scuttled, and in the peculiar the ordinary that has been sunk; people always fear what requires watching” (128).

The doctor’s speech expresses that those who fall into the category of peculiar, in which “the ordinary has been sunk,” are endowed with possessing abilities of the unknown. Here, as Ed Madden would suggest, the doctor “offers a kind of moral voice, a voice of reclamation, a voice that values difference in a world that does not” (216).

This under appreciation for the different, Barnes argues, is largely the result of patriarchal institutions of society such as the Church. She suggests that these institutions reject those who are different, like Dr. O’Connor who is “the other woman that God forgot” (150). She additionally condemns patriarchy through the symbolic use of the phallus, or in Barnes’s case, “the nonphallic penis” (Marcus 94). As the phallus is usually the symbol of “patriarchal authority,” (Veltman 218) Barnes rejoices in its breakdown through O’Connor’s “Tiny O’Toole” which is small, impotent, and foreign to its owner (Barnes 140). As Jane Marcus notes, “the symbolic phallus as law is absent in *Nightwood*, replaced by the wayward penis of the outlaw and transvestite” (94). Moreover, Barnes points to the contradictory ideals of the Church through the depiction of O’Connor’s priest, Father Lucas, and his paradoxical advice to “be simple like the beast and yet think and harm nobody” (140). The misery that the doctor endures as a result of his inability to fit into the mould of a patriarchal society’s roles, as well as the expectations of the Catholic faith, are obvious from his last monologue in the chapter “Go Down, Matthew”. He “offers a final plea for God to ‘put the light out,’ that blinding light which has obscured his vision of himself, his gender” (Veltman 220). Laura Veltman suggests that the doctor’s final statement, “now *nothing, but wrath and weeping*,” (Barnes 175) demonstrates the inevitable fact that the doctor cannot and will not “achieve a self within a patriarchal order” (221). Even if he is

“dressed in garments of the known,” (man’s attire), “he is ultimately unknowable. . .to himself” (221).

In conclusion, Djuna Barnes’s novel *Nightwood* is a manifestation of Mina Loy’s definition of Modernism: it is a look beyond the “frame or glass case of tradition.” Through the use of her Tiresian figure, Dr. Matthew O’Connor, as well as her cast of “misfit” characters, Barnes portrays the desolation of marginalized groups as a result of capitalism and societal institutions, specifically the institution of gender. Yet, she also demonstrates that there is beauty and power in the unknown. Within the tattooed body of Nikka the black circus man, Barnes gives readers a message to “*Garde tout*,” meaning look at *everything*, and see the beauty in so-called barbarity (20), and, consequently, to see the beauty in the unknown, the oppressed, and the different.

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