

. . . [T]he voice functions as a foreign body, as a kind of parasite introducing a radical split: the advent of the Word throws the human animal off balance and makes of him a ridiculous, impotent figure, gesticulating and striving desperately for a lost balance.—Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*

Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, like many modernist texts, sustains a commentary on the status of the human subject in the early twentieth century as it straddles the legacies of Enlightenment rationalism and Darwinian revelations. But unlike much modernist writing, Barnes's novel refuses the displacement of animality onto marginalized others in the service of imperialist and masculinist projections. While the discourses of gender, race, and sexuality in *Nightwood* have been under examination for some time, Barnes's species discourse, and its relationship to language, circumscribe a posthuman identity premised on a critique of the phallus. Robin Vote figures non-identity as a form of subjectivity, where the nonlinguistic, the undecidable, and the animal serve to revise what counts as human.

Barnes's novel formulates a scathing critique of language as that which forces the unknowable into the realm of the known. Reading this ornate and historically marginalized text engages us in deeply philosophical narratives that trouble humanist subjectivities by privileging a kind of animal consciousness. Bonnie Kime Scott tells us that the original title of Barnes's novel reveals more clearly its engagement with the discourse of species: "Djuna Barnes wrote to her writer/agent/friend Emily Holmes Coleman that, before settling upon *Night-*

wood as a title for her best-known novel, she had considered *Night Beast*, and regretted the ‘debased meaning now put on that nice word beast.’”¹ This final sentiment hints at the larger philosophical structure of Barnes’s mandarin text, for the novel privileges the “beastly.” It validates a human ontological mode that is open to multiplicity, organicism, and perpetual change. Conversely, the text associates traditional humanist forms of identity with alienation, disillusionment, futility, and disaster.

This critique of identity is played out primarily through the novel’s dialectic of language and silence. The Word as stabilizer of identity comes in for consistent abuse, particularly through the immoderate speeches of Dr. Matthew O’Connor and the various linguistic refusals of Robin Vote. Robin embodies nonidentity as an authentic form of being, and her silence is a marker of this value system. She refuses to categorize her gender or her sexuality, and by the novel’s end she is unwilling to conform to a human identity that denies her own animal being. Robin ultimately transgresses the symbolic as a limit upon her phenomenality. Through Robin’s character, Barnes troubles the very terms of human subjectivity by thinking about identity outside the conditions set by its symbolic economies.

Nightwood is obsessively concerned with the politics of the outside. The hierarchical binaries of male-female, white-black, Christian-Jew, heterosexual-homosexual, and human-animal are woven throughout the text in variously overlapping and abutting matrices. As the novel opens, the fabricated lineage of Felix Volkbein signals what will be the text’s ongoing concern with configurations of the powerful and the abject. Felix’s father, Guido Volkbein, was a Jewish man who invented for himself an Austrian, Christian, aristocratic heritage. Guido substantiated his false identity to his Christian wife with a sham coat of arms and a list of nonexistent ancestors. Felix, who believes himself a “pure” descendent of the Christian European aristocracy, is in fact a child of miscegenation. Guido’s “pretense to a barony” went undetected even by his wife, Hedvig, but she remained suspicious of her husband throughout her life, repeatedly asking him: “What is the matter?”² Hedvig’s question emphasizes the materiality of blood connections; according to the logic of aristocratic power structures, one may be called baron only if one’s blood allows, so the linguistic signifier weds the material and immaterial, the tissue and the title.

It is the physical composition of bodies—bodily *matter*—that in-

fuses aristocratic birthrights with value as cultural capital. Aristocracy is thus materialized or rendered powerful through bodies that are purely bred. Judith Butler explains the production of “bodies that matter” with attention to the exclusions upon which they depend:

This xenophobic exclusion operates through the production of racialized Others, and those whose “natures” are considered less rational by virtue of their appointed task in the process of laboring to reproduce the conditions of private life. This domain of the less than rational human bounds the figure of human reason, producing that “man” as one who is without a childhood; is not a primate and so is relieved of the necessity of eating, defecating, living and dying; one who is not a slave, but always a property holder; one whose language remains originary and untranslatable.³

I will return to questions of animality and language. Here, Butler’s discussion of racial abjection points out Felix’s ironic position as he unknowingly invalidates his claim to aristocratic status.⁴ In Žižekian terms, Felix’s Jewishness operates as an internal impediment in the circuit of racial purity and stable, normative identity. Žižek explains that in psychoanalytic theory, “even if the psychic apparatus is entirely left to itself, it will not attain the balance for which the ‘pleasure principle’ strives, but will continue to circulate around a *traumatic intruder in its interior*—the limit upon which the ‘pleasure principle’ stumbles is internal to it.”⁵ Similarly, Felix’s status as Jewish, which according to the logic of racial purity inheres materially in his blood, functions simultaneously as an inescapable impediment to his drive for European privilege and its alibi and *raison d’être*.

The crucial point about Felix, the trait that sets up the larger philosophical problems of the text, is his desperate desire for identity—an identity fixed by language and culture, an identity whose meaning is guaranteed by the symbolic order, an identity that constitutes a stable subject position in relation to humanist systems of value—in essence, a phallic identity. Felix’s attempted identifications with aristocracy and hierarchy mirror, in psychoanalytic terms, his desire to “have” the phallus and, in the having, to be stabilized in relation to the transcendental signifier. However, as Butler reminds us, such identifications are bound to fail; they are “vain striving[s] to approximate and possess what no one ever can have” (*B*, 105). They therefore require rigorous and repeated citation:

Identification is constantly figured as a desired event or accomplishment, but one which finally is never achieved; identification is the phantasmatic staging of the event. . . . Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshaled, consolidated, retrenched, contested, and on occasion, compelled to give way. (*B*, 105)

Felix's neurotic obsession with the past—and with his past in particular—not only functions as a symptomatic marker of his false origins but also points to the more general unsustainability of identity. Felix is obsessed with “what he term[s] ‘Old Europe’: aristocracy, nobility, royalty. . . . In nineteen hundred and twenty he was in Paris . . . bowing searching, with quick pendulous movement, for the correct thing to which to pay tribute” (*N*, 9). He also becomes “the ‘collector’ of his own past” (*N*, 10), and in this novel the collector represents a distinct ideological position. Collectors meticulously gather singular objects in museums and galleries, objects that represent a particular style, culture, or era. Each object in a museum has a well-defined function; it signifies something specific and can be placed within an inflexible narrative of aesthetic and symbolic meaning.

In an attempt to make his own identity signify, Felix collects images of it, trying to infuse it with a fixed meaning or—in Lacanese—with a symbolic plenitude. The “museums” in Barnes's text are often private residences arranged so that their furnishings and displayed objects represent a love relationship. The Volkbein's home, for instance, is “a museum of their encounter” (*N*, 11), a phrase later used to describe Nora's home and her attempt to reify and control her relationship with Robin. It is Robin, of course, who vigorously rejects the collector's penchant for fixing meaning and identity. But I will come to that.

For Felix, who has internalized racial, economic, and cultural distinctions,⁶ and who vainly seeks to fill the void opened up in his subjectivity by his false lineage, nonidentity functions as a lack. Felix experiences nonidentity as a gaping internal void that drives him to act out his desire to “bow down” to some proper cultural authority. In “Where the Tree Falls,” Felix enters a café where he believes he sees “the Grand Duke Alexander of Russia, cousin and brother-in-law of the late czar Nicholas” (*N*, 125). On his way out that evening, Felix bows to this man in a ridiculous and shameful act of desperation meant to sustain his illusions of propriety and place.

While Felix is clearly marked by his need to create a phallic identity, Dr. Matthew O'Connor, the second primary character to emerge in Barnes's text, presents a more complicated relation to that desire. Matthew is first introduced at Count Altamonte's party, where everyone in attendance is listening to him rant. "Once the doctor had his audience," we are told, "nothing could stop him" (N, 15). Constant talk is not only the doctor's habit but also his compulsion. He speaks loudly, brashly, and endlessly. In Barnes's text, his linguistic excesses are matched only—and conversely—by the surplus of Robin's silence.

Language and its absence are pivotal frameworks through which Barnes articulates the problematics of identity in *Nightwood*. When Matthew answers Felix's question about Vienna with rhapsodies on "young Austrian boys" rather than its "great names," Felix feels "that the evening was already lost . . . given over to this volatile person *who called himself a doctor*" (N, 17, my emphasis). Felix's disappointment in Matthew centers on the doctor's lack of interest in the status conferred by great names and, most important, on the failure of a name to correspond accurately with its signified content. That is, Matthew's claim to the title "doctor" seems false, and the reader already senses that this "middle-aged 'medical student'" is of questionable repute (N, 14). This exchange, like much of the novel, exposes the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, putting particular emphasis on this disparity in matters of name and identity. Felix is also distressed by Matthew's doubtful claim to be a doctor because it ignites a subconscious acknowledgment that Felix's own claim to aristocratic lines is also a sham.

Felix longs for what Derrida famously describes in "Speech and Phenomena" as the fullness of meaning as presence in speech and the correlative understanding of history as "the production and recollection of beings in presence, as knowledge and mastery."⁷ Felix wants the term *baron* to accurately denote a fullness of meaning, an originary power ascribed to his person through bloodlines. He would like the term doctor to truthfully describe Matthew's mastery of a body of knowledge. Felix desires a correspondence between the signifier and the self-presence and authority of humanist (phallic) identity. Both the Word and the Phallus are idealized in this wish structure so apparent in Felix. In his well-known critique of Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*, Derrida helps us think about the connection between the idealized phallus and the spoken word. Addressing Lacan's claim that

the letter in Poe's story is indivisible, Derrida argues that the indivisibility of the letter can be understood as an idealization of the phallus, an idealization upon which the whole ideological system of psychoanalysis depends. As Barbara Johnson's gloss of Derrida's analysis explains, "With the phallus safely idealized and located in the voice, the so-called signifier acquires the 'unique, living, non-mutilable [sic] integrity' of the self-present spoken word, unequivocally pinned down to and by the *signified*."⁸ This critique of Lacan underscores Derrida's ongoing skepticism concerning meaning as univocal, circumscribed, and locatable in the metaphysics of presence, particularly as it is manifested in the spoken word. Accordingly, Felix's longing for a normative, phallic identity is tied to the power of words to express and embody the idealized plenitude of meaning that undergirds such identity, but this power is exposed by the text as a sham. The text insists that language is opposed to being or presence, that language, in fact, destroys being. Thus, I argue that the text features a critique of the phallus and its derivatives, especially identity. This critique is mounted specifically through the interrogation of language and the concomitant privileging of being as nonidentity, as something therefore beyond humanism. One might draw a parallel between Derrida's critique of Lacan's privileging of "full speech" in the psychoanalytic exchange and *Nightwood*'s critique of "full speech" in the formation of identity. This parallel should, however, be examined in the context of the extraordinarily complex debate surrounding Derrida's critique of Lacan.⁹

Keeping in mind that Lacan's phallogentrism is a much contested topic that ranges far beyond the scope of this essay,¹⁰ we might posit Žižek's description of the Lacanian signifier as a possible parallel to *Nightwood*'s position on the Word:

[Consider] the fundamental Lacanian notion of the signifier *qua* that power which mortifies/disembodies the life substance, "dissects" the body and subordinates it to the constraint of the signifying network. Word is murder of a thing, not only in the elementary sense of implying its absence—by naming a thing, we treat it as absent, as dead, although it is still present—but above all in the sense of its radical *dissection*: the word "quarters" the thing, it tears it out of the embedment in its concrete context. . . . The power of understanding consists in this capacity to reduce the organic whole of experience to an appendix to the "dead" symbolic classification. (*E*, 51)

In this sense, then, the reign of the symbolic is the “*reign of the dead over life*” (*E*, 54), and it is this aspect of the reign of the symbolic that comes under vigorous attack in *Nightwood*. But I turn now to the novel’s specific critique of language.

The distance, or gap, between the word and being, between the word and the living—what Žižek describes as the signifier’s radical dissection of experience—is not only noted by Felix when he assumes that Matthew merely “calls” himself a doctor; it is also the subject of Nora Flood’s first words in the novel, which come on the heels of Felix’s misgivings. Addressing herself to Felix and Matthew, she boldly asks: “Are you both really saying what you mean, or are you just talking?” (*N*, 18). The text repeatedly poses this question, particularly through scenes featuring Matthew’s loquacity. Nora’s first words call attention to what is shown throughout the novel to be an inverse correlation between speaking and meaning: the more one says, the more divorced one becomes from meaning. Put another way, the more one tries to use language to capture experience, the further away from that experience one moves. Judith Lee’s observation that in *Nightwood* the “power of speech is associated with the experience of separation and difference” confirms this dynamic.¹¹

Matthew, the novel’s most excessive talker, gestures toward self-rebuke in this opening scene when he describes Martin Luther as a man who “went wild and chattered like a monkey in a tree and started something he never thought to start” (*N*, 20). Matthew aligns Protestantism with prattle when he insists that in a Protestant church, one listens “[t]o the words of a man who has been chosen for his eloquence, . . . [whose] golden tongue is never satisfied until it has wagged itself over the destiny of a nation” (*N*, 20). Resurrecting the text’s initial concern with the meaning and symbolism of blood, Matthew then contrasts this talkative faith with the Catholic faith, which is “[s]omething that’s already in your blood” (*N*, 20). He aligns language with the noncorporeal and abstracted: blood and the body remain alien to excessive “chatter.” The use of Catholicism to launch this distinction may seem puzzling given the Catholic emphasis on ritual and liturgical symbolism, but the doctrine of transubstantiation probably drives the comparison. For Catholics, the Eucharist is not a symbol; it *is* the body and blood of Christ. What Catholicism underscores by insisting on the sacramental flesh-ness of the body of Christ is precisely the link between “Eating Well” and the ethical bringing-into-being of the

subject that Derrida outlines in his essay by the same name. Subjectivity in the West, Derrida suggests, operates most centrally through “cannibalisms”—both real and symbolic. “Carno-phallogocentrism,” then, can be glossed as a certain “becoming-subject of substance” for which one must “take seriously the idealizing interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth, whether it’s a matter of words or of things, of sentences, of daily bread or wine, of the tongue, the lips, or the breast of the other.”¹² Becoming human is accomplished through the ingestion, incorporation, and interiorization of the other, the other both as object and as subject. This is why Derrida explains that the head of state, the “*chef* must be an eater of flesh (with a view moreover, to being “symbolically” eaten himself . . .)” (“EW,” 114). Transubstantiation is *symbolic cannibalism* par excellence, in which the ingestion of the flesh of God (the Word that has become Flesh) calls the subject into its highest relation to the ethical and the metaphysical, hence Derrida’s observation that

[t]he question is no longer one of knowing if it is “good” to eat the other or if the other is “good” to eat, nor of knowing which other. One eats him regardless and lets oneself be eaten by him. The so called nonanthropophagic cultures practice symbolic anthropophagy and even construct their most elevated socius, indeed the sublimity of their morality, their politics, and their right, on this anthropophagy. (“EW,” 114)

Transubstantiation insists on an interimbrication of the symbolic and material that performs a deconstruction of this most emblematic of binaries. What Matthew’s discussion suggests, in a very Derridean way, is that the “highest” of symbolic spiritual discourses contains, indeed is premised upon, the “lowest” of physical economies, which involves the intimate passage through—and we must not forget all the way through—the body. Such deconstructions characterize *Nightwood* throughout, particularly in Matthew’s discursive strategies (though not necessarily his performative ones, a distinction I discuss later), which are largely aimed at affirming the coincidence of high and low, clean and unclean.

Religion—particularly Catholicism—continues as a significant discourse through which Barnes renders the entanglement or interimbrication of hierarchical opposites. The dissolution of oppositional boundaries serves as a metatheme in the text, as Jane Marcus asserts

in her discussion of tattooing as an activity that blurs the distinction between spirit and body. According to Marcus, "*Nightwood* is about merging, dissolution, and, above all, hybridization. . . . *Nightwood* makes a modernism of marginality" ("LL," 223). Nikka, the "nigger who used to fight the bear in the *Cirque de Paris*," embodies such hybridization (*N*, 16): his racially and culturally marginalized (and sexualized) body is covered with tattoos alluding to high literary, architectural, and sacred texts that challenge his cultural assignation as savage. The linking of the spiritual and the bodily recurs later in the novel when Robin becomes pregnant and immediately makes the Catholic vow, when Matthew masturbates in an empty church, and of course in the final scene in which Robin seemingly attempts to become-dog, in whatever sense we might understand that becoming. In part, these linkages reflect the text's insistence on the inclusion of animality as an essential part of human identity, as inseparable from it. That inseparability explains Matthew's admonishments to embrace the "good dirt" (*N*, 85); Robin attempts such an embrace primarily through her suspicion of the usefulness of language and its counterpart, identity.

This usefulness is challenged as Felix and his friend Frau Mann are walking out of the Count's soiree and Felix asks her: "Is he really a Count?" While the question is ostensibly concerned with the patrician bloodlines that are Felix's fixation, Frau Mann's reply knowingly responds to the more radical interrogation of language and identity that underlies his query: "*Herr Gott!* . . . Am I what I say? Are you? Is the doctor?" (*N*, 25). One of the central problems of the novel is thus laid bare. One cannot be what one calls oneself: language cannot account for ontology. But this thesis is highly problematic because meaning, at least in the Western tradition, is almost always linked to symbolic systems, most often to linguistic ones. Derrida points out this linkage in his rigorous critique of Heidegger's concept of being or spirit as an exclusively human phenomenon. Derrida explains that the fundamental difference between humans and animals posited by Heidegger is one of language; it is the human ability to name an entity, and recognize that entity in its individual entity-ness, that separates humanity from the rest of the animal world. By contrast, the animal is characterized by its inability to name, by the "properly *phenomenological* impossibility of speaking the phenomenon whose phenomenality as such, or whose very *as such*, does not appear to the animal and does not unveil

the Being of the entity.”¹³ If identity cannot be posited through language, through what one says, then what of identity? Robin produces the rejoinder to this, the text’s deepest question.

Robin’s introduction in the novel exhibits a marked divergence from the concerns with naming and placing that characterize the text’s first interactions between Felix and Matthew. She is not only silent but also wholly unconscious and utterly removed from the realm of social and civil distinctions. The first significant description of Robin highlights her odor as having “the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness” (N, 34). The emphasis on smell places her in the realm of animality, for later in the text Matthew insists that “Animals find their way about largely by the keenness of their nose . . . [we] have lost ours in order not to be one of them” (N, 119). A clear echo of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, this coupling of animality and the olfactory explains the “organic repression,” to use Freud’s term, that one must perform in order to stand upright, disavow one’s animal nature, “become” and remain human.¹⁴

Robin is also figured as a prehuman organic body whose “flesh was the texture of plant life” and whose head is surrounded by “an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water” (N, 34). She is a supremely primordial and element-ary being whose subjectivity, rather than being impermeable and distinct, is characterized by seepage and overlapping. Among other binaries, she confounds the usual separation between human and animal: she seems “to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room . . . [where] one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-winds render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness” (N, 35). Thus Robin represents the refusal of organic repression as a necessary condition for the achievement of human subjectivity. Rather than abjecting animality, she seems to include it as a necessary part of her humanity.

Most interesting for my purposes is the novel’s description of Robin as “a woman who is beast turning human” (N, 37). This crucial phrase refuses to place Robin firmly in either the animal or human realm. She is “turning” or becoming; she is both animal and human. As Kime Scott notes, Barnes “constructs a blurred middle ground between the bestial and the human, disrupting these categories, and the very practice of categorization.”¹⁵ It is thus through Robin’s character that Barnes launches her most radical critique of humanism and its abjection of the animal. Robin’s character insists that our connections to

materiality must not be disavowed in order to produce the subject of humanism. On the linguistic level, the phrase “beast turning human” emphasizes the fact that Robin cannot be described with one word or term. She defies the power of the signifier to represent its implied signified.

Robin’s character undercuts the traditional notion that human and animal are separate realms and calls for an expanded definition of humanity that includes characteristics usually disavowed in Western culture. As the “infected carrier of the past,” she represents what has been systematically repressed by centuries of civilization, and so “before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers” (*N*, 37). This opaque passage reengages the question of cannibalism to stress Robin’s connections to blood and corporeality. Infected by the past, she embodies our organic lineage, our ancestral connection to the animal; as Karen Kaivola puts it, Robin offers “access to whatever aspects of ourselves we might ordinarily repress,” personifying “the unconscious and the instinctual.”¹⁶ More important, the desire to eat her suggests an obscene cannibalistic drive that ignores the edicts of humanist ideologies that separate human from animal by forbidding the consumption of human flesh. In this sense, Robin reminds us of some past organicism that destabilizes the most strident humanist taboo, the one against cannibalism. Or using the terms of Derrida’s discussion of ingestion and incorporation, Robin invites us into a transgressive literalizing of the symbolic cannibalisms that structure our subjectivation.

Ironically, it is Felix who finds most compelling Robin’s ability to carry “the quality of the ‘way back’ as animals do” (*N*, 40). He naively believes that Robin’s apparent link to the past will provide the stable identity he so desperately seeks to inhabit. But their fundamental incompatibility begins to surface immediately and reaches its apex with the birth of their son, Guido. When the infant is a week old, Robin returns from a wandering spell, and at Felix’s approach, says “in a fury, ‘I didn’t want him!’” (*N*, 49). After striking Felix, Robin suggests that they deny Guido’s existence: “‘Why not be secret about him?’ she said. ‘Why talk?’” (*N*, 49). The last question echoes Nora’s opening query to Felix and Matthew. Why talk, she implies, when words are empty and meaningless? More to the point is the way this ques-

tion exemplifies Robin's implicit interrogation of phallic or symbolic identity.

In her dismay at not wanting to have given birth, Robin leaves Felix and Guido. When she reappears in a romantic relationship with Nora Flood, however, Robin refuses to provide an explanation for her disappearance: "She did not explain where she had been: she was unable or unwilling to give an account of herself" (*N*, 49). Robin's *modus operandi* is to remain unaccounted for, unlocatable, particularly by avoiding language. Her few proclamations insist that the word's ability to define and position one is false and undesirable. Yet although she has escaped from Felix and his loyalty to the signifier, Robin is now involved with Nora, who "[b]y temperament . . . was an early Christian; she believed *the word*" (*N*, 51, my emphasis). Nevertheless, Nora, like Felix, seems attracted to Robin because Robin rejects the word and believes the blood. But Nora also wants to capture Robin and domesticate her within an Oedipalized framework, channeling Robin's wayward energies into a familial structure. As Dianne Chisholm argues, "For Nora . . . Robin signals a primeval animism that Nora had not known she was missing and that she tries obsessively to domesticate and possess."¹⁷ We might substitute for Chisholm's "animism" the more specific term "animality."

Robin's alliance with Nora is also marked by resistance and dissatisfaction, though it is less violent than her relationship with Felix. Nora and Robin meet at the circus, a carnivalesque setting traditionally associated with the disruption of hierarchies. Here, Robin is powerfully aligned with the circus animals in their captivity:

. . . Nora turned to look at her; she looked at her suddenly because the animals, going around and around the ring, all but climbed over at that point. They did not seem to see the girl, but as their dusty eyes moved past, the orbit of their light seemed to turn on her. . . . Then as one powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite the girl, she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface. (*N*, 54)

These animals do not rely on the human specular economy to "see" Robin; rather, they seem to share her experience of imprisonment and

her longing for escape. While there is an uncanny element of desire in the lioness's stance, it remains unclear whether that desire is for acknowledgment, release, or communion. The animal's going down parallels Robin's own prostration at the end of the novel and suggests surrender or abandon. The final image of a river "falling behind impassable heat" and "tears that never reach the surface" not only links the animal's and Robin's stultification by humanist power structures that repress animality but also suggests that an animal's experience, though technically untranslatable into human language, is nonetheless powerful and clear. Indeed, the animal's experience-desire is so overwhelming that Robin rises "straight up" from her seat, and Nora insists they leave the circus immediately (*N*, 54).

At this point, Robin is unable, as usual, to articulate her desire to be positioned in relation to her surroundings. She "looked about distractedly. 'I don't want to be here.' But it was all she said; she did not explain where she wished to be" (*N*, 55). This statement accurately condenses Robin's general preference for nonidentity and change. She does not want to be "here," to be specifically placed and marked, nor does she express a preference for an alternative space or place from which to measure her relations to others. This childlike and animal-like resistance to self-definition elicits a parental or keeper function in Nora. As the two begin their life together, Robin "told only a little of her life, but she kept repeating in one way or another her wish for a home, as if she were afraid she would be lost again, as if she were aware, without conscious knowledge, that she belonged to Nora, and that if Nora did not make it permanent by her own strength, she would forget" (*N*, 55). A few pages later, Robin's less-than-conscious "knowledge" is described as her "tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray" (*N*, 58). This passage reinforces Robin's link to ("stray") animals and further constructs the relationship between Nora and Robin as one of keeper and pet. But Nora already senses that her pet will never be fully domesticated. Their home is a museum of their encounter where Nora obsessively keeps everything in its place because of "an unreasoning fear—if she disarranged anything Robin might become confused—might lose the scent of home" (*N*, 56).

Inevitably, though the two women live together for years, Robin begins to stray. She refuses to be identified with one place or one person, so during her night "departures" she goes "from table to table, from drink to drink, from person to person"; even her thoughts, we are told,

are “in themselves a form of locomotion” (*N*, 59). These descriptions align Robin with continuous change and movement. Interestingly, her resistance to stable “positions” is foreshadowed the very moment she is introduced in the text, where she is figured as a dancer: “Her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance, the thick-lacquered pumps looking too lively for the arrested step” (*N*, 34). While beginning dancers imitate positions, advanced dancers “move through” positions to create a seamless and continuously changing movement-event. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari address this phenomenon: “Movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible; it is by nature imperceptible. Perception can grasp movement only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form. Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affect, are below and above the threshold of perception.”¹⁸ Robin is therefore appropriately figured as a dancer who functions within a continuous displacement of desire, a circuit of affect, and who in a certain sense cannot be perceived. This configuration of Robin as outside perception also explains the novel’s repeated linking of her character with the tactile sense. Felix is not only surprised by Robin’s attraction to both the “excellent” and the “debased”; he also notices her peculiarly intense tactile proclivities:

When she touched a thing, her hands seemed to take the place of the eye. He thought: “She has the touch of the blind who, because they see more with their fingers, forget more in their minds.” Her fingers would go forward, hesitate, tremble, as if they had found a face in the dark. . . . At such moments Felix experienced unaccountable apprehension. The sensuality in her hands frightened him. (*N*, 42)

This inversion of the Freudian emphasis on the eye further removes Robin from the realm of the human.¹⁹ Her radical refusal of identity and her consequent promiscuity are precisely what Nora cannot accept. As Matthew brutally but accurately describes Robin, she is “outside the ‘human type’—a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain. . . . Every bed she leaves, without caring, fills her heart with peace and happiness. She has made her ‘escape’ again. That’s why she can’t ‘put herself in another’s place,’ she herself is the only ‘position’. . .” (*N*, 146).

Robin’s compulsion to move, change, and resist symbolic forces

that provide a name, identity, and place is torturous to Nora, who respects the symbolic as a guarantor of meaning. But while Nora paces the floors awaiting Robin's return, she bends "forward, putting her hands between her legs, and begin[s] to cry, 'Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!' repeated so often that it had the effect of *all words spoken in vain*" (N, 61, my emphasis). This moment catalogues the failed appeal to Lacan's "big Other." Žižek explains that this "hidden agency" is typically construed as "a kind of meta subject (God, Reason, History, Jew)" (E, 39). Nora's vain "Oh, God!" reveals the emptiness of the metasubject and the failure of words to fill out or correspond to this Grand Meaning. This moment, like the text as a whole, insists that the humanist, symbolic locus of power is always already evacuated, and that each performance of its power is in fact a staged feint that depends on an assumption of privilege based on a retroactively posited origin that can never be substantiated. Moreover, each linguistic appeal to this metasubject is empty, vain, futile.

Words are vain for Nora because they fail to organize her relationship to Robin within a meaningful and recognizable narrative. Standard social markers such as husband and wife mean nothing to Robin and are doubly insignificant for the couple since their relationship operates on the margins of a heteronormative culture. But one might argue that Nora's desire for a normative and monogamous relationship and her maternal tendencies toward Robin in some way mimic the standard hetero-Oedipal familial structures of Western culture. Some critics insist that the novel is just as skeptical about lesbianism as it is about heterosexual alliances; perhaps this is precisely because of Nora's need to mimic heteronormative relational frameworks. Chisholm maintains that "Instead of speaking out on lesbianism in cryptic modernism, *Nightwood* seriously challenges the epistemological and ontological claims of sexual discourse in general."²⁰ Moreover, it is the larger question of identity itself, and the abjections our identities require, that frames the deep ideological structure of the novel.

If Robin represents nonidentity as a privileged form of being, Jenny Petherbridge acts as a powerful foil to her. Like Felix, Jenny experiences nonidentity as an absence to be filled. With biting irony, the narrator indicates that Jenny's stories also fall into Nora's category of "just talking": "The stories were humorous, well told. She would smile, toss her hands up, widen her eyes; immediately everyone in the room had a certain feeling of something lost, sensing that there

was one person who was missing the importance of the moment, who had not heard the story; the teller herself" (N, 67). Jenny provides another affirmation of the link between identity and language as a repressive constraint. The narrator says of her, "She was master of the over-sweet phrase, the over-tight embrace" (N, 68). In one of Robin's few addresses to her, she snaps: "Shut up, you don't know what you are talking about. You talk all the time and you never know anything. It's such an awful weakness with you" (N, 76). Robin's rare speeches in the novel often admonish others to give up talking. Here, violence erupts between the women. Jenny, jealous of Robin's attentions toward a young girl, strikes Robin and continues "scratching and tearing in hysteria, striking, clutching and crying." Robin, already bloody from the assault, does not resist the attack. Rather, she seems drawn to it: "as Jenny struck repeatedly Robin began to go forward as if brought to the movement by the very blows themselves, as if she had no will" (N, 76).

Elaine Scarry's work on the phenomenology of pain helps us account for Robin's behavior. Scarry notes that physical pain "actively destroys [language], bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned." According to Scarry, the unspeakability of pain is due to its lack of referential content: pain "is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language."²¹

Robin seems drawn to violence partly because it is language-destroying. But Scarry also explains that losing the ability to speak corresponds to the destruction of identity. "It is intense pain," she claims, "that destroys a *person's self and world*, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe."²² Jenny's beating assures, if only for a moment, Robin's self-annihilation. The physical boundaries that usually demarcate a distinct Robin are destroyed as Jenny crosses them, and the symbolic order that creates and sustains the idea of Robin is therefore incapacitated.

Nora, who is made miserable by such self-obliterating behavior, decides to seek an explanation for it from Dr. O'Connor. In the labyrinthine section titled "Watchman, What of the Night?" Matthew explores the relationship between the night and identity in order to clar-

ify Robin's mode of existence. He insists that Robin refuses to separate the clean and filthy; she serves as an organic repository that allows a person to "trace himself back by his sediment, vegetable and animal, and so find himself in the odour of wine" (*N*, 84). This tracing implies a dispersal of that which composes the body. Materially speaking, the elements that make up the vegetable and animal, for example, the particles of wine that enter one's nose to produce smell, are the same elements that compose human bodies. Thus, the hermetic sealing off from other objects of the human person required to produce the Cartesian subject, the self—what Freud theorizes as the overcoming of "polymorphous perversity"—is troubled by Robin's mode of being.²³ I will return to the question of the polymorphous shortly, but first a word about "the night." In his discussion of reality and the symbolic universe in *Enjoy Your Symptom*, Žižek pays considerable attention to the Hegelian concept of "the night of the world." To explain this "withdrawal of the subject into itself," this "experience of pure self *qua* 'abstract negativity'" (*E*, 50), Žižek quotes from Donald Phillip Verene's *Hegel's Recollection*:

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity. . . . The night, the inner of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical presentations, is night all around it, here shoots a bloody head—there another white shape, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into night that becomes awful. . . .²⁴

Žižek goes on to gloss this moment as "the 'psychotic' withdrawal of the subject into itself" and to point out that the symbolic order is only a temporary and momentary covering over of this fundamental negativity (*E*, 50). In fact, while Hegel argues that language can transform this ephemeral confrontation with the night of the world, Žižek characterizes the power of language as momentary. This is his significant reversal. For Žižek, it is the night of the world that looms larger than spirit. And what Robin embodies is being *qua* "the night"—which does not require sublation through spirit because it already is spirit, in some post-Hegelian, post-Heideggerian sense—indeed, in a rigorously posthuman sense.

Hegel's night is an "empty nothing, that contains everything," a space of radical heterogeneity, multiplicity, and nondistinction where

“phantasmagorical presentations” appear randomly and without reference to a meaningful narrative. Sleep and the unconscious also correspond to this night, explaining Robin’s deep affinity for sleep and its connection to multiplicity and the nonsensical. Matthew tries to explain to Nora Robin’s attraction to sleep and Nora’s own horror of that attraction:

The sleeper is the proprietor of an unknown land. He goes about another business in the dark—and we his partners . . . cannot afford an inch of it; because, though we would purchase it with blood, it has no counter and no till. . . . When she sleeps, is she not moving her leg aside for an unknown garrison? Or in a moment, that takes but a second, murdering us with an axe? Eating our ear in a pie, pushing us aside with the back of her hand, sailing to some port with a ship full of sailors and medical men? And what of our own sleep? We go to it no better—and betray her with the very virtue of our days. (*N*, 87–88)

The sleeper, in dreaming, obliterates all the commitments and promises made during waking hours. In this way, sleep and the night give the lie to social conventions, particularly monogamy and fidelity. That is, the night belies the symbolic in its foundation of the social.

Robin represents the kind of polymorphous “perversity” or multiplicity that Deleuze and Guattari describe in *A Thousand Plateaus* as “becoming-animal.” Nondomesticated animals, they explain, tend to experience themselves as packs or crowds, not as differentiated selves.²⁵ Robin’s mode of being is rhizomatic, schizophrenic, and amorphous; it is the practice of “deterritorializ[ing] oneself,” of refusing an individuated identity (*TP*, 32). The essential critique that Deleuze and Guattari level at Freud revolves around his tendency to reduce representations of multiplicity in psychotic episodes to the unifying Oedipal economy, to the “familiar themes of *the father*, *the penis*, *the vagina*, *Castration with a capital C*” (*TP*, 27). Freud finds only daddy in the Wolf-Man’s visions of wolf packs: “he did not see that the unconscious itself was fundamentally a crowd” (*TP*, 29). Like Felix and Matthew, Freud relies on language to combat this frightening lack of differentiation in the psychotic mind:

[W]hen the thing splinters and loses its identity, the word is still there to restore that identity or invent a new one. Freud counted

on the word to reestablish a unity no longer found in things . . . *the* Signifier, the devious despotic agency that substitutes itself for asignifying proper names and replaces multiplicities with the dismal unity of an object declared lost. (*TP*, 28)

Robin's character offers a similar, though implicit, critique of identity as necessarily unified by the signifier. She is indeed "psychotic" in the sense that she refuses "to exchange enjoyment for the Name of the Father" (*E*, 77), and she therefore inhabits the kind of plurality that Deleuze and Guattari associate with the animal. Thus, the novel affirms psychosis or, rather, it undoes the implied marginality of the term by insisting that Robin's refusal of identity is, as Marcus puts it, the "more humane condition" ("LL," 238). The novel also echoes Deleuze and Guattari's critique by exposing a link between the tenets of psychoanalysis and an authority that borders on a fascist insistence on identity. Marcus says it forcefully: the novel reveals "the collaboration of Freudian psychoanalysis with fascism in its desire to 'civilize' and make 'normal' the sexually aberrant misfit" ("LL," 238). This normalizing function is precisely what Deleuze and Guattari theorize with respect to animality and Freud's need to translate the Wolf-Man's episodes into humanized, Oedipalized narratives.

Robin also invites the retrieval of "filthiness" in oneself, particularly through sleep. Matthew belabors this point while Nora resists accepting his insights:

A high price is demanded of any value, for a value is in itself a detachment! We wash away our sense of sin, and what does that bath secure us? Sin, shining bright and hard. In what does a Latin bathe? True dust. We have made the literal error. We have used water, we are thus too sharply reminded. A European gets out of bed with *a disorder that holds the balance*. The layers of his deed can be traced back to the last leaf and the good slug be found creeping. (*N*, 89, my emphasis)

Matthew again privileges Robin's disorder as one that "holds the balance." This phrase suggests that the clean and civilized life, the Oedipalized and repressed life distant from animality, is off balance. One is reminded of Butler's discussion of the oppressive nature of coherent identities.²⁶ "The question here," she explains, "concerns the tacit cruelties that sustain coherent identity, cruelties that include self-

cruelty as well, the abasement through which coherence is fictively produced and sustained. . . . [I]f identity is constructed through opposition, it is also constructed through rejection" (B, 115). Matthew suggests that we err in rejecting the unclean portions of ourselves—that we practice a certain cruelty toward that part of our nature—and that we should strive for a balance by refusing to abject the unclean. Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection triggered by the improper and unclean in *Powers of Horror* confirms the difficulty with which Nora—and Felix—confront Robin's embrace of the impure. According to Kristeva, objects such as bodily excretions and corpses cause abjection because they disrupt "identity, system, order."²⁷ These objects destabilize boundaries and point out the falsity of purified identifications.

Matthew also explains that language cannot account for the night because of the night's intimate alignment with death and mortality and their inevitable reminder that humans are, despite everything, primates who must die along with the rest of the animal world; human language doesn't alter this inescapable fact. "Life, the permission to know death," Matthew continues. "We were created that the earth might be made sensible of her inhuman taste; and love that the body might be so dear that even the earth should roar with it. Yes, we who are full to the gorge with misery should look well around, doubting everything seen, done, spoken, precisely because we have a word for it, and not its alchemy" (N, 83). The desire here is for a direct experience of something, an experience that bypasses language.

Robin has mastered the art of bypassing language, but Matthew certainly has not. He continues to be his own worst critic in the lengthy section "Watchman, What of the Night?" After imploring Nora to doubt the things we have words for, he confesses his self-betrayal in this regard. "I've given my destiny away by garrulity," he declares (N, 91). This admission is immediately linked to Matthew's transvestitism. His compulsive self-disclosure soon reveals his truest desire: "to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar" (N, 91). These admissions come as no surprise given the section's opening image. In Matthew's cramped and squalid quarters he wears a woman's night-gown: "The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls. . . . He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted" (N, 79). In fact, Matthew wants to be more than a woman; he wants to embody

archetypal femininity. He betrays this desire by “taking the prominent features of one sex and inflating them with hyperbole.”²⁸ He confesses to wanting “a womb as big as the king’s kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner” (*N*, 91).

Matthew, then, is the worst betrayer of his own advice to shun the “things we have words for.” When he dons a woman’s nightgown, he literalizes the very error of which he accuses Nora: “[Y]ou have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known” (*N*, 136). Matthew seems unable to practice what he preaches. Despite his rejection of masculinity as a culturally normative identity marker, he desires its opposite. He cannot enact a radical refusal of false identities and instead replaces one gendered identification with his desire for an exaggerated version of another. Matthew wants to be Woman, and Woman is certainly something for which we have words. The text implies that Matthew’s profound desire to be barefoot and pregnant does not liberate him from the edicts of a heteronormative system but, rather, tethers him more brutally to gendered modes of being that are constrained by the insidious binary boy-girl. Thus, while Matthew’s *mind* wanders and changes, and while he repeatedly speaks the text’s concern with nonidentity as being, Matthew himself does not experience this undifferentiated mode in its phenomenality. According to the logic of the text, he cannot experience it unless he *stops speaking* about it.

Thus Matthew, because he remains a slave to the masculine-feminine distinction, has more in common with Felix than with Robin—despite the fact that he voices the text’s radical critique of identity. His adoption of excessive femininity reinscribes a symbolic system that operates fundamentally upon difference. Matthew says of himself, “I am a doctor and a collector and a talker of Latin” (*N*, 92). And though his discursive values tend toward the polymorphous, he places himself in an exacting narrative of gendered meaning, becoming a kind of masterpiece in the museum of transvestitism.

Matthew makes his last appearance in the section “Go Down Matthew,” which offers the novel’s final comment on the link between language and identity. As this section opens, Matthew finds Nora writing a letter and admonishes her in a manner that suggests she is speaking rather than writing: “Can’t you be quiet now?” he asks. “Can’t you be done now, can’t you give up?” (*N*, 124). His pleading appears directed more at himself than at Nora, and his redundant re-

vision of the question emphasizes his inability to comply, as well as his frustration with that inability. He begs Nora to abandon words, saying, "[P]ut the pen away," "lay down the pen," and finally "put down the pen" (*N*, 125–27). The pen is an all-too-obvious metaphor for the phallus in this section, but the comparison warrants attention. If the novel stages a critique of phallic identity and its residue in language, then Matthew's request that Nora put down the pen serves as his final plea—to self and other—to abandon the desire for such identity. Indeed, images of the phallus in this novel are either flaccid or accursed. When Matthew exposes himself—exposes Tiny O'Toole—inside an empty church, the only overt image of his penis is that of Tiny "lying in a swoon" (*N*, 132). And as Marcus points out, at the center of the novel are the *pissoir* episodes that "condemn the upright. A woman curses her lover in the toilet: 'May you die standing upright! May you be damned upward! . . . May it wither into the grin of the dead, may this draw back, low riding mouth in an empty snarl of the groin'" ("LL," 238). The novel seems to insist that the Phallus is never really turgid and therefore does not provide ontological plenitude; rather, it robs us of a certain fullness of being.

Matthew's continued pleading with Nora to lay down the pen results only in his own verbal surplus, and as the scene continues, he becomes increasingly hysterical. Soon he is cataloging his own fanatical belief in the Word. He asks Nora, "Haven't I eaten a book too? Like the angels and prophets? And wasn't it a bitter book to eat?" (*N*, 127). This striking image suggests that Matthew has forfeited physical or material sustenance for the ingestion of words and images. Explaining his own entrapment does not release him from it, for he keeps talking: "Jenny without a comma to eat, and Robin with nothing but a pet name. . . . But does that sum her up? Is even the end of us an account?" (*N*, 127).

As if in response to his question about Robin, Matthew gives an account of himself that is clearly doomed to inconsequence. The image of the book is again central to the broad philosophical question Matthew poses about human experience. This question turns on the constitutive disjunction between animality and consciousness, or spirit, in the human person. He explains that a priest once gave him this advice: "Be simple, Matthew, life is a simple book, and an open book, read and be simple as the beasts in the field" (*N*, 131). This dual objective—to be within language and simultaneously outside it, to be bard and

beast—is precisely what Matthew cannot accomplish. It is ultimately impossible to be “like an animal, and yet think” (*N*, 131). More important, Matthew is driven to despair by this impossibility, while Robin abandons this goal and almost celebrates the impossibility of attaining it by variously rejecting the symbolic and embracing animality.

After instructing the patrons of his favorite café to listen, Matthew insists: “To think is to be sick” (*N*, 158). Though he cries out for a permanent escape from all explanations—“God, take my hand and get me up out of this great argument” (*N*, 162)—he begins to blame others for his damned condition. “I’ve done everything and been everything that I didn’t want to be or do,” he exclaims, “and I wouldn’t be telling you about it if I weren’t talking to myself. I talk too much because I have been made so miserable by what you are keeping hushed” (*N*, 162–63). At this moment Matthew suggests that the forces of repression or disavowal that people like Nora and Felix employ to deny their own connection to the “good dirt”—to animality and organicism—suffocate him. The weight of such repression compels him to speak what others keep “hushed.” John Forrester might argue that this moment reveals a Derridean infiltration of an analytic space by the nonanalytic.²⁹ Perhaps Matthew’s speech has been invaded by the animality that others reject, but this particular infiltration into language is one the novel does not seem to recommend.

Matthew’s explanations are complex and sometimes contradictory. While he claims that he talks because of what others refuse to speak, he also insists that he talks because he is talked to. When his soliloquies become excessively hysterical, he finally begins to “scream with sobbing laughter. ‘Talking to me—all of them—sitting on me as heavy as a truck horse—talking!’” (*N*, 165). Language takes on the properties of a physical weight, bearing down heavily upon him. Before his final descent into raving, Nora forces him to hear her: “Listen,” she insists, “You’ve got to listen!” (*N*, 155). Despite Matthew’s demands that Nora “put down the pen,” literally and figuratively, she narrates her disappointment in Robin to its bitter and unsatisfying end, telling Matthew that a mutual deathbed would have been her only happiness with Robin. At that point, Matthew seems obliterated by the force of her language and stands “in confused and unhappy silence” (*N*, 18).

In his last, pathetic moments in the novel, an extremely drunk Matthew falls “upon the table with all his weight, his arms spread, his head between them, his eyes wide open and crying” (*N*, 165). Though

he only whispers, he manages to address the crowd around him, begging for release: “‘Now that you have all heard what you wanted to hear, can’t you let me loose now, Let me go? I’ve not only lived my life for nothing, but I’ve *told it for nothing*’” (*N*, 165, my emphasis). Matthew’s sense of being trapped by the words he speaks is acute. He seeks release from the lure of a language that promises meaning through stable identifiers but does not deliver. He notes in the end that his words, like Nora’s, have been spoken in vain: “‘Now,’ he said, ‘the end—mark my words—now nothing, but wrath and weeping!’” (*N*, 166).

The final and much-contested section in the novel, “The Possessed,” provides a complicated and ambiguous foil to the various excesses of language that precede it. While Matthew seems paralyzed at his café table by his reliance on words, Robin is anything but stationary. After arriving with Jenny in New York, she “began to haunt the terminals, taking trains to different parts of the country, wandering without design” (*N*, 167). Unable or unwilling to be fixed, Robin must wander, move, and change. She then gravitates toward Nora’s home, mostly walking in the open country, “pulling at the flowers, speaking in a low voice to the animals. Those that came near, she grasped, straining their fur back until their eyes were narrowed and the teeth bare, her own teeth showing as if her hand were upon her own neck” (*N*, 168). In this brief and final chapter, the novel’s deep engagement with the discourse of species surfaces most clearly. Robin grasps the animals as if she grasps herself. The boundaries of her subjectivity spread out toward animals and a kind of animal consciousness that rejects strictly humanist identifications.

Jenny becomes hysterical. Robin’s “desperate anonymity” is unacceptable to Jenny, so she “accuse[s] Robin of a ‘sensuous communion with unclean spirits’” (*N*, 68). Robin’s desire for anonymity is figured as her absorption into the nonhuman world: “Sometimes she slept in the woods; the silence that she had caused by her coming was broken again by insect and bird flowing back over her intrusion, which was forgotten in her fixed stillness, obliterating her as a drop of water is made anonymous by the pond into which it has fallen” (*N*, 168). In this passage Robin can stop moving, and become fixed, because she is deeply subsumed into a nonhuman milieu, and in this rare moment of stillness, human language is replaced by animal sounds or noises. This often overlooked description is crucial to recognizing the

redeeming nature of Robin's subjectivity as nonidentity. To be obliterated as human and self by becoming nonself, by becoming an anonymous drop of water in the greater ontological pond—a pond larger than Being conceived as merely human, as merely *Dasein*—this is Robin's reverie. And to frame the “merely human” here, to deflate the self-importance of humanism by elevating the nonhuman, the undecidable, the nonlinguistic, the animal—this is the posthumanist triumph of Barnes's novel, a triumph that ultimately revises the category *human*.

The ambiguity of Robin's final encounter with Nora's dog in a chapel near a “contrived altar” begins to make sense in light of this radical posthumanism (*N*, 169). This last scene, so highly contested in critical readings of the novel, obliterates distinctions between sacred and profane, human and animal, fear and desire, play and aggression. When Robin goes down on all fours, she renounces Freud's upright humanity and all its cruelty, abandoning the exclusionary edicts of identity. She swings her head against the dog's body, seeming at times to play with him. But she has become-animal so fully that the dog “reared as if to avoid something that troubled him to such agony that he seemed to be rising from the floor” (*N*, 170). In her final renunciation of the symbolic, Robin “began to bark also, crawling after him—barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching” (*N*, 170).

The fundamental undecidability of this scene is in accordance with the larger tenets of the novel, which declare the impossibility of choosing between rigid binaries. Unlike Matthew, who supplants one culturally constructed identity with another, or Felix who attempts to reinforce his false identity with signs from the past, Robin challenges the symbolic at its core, asserting that the outside of symbolization is not a radical absence but a kind of ontology, a plenitude experienced as anonymity, self-obliteration, movement, and change—perhaps as communion with alterity, especially with the nonhuman. *Nightwood*, then, is striking among its contemporaneous texts in its radical posthumanism. Perhaps more than any other modernist character, Robin offers a powerful gesture away from being as identificatory, humanist, exclusionary, and sustained within a matrix of abjection. Robin is said to have “no volition for refusal” (*N*, 43), and it is this openness toward alterity that defines her and, in my reading, redeems her, while those around her are doomed to suffer the disappointments of symbolic systems that repress, constrict, and ossify experience.³⁰ In the end it is

Robin's refusal to object animals and animality that saves her from the perils of reification in the human. Indeed, Robin seems to be modernism's clearest realization of Matthew's hypothesis: "'Ah,' he added, 'to be an animal, born at the opening of the eye, going only forward, and, at the end of the day, shutting out memory with the dropping of the lid'" (N, 135).

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Notes

- 1 Bonnie Kime Scott, "Barnes Being 'Beast Familiar': Representation on the Margins of Modernism," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (fall 1993): 41.
- 2 Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1937), 3. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *N*.
- 3 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 48. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *B*.
- 4 I am leaving aside the larger question of the text's treatment of Jewishness. It seems possible that despite the text's focus on abjected positions and discourses (such as animality and sexual deviation) Jewishness remains marginalized to a greater extent than the others.
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 48, my emphasis. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *E*.
- 6 For another discussion of Felix's embodiment of racial purity tainted by false claims to ancestry, see Jane Marcus, "Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic," in *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1991). Further references to this essay will be cited parenthetically as "LL."
- 7 Jacques Derrida, "*Speech and Phenomena*" and *Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), 102.
- 8 Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 225.
- 9 For an introduction to some of the chief critical issues at stake in the disagreements between Derrida and Lacan, see Johnson, "The Frame of Reference."
- 10 See, for instance, Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), especially 133–46.

- 11 Judith Lee, "Nightwood: 'The Sweetest Lie,'" in *Silence and Power: A Re-evaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1991), 216.
- 12 Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or The Calculation of the Subject: Interview with Jacques Derrida," by Jean-Luc Nancy, in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113. Further references to this interview will be cited parenthetically in the text as "EW."
- 13 Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 53.
- 14 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 30.
- 15 Kime Scott, "Barnes Being 'Beast Familiar,'" 43.
- 16 Karen Kaivola, "The 'Beast Turning Human': Constructions of the Primitive in *Nightwood*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (fall 1993): 175.
- 17 Dianne Chisholm, "Obscene Modernism: *Eros Noir* and the Profane Illumination of Djuna Barnes," *American Literature* 69 (March 1997): 181.
- 18 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 280–81. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *TP*.
- 19 Freud figures our transition from animal to human as an organic repression and a developing shift from the olfactory to the specular; see *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 29–30.
- 20 Chisholm, "Obscene Modernism," 172.
- 21 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 4, 5.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 35, my emphasis.
- 23 "Lecture II Parapraxes," in volume 15 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 209.
- 24 Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); quoted in *E*, 50.
- 25 It is important to note that Deleuze and Guattari err in characterizing animal consciousness as nondifferentiated because, in fact, we know that animals have complex experiences of self and other that cannot be so simplistically categorized; see, for example, Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer, eds., *The Great Ape Project: Equality beyond Humanity* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993); and Donald R. Griffin, *Animal Minds* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 26 Given my reliance on Žižek in this essay, it is necessary to note that Butler and Julia Kristeva finally disagree with Žižek's privileging of the real,

which they and other feminists interpret as a potential reification of castration and the Oedipal scenario. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler raises the possibility that Žižek understands these classic psychoanalytic mechanisms as existing outside cultural and political contingencies, and she suggests that Žižek's work therefore valorizes the real as "a token of a phallus" (B, 197), as a doctrine closed to interrogation that secures the correlative links between man-phallus and woman-lack. See also Žižek's rejoinder to Butler's critique in the appendix to his *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), where he reiterates the Lacanian insistence that the phallic signifier is defined by difference and lack.

- 27 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Lion S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), 4.
- 28 Andrea L. Harris, "The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," in *Eroticism and Containment: Notes from the Flood Plain*, ed. Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1994), 233–59.
- 29 John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan, and Derrida* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 235.
- 30 My understanding of Robin's "redemption" from the human differs significantly from readings that interpret her assumption of nonhuman identity as pathological or regressive. Dana Seitler's recent classification of *Nightwood* as a "degeneration narrative," for instance, frames the novel in such a register, though Seitler's reading understands this kind of narrative through a complex analysis of scientific culture; see "Down on All Fours: Atavistic Perversions and the Science of Desire from Frank Norris to Djuna Barnes," *American Literature* 73 (September 2001): 525–62.

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