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I CAN OPERATE IN THE DARK—BODIES ARE  
PHOSPHORESCENT...<sup>1</sup>  
OCCULT MODERNISM AND MYTH-MAKING  
IN DJUNA BARNES'S *NIGHTWOOD*

*Abstract*

Djuna Barnes's ties with spiritualism and ancient traditions of transformation have suffered undeserved critical neglect and studying these influences would enlighten any discussion of *Nightwood*. In what follows I will lay out the foundations of such an undertaking. *Nightwood* has much more—or more precisely, something else—to offer than a stylized opinion about homosexuality and woman's place in patriarchal culture, as many critics have argued. I suggest that we need to see *Nightwood* as a critique of the alienating public culture and of modern society, reflexive of the definitive socio-cultural and spiritual activity of its time. I will be looking at Robin's and the other characters' existence in, and attempt to break away from, a cultural framework that decreasingly tolerates a non-binary mode of being. Thus, the end—in both senses of the word, 'goal' and 'fate'—of Robin's quest is a detachment from a society grounded in 'either/or' choices in favor of a long-lost 'neither/nor' possibility. Robin, the unsexed "beast turning human" (Barnes and Plumb 36), is descending in her mind into the only setting where such form of being was last possible: prehistory.

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<sup>1</sup> Photo inscription by Barnes from the 1920s, taken from the Djuna Barnes collection in Maryland.

### *The Mystic's Path*

A little researched field within female modernism in general and Djuna Barnes scholarship in particular is the intense interest in ancient traditions and occult notions. Barnes had a long standing affair with things beyond ordinary understanding and sensation. She grew up in the same house where Zadel Barnes, her grandmother and a distinguished medium, conducted her channeling sessions. For Barnes, the affection for the exotic and the unconscious was early provoked by the outings to the circus with her grandmother when she was a child, and her fascination with the circus animals surfaces in her later journalism as well. Bonnie Kime Scott, discussing the beast motive in Barnes's works, examines some of the illustrations Barnes made for her works, noting that the images Barnes based her drawings for *Ryder* on is *L'imagerie populaire*, a 1926 collection of images dating back to the fifteenth century. Those images that Barnes loved the most, continues Scott, depict animals posing in human roles in reverse power relations. Her acquaintance with the humanized circus animals of the famous Hippodrome Circus "who mock the hierarchy of humankind over the natural world" (Winkiel 15) are reverberated in some of these drawings. She was moved by the gaze of the animals that she encountered in the circus, their promise of secret knowledge unveiled, and the idea of a distant bestial past that humans have the inner knowledge, albeit secret, to reconnect with. On other occasions, she drew mythic beasts, and in *Ladies Almanack* she depicted some of the human characters as animals. One picture, drawn to accompany *The Book of Repulsive Women*, published in 1915, shows a creature that is a cross between animal and human, and Scott calls attention to its striking resemblance with Robin of *Nightwood*. Her countless mythic references that appear from time to time in pictures as well as words thus make certain what Donna Gerstenberger calls "an emphasis on ontology [as] central to an understanding of Barnes's work" (33).

Barnes's body of work as journalist, writer and occasional illustrator shows that she not only lived in an era of increased attraction to ancient philosophies, but she herself actively sought the opportunity to study some of them. Let me take a short detour here to

review some of the relevant cultural and spiritual developments of the 1920s.

In the 1920s public culture started to develop an attraction to all things exotic, a current that was in part facilitated by the discovery of geographical sites that had long captured the imagination of modern culture. One was the 1911 discovery of the lost Inca city of Macchu-Pichu in the Peruvian Andes, and the other, more impressive one took place in 1922, as British Egyptologists Carnarvon and Carter unearthed the tomb of King Tutankhamen in the Valley of the Kings (“Mixing Art With Exotic Culture”). At the same time, the public sites of entertainment popularized shows that combined the old fascination with the ‘freakish’ with the new commodified spectacle. Productions featuring wild and exotic animals were still quite popular, and the foreignness of black skin combined with an eroticized body made a star of the Black singer and dancer Josephine Baker. The trend spread over to art, and James Clifford notes that this modernist aesthetic worked to “provoke manifestations of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious” (qtd in Kaivola 172).

The Russian mystic and dancemaster George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff was one of the few gurus to make an impact on female modernists, including Barnes. Gurdjieff is explicitly linked in several studies of the occult to some Left Bank women, including Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Janet Flanner, Solita Solano, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Djuna Barnes—all attending the study group at least a few occasions but most of them devoted ‘pupils’ (Mapel-Bloomberg). Jacob Needleman’s essay on his life and teachings reveals that he was born in Armenia in 1866 and spent his youth journeying to Central Asian and Middle Eastern monasteries and schools of awakening, “searching for knowledge about man that neither traditional religion nor modern science by itself could offer him” (Needleman). Gurdjieff settled in Paris in 1922, and his teachings inspired several of the modernist women to form a study group in order to get acquainted with his doctrines and hopefully implement in their own lives some of what they successfully sorted out.

Gurdjieff came in a time of crisis in modern culture. The crisis and disillusionment of modern existence that characterized the era of modernism were all the more unbearable as they were preceded by

much optimism. Mapel-Bloomberg identifies a “transformation from a more positive and utopian Spiritualism practiced in the latter part of the nineteenth century to a more nihilistic and distopian, or occult spiritualism in the years after the Great War.” The modernist writers suffered the personal and economic tragedies of the times as harshly as anyone, and for them, “Modernism became Morbidity” (Mapel-Bloomberg). In 1919, Djuna Barnes was asked in an interview, “Why such morbidity?”, and she answered:

Morbid? You make me laugh. This life I write and draw and portray is life as it is, and therefore you call it morbid. Look at my life. Look at the life around me. Where is this beauty that I am supposed to miss? The nice episodes that others depict? Is not everything morbid? I mean the life of people stripped of their masks. Where are the relieving features?

Often I sit down to work at my drawing board, at my typewriter. All of a sudden my joy is gone. I feel tired of it all because, I think, ‘What’s the use?’ Today we are, tomorrow dead. We are born and don’t know why. We live and suffer and strive, envious or envied. We love, we hate, we work, we admire, we despise... .Why? And we die, and no one will ever know that we have been born. (qtd in Mapel-Bloomberg)

In the aftermath of the horrors of World War I, the devaluation of human life and worth and the shifting emphasis from the ‘individual’ to the ‘mass’—as appearing in the varied forms of war casualties, workers in factories, or commodities on assembly lines—called for a spirit of guidance in the lives of modernist women writers.

Gurdjieff offered a clear view of the causes of the fallen state of the individual, of which Needleman gives a useful summary. According to Gurdjieff, for life to be lived to its full potential, humans need the balanced and fully realized presence of three faculties: the intellectual or thinking, the emotional, and the instinctive or moving centers. Contrary to that, the scientific, technical and material progress that has been taking place in modern civilization has “[pushed] the individual further into only one of the centers—one third, as it were, of one’s real self-nature” (Needleman). Technological inventions like the assembly line drove workers into the moving center, and participation in the war required the same faculty from the soldiers in the front. Similarly, modern society honored clothing that emphasized the individual’s commitment to one end of the man/woman polarity, hence hiding

behind the costume one half of their true androgynous nature. Animals were showcased in a way that accentuated an artificial hierarchy between human and animal whereby the 'human animal' was not allowed to expose existing animalistic impulses within the existing cultural framework.

The modernists keenly felt the impact of these dramatic changes. Along with her contemporaries, Barnes felt that the modern enterprise of the beginning of the twentieth century has rendered individuals blind to values they formerly cherished. The broadening human horizon that the emerging possibilities promised was only pretense; the new circumstances thrust many into the pursuit of material wealth, or in the case of World War I, mass killing. Although the conventional notions of development created the illusion of autonomous consciousness, in fact there was no "authentic 'I am' ... only an egoism which masquerades as the authentic self" (Needleman). Thus, as Needleman continues, "modern man's world perceptions and his own mode of living are not the conscious expressions of his being taken as a complete whole. ... on the contrary, they are only the unconscious manifestation of one or another part of him." In this sense, says Gurdjieff, human beings are automatons, giving only mechanical reactions to stimuli coming from the inside and the outside, and are incapable of consciously utilizing and authentically expressing in one gesture their thought, feeling, and will. They do not have control over their situation and thus can only passively suffer the things that are happening to them. The material growth brought with it moral degeneration that went unnoticed for many because of the spell of civilizational progress on the individual.

Modernist women did not depend on Gurdjieff for an enumeration of the calamities of the human situation as much as they depended on him for a path that they could follow to regain a lost sense of self. I am turning to Needleman for a paraphrase of the Gurdjieffian idea: "Deeply buried though it is, the awakened conscience ... is the only force in modern man's nearly completely degenerate psyche that can actually bring parts of his nature together." The *how* of this initiative consisted of "physical work, intensive emotional interactions, and the study of a vast range of ideas about humanity and the universal world," and also movements taken from sacred dances, all toward the ideal of obtaining a sense of cosmic wholeness (Needleman).

Gurdjieff's school of thought was often referred to as "the primordial tradition," and his program indeed involved a kind of prehistoric state to be recovered. Sandra M. Gilbert identifies a similar search for the "androgynous wholeness and holiness of prehistory" (217) as the prime objective of many modernist women writers. I think it neither necessary nor feasible to prove whether all female modernists were influenced by Gurdjieff, but the common line of thought is obvious. He alluded to the regaining of a sense of cosmic wholeness in a time when the human psyche was cluttered with deceptive notions about self-realization, and Mircea Eliade describes this same sentiment, only in connection with the ceremonial transvestism of many non-Western peoples. She writes that these societies practiced rituals whose purpose was "a coming out of one's self, a transcending of one's own historically controlled situation ... in order to restore, if only for a brief moment, the initial completeness, the intact source of holiness and power ... the undifferentiated unity that preceded Creation" (qtd in Gilbert 217). George Baker and Walter Driscoll also mention the Gurdjieffian idea of certain reintegrative moments "in which thought, feeling and sensation of one's physical presence were in an unmistakable relationship," moments which Gurdjieff calls special "I am" moments of "remembering oneself."

### *The Shaman's Lore*

Barnes's profound esoteric interest probably extended beyond the teachings of Gurdjieff though. There are other traditions relevant for the ensuing discussion of *Nightwood* that share many of the characteristics of the Gurdjieffian ideas, mainly because Gurdjieff knew them from his early studies. Allen Holmquist and Ralph Metzner both group together several frameworks of thought, including shamanism, meditation, alchemy and ancient mythology, under the name 'traditions of transformation,' because they all address the notion of reconciliation of polarities. Holmquist identifies three major oppositional pairs that, according to shamanism, need to be integrated so that the individual may experience a wholeness of the psyche that was lost with the emergence of Western society. These pairs are male/female, human/animal, and good/evil, and the way to work with them is a three-stage process: one perceives the presence of dualities,

understands the need to reconcile them, and ultimately finds that they are in reality non-existent (Holmquist).

The concept of androgyny holds that “all human beings are, in essence, comprised of both masculine and feminine characteristics, although one is generally more developed and expressed in the world.” Ancient traditions emphasize the need to bring the two kinds of energies together within the individual; shamans may try to achieve the integration by ritual transvestitism and long periods of living as the other sex does (Holmquist).

The boundary between humans and animals is also conceptualized as the distinction between intellect and instinct. Holmquist remarks that “[t]he Western world, through its focus on the preeminence and development of the rational mind, ... has lost an important connection with animals, our own animal body, and our basic animal-like and animistic instincts.” It is notable that Gurdjieff blamed Western society in a similar manner for disintegrating the individual to the point where they lost touch with their authentic selves. Shamans admit to that shattering of the whole as well when they say that in ancient times animals and humans could understand each other’s language and existed in close relation and harmony.

Concerning the opposition of good and evil, Metzner notes that in alchemical literature “the dark, destructive aspects of the psyche are symbolized by the nigredo (blackness), that has to be transmuted and uplifted through the alchemical fires of purification.”

Indeed, both Gurdjieff and the ‘traditions of transformation’ emphasize a reconciliation and equal redistribution of the shattered parts of human nature, with the grand design of experiencing, if only for a moment, a kind of primordial wholeness, in Mircea Eliade’s words, “the undifferentiated Unity that preceded Creation” (qtd in Gilbert 217). At the same time, both of them imply that the externalized part of the self assumes the place of the whole, in Gurdjieff terminology, it “masquerades as the authentic self” (Needleman). Modern society was permeated by an all-encompassing masquerade that involved a ‘part stands for the whole’ scenario; meanwhile, the individual was locked into societally called for and defined positions that helped keep up binary order.

### *Barnes's Night Sky*

In *Nightwood*, Barnes presents the reader with an intricate cosmology that is largely derived from the several spiritual teachings and ancient mythologies that she was familiar with. This cosmology is made up in such a way that she establishes associations and makes cross-references between concepts from a variety of sources, to the effect that in the end each one seems inherently related to another, sometimes helping, other times hindering understanding. In Louise DeSalvo's wording, Barnes has a style "which simultaneously masks and reveals" (qtd in Michel 54), well illustrated in the following passage, spoken by Matthew O'Connor, which sets *Nightwood's* own special mythology going:

Have you ... ever thought of the peculiar polarity of times and times; and of sleep? Sleep, the slain white bull? Well, I, Doctor Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor, will tell you how the day and the night are related by their division. The very constitution of twilight is a fabulous reconstruction of fear, fear bottom-out and wrong side up. Every day is thought upon and calculated, but the night is not premeditated. The Bible lies the one way, but the night gown the other. The Night, 'Beware of that dark door!' " (Barnes and Plumb 70)<sup>2</sup>.

This passage is the first one in a succession of musings by the doctor about the nature of the night, in which Matthew invokes an Indo-Iranian creation myth involving a white bull. The myth, which is the central episode of the cult of Mithraism, involves the sun god Mithra, or Mithras, who was born under a sacred tree and beside a sacred stream, holding a torch and a knife. The sun god Sol sent a raven to Mithras with the order to slay the mysterious white bull. When Mithras killed the bull with his knife, the bull became the Moon and Mithras' cloak turned into the sky. As the myth goes, thus came the alteration of day and night, animals and plants started to form and time was created ("The Legend of Mithras"). Barnes simultaneously hints at the initial nonexistence of day and night, and the moment of their split into binary opposition: the instant the world was created, it

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<sup>2</sup> All subsequent quotations from *Nightwood* are cited parenthetically with page numbers only.



was structured by polarity. With another stroke of the pen, she associates the 'night' with 'the unconscious'; sleep opens up the "dark door" of desires lacking the sanction of the Bible. The mention of the night gown is pronounced here as just moments before this dialogue Nora found Matthew in a woman's night gown. But the gesture of 'twilight' makes it clear that 'convergence' will assume a more emphasized status than the 'polarity' of day and night. In the intricate cosmology of *Nightwood*, the binary of 'day' and 'night' will stand for further dualities, and their division will come to denote their brief blending into One, in a moment of paradoxical nonexistence.

I take this assertion as my starting point, adding that numerous others might equally be valid, especially in the case of Barnes whose evasiveness was probably the only thing she had a commitment to. In only a few sentences, Barnes sets the stage for an endlessly explicable flow of ideas regarding the nature of binaries as inevitably present in modern society, and as the title of the novel shows, the 'night' takes a major role in this enterprise. In fact, it has its own life as an extra character, acting as a gate to many of the issues and patterns of thought that Barnes plays around with in the course of *Nightwood*.

The first four chapters introduce the main characters—Felix, Matthew, Robin, Nora and Jenny—and at the same provide capsule glimpses into their respective characters and priorities. The setting is the increasingly commodified space of public culture and the "splendid and reeking falsification" (11) of the circus, "taking its flight from the immense disqualification of the public" (11). The characters are in a search for definitions for themselves and a sense of belonging. Felix inherited from his father Guido Volkbein an obsessive "pretense to a Barony" (5), with all due fabricated evidence, including "a coat of arms that he had no right to and a list of progenitors ... who had never existed" (5), and "life-sized portraits of Guido's claim to father and mother" (7) which were in actual fact mere "reproductions of two intrepid and ancient actors" (7). Doctor O'Connor, "pathetic and alone" (30), is looking for his man and pursuing his futile wish to "boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar" (78). Nora has "that mirrorless look of polished metals which report not so much the object as the movement of the object" (48); she is "endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem" (48), a

preoccupation that soon finds an object in Robin's unattainable love. Robin is awakened from a sleep "incautious and entire" (36) and suffers from being hunted at once by "love and anonymity" (53). And Jenny, in being "a bold and authentic robber" (59) of other people's objects, stories and memories, "defiled the very meaning of personality in her passion to be a person" (60). Their respective claims to personality masquerade as their true nature and longing, but in lieu of the truth of the self they live on substitutes, without knowing. Gurdjieff described this state as the general self-deception of the individual who is in "endless pursuit of social recognition, sensory pleasures, or the vague and unrealizable goal of 'happiness'" (Needleman), notions that cultural conditioning implanted in their minds. This masquerade of illusory senses is, according to Gurdjieff, poor substitute for the autonomous and consciously lived life (Needleman), a sentiment that is also expressed by Matthew O'Connor, who has a 'gift' of verbalizing others' miseries. Although everyone strives to live it to the fullest, "[I]f life is not to be told, call it as loud as you like, it will not tell itself" (109), he proclaims, because that would require an awakened consciousness; in fact, people are asleep:

Donne says: 'We are all conceived in close prison, in our mothers' wombs we are close prisoners all. When we are born, we are but born to the liberty of the house—all our life is but a going out to the place of execution and death. Now was there ever any man seen to sleep in the Cart, between Newgate and Tyburn? Between the prison and the place of execution, does any man sleep?' Yet he says, 'Men sleep all the way'" (82).

The curse of the "slain white bull" is sleep itself: ever since the beginning of time, since the alteration of day and night, people have lost their unity, therefore cast to an eternal sleep of self-awareness. O'Connor, self-proclaimed "god of darkness" (106), tells that life—"this extremity, this badly executed leap in the dark" (28)—as members of society live it, is spent in eternal darkness, "sleep[ing] in a long reproachful dust against ourselves" (72). His view of the human condition as 'sleep' is shared by Gurdjieff (Needleman), a man not unlike Matthew: both share a vast knowledge of ancient wisdoms and traditions. They find it equally impossible to get to the "authentic 'I

am' (Needleman) or the "alchemy" (72) by virtue of explaining it with words:

"To think of the acorn it is necessary to become the tree. And the tree of night is the hardest tree to mount, the dourest tree to scale, the most difficult of branch, the most febrile to the touch, and sweats a resin and drips a pitch against the palm that computation has not gambled. Gurus ... expect you to contemplate the acorn ten years at a stretch, and if, in that time, you are no wiser about the nut, you are not very bright, and that may be the only certainty with which you will come away ..." (72).

Matthew contends that the nature of night and sleep has to be an object of continuous examination and contemplation, because they are what stand between individuals and their true self-realization and spiritual awakening, processes that are hindered by the cloud of deceptions through which modern culture operates.

In Barnes's literary cosmology, then, the night often alludes to 'suppression' as well. With the creation of the binary of day and night, the unified One was split into two converging halves. Ever since, at 'night' there can be no 'day,' and vice versa. In this sense, then, the 'night' suppresses its other half, and all binaries inherently contain this same either/or scenario. The doctor tells of the French that they "alone leave testimony of the two in the dawn; we tear up the one for the sake of the other, not so the French," because "they think of the two as one continually" (71). Conceptualizing the two as One whole thus interrupts the working of the binary oppositional scheme and facilitates the attainment of forgotten harmony.

In modern Western thought grounded in binary oppositions, the 'night' has associations not only with 'sleep,' 'darkness' and 'suppressed', but many other notions as well. Traditions of transformation work with three pairs of polarities whose balancing are mutually important in many ancient systems of spiritualism: masculine and feminine, good and evil, and human and animal consciousness. In modern society, there are usually different values attached to each side of these dualities, and a huge emphasis is placed on their clear and unambiguous separation within the pairs. The shift in public culture toward fixed meaning caused a split in the way humans' animal descent was treated, and fashion also began to show commitment to distinctly sex-specific clothing. As far as the third pair

of opposites is concerned, both religion and common ethics have always been unequivocal in their opinion about good and evil. With the increase in technological inventions and new scientific discoveries, public rhetoric characteristically sided with intellect as opposed to instinct; and in fashion social opinion honored a dress code that reflected traditional heterosexual roles. Consequently, the latent members of these three pairs—animal instincts, evil tendencies and sex contra-specific behavior—have always been associated with ‘suppression.’ *Nightwood* addresses all three of them in the way ancient traditions do: it grants a distinguished status to the simultaneous presence of both sides of the polarity, thereby eventually extinguishing the oppositional energy of one another.

Like a spiritual leader to Nora, Matthew makes the first association of ‘night’ with animal consciousness. He proclaims that in order to consolidate the impulses of night and day, at first one must “[make] a roadway for” (72) the latent side—the suppressed night (un)consciousness—and allow its energies to repossess one half of the personality. Continuing with his praise of the French, he offers his insights by way of saying:

“The French have made a detour of filthiness—Oh, the good dirt! Whereas you are of a clean race, of a too eagerly washing people, and this leaves no road for you. The brawl of the Beast leaves a path for the Beast. You wash your brawl with every thought, with every gesture, with every conceivable emollient and *savon*, and expect to find your way again. A Frenchman makes a navigable hour with a tuft of hair, a wrenched *bretelle*, a rumpled bed. The tear of wine is still in his cup to catch back the quantity of its bereavement; his *cantiques* straddle two backs, night and day.”

[...]

“Be as the Frenchman, ... he can trace himself back by his sediment, vegetable and animal, and so find himself in the odour of wine in its two travels, in and out, packed down beneath an air that has not changed its position during that strategy” (73).

The French alone, says Matthew, embrace their Beast, unlike the Americans, who “[separate] the two for fear of indignities” (73). Modern society, especially from the beginning of the twentieth century, took pride in its intellectual development as a ‘race’ and increasingly denied connection with anything primitive and

instinctive, a process that was probably facilitated by the spreading of machinery and the automation of work tasks as well. Whereas the French find themselves even “in the odour of wine,” just as “[a]nimals find their way about largely by the keenness of their nose” (101), most other cultures “have lost [theirs] in order not to be one of them” (101). Robin, however, has no problem reconnecting with her Beast; she has that “odour of memory” (100) which modern peoples are missing. In her eyes she has something like “the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye” (36). Robin is different from the French in that the latter build a path backward to their Beast, while Robin is already there, “[carrying] the quality of the ‘way back’ as animals do” (39):

The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a ‘picture’ forever arranged, is for the contemplative mind the chiefest danger. Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person’s every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey” (36).



*Figure 1.*

Robin's "beast turning human" evokes in the spectator images, feelings, senses, but never thoughts, as if something in connection with this creature were somehow inherently incompatible with the intellect. She does not even speak much, except to animals (137), which makes her akin to those people living long ago who, according to shamans, knew the language of the animals. The image of the unicorn, the white horse with a long horn, is reminiscent of a drawing by Barnes from her 1915 *The Book of Repulsive Women*, reprinted in Bonnie Kime Scott's essay:

Scott imagines Robin's figure into this drawing, giving the following description:

... a female nude, kneeling on one leg with the back leg extended on a fragmentary brick wall, clutching two four-petalled flowers on straggling stems. The woman/creature's back leg dwindles without achieving a foot, an erect tail rises in a dotted line above her buttocks, and two feathers or ears top her head. Her facial features are masked or made up so that a larger than human grimace and a small horn appear... [it] is ritualistically oriented toward the side of the picture where the dark background is cut away below by white vertical marks resembling sprouts, and above by a crescent shape (Scott 44–5).

This transforming figure is by all means "outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin" (121), and mythic in its outer features, having both animal's and human's body parts. I agree with Scott that the horns have special importance: *Nightwood's* Robin is portrayed as having "temples like those of young beasts cutting horns" (113). It is also intriguing that as the doctor goes on elaborating the prominence of horns, he calls attention to old duchesses and asks, "Have you ever seen them go into a large assembly of any sort ... without feathers, flowers, sprigs of oat, or some other gadget nodding above their temples!" (113). The accessories that these women wear above their temples at once seem like horns: a remainder and reminder of the bestial past they are otherwise so much removed from. The careful placement in the cultural setting is important as well, as when Robin is first met with; she "seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room" (34), surrounded by exotic plants and cut flowers, a mix of wild and domesticated. The whole episode is indeed much like it was staged:

“the set, the property of an unseen *dompteur*, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of woodwinds render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness” (34). Susana Martins suggests that “Robin is seen not so much as the primitive, but as the culturally defined, carefully placed in a theatrical *mise-en-scene*,” and from the way Robin is presented to the spectator, I am further reminded of Barnes’s 1915 “The Souls of Jungle Folk at the Hippodrome Circus” interview, even the title of which betrays Barnes’s predisposition toward seeing the animals of the circus not as wild and unyielding but only culture’s idea of the primitive, tailored for the masses. The presentation of nature as Barnes reads it into the new circus space is mere costume; one cannot escape the similarities between Barnes’s “ritual of familiarity and respect” (Scott 43) with which she greets the animals at the basement of the Hippodrome on the one hand, and the *Nightwood* scene of Robin’s visit to the circus. In this scene, the animals that are circling inside the ring “all but climbed over at that point” (49) where Robin is sitting. When the lions are brought in, one of them seems to communicate with Robin:

... 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 (49).

This episode is like a mirror scene of Barnes’s bewildered salute to the caged animals; both involve humanized circus animals, kept behind bars for the protective separation of humans from animals. Although still a majestic animal in appearance, the lioness has been domesticated so that she establishes eye contact with Robin: “the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye” (36) is already gone. It is also significant that at the time of this scene, Robin is married to Felix, having bore him a child not long ago; in a sense, the lioness sees her own situation echoed in Robin who is just as domesticated as she is: one is society’s version of the primitive, the other is culture’s idea of woman. Robin returns the gaze of the lioness and is disturbed by the apparency of kinship and the sudden rush of prehistoric memory; she at once finds herself in the position of spectator and spectacle.

The myth of the “slain white bull” (70) also asserts that the death of the bull and the creation of the world brought along the struggle of Good and Evil on earth (The Legend of Mithras). In light of this, then, day and night inevitably entail the conflict of good and evil, a conflict that can be resolved by embracing both and neither. Matthew says that “[a] man is whole only when he takes into account his shadow as well as himself” (101), simultaneously referring to the bestial and the sinful side of the psyche. Matthew maintains that the struggle of good and evil begins in a person’s life soon after they are born, but that “every child is born prehistorically” (115), equally “damned and innocent from the start, and wretchedly—as he must—on those two themes—whistles his tune” (102). Habit conditions people to suppress their evil side, but “[t]here is not one of us who, given an eternal incognito, a thumbprint nowhere set against our souls, would not commit rape, murder and all abominations” (75). One becomes One only if they counterbalance the two opposites, which, in turn, will eventually neutralize each other:

Don’t I know that the only way to know evil is through truth? The evil and the good know themselves only by giving up their secret face to face. The true good who meets the true evil (Holy Mother of Mercy, are there any such!) learns for the first time how to accept neither; the face of the one tells the face of the other the half of the story that both forgot (116).

This passage is analogous with the one about “neither man nor beast deprived” (36), and as animals are usually thought innocent by virtue of having no volition, it follows that Robin—a “beast turning human” (36)—is halfway between good and evil, “meet of child and desperado” (34). It is captivating that ever since her first scene where she was being awakened in the hotel room by the doctor, Robin had become part of culture in more ways than one: though reluctantly, she began to participate in public culture and take up habits and positions available within the framework of society. She got married, bore a child, visited the circus, and got involved in a relationship with Nora. She even “took the Catholic vow” (42), a move that was probably part of her “turning human” (36); but this move toward ‘legitimate goodness’ held no reward for her:



She prayed, and her prayer was monstrous, because in it there was no margin left for damnation or forgiveness, for praise or for blame — those who cannot conceive a bargain cannot be saved or damned. She could not offer herself up, she only told of herself, in a preoccupation that was its own predicament (43).

Religion, operating with binaries as well through the continuous attribution of the categories of innocence and sin, cannot conceive of good and evil as nonexistent/One, just like Robin cannot be one thing, only neither.

The third polarity that *Nightwood* is preoccupied with is that of masculine/feminine, and the characters who seek consolidation of this opposite within themselves mainly employ clothing as the agent of repossessing the far end of the binary. Matthew himself is like a modern sorcerer, a shaman, wearing his night gown like a wizard's cloak; he is engaged in the kind of ritual transvestism through which shamans recaptured the female energies for a wholeness of experience. In the doctor's room one may find "perfume bottles, ... pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs... . laces, ribands, stockings, ladies' underclothing and an abdominal brace" (68), "yet this room was also muscular, a cross between a *chambre à coucher* and a boxer's training camp" (69). When Nora appears in his apartment in the middle of the night, she finds him "in a woman's flannel night gown ... [his] head ... framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders, ... heavily rouged and his lashes painted" (69). He aims at equilibrium between male and female when he refers to God in the feminine, saying that "[p]ersonally I call her 'she' because of the way she made me; it somehow balances the mistake." Once he calls himself the "bearded lady" (84), an allusion to the famed performer/'freak' of the old participatory circus. Robin, too, dresses in clothes culturally assigned for the 'opposite sex.' She is "a tall girl with the body of a boy ... [with] broad shoulders ... [and] her feet large" (43), wearing men's clothes (122, 139), and her walk also exposes her as 'unwomanly' by virtue of her movements which are "slightly headlong and sideways; slow, clumsy and yet graceful, the ample gait of the night watch" (39). It is her clothes that define her as an invert; the significance of clothing is primary. Although Nora is also a lesbian, she is not a cross-dresser as society sees it. Her costume does not give away her

lesbianism, moreover, it conforms to the conventions of gender-specific clothing. Robin's marrying a man and bearing a child is of minor importance when all the while she dresses in men's clothes. In contrast, Nora does not marry, does not have a child, and has relationships exclusively with women; still, she dresses in women's clothing. She can actively violate a number of social conventions by virtue of her sexual behavior and it will still not be enough for the purpose of 'qualifying' as an invert of culture's definition. Even the disruption of gender roles goes unnoticed if it is not accompanied by an outwardly visible inversion; it is Robin and Matthew who are visibly subversive, and this turning around of the rules that culture sets up for them is their way of "restoring the primordial chaos of transvestism or genderlessness" (Gilbert 218). In the reconciliation ritual the individual reaches a state of consciousness that is true to the prehistoric wholeness of (un)sexed self:

The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace—neither one and half the other ... in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince—and not a man. (114)

By embracing and consequently eliminating the inner conflict of male and female, one "journeys beyond"—and before—"gender" (Gilbert 196). While costume is the perpetrator of binary positioning in modern homogenized culture, in the course of their ritual transformation Robin and Matthew appropriate it for their own means to eliminate that same artificial positioning and thus create an alternative reality of inclusivity.

Robin seems to exist at the 'twilight' of the night, that is, she incorporates within herself all three pairs of dualities that I examined. She emanates an "'odour of memory,' like a person who has come from some place that we have forgotten and would give our life to recall" (100); at the same time, there is an antagonistic quality to her existence which keeps her discontent. As Nora puts it, "she was asleep and I struck her awake... . she who had managed in that sleep to keep whole... . and there before my eyes I saw her corrupt all at once and withering, because I had struck her sleep away" (121). When Nora took possession of her in love, when she was awakened from her sleep

in the hotel room, when she was taken by Felix, when she gave birth to Guido, her “first position in attention” (113) was invaded by a force she had no concept of, as she had no concept of anything beside herself. Culture’s successive arms plotted to dress her in the “garments of the known” (114) and started to forget her sleep, asking Nora to remember her, “[p]robably because she has difficulty in remembering herself” (102). As I already noted, in Gurdjieffian theory the phrase ‘remembering oneself’ denotes that state in which the individual reconnects with their primordial consciousness, and I take the word ‘remember’ to have a double meaning here: someone who forgets cannot re-member themselves, because their authentic selves are in pieces. Robin, too, is ‘dis-membered’ in this sense, for “[s]he would kill the world to get at herself if the world were in the way, and it *is* in the way” (128).

Gurdjieff’s idea is that in modern societies people lost connection with all three of their faculties that they need in order to keep up an integrated, authentically conscious self-awareness: the intellectual, emotional and instinctive faculties are not equally developed within one person. Robin, Matthew and Nora all suffer from the peculiar modernist malady of fragmentary selves. Matthew’s speeches occupy almost half of the novel, and true to the watchman that he is, he speaks, and keeps record of everything: “The reason I’m so remarkable is that I remember everyone even when they are not about” (135). In his “priceless galaxy of misinformation called the mind” (124), he has all the secret and obscure deeds of nature figured out, but only to be able to say, “[t]o think is to be sick” (131). He speaks with longing about being 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” (113). But his tragedy is that he ‘knows’ but cannot ‘do’. Of Nora he says, she is “beating her head against her heart, sprung over, her mind closing her life up like a heel on a fan, rotten to the bone for love of Robin. My God, how that woman can hold on to an idea!” (133). Her preoccupation is not with the matters of the mind but rather those of the heart:

Love becomes the deposit of the heart, analogous in all degrees to the ‘findings’ in a tomb. As in one will be charted the taken place of the body, the raiment, the utensils necessary to its other life, so in the heart of the lover will be traced, as an indelible shadow, that

which he loves. In Nora's heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora's blood. Thus the body of Robin could never be unloved, corrupt or put away (51).

Nora's world revolves around her emotions for Robin; Robin's world revolves around herself. Matthew confesses that he does not like her; Robin is unlike him, but he has to "admit that much: sort of fluid blue under her skin, as if the hide of time had been stripped from her, and with it, all transactions with knowledge" (113). Her animal consciousness is much emphasized, and in accordance with this fact, Robin seldom utters anything in the course of *Nightwood*, and nothing in the last chapter, on which Carolyn Allen comments that Robin moves "back into the preverbal world" (qtd in Mylin). Indeed, Robin's presence is much more pronounced in the passages about the beast than anywhere else, and, accordingly, Matthew and Nora dominate their respective territories of intellect and emotion; all three characters easily offer themselves up for such interpretation. Their nostalgia for a mythic and highly hypothetical moment before Creation, before the alteration of day and night, indeed suggests that their fears were similar to Gurdjieff's, and naturally Barnes's: that modern life at the *dawn* of the twentieth century only furthered the *dusk* of true self-awareness.

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