NIGHTWOOD: THE EXILED GENDER

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Nightwood has traditionally been considered as a modernist cult book. Since the publication of the novel in 1936 criticisms have been based more on its form than its content. Some of the first criticisms such as that of Rebecca West's in 1936 indicate that the novel is one of deep morality because of all of its characters nobody is in their right mind (Marcus 1991, 198).

Rose C. predicted in 1937 that the novel would be read for other reasons and not simply for its plot. And she was right. The earliest criticisms reflect the profound shock that the novel created in connection with social customs and the morality of the times. The textual complexity disturbed many, and while some critics rejected the text considering that the "great novel" was more common and simple (Mark Van Doren 1937), others placed special emphasis on understanding its formal resources (Frank 1963, Kannestine and Smith 1977, Scott 1976).

In his introduction to the book in 1937 T.S. Eliot pointed out the error that could be made in judging *Nightwood* against a conventional model, because to do so would be even more misleading than all the misfortunes that occur in the novel. Other critics, such as Fadiman, agreed with Eliot. From all this, one can conclude that *Nightwood* is not an easy book and neither is it intended for the general public. It is a book which requires a new kind of reading. The decades following its publication did not provide definitive criticism for freeing this work from its exile within the modernist movement.

In any case, more than four decades have passed before coming to a new appraisal of *Nightwood*. Studies dedicated to Djuna Barnes have proliferated since the early eighties. The majority of these place her in the current of modernist female writers. Sandra Gilbert (1982) studies this gender aspect within Modernism extensively. In the same way, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1985), Shari Benstock (1986), Mary Lynn Broe (1991), Bonnie K. Scott (1990) and Jane Marcus (1991), to cite a few examples, have studied gender relations in the novel.

The critical vacuum before 1980 avoided both the gender perspective and social and political transgression. This fact proves *Nightwood*'s exile in comparison to other modernist works of the same period. The lack of criticism is but the reflection of many other exiles.

Djuna Barnes' first exile begins in childhood. Her family was marked by a polygamous father who lived with his wife and lover at home and with whom Barnes seemed not to have a good relationship. In the Victorian society of Barnes's childhood there were few opportunities for a woman with aspirations. Her paternal grandmother, Zadel Gustafson, helped her constantly and even encouraged her to study in the Pratt Institute of Art where she acquired the necessary training to land

her first job as a journalist and later to travel to Europe.

Her grandmother Zadel helped her to escape her destiny as a woman in an Edwardian society which would demand her submission within a patriarchal family, and which recognised the woman only in her role as a mother. This first initiation into a freer life, due to her beloved grandmother Zadel, was decisive for Djuna Barnes, who always aimed to imitate the model of the independent woman which Zadel represented for her. From the most liberal circles during her life in Paris to the English mansion Hayford Hall where she lived with Emily Coleman and Antonia White from 1932 to 1938 with the financial help of Peggy Guggenheim, Djuna Barnes accomplished her objective in life. In spite of her economic difficulties, she managed to lead her life in accord with her desires.

Djuna Barnes belongs to the second generation of the 'New Women' who struggle to change the social order and did not accept traditional values. According to Smith-Rosenberg, the 'First Generation' had fought for their independence but continued to follow traditional family roles (1985, 252). Zadel Gustafson represents this generation of women. Djuna Barnes was more radical in her attitude towards patriarchal society and gender.

The 'Second Generation' of new women in which Djuna Barnes belongs did not find solid support or understanding from the previous generation which considered them too radical. There was also no support from certain educators and sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis at the end of nineteenth century who devalued unorthodox sexuality. For them, the woman that had developed according to her reproductive functions could not abandon "her duties as a mother or a woman" in order to pursue intellectual interests. They believed that intellectual pursuits had a negative influence on the health of a woman and were the cause of sterility and hysteria (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, 260)

These ideas on women's sexuality entail a fallacy for the woman who is outside the orthodox sexual model and who dedicates her life to writing. For example, for Barnes, sexual liberation becomes a precondition for the expression of her literary creativity. In this case, writing is strongly related to sexual liberation.

In this way, *Nightwood* embodies the views exiled by a society which considers gender opposition as a natural and biological fact. At the same time it reflects the exile of a sexual choice considered sterile and deviant, namely lesbianism.

Seen from an historical perspective, *Nightwood* is an attempt to escape from the temporal order by considering history as the continuation of a tradition which denies women's voices. The language used shows contradiction almost systematically, and this proliferation of contradictions explains the use of paradoxes and metaphors that can be interpreted from various perspectives: language also reflects the exile. So if in *Nightwood* it is not possible to create a language which completely defends the voice of the woman that is due to the internalised rebellion and to the conflicts which Barnes had to endure as the result of her multiple exile.

Nevertheless, she speaks of a marginality. Jane Marcus is therefore right to claim that *Nightwood* constructs a narrative which "mothers the Other" (Reizbaum

1988, 188). In this manner, the necessary resources are created which favour the difference. The characters and their environment form the world of exile parodied in the book. And in that world Djuna Barnes caustically defends those condemned by society.

Inside the marginal world depicted in the book, I consider gender as one of the main aspects parodied and subverted, apart from racism, religion or history. The concept of gender begins to assume great importance at the beginning of the twentieth century, probably as a consequence of social and economic changes. After the First World War, the opposition between genders was to become even more pronounced. In experimenting with increased liberties, women created a particular social crisis and destabilised the bourgeois order based on opposing genders.

The change in social customs created distinct reactions in literary movements: while the male modernist writer's attitude was generally conservative, that of the women writers was more innovative. The male writer of this period sees a gender myth which he wishes to hold on to in order to maintain certain values he finds universal and unchanging. The woman writer, on the other hand, wishes to experiment with gender and to completely uncover and reveal the fraud constituting the artificiality of gender.

Male modernist writers find a certain stability which connects them to the past; they do not demand any change which endangers their situation. For women modernists, gender constitutes a target for destruction because it places them in an inferior position. As Sandra Gilbert has written:

> It is only those who are oppressed or repressed by history and society who want to shatter the established paradigms of dominance and submission associated with the hierarchies of gender and restore the primordial chaos of transvestism or genderlessness. (Gilbert 1982, 218)

Indeed, the women modernists must have felt the oppression of belonging to the feminine gender when in their works they sought to be free from this opposition. Biological determinism which identified sex with gender was a falsehood for them. They invented a new language full of images and metaphors which overturned the social order. The final aim was to create a new reality which could overcome the antagonism between the genders.

The cross-dressing of women during this period was important for redefining their new status in society, as Susan Gubar points out in her study on the role of clothing for the modernist women writers (1981, 479). The characters in *Nightwood* use cross-dressing to play with gender. For example, Robin Vote, the main character, always appears in male clothing and with male mannerisms. Doctor Matthew O'Connor goes to bed in a night-gown and wig when Nora comes to visit for the night. In his room, one could find all kinds of objects associated with women such as "laces, ribands, stockings and women's underclothing" (Barnes 1937, 78-9).

Matthew hides at home whenever he dresses up as a woman, knowing that society would not accept such behaviour in public. His nocturnal transformation only touches superficially on the concept of femininity: clothing, cosmetics and other accoutrements associated with women. He emphasises in this way the theatricality of his idea of being a woman. Djuna B in make up is evident in her personal life as well as in *Nightwood* as a parody of all that is feminine, especially in Matthew O'Connor, the only character in the novel to use cosmetics.

Matthew's desire to switch sexual roles is effected through the use of cosmetics and women's clothing, but this is nothing more than a superficial mask, and does not really satisfy him. His mistake is to rely only on superficial appearance in order to make his change, and is thus the source of his frustration.

By contrast, Robin wears men's clothing but she has no intention of changing her sexual identity and the text never emphasises her physical appearance. We know she wears pants, has short hair and a childlike appearance. The descriptions referring to her are often surreal images. Her physical appearance is not as crucial in the novel as that of Matthew's. Matthew displays his with human and often grotesque features. Matthew hides and feels ashamed every time he takes on a feminine role. For instance, in the Parisian hotel room in which Matthew wakes Robin up from her dream, not aware that Felix is watching him, he puts on perfume and paints his lips with rouge.

The doctor is a parody of the feminine gender. First of all, he cannot reveal his transvestite identity in public and chooses instead to hide. Secondly, because the gender to which he aspires is a mask which is intended to embellish and objectify the woman. There is no positive image for the transvestite man. His role is absurd because he converts himself into a mannequin and not a person. Matthew's gender parody takes on a double aspect of fraud and superficiality.

By contrast, Robin's description is very idealised and the frivolous paradigm of gender differentiation does not appear in her character. Robin is able to escape from a determined gender role. As for her name, Robin, this is the masculine form of Robina; while her surname Vote suggests feminist or suffragette victory. Her features are asexual. She is closer to being androgynous than to being a man or a woman. She belongs to a childhood world where concrete gender patterns are not yet established.

Just as childhood provides an escape from gender, prehistory and its animal world bring to *Nightwood* an indictment of history which creates false myths. Robin has no definite gender because she exists outside of history. One finds in her eyes the wildness that sets her apart from human nature: "the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye" (Barnes 1937, 37). She is caught between human and animal nature. This characteristic is presented positively in the novel. It is dangerous for women to adjust themselves to conform to a definite gender role: "the woman who presents herself to the spectator as a 'picture' forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger" (Barnes 1937, 37).

Robin provides an example of the escape from gender and the search for a

new historical time. She represents the past which is impossible for us to know because this past eludes man's memory. Her scope of existence is nebulous, where conscience does not yet exist, but where the anxiety of being is a struggle between two worlds:

> 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 brided veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become a myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey. (Barnes 1937, 37)

The descriptive emotion lives in the fantasy of her images which surround us with a surreal atmosphere. Robin is the character with the highest level of idealization in the book, she is always positioned between dream and reality. Her character was inspired in part by Thelma Wood, the North-American sculptress with whom Djuna Barnes maintained an intense relationship in Paris, and also in part by the myth of the vampiress of the first decade of the twentieth century. The vampiress always lays traps for her victims, smokes cigarettes, dresses in men's clothing and reverses her gender. On her development, "the vamp made way for the flapper, the 'It' girl, and the professional woman as heroine" (Levine 1988, 274).

Barnes was inspired by the myth of the vampiress invented by men and she transformed it into the liberated woman of the 20's and 30's which Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich brought to the silver screen. *Nightwood* modifies the vampiress who devours men; Robin inspires pity by being the victim of her ambiguous nature and of her struggle to be free.

After her frustrating relationship with Felix Volkbein, Robin meets Nora Flood, the character most closely resembling Barnes herself. They meet for the first time in an American circus where Nora, seeing the animal magnetism between Robin and the lions desires to take her away from that animal world and 'domesticate' her. From this moment on a relationship starts in which Nora embodies patriarchal values in her treatment of Robin as an object of desire (Benstock 1986, 258). Her mistake is to behave with Robin as a man would, trying to destroy Robin's gender indifference. Nora tries to 'save' her, and in doing so, places her trust in Doctor O'Connor, in the hope that he will help her regain Robin. In being with her, Nora wishes to make Robin a social creature.

According to Shari Benstock, Nora's crime consists in her attempt to introduce Robin to the patriarchal code (1986, 263). Nora is not conscious of Robin's difference, nor of her refusal to belong to any gender pattern, so she insists on the possibility that Robin can change. Nora even tries to get closer to her world,

adopting Robin's night-life style, but in the end she cannot understand Robin's infidelity, and breaks up with her.

Jenny Petherbridge takes Nora's place in Robin's life. Unlike Nora, Jenny is incapable of loving. She parodies the worst characteristics associated with the feminine gender, which reduce women to mere objects. Jenny thinks exclusively in terms of material possessions; she herself is alienated from her own existence and she transforms Nora and Robin's love into yet another object to collect. She is defined as a "squatter by instinct" (Barnes 1937, 68). Her incapacity for love stems from her own alienation as a woman and from the keen desire to acquire the power denied her by patriarchal society. In sum, she displays the superficiality of the feminine gender taken to its ultimate consequences.

Matthew O'Connor exhibits the contradiction of the male gender in society. He ridicules the strict oppositional code of a gender difference which suppresses masculine weakness. The only way out for Matthew, as Shari Benstock points out, is perversion, due to the rigid concept of gender. But *Nightwood* neither celebrates nor condemns perversion: it reveals *difference from* arbitrarily imposed norms and exposes the roots of that which society has defined as the perverse, uncovering 'sin' as the transgression of sexual difference. (Benstock 1986, 263)

Matthew criticises the patriarchal power which suppresses women's voices. At one point he asserts: "The only people who really know anything about medical science are the nurses, and they never tell; they'd get slapped if they did" (Barnes 1937, 31). Representing the repressed feminine side in man, Matthew continually wishes to have been born a woman. But his idea of the feminine is influenced directly by patriarchal society: he feels like a bride, he dresses and paints himself like a woman, he speaks like a chatterbox every time he meets with Nora and desires to be a devoted wife. Meanwhile Djuna Barnes mocks the strict concept of gender and her criticism, which always borders on the grotesque, is frequently humorous, as illustrated by Matthew's words:

> No matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar. (Barnes 1937, 91)

In *Nightwood*, Robin and Matthew are undifferentiated in regard to their sexual identity. They are instead members of a third sex, since they do not belong exclusively to any of the gender categories. Robin is defined through sexless and unchanging images: "a cherubim, an angel, a statue or a doll" (1937, 41, 148). In *Nightwood*, the doll is associated with the third sex:

> The doll and the immature have something right about them, the doll resembles but does not contain life, and the third sex because it contains life but resembles the doll. The blessed face! ... Their kingdom is without precedent. Why do you

> think I have spent near fifty years weeping over bars but because I am one of them! (Barnes 1937, 148)

The third sex is a new creation. In *Nightwood* this third sex creates tensions in the characters of Robin and Matthew. Matthew pursues androgyny through transvestism and the use of make up. While for Robin, the third sex is the search for a genderless world in childhood and apart from history. According to Sandra Gilbert, the third sex is the desire to assert one's identity and to reject the restriction of the self when those restrictions oblige one to wear a certain type of clothing or to follow a certain gender model. In this way, the third sex permits freedom from the strict gender patterns and allows the oppressed sex to exist against subordination (Gilbert 1982, 218).

As characters close to androgyny, Robin and Matthew never reach their own self-fulfilment. They are incomplete, and both are outside the common definitions of gender. In these characters, Djuna Barnes parodies the myth of gender. The roles are interchanged. Women take the active role while men are not the agents of power. Masculine supremacy is subverted with physical impotence, as in the characters of Nikka, Count Onatorio Altamonte and Matthew O'Connor.

Sexual indeterminacy and the resulting confusion that this provokes is reflected in the description of the trapeze artist Frau Mann. Her sexual identity is fused with her occupation and with her trapeze-artist's disguise:

> She seemed to have a skin that was the pattern of her costume ... The stuff of the tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was unsexed as a doll. The needle that had made one the property of the child made the other the property of no man. (Barnes 1937, 13)

The symbol of the doll is repeated to suggest sexual ambiguity. The name, Frau Mann, is proof of that. Her being has been objectified in the trapeze and lacks life and sexual desires. The trapeze provides an identity for Frau Mann. The profession she carries out as trapeze artist is merged with the human being which renounces the possibility of having a life outside her professional activity. In Frau Mann, Djuna Barnes reflects her own ambivalence as a woman with respect to her private and professional life as an artist.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg points out the gender ambiguity in *Nightwood.* According to her, doubt still remains as to whether the challenge to traditional roles deprives woman of her identity or whether the escape from gender has liberated women from patriarchal society:

> Frau Mann embodies one of the critical dilemmas of modern feminism: in rejecting gender as an artificial construction, does one lose one's identity as a woman? Beyond gender, what

is one? Frau Mann remains enigmatic. (1985, 292)

The artificial aspect of the social construction of gender forms part of the criticism of certain excessively rigid functions for women. Nevertheless, the rejection of gender identity provokes multiple tensions. In *Nightwood*, all the characters who avoid gender patterns survive in a strange environment; Frau Mann on her trapeze, Matthew in his transvestism and Robin through her double nature, human and bestial. There is no clear positive answer for defining a new concept of gender.

The third sex shows the inability to resist the gender opposition so firmly established in society and therefore it shows the inability to escape from such duality in order to write a new identity. The third sex would then be a patriarchal construct in which women's sexuality is likewise repressed. The third sex indicates death and sterility for women (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, 261). In this sense, Shari Benstock subscribes to the idea of Hélène Cixous when she says, "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (1991, 338). The expression and the voice of women requires the liberation of the body as a first step in building a new concept of woman free from the patriarchal code. In Barnes's own life, sexual freedom was vital as a way to control her own thoughts, language and artistic life.

In *Nightwood*, the relationships among couples show the absurdity of the patriarchal conception inherent in fairy tales. This myth, which constitutes a large part of childhood, perpetuates traditional gender values. According to this model, masculine and feminine characters assume opposite roles. Independence, liberty and the reasoning of men is contrasted with dependence, passivity and the emotionality of the heroine in fairy tales. The voice of women in fairy tales is restricted and she is converted into an instrument subject to patriarchal law.

The couples in *Nightwood* invert the gender paradigm. Barnes's text is well aware of this artificial model which shapes the expectations of society with respect to men and women. The two lesbian relationships that are introduced in *Nightwood* break the heterosexual system and its fairy tale. In consequence, the book attempts to define a new relationship for the woman free from gender patterns.

Hedvig and Guido are the first couple in the novel to parody the romantic relationship based in fairy tales. Guido's weakness contrasts with the military-like power of his Viennese wife Hedvig. Felix and Robin have a similar kind of relationship. At the beginning, Robin assumes the role of a passive character following Felix's desires. Felix seeks to recover a sense of teleology in which the masculine triumphs (linear time) over the feminine (cyclical time) (Lee 1991, 210). Felix is mistaken in his predictions about Robin. His desires to be socially integrated are destroyed by her lack of a sense of maternity.

Jenny and Robin caricature the ideal of romantic love. Jenny does not intend to save Robin, but only to keep the previous love she had with Nora. For Jenny, Robin is just a stolen object to add to her collection. Jenny perpetuates the masculine model in which the woman exists thanks to her value as an object of

exchange. Love does not exist between Jenny and Robin; both are incapable of having an affectionate relationship. While Jenny seeks to trap Robin's will, Robin flees from all that which signifies subjugation or lack of liberty. Once again, the impossibility of associating love with the alienated concept of woman is revealed.

Nora and Robin's relationship possesses a higher level of complexity than those previously discussed. In those, the idealised love found in children's stories was reduced almost exclusively to a parodic tale. Nora tries to save Robin from her wild nature. Their first meeting in the circus shows Nora's attempt to keep Robin away from the animal world as represented by the lioness, which Nora cannot comprehend.

Nora and Robin each follow the traditional opposing gender roles and in their relationship the incompatibility between the sexes and gender as illusion is made manifest. In the relationship between Nora and Robin, the man/woman duality is substituted by that of mother/daughter (Lee 1991, 212).

The myth of fairy tale love first learned in childhood constitutes the first deception relating to gender. And although it is difficult to destroy a myth, Barnes aims for a deconstruction of gender by means of transvestism, androgyny or relationships between the sexes, whether these be lesbian or heterosexual. Barnes reveals to us gender from the point of view of patriarchy, hence the difficulty to propose new options in order to shape a new feminine identity. Her worth is in presenting gender as the first and "sweetest lie of all" (Barnes 1937, 156).

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