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DJUNA BARNES' NIGHTWOOD: A MODERNIST EXERCISE

"On or about December 1910 human life changed." These now famous words of Virginia Woolf tried to reflect the consciousness of the speed of change at the beginning of the century. This sort of dramatic or prophetic gesture only revealed the intensity with which writers and artists of all kinds lived one of the most dynamic periods of human history. James McFarlane and Malcom Bradbury go so far as to say that Modernism was one of those overwhelming dislocations in human perception which changed man's sensibility and man's relationship to history permanently. In its multiplicity and brilliant confusion, its commitment to an aesthetic of endless renewal, or as Irving Howe calls it, its improvisation of "the tradition of the new," Modernism is still open to analysis and to debate. Even if we are talking of Postmodernism and even Post-postmodernism, the period we are referring to now (first quarter of the century, roughly) does not have a single concrete and aesthetic reference. As a matter of fact, few ages been as multiple and as promiscuous in their artistic choices as was Modernism. Very often, though, the tendency to sophistication and mannerism, to introversion, and to technical display for its own sake and even internal scepticism have often been cited as essential in the definition of Modernism. And since the terms have a vague connotation, we will have to establish some kind of framework of reference or definition of the movement in order to move relatively safely in the analysis of a novel often mentioned as a masterpiece of modern aesthetics.

When speaking of the novel as genre we tend to associate Modernism with the internal stylization of the form, the distortion of the familiar surface of the observed reality, the use of the so called spatial novel which is only the disposition of artistic content according to the logic of

metaphor, form and symbol rather than the linear logic of the story, the psychological progress or history. There is a new emphasis on technique and on tactics of presentation which trap the reader in the illusion of consciousness, what Leon Edel has called "the scrambled data" of the uncensored mind in an attempt to render the illusion of inner reality instead of the illusion of a real world as in the period of Dickens, Balzac or Tolstoy. Never has the novel been closer to creating its own poetics, like other genres, than at this period of Modernism. Following the example of Flaubert the Modernists were deeply aware of the architectural possibilities of the novel. Henry James in his prefaces, and Conrad in his, tried to formulate an aesthetic credo which would elevate the novel from the level of popular entertainment to the realms of artistic self-consciousness and even to the kind of secular religious ritual which drama had been for the Renaissance. In other words, artists, who are the "antennae of the race, always writing the history of the future", wanted to record the change that occurred in 1910. And suddenly, terms such as plot, structure, texture and point of view invaded the critical jargon and became the standard test for the excellence of any novel, indeed the standard for inclusion in the canon in the old sense of the "canon" of the masters....

After this rather general introduction, let me now focus the discussion on the topic of the program: "Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*: A Modernist Exercise".

When Djuna Barnes published her novel Nightwood, in 1936, the high point of Modernism had already been reached: Joyce had published Ulysses in 1922; Eliot's Waste Land dates from that "Annus mirabilis"; H. James had been dead for two decades, the Sound and the Fury was seven years old, and the major works of most of the American Writers of the Lost Generation (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, etc.) had been published. Djuna Barnes was in many ways a

distinguished member of that coterie of expatriates who looked at the American Scene from the other side of the Atlantic and who participated actively in the fervor of artistic creation and artistic renewal that dominated the Paris-based scene of a very special decade, one not again equalled in this century.

However, the reputation of Djuna Barnes has never been as solid as that of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, or for that matter any other members of the group. Even today her work is rarely anthologized; though her stories and The Ladies' Almanac have been reprinted, there was never a Barnes boom. Scholarly surveys of American literature fail even to index her name. Her first novel, Ryder, has been out of print since 1928. In 1962, the publication of the Selected Works of Djuna Barnes partially corrected the previous oversight and it is almost a testament to the small but almost fanatical following her works have had.

This situation presents a clear contrast with the high critical acclaim given to some of her works, particularly Nightwood. T. S. Eliot, who arranged for its publication by Faber was unusually generous in his praise of the novel. And twelve years later, at the time of the second edition, his admiration of Nightwood has not diminished. These are his words: "What I would leave the reader prepared to find is the great achievement of a style, the beauty of phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterization, and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of the Elizabethan tragedy." Almost every other critical judgement has pointed out the singularity of this book. Mark Van Doren says: "For brilliance and formal beauty few novels of any age can compare with it. But one must also say how desperate it is". Edwin Muir questions the generic identity of Nightwood: "Whether the book should be called a novel it is hard to say. It is more a vicarious confession, like most of the best fiction."

Leslie Fiedler looks at the brilliant surface of the novel with a suspicious eye. Its style is described as "oddly skewed." But in general we could reasonably say that the reputation of the novel lies in some of its striking passages, in the "poetic" quality of this language and in the shocking nature of its theme. And writers as diverse as Malcolm Lowry, Dylan Thomas, Carson McCullers and John Hawkes have been lavish in their praise of the work and eager to proclaim its influence on their work.

More than half a century after its publication, Nightwood continues to attract the attention of specialized criticism although it has not generated as much printed critical material as one would expect from its excellent credentials . But there is no doubt that the interval of fifty years has introduced an important element into the picture: that of the contemporary reader. And he or she is a very self-conscious reader. The works of modernist writers have generally been approached and evaluated according to their formal qualities as if the meaning of the text remained anchored in its immanent qualities. It is true, as I have already pointed out, that the modernist text with its formal exhibitionism and its foregrounding of language called attention to itself as if these were the only elements that counted. The author practically disappeared behind curtains and the reader was turned into a clever but submissive detector of tricks and clues.

The picture has somehow been altered. Today the reader demands participation in the process of appropriation of a text. And his active role in the creation and evaluation of a text brings back its historical dimension, which had been lost under the demands of formalism and structuralism, both interested in patterns and systems rather than in the individual reactions of a reader.

It now seems that the inclusion of the reader

as an important part of the hermeneutic circle will also determine the continued validity of a work of art. Whether Nightwood passes or fails the test of canonical validity is going to be the focus of our interest this afternoon. The success of our approach will depend on the ability of the reader (in this case your speaker) to keep a balance between subjective response and the formal presence of the text.

The very basic link between reader and writer is usually established through the comprehension of the story which is being told or composed. In Nightwood, Djuna Barnes has left enough traces of her concern about the reader to use one of her characters as a spokesman for her concerns. It could not be anyone else but Dr. O'Connor, who has the authorial point of view part of the way. On page 97 he says: "I have a narrative, but you will be put to find it".

Precisely the reader of Nightwood is given the hard task of putting together a story which unfolds in a strange way. There is no obvious chronological thread to grab on to nor can the reader follow the various stages of the social or biographical careers of the characters. In similarly difficult novels like Ulysses one can follow Leopold Bloom's epic odyssey throughout the city of Dublin. Nothing like that is possible in Nightwood. As Frank Joseph points out in his influential 1945 article "Spatial Form in the Modern Novel," Nightwood lacks a narrative structure in the ordinary sense; it cannot be reduced to any sequence of action for the purposes of explanation. Dr. O'Connor is wrong. He does not have a narrative. What he has is a static situation in which any incident is looked at from several perspectives. The eight chapters of Nightwood are like searchlights "probing the darkness each from a different direction" in order finally to illuminate the same tangled situation. In the first four chapters we are introduced to each of the important characters: Felix Volkein,

Nora Flood, Robin Vote, Jenny Petherbridge and Dr. Matthew O'Connor. The next three chapters are, for the most part, monologues by the doctor in which he broods upon the incidents of the previous chapters. Finally the last chapter, "The Possessed" is a slightly forced plot resolution which comes as a tour de force because that is the only chapter in which what happens is told in a straightforward, realistic manner by an omniscient narrator.

It is not the fragmentation of point of view nor the rupture of chronological line that surprises the reader, though. William Faulkner in 1929, for example, had published one of the boldest experiments in narrative point of view in the language; and although the initial approach to The Sound and the Fury is confusing for the reader, the story unfolds progressively as we follow the different perspectives upon the same incidents. In other words, fragmentation was almost a narrative routine in the modernist novel which shocked and alienated the readers at first, but which became standard practice throughout the century. Fragmentation in the modernist novel was the necessary counterpart to its thematic development. What is difficult in Nightwood is the near total absence of naturalistic elements to serve as the skeleton of the story or, in other words, the minimal concession to verisimilitude. James Joyce, Faulkner, even Virginia Woolf created stories of extremely complex form, but they were rooted in the lived experiences of their readers. There was a realistic substratum of lived experience which was sublimated or transcended by a system of symbolic cross-references. In Nightwood there is almost never a description of circumstance or environment which is relevant to the understanding of a character or which provides a social setting. We are asked to accept Barnes' world as we accept an abstract painting. Joseph Frank, once again, compares the style of Djuna Barnes to that of Braque as a contrast to that of Cezanne. And I believe the comparison enlightens quite clearly the

nature of Nightwood. What characterizes Cezanne is the tension between his desire to attain aesthetic form through colour and line and his desire to reach his goal through the depiction of recognizable objects. Joyce similarly accepted the naturalistic principle by presenting his characters in their routines and circumstance, but at the same time he created a symbolic structure of implication. Nightwood, like a Braque collage, is deprived of a world of immediate reference.

T.S. Elliot used the adjective "poetic" to describe this effect and he also warned the reader about the difficulty of the novel: he was right. Nightwood requires not a second, like he suggested, reading but a third and a fourth. And I believe that this may simply be too much to ask from a contemporary reader who is well trained in connecting loose-ends, in chasing leitmotifs and in putting the puzzle back together, but is impatient with a poetic language which muses and circles around itself. As a result of that choice of style and structure, the reader knows that something is going on, but he is terribly distant from the characters. He is told that there is pathos, but he has not been exposed to it. It is only the recapitulation of the incidents of the novel that makes him aware of the horror and misery of the characters. Faulkner, with a style that at times is not so dissimilar from D. Barnes, creates some kind of emotional rapport with his characters. Once you have read The Sound and the Fury you cannot forget Benjy or Quentin or even the hateful Jason. In my opinion, Djuna Barnes fails to seduce the reader into her story. He or she keeps at a distance from the book pondering whether it is really worth listening to those long, intense, aimless monologues. Readers have many of the feelings of awe and un-involvement that they have in reading Eliot's Gerontion, perhaps the work closest in tone, brilliance and hermeticism to Nightwood.

What then is the story?

It is the story of a group of expatriates in postwar Europe. The basic scene is Paris, with a couple of excursions to Vienna and America. The structuring of the events is really not so irregular. The first chapter, in which Felix is introduced, sets the time and location of the story (Paris 1920) when Felix is 40 years old; son of an Italian Jew, vaguely reminiscent of Leopold Bloom, who dies before Felix was born, and a Viennese Christian, who dies in childbirth. Pathologically obsessed with the idea of an aristocratic past, Felix sticks desperately and ridiculously to the concepts of royalty and nobility and he bows down to anyone who may have a title. He comes to know many people from the entertainment world who assume fictitious names such as Baron, Duchess, Princess. In the second chapter, Felix who is in the company of his drinking crony and confidant, Dr. O'Connor, meets Robin Vote, when the doctor is urgently summoned to the hotel to save Robin from the effects of a wild night out. Felix falls in love with Robin; they get married. She gives him a son, Guido, and immediately abandons Felix. In the third chapter, she takes up with Nora, an American of aristocratic origins who lives in an ancestral home in the state of New York where she entertains an "assortment of poets, radicals, beggars, artists and people in love". In the fourth chapter, Robin leaves Nora and comes to live with Jenny, a woman presented in the novel as a parasite and opportunist. The fifth chapter is an endless monologue of Dr. O'Connor when Nora visits him to inquire about the meaning of things, specially the meaning of the night. In the sixth chapter, Felix leaves Paris for Vienna with his son, not to reappear in the novel. The seventh chapter is again a conversation between Nora and the doctor about the lost love of Robin. The doctor leaves the novel screaming like a madman. And the final chapter, very short, takes place in the United States, at Nora's mansion where Robin has taken refuge from Jenny and from the world. There Nora's dog finds Robin in the chapel crawling on all fours in front

of a makeshift altar. When Robin and the dog meet forehead to forehead she chases the dog into a corner where they bark at each other. The novel ends on this surrealist note which negates any possibility of catharsis for the reader.

What I have just done is obviously a disservice to Nightwood because Djuna Barnes never meant to create a straightforward story. Nothing much happens. Rather than action what we have is an intense, relentless scrutiny of man's hopelessness and misery. Nightwood is concerned with the perception, memory and association of its characters and their consequent behaviour. It draws heavily on images from nature, childhood and religion. If we had to look for an image that somehow reflected the structure of the novel I would choose that of the circus. Not only do Nora and Robin meet at the circus but the rest of the characters are presented as a gallery of grotesques and transvestites. According to Donald Greiner, Nightwood "provides insight into the disordered human condition by conveying generalizations about love, bestiality and religion and it avoids the reader's expectation of verisimilitude and of character development".

I agree finally with Joseph Frank in his description of Nightwood as a spatial novel. Djuna Barnes like almost every modernist writer (Flaubert included) favoured the technique of constructing a plot in the manner of "collage" by juxtaposing different bits and pieces which have their own identity outside the main frame. Perhaps the word collage is not appropriate because of the connotations of random choice and the aleatory nature of this pictorial form. What I mean by that is that the novel is built on a series of static, quite independent, tableaux related to each other by the interconnections among the characters, by symbolic overtones and by a carefully chosen system of cross-references. Structure and theme work hand in hand to render the terrible isolation of each of

the characters in the novel. The reader does not understand fully the implications of each tableaux until he or she finishes reading the novel or rereads it. The first five chapters of the novel, for example, are composed around each of the main characters. They are not presented as round characters but rather, in each composition the writer has chosen the most significant or revelatory detail about the character.

The appearance of Robin Vote, a protagonist whose point of view is never given, is perhaps the best of the tableaux. The doctor (later we find he is a fake doctor) and Felix who are drinking in a Paris bar are called by a bellboy from a nearby hotel to look after a lady who has fainted and cannot be awakened. This is the description given by Djuna Barnes:

The perfume of her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad,porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorous glowing about the circumference of a body of water-- as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deteriorations-- the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds-- meet of the child and desperado.

Robin is no more than a beautiful but lifeless image when first seen, for she is stretched out on the bed like a ballet dancer frozen in midstep. Felix is watching from behind a plant. The doctor

is involved in a strange ritual behind the screen. At one point he uses Robin's make-up on himself and steals a bank note from Robin. The bellboy is standing around. But just as important as the characters is the environment which creates a feeling of ritualized death, of impending doom, of a "sleeping beauty who will awaken to death instead of life." From these descriptions we begin to realize that Robin symbolizes a state of existence which is beyond good and evil. She is both innocent and depraved precisely because she has not reached the human state, where moral values are dominant. The doctor describes her as "a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain." Robin goes through life without acquiring any human sense of guilt, responsibility, or remorse. She leaves Felix and their son to start a lesbian relationship with Nora and then leaves Nora for Jenny. She goes through the novel as if living in a dream from which she has not yet awakened. Her promiscuity and selfishness are only aspects of her radical innocence, that is, her inability to relate to anyone. That is why the novel ends with Robin going back to the woods, to nature, to a kind of pre-historic time in her identification with the dog. It seems as if the failure of the rest of characters lies in their incapacity to raise her to the level of the human.

But the dominant image throughout the novel is that of her lying in bed in the middle of such an incongruous scene, which reminds Dr. O'Connor of a Rousseau painting.

If we want to stretch our understanding and interpretation of the novel a little further, we could affirm that Nightwood tries to go beyond the individual nature of the characters and give them an allegorical projection. Felix and Nora's failure with Robin represents the irreconcilable forces of history and nature. Neither Felix's bowdlerized version of European history nor Nora's

reenactment of American traditional values can provide Robin with a sense of identity.

Dr. O'Connor, the man who wants to be a woman, is a grotesque and unreliable Tiresias in his capacity to understand the dark side of life, the night. At first he seems to thrive in the ambiguous world of his transvestism, being everybody's confidant and moral reflector while at the same time he is an inveterate liar, a drunkard, a thief and totally ineffectual. His exit from the novel does provide a different picture. Sick of listening to everyone's problem he exclaims:

"Oh,"he cried. "A broken heart have you! I have falling arches, flying dandruff, a floating kidney, shattered nerves and a broken heart! But scream that an eagle has me by the balls or has dropped his oyster on my heart? Am I going forward screaming that it hurts, that my mind goes back, or holding my guts as if they were a coil of knives? Yet you are screaming and drawing your lip and putting your band out and turning round and round!

After this outburst he goes back to the bar to get drunk again.

In many ways the structure of Nightwood reminds one of a morality play where the characters are representations of vices and virtues. But, unlike the morality play, as I have already mentioned, there is no final catharsis, no redeeming quality. In this sense, Djuna Barnes joins the school of "cruelty and horror" represented by writers as detached as Flannery O'Connor, Nathanael West, John Hawkes and, at times, William Faulkner.

Finally, I would like to make a few comments on the language of Nightwood, which continues to be its major claim to glory.

If we read the book straight forwardly, its style will crumble down in its excesses, paradoxes, and poetic vagueness. Its epigrammatic quality will no doubt perplex and bother the contemporary reader with its intensity and moral eagerness. Its proustian comparisons and similes will seem slightly overdone. Its obsessive, almost Faulknerian, groping around the character's motivation will appear almost irrelevant to a reader who has been provided with an incomplete picture of those characters.

But all of those elements would be less troublesome if readers would take hold of the novel, as Elizabeth Pochoda puts it by the "handle of its wit,"¹⁰ for it is a funny book although funny in a sort of desperate way; funny with the kind of humor one finds in John Hawkes or Flannery O'Connor. Looked at in this way, the book is an exercise in self-destruction. One has the feeling that language and style are out of proportion to the subject as if language itself were a circus act to dazzle and shock onlookers. Felix's claim to a future based on a falsified conception of the past is reduced to ashes in the first page of the novel where the author telescopes Felix's background in two paragraphs in the best mock-epic tradition of Fielding. From then on he cannot escape his own caricature so that his grand language on the subject of history becomes self-mocking and self-defeating. The same is true of the language used in the relationship between Nora and Robin. The language of the passages about Nora's passion appears moving until one realizes that it is heightened just enough to suggest melodrama. That slightly hyperbolic style suggests that there is something else behind her language; perhaps her inability to cope with love even if she talks about it in a grand manner. The function of style in Nightwood is to enhance the disparity and maladjustment of dream and palpable reality. There is a sentence in the novel which seems an accurate assessment of what Barnes intended in her work:

"Skill is never so amazing as when it seems inappropriate". In this novel, Djuna Barnes also seems to have gone out of her way to assign the best stylistic effects to the most inappropriate character and setting: Dr. O'Connor praying his penis, his Tiny O'Toole, in the church of St. Sulspice and Robin's Journey into anonymity ending with her ludicrous attempt to crawl back into the beast world.

The doctor's monologues are a superb example of this amazing skill. His penetrating observations on human nature defy logical penetration: there is a paradox at the core of every important utterance, whether it is his or it is the novelist's. We also know that he is a liar. However his language shows the writer's best effort to convey the character's unrelenting demystification of man's oeuvre and man's capacity to think and reason with a poetic rendering of the mystery of life. One wonders if Djuna Barnes was in full control of her style or whether what began as a joke on the characters finally ended by swallowing the novel as well. I am afraid that the latter is the case more than once. Her brilliant linguistic and stylistic exercise is always on the tight rope, very close to self-parody. The very end of the novel seems to corroborate that feeling when the prose of the last section suddenly becomes flat and realistic as if there were no place for language to go.

To conclude I would say that in spite of its extravagance and in spite of a certain faddishness of style, Nightwood is a superb example of modernist prose and one which will continue to be read and admired. Few writers have been so successful in exposing man's hopelessness and failure with such a degree of detachment and confidence.