Intemperate time: Queer(ing) temporality and narrative in *Nightwood*

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Abstract

In this article, Leah Lynch discusses Djuna Barnes' queer manipulation of narrative temporalities in her 1936 novel *Nightwood*. Reading this modernist novel through queer and psychoanalytic lenses, Lynch suggests that it displays the reciprocal, albeit uneven, construction of normative modes of being, and normative, novelistic conceptions of narrative. The novel offers not so much a model of how one might live time, affiliation, and language differently, but rather an unsettling of those norms that have, through gradual growth, come to figure as 'natural'. Using syntactical and narrative contortion, Barnes creates relationalities and subjectivities for her characters that are not consonant with linear time, but rather align with those spatiotemporalities (existences within both space and time) in which lives can be lived differently, or queerly. As queer narrative, *Nightwood* is therefore less about a return, retrieval, or other essentialist methodology, than it is with providing a stage for those particularities that can be elided by 'straight' images and understandings of time.

Key words
Djuna Barnes, Nightwood, queer temporalities, decadence

Djuna Barnes' 1936 novel *Nightwood* has an episodic, if not fragmentary narrative arc, including a tireless deferral of telos. Rhetorically discontinuous, it seems to delight in a play of surfaces, rather than in achieving character and plot cohesion. If these features appear unremarkable in a modernist (con)text, Joseph Frank (1945) suggests that Barnes' narrative abandons a principle of verisimilitude which modernist works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927) continue to cultivate.[1] *Nightwood* evokes a love of artifice, detail, and decay, redolent of a Decadent sensibility. These aesthetic strategies, in concert, betoken a twisted – or queer[2] – relationship to time, all the more significant given the centrality of 'deviant', queer sexuality to Decadent art – a movement still endemic in Barnes' milieu when *Nightwood* was composed (Carlston, 1998, pp. 46, 49). In a letter to Emily Coleman, who was instrumental in *Nightwood*'s publication, Barnes explains that it 'is not a novel ... there is no continuity of life in it, only high spots and poetry' (quoted in Barnes, 1995, p. x). Yet, such 'continuity of life' is itself secured through narrative. As I argue throughout this article, *Nightwood* presents a reciprocal, albeit uneven, construction of normative modes of being, and normative, novelistic conceptions of narrative. Thus, we achieve, as *Nightwood*'s Nora Flood tries to do in her conversations with Dr Matthew O'Connor, a coherent idea of our subjectivity and relationality through a process of narrativising. In this way, we aestheticise life in order, perhaps, to make sense of it.

Yet within some novels, particular aesthetics come to be so naturalised as to offer a semblance of objectivity. The Bildungsroman suggests itself here, in view of its insistence upon, its very title stressing, 'straight' development – a teleological maturation through one's formative years, often culminating in 'adulthood'. Such 'straight' aesthetics coincide with linear, reproductive time, and promise continuity through heterosexual monogamous relationality. In contradistinction, *Nightwood* offers a non-coincidence between narrative patterning and linear

time, as narrative spills over or moves sideways. Barnes' voluptuous narration of a circus performance in this novel – lingering, circling, and embracing lateral development – leads Elizabeth Pochoda to argue that 'the [circus] ring itself contains all time at once – there is movement but *no progress*' (1976, p. 188; my emphasis). But why must 'progress' be restricted to forward movement, as Pochoda's claim implies, or measured according to linear time? What of the relationalities and subjectivities – akin to the artifice, repetition, and performance in *Nightwood*'s circus – that are not consonant with linear time, but with those temporalities by which queers live?

In this article, I therefore investigate how Barnes' queer manipulations of narrative may be understood to restyle temporality.[3] I argue that the interstices she creates through syntactical and narrative contortion offer *Nightwood*'s characters various spatiotemporalities – existences in both space and time – in which to relate differently, or queerly. I draw on the work of Elizabeth Freeman, who suggests that 'a hiccup in sequential time' within visual texts opens up relational possibilities (2010, p. 3). Freeman's argument is indebted to theorists such as Judith Roof (2016), who demonstrate how 'straight' time, reproduction, marriage, and other constituents of heteronormativity map onto narrative time. A disruption of such a narrative's forward thrust at once denaturalises it and allows us to imagine novel ways of being (and being together). Indeed 'queer time', broadly construed, disturbs the linear, teleological paradigm of temporality. It exposes the dubious motivations of the norm(ative), along with its ahistorical impulses. Hayden White addresses this ideological freight and resonance of narrative too, when he observes that any congruence between narrative and 'life' or narrative and 'history' is not so much 'natural', as a marker of power (1987, p. x).

It is important to emphasise that such entanglements of narrative, temporality, subjectivity, and relationality are both historical and quite recent phenomena. Along with Michel Foucault (1972), we might locate this convergence, roughly, in the late-nineteenth century. However, it is at the turn of the twentieth century in particular that same-sex desire, through sexological and Freudian reworking, becomes characterised by a queer, 'backwards' relationship to the temporal: queer corporeality is deemed out of sync with the (normative) life narrative. Moreover, the queer, asynchronous body is where degeneration theory – propounded by Max Nordau, Cesare Lombroso, and Charles Féré among others – interfaces with Decadence, allowing me to read moments of narrative (super)abundance in *Nightwood* as possible sites of queer temporality. Sigmund Freud is particularly useful to my analysis of (hetero)narrative in *Nightwood*, insofar as his work is at once seminal in the instigation of a (hetero)narrative of sexuality, yet consistently offers insight into the contingency and happenstance of this mode of desiring. For example, near the end of his *Three essays*, Freud concedes that '[w]here inversion is not regarded as a crime it will be found that it answers fully to the sexual inclinations of no small number of people' (2000, p. 95). In other words, same-sex love is not so much in defiance of the statistical as it is the juridical norm; discursive, narrative mechanisms work to reify it as *abject*. Freud offers a way to read for perversity in narrative that is sensitive to the moralising function of narrative (and history). As Erin Carlston observes, '[i]f Freud wrote, often prescriptively, of what constituted "normal" sexuality, particularly for women, he nonetheless did so within the context of an oeuvre that dramatically called into question a value-laden concept of normality' (1997, p. 179). Taking these observations as an oblique genealogy, what might a queering of narrative (time) teach us about history, and what challenges might it pose to normative epistemological and hermeneutic principles?

Whereas Judith Halberstam locates the production of queer spatiotemporalities inside postmodern aesthetics (2005, p. 6), I nevertheless interrogate the ways in which Barnes, very much a modernist writer, may equally participate in the rupturing of (hetero)normative or

'straight' time. Straight time informs more general ways of being in the world, such that we understand a healthy, or good, life as one which *progresses*: maturity of the body, psychosexual development towards a heterosexual monogamous coupling, advancement in society or work, and (hetero)sexual reproduction (Muñoz, 2009). Looking to *Nightwood*, I ask, what if we 'narrated' time differently? What new possibilities for subjectivity might arise? 'Normal' narrative time, as I have begun to outline, maps onto the linear, teleological patterning of heterosexual intercourse and straight relationality, whilst queer narrative time, though not precluding linear, teleological cartographies of orgasmic pleasure, admits of:

> pleasures [that] can be multiple and indefinite. Where normative heterosexual sex centres on the singular (reproductively intentioned) orgasm, the queer narrative can have a million climaxes, or none at all. In short, queerness loosens the structural grip forcing narrative to move in a singular, inevitable direction. (Chess, 2016, p. 89)

Queer narratives, we might say, linger. They are blind hands tracing the lover's body with no ambition to locate a particular zone. They resist the singularity of heterosex, where although pleasure is not confined to the locus of genitalia, it is nevertheless supposed to be most intense therein. Queer narratives such as *Nightwood* enjoy instead the invisible infinity of points where one grain of skin hazes into another. They embrace diversion, or *divertissement*.

Comprising eight chapters, *Nightwood* is a frenzied, narcotic tale. Its medley of characters blurs static categories of nationality, sexuality, and gender. What is more, the characters' bodies convey a mutability of identity with regard to 'invert' or homosexual embodiments. Rather than being static, queer bodies in *Nightwood* are vibrant, agentive sites of flux and becoming. The text parodies sexological, eugenicist, and other frameworks of biopower and presents expat-American Robin Vote and unlicensed gynaecologist-cum-psychoanalyst Dr Matthew O'Connor as its elliptical centres. It details Robin's relationships, first with Felix Volkbein, then with Nora Flood, and finally with Jenny Petherbridge. We are, in addition, privy to 'a period of Robin's promiscuity' (Faltejskova, 2010, p. 120).

If Robin is the focus of the novel, around whom its comings and goings are organised, it seems we only 'know' Robin, apart from a few phrases, through what others say of her. Their chatter, moreover, engenders a nebulous image, a 'mimesis of subjection' (Henstra, 2000, p. 126): Robin is articulated into being through others' discourse. Yet, I argue, Robin is *always more than* the identity her lovers construct for her. As Carrie Rohman puts it, she 'figures non-identity as a form of subjectivity' and 'an authentic form of being' (2007, pp. 57-58).

In playing out processes founded upon a linear understanding of temporality, including Robin's subjection, *Nightwood* disrupts and draws attention to straight time – the chrononormative – as a device of social regulation and disciplinary control. It offers a textual gesture which declares the subject, sui generis, as illusory. Humanist, straight narrativity labours to install this subject as predating story lines that 'effect a narrative closure on gender [and subjective] experience' (Butler, 1990, p. 329). By managing and apportioning subjectivity, straight time tabulates and specifies phases of life, whilst simultaneously effacing its groundwork, its 'site of inscriptional space' (Butler, 1993, p. 52). In order to create a spatiotemporality wherein queer bodies might *live*, Barnes thus limns a narrative that is rich in circumlocution, with a diction delighting in its own technē, or creative artistry – fluid and thick, digressive and contrived. Moments of contraction and dilation, concertina-ings of narrative and syntax, beget time to fold and unfold. Mixed metaphors ('you could beat them [women] in *flocks* like a *school* of *scorpions*'; Barnes, 1995, p. 139; my emphasis), metaphysical conceits, and hypotaxis (syntactic subordination) knock the reader off kilter. Barnes' queer poetics, then, reject the 'masculine'[4] logic of Ezra Pound,[5] who sought a language capable of radically curtailing the gap between signifier/signified, 'the sign arising directly from the thing it represents' (Carlston, 1998, p. 78). Instead,

Barnes' narrative savours the inability of language to channel authorial intentionality, her intertextual, citational use of words evincing the aporia (or contradictions) that arise when we try to pin down a singular interpretation. In this sense, moreover, the novel critiques (human) language: the Symbolic's corseting of multiplicity into the 'garments of the known' (Barnes, 2007, p. 123).

Time writes the body

Language and time constitute the warp and weft of the discursive body and it is from their conjunctions that the (modern) subject emanates. Yet for the (hetero)normative body, the etchings of time and language are rarely visible. It is the *Other's* body – Robin Vote's throughout *Nightwood* – that comes to know the violence of 'straight' time: to inhabit time queerly may mean feeling as though one is in a different time zone, or always running late. Indeed, inside what Elizabeth Freeman terms a 'chronobiological society', the state and other institutions 'link *properly* temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change' (2010, p. 4; my emphasis). Freeman's use of 'narratives' here is not incidental. Her analysis is sensitive to the ways in which narrative, temporality, and history overlap and reify one another as 'natural'. 'Having a life', she continues, and we might add, a life worth living, 'entails the ability to *narrate* it not only in these state-sanctioned terms [of psychiatry, medicine, and law] but also in a novelistic framework: as event-centred, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or major transformations' (p. 5). *Nightwood* offers a theory of time narrated *other*wise. Those (queer) lives obfuscated by normative narrative mechanisms find in Barnes' novel a moment or moments where the strictures of 'straight' narrative and 'straight' time loosen their hold.

Apposite to its censuring of 'straight' time and narrative, the novel begins with a denaturalisation of motherhood and mother's time. *Nightwood* opens upon an entanglement of birth and death, thus offering 'an argument against the tradition of making matrimony and procreation the central, structuring principles of the novel' (Glavey, 2009, p. 20). The first sentence's surfeit of detail, apart from according with Decadent aesthetics, makes the 'naturalness' of heterosexual reproduction seem much less certain:

> Early in 1880, in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people, Hedvig Volkbein, a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty, lying upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valance stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin on which, in massive and tarnished gold threads, stood the Volkbein arms – gave birth, at the age of forty-five, to an only child, seven days after her physician had predicted she would be taken. (Barnes, 2007, p. 1)

With its subject (Hedvig Volkbein) separated by a volley of qualifying clauses from its verb ('gave birth'), form and content dovetail here, and Barnes reworks the notion of heterosex as healthy, productive, and generative (in opposition to queer sex, so often construed as pathological, sterile, and degenerative). The text performs, materially, the gap between heterosex and reproduction; it introduces an excess of detail, which overwhelms and takes precedence over the sanctity of birth. Amidst the textual accoutrements, the placement of the verb 'gave birth' is bathetic.

In troubling the heteronormative order of representational importance, *Nightwood* exposes the mechanisms by which certain narrative patternings are afforded 'value'. We open with a sentence that occupies a whole paragraph, an inchoate gesture to the text's preoccupation with chafing against narrative time. Hedvig is the text's first improper mother – old, masculine, and (soon after) dead.[6] Above all, her impropriety is a matter of time: she is 'forty-five' and gives

birth 'seven days *after* her physician had predicted she would be taken' (Barnes, 2007, p. 1; my emphasis). This is significant in light of discourses of domesticity still persistent at the time Barnes is writing – paradigms which insist on maternal feelings in women as 'primal, as a human condition located in and emanating from the psyche's interior' and, therefore, as time*less* (Freeman, 2010, p. 5). Such a naturalisation and internalisation of motherhood and mother's time serves to doubly exclude queer women from the essentialised category of Woman, for not only do they fail to engage in relations (exclusively) with the 'opposite sex', they also 'fail' to adhere to reproductively-oriented sex. The text's deconstruction of motherhood (a doubly naturalised temporal relation) so early in the novel clears the way for queer pleasures, those bodily assemblages – polymorphous and unnameable – that continue to trouble a definitive coinciding of fucking with (re)production.

The opening chapter of *Nightwood* is noteworthy insofar as it speaks to the novel's deconstruction of binaries, its play of surfaces, and its knowledge of the ways in which time inscribes the body. It ironises too, setting us up for a linear narrative (its outlining of a 'dynasty', for instance) only to *de*lineate this in a manner continued throughout the novel via Barnes' frequent punctuation of metaphors and descriptive phrases with anacoluthon, or rhetorical non sequitur. Thus, Robin is figured 'playing with her toys, trains, animals and cars to wind up, and dolls and marbles and soldiers' (Barnes, 2007, p. 133). The preference of conjunction ('and') after 'wind up', rather than a comma, defies the sequence of linear, straight time, instead privileging the lateral; not ungrammatical but anti-grammatical. Moreover, a phrase such as, '[t]he same though more condensed power of the hand … *as sinister* in reduction *as a doll's house*' (p. 4; my emphasis) illustrates the way in which anacoluthon, if we bastardise it a little, continues to disrupt linear temporalisation. That is, in accordance with (hetero)normative narrative patterning, we come to expect a certain grouping of images, linked across (textual) *space*, and when these do not appear, we are dizzied into an awareness of metaphor's other index – *time*. Metaphors in *Nightwood*, then, do not bring things closer together or necessarily facilitate understanding. They are opaque:

> This chamber that had *never been* her grandmother's, which was, *on the contrary, the absolute opposite* of any known room her grandmother had ever moved or lived in, was nevertheless saturated with the *lost presence* of her grandmother, who seemed *in the continual process of leaving it* (Barnes, 2007, p. 57; my emphasis).

More than a simple defamiliarisation, which might signal an allegiance to Formalism, Barnes' description through negation here denies reconciliation between what is described and its descriptor. Simile trespasses simile in an endless, spiralling (thus non-teleological) chain of signification. *Nightwood* affords us a visceral experience of temporality, and forces us to look at things *other*wise, in the manner of what Barthes calls a writerly text, which summons the reader as its producer (1974, p. 4).

Furthermore, this first chapter hints at the text's ongoing preoccupation with artifice and time. We have, for example, the description of Guido and Felix's manufacture of a barony – perhaps suggesting the artifice of time – wherein houses appear like museums:

> The long rococo halls, giddy with plush and whorled designs in gold … peopled with Roman fragments, white and dissociated; a runner's leg, the chilly half-turned head of a matron stricken in the bosom, the blind bold sockets of the eyes given a pupil by every shifting shadow so that what they looked upon was an act of the sun. (Barnes, 2007, p. 5)

Here, decadence encounters decay in uneven intermingling(s), and syntax mirrors content (the sentence is 'giddy' and 'whorled'). The text insists '[t]he *likeness* [of the portraits in the Volkbein household to Felix] was accidental' (Barnes, 2007, p. 6; my emphasis) because they portray actors rather than ancestors; accidental thus entails a construction of identity. Such an

averment of artifice is all the more significant given that, in the following paragraph, there is a massive leap to 'thirty years later' accomplished in a single sentence (p. 7). Coupled with the narrator's inability to detail such an interval, which is attributed to Felix's alterity – 'for the step of the wandering Jew is in every son' (p. 7) – this line drives home the point that the master narratives of history and literature are predicated upon the exclusion and abjection of otherness.[7] The elision is thrown into relief, similar to the bathetic birth sequence, by its decadent surroundings. This moment will also reverberate later in the elapsing of the time Nora and Robin spend together, where the omniscient narrator devotes more space to rehearsing their possessions than their 'mutual love' (p. 50). Just after the two women first meet at the circus, there is a material gap on the page (a line break), followed directly by a mention that Robin 'stayed with Nora until the mid-winter' (p. 49). If, when we first read this sentence, it sounds as though a few months have elapsed, what comes later in the 'narrative' makes us realise a number of *years* have in fact been contracted into the brevity of this simple sentence. It appears that certain lives cannot be narrated, inasmuch as the strictures of straight language, narrative, and time cannot accommodate them. As Matthew O'Connor himself says, 'We call history the best the high and mighty can do' with their time, their narrative, their 'history' (p. 14).

Also in the course of this opening chapter, Matthew describes Cirque de Paris performer Nikka, whose name resounds as a poor homophone of 'nigger [nigga]' (Barnes, 2007, pp. 14-15). This suggests the impropriety of language to report on reality, where even linguistic crassness exceeds itself, and the schism between signified and signifier is never (able to be) closed. We are escorted by Matthew's emphatically homoerotic, and at times ambivalently racist,[8] tableau here to a discussion of queer subjectivity and its limitations, even within queer time. In the case of Nikka, the commodification and spectacularisation of the body under capitalism and colonialism, especially the racially *other* body, discounts any facile reading of agency through decadence or practices of aestheticising the 'self'. Yet, the details of Matthew's storytelling linger, and force us to linger, over the contours of Nikka's abject body. After reeling off a description of each tattoo that covered Nikka's body 'from head to heel' (p. 14), he concludes, titillating us, 'And just above what you shouldn't mention, a [tattoo of a] bird flew carrying a streamer on which was incised, "*Garde tout!*"' (p. 15). Circumlocutional and effusive, Matthew's speech is queer in both form and content, refusing to take the most direct route between two points. As Brian Glavey notes, 'O'Connor's extravagant description might be said to preserve something of Nikka's autonomy – insisting on an ineluctable difference even as it renders him "comparable" to others' (2009, p. 753). By virtue of Matthew's pulsating prose, Nikka's body is also an active, agentive, attractive body; as readers we are not afforded an easy appropriating gaze, such is the ambivalence of Barnes' aestheticising praxis which persists throughout *Nightwood*. Indeed, this 'aesthetic of indeterminacy', to borrow Robin Blyn's coinage (2008, p. 518), becomes all the more ambiguous in the text's portrayal of Robin – does such (textual) decadence afford Robin agency?

The opening chapter tenders, finally, the possibility of a different, perhaps even queer, time. Shortly after relating his memories of Nikka, Matthew tells Felix and Nora about the time he encountered a cow while sheltering in a cellar during a wartime bombing raid. 'There are directions and speeds that no one has calculated', he says, 'for believe it or not that cow had gone somewhere very fast that we didn't know of, and yet was still standing there' (Barnes, 2007, p. 21). The circus too, with its 'splendid and reeking falsification' (p. 10), stages the text's time-rupturing entrance of Frau Mann: 'Her legs had the specialized tension common to aerial workers; something of the bar was in her wrists, the tan bark in her walk … The *span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh* that she was as unsexed as a doll' (pp. 11-12; my emphasis). In its descriptive decadence – particularly its hypotaxis and artifice –

this entrance echoes the earlier detailing of Hedvig, and prefaces our more primitivist-dyed acquaintance with Robin.

The novel's introduction of Robin, in its similitude to the overt decadence of Hedvig's and Frau Mann's portrayals, exposes the proximity between aesthetic and ideological strategies of nature (primitivism) and culture (artifice) – that uneasy irreducibility, already alluded to in Matthew's description of Nikka, which linear time works hard to dissemble. Primitivism in *Nightwood* exudes and converges with decadence: Robin is the 'infected carrier of the past' (Barnes, 2007, p. 34) who 'carrie[s] the quality of the "way back"' (p. 36). Decadence and primitivism coalesce here to dispute fetishising either as a site of authenticity. This is further reinforced by Frau Mann and her decadent attire/body, making Matthew think of Nikka, 'something forgotten but comparable' (p. 14). In a modernist novel that is rich in asynchronous relationality – to time, to other bodies – a nod to primitivism seems inescapable. For the discourse of primitivism relies on what Nicholas Thomas terms an 'antithetical relation to modernity' (1994, p. 174). This can be expanded on as an engagement that deploys notions and imagery of a pre(European)-civilised state. Rather than the putative stasis of its other, frequently twin, mode of exoticism – orientalism – primitivism also authorises the possibility of 'civilising'. This bears certain similarities to the way in which the queer body is rendered in sexological discourse as 'immature', hence the persistent hope that queers will grow up and become 'straight'. The features of primitivist discourse are peculiar in their *temporal* disjunction from Europe and 'civilisation' more than their spatiality (although they may be *other* in both modalities). We thus meet Robin through a flurry of primitivist tropes, as she lies in a faint in her hotel room:

> On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of *potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly oversung by the notes of unseen birds*, which seemed to have been forgotten – left without the usual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives – half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and dishevelled. Her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance, the thick *lacquered pumps looking too lively for the arrested step*. Her hands, long and beautiful, *lay on either side of her face*. (Barnes, 2007, pp. 30-31; my emphasis)

This deployment of primitivism, however, is both self-conscious and ambivalent. As Daniela Caselli argues, the scene 'figures Robin's bewildering mixture of absence and movement which will be the driving force of the rest of the narrative; and it produces a genealogy which refuses to lead back to an origin' (2009, p. 164). Again, there is hypotaxis, a cascade of subordinate clauses, a spilling over of similes ('like cloaks', 'as in a dance'). Recapitulating the tableau upon which the novel opens, Robin's introduction achieves a lateral relationship to time more proper to cinema: the wide angle shot that allows a director to juxtapose elements otherwise disparate, to dilate time by fitting more into an event of the visual field than seems 'natural'. Finally, the scene captures this artifice in its content: 'potted plants', 'cut flowers', and the 'exotic palms', which, in the act of being named as such, become much *less* exotic.

In emphasising the artifice and 'performance' of this scene, Barnes evinces the performative nature of our relationship to time. To speak of linear time and properly matured, civilised bodies is not merely to report on the world; instead, we bring these phenomena into being through language and narrative. In the subsequent passage, where Robin is attended to by Matthew, the conditions of enunciation (l'énoncé) that afford certain claims, especially those about the Other, are laid bare. Matthew seems to foreshadow this narrative self-awareness, telling Felix in the preceding scene, 'We say someone is pretty for instance, whereas, if truth were known, they are probably as ugly as Smith going backward, but *by our lie we have made that very party powerful*' (Barnes, 2007, p. 28; my emphasis). Words do things. Barnes' narrative is thus self-consciously performative. Robin is at once static and dynamic, a 'beast turning

human' (p. 37). The language, in its decadence, emphasises construction, whilst the plethora of similes, the over-determination of Robin's body, encode language's inability to fix the (queer) subject unless it can also fix time as linear and teleological. We cannot help but be aware of the production of Robin as a subject:

> The perfume that 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 … Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of an unseen *dompteur*, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-wind render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness. (p. 31)

As Matthew attends to Robin in her hotel room, Felix observes the doctor perform a surreptitious toilette at Robin's night table. The narrator likens him to a 'dumbfounder', or magician, whose 'back and elbows move in a series of "honesties," while in reality the most flagrant part of the hoax is being prepared' (Barnes, 2007, p. 32). 'Straight' valences of subjectivity and relationality are thus rendered normative; Matthew's sleight of hand to apply rouge to his lips renders 'their sudden embellishment … a visitation of nature' (p. 32). What Blyn calls 'the hoax of authenticity' (2008, p. 519) marks this scene not as a simple deconstruction of binaries, but a rejection of truth tout court. We have a setting where even the walls are more human than humans (they 'made their escape'), yet we are also warned about 'the woman who presents herself to the spectator as a "picture" forever arranged' (Barnes, 2007, p. 33).

Robin's introduction paints her as 'submerged and held down under her culture's [metaphorical] consciousness, even her own' (Stockton, 2009, p. 109). Yet Robin, we learn, has a hand in her own objectification. As such, Barnes troubles any easy division between subject and object. Robin makes self-spectacularisation a mode of living queerly, blurring a zone we might otherwise judge as lacking in agency. Where the queer subject is posited as backwards, primitive, or immature, Robin's embodiment, catachrestically, embraces its own abjection. Catachresis – that 'repeated scandal by which the unspeakable nevertheless makes itself heard through borrowing and exploiting the very terms that are meant to enforce is silence' (Butler, 2002, p. 78) – allows Robin to act on her reader, or viewer, as an excess, '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' (Barnes, 2007, pp. 33-34). This profusion of imagery, a perverted metaphysical conceit, queers time and grants Robin space to live, 'a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth' (p. 34). My reading here coalesces with Glavey's, who argues that Robin 'refuses to participate in the narratives … [that] other characters – not to mention readers – devise for her' (2009, p. 757).

The Barnesian conceit, of which I take Robin's introduction as exemplary, throws into question likenesses of all kinds, and reveals metaphor's place in a linear temporal economy. This is significant, not least in a discussion of queer time and subjectivity. As Stockton posits, arguing for a similar denaturalisation of metaphor in *Nightwood*, 'there is [in the conceit] an interval – sometimes it is long, sometimes it is short – between every vehicle and its tenor' (2009, p. 92). Yet when the vehicle 'fails' to operate in a linear manner and does not convey us from A to B, the conceit draws our awareness, uncannily, to time: it offers a queer positionality, a *slant* on time. Samuel Johnson defined the metaphysical conceit as 'a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike … The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together' (cited in Abrams, 1999, p. 42). This appears at first blush to describe Barnes' text in moments such as Robin's introduction, and seems true of many of the metaphors and similes that populate *Nightwood*. However, in

an understated refusal of linearity, these images are, as aforementioned, perverse, with their comparisons left open-ended. An alterity thus seeps in.

Indeed, the Barnesian conceit strays off course; as queer poesis, it collocates two things normally held as alike, and in separating them by a lengthy, often hypotactic vehicle, denaturalises the inevitability of their 'normative' resemblance. For instance, Matthew says to Frau Mann over drinks, 'I tell you, Madame, if one gave birth to a heart on a plate, it would say "Love" and twitch like the lopped leg of a frog' (Barnes, 2007, p. 24). Matthew's conceit here might propose the endurance of affect, but it does so in defiance of linearity; it is non-communicative, non-(re)productive, with its vehicle sending us off on a tangent – a lateral motility – thereby obfuscating its tenor. This furnishes a bizarre, queer tension between 'heart' and 'love': love is a muscle spasm. The normative logic of love is deflated: it is a twitching limb, not the privilege of certain 'straight' bodies, nor of marriage and reproduction. In revising this dyad of heart and love, *Nightwood* unfurls a space for alternative valences of relationality and subjectivity. Barnes' queering of time here partakes of an absence, re-routing the conceit's argumentative thrust. In *Nightwood*, her line of reasoning thus seems, at first counterintuitively, to unyoke concepts coupled within normative time and narrative. She splinters meaning and engenders uncertainty. Her conceits thus critique the way that words are understood to report on reality, when in fact they often actualise reality in a prescriptive, that is, *performative* gesture. Just as Caselli argues that the novel is 'a method of persuasion without a thesis to demonstrate' (2008, p. 158), Barnes' conceits postpone, or sometimes deny, telos and its guarantor, teleological time.

'Are you both really saying what you *mean*, or are you *just talking*?'

The scene discussed above, where we first meet Robin, stands as the cynosure of the Barnesian conceit. We encounter this conceit again in other textual landscapes in *Nightwood*, namely the garrulous queer narrative moments that Matthew instantiates through his monologues. These monologues also contribute to the novel's delaying of teleological, linear temporality. Matthew's circuitous, loquacious speech usurps the main, omniscient narrative from the margins, a centrifugal motion appropriate to a novel that delights in surface while eschewing a centre, an essence. '[M]y mind is so rich that it is always wandering', Matthew declares to Nora (Barnes, 2007, p. 93); meanwhile, we are told on more than one occasion that Robin has taken to 'wandering' disconsolately by herself in both countryside and city (pp. 41, 43, 150). The novel's doubling between Matthew and Robin is thus made all the clearer. Whereas Robin is almost entirely silent, though, Matthew's speech is so profuse that it sometimes seems as though he will exhaust language. He marries commentary on the past and future in ways that fatten the present. And while his anaphora (repetition) achieves its usual effect of glancing backwards to the repeated phrase, thereby interrupting linear, forward-marching time, it is also inflected queerly. We have, for instance, the phrase 'And then' repeated six times in less than a page (pp. 94-95). This, I argue, engenders a peculiar rupture, for as 'then' drives us forward into the future-present, we are simultaneously thrust back to the past-present. According to Blyn, Matthew's monologues in *Nightwood* offer 'protection against the threat of incorporation … competing explanations of Robin vie against one another … casting each other into doubt' (2008, p. 519). The gaps in the textual fabric made apparent through Matthew's speech evince the movement that is immanent in things we think of as static (identity, say), and the stillness that may be inherent in movement; linear time as forward march starts to come undone.

Further, as Sarah Hayden observes, 'Matthew embodies and frequently enunciates a heroic but ultimately untenable stand against the hegemonic imperative to designate clear and

absolute borders between false polarities' (2012, p. 78). This negation of binary polarities and of the clear distinction between binary pairs ('the peculiar polarity between times and times'; Barnes, 2007, p. 72) is profoundly disruptive, and wrenches open spaces in 'straight' time for the queer body to be(come). When explaining to Nora 'how the day and night are related by their division', Matthew tells Nora that '[t]he very constitution of twilight is a fabulous reconstruction of fear, fear bottom-out and wrong side up' (p. 72). His words sustain both literal and figurative meanings: the division between night and day is imposed, yet arbitrary. Additionally, Matthew suggests that it is imposed because we fear the non-linear, clandestine spatiotemporality of the night (hence, we govern alterity by bifurcation, *us versus them*). This queering of narrative time performed by Matthew is not moralistic or do-gooder in nature, but rather, a seemingly intrinsic behaviour for him – perhaps the only true sense in which he is a doctor, a healer. He creates, after all, queer spatiotemporalities for Robin, even though he voices his dislike for her: 'Yes, oh God, Robin was beautiful. I don't like her, but I have to admit that much' (p. 121). What is more, he refuses to shore up Felix and Nora's schematic, static interpretations of her behaviour, instead teasing out the contradiction in their often pathologising statements. In this way, Matthew's loquacity also comes to disrupt any notion of a coherent subjectivity for Robin. *Nightwood*'s textual pulsations announce the irreducibility of the subject to a stable, biological self, and stress the primacy of intersubjectivity and interpersonal relations. As Matthew's speeches remind us, artifice and nature do not separate neatly into polarised categories.

This privileging of artifice and its attendant performative understanding of sex/gender subjectivity is also demonstrated when Nora pays a visit to Matthew and comes upon him, lying in bed, wearing a nightgown, full make-up, and a woman's wig. Here we witness an archetypal instance of *Nightwood*'s narrative concertina-ing. When Nora opens the door and sees Matthew, she immediately thinks of Red Riding Hood seeing the wolf in her grandmother's bed. The omniscient narrator tells us that 'this thought, which was only the sensation of a thought, was but of a second's duration, as she opened the door' (p. 71). A detail whose subtlety risks belying its import, this 'second' is the same 'one second' mentioned on the previous page at the moment Nora 'opened the door and for one second hesitated' (p. 70). In contradistinction to Felix's formative thirty years, and Nora and Robin's dozen or so years spent together – both of which are compacted in narrative time into a single sentence – we have here a second that endures for almost two pages. To meet with the doctor is to experience time differently, expansively, and it is all the more significant that Nora's sense of time alters upon seeing Matthew in 'drag'. Drag may disquiet by opening up the gap between the accoutrements of gender and the body they are assumed to reflect. As Butler informs us, 'all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation', such that 'heterosexuality [and its normatively gendered bodies] is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization – *and failing*' (1992, p. 313; original emphasis). In a manner that bears out Butler's line of argument, especially her suggestion of sex/gender's formulaic but necessarily obfuscated constitution, Matthew describes, a few pages later, his desire for 'femininity': 'It was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king's kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner' (Barnes, 2007, p. 81). Whilst these signifiers seem to relate (an) essentialised female corporeality, it is a hyperbolic femininity, which has less to do with the body than with self-styling or performativity. The strange similes do the work of drag,[9] denaturalising the body parts they circumscribe – womb/king's kettle, bosom/schooner – thereby injecting a degree of masculinity into the feminine stereotype. Like the conceits used to introduce Robin, and those elsewhere in the text, these juxtapositions break open – *drag* – time in their defiance of our expectations.

Drag, as we saw, makes time drag too. It provokes us to seek out an origin, to look backwards. We, like Nora, experience viscerally 'the *disorder* that met her eyes' (Barnes, 2007, p. 70; my emphasis). Hence, time here stutters and splutters. Such temporal drag also reinforces the intersection between Robin's and Matthew's embodiments. For Felix will later say of Robin, 'There was in her every movement a slight *drag*, as if the past were a web about her' (p. 107). Corporeal *other*ness, then, may jam the forward teleological march of 'straight' time. In reading Matthew's drag this way, I do not mean to occlude the material, body-in-the-world experience of such a 'failure' to pass. Yet within *Nightwood*'s textual space, *not* passing makes the reader and the viewer (Nora) check themselves, rather than 'checking' Matthew for doing his gender 'wrong'. As with his discourse, Matthew's queer corporeality inserts itself into temporality, and thereby ruptures the easy forward march of linear, 'straight' time. Finally, Matthew's desire for, and performance of, womanhood is also anchored in a memory of 'being woman', when he tells Nora that, 'In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps it's the memory that haunts me' (p. 81). Matthew animates the mutability of sex/gender, not least of all given that he is now understood to be a 'man'. He supposes a recollection of different times, wherein his body fit comfortably (in both senses), and he could perform his gender without retribution. Now he bangs up against the constraints of straight' time. Matthew, perhaps more than any other character in *Nightwood*, acknowledges the ways in which time writes the body. 'The wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future', he continues, giving a nod to Proust (p. 81).

Everything, Matthew surmises, is citation; our lives are a matter of repetition with a difference. Progress in the forward, linear sense is always contaminated by the past, what Muñoz comes to term a 'backward glance that enacts a future [queer] vision' (2009, p. 4). Similarly, when Matthew tells Nora, 'if I could have stopped Brech on his way into Ireland and have whispered in his ear I would have said, "Wait" (though it was seven hundred years BC)' (Barnes, 2007, p. 113), he exposes the foisted nature of narrative time. For insofar as he can narrate two temporally disparate events, suture them, and make them appear sequential, his self-interjection 'though it was seven hundred years BC' cautions us to resist such facile sequencing. Matthew's text in these moments is like gauze: woven finely, it marries the edges of the narrative wound, whilst still allowing us to peek through. And if we look carefully, we can see what it aims to occlude. Matthew queers time once again by exposing the non-inevitability of normative narrative mode(s). The epigrams and aphorisms of the doctor's narrative overlap and infect one another, problematising, as noted, an aetiology of the 'invert'. More generally, they postulate the performativity of language, narrative, and linear time. This is what I understand Blyn to mean when she argues that 'rather than defining Robin, O'Connor's hyperbolic assertions and elusive digressions work to un-fix Robin from the appropriations of Nora and Felix' (2008, p. 519).

Before turning from Matthew's queering of narrative time to an analysis of Robin's disruptive motions, I note lastly that Nora and Matthew's aforementioned discussions enact a concertina-ing of time. Teresa de Lauretis makes a similar observation when she argues that these conversations 'stretch out the time of narration by excruciatingly protracted monologues and punctiliously detailed descriptions of characters and locations' (2008, p. 118). '[W]e can see the minutest details of a scene', she continues, 'but what "happens" is next to nothing' (p. 118). Above all, de Lauretis' 'next to nothing' testifies to the queering of (narrative) time in *Nightwood*. More microcosmically, the novel's temporal self-awareness is indexed, for example, by the repetition of 'now': four times in three lines at the opening of chapter seven, a rehearsal that evacuates the word of its meaning and speaks to the impossibility of 'presence' in the 'present' (Barnes, 2007, p. 112). Intuiting that Nora's writing to Robin partakes of

narrative – she seeks to assign meaning and value in a world that is itself amoral – Matthew says '*Now* be still, *now* that you know what the world is about, knowing it's about nothing?' (p. 112; my emphasis). The rhetorical force of 'now' adheres to the anaphoric repetition of 'can't you' interspersed throughout the following pages (pp. 112-15). Similarly, Matthew's utterance of presence, 'And there I was', when he is describing his visit to a church, belies presence itself as always already 'past' or elsewhere (p. 120). What happens in these 'long takes', and in Matthew's narration more broadly, is at once a formal and thematic gesture, a *sleight* that reverberates as a slight, inasmuch as it disavows normative movement and relationality. Either the narrative looks backwards whilst still in motion, or it tells of interactions that refuse obsessive futurity and (re)productivity. In this way, Matthew's speech again mirrors Robin's wandering in its non-teleological cadence.

Queer nomadology

Nightwood proposes through the character of Robin Vote a sexual subjectivity that is 'utterly mobile, homeless, and capable of exquisite sexual shattering' (Seitler, 2001, p. 555), and thus presents an embodied defiance of linear, teleological narrative. Robin's nomadic movement and relationality parallel what we have seen of Matthew's insistent, purposive periphrasis. She inhabits the liminal. Her being is interstitial. Syncopated, the beats of linear time (marriage, reproduction, maturity) lose their accent in Robin's movement. Especially in chapter three ('Night Watch'), everything is figured in a language of movement and music: 'Robin, unseen, gave back an echo of her unknown life' (Barnes, 2007, p. 52); 'the progressive growth of noise that would be Robin coming home' (p. 55); 'Nora would tabulate by the sounds of Robin dressing the exact progress of her toilet; chimes of cosmetic bottles and cream jars' (p. 52). These phrases also suggest Nora's attempts to 'decipher' Robin's movement(s). In fact, the first things Nora notices about Robin are her gestures and movements: she 'took out a cigarette and lit it; her hands shook and Nora turned to look at her' (p. 49). But in keeping with the novel's resistance to essentialism and singularity, the omniscient narrator modulates these events. Robin's relational economy of music and gesture is layered ambiguously onto her, as we cannot know whether it stems from her directly, or from Nora's interpretation of her movement, or, indeed, from the omniscient narrator's appraisal of Robin.

Referring to Robin's dearth of speech, Barnes wrote, 'I do not want to connect her [Robin] in any way with the present temporal world a*s we know it*, it is why I did not let her say more than two words for herself in the book' (cited in Plumb, 1993, p. 156; my emphasis). And Felix, much later on in the novel, seems to channel this sentiment. Robin's innocence, he proposes to Matthew, 'may be considered "depraved" by our generation, but our generation does not know everything' (Barnes, 2007, p. 106). Read together, Barnes's authorial statement and Felix's reflection on Robin point towards the same targets: 'straight' narrative, 'straight' time. In opposition to the majority of critics who assume Robin is unambiguously 'silent', I contend she plays a part in the 'narration' of her becoming, articulating through marginal economies of music and gesture.

Robin's movement, like that of the flâneur, resonates with an anomic relationality. She moves contrapuntally: '[e]very bed she leaves without caring, fills her heart with peace and happiness. She has made her "escape" again' (Barnes, 2007, p. 53). Her departures from the domestic space she shares with Nora are characterised by a 'slowly increasing rhythm'; 'from table to table, drink to drink, person to person', she 'walk[s] in a formless meditation' (p. 53). Promiscuous, her subjectivity and relationality are in constant flux. Whereas the

monogamous couple conjures the illusion of giving oneself entirely to another, of allowing oneself to be known entirely by another, a promiscuous embodiment such as Robin's exposes the impossibility of *absolute* knowledge. We are always *more than* this 'I'; always already a multiplicity. To this effect, Felix struggles to understand Robin's relationship with(in) spatiotemporality: 'When she touched a thing, her hands seemed to take the place of the eye … Her fingers would go forward, hesitate, tremble, as if they had found a face in the dark' (pp. 37-38). Robin's embodiment imagines a haptic, or sensory, knowledge, an epistemology of *lingering*. Unlike the visual, touch entails apprehension through movement; we have to run our hands over something in order to achieve a sense of it. And this is never finished; haptic perception belies the sovereignty of the empirical gaze. *Nightwood*, via Robin's alternative relation to spatiotemporality, suggests a mode whereby we might convey the visceral and affective resonances of lived experience. It is fitting that Felix, the voice of reason and patrilineal relationality in the novel, is frightened by 'the sensuality in her [Robin's] hands' (p. 38). What the earlier hotel scene with Matthew enacts on a microcosmic scale is true of Robin throughout the novel: we can never bring her into focus because the moment we think we have understood one freeze-frame, another interrupts, interposes between our *thoughts* of Robin and Robin the *embodied* being. 'I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time', Felix says, 'I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties' (p. 100). Recalling the series of images used to describe Robin in the hotel, descriptions of her do not fit neatly on top of one another. A bulk of detail teases us with the possibility of a coherent, well-rounded understanding of her identity, even whilst the flood of qualifying clauses, in a grammatical sense, bespeaks uncertainty. Robin remains prowling around the liminal.

Queer children

With Robin, *Nightwood* speaks also to the ambivalence of queer subjectivity, indexed by a slippage between agency and pathology. This is a trope that persists in the present: queerness as prolonged adolescence, a *failure* to grow up. Robin's characterisation as childlike might be taken to traffic in Freudian and sexological accounts of inversion. If Barnes' characterisation of Robin rehearses homophobic tropes, however, it does so with a design to expose their aporia, or uncertainty. The queer body in Freudian equations is said to be out of joint with time, but also in terms of its interactions with other bodies; queer relationality is seen to approximate straight relationality, where the latter auto-naturalises itself. Queer narrative (time) in *Nightwood* does not seek to revise queerness as 'whole' and 'mature'. Instead, it belies the desirability of these notions, even their plausibility. It thus aligns with Lee Edelman's characterisation of queerness as 'the side of those *not* "fighting for the children," the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism' (2004, p. 3). Edelman's argument proposes that through a series of sleights of hand – where the child is installed as the telos of all 'straight' sex, and queer sex's only telos is identified as pleasure, which society then encodes as excess(ive) – heterosex projects its own narcissism onto queer sex and relationality (2004). This then allows heterosex to partake, even in secular society, of reproductivity as alibi – reproductivity which encodes sex as teleological and meaningful (Edelman, 2004). Robin's repeated hints at violence to children or their proxies – their dolls – disquiets, albeit with less nihilism than Edelman, a cultural logic of motherhood, and mother's time as lovingly devotional and self-sacrificial. Robin is discovered, for example, 'holding [her] child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down' (Barnes, 2007, p. 43). This moment finds its recapitulation

when Robin holds the doll she has given Nora above her head, and then proceeds to crush it, summarily, with her foot (p. 133). The Child, and the Child of the future, moreover, is the spectral figure Edelman identifies as holding to account all those who are queer and all who evade reproductive, monogamous heterosexuality (2004, p. 3). This figure imposes strictures on what a (queer) body *can do*; it represents an inter-subjective, inter-corporeal violence that takes as an indication of its rightness the supposed 'naturalness' of heterosexuality and (re) production. It is history's guarantor, a point made clear by Felix's desire for a child when he feels history is undergoing erosion in the present: 'Wo ist das Kind? Warum? Warum?' (Barnes, 2007, pp. 40-41).

That Robin, the 'tall girl with the body of a boy' (Barnes, 2007, p. 41), figures in the text as a 'mother' again throws into question the sort of body to which motherhood can attach itself. If Robin, as a member of the 'third sex' (p. 134), can give birth, this axiom of womanhood begins to look a lot like cultural construction, an ideological overlay, much more than biological 'facticity'. The novel advances this point with Matthew's desire for 'children and knitting', which however unfulfilled, is subversive in the doctor's daring to ask at all (p. 132). Robin is also figured as a child herself, even at the moment of giving birth: she 'was delivered … crying like a child' (p. 43). This description of her disrupts the chronology of 'straight' time, as it muddles the neat divisions of adulthood and childhood, and injects a sexuality into the child that heteronormative culture seeks to elide.[10] Kathryn Bond Stockton touches on this idea, saying, 'despite our culture's straightness, the child can only be "not-yet-straight," since it, too, is not allowed to be sexual' (2009, p. 7); to figure the child as a site of queerness becomes an upfront provocation. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Robin is most loquacious in conversation with a youth – an English girl, whom she meets at Jenny's soirée – as though she is in this moment able to make herself intelligible (Barnes, 2007, pp. 63-69). Such liminality, the child as mother, queer mother no less, reinforced by Robin's *between*-species and *between*-sex/gender identities, threatens the enclosed spatiotemporality of (childhood) innocence.

Choosing her queer mode of relationality over her son Guido and monogamy, Robin becomes all the more unintelligible. She is inappropriately oriented away from the future, 'wandering without design', 'distracted', and preferring the necessarily transient accommodation of a hotel over playing house in the countryside with Jenny (Barnes, 2007, p. 150). She shows no interest in evading the queer's abject positionality. This being so, her relationship to time is understood, by her lovers in particular, as moribund. Jenny 'bec[omes] hysterical' at Robin's wanderlust, because her (second-hand) narrative of romance cannot accommodate Robin's promiscuity and mutability, 'her *desperate anonymity*' (p. 151, my emphasis). Yet Robin's relationship to time offers a different, supra-discursive vitality, perhaps beyond language. My analysis here departs from Karen Kaivola's, who locates the source of Robin's anguish in her 'hopping from bed to bed' (1991, p. 87). I contend that it is not because this mode of desiring 'precludes *real* intimacy' (p. 87, my emphasis) – a problematically normative construct in itself – but rather that the *unthinkability* of queer affiliation as plural and transient provokes serial misrecognition of Robin, which itself generates anguish. Non-monogamous relationality is rhizomatic rather than arborescent; thus it privileges lateral affiliation and calls into question the possibility, let alone desirability, of forward progression and upward growth supposed to inhere in 'straight' affiliation. It operates once again in defiance of normative temporality and relationality. Robin divorces sex not only from procreation, but also from love, family, and commitment – the buzzwords invoked, however inaccurately, by heteronormative society to testify to its own naturalness.

I mentioned earlier that whilst my discussion of Robin does not focalise same-sex desire, or take it as the problematic of her subjectivity, I nevertheless strive to remain sensitive to its particularities. Judith Butler argues that same-sex desire between women, lesbianism to

risk an anachronistic descriptor of Robin and Nora's relationality, 'is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable' (1992, p. 312). *Nightwood*'s queer temporal interstices facilitate an examination of different approaches to this (queer) unintelligibility. To this effect, in her discussions with Matthew, Nora enumerates the various paradigms of desire between women to be found in the sexological and/or psychoanalytic literature of the day, as she formulates her relationship with Robin. It is maternal and daughterly ('all I knew was that others had slept with my lover and my child', p. 141), narcissistic ('have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?', p. 137), incestuous ('For Robin is incest too, that is one of her powers', p. 141), and idealist, or 'pure' ('no rot had touched her until then', p. 131). Each of these formulations reconfigure the potential 'sameness' in same-sex relationships into the passive/active, subject/object, dominant/dominated binaries of heterosex. Each connotes an asynchronous relationality, particularly the mother-child paradigm, which as a conceit sunders the bodies it would unite through intergenerational distance and the demand that at least one party 'look backwards'. That Nora takes 'scientific' postulations of lesbian desire as her touchstones accords with her characterisation as rational, Puritanical, and a believer in the Word. Yet it is also symptomatic of the scarcity of paradigms available to women at the time. As Kaivola observes, 'A woman who loves and desires another woman would not, especially in the early twentieth century, find many cultural texts or artefacts to help her articulate her own experience and difference from the heterosexual norm' (1991, p. 62). In her efforts to shoehorn her relationship with Robin into the constraints of these strai(gh)tening models, and into a monogamous dyadic structure, bringing it into line with the linear, regular tempo of 'straight' time, Nora loses Robin. To this effect, we have Matthew's proclamation, directed at Nora, 'you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known' (Barnes, 2007, p. 123). However, in order to combat this impasse, to overcome such a dearth of queer narrative, the novel engages mimetically in what Freud termed Nachträglichkeit, or belated/deferred action, an eminently queer gesture. The subject, in this case Nora, relives the past she could not 'live' at the time. Thus, we see the same scene – Nora's confirmation of Robin's infidelity – multiple times, whilst the final retelling is filtered through a discussion with Matthew, the text's queer(ing) voice.

'Nothing but wrath and weeping'

Yet *Nightwood* does not allow even Matthew's counter-history the final 'word'. Barnes' narrative enacts a final parody of 'straight' narrative, its peculiarly Freudian primacy of orgasm, and its attendant urge to dictate the course and telos of narrative. Having finished his story, unable to get (it) up, Matthew ejaculates the novel's close: 'the end – mark my words – now *nothing, but wrath and weeping!*' (Barnes, 2007, p. 149; emphasis original). If his narratives have been supremely queer throughout, in seeking to curtail the course of events Matthew becomes a mouthpiece for teleological, linear temporality. And yet the story continues, in defiance of his dictum. Just as woman's body can sustain a plethora of climaxes, Barnes's narrative exceeds the singular orgasm of its male, diegetic psychoanalyst. There is also a suggestion that 'wrath and weeping' (as reverberation of hysteria) are outside of narrative, or perhaps unable to be narrated, even in the terms of Matthew's loquacious, decadent speech. In this way, Barnes locates a failure in discourse to express 'feminine' affect. Language mediates rational, closed-bodied commentary on 'reality'. 'Wrath and weeping', as corporeal, irrational, and fluid, refuse containment in language.

These 'concluding' pages of the novel, which depict a reunion of sorts in a chapel between ex-lovers Robin and Nora, announce a final breaking open of narrative (and heteronormative) temporality. As Nora arrives on the scene, she lurches into the jamb of the chapel door and is knocked unconscious. Robin falls to her knees and begins, we might say, to play fight with Nora's dog. The verbs cascade upon us, with Robin 'sliding', 'swinging', 'dragging', her veins 'throbbing', and the dog 'rearing', 'slanting', 'trembling', 'whining', and 'waiting' (Barnes, 2007, pp. 152-53). The text pulsates here with 'doing' (as opposed to 'being'), permitting the enactment of a dilation, perhaps even a tumefaction, of time. The cascade originates with Nora (her entrance), such that from the moment she is knocked unconscious – 'Nora's body struck the wood' (p. 152) – it appears Robin takes over and sustains Nora's movement: 'Robin began going down', engendering a continuity between these two bodies (p. 152). Whereas the novel has evidenced that Nora and Robin cannot communicate through language, here, movement offers a mutual discourse; an economy of gesture. Rhythm and cadence are foregrounded, 'producing an anatomy of the emotions that animate every part of the two fighting bodies' (Blake, 2015, p. 164). References to music and rhythm, as aforementioned, abound throughout the novel. They function as alternative ways to conceive of a queer relationship to time, seemingly coming to a head in this final chapter. This is perhaps what T. S. Eliot grasps when he concludes, 'the final chapter is essential, both dramatically and *musically*' (from Eliot's preface in Barnes, 2007, p. xviii; my emphasis).

Robin's body becomes the vehicle of its own metaphor – 'becoming animal' – and by aligning with other improper metaphors throughout the novel, introduces a queer interstice into the trajectory between tenor and object.[11] John McGuigan's exegesis of this moment, in spite of an otherwise sensitive reading of *Nightwood*, terms Robin's embodiment that of a 'depraved animal' (2008, p. 36) in line with the many critics who have construed this chapter (titled 'The Possessed') as her *descent* into animality. These interpretations draw on figurations of sexual deviance, especially in women, as bestial, and insist on teleological movement, whether progression or regression. Robin is understood to become animal when the text seems aware that *to become* and *becoming* – the latter as ongoing, always in flux, and partaking of a lateral temporal relationality – are different. This moment's engagement with queer temporality means it resonates with something to which we are less willing to acquiesce. Down 'on all fours', Robin's body bespeaks human-animal imbrication, an unbreakable, queer contamination – something 'obscene and touching', otherwise excised by linear understandings of temporality (Barnes, 2007, pp. 152-53). Queer temporality exposes here our relation to the animal as oblique and entangled, as opposed to distinct and hierarchised. Because it suggests the permeability of borders between self and Other (the borders, which in a Kristevan paradigm, are necessary to maintain the 'straight' subject's agency), this scene registers as particularly disquieting. In view of this undermining of binaries and lateral articulation of time, Caselli suggests the final chapter supposes that 'human and inhuman are questions, searched rather than known' (2009, p. 157).

In Matthew's absence, the prose of 'The Possessed' is palpably different, even sparse. The adjectives and conceits give way, as noted, to verbs. Yet, unlike critics who are quick to dismiss this chapter, or read it as a failure of Barnes' narrative innovation, I maintain that she queers time, albeit in a dearth of decadence, and posits a final challenge to teleological narrativity. The body, Robin's in particular, is afforded prominence; not as knowable (by a 'straightening' gaze), but vibrant and in flux. There is the alluring possibility of signification beyond language, as the chapter's dynamic, material components communicate an affective intensity to the reader. '[C]rying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head', Robin's body and the dog's blur syntactically (Barnes, 2007, p. 153). But these supra-linguistic elements in *Nightwood* do not point to an 'elsewhere'. Barnes' critique of language and intelligibility is too subtle to engage

in utopics. *Nightwood* offers ultimately not so much a model of how one might live time, affiliation, and language differently, but rather an unsettling of those norms that have, through gradual growth, come to figure as 'natural'. As queer narrative, it animates going nowhere as going somewhere. It exposes narrative's undisclosed schemata of value and meaning. As queer genealogy, looking sideways and backwards in *Nightwood* is not about a return, retrieval, or other essentialist methodology. Looking back, gaps and the failures of language evince instead the particularities that can be elided by 'straight' images and understandings of time. The relationality sought by Robin is capacious and plural. The novel's manipulations of narrative temporality attempt to offer her a place to speak from, a queer subject position. Yet, as I have shown, to speak within a relational economy that privileges monogamy and heterosex is to risk (mis)recognition.

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Notes

1. Although this article acknowledges its debt to Frank's suggestion of narrative radicalism, it uses this point of departure to reach a very different conclusion. In many ways, Frank's reading is exemplary of what happens when we try to shoehorn a 'queer' narrative into a 'straight' container.
2. Queer is, by definition, an open-ended term. However, throughout this analysis, my usage most closely echoes Eve Sedgwick's, who writes that '"queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (1993, p. 7).
3. If the relationship between narrative and time is not immediately apparent, let us remember that, in their normative, linear instantiations, both narrative and temporality presuppose and validate development and forward movement. The individual like Robin, who circles back, or spirals in non-teleological pleasures, risks characterisation as child or adolescent, the not-quite-agentive subject who must submit to the 'adult' strictures of those who know better.
4. Masculine and feminine should be understood, here and throughout, in the sense of hegemonic/marginal positionalities. Whilst no easy divide between these exists, I hope this evinces my commitment to eschewing an essentialist reading of the text (as informed by *Nightwood*'s own war on essentialism).
5. Indeed, Pound characterised Barnes's writing in the following terms: 'Her/Blubbery prose had no fingers or toes' (Pound, 1971, p. 286).
6. The text's emphasis on her characterisation as masculine is especially apparent in the passage contrasting her with her husband Guido (Barnes, 2007, pp. 3-5). Yet in keeping with the novel's destabilisation, rather than inversion, of binaries, Hedvig's masculinity here is ambiguous, performative.
7. 'Wandering' is important here. For, as Blyn observes, it is Robin who is the text's 'wandering Jew', not Felix (2008, p. 510). As this article expands on, there is something rather queer about wandering, whether it is embodied, or the more abstract wanderings of Matthew's speech.
8. As Erin Carlston reminded me, 'critics argue about whether she [Barnes] inscribes anti-Semitism (and racism) or only describes them' (personal communication). Whilst questions of 'race are too large for this article to canvas, I find Barnes' phrasing, in general, implicates the reader in its portraits; thus these are not racist per se, but because committed to text, they are open to racist interpretation.
9. Elizabeth Freeman speaks of 'temporal drag' in the preface to her brilliant *Time Binds* (2010, p. xxiii). Whilst we are both punning on drag in the context of queer theory, my usage arose spontaneously as I read this scene in *Nightwood* and incorporated a sideways glance to Judith Butler. As far as I can tell, Freeman has something rather more abstract in mind, where time itself is dressed in drag.
10. We also note the doubling between Robin and her son, Guido. This latter is, emphatically, the queer child (not with any particular nod to sexual orientation, but rather an improperly temporalised subjectivity and relationality).
11. 'Becoming', suggest Deleuze and Guattari, 'is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, "appearing," "being," "equalling," or "producing"' (1980, p. 239).

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