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Djuna Barnes's Nightwood and Disqualification

we who are full to the gorge with misery, should look well around, doubting everything seen, done, spoken, precisely because we have a word for it, and not its alchemy.¹

What is the significance of a history of enforced exile for Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*? The book, as the epigram for this essay puts it, focuses on characters "full to the gorge with misery" and existential "doubt." Does the history of political exiles in the 1920s and 1930s form a part of this misery and epistemological scepticism? Readers have disagreed on this question. For many early reviewers, the history referred to in the novel is more obviously connected to the social and cultural activities of cosmopolitan American expatriates in the 1920s. Eliot famously described the "abnormalities of temperament" of its émigré characters, but was more interested in the book's aesthetic innovations, its "beauty of phrasing," than with its engagement with history. Other early reviews deplored what they saw as its narrow frame of reference. Philip Rahv writing for the *New Masses* complained that it documented the "minute shudders of decadence developed in certain small in-grown cliques of intellectuals and their patrons" while Theodore Purdy in the *Saturday Review* labelled it dismissively as "coterie literature."²

The book's connection to fascism began to be explicitly addressed in the 1960s. Kenneth Burke declared that despite its conflation of race and blood *Nightwood* had nothing to do with the Nazis and was "as 'innocent' of political organization

¹ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*, ed. Cheryl J. Plumb (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 72.

² Philip Rahv, *New Masses* (1936); Theodore Purdy, *Saturday Review* (27 March 1937). Both quoted in Jane Marcus, "Mousemeat: Contemporary Reviews of *Nightwood*," in Mary Lynn Broe, ed., *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1991), 195-206 (200).

as is childhood.”³ Jane Marcus, in her ground-breaking essay “Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman’s Circus Epic” (1991) disagreed. She insisted that a history of persecution was central to the text’s meaning: “it figures by absence the authoritarian dominators of Europe in the 1930s, the sexual and political fascists.”⁴ Marcus claimed that the book was central to a newly defined literary modernism because of its representation of the ostracised and persecuted, and argued that a spirit of negation informs the text throughout: “Freud, fascism, Hitler, ‘high art,’ and the lumpen proletariat haunt the text as a potent ‘political unconscious.’”⁵ Rather than appearing directly in the book, the “Aryan Superman” also makes his mark through negation: he “is absent from the text, but his ‘uprightness’ is the ethic that the characters’ abjection opposes.”⁶

Disputes about whether the book’s itinerants are best characterised as cosmopolitan aesthetes or persecuted outsiders have continued to divide its readers. Barnes’s writing is, for some, still representative of a fashionable modernism of cosmopolitan hedonism, inebriation, and alienation. In Edward St Aubyn’s novel *Bad News*, Patrick Melrose carries an unread copy of *Nightwood* in his pocket during his debauched, drug-fuelled, and desolate night in New York, a secret talisman of his own melancholic despair and literary aspirations.⁷ Bonnie Kime Scott, in her two-volume *Refiguring Modernism*, in contrast, situates Barnes as central to a refigured modernism because she gives voice to marginalised subjects, particularly lesbians and Jews.⁸ Yet the nature of this voicing of marginality is complicated. Daniela Caselli argues that the book’s stylistic innovations, which she eloquently describes as a “slap in the face of syntax and punctuation” and which “destroys the possibility of transparency and

³ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 252.

⁴ Jane Marcus, “Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman’s Circus Epic,” in Broe, ed., *Silence and Power*, 221-50 (251).

⁵ Marcus, “Laughing at Leviticus,” 222.

⁶ Marcus, “Laughing at Leviticus,” 223.

⁷ Edward St Aubyn, *Bad News* (London: Heinemann, 1992).

⁸ Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, vol. 1, *The Women of 1928* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995) and *Refiguring Modernism*, vol. 2, *Postmodern Feminist Readings of Woolf, West and Barnes* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995).

naturalness,” works also to sabotage “the relationship between history and literature.”⁹ Deborah Parsons, in contrast, situates the novel’s representation of the dispossessed in the history of the 1920s and 1930s. The book, for Parsons, is

a vision of modern despair that is symbolic of all outcasts from an intolerant society. Analysing the social and psychological spaces of an urban modernity of the “dispossessed,” [Barnes] presents a searing indictment of the construction and regulation of concepts of the orthodox and the taboo, at a time when sexual, racial and national difference was acquiring newly violent resonance.¹⁰

Parsons pins Barnes’s outcasts to a history of fascism: *Nightwood*, she argues, is a critique of a “Western and increasingly fascist social order obsessed with identification and regulation of the alien and the impure,” a critique which “disturbingly predicts Hitler’s projects of racial and social purity.”¹¹

While Marcus and Parsons connect *Nightwood*’s outcasts to a history of Western and fascist exclusion, their readings focus on the figure of the dispossessed and do not elaborate further on the depiction of power itself. In this essay I want to revisit the question of exile, or “disqualification” as Barnes described it, in *Nightwood* by pinning it to a crisis of sovereignty. Animals, geographical anonymity, and the lawless violence of the unconscious are all vehicles for imagining exile or statelessness in the book. Sovereignty, meanwhile, is repeatedly connected to a ruler’s position outside the law, with images of Felix’s fantasies of the authoritarian Imperial courts of Old Europe, the king as someone who must be bowed down to because he “has been set apart as the one dog who need not regard the rules of the house” and Nora as a hopeless judge “outside the world and its history.” This essay will argue that the images of sovereignty, judgement and dispossession tend to connect to each other in the novel so that these terms are defined in relation to each other. They evoke a crisis of

⁹ Daniela Caselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 3, 168.

¹⁰ Deborah Parsons, *Djuna Barnes, Writers and their Work* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2003), 61.

¹¹ Parsons, 65, 80.

citizenship that needs to be read in relation to the wider political context in which the book was written and published.



Djuna Barnes left New York to live in Paris in the early 1920s. She began to write *Nightwood* perhaps as early as 1927, with the first draft completed by 1931. She moved briefly to the UK in the early 1930s to finish the book. After being rejected by numerous publishers, re-written three times, and rejected again—mainly for its experimentalism—*Nightwood* was sponsored by T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber and published by them in 1936. Promoted by some influential writers such as Eliot and Dylan Thomas, heavily criticised for its obscenity by others, it had a limited readership at the time of its publication and soon fell out of print.

One of the main reasons for the book's rejection by publishers and readers was because of its structure—or lack of structure as many readers saw it. It is indeed true that *Nightwood* is a novel which seems off-balance in narrative terms. Painterly imagery and storytelling coexist but often fail to cohere. And the book is self-reflexive about the idea that these are different ways of producing knowledge. Robin Vote's capacity to present herself as a silent "picture forever arranged" is, the narrator tells us, a danger to Felix Volkbein, while Doctor O'Connor relentlessly tells stories to inattentive listeners. Both kinds of knowledge are incomplete. In the absence of love, static images or disconnected objects lack meaning and coherence. And, while storytelling is relentlessly performed, the stories often lack resolution as well as listeners. Nora Flood, for instance, only attends to the Doctor's stories of the night when they focus on Robin. If individualised love is the human capacity that makes these images and stories meaningful, then meaning is partial and fragmented. Stories, it seems, lack collective significance.

Many modernist texts, in their formal disconnections, perform the idea that meaning is partial and are similarly self-reflexive: in the absence of shared history, religion, or tradition, knowledge is split apart and re-combined in new and startling ways. While some writers, such as Barnes's editor at Faber T. S. Eliot, lamented the loss of collective meaning, others revelled in it. What then of

Nightwood? Does it replay this idea with novel subject matter—tuned to a witty and mournful key?

Emily Coleman was Barnes's greatest supporter in her struggle to publish *Nightwood*. However, she, like many of Barnes's readers, criticised the book's unstructured form and urged her to rewrite it so that the book's unity was situated in the "tragedy of Nora and Robin." Barnes protested, however, insisting that she wanted to surround the story of Nora and Robin with characters of "disqualification." Cheryl Plumb, in her helpful introduction to the Dalkey Archive edition of *Nightwood*, reproduces one of Barnes's letters to help clarify the meaning of this word. Barnes describes a disagreement with Eustace Seligman in the following terms: he had brought her and twenty other lunch guests to see

the expensive horse, then the middle class horse, and then that poor demented dog, who knew he was being looked at for what had happened to him, for his disqualification, you could see it in the way he would not turn his eyes aside, too damned to make his eyeballs turn from you, it reminded me of that look Baroness [von Freytag-Loringhoven] gave me long ago, just before she said "Shall I trust you?"¹²

Plumb interprets the eyes of Barnes's disqualified dog—with the Baroness's shadow hovering in the background—in human and historical terms: the disqualified, according to Plumb, have an "awareness of a sense of shame, a suggestion that individuals who incurred public dismissal or scrutiny suffered because of what had happened to them or what they were, that is, Jewish, homosexual, or alienated from the values of a dominant culture."¹³ Barnes's dog, for Plumb, is a symbol of the ostracised or politically excluded with acute historical resonance and she is right to suggest that the disqualified are made to take on the responsibility for the "shame" of their exclusion. But a number of unexplored ideas about exclusion and shame are left hanging. It is ambiguous whether the dog is disqualified because he is classed as demented or because he

¹² Written 20 September 1935; see Cheryl J. Plumb, "Introduction," in *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*, xviii.

¹³ Plumb, xviii.

is a dog in the presence of horses—themselves classed as expensive or middle-class. Stranger still, it is unclear where the human sits in these stratifications. Is the Baroness superior to the horse, or in some way similar to the dog? The dog is shamed because he is disqualified and because he is damned, a conflation of profane and religious registers that, rather than suggesting a specific form of transgression, evokes a dynamic of exclusion.

Barnes uses the word disqualification in the letter to Coleman precisely, as it reappears in *Nightwood* itself in a passage which also considers the nature of shame. During a description of Felix she writes:

His embarrassment took the form of an obsession for what he termed “Old Europe”: aristocracy, nobility, royalty. He spoke any given title with a pause before and after the name. Knowing circumlocution to be his only contact, he made it interminable and exacting. With the fury of a fanatic he hunted down his own disqualification, re-articulating the bones of the Imperial Courts long forgotten (those long remembered can alone claim to be long forgotten), listening with an unbecoming loquacity to officials and guardians for fear that his inattention might lose him some fragment of his resuscitation. He felt that the great past might mend a little if he bowed low enough, if he succumbed and gave homage.¹⁴

Felix is cut off both temporally and racially from the aristocratic history that he frantically pursues. His only way of communicating with this tradition, the traces of which he finds in noble names and living officials, is to bow down to it. His submission takes place in speech, in his pause before and after the names of the titled, and through the posture of his body in its rigid attentiveness to the words of officials. His embarrassment resides in a kind of knowing obsession with his own disqualification and physical submission to its terms.

In a slightly later passage Barnes extends Felix’s personal disqualification to “the public”:

¹⁴ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 9. Henceforth *N*.

The emotional spiral of the circus, taking its flight from the immense disqualification of the public, rebounding from its illimitable hope, produced in Felix longing and disquiet. (*N* 11)

Here it is the people who lovingly submit to the “splendid and reeking falsification” of the circus because of the origins of this falsification in their disqualification from power. The public knowingly succumb to a theatrics of power, in which the circus performers adopt noble titles in order to “dazzle” and mystify their audience. The soaring hope of the people finds expression in the extraordinary flights of circus performers, an apt image for the hopes of the disqualified.

This dynamic of exclusion is one in which both Felix and “the public” participate, seemingly revelling in their distance from a spectacle of power. It leads Felix, for instance, to cling “to his title to dazzle his own estrangement” (*N* 11). Daniela Caselli argues that Barnes writes Felix’s Jewish estrangement by way of a third-person narrative voice that is a “pre-eminently non-Jewish one, which sees the Jew as ‘everywhere from nowhere.’”¹⁵ But these passages, rather than singling out Felix in his disqualification, connect his dispossession to that of “the public.”

Marcus suggests that Barnes’s book comically transgresses fascist authority through negation, but the novel does present some direct descriptions of sovereignty. In a later discussion about nobility between the Doctor and Felix power, animals, and theatre are brought together into a single image which is more precise about how power itself functions. The Doctor describes the figure of the King thus:

A king is the peasant’s actor, who becomes so scandalous that he has to be bowed down to—scandalous in the higher sense naturally. And why must he be bowed down to? Because he has been set apart as the one dog who need not regard the rules of the house; they are so high that they can defame God and foul their rafters! (*N* 37-8)

¹⁵ Caselli, 166.

The King described in this passage is the individual who legitimises the kingdom by being set outside it. The word scandalous is from the Latin *scandalum*, meaning a cause of offence or stumbling, but also in Old French the word signifies the discredit to religion that can be occasioned only by the conduct of a religious person. The meaning Barnes gives to the word is similarly focused on the scandal of the insider who breaks the rules. The King becomes a King precisely because of his ability to set himself apart through his theatrical excesses—he becomes “so” scandalous that he is bowed down to. This passage presents an image of the sovereign as the one individual who legitimises the state by being able to disobey its rules, an idea of inclusive transgression also contained in the word scandalous. Barnes’s use of animal vocabulary—the King is the “one dog”—sets up another layer of transgression in the idea of species separation that the image implies. Not only is the King theatrical he is also animalistic, a separation that is enforced by the idea that he can both defame God and foul his own nest.

And yet at the same time, this image of monarchy is one that evokes its contingency. Why must the King be bowed down to? Doctor O’Connor asks. Not because of any intrinsic qualities, but because he has been set apart. And just as the King’s sovereignty relies on a theatre of power, so the theatrical titles and performances of the circus make power part of everyday life. The most notorious dog image in *Nightwood* is obviously the one that concludes the book and it is not incidental that the image was and continues to be scandalous. Yet it is also worth noting that the scandalous structure of power described above is also one that pertains to the character of Robin. While there are a number of descriptions of Robin acting like an amoral tyrant—one image has her holding up her baby as though she is about to strike him down and another focuses on her grinding a doll’s head into the floor—she also comes to her end, and concludes the book, while barking and crawling like a dog.

If the King ruling over peasants represents one kind of state sovereignty, *Nightwood* pictures a range of different political systems. The novel begins with the position of the Jew in racist Imperial Austria, describes peasants in relation to kings and queens, and then comes up to date in its focus on “the public,” the circus, and modern-day monarchies. With the entrance of Nora Flood in Chapter Three the novel turns to descriptions of modern-day US democracy: she was

known instantly, we are told, “as a Westerner” (N 46). Yet the model of justice eked out by the democratic Nora relies on a structure of inclusion and exemption that is similar to the Doctor’s scandalous peasant’s king. In a description of Nora she is presented thus:

There was no ignominy in her; she recorded without reproach or accusation, being shorn of self-reproach or self-accusation. This drew people to her and frightened them; they could neither insult nor hold anything against her, though it embittered them to have to take back injustice that in her found no foothold. In court she would have been impossible; no one would have been hanged, reproached or forgiven, because no one would have been “accused.” The world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem. (N 48)

This description of the consequences of Nora’s lack of ignominy—or shame—is a chilling one, as it separates justice and life. Nora is external to injustice, just as she is outside the bottle in which the world and its history are contained. She responds forensically, without moral energy. People are both attracted to and terrified of this neutrality because they are compromised by it—her non-judgemental stance deflects the unjust thoughts of others, who are forced to take back—and internalise—the responsibility of their injustices. If extended into a general moral law, Nora’s approach would produce an unjust world in which individuals were morally separated from each other, as though by a glass wall. Her position outside the bottle makes her either an exile or an amoral sovereign.

Nora’s inclusive approach produces an unhealthy internalisation of judgement. The idea that modern democracy is distinguished by its processes of internalisation conforms to the view put forward by the Doctor in other parts of *Nightwood* in which the Catholic spectacle, a religion which allows its members to lie to it, is contrasted to Protestant introspection, which is identified as one of the ideological origins of modern American democracy. The idea that both inclusive Nora and Robin Vote (whose surname, as many critics have noted, is not incidentally connected to democracy) teeter on the boundary of

dispossession and amoral sovereignty is one that extends the novel's meditations on power, theatre, and exile into the everyday lives of modern cosmopolites.

The world of *Nightwood*, then, is one in which all the characters are outcasts. But it is also one in which the systems that produce disqualification are seen to rely on structures of exception. The sovereign, like the outcast, sits on the border of the law; he is both internal to its terms and is the "one dog" able to break the rules. In Chapter Six, the Doctor describes the "night" world of the book's title as a dizzying one in which amoral sovereignty and exile are conflated. In the night, he suggests, humans are both disconnected from geography and nation, and owners of this unknown terrain: the "sleeper is the proprietor of an unknown land" (N 74). This geographical uncertainty enforces the civic anonymity of the night: asleep, we act in houses "without an address, in a street in no town, citizenized with people with no names." Anonymity and displacement allow for a cosmic violence and injustice: "There is not one of us," the Doctor declares, "who, given an eternal incognito, would not commit rape, murder and all abominations" (N 75). The image implies that state structures of law and citizenship are necessary to prevent violence and desecration. All of us, the Doctor insists, would commit forms of mythic violence under the cover of anonymity.

The connection of displacement and anonymity also features at the end of the novel. Along with her communion with animals in the final Chapter of *Nightwood*, Robin is also a figure defined by itinerancy and anonymity. Her anonymity is described from at least three angles. It is imagined in precise terms—she is pictured "haunting" the New York "terminals" for instance—and in more abstract language—we are told that "in her gestures there was a desperate anonymity" (N 138). Yet, in a further image, Robin's anonymity is pinpointed and refined by way of natural imagery:

Sometimes she slept in the woods; the silence that she had caused by her coming was broken again by insect and bird flowing back over her intrusion, which was forgotten in her fixed stillness, obliterating her as a drop of water is made anonymous by the pond into which it has fallen. (N 138)

This description of one kind of night wood is also a classic Barnes sentence. There are temporal and imagistic oddities and inversions, such as the idea that Robin is the source of a silence and stasis that is then broken by nature's creatures; or the idea that the silence of Robin's coming is broken by insects and birds that flow back over her intrusion. Her own rupture of silence is described in retrospect, as though it predates the presence of insects and birds. So while she is a foreign element in this natural landscape, she also seems to predate it and to be obliterated by it. The reference to anonymity is itself arresting. One would not normally think of water as having identity and therefore of being capable of anonymity. The writing creates a striking image of depersonalised bare life.

These reflections on anonymity, citizenship, and authority are significant, not only for the way that *Nightwood* exposes the sinister connections between disqualification and power, but also because, as Barnes indicated in her letter to Coleman, they determine its formal properties. The narrative, like its characters, drifts around different world cities from New York to Berlin to Vienna to Paris so that the legal or moral terms of exclusion are always uncertain. The result is to create ideas of law, nation, and tradition with a fictional and fragmented feel. The narrative is also quite explicitly structured around the fateful stories of the underworld. The stories of the "high and mighty," the Doctor declares, are what we call "history." But,

think of the stories that do not amount to much. That is, that are forgotten in spite of all man remembers (unless he remembers himself) merely because they befell him without distinction of office or title—that's what we call legend and it's the best a poor man can do with his fate. (*N* 13-14).

The Doctor's "unexpurgated" and inconclusive stories of the forgotten characters of the underworld—the legends of prostitutes, wrestlers, drifters, circus performers, women with no legs, and many more—dominate *Nightwood*, splintering the narrative into fragments of forgotten lives. Not only does the novel narrate these stories of the forgotten, mostly through the Doctor's lips, it also describes writing and storytelling as activities of the disqualified, so that the novel presents a picture of a world comprised of innumerable untold individual stories. It suggests a world without the legislative force of "history" as the

Doctor describes it or of other kinds of narratives—whether national, moral, religious, or legalistic—which could make these individual stories cohere.

One blueprint for the book's descriptions of the anarchic disconnection from moral law and the legislative force of official "history" might be the work of the Marquis de Sade, who is one of the few authors mentioned in *Nightwood*. In an early scene Felix comes across a sleeping Robin with a copy of his memoirs in her hand. Robin has underscored one of the sentences in the book which relates to captivity, power, and devotion: "Et lui rendit pendant sa captivité les milles services qu'un amour dévoué est seul capable de rendre" (*N* 44). The words prompt Felix to think "What is wrong?" and that night, amidst loud cries and curses, Robin gives birth to Guido.

Given Robin's general inability to attend to people, it seems significant that she has given enough attention to de Sade's words to underline a few of them. In a general sense one can see how de Sade's writing has relevance for *Nightwood*. De Sade's works enjoyed new life in the 1920s and 1930s when his writing became central to the Surrealist interest in lawlessness, desire, and violence. By referencing de Sade, then, Barnes is partly pinning the scene to a particular moment in the history of de Sade's resurrection as a fashionable writer for the avant-garde. But de Sade's fictional world also has significance for *Nightwood* in a more profound sense. Like de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, the book depicts characters who are at once exempt from the constraints of the state, from civic society, law, religion, or morality, and in which the law imposes itself on the physical life of the body.

Both de Sade's writing and Barnes's *Nightwood* explore the circular limits of unconstrained freedom or desire, although in very different ways. In de Sade's castle, desire tends to end in violence or unsatisfactory death, only to begin again and traverse a similar cycle of destruction. In *Nightwood*, Robin is lost in the loop of her freedom to act without constraint—she is described as a "lost land"—and seems to yearn, in an inarticulate way, for some kind of tether—whether of a religious or emotional kind (*N* 42).

The significance of the de Sade book Robin holds in her hand also lies in the specific underlined words. The reference to captivity suggests that Robin, at this

early point in the novel, sees herself trapped in the marital structure Felix has constructed for her. But perhaps more significantly, writing itself is presented as an activity of the imprisoned which seeks to control the past and the future. Here again de Sade acts as a kind of reference point. Not only did de Sade's books focus on the sexuality of abusing captive girls and boys, he also wrote compulsively while incarcerated. Much later in *Nightwood* there is an extended meditation on the compulsive nature of writing. Chapter Seven begins with the Doctor coming into Nora's room and discovering her writing a letter to Robin. "Why not put the pen away?" he asks (*N* 105). And she replies, "If I don't write to her, what am I to do?" Over a number of pages he repeatedly urges her to lay down her pen, to resist her compulsive desire to write to the unresponsive Robin. The chapter begins "Can't you be quiet now," and the present tense is significant through the chapter: "Be done now," "Now be still, now that you know what the world is about." And it is in response to this that Nora insists she must inhabit the restlessness of writing. "If I don't write to her, what am I to do? I can't sit here for ever, thinking" (*N* 105, 106).

Nora's psychological and emotional imprisonment could be read as a modernist counterpart to de Sade's literal incarceration. Like de Sade, Nora's writing is also implicated in the attempt to control time. Nora's writing is an activity that tries to manipulate the future and the past. The Doctor accuses her of seeking to imprison Robin through her writing. Not only is she forcing Robin to "tear open a million envelopes to her end," she also wants to "unspin fate," a statement that suggests that writing does not just revise the past, but is also fateful, attempting to control the narrative arc of time (*N* 106). "You've made her a legend" the Doctor tells Nora, pinpointing Nora's attempt to control Robin's future as well as her past (*N* 106). Walter Benjamin, in his essay on Kafka, notes something similar, but also figures writing as that which defers judgement: "In the stories which Kafka left us, narrative art regains the significance it had in the mouth of Scheherazade: its ability to postpone the future." In *The Trial* this temporal dimension is significant for K's relationship to the law. Benjamin states: "In *Der Prozes*, the postponement is the hope of the accused man only if the proceedings do not gradually turn into the judgement."¹⁶ The idea that the accused can hope

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, 1927-1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others, ed. Michael W.

for nothing more than deferral, is also referred to in *Nightwood* in a passage in which Doctor O'Connor addresses the lovesick Nora:

Haven't I eaten a book too? Like the angels and prophets? And wasn't it a bitter book to eat? The archives of my case against the law, snatched up and out of the tale-telling files by my high important friend. And didn't I eat a page and tear a page and stamp on others and flay some and toss some into the toilet for relief's sake—then think of Jenny without a comma to eat, and Robin with nothing but a pet name—your pet name to sustain her; for pet names are a guard against loss, like primitive music. (N 107)

This description of the Doctor ingesting the archives of his legal case imagines his body, both inside and out, as subject to the law. If one knows about Barnes's struggles to write and revise the manuscript of *Nightwood*, it is hard not to picture the author herself in this image of the Doctor tearing, stamping, and discarding pages. More significantly, however, the law against which the Doctor compiles his case is one in which judgement is unknowable and endlessly deferred. The Doctor later asks "is even the end of us an account?" The implication is that not only does one need to make a case against the law because one is already in the wrong, but that the law infiltrates the body. The law is kept general in this description, but it has striking similarities to the internalised law of Nora's disinterested democratic judgements. The cases of the accused are a hideous jumble of words and grammatical signs: the books, tales, pages, commas, and pet names are signs of linguistic life positioned as offerings or justifications to an uncertain law.



In the rest of this paper I want to argue that the ideas explored above spring, to some extent, from the historical features of the 1920s and early 1930s. This is not to suggest that Barnes wanted to write a book about politics; rather, that the crisis of sovereignty that is importantly staged at a number of points in the novel

Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1999), 794-818 (807).

formed part of a wider debate about state sovereignty and citizenship after the First World War.

In the period immediately after the First World War Europe witnessed a huge increase in mass migration and refugees from Russia, Armenia, Bulgaria, and Greece, as well as the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Germans, Hungarians, and Rumanians. At the same time, the Russian Revolution threatened to spread across Eastern Europe, with short-lived republics in Germany and Hungary. States were in flux, both geographically, with new territories marked out by the dominant Western powers, and in terms of political systems, with Mussolini's rise to power in Italy. It is therefore unsurprising that a number of influential theories of sovereignty were produced in this period. In his theory of sovereignty, written just after the First World War and published in 1922, Carl Schmitt controversially described the essence of sovereignty as the exception: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."¹⁷ This ability to decide is not only essential to monarchies, but also to modern parliamentary democracies in times of national crisis: "The state suspends the law in the exception on the basis of its right to self-preservation."¹⁸ It is important to modern states that the decision to suspend the law works within a juridical framework: "The exception remains, nevertheless, accessible to jurisprudence because both elements, the norm as well as the decision, remain within the framework of the juristic."¹⁹ The political system hands this authority to decide to the sovereign: "Although [the sovereign] stands outside the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs to it, for he must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety."²⁰

In his post-war essay "Critique of Violence" (1921), Walter Benjamin also argued that sovereignty involved the power to decide on a state of exception, but he criticised the origins of this decision and exception in violence. He claimed that the nation state was based on violence and that justice would involve finding

¹⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters in the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985), 5.

¹⁸ Schmitt, 12.

¹⁹ Schmitt, 12-13.

²⁰ Schmitt, 7.

a position outside both natural law and positive law traditions. His “philosophy of the history of violence” involved understanding the history of the law and its current logic. The law, he argued, is grounded in the violence of its mythical and religious origins, and it also administers and controls the assertion of violence. Legalised violence includes the enforced violence of military conscription, the police, and education, as well as proscribed violence such as general strikes, murder without collective ends, and revolutionary violence. Law, then, has violence at its heart: it is “never reason that decides on the justification of means and the justness of ends: fate-imposed violence decides on the former, and God on the latter.”²¹ For Benjamin the law—and particularly the language of law—cannot represent the interests of the disqualified.

In his analysis of Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty Giorgio Agamben considers the sovereign in his position both “outside and inside the juridical order” in order to understand the way in which “bare life” “enters into the structure of the state and even becomes the earthly foundation of the state’s legitimacy and sovereignty.”²² Agamben pinpoints the period after the First World War as the time when the “hidden difference between birth and nation entered into a lasting crisis.” Refugees, Agamben claims, were one of the key factors in this crisis: they represented a “disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state” and put “the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis.” At the historical moment when a rights agenda began to emerge ideologically, many European states introduced measures to denationalise huge numbers of their own populations. Agamben argues, that the “figure who should have embodied the rights of man par excellence—the refugee—signalled instead the concept’s radical crisis.”²³

Benjamin turned to the question of enforced exile in a short text written a few months after the Nazi rise to power and book burnings of 1933, an essay which captures some of the issues at stake in trying to understand the role of writers or writing in relation to these historical experiences of exile. There are two versions

²¹ Benjamin, 247.

²² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15, 127.

²³ Agamben, 129, 131, 126.

of this text, one of which is called “Agesilaus Santander” (First Version) (written August 1933) and “Agesilaus Santander” (Second Version) (written August 1933). There has been much speculation about the meaning of the title, with Gersholm Scholemn suggesting that “if we set aside the extra *i* [...] the name is an anagram of *Der Engel Satanas*, ‘Satan’s angel.’”²⁴

In this text, unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime, he discusses his German-Jewish identity. When he was born, Benjamin’s parents, thinking that he might one day wish to be a writer, decided to give him two unusual names to allow him to publish his works and obscure his Jewish identity. When Benjamin published his first works, however, rather than adopt these non-Jewish names he decided to keep them secret. He thereby refused his parents’ attempts to protect him and instead chose to watch over and protect the names themselves. In Jewish tradition, the child is given a name kept secret until the day of his maturity. For Benjamin, his secret name takes on a slightly different significance: “it remains the name which gathers all the forces of life unto itself, and by which these forces can be conjured up and protected against outsiders.” This is stated slightly differently in the second version: “Thus, it remains the name that binds together all the forces of life and that is to be protected against outsiders.”²⁵ Instead of hiding his Jewish identity, the name becomes the thing that is kept hidden. The name thus carries the conflicted nature of Benjamin’s Jewish-German identity, both in his relationship to his parents and in his position as a writer. At some level, the “forces of life” bound into the name involve the terrible nature of Benjamin’s parents’ historical foresight. “Forty years ago,” Benjamin states, “it was impossible for parents to be more prescient.” But the name, kept hidden and watched over by Benjamin, also captures his youthful desire to refuse this history. Benjamin’s relationship to the name is both tragic and utopian.

The tragedy and the utopianism are intertwined in the figure of the angel. The angel, Benjamin writes in the second version of this text, “resembles everything from which I have had to part: the people, and especially the things.”²⁶ Paul Klee’s small ink drawing, *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin had bought in 1921

²⁴ Benjamin, 716.

²⁵ Benjamin, 712, 714.

²⁶ Benjamin, 715.

and which is his most famous possession, seems to be partly referred to here. It would feature significantly as the “angel of history” in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in 1940. There is something raw and immediate in Benjamin’s 1933 response to parting from things and people, as well as the broader notion of dispossession represented by the angel. He is keen in this 1933 text to ensure that the angel is Janus-faced, as it represents both historical catastrophe and a youthful utopianism. The angel, he states in the second version of the text, “wants happiness—that is to say, the conflict in which the rapture of the unique, the new, the yet unborn is combined with that bliss of experiencing something once more, of possessing once again, of having lived.”²⁷ The revolutionary future of “the yet unborn” is grounded in the life of Benjamin’s authorial youth, a trajectory which stands opposed to the unfolding political history of liberal and totalitarian “progress.” Benjamin’s gesture towards a futuristic justice beyond the positive and natural law traditions is one that presents a literary angle on the attempt to represent the stateless figure.

Barnes’s literary vision constitutes another. *Nightwood* is constructed around the lives of the disqualified and meditates on the structures of power that have produced them. But these dynamics are distorted and grotesque. Her descriptions of monarchical and democratic power accord with the structure of the sovereign exception, but her sovereigns are scandalous, theatrical, blasphemous, and animalistic, and the laws of states are either unknowable and totalitarian or morally empty. Schmitt argued that the “exception reveals most clearly the essence of the state’s authority.”²⁸ In Barnes’s novel, the sovereign reveals the essence of the state’s authority in contingency, spectacle, and excess. *Nightwood* pictures geographical and national displacement as a worldly nightmare that unleashes the freedom to act violently without constraint. The novel, by way of Doctor O’Connor’s words, privileges the process of storytelling as a way of giving voice to the unrepresented. Yet its words, by picturing the animalistic and anonymous life of the itinerant, also produce a chilling image of the stateless person stripped bare. The book is a dark imaginative engagement with the sovereign crises and enforced exiles of its time.

²⁷ Benjamin, 715.

²⁸ Schmitt, 13.