

## THE METAPHORS SHE LIVED BY: LANGUAGE IN DJUNA BARNES'S *NIGHTWOOD*

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**Abstract.** This paper inquires into how Djuna Barnes foregrounds language in *Nightwood* and then posits its limits through the intimation of a transcendent form of ineffability. Multiple strategies concur for language's prominent position: a catachrestic use of metaphor, dense intertextuality and metafictional reflection on language. A hiatus marks the narrative in the last chapter which, stylistically different from the rest of the narrative, evokes the sublime. In this last chapter, Barnes conspicuously gives up the previous strategies that turn the reader's attention to language in order to suggest the impossibility of language to convey the extreme joy and pain of love.

**Keywords:** language, heteroglossia, metaphor, catachresis, sublime

The first international conference on a major figure in late modernism, Djuna Barnes, held in London in September 2012, which brought together Barnes's scholars and exegetes from all over the world, showed that Barnes's disconcerting, even arcane language paradoxically facilitated international communication. As a common reader I have been intrigued and delighted by *Nightwood*, now a classic in gender studies, and thus had to grant the novel a scholar's attention inquiring into what seemed to me the most apparent and deepest issue, melancholy. However, the most apparent and deepest issue in *Nightwood*, which calls for 'a good reader's' attention, in Nabokov's sense of the term, and an 'implied reader's' interpretation, in Iser's sense of the term, is language (see Note 1). The response of an early publisher, T.R. Smith, who acknowledged the 'brilliant writing' but rejected the novel for being 'a rambling, obscure complicated account of what the average reader will consider 'God only knows' could give the modern reader an inkling of Barnes's idiosyncratic language (Plumb, 1995: xi). Indeed, critics from different periods since its publication in 1936 in Great Britain have posited its illegibility before proceeding to demonstrate its legibility.

Not only its puzzling diction but also its lack of unity of space and time make *Nightwood* a novel difficult to summarize. The narrative brings together five major characters haunted by despair and loss. At the discursive helm of these expatriates living in Paris between the two wars is the fake gynecologist but genuine abortionist, the transvestite Matthew O'Connor, speaker in chief, whose long monologues often overpower the third person narrative voice. At the antipodes of this logorrhea is the quasi silent character, Robin Vote, the obscure object of desire of Felix Volkbein, Jenny Petherbridge and Nora Flood and

O'Connor's object of interpretation. Although through the lives of the socially, racially and sexually excluded who find themselves wedged between the two wars, the narrative explores marginalization and dispossession, the main focus seems to be the passionate relationship of Robin and Nora. The rupture of this love affair, due to Nora's possessiveness, and the havoc it creates for her, entails the break in language at the end of the novel.

Daniela Caselli finds Barnes's language a 'slap in the face of syntax and punctuation' (Caselli, 2009: 3) 'oscillating between being cast-off and antique, worthless and precious' (Caselli, 2009: 17). Unlike T.S. Eliot who edited and introduced the book, Barnes had no formal education. Unlike Joyce to whom she has been compared (Benstock, 1986: 231), she learnt no foreign languages, as her biographer, Philip Herring, reports (Herring, 1995: 278). However, the overall effect is of a prose 'figuratively [...] radical' (Gillespie, 2012: 147) and extravagantly poetic fully appreciated 'only' by 'sensibilities trained in poetry,' as Eliot made clear in his introduction to the book (see Note 2). A plethora of foreign words gives the finishing touch to this cosmopolitan narrative that starts in Vienna and ends in Upstate New York. In addition, linguistic heterogeneity, what Jane Marcus's aptly calls, 'the book's hysterical heteroglossia' (Marcus, 1991: 222) transforms the narrative into a linguistic maze that only informed readers can fully explore. Through an eclectic approach to text analysis and building on the findings of previous scholars, I will inquire into how the narrative foregrounds language and then, in the last chapter, posits its limits. Multiple strategies concur for language's prominent position, namely, a catachrestic use of metaphor, dense intertextuality and a metafictional reflection on language. In the last chapter of her novel, Barnes conspicuously gives up these strategies that turned the reader's attention to language in order to suggest the impossibility of language to convey the extreme joy and pain of love. But let's first deal with the title and see how language outwitted its author.

In a letter to her friend, Emily Coleman, in December 1934, Djuna Barnes referred to *Nightwood* as 'my life with Thelma' (Plumb, 1995: vii). Her unhappy love affair with the artist Thelma T. Wood, 'the longest and most damaging' in her life (Benstock, 1986: 236), urged Barnes to explore the possibilities of representation hiding and highlighting her lover's name in the title of the novel. In October 1936, in another letter Barnes informed Coleman 'of her discovery that the title was Thelma's name: "Nigh T. Wood-low, thought of it the other day. Very odd"' (Plumb, 1995:ix). Indeed, this late discovery which is immediately obvious for any of Barnes's scholars indicates how language can thwart a writer's intentions revealing more than he/she intended to show or unconsciously enhance his/her efforts for this linguistic game of hide-and-seek. Barnes's metaphoric turn of thought is the hallmark of her novel as the author's statement about her manuscript in progress shows, 'it lies here on the floor, and I circle around it like the murderess about the body, but do nothing' (Plumb, 1995: xii). Yet Barnes completed her manuscript giving it its final shape after some negotiation with its editor, T.S. Eliot, who heavily edited *Nightwood*.

The very first element that draws the reader's attention to language is the high density of metaphors in the text. Two overarching, structural metaphors unfold in the narrative, that of the night and that of descent and decay. The former runs through the unredeemable melancholy of its characters and their ontological, social and historical condition and is consolidated by the latter through a fecal motif and their movement, a permanent 'bowing down.' The title of the first chapter is 'Bow Down' referring to Felix's eagerness to bow down to titled nobility in his desperate attempt to forge a gentile's identity and enter history. In the last chapter, Nora collapses followed by Robin who bows down to meet Nora's dog. The sexual pun that is also inclusive in the title of the seventh chapter, 'Go down, Matthew' is indicative of the laughter, through which the narrative counterpoises the despair of the outcast; the obscenity of the latrine and gutter language carries Rabelaisian echoes.

It is the nature and the novelty of Barnes's metaphors that account for what Alan Singer calls the novel's 'formal identity' (Singer, 1984: 69). Readers of *Nightwood* are invited to see the play of language in which the main actor is metaphor. Aristotle's famous statement that metaphors are like riddles is nowhere else truer than in this narrative that sent critics on an exegetical spree. This is how the narrative voice describes Robin,

Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person's every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience: an image of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey (59).

One metaphor calls for another in this sort of Russian doll technique. The difference is that the dolls are not the same. Singer makes explicit Barnes's use of catachresis, the 'trope that strayed beyond the field of contextual determinations' (Singer, 1984: 72), which is behind the author's exacerbated tropological sensibility: 'each additional gesture of metaphoric elaboration has the effect of seemingly dispersing, rather than integrating, the elements of a coherent pattern' (Singer, 1984: 75). The reader can only be taken aback by Barnes's metaphorical complexity and apparent incoherence. Yet Singer does account for such a narrative discontinuity by laboriously demonstrating some overall imagistic coherence and thus taking into account the entire context of the narrative. Singer's ardent inquiry into Barnes's metaphor can only remind us of Wayne Booth's statement that 'there might be a special flowering about a criticism that [...] discriminate[s] among the characters and cultures that metaphors build, in the belief that the quality of any culture is in large part the quality of the metaphorists that it creates and sustains' (Booth, 1979: 70). Singer's essay justifies Booth's thesis that metaphor should never be judged out of its context (Booth,

1979: 60). Indeed, considering the larger context and culture may also help us understand Barnes's metaphoric frenzy and her 'figural' (Lyotard) approach to language in *Nightwood*. So let's consider the novel within the literary movement that marked the 1930s.

Tyrus Miller, in his study of the end of modernism, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*, has ironically canonized Barnes by granting her a prominent position in a movement on the verge of dissolution whose aesthetics 'weakened the formal cohesion of the modernist novel' (Miller, 1999: 19). According to Miller, *Nightwood* seems to be plagued by its author's 'doubts about the possibility of representing experience as such' (Miller, 1999: 147), and 'retraces the surface circling and drift of signs [...] mocking modernism's attempts to redeem the incoherent surface appearances by referring them to convulsed depths of thought and passion' (Miller, 1999: 163). The chief interpreter of events, the mock doctor and mock psychoanalyst, Matthew O'Connor, is also a mock Zen Master in his persistent practice to give unrelated, absurd answers to the agonized questions of his interlocutors in search of awakening from their illusions. Far in the agony of the movement, Barnes not only lets her metaphors run amok but forges ahead to meet the postmoderns. Indeed, in the twilight of modernism and in the dawn of postmodernism, she creates a deeply self-conscious narrative by winking at her predecessors and undertaking a metafictional reflection on language.

In fact, sustained intertextuality informs the text and deepens its antimimetic drive. Barnes eclectic references are interwoven in her prose. As numerous critics have noted, the Bible, Donne, Blake, Montaigne or Colley Cibber (Caselli, 2009: 160-164), Victor Hugo, Eugène Sue, Rabelais (Marcus, 2009: 226) densify the linguistic tapestry of her text. Nora's surname, Flood, characterizes her as the one who flooding her lover with her demands sends her away and who cries a lot over her loss, yet the intertextual link with Donne's sermon on the death of the Queen, 'in her death we were all under one common flood, and depth of tears' (Caselli, 2009: 161), adds another dimension to her characterization signaling also the death of an era. Likewise, the Biblical references offer a larger background to O'Connor's mock-apocalyptic discourse, heavy with the ravages of the war, and his prophecies that come true. Indeed, lament is the doctor's discursive mode, the second discursive genre, in fact, that allows for the incorporation of evil whose intimations come up in the doctor's monologues.

However, this enlarged reading that the narrative itself encourages and supports ironically makes clear a misreading that occurs within the narrative. As Benstock notes, '*Nightwood* constructs a society doomed to misread itself and to misinterpret the signs of its own operations' (Benstock 1986: 258). It is a society that alienates those who are different not only from itself but also from themselves and obliges them to live in a perpetual night both literally – most of the narrative takes place at night – but also emotionally and spiritually. Being alienated from themselves, too, become unable to communicate with each other,

and appear as eternal 'freakish *flâneurs*' (Bombaci, 2006: 65) whether 'wandering Jews' or gentiles, whether abroad or at home.

It is no wonder then that language as an instrument for communication or for attaining truth, the truth of human existence or of the unconscious, as we shall see, is to be questioned in the text. From Nora's anodyne question that seeks a meaningful conversation, 'Are you both really saying what you mean, or are you just talking?' (Barnes, 1950: 34), to the narrative voice's or O'Connor's implicit or explicit derogations of language, the narrative concerns itself with its own medium. Indeed, it is Matthew, the glib talker, whose nickname is eloquently Mighty-grain of salt Dante O'Connor, a self-appointed 'fisher of men' (ibid.: 141) (mock-Christ and active homosexual) and 'god of darkness' (ibid.: 180), the one who questions language. His rambling, aphoristic spurts of discourse contain disenchanted, imperial insights into human capacity to reach truth through axioms, 'There is no truth, and you have set it between you; you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable with the garments of the known' (ibid.: 193). Likewise, in his role of a storyteller O'Connor also questions narrative. From his challenging, postmodern statement, 'I have a narrative but you will be put to it to find it' (ibid.: 141), to his final, disillusioned observation, 'I've not only lived my life for nothing, but I've told it for nothing' (ibid.: 233), his discourse also echoes the incipient crisis of literature left in 'a narrow apartment in the new tower-block of the arts' in the years of late modernism (Miller, 1999: 37).

Not only O'Connor's role as a storyteller in the narrative but also the one as a mock-psychoanalyst, given the general drive of the text to parody authority, highlights the medium of language as a valuable yet ineffective tool. Marcus's reading of *Nightwood* as a critique of Freud in her essay, 'Laughing at Leviticus,' does not necessarily invalidate Freud's identification, internalization, incorporation, regression theoretical model necessary to understand the text; the critics, Victoria L. Smith and Garry Sherbert, who, to a greater or lesser extent used it, came up with enlightening results. Behind Robin, the internalized object, there is the maternal one. Yet the open secret in the narrative, the twist of the classic tale, the turn of the screw in *Nightwood* is that the maternal object is replaced by the grandmaternal one. Nora's unnerving need for utterance, 'I don't know how to talk and I've got to' (Barnes, 1950: 184), does produce her two incestuous dreams fathomed by Matthew. Yet the return of the repressed haunts the narrative as the whole process remains suspended when the doctor dismisses Nora, 'can't you let me loose now, let me go?' (ibid.: 233), and pronounces his last prophesy, 'Now, [...] the end... nothing, but wrath and weeping' (ibid.: 233), bound to come true since all the others did. The liberating, normalizing discourse does not occur in the narrative and the struggle for remembrance through the talking cure remains fruitless for Nora. Moreover, O'Connor's last oracle seems to refer not only to Nora's personal fate but also to mankind's, as Marcus suggests in her political reading of the novel, with the new war looming ahead making *Nightwood*'s characters, Black homosexuals, Jews, transgender

and lesbians, appear as the future victims of fascism. Thus, O'Connor's final oracle is a prediction of unspeakability in the double sense of the term that refers to something both inexpressible and objectionable.

Indeed, the last chapter features 'A 'beyond' of language in full recognition of the fact that language is not to be transcended,' as Peter Haidu suggests in an essay that deals with the dialectics of unspeakability, 'silence is one of the ways in which we make sense of the world' (Haidu, 1992: 278). 'The Possessed,' the last chapter in the novel, which initially T. S. Eliot had eliminated from the final version of the novel, clearly marks a hiatus with the rest of the narrative. Barnes's 'sonorous prose' (Barnes, 1950: 38) seems intent to create silence as her convoluted metaphors come to a tropological standstill. Indeed, the author no longer appears interested in tropes. It seems as if she overused language to create this contrast with her final chapter and guide the reader into the intimation of this 'beyond.' For Singer the last chapter marked by this hiatus 'epitomizes the disjunctive rhetoric that organizes the rest of the novel' (Singer, 1984: 87). However, it is not for the sake of a final disjunction that Barnes insisted on keeping it in her novel. In this last chapter love is treated as sublime and monstrous.

Placed under O'Connor's intimation of future unspeakability, 'The Possessed' also fulfills his prophetic pronouncement, 'though these two are buried at opposite ends of the earth one dog will find them both' (Barnes, 1950: 106). The two women in search of each other are brought together in Nora's chapel in a posture of deferred reunion as Nora, beside herself, in extreme agitation, seems to collapse at the entrance and Robin, who is cast in the narrative as the 'beast turning human,' turns into 'woman becoming animal.' In a scene that shocked some critics and puzzled others, Robin 'going down' (ibid.: 237) becomes indistinguishable from the dog (see Note 3). The Deleuzian concept of 'man becoming animal' which furthers the metamorphic motif in reverse, since Robin was likened to an animal in the narrative, could highlight Robin's commitment to freedom. She returns to her possessive lover but also escapes into 'this *zone of the indiscernible, of the undecidable* between man and animal,' as Deleuze notes in his analysis of one of Bacon's pictures (Deleuze).

In this arrested moment of near-reunion, extreme tension stemming from the tantalizing proximity of the two lovers and their ineluctable apartness, Barnes attempts to intimate the sublime. A transcendent form of ineffability, which Caselli refutes (see Note 4) seems to permeate *Nightwood's* last chapter. From the overstatement of jumbled, mixed metaphors the novel moves towards a tradition of ineffability. Kant's elements of the sublime, shadows and solitude in the woods at night in a sacred space accumulate and along with the exacerbation of affects point to a terrible sublime. The prose like a camera records without commenting the silence of the night cleft by animal sounds, Robin's and the dog's crying and barking. The narrative remains suspended in its final tableau, woman and dog in utter prostration before the altar. It is in the last chapter that the upwardly

transcendent and the downwardly monstrous, repulsion and attraction, terror and exultation meet announcing the postmodern sublime which Richard Kearney defines as a confrontation with 'a negative dialectic of privation,'

while the postmodern sublime shares with Burke, Kant and the romantics a sense of ontological dislocation, together with the abandonment of our powers to understand, there is something different about it. For while Kant and Burke still held to the idea that the shocking and rupturing character of the sublime might be somehow rendered in 'sublime objects' which took some of the pain out of the terror and offered us some cathartic compensation [...] the postmodern avant-garde offers no such solace (Kearney, 2001: 493).

Thus *Nightwood's* ending is marked by the unforeseeable, the incommensurable the inexplicable that ultimately reduces us to silence. The novel eludes closure as it has reached the limits of language. Yet its eerie depiction of an unhappy, rather destructive love and its uncanny prefigurement of evil made it a hallmark in the history of American literature. As for its author, there is little doubt that it provided a sort of working-through leaving her still to wrestle with and wonder about words, as her letter to Peter Hoare testifies, 'How does one arrange for life [...] how do writers keep on writing? [...] "the passion spent" – the passion made into *Nightwood* [...] what is left? "The horror," as Conrad put it' (Broe, 1991: 37). To keep out of horror's way, the famous recluse of the Patchin Place kept working on language till her death at the age of 90.

## NOTES

1. In *Lectures on Literature*, Vladimir Nabokov discussing what a good reader is makes clear that a good reader is re-reader; Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose from Bunyan to Beckett* shows how a text constructs its own reader.
2. Indeed, an early critic, Edwin Muir, did make the point that meaning in *Nightwood* is produced by the interpreting gaze (Caselli, 2009).
3. In her comments on the last chapter, Barnes revealing her ambivalent feelings about her love seems intent to preserve the elusiveness of her aporetic ending, 'By 11 July 1935, Barnes wrote Coleman that she had finished the book. She described its conclusion: 'when they see each other Robin goes down with the dog, and that's the end. I do not go any further than this into the psychology of the "animal" in Robin because it seems to me that the very act with the dog was pointed enough, and anything more than that would spoil the scène anyway; as for what the end promises (?) let the reader make up his own mind, if he's not an idiot he'll know.'" (Plumb, 1995: xv).
4. "Meaning in Barnes is promised as ready-made but not delivered, gestured towards but not unveiled, and – at times – exposed as too simple to be read. Such

strategies, rather than subscribing to a transcendent form of ineffability generate [...] an oeuvre in which everything is meaningful, even what is presented as meaningless, nonsensical, or impenetrable' (Caselli, 2009: 11).

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