

“Like a Rotten Apple to a Rotten Apple’s Breast Affixed We Go Down Together”;  
Submission as Intimacy in Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*

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“Bow Down”, begins Djuna Barnes’ 1935 genre-bending tragic spectacle, *Nightwood*. Immediately, the reader is faced with an imperative, a call to submit and bow down – but to what, or whom? Submission is a complicated and persistent theme in the novel. Set in the circuses, public houses, and private bedrooms of 1920s Paris, the narrative follows the turbulent love life of Robin Vote; her first marriage to the false-Baron Felix Volkbein, whom she leaves for Nora Flood; Nora Flood, whom she leaves for Jenny Petherbridge; Jenny Petherbridge, whom she eventually leaves to wander in the woods surrounding Nora’s estates. The novel progresses through the semi-dialogues of Doctor Matthew O’Connor, a transgender unlicensed gynecologist whose inexplicable omnipotence and obscene eloquence comfort and criticize the other characters in turn. The novel, which begins with a call to submission, takes for its subject the life and loves of those who have been forced to submit to a dominant social order in which they are included only as outcasts: “poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love... Catholics, Protestants, Brahmins, dabblers in black magic and medicine” (55). *Nightwood* is not, however, a tale of victimization. Many critics see the novel as a celebration of marginalized identities, what Jane Marcus calls a “book of communal resistances” (144 Marcus) by the oppressed against their oppressors. However, *Nightwood* criticism often makes the mistake of judging a reactionary and subversive text by the very terms it rejects – the hegemonic binaries of good/bad, human/beast, and dominance/submission. The pervasive theme of submission is often understood by critics only in terms of its traditionally negative connotation. The possibility that, in the backwards-spectacle world of *Nightwood*, the value of submission itself could have been overturned has gone critically under examined. In this paper, I will argue the possibility that *Nightwood* imagines a submission which is not the abjected state of an oppressed people but a technique of their being in community; a type of bowing which is subversive rather than submissive to domination.

That the morality of *Nightwood* reverses and revises traditional values is clear in any number of Doctor O’Connor’s wild speeches and in Barnes’ non-literal and often contradictory use of

language. In a letter to her friend Emily Holmes Coleman, Barnes complained that she could not title her novel 'Night Beast' because of the "debased meaning now put on that nice word beast," (Barnes in Rohman 58), highlighting the high value she placed in her writing on words with traditionally negative or 'debased' meanings. Marcus, though she understands the novel as a defense of those who have suffered debasement at the hands of dominant society, makes a crucial mistake when she claims that "*Nightwood* asserts that the outcast is normal and truly human" (Marcus 164). Instead of celebrating the alternative worth of those who are "outside the 'human type'--a wild thing caught in a woman's skin" (155), Marcus 'redeems' the characters by simply flipping the man/beast binary instead of understanding the way in which *Nightwood* disrupts it. The text does not allow for the mere swapping of words in the traditional equation; beast does not simply come to mean good and human bad. Instead, the text creates a world in which the beastly remains "outside the 'human type'", an alternative to rather than a reiteration of established binaries of language and worth; as the Doctor says, "in fact my great virtue is that I never use the derogatory in the usual sense" (124). The characters of *Nightwood* exist outside the normal type, with identities and desires which are excluded from the normative. Binaries are impossible to establish in the night wood, and submission is no exception. To understand the morality of *Nightwood* requires a relinquishing of hierarchical binaries and an examination of what submission means in the context of the text itself.

The crucial importance of the twin themes of submission and descent can be seen in the phrase's placement at the forefront of the book, and their interdependence can be seen in the two words used: "Bow" and "Down". The phrase, which was Barnes' original title of the novel (*Original drafts* 212), combines both the physical and mental aspects of supplication and descent demanded of the marginalized characters by the societal norm. Many critics overlook the importance of submission in the larger and more easily identifiable thematic of descent, or analyze it only in the context of the hegemonic imperative.

Rachel Potter interprets the phrase as a description of Felix, the character with whom the first chapter is largely concerned. The phrase expresses the way "[Felix] is cut off both temporally and racially from the aristocratic history that he frantically pursues. His only way of communicating with this tradition...is to bow down to it." (Potter 183). The value of this submission is ironized,

however, by the Doctor's claim that Kings "must be bowed down to...[because] they are so high that they can defame God and foul their rafters!" (43). Traditional, imperial power is shown to be only a "theatre of power" (Potter 185) in the novel, a system in which submission is the means by which control is given to the sovereign: an imbecilic and befouled puppet, who nonetheless holds real power because of the submission he is shown. Submission, in Potter's theory, is a tool of those in power (for better or for worse) which the marginalized have internalized to the point of obsession.

To Dana Seidler, *Nightwood's* use of bestial or "atavistic" imagery is an "ironic reappropriation" (550) of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century anxiety over social "degeneration theory" (530) which lead to social beautification reforms that often targeted gay and immigrant communities (See Heise). Seidler sees the phrase "Bow Down" in the context of how "most of Barnes's characters 'go down'....The continual refunctioning of the decree to 'go down' invokes an erotic or (homo)sexual vernacular and acts as a prophetic metaphor for the characters of the novel, who all go down the scale of humanity, or degenerate" (Seidler 550). These degenerated humans are not "compared to a more 'healthy' social form" (555) but, Seidler argues, the true form of the individual in modern society. Seidler understands the submissive element of the characters' descent, but she understands the imperative to bow only as a "prophetic metaphor", something the characters are forced to do and in which they have no agency.

Dianne Chisholm is a major voice among critics who read *Nightwood* as a political novel. Chisholm sees the images of Robin "'going down' on her knees before the alter...devolving into a species of the lowest moral order...[symbolizes how] Modernism breeds barbarism: behind the liberal façade, it is literally going to the dogs" (Chisholm 186). Chisholm argues that Barnes' political weaponization of obscene language and imagery allows her to reveal "the progressive decay of modernization" (194) and to "clear[] explosive queer space for radically rethinking the history of sexuality" (195). Chisholm's interpretation treats *Nightwood* as a political whole, a world in which the submission and descent of the characters exposes a cultural critique and Barnes' creation of an "erotic decrepitude beyond good and evil" (186). She views submission in generalities, as something which the characters do, but without accounting for why or how they do so.

Jane Marcus is another influential critic on the political impact of *Nightwood*, who focuses on the way submission relates not to the characters but to the reader themselves. In her article, “Laughing at Leviticus: ‘Nightwood’ as Women’s Circus Epic”, she develops a complex understanding of the way in which the placement of the imperative to “Bow Down” at the front of the text, before any characters are introduced, confronts and implicates the reader in the imperative. The reader, assumed to be part of the dominant Levitical order, is rejected from the text by the imperative and cast as an audience to a circus: “Cast strictly in this role of ‘audience,’ the reader is forced to ‘bow down’ to the text, to replicate the anxiety of abjection” (Marcus 162). Marcus places the reader in the disempowered position of an audience forced to “bow down” and watch the “private pain of a panoply of ‘monsters’” (Marcus 162) from a position, ironically, of marginalization by the text itself. Marcus understands *Nightwood* as “a book of communal resistances of underworld outsiders to domination” (Marcus 144) in which the homosexual, disabled, and racially rejected characters assert their identity against the erasure and homogenization of fascism by turning the imperative to submit back on their oppressors.

Critical approaches to submission in the text often understand submission only in its traditional and negative connotation; to Chisholm and Seidler, it is an enactment of modernity’s degradation; to Marcus, it is an inferior state forced upon the reader. Submission is treated as a state imposed upon the marginalized characters, in which they have no choice. This is, to a degree, true: the marginalized cannot help but be marginalized because it is a state imposed upon them by the dominant society. This does not mean, however, that as unique and intelligent agents, each of their responses to submission will or must be uniform; in *Nightwood*, they are not. Each character has a unique style of submitting and of conceiving of their own submission. Potter’s argument that Felix has internalized his own submission expresses how submission is clearly not only imposed upon the characters but practiced and perpetuated by them. The flaw in the political approaches of Marcus and others who argue for both the negativity of submission and the “privileging of the oppressed” (Marcus 156) is the overlooking of the ways in which the submission of the characters is an inseparable quality of those privileged and oppressed characters.

To understand how any situation or response to forced submission can be considered “the more *humane condition*” (Marcus 171), there must first be a new understanding of the political debates which take place within *Nightwood*. Chisholm and Marcus both see *Nightwood* as a rejection of the political movements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century towards racial purity, societal beautification, and queer censorship. They treat the text as a whole, as an object expressing Barnes’ objection to her political era. And yet, explicit political debates are almost entirely absent from the text. The subject most debated in the text is love. Critics focused on Barnes’ own political agenda against fascism overlook another debate, one no less political than that of fascism, wrapped up in the genre of the novel itself: that of love. Privileging the novel’s existence as a love story above its political statement is far from reductive – it conjures a political debate no less important than the one Marcus sees. Intimacy between people, be it sexual or social, is an undeniably political as well as cultural debate; the long history of miscegenation and sodomy laws which continue to be debated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are a testament to the way in which the romantic and sexual lives of marginalized populations are as fiercely regulated as their individual existences. This invalidation of intimacy is a symptom of the oppression which the characters face: “I know my Sodomites...and what the heart goes bang up against if it loves one of them... What do they find then, that this lover has committed the unpardonable error of not being able to exist – and they come down with a dummy in their arms” (100), says the Doctor. Love is not an option for those who are categorically excluded from humanity. Nevertheless, *Nightwood* is concerned with characters drawn from these communities as they attempt to establish communal bonds, be they of love or friendship. The text is concerned not with the political activities or allegiances of these characters but the ways in which these characters struggle to achieve intimacy and community together despite an oppression that tries to strip them of their humanity. The characters who can achieve community, intimacy, and friendship against this oppression are the ones who can be said to ‘succeed’, and it is in their success that the celebration of *Nightwood* is expressed.

The characters who can be said to ‘succeed’ in this way are Robin and the Doctor, united by their irresistibility to other characters. Despite objecting to the Doctor’s vulgarity and his less-than-legitimate professional life, Felix realizes “that he would continue to like the Doctor, though he was

aware that it would be in spite of a long series of convulsions of the spirit, analogous to the displacement in the fluids of an oyster, that must cover its itch with a pearl” (40). Similarly Robin, who abandons lover after lover, who is alcoholic, unfaithful, and impossible to live with, is nevertheless desired and sought out by everyone but the Doctor himself. These two characters make up the poles of the text: everyone talks to the Doctor, and everyone talks about Robin. Unlike Nora, Felix, and Jenny, who are isolated from one another and have few acquaintances of any importance, Robin and the Doctor are necessary to the other characters – for someone to talk to and someone to talk about.

None of these characters, however, are exempt from the ubiquity of submission in the text. The love triangle between Jenny, Nora, and Robin has led feminist critics, especially in the 1980s, to categorize *Nightwood* as a lesbian drama (Henstra 125), a label which has been expanded in recent criticism to a queer text (Chisholm 171). Given the fluid sexuality of the major players, none of whom, with the exception of Felix, can be strictly considered “straight”, this classification is understandable. There is, however, an even larger group that can be defined as the text’s subjects: the marginalized and outcast. The novel speaks of Nikka the black circus performer; Mademoiselle Basquette, a woman without legs; prostitutes; circus performers; Frau Mann, whose name translates to Mrs. Man; expatriates; a defrocked priest – the cast of characters is made of those who are left out of society. The hypersexualization of these marginalized characters has no doubt contributed to the labeling of the book in terms of its characters sexuality: Doctor O’Connor’s description of Nikka’s body begins in the groin, with the information that his phallus is tattooed with “Desdemona” (19); Mademoiselle Basquette’s story culminates in her being raped by a sailor (29); Frau Mann’s circus costume makes her “unsexed as a doll...the property of no man” (16); the Doctor himself is explicit about his sexuality and identity to the point of obscenity, telling Nora of his exploits with prostitutes (139) or his own anonymous sexual encounters (100-101). The explicitness of the sexuality within the text makes it easy to overlook the deeper threads which connect even the heterosexual Felix to the transgender Doctor: their mutual exclusion from dominant society. Critics interested in Barnes’ use of obscenity in *Nightwood* have analyzed the meaning of this hypersexualization (see Chisholm),

but it is important to keep in mind the larger categories which the shocking language can overshadow; *Nightwood* is not a novel of the invert or the pervert but the outcast.

These are characters who, like Felix, are “heavy with impermissible blood” (5); within the dominant social order, there is no room for the religiously, sexually, racially, or bodily other to exist even as alternatives; their only choice is submission. Felix and his father, Guido, “lived as all Jews do, who, cut off from their people...find that they must inhabit a world whose constituents, being alien, force the mind to succumb to an imaginary populace” (5). The imperative to submit, to “bow down” or “succumb”, is thus one directed at the marginalized by the dominant populace. In order to be accepted by the “imaginary populace”, figured for Guido in the body of his Christian wife Hedvig, both men “succumb” by adopting a false Christian genealogy and aristocratic title. Only through submission and adoption of “alien” customs are Felix and his father allowed to ‘pass’ in society; the “anxiety” (7) in which both Guido and Hedvig live and die (that she will discover his illegitimate heritage) demonstrates how it is only this shallow pretense which gives Guido his legitimacy. As Jews, father and son are “outcast” (5); only by pretending Christian nobility are they allowed to ‘pass’ and participate in dominant society. Felix takes the imperative to submit one step farther than his father, physically as well as mentally bowing to “anyone who looked as if he might be ‘someone’” (12). He literally bows down to those who represent the dominant order, and yet the fragility of this pretense is exposed by the Doctor, who asks, “Look at Felix now; what kind of a Jew is that? Screaming up against tradition like a bat against a window-pane” (162). The Doctor ‘outs’ Felix as Jewish despite Felix’ lifelong claims to Christian nobility, exposing the impossibility of Felix’ dream of legitimacy.

The imperative to “bow down” demanded of the racially other is demanded too of the sexually other. Even the Doctor is forced to ‘pass’ within the acceptable limits of society by following prescribed gender norms. Born biologically male, the Doctor is transgender and mourns the fact that he “turned up this time as I shouldn’t have been, when 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” (97). Nevertheless he answers to male pronouns and dresses in male costume in society. Alone in his rooms after midnight, Nora finds him in drag at the beginning of

Chapter Six, “Watchman, What of the Night?” The sight shocks Nora, and the Doctor is forced to remove his wig and hide his feminine dress before their dialogue can continue. His transgression of gender boundaries stems dialog, and only his attempt to return to those boundaries allows conversation to continue. Like Felix’s attempt to hide his heritage, the Doctor’s pretense at normative gender is grotesquely comical; though he has removed the wig and hidden his dress, he is still “heavily rouged and his lashes painted”, surrounded by a confusion of medical tools, women’s undergarments, and excrement (85). The Doctor and Felix demonstrate the way in which the submission demanded of the marginalized is simultaneously their only access to social legitimacy and also ultimately futile; they are “impossible people” (16), caught between the demand to submit to a society that they can never be a part of.

If submission is inescapable for the characters in the text, then those who succeed in maintaining social contact are not marked by their liberation from submission but by their approach to it. Each of the four main characters subscribe to a unique style of submission, but only Robin and the Doctor manage to make themselves sought after and indispensable to the lives of their friends and acquaintances. What makes the submission of these two distinct from that of Nora and Felix, such that it allows them to form social intimacy where the others cannot, requires a careful examination of each character’s style of submission.

Felix’s obsession with submission to “what he termed ‘Old Europe’” or the “Great Past” (11-2) has received ample criticism. Submission is his primary mannerism, from his first appearance, “bowing, searching, with quick pendulous movements, for the correct thing to which to pay tribute” (12) to his final appearance, still “holding his gloved hands before him in the first uncompleted motion of submission” (114). Felix is always looking explicitly for “someone” (12) to whom to bow, whether it be in the imaginary form of the “great past” or a stranger who resembles royalty. Bowing is his way of reifying the myths upon which he has built his (false) identity. His submission is hierarchical and participates in the traditional binary of dominance/submission, in which Felix must submit to a dominating entity which holds (and withholds) all power over him.

In this style of submission, his interpersonal relationships become subordinate to his obsession. Upon first meeting Robin, the Doctor asks Felix if he has ever thought of marriage, and

“The Baron admitted that he had; he wished a son who would feel as he felt about the ‘great past’” (42). From their inception, both his marriage and his son are means of perpetuating his duty to the past. His conviction that “‘To pay homage to our past is the only gesture that also includes the future’” (43), shows how there is no room in his life for anything more important than the imaginary past. Everything about himself – including his son, his wife, and his relationship with both – become tools of his devotion. His hierarchical style of submission makes him unable to prioritize Robin or their relationship, and their marriage cannot last.

Nora appears initially as Felix’s antithesis, Robin’s second lover and the eternally unbent. In opposition to Felix, she is described as upright to a fault (102) and “immune from her own descent” (55-7); she never bows, even to her lover, and both the Doctor and Robin curse her for it (102, 153). Though she never bows, she does not make Felix’ mistake in making Robin secondary – instead, Nora’s entire life becomes devoted to Robin alone. Despite these differences, however, Nora and Felix share a traditional, hierarchized model of submission which manifests in Nora’s obsession with monogamy. The institution of monogamy, what Seitler calls “The couple as a social form” (548), is based upon the idea of the two becoming subordinate, even indistinguishable, from the couple as a singular unit. The couple is more powerful than either individual, both of whom must surrender their separate identities for the sake of the one. Nora herself describes the future she wished to have with Robin in this way when she says, “I knew in that bed Robin should have put me down. In that bed we would have forgotten our lives in the extremity of memory, moulted our parts, as figures in the waxworks are moulted down to their story, so we would have been broken down to our love” (167). Nora’s monogamy implies a hierarchy as much as Felix’s monarchy, except that Nora’s imaginary ruler is the image of herself and Robin as a couple. Nora states repeatedly that Robin is herself (136, 156, 161), and that “a woman is yourself...on her mouth you kiss your own” (152), emphasizing the way in which she herself loses her identity in the face of her love for Robin. Robin’s inability or refusal to do the same drives them apart. As their relationship deteriorates, “Robin’s absence...became a physical removal...as an amputated hand cannot be disowned because it is experiencing a futurity, of which its victim is its forebear, so Robin was an amputation that Nora could not renounce” (65). Nora’s loss of Robin is described as an injury because her attempt at a

relationship was an attempt to, as literally as possible, make their bodies into one. Robin's refusal to be incorporated into "our love" is a physical trauma to Nora.

The reality of their situation is a testament to the incompatibility of Robin and Nora's concept of love: their home becomes "the museum of their encounter" (61), and Robin becomes a "fossil" (61) in Nora's heart long before they separate. Their home is the manifestation of what Seitler calls the "burden of stability the couple form requires.... Inside the domestic interiors of the museum, love becomes instantly dead" (Seitler 548). Nora's obsession with conforming to the submission implicit in monogamy kills her relationship with Robin; and, by extension, Nora herself.

Despite their apparent differences, both Nora and Felix conceive of submission in the traditional value binary of dominance/submission in which there is a strict hierarchy of power. Though their ruling entities are largely imaginary or immaterial (Christianity for Felix and heteronormative monogamy for Nora), they nevertheless have real and tyrannical effects upon their subjects. Both characters seek out their own "disqualification", that which they wish to be but never can: Felix will never be able to extract his Jewish blood, just as Nora as a lesbian in the 1920s can never have a truly legitimate marriage. Both Nora and Felix submit in a way that requires them to relinquish their own identity and power, a submission which not only oppresses them but perpetuates and reifies the normative standard they can never achieve; they become the agents of their own "disqualification". It is not insignificant that both fail to maintain their love with Robin.

Robin and the Doctor are not immune to the imperative to "bow down" to the oppressive standard. As the "girl who resembles a boy" (145) and the "last woman left in this world, though I am the bearded lady" (107), they too have marginalized identities which are subject to societal injunctions of submission. They are perhaps more subject to these injunctions even than Nora and Felix, who can to a certain degree 'pass' in society in a way that a woman in man's trousers or a man in woman's nightgown cannot. Like Felix, both Robin and the Doctor are often described in positions of submission or descent (though, unlike him, it is neither of their primary characteristics). Both characters exit the novel by 'going down', Robin running with a dog in an abandoned American chapel and the Doctor drunkenly ranting in a Parisian bar. Their submission is

inescapable, but their responses to the imperative to “Bow Down” are distinct from those of Felix or Nora.

Robin and the Doctor’s styles of submission are best expressed in the final chapter of the book – “The Possessed”. In the final scene, Robin sinks to all fours and begins to run and bark like a dog. The scene, though one of chaos, is nevertheless described as “obscene and touching” (179). The many critics who understand this scene as a veiled sex metaphor (Herring 16) fatally reduce the scene to just another sex joke. Yet there is a grain of truth in the assumption: the final lines describing Robin’s run with the dog are the most physically explicit in the text:

The dog, quivering in every muscle, sprang back, his tongue a stiff curving terror in his mouth...she came on, whimpering too...he ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees.  
(180)

Though the reading as sex-scene is too simple, it touches on the fact that this is the closest thing to a description of sex that Barnes includes in the tale of three sets of lovers. This is the moment in which Robin achieves the most explicit intimacy, “obscene and touching” though it is. While critics have been distracted by the hints of bestiality, what is more important than her romp with the dog is the manner in which woman and dog cavort, a manner expressed in the title: they are both wild, hysterical, and possessed. It is impossible to pinpoint, however, what exactly Robin and the dog have been possessed by; though Robin lacks control, she does not do so by handing that control over to another. The lack of an identifiable dominating entity is the crucial difference between Robin’s style of submission and those of Nora and Felix.

Robin’s is a submission which lacks hierarchy and subverts dominance. Robin’s energetic comingling with the dog is different from Nora’s “be[ing] broken down to our love” (167) because they are not reduced by their union but amplified. She and the dog share an ecstatic experience which cannot be wholly described as human becoming dog nor dog becoming human, but in which

both add the characteristics of the other to their own. Together they create a new experience that is specific to their situation, a possession in which they relinquish control without being controlled.

Their union is “touching” and described with the physical detail that is missing in the scenes of romance between Nora and Robin because submission as possession requires no hierarchy and is an experience of freedom rather than consolidation. Instead of two becoming one, or one submitting to another, two exist ecstatically together. Thus the final chapter, which critics have seen as “faulty”, “devoid” (Pochoda 188), and script-like (De Lauretis 120), formally reflects its subject: it is void of interiority in the form of narration because Robin herself is not self-contained. There is nothing within her she must expose in the text because she is possessed and completely opened out – to Nora, to the dog, to the night, to her own physicality; she has submitted entirely and the result is not a possession but one who is possessed.

Both Robin and the Doctor, the two who best realize this style of intimacy, are characterized by their anonymity. The Doctor, who “knows everything [] because he’s been everywhere at the wrong time and has now become anonymous” (89), and Robin, who is unable to maintain her monogamous relationship with Nora because “two spirits were working in her, love and anonymity” (60). Marcus sees the tension between love and anonymity as a zero-sum relationship: if Robin has one, she cannot have the other. She reads Nora and Robin’s relationship as a situation where “[Robin’s] abjection is the reverse of Nora’s uprightness, and it is privileged in the novel as the more *humane condition*. She doesn’t want to be saved; she wants to be free” (171). Yet the Doctor also sees that, “every bed [Robin] leaves, without caring, fills her heart with peace and happiness” (155); to Robin, love *is* anonymity and freedom. Robin does not simply want to be free in the political sense that Marcus sees, but to have a love that is defined by its freedom. The reason that neither Marcus nor Nora can see this as a legitimate type of love is their unconscious prescription to yet another traditional binary: that of freedom/monogamy, in which monogamy is a legitimate form of love and thus freedom cannot be. Robin does not reject the traditional concept of love so much as she strives for an alternative.

Though it allows Robin to finally have a truly “touching” and intimate moment with the dog, non-hierarchical submission is not always a positive experience. The Doctor’s experience gives the

most lie to Marcus' formation of the book as a joyfully triumphal text; the Doctor may be laughing, but he is doing so only through his tears. The Doctor, unlike Robin, is able to articulate the full range of experiences and influences that are brought to bear on an individual when they submit themselves to non-hierarchical alterity. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik note that, "whereas Robin reacts to [her experiences] physically (her 'sleepwalking' state emphasizes her lack of intellectual and/or emotional engagement with the world), the Doctor withdraws into metaphysics and the word" (Horner 85). Robin speaks only rarely in the novel, while the Doctor does almost nothing but articulate his pain. The broad range of topics on which he discourses seem, on the surface, totally irrelevant to the topic of his initial speeches. Multiple times during "Watchman, What of the Night?" the Doctor must assure Nora that he is indeed "coming to" his point (88, 92, 95, 104) as he tells story after story. To Nora, his chapter-long soliloquy was clearly not the answer she was seeking when she asked him to "tell me everything you know about the night" (86). To the Doctor, however, all these seemingly random anecdotes are absolutely connected: to accurately tell of the "night of nights" (95), he must first tell of the French night; and to tell of the French night, he must tell of the American, and so on ad infinitum. Victoria Smith calls the Doctor "a kind of walking, talking analogy, providing strange and obscure stories that...at times reflect and amplify [the characters'] pain and at times distort it by...setting it beside a story that has no seeming connection" (Smith 198). Smith sees the Doctor's juxtapositions as rhetorical analogies or metaphors which illuminate only the topic being discussed, but the Doctor's anecdotes are far more personal: "What an autopsy I'll make," he exclaims, "with everything all which ways in my bowels! A kidney and a shoe cast of the roman races; a liver and a long-spent whisper, a gall and a wrack of scolds from Milano... not to mention the thought of Cellini in my crib of bones" (107-8). Every story he tells or hears has an effect on him, detectable at the level of autopsy. He tells the story of when "Catherine the Great personally sent for me to bleed her" (173). The medical procedure of bleeding is viscerally physical, suggesting not only that he was in mental communication with Catherine the Great (who, coincidentally, died over one hundred years before the Doctor's time) but also had a physical contact in which he effected her body and she his in turn. When the ex-priest calls for him to "remember your century at least!", he replies that he is "a man with a prehistoric memory...I've known

everyone!” (173-5). To the Doctor, everything is personally relevant because he understands that submission to and possession by anonymity means that literally everything, from a lover to wild dogs to the French docks at night, has the power to effect him.

The night is understandably the Doctor’s “favorite topic” (86), as the temporal representation of indeterminacy which “designates both an atemporality and an aspatiality in which methods of categorization have difficulty maintaining social order, thus freeing the citizen-subject from notions of sexual civility” (Seitler 548). “Do things look in the ten and twelve of noon,” asks the Doctor, “as they look in the dark?... for now the hand lies in shadow; its beauties and its deformities are in a smoke” (92). Anonymity is the mark of those who achieve intimacy through submission as possession; he says of his fellow night-people, “their lack of identity makes them ourselves” (94). Unlike Nora’s insistence on making Robin herself, which is inflexible in its obsession with Robin, the anonymous “people with no names with which to deny them” (94) who constitute the Doctor are by their very definition a shifting and constantly undeterminable populace. The Doctor is made up of unpredictability and anonymity itself, an irreducible otherness to which he submits.

Those who can do the terrifying and submit to anonymity are those who achieve intimacy and subvert domination in *Nightwood*. However, though the text figures and privileges a submission that subverts dominance, it makes no pretense that this is an ideal state. While Robin sometimes gains “peace and happiness” (155) from her anonymous sexual encounters, her inability to tolerate the structured submission of Nora or Felix drives her away from devoted lovers. Both Robin and the Doctor exit the novel crying; she, running like a dog in the American woods, the Doctor, drunkenly ranting in a bar to a defrocked priest. Their submission to anonymity frees them from the hierarchical constraints of domination, and yet it exposes them to unpredictability and insecurity. “How do you stand it, then?... How do you live at all if this wisdom of yours is not only the truth, but also the price?” (96), Nora demands of the Doctor as he tells her of the night. His answer is that he cannot do anything else: “I haunt the *pissoirs* as naturally as Highland Mary her cows down by the Dee” (97). Submission to otherness, though it destroys the Doctor and pushes Robin’s lovers away from her, is the only way in which Robin and the Doctor can exist at all, the only way to submit in a

way that leads them to intimacy rather than to subjection beneath an oppressive force. It is only in comparison to Nora and Felix, who bow and allow themselves to be dominated, that the tragic lives of Robin and the Doctor are preferable. Submission to possession is a way of subverting domination only for those who are victims of oppression – the intimacy of the possessed is not the key to total liberation, but a means of escaping beyond the system – a dangerous and exposed existence, but one which allows these characters a modicum of identity and a shot at intimacy.

*Nightwood* is not a defense of the queer or marginalized for the benefit of a ‘normal’ audience, but a tool written for those populations as their own defense. *Nightwood* is a reclaiming of the submission demanded of the marginalized in a way that subverts their domination by the hegemonic. As Thomas Heise notes, “In *Nightwood*, the terms of exclusion are the terms of shared pleasure” (Heise 316). By embracing their subjugation and turning it into their highest form of intimacy, the imperative loses its power to be used against them. Like the highly stylized performance of punk clothing or criminal tattoos, which are “the outcasts’ defiance of logocentric society’s exclusion of them” by specifically embracing and exaggerating their outcast status (Marcus 156), Robin and the Doctor subvert their oppression by re-appropriating it. The opening imperative to “Bow Down” is one which is familiar to those to about whom the novel is addressed, and its position at the beginning of the book is a way of establishing this target audience. Those who recognize the imperative and identify with it will understand the refiguring which will take place in the book; those who cannot are, as Marcus sees, locked out of the text. The structure is “tightly closed” (Marcus 162) only to those who are of the dominant order. The text is not written for them but for the bent and broken, and the opening imperative serves almost as a password: a phrase which both invites connection from those who know and rejects those who don’t. *Nightwood* is tale of victims that is not a tale of victimization, an exploration of the tragic intimacy that is both the “unendurable” and “the beginning of the curve of joy” (125) for those who cannot exist but must still love. *Nightwood* imagines a new submission for those oppressed by the dominant call to “Bow Down”, a submission which subverts the hierarchical to become a tool by which the marginalized can achieve previously withheld intimacy and community. “Let go Hell;”, says the Doctor, “and your fall will be broken by the roof of Heaven” (133).

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