Emily Gil (c/o 2024)

Professor González

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What Goes In Will Come Out: Eating and Excreting in *Nightwood*

In *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes explores how history dictates our lives from ideology down to the material, digestive level. She leads the reader through once-familiar countries and settings made strange, dangerous, and beautiful by their marginalized inhabitants: Nora and Felix perpetuate their own marginalization by holding onto the ideology that persecutes them, the doctor attempts to heal them by revealing the truth of their desires, and Robin seems to be the only person alive unburdened by history and memory. Barnes drains history of its power by exposing the "upright" characters who perform normativity and retain historical stigma in order to gain access to the mainstream. In privileging dominant cultural values over their own identities and the darkness of their desires, these characters are full of contradictions with no way to relieve themselves. Through metaphors related to excrement and history, the doctor demonstrates the dangers of remembrance and forgetting as an alternative option; our desires are not sick, but our reliance on hierarchy makes us so.

The doctor is the unofficial guide for the characters who are curious about the night; he uses his expertise to demythologize it, exposing the stigma surrounding dirt and waste that perpetuate harmful division. He posits that there is no use in distinguishing between night and day, because the impulses that exist during nighttime are the desires that we have had all along. Unlike our actions during the daytime, there is nothing "premeditated" about the night; therefore, the night allows the truth of our desires to appear (Barnes 87). The doctor makes a distinction

between those that are comfortable fully knowing themselves and those who attempt to cleanse themselves of their desire and enforce the separation; the Frenchman can trace the physical evidence of his bender through the "odour of wine in its two travels, in and out," while the puritanical American washes too often to meditate on his vices or remember that he indulged them at all (Barnes 91). Whitley argues that, in *Nightwood*, "history is shown to be an excremental construct," with characters like Nora and Felix shunning a dirty, essential history in favor of a sanitized one. However, Whitley's reading does not delve into the deadly implications of a sanitized history beyond an individual fear of dirt and disorder, or the dangerous self-erasure inherent to Nora and Felix's worship of such a history given their positionalities. When we become comfortable separating night and day, clean and dirty, it becomes easier to categorize ourselves as 'pure,' and implicitly sanction punishment for those who are 'impure,' pathologizing the dirt and desire that defines us all. Excrement is not simply a dirty history, but the marginalized self and its desires, subject to endless moralizing and intense political abjection. The stigma surrounding excrement controls us through shame; however, the doctor teaches us that excrement doesn't have to be an instrument of our own oppression, but a tool for liberation. Marcus aligns Barnes's emphasis on waste with Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque: "dung and defecation … are part of carnival's reversal of authoritarian values, the eruption of folk humor in a bawdy acceptance of decay as renewal, of death as part of life" (Marcus 153). When pared down to its basic functions, all human bodies are alike; the acknowledgment that everyone excrete takes the shame out of it, abolishing hierarchy and oppression. Those who embrace the full truth of their bodies are celebrated. The doctor encourages his "patients" to pull back the curtain on themselves and reveal the desire that has always been a part of them, of everyone: to embrace the night.

Barnes uses metaphors about consumption and incorporation to pervert ideals of love and family into ravenous desperation, uncovering an endless cycle of self-sustained incorporation without an excremental opposite. The book begins with Felix's birth and a description of his father, with whom he shares the same matter and personality: "childless at fifty-nine, Guido had prepared out of his own heart for his coming child a heart, fashioned on his own preoccupation, the remorseless homage to nobility" (Barnes 5). Barnes's use of words like "prepared" and "fashioned" evoke the carving of a miniature that injects a level of destiny and control into their connection that goes beyond the act of fathering a child. Guido dies before Felix is born, but makes sure that he inherits his obsession with European aristocracy so that he too can "bow down" to history to apologize for being Jewish. By essentially portraying Felix and Guido as the same person, Barnes illustrates the endless cycle their family is doomed to perpetuate forever. Guido's painfully intense desire to be accepted is passed down in the form of hunger. Everywhere Felix lives is "some country he has devoured rather than resided in" (Barnes 10); he feeds on the "milk" of hostile Christian society, which "was his being but which could never be his birthright" (Barnes 13). Though he consumes both faithfully and they are part of him, he has no claim to either. This disconnects him from his source of sustenance and leaves him in a perpetual state of longing, never totally satiated. His first encounter with Robin reveals the violent, auto-cannibalistic tilt to this deprivation:

> "Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache - we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers" (Barnes 41).

Unlike the family "history" forged by his father, this version of the past is raw and nightmarishly real. His ancestors have devoured death in the manner Felix devours whole countries. However,

this oneness extends to their inability to master either; death is “returning” because it has not been conquered. Felix is still compelled to consume and master death in his remembrance. His aim is to perpetuate the eternity that comes with embodying one's ancestors and passing down their essence; in short, he wants to achieve immortality. He wants a son that is exactly like him and holds the same values, “for without such love, the past as he understood it, would die away from the world” (Barnes 49). Unmasked, the preservation of family glory turns out to be a violent struggle against death that stems from terror of obsolescence. However, a present sustained only by the past is no future at all; in an act of auto-cannibalism, Felix consumes his family and history while desperately trying to recreate it in himself and the son he shares with Robin who, like his mother, is unequipped to inherit the future Felix chooses for him. The effect is an ouroboros at its end, unable to stay alive any longer on only itself for sustenance. Nora embodies a different sort of past, but the past all the same; to know her is to feel “early American history… being re-enacted” (Barnes 56). She carries the legacy of God-fearing, hardworking Puritans and embodies an upright, moral consciousness, which appears in the selfless love she bestows upon others, always to her own detriment. However, when she meets Robin, her “pure” love is revealed to be self-serving, narcissistic, and focused on idealizing the past. Nora quickly finds that she cannot control Robin’s promiscuity or her desire for places Nora cannot know. As a result, she relies on maintaining a static, idealized image of Robin that she can manipulate at will. Robin is a “fossil” in Nora’s heart, and their shared apartment is “the museum of their encounter”, demonstrating the same impulse towards futile preservation as the Volkbeins, and the same desire to kill, to incorporate, to master. Nora’s possessive absorption of Robin presupposes a loss of Robin’s identity; she is Nora’s “amputated hand,” and Nora wants to become one “as figures in the waxworks are moulted down to their story, so we would have broken down to our

love" (Barnes 64, 167). These descriptions privilege Nora's identity and desires over Robin's. Nora is the autonomous person with the stray hand, and she insists on incorporating Robin who fears exactly that. Nora soon realizes that her love is self-absorbed and asks the doctor, "have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?" (Barnes 161). This violent narcissism lies at the heart of Nora's love. Robin has become Nora, so to incorporate Robin is to consume herself. The doctor introduces time to this concept by commenting on Nora's inability to let go of Robin: "My uncle Octavius … ate his fish when he caught it! But you, you must unspin fate, go back to find Robin!" (Barnes 133). Instead of accepting the natural conclusion of being done with a meal, Nora must reenact the catch and consumption in perpetuity. Like Felix, she ends up feeding on a representation of herself in endless, cyclical reiterations. Their shared obsession with memory and the idealized past exposes a self-sustained consumption that has no excremental opposite. The doctor notes to Nora that "for all our outcry and struggle, we shall be for the next generation not the massive dung fallen from the dinosaur, but the little speck left of a hummingbird" (Barnes 162). They are not only unable to acknowledge waste, but also unable to void at all.

The doctor posits forgetting/voiding as a liberatory alternative to historical memory. Nora and Felix's memories are heavy with historical stigma. Nora is unable to stop viewing Robin as someone she needs to save, which presupposes a right, moral way of being that conflicts with the societal abjection of her own homosexuality. Felix's internalized antisemitism is so strong that he spends his life in embarrassed submission to everyone around him. Carrying both dominant and personal histories within them weigh them down; as the dominant imposes on the personal, their marginal identities and desires are increasingly repressed. Cole presents a reading of *Nightwood* that privileges the Other's escape from the normative forces of history and memory:

> "Historical narrative that omits the unconscious - that closes the gaps, quiets disruption, and stops slippage - shuts itself to the mechanisms of social change. Committed to continuism, insisting that we can identify and thereby register the lost object, such narration either disallows the otherness that we cannot name or offers no means to acknowledge it." (Cole 392).

History can be exclusive or inclusive; however, even when history attempts to make marginalized actors visible, it assumes that the Other can be categorized and presented. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of the Other, which is indefinable because upright history will never adopt the language appropriate to describe it, or will dilute it until it is digestible enough to be presented alongside orderly, hierarchical history. The Other is the disruption of order, and its presentation in mainstream history is something that cannot happen without some degree of normalization. By remaining undefined and abject in their marginalization, the Other breaks free of normalization and remembrance. The doctor is wary of this historical memory and its ability to delineate good and bad: "Everything we do is decent when the mind begins to forget - the design of life; and good when we are forgotten - the design of death" (Barnes 112). He takes power away from history by making decency and goodness into issues of memory, not innate morality. Felix and Nora have already demonstrated that even things like love and familial honor have no inherent worth, and yet they do not escape; they are cursed with memory, and so retain history's oppressive labels and structures, ridding themselves of excremental evidence. Excrement is the secret desire hidden from even ourselves, the unknowable expanse of night. To shun it is only a temporary relief, as the doctor has already established that it is useless to separate day from night and our desires from us; however, we are so full up with our conflicting identities and histories that we must void *some*thing. Instead of attempting to forget/excrete our

desires (which will never truly leave us), we can follow the doctor's theoretical example and forget/excrete the hierarchy in an attempt to liberate ourselves of its oppressive rule. In doing so, we rid ourselves of the instinct to categorize and stigmatize, recalling Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque; when we strip ourselves of hierarchy, we destigmatize all bodies and bodily functions. All are obscene and outrageous, made equal and anonymous in the celebration of the universal excrement and the body; no one is memorable, not even the "freaks," because everyone has shed the historical memories that divide us, that build up the mystique of the Other. To be truly forgotten is a luxury of the dominant cultural group; the doctor says that "only the scorned and the ridiculous make good stories," which implies that outside of mainstream history, those who are remembered are the Others, made into spectacle only because the bounds of normativity enforce separation between people and the Others (Barnes 169). Felix and Nora are spectacles that strive to be normal, and can only free themselves by voiding and avoiding history's stigmatized memory, like Cole's Other. We must forget the impulse to hold onto the things that make us hate ourselves.

Though the doctor advocates for forgetting, he is the character who remembers the most. As an informal psychoanalyst, he listens to his patients at their most vulnerable and therefore knows them intimately. He demonstrates this extensive knowledge by scattering their stories everywhere - who is who, how they connect, what they want - but his knowledge is not what should scare others: "It's the boys that look as innocent as the bottom of a plate that get you into trouble, not a man with a prehistoric memory" (Barnes 173). Ignorance is dangerous, with its hastily drawn lines that exclude and stratify based on a half-baked conception of the world. The man who knows all knows enough to understand that there is no good or bad - just labels. In his final scene, the doctor is questioned about the existence of his wife. He reveals that she was

actually his brother's wife and that his children are his brother's children, but that he loved them and did more for them than his brother. Beyond the taboo and scandal of a story like this, love was given where love was needed. To the doctor, that truth is the purest thing possible. Truth informs how he treats his patients; he attempts to help them face themselves, to see their desires for what they really are. To some extent, he succeeds in doing this himself. He knows exactly what he wants, which is to "boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar" (Barnes 98) - however, he cannot achieve this domestic love because he is undesirable, "a face on me like an old child's bottom" (Barnes 97). Unable to connect with lovers beyond trysts in public bathrooms, the doctor's desires result in nothing more tangible than his own knowledge of what he wants, the absence of which makes his longing even stronger. He resorts to approximating that emotional connection through his relationship with his patients. Though he complains that they use him to learn of the night, they provide companionship that he cannot afford to give up. The doctor describes people who want love as overfed birds, fattened by the kindness of strangers and unable to take flight, divorced from their nature for desire of love (Barnes 170). Though he claims that he has avoided this fate, he gorges himself on the lives of his patients, retaining their histories in an attempt to approximate closeness even if it doesn't come close: love by the hour, always empty, advice falling on deaf ears. Though he recognizes the futility in helping his patients, he continues to meet, remember, and consume them. His consumption is different from Nora's and Felix's however, in that it isn't historically informed and the destruction is fully self-contained (he's not close enough to anyone to hurt them) - but he is still using others to make his reality bearable and killing himself by relying on love that isn't the love he needs. Consuming others is harmful whether it obscures the truth or makes it easier to live with the known truth.

If life is an endless cycle of incorporation and excretion, regardless of whether or not it is liberatory or oppressive, Robin does not want to participate in it. She is an aloof, instinct-driven person, whose behaviors and desires are wholly separate from the ones society deems acceptable for women (confined to heterosexual love and motherhood). Her stark opposition to the dominant cultural norm is highlighted by her beginning to nightwalk when she is pregnant; impending motherhood sparks her natural repulsion against being incorporated by others, instead of the socially mandated closeness and domesticity. In motherhood, she becomes a vessel, a mother, a wife, and ceases to be herself. After giving birth, she leaves Felix and continues to live by her desires, leaving relationships when the threat of incorporation becomes too real. She leaves Nora once she becomes too controlling and pathologizes her need to wander, and stays with Jenny, who is so far removed from being a person that there can be no real closeness between them. Unlike Nora and Felix, Robin refrains from holding a moralistic view of her desires and her own abjection, excreting the oppressive historical memory that binds them. If the doctor advocates for forgetting, Robin has already forgotten. Robin is separate from the cyclical eternity that characterizes everyone else in *Nightwood*:

> "The Marchesa remarked that everyone in the room had been going on from interminable sources since the world began and would continue to reappear, but that there was one person who had come to the end of her existence and would return no more" (77).

Unlike Felix and Nora who are fueled by desires not fully their own (though their desires are narcissistic, they are also dictated by history and therefore "interminable"), Robin is fueled by desires all her own. She is not preoccupied with passing down her desires to children, she will satisfy her own cravings, and she will bow down to no one. Once she dies, all she is and all she wants will die with her. She has not only forgotten hierarchy, but also the need to be

remembered. Felix's original goal is to live forever in survival of his family history is dependent on offspring that are faithful recreations of himself and the people related to him. However, Robin does not fear mortality. She needs no human shield to protect her from "the end of her existence." To someone who passes through life like a perfectly-healed exit wound, the dominant desire of people to incorporate others and leave their mark on the world is alien. Nora and Felix project their narcissistic ideals of love and glory onto her and fail to see her as a person. As a result, Robin craves a relationality separate from this craven, historically-informed consumption; she ends up finding comfort in interacting with Nora's dog by becoming dog-like herself. Martins argues that by cornering and scaring the dog, Robin enacts the same antagonistic, controlling relationship between herself and Nora (Martins 122). By restricting Robin to the relationality that she wants to escape, this reading does not look at the more existential implications of their interaction. Blake offers a different reading that blurs the line between person and animal. Robin finally submits to her own inscrutable hunger and becomes the "uncanny," frightening the dog with her in-betweenness; however, they come to a mutual acceptance of one another, a "new kind of relationality" in the end (Barnes 165). Robin becoming dog-like is not a seamless transformation; the dog is "troubled," obviously unsettled by a human acting imperfectly animalistic when the separation between human and animal is typically set in stone. However, despite being unsettled by Robin's attack, the dog lays down with her, "his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees" (Barnes 180). The dog wordlessly accepts Robin and enacts physical closeness, despite being exhausted by her inexplicable harassment. The dog does not moralize, demand an explanation, or slap her with a label for blending beast and human, content with mutual existence and rest. For the first time, Robin experiences a relationality that expects nothing but eventually accepts all, even without full

understanding or consumption of the other. Like Robin, their interaction is “something not yet in history”; there are no rules yet written for how a beast turning human interacts with a beast (48). This is so unlike the human social world, where hierarchy and codes dictate how we interact with one another and view ourselves, the love we perpetually want from others but never receive. The purest form of forgetting/voiding is totally starting over with another species, with which you don’t share the same oppressive language and inherited historical memory.

Barnes illustrates a world in which holding onto history is to hold onto shame. In Nora and Felix, she represents the marginalized people who absorb history's stigmas and cling to structure in an unconscious attempt to make their desires pure and upright. The doctor describes those desires as excrement; however, because Felix and Nora’s consumption is so narcissistic and self-sustained, it has little to no excremental opposite. Instead, the doctor encourages them to acknowledge the truth of their desires and forget/void historical stigma as excrement in order to humanize and accept themselves - something history will never do. Upon doing so, they will come closer to understanding the inscrutable Robin, who just wants to live without being questioned or pathologized. This is true for all of us; whether we are searching for a new relationality among beasts or itching to consume the idealized versions of ourselves in others, we are all sick. And by that standard, we are all probably fine.

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