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“ ‘The Triumph of the Epicene Style’: *Nightwood* and Camp”

Margaret Gillespie

Mademoiselle Basquette [...] was damned from the waist down, built like a medieval abuse. She used to wheel herself through the Pyrenees on a board. [...] I wanted to give her a present for what was missing and she said, ‘Pearls—they go so well with everything.’ (Barnes 1995, 22)

- 1 In what queer scholars commonly cite as Anglo-American literature’s first attempt to discuss the concept, Charles Kennedy, a gay doctor in Christopher Isherwood’s 1954 *The World in the Evening*, admits that camp “is terribly hard to define [but] you’ll find yourself wanting to use the word whenever you discuss aesthetics or philosophy or almost anything. I can never understand how critics managed to do without it” (36). “To talk about camp is to betray it,” Susan Sontag famously cautions in her 1964 “Notes” on the phenomenon.¹
- 2 While recognising the difficulty, the illegitimacy even, of discussing it, the following article will argue for the centrality of camp in American modernist Djuna Barnes’ 1936 chef d’oeuvre *Nightwood*. That *Nightwood* was a novel peopled almost exclusively by sexual marginals was a fact that could hardly be ignored, even by its earliest critics. Recognition of *Nightwood*’s campiness, on the other hand, was long eschewed by scholars, perhaps for fear that acknowledging it might compromise the novel’s status as serious experimental or feminist fiction. This is only slowly changing. With the arrival of gay and lesbian studies in the Anglo-American academy in the 1980s², homosexual themes in literature were offered a new respectability, legitimizing in their turn new approaches to Barnes studies (Allen 1993, 1996, Benstock 1986, Galvin 1999, Stimpson 1982). More recent queer readings of *Nightwood* have gone further still in exploring the interplay between gender, sex and text, showcasing, as Deborah Warren has noted, “the way in which [...] stylistic play [...] intersects with [...] conceptual concerns” (3). But not until the twenty-first century have camp elements in the novel

been explicitly and positively referenced (Caselli 2009), and even then, they remain relatively underexploited. Campiness is presented either as a given (“meaning in *Nightwood* is oblique and camp,” “the grandmother’s camp appearance” 159, 186) or conversely proffered as a potential misreading of the novel.³ It will be contended here that camp is key to the aesthetic expression of deviant sexuality in *Nightwood* and integral to the novel’s often incongruous, often outrageous textual *modus operandi*. Crucially, exploring how camp functions in *Nightwood* offers the possibility of a reading of the novel’s troubling of conventional gender and generic paradigms that does not stop at the level of non-hetero-normative characterisation or obscure poetics, but rather apprehends the two conjointly.

Sontag’s “Notes on Camp”

- 3 There have been a number of attempts to describe what camp is, many of them concentrating on providing an inventory of elements said to embody sensibility (examples of camp cinema, Babuscio 119-134, examples of camp slang, Blachford 304-307, camp anecdotally catalogued, Dyer 49-61). Sontag’s “tentative and nimble” notes (1), which form the concluding chapter of her seminal *Against Interpretation*, stand as the first formal attempt to theorise camp as a valid aesthetic practice and to set out the metaphoric relation between camp as a cultural sensibility and what the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries would go on to call queer sexuality. Subsequent theorists have perhaps unfairly chided “Notes” for purportedly underplaying camp’s politically subversive potential⁴ or side-lining the question of gender (Richardson 89). Yet Sontag’s reflections provide a valuable starting point, not least because they form part of the author’s critical intervention against the hermeneutics of depth dear to canonical post-war American scholars such as the New Critics and the New York intellectuals (Ross 64). Indeed, camp is first and foremost significant for Sontag because it imposes a new mode of vision that refutes orthodox aesthetic criteria of profundity, truth, and beauty in favour of a sensibility based on “sensuous surface and style at the expense of content”, “the degree of artifice, of stylisation” and “artifice as an ideal, theatricality” (Sontag 2, 8).
- 4 In this sense, Sontag’s definition echoes camp’s alleged etymology—the term has been traced to the French *se camper* (Bergman 6, Brien 873), or “assuming a proud, bold or provocative pose.”⁵ But camp is more than just an aesthetic of affectation or a rejection of established cultural hierarchies—even though it may appear to be simply that.⁶ Eschewing normative value categories (the authentic, the proper, the natural), camp ushers in polysemy, incongruity and perversity in their place:

Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the “off”, of things-being-what-they-are-not. The best example is in Art Nouveau, the most typical and fully developed Camp style. Art Nouveau objects, typically, convert one thing into something else: the lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants, the living room which is really a grotto. (3)
- 5 Anything, from the sublime, to the banal, to the ridiculous may be extolled: it is in their potential to resist to a fixed, limited identity that an object may be perceived as camp: “lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants, the living room which is really a grotto.” Indeed, through the camp eye, the very notion of genuine identity, be it sexual or otherwise, is met with mocking incredulity: “it’s not a lamp but a ‘lamp’; not a woman but a ‘woman’” (3). And whenever an object or person is celebrated, it is as the

metaphoric expression of the masculine-feminine *brouillage* lying at the heart of the camp aesthetic, itself drawing on

A mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness consists in *going against the grain of one's sex*. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine [...]. Camp is the triumph of the epicene style (3, emphasis mine).

- 6 Just as “going against the grain of one’s sex”—non-normative sexuality—may, be viewed as unseemly, incongruous or even monstrous from a mainstream perspective, so conversely will camp embrace and champion the inappropriate in all its guises, challenging normativity’s claim to hegemony. The “outlandish”, the “old-fashioned” and “bad taste” (Sontag 5, 6, 10) may thus all be understood as manifestations of queer sexuality-as-trope.

Butler and camp

- 7 As critics have frequently observed it is philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler who has arguably most contributed to furthering the academic legitimacy and visibility of camp in more recent years, and to championing its subversive potential. In her groundbreaking thesis, which takes non-normative gender practices as its theoretical template and cross-dressing as its privileged exemplar, Butler famously contends that gender is an always already performative effect. In other words, gender is always a “doing”, even if, within a given cultural matrix, it tends to be perceived as a stable and irrefutable “being”:

The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of ‘the original’ [...] reveals the original to be nothing but a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original. (1990a, 31)

- 8 It is this knowledge of the fundamental inauthenticity of gender that informs the camp sensibility—or in the words of Sontag, “to perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (3). Butler’s understanding of the performativity of gender and her sense of the value of exposing such a mechanism through strategies of “subversive repetition” (Butler 1990a, 147)—in other words, via the parody, mimicry or *camping up* of normative gender roles—holds enormous theoretical potential. Firstly because the notion of gender performativity counters heterosexuality’s natural presumption of hegemony, but also and more generally because it unmasks *all* identity constructions as inherently fraudulent:

In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the *illusion* of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 1990b, 270, emphasis mine)

- 9 If what queer signals is an “ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding and continuous” (Meyer 2-3), then it is through camp’s

performative deconstruction of the homo-hetero binary and its semiotic correlates that this challenge is executed.

- 10 Rereading Sontag through Butler and queer theory then, a working definition of camp might tentatively run as follows: that it is the site of a "radical demystification of gender" (Cleto 31), which rejects the existence of an innate biological truth of sexual identity and by extension any fixed identity. Camp demystifies gender and "hollows out" (Dollimore 310) the depth model of identity through parodic enactment, the foregrounding of theatricality and the privileging of surface over substance. It valorises sexually indeterminacy—the epicene—and its metaphorical avatars the incongruous, the outlandish and the mismatched. With its ontological suspicion of stable selfhood, its wilful collapsing of the dyads of nature and culture, of authenticity and artifice, of seriousness and frivolity, camp posits identity as "performative, improvisational and discontinuous" (Meyer 2).

"Camp modernism"?

- 11 As testified by the number of scientific publications on the subject, the key role played by queer theory in the re-evaluation of modernism since the 1990s cannot be overstated, with "queer modernism" now an established academic domain in its own right. This is no coincidence. As Laura Doan and Jane Garrity remind us, the two fields are richly imbricated: "both resist fixity, cross boundaries, and regard with fascination the transgressive the marginal and the liminal" (542). The concept of "camp modernism", on the other hand, remains surprisingly understudied, with a first collection of journal articles currently under preparation for publication in 2016 and a fleeting mention in one entry of a recent reference volume on English literature to its name.⁷
- 12 We may also wonder why it has taken so long for camp to be allowed entry into Barnes scholarship. This may well have as much to do with the intensity of high modernism and even second-wave feminism's antipathy towards camp as it has with the vogue-ish popularity camp currently enjoys within contemporary academic circles⁸, thanks, as has been argued, to its timely theoretical re-conceptualisation in the notion of gender performativity. As we will see, Barnes scholars have long recognised *Nightwood*'s relentless undermining of the grounds for binary categorisation as one of its signature poetic and thematic concerns.⁹ But if both gender and genre are undoubtedly "troubled" in this *oeuvre* of sexual-textual impropriety, it is only recently that they are beginning to be studied in conjunction.

Early readings of *Nightwood*

- 13 Earlier readings, at pains to stress the novel's highbrow modernist credentials, championed its "pure", formal qualities and bemoaned its unfortunate recuperation by a literary demimonde beckoning from across the cultural "great divide," as Andreas Huyssen would later name it.¹⁰ This hermeneutic trend had been set in motion even before the novel hit the printing press. Publishers T.S. Eliot and Frank Morley doctored the novel of some of its most blatantly camp anecdotes such as the episode when a cottaging Matthew O'Connor, caught *in flagrante* by a "hand of the law" finds himself in

a police cell he professes once to have been occupied by his soul-mate and fellow “blasphemed queen” Marie-Antoinette. Or when he visits the castle of “mad” Bavarian King Ludwig II¹¹ “called infirm because he’d had everything except a woman and a lace collar—and I wouldn’t be so sure about the collar” (Barnes 1995, 26, 20). Another censored passage hypothesizes on the fate of an “invert” in the ironically-appositely named rural, mid-West town of Wabash (Native American for shining white), ends on a gloriously bathetic punch line announcing the triumph of the law of the (sexual) marketplace over legal and religious censoriousness:

Now suppose you were in Wabash where the thing had never been heard of? It *has* happened. So what does the judge do but call up the nuncio of the office and he says ‘John, what do I give a man of this sort?’ And the clerk answered back, as quick as hitting yourself in the eye, ‘A dollar, a dollar and a half, two dollars.’ (134)

- 14 Keen perhaps to stall unflattering comparisons between *The Waste Land*’s Tiresias and his trashy Barnesian alter-ego, Matthew O’Connor, T.S. Eliot’s euphemistic imprimatur of an introduction to *Nightwood* continued to sanitise the novel, cautioning the reader against judging the morals of its protagonists, inviting him or her to venture beyond the novel’s tawdry veneer to access its deeper universal human message (an interpretation Barnes felt had “really missed the mark”¹²). In so doing, Eliot marshalled Djuna Barnes’ “individual talent” safely within the confines of the literary “tradition”¹³ he was establishing in his own literary essays at the time:

The miseries that people suffer through their particular abnormalities of temperament are visible on the surface: the deeper design is that of human misery and bondage which is universal [...]. Taken in this way, *Nightwood* appears with profounder significance. To regard this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks is not only to miss the point, but to confirm our wills and harden our hearts in an inveterate sin of pride. [...]

What I would leave the reader prepared to find is the great achievement of a style, the beauty of phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterisation and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy. (6)

- 15 Campiness was in a sense *Nightwood*’s dirty secret and given half a chance, threatened to relegate it to the ranks of effeminate, *coterie badinage*.¹⁴ For the novel’s early reviewers and critics, *Nightwood*’s highbrow reputation had at all costs to be preserved from such a sorry fate. “Only by a miracle it would seem” mused Clifton Fadiman writing in *The New Yorker* in 1937, “can ‘Nightwood’ escape the affectionate, destroying hands of some twittering literary cult”; the same year, Dylan Thomas’s review of the novel would caution against the risks of *Nightwood* falling into the hands of “intellectual flibbitygibbits” (quoted in Caselli 152). Little seemed to have changed by the 1970s when Louis F. Kannenstine, author of one of the first monographs on Barnes and striking a similarly censorious chord, bemoaned the fact that “*Nightwood* [had] thus become *ready game* for literary cultists, devotees of 1920s expatriate lore or proponents of ‘camp culture.’” At the same time he applauded those scholars who salvaged the novel from this regrettable outcome: “critical scholarship has not been unkind to the novel. Essays of critics such as Joseph Frank, Wallace Fowlie and Kenneth Burke have sustained its reputation, at least in academic circles” (Kannenstine xii, emphasis mine). For feminist Shari Benstock, writing a decade later, that same rapacious “camp culture” was to be held up to blame for the novel’s recuperation by sexual marginals: “*Nightwood* was to become a cult guide to the homosexual underground nightworld of Paris” (235).
- 16 If it wasn’t the content that offended, it was the depravity of the novel’s style: “It is obvious that you tried to do an honest study of perversion but I am afraid you got lost

in your studies" was the smart rebuttal of *Bow Down*— the original title of the novel— Barnes received from publishers Boni and Liveright in 1934 (quoted in Herring 222). More recently, feminist and new historicist evaluations have also sought to foreground the interface between the novel and the ideological and sexological debates, discourses and practices prevalent at the time of its writing.¹⁵ Typically, such readings pit their engaged agenda against a perceived intellectual cowardice revealed by some critics' frivolous over-attention to style, "*sidestepping* ideological questions that discussions of subject matter might have involved," as Shari Benstock put it in 1986 (244, emphasis mine).

Camp in all but name

- 17 Ironically enough, it was precisely some of the earlier style-centred investigations which sought to uncover the workings of "black humour" or "wit" in Barnes that were the first to really touch on the novel's campiness. Donald J. Greiner's 1975 study, for instance, regrets the over-attention accorded to *Nightwood*'s "militantly experimental technique" (43), locating rather in the novel's incongruous *mélange* of grotesque, horror and artifice the precursor of later-twentieth century post-modern black humour. As if to anticipate Andy Medhurst's assertion "postmodernism is only heterosexuals catching up with camp" (206), Greiner probes the brazen theatricality of *Nightwood*'s prose, with its pilfered style-effects from across the ages, its oddly and anachronistically garbed protagonists (citing protagonist Robin's "newly ancient silks" or Felix, her jilted husband, as "tailored part for the evening and part for the day" Barnes 1995, 49), and the "fantastically furnished" houses they inhabit (40, 9). This leads Greiner to conclude "the black humor of *Nightwood* is, indeed, particularly illustrated in the grotesque, violent characters, the detached attitude toward the descriptions of outrageous clothes and houses, and the parody of the novelist's role" (46).
- 18 In a similar vein Elizabeth Pochoda, writing the following year, posits a holy trinity of "wit", "hoax" and "masquerade" as *Nightwood*'s overriding stylistic currency. Pochoda takes as her cue the scene where the "dumbfounder" doctor Matthew O'Connor, under the pretext of treating an ailing Robin, is charted performing a series of ironically termed "honesties" that dissemble the illicit activities he is actually engaged in—the theft of a hundred-franc note and the procurement of the rouge and powder arrayed on Robin's bedside table. She compellingly argues that a novel like *Nightwood* "so deliberately and gorgeously overambitious", is "not meant to be taken straight" even in its most rhetorically sober moments. In a passage which seems to echo Sontag quoting Oscar Wilde's *In Conversation* —"One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing" (Sontag 10)—, Pochoda identifies what could arguably be termed the camp spin that the ostensibly empathetic narrative voice puts on the trials and tribulations of Nora Flood's love tragedy: "the language of the passages about Nora's passion appears moving¹⁶ until one realises that it is heightened just enough to suggest melodrama" (Pochoda 184). She then goes on to quote in corroboration one of the "doctor's" signature campy rejoinders, a blithe relegation of Nora's anguished metaphysical soul-searching to the level of humdrum physiological ailment and risqué aside:

‘Oh’, he cried. ‘A broken heart have you? I have falling arches, flying dandruff, a floating kidney, shattered nerves and a broken heart! But do I scream that an eagle has me by the balls or has dropped an oyster on my head? [...] Yet you are screaming and drawing your lip and putting your hand out and turning round and round!’ (Barnes 1995, 128)

Djuna Barnes and camp

- 19 Returning to *Nightwood* later in life, Barnes bemoaned the gay and lesbian following the novel had engendered, claiming she would never have written it had she realized “the reputation it would bring her” (O’Neal 120). The author’s apparent abhorrence of sexual deviancy does not preclude reading the novel through the lens of “camp modernism”, however. Indeed, as Scott Herring has convincingly argued,

Acknowledging [her] reticence towards homosexuality does not reveal that Barnes was an ex-gay *avant la lettre* or support the thesis that she succumbed to a homosexual panic that might explain her misanthropy. It would instead be more accurate to say that she was suspicious of prescriptive identity categories. (155)

- 20 Queer rather than ex-gay *avant la lettre* then, Barnes, as seems clear from much of her early journalism, conceived of both her own femininity and her artistic production in terms of artifice and theatricality. A 1915 interview with the silent film and stage actor Lou Tellegen sees Barnes assume the moniker of “indispensable PEN PERFORMER,” while the interview itself is presented in the form of a play, complete with stage directions (4-5). In “Against Nature,” a Wildean piece published in the August 1920 edition of *Vanity Fair* under the pseudonym of Lydia Steptoe, and bearing the lead “In Which Everything that is Young, Inadequate and Tiresome is included in the Term Natural”, the author calls for “intricacy, falsity, perfidy—anything that is a step removed from this eternal simplicity that everybody seems to like” (88).

- 21 A fictional “Miss Barnes” features in Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler’s 1935 *The Young and Evil* (1935), a collaborative magical-realistic account of the Greenwich village gay scene, for which Barnes had penned the promotional dustcover blurb. Barnes figures in a folksy conceit that appears in the opening pages of the novel as a sort of camp doyenne of letters, her name deployed, as Melissa Jane Hardie notes, for “its prestige and cult status” (45):

Julian said I think I like Djuna Barnes which is a good way to think.
Karel crossed his legs and forearms with the glass in his left hand. Yes and if Miss Barnes were to come past my gate I’d say come into my yard Miss Barnes and sit upon my porch and I will serve you tea and if you will recite one of your poems I will be glad to learn it backwards. (Ford, Tyler, 18)

- 22 That Barnes should feel comfortable in endorsing this novel (“never, to my knowledge has a certain type of homosexual been so ‘fixed’ on paper”) suggests a familiarity and certain affinity with campiness. Indeed, she employs the term quite unselfconsciously when, in correspondence with *Nightwood*’s German translator Wolfgang Hildersheimer she glosses the expression “tiny”, used by the character Matthew O’Connor to refer to his sexual member: “it is also a sort of ‘cant’ word among certain homosexuals of that day, and in Paris, a ‘camping word’... passing for a number of things” (Broe 219).

Nightwood as camp

- 23 Loosely inspired by the life and lesbian loves of Djuna Barnes' Paris years, *Nightwood* is peopled entirely by a motley contingent of "peculiarly swung" racial and sexual outcasts (Barnes 1995, 128): Hedvig Volkbein, a woman of "massive chic", her son Guido "tailored part for the evening and part for the day", and Frau Mann the "Duchess of Broadback", to name but a few (6, 9, 12). None really pass as rounded or genuine and one even "defil[es] the very meaning of personality in her passion to be a person [for] only severed could any part of her have been called 'right.'" None can be said to evolve, while some actually regress or "go down", losing the trappings of the selfhood they once possessed. Robin, who is initially presented as "beast turning human," ends the novel on all fours (61, 58, 105, 36). Social marginals (Jews, homosexuals, lesbians and freakish circus performers) alienated from dominant culture, they are associated with the concept of "disqualification" (Plumb, xviii), but even as signifiers they barely qualify as fictional characters. The reader is never encouraged to identify with them, and this distancing is immediate, from the moment they are first introduced. One such introduction, a lexically and syntactically elaborate *tableau vivant*, opens the novel:

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

Turning upon this field, which shook to the clatter of morning horses in the street beyond, with the gross splendour of a general saluting the flag, she named him Felix, thrust him from her, and died. (1)

- 24 The first, paragraph-long sentence separates the subject (Hedvig Volkbein) from its verb ("gave birth") by a long series of highly ornate phrases describing the bed upon which Hedvig is lying, itself embellished with a series of heraldic motifs linked to the House of Hapsburg (Gallagher 283). If Hedvig is physically obscured by the all-imposing bed, so too is she concealed within the heavily laden phrases of the description which function to reduce her to the status of sign and spectacle—as if she too has been blazoned onto the coat of arms, and the entire room has been flattened out into an armorial image. In its depiction of the death of Hedvig, the scene appears to be portraying the fading glory of European aristocracy, as underscored by the expression "tarnished gold threads". Yet Hedvig's family name "Volk", —German for ordinary people—would seem to denote not a member of the social elite but its humble antithesis. Further ambiguity is introduced by the oxymoron "massive [...] threads", an expression that in its turn echoes the sexual indeterminacy and incongruity of Hedvig herself ("great strength and military beauty"; "with the gross splendour of a general saluting the flag").
- 25 Its ostensible diegetic thrust the ill-fated liaison of Nora Flood and her androgynous female lover Robin, the novel is actually dominated by the garrulous narrative presence of "Dr Matthew-Mighty-Grain-of-Salt-Dante-O'Connor," a cross-dressing back-street abortionist of dubious credentials, whose invasive discourse, rich with perverse and bawdy anecdotes, offers a camp counterpoint to the official third-person narrative voice. In this sense *Nightwood* violates the "natural" propriety of the fictional form,

inverting the hierarchy between dominant authorial voice and subordinate character, subverting fictional conventions and parodying the novelist's role.

- 26 One such anecdote is the dazzling description of Nikka, the tattooed black wrestler. In its illusion of narrative harmony, its brazen posturing of verbal ornament as substance, its *blasé* amalgam of high-and low-brow references and citations pilfered from of *melee* of disparate sources all conjured up in the service of charlatan Matthew O'Connor's obscenely epicene imagination, the passage stands not only as an image in miniature of the novel¹⁷, but also as an enactment of the workings of camp that are at play there.

'Well, but God works in mysterious ways to bring things up in my mind! Now I am thinking of Nikka, the nigger who used to fight the bear in the Cirque de Paris. There he was, crouching all over the arena without a stitch on, except an ill-concealed loin-cloth all abulge as if with a deep-sea catch, tattooed from head to heel with all the *ameublement* of depravity! Garlanded with rosebuds and the hack-work of the devil—was he a sight to see! Though he couldn't have done a thing (and I know what I am talking about, in spite of all that has been said about the black boys) if you had stood him in a gig-mill for a week, though (it's said) at a stretch it spelt Desdemona. Well then, on each buttock, half public, half private, a quotation from the book of magic, a confirmation of the Jansenist theory, I'm sorry to say and here to say it. Across his knees, I give the word 'I' on one and on the other, 'can' put those together! Across his chest, beneath a beautiful caravel in full sail, two clasped hands, the wrist bones fretted with point lace. On each bosom an arrow-speared heart, each with different initials but with equal drops of blood; and running into the arm-pit, all down one side, the word said by Prince Arthur Tudor, son of King Henry the Seventh, when on his bridal night he called for a goblet of water (or was it water?). His chamberlain, wondering at the cause of such drought, remarked on it and was answered in one word so wholly epigrammatic and in no way befitting the great and noble British Empire that he was brought up with a start, and that is all we will ever know of it, unless' said the doctor, striking his hand on his hip, 'you are as good at guessing as Tiny M'Caffrey'. 'And the legs?' Felix asked uncomfortably. 'The legs', said Doctor O'Connor, were devoted entirely to vine work, topped by the swart rambler rose copied from the coping of the Hamburg house of Rothschild. Over his *dos*, believe it or not and I shouldn't, a terse account in early monkish script—called by some people indecent, by others Gothic, of the really deplorable condition of Paris before hygiene was introduced, and nature had its way up to the knees. And just above what you mustn't mention, a bird flew carrying a streamer on was incised, '*Garde tout*'. I asked him why all this barbarity; he answered he loved beauty and would have it about him.' (14-15)

- 27 Nikka is presented as emblem of otherness: the tattoos or "*ameublement*"—furnishings, decorations—that adorn his skin associate him literally with a coat of arms, while the depravity that this decoration embodies recalls his status as atavistic other. Incongruous amalgam of the monstrous and uncannily captivating, Nikka is above all a spectacle, a performance. The hyper-exotic black wrestler is clothed uniquely by the doctor's fey yet lubricious discourse, a high-camp cocktail of religious and homoerotic sentimentalism ("on each bosom an arrow-speared heart, each with different initials but with equal drops of blood"). The doctor's own, "queeny" mannerisms are caricatured in their turn by the narrative voice ("striking his hand on his hip").
- 28 Preparing to fight against a bear, crouching almost naked, Nikka is ostensibly presented in a near-savage state; yet if he is unable to distinguish between good and evil and apparently utterly devoid of moral conscience or aesthetic judgement ("I asked him why all this barbarity; he answered he loved beauty and would have it about him"), Nikka also embodies the candid ingenuity of a maiden ("garlanded with rosebuds"). For

Barnes is not out to reveal the “essence” of otherness but rather to demonstrate the campy workings of its discursive confection. Abandoning all claims to original or singular meaning, the author rather proffers her readers the enactment of a phoney and gloriously superficial identity; literally skin-deep, an affair of surfaces that might have been fashioned or woven as a wooden engraving (“hack” and “fret” suggest carved wood), an article of clothing (Nikka is embroidered with quotations, his penis combed like cloth) or an architectural façade (the coping of the Hamburg house of Rothschild).

- 29 In perpetual movement (“crouching all over the arena”), in the image of figurative language resisting stable, coherent meaning, Nikka eludes control and containment. Contradictory narratives, styles and registers from the ribald to the arcane, covering history, literature and religion come into literal conflict on Nikka’s body, a body whose centrality and artifice are underlined by its physical inscription within a circus arena.

Conclusion

- 30 Be it at poetic or diegetic levels, as gender or genre, *Nightwood* can only unsuccessfully pass as decent, legitimate or “straight.” “Form” and “content” in this camp novel collude in the services of the deviant and inauthentic to perform a travesty of signification that flouts dominant culture’s hermeneutics of depth, and de-robes as chimera the illusion of stable, gendered selfhood. Long relegated to the wings of *Nightwood* criticism as the repressed other of pokerfaced modernist gravitas, the novel’s “epicene style” queers the “harmonies of traditional seriousness” (Sontag 3, 8) performing a wilful transgression of sexual-textual rectitude. It is in camp, that peculiarly “fugitive sensibility” (1) where sexual ambiguity meets style as substance, that the novel finds its most genuinely subversive mode of expression – “evacuat[ing] custom [...] for the natural raiment of extremity” (Barnes 1995, 69) and camping up the very status of fictional form itself.

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NOTES

1. Or as she also wittily remarks, “it’s embarrassing to be solemn and treatise-like about Camp. One runs the risk of producing a very inferior piece of Camp” (Sontag 1-2).
2. David Bergman notes of the situation in the United States, “conferences on gay and lesbian studies circulate among the Ivy League campuses, attracting thousands of scholars; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Douglas Crimp, Jonathan Dollimore and Judith Butler are all international stars” (Bergman 5).
3. “*Nightwood* [...] renders impossible the knowingly well-meant rehabilitation of sentimentality (under the aegis of kitsch or camp)” (Caselli 184).
4. “It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical.” (Sontag 2) Critics were quick to contest this view (Babuscio 40-58, Bronski 42-46, 92-144, King 12). Sontag would later revise this position in a 1975 interview where she ascribed to camp “a considerable if inadvertent role in the upsurge of feminist consciousness in the late 1960s,” (Ross 72) but even her initial definition of camp in “Notes” is never as totally apolitical as she claims: not only does she attribute camp taste a “democratic *esprit*” (9), but she also views camp as “propagandistic” in its brazen jettisoning of bourgeois rectitude (“Camp is a solvent of morality,” 10).
5. “Se tenir dans une attitude fière, hardie ou provocante” (*Le Petit Robert*).
6. “Many examples of Camp are things which from a ‘serious’ point of view are either bad art or kitsch”, “it’s good *because* it’s awful” (Sontag 3, 11).
7. A “cluster” on “Camp Modernism”, edited by Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao is forthcoming in *Modernism/Modernity* in 2016; “Gay and Lesbian literature” (Birch & Hooper 277).
8. “Not so long ago camp languished, theorised as a shameful sign of an unrecognised self-hating, and even woman-hating, homosexual by gay, feminist and lesbian critics alike. Now camp has been rehabilitated with a vengeance: not only feminist, but even macho masculinity is read as camp therefore radical” (Tyler 33).
9. Donna Gerstenberger, for instance, argues that the Barnesian text “relentlessly undermines grounds for categorization” (Gerstenberger 1989, 130). For Elizabeth Béranger, the text “snatches up signifiers and absorbs them into its system so as to manipulate, distort, deform and disfigure them, inevitably rendering them identical to one another and totally meaningless” (“[le texte] happe [...] tout ce qui est significatif et le prend dans son système pour le manipuler, le triturer, le déformer, le défigurer avec le résultat prévisible qu’il sera alors identique au reste et totalement insignifiant”, Béranger 377, my translation).
10. For Huyssen, late-nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth century high art assures its identity and legitimacy by defining itself against its purported contrary, mass culture: “only by fortifying its boundaries, by maintaining its purity and autonomy, and by avoiding any contamination with mass culture and with the signifying systems of everyday life can the art work maintain its adversary stance: adversary to the bourgeois culture of everyday life as well as adversary to mass culture and entertainment which are seen as the primary forms of bourgeois cultural articulation” (Huyssen 54). Huyssen also argues convincingly that low culture and the mob are gendered as feminine.
11. Marie-Antoinette’s sexuality has elicited much controversy over the centuries. Terry Castle argues that the queen stood as a “code figure for female homoeroticism in the nineteenth century, even a kind of protolesbian heroine” (Castle 10). Ludwig II of Bavaria (1845-1886) was also a “notorious” homosexual. See McIntosh for a discussion of the monarch’s “proclivities.”
12. According to Barnes’ biographer Philip Herring, “Barnes told James Scott that Eliot had ‘really missed the mark’ in his introduction” (Herring 233).
13. T.S. Eliot’s 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” sets out his personal, Eurocentric vision of the canon, which not only celebrates the greatness of the European literary legacy but

also suggests that contemporary writers should escape the excesses of personality to honour as they, in their turn, influence literary heritage.

14. Or, as Jeanette Winterson puts it in her 2006 introduction to *Nightwood*, “The distaste displayed by reviewers for the rapacious clutches of intellectual coteries also betrays a certain uneasiness with the possibility that this book could become ‘a milestone on any map of gay literature’ ” (Barnes 2006, ix).

15. Incredibly for a novel that takes such pleasure in defying centralizing discourse, there has been a move not only to pin down ideological issues in *Nightwood* once and for all, but also, as Caselli has noted, to scan the novel for political incorrectness: “recent scholars perhaps more interested in the ‘identity thing’ than in rhetoric have located the excessive quality of the novel in [...] its alleged fascist frequentations, supposed anti-Semitism and even suspected homophobia” (153).

16. This, for instance, is how Nora describes her unending attachment to her erstwhile lover Robin: “‘Oh Matthew. I don’t know how to go. I don’t know which way to turn! Tell her, if you ever see her, that it is always in her arms – forever it will be until we die. Tell her to do what she must, but not to forget’ ” (Barnes 1995, 124).

17. “Nikka is a representation of *Nightwood*, a text which enmeshes fragments of a culture of embellishment, illusion and affectation” (“Nikka est une représentation de *Nightwood* qui est un texte filet enserrant des fragments d’une culture dont la fonction est de maquiller ou d’illusionner ou de parade.” Béranger 396, my translation).

ABSTRACTS

Nightwood (1936), American modernist Djuna Barnes’ most famous novel, is notorious as much for its subject matter as for the unreadability of its prose. However, if both gender and genre are undoubtedly “troubled” in this masterpiece of sexual-textual impropriety, the two are surprisingly rarely apprehended conjointly. This article argues for a positive re-evaluation of the role of the camp in *Nightwood* as the novel’s key aesthetic expression of deviant sexuality.

Nightwood (1936), roman le plus célèbre de l’écrivain moderniste Djuna Barnes est connu tant pour les thématiques qu’il traite que l’illisibilité de sa prose. Mais si genre sexuel et genre textuel sont tous les deux « troublés » dans ce chef d’œuvre aussi insaisissable que dérangement, il est rare que la critique leur accorde la même importance. Il sera question ici de relire *Nightwood* par le prisme du *camp*, principal mode d’expression esthétique de la sexualité déviante dans le roman.

INDEX

Keywords: queer theory, camp, modernism, homosexuality

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