

THE GENDER OF BELIEF: WOMEN AND CHRISTIANITY IN T. S. ELIOT AND

DJUNA BARNES

by

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## An Abstract of the Dissertation of

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This dissertation considers the formal and thematic camaraderie between T. S. Eliot and Djuna Barnes. *The Waste Land*'s poet, whom critics often cite as exemplary of reactionary high modernism, appears an improbable companion to *Nightwood*'s novelist, who critics, such as Shari Benstock, characterize as epitomizing "Sapphic modernism." However, Eliot and Barnes prove complementary rather than antithetical figures in their approaches to the collapse of historical and religious authority. Through close readings, supplemented by historical and literary sources, I demonstrate how Eliot, in his criticism and poems such as "Gerontion," and Barnes, in her trans-generic novel *Nightwood*, recognize the instability of history as defined by man and suggest the necessity of mythmaking to establish, or confirm, personal identity. Such mythmaking incorporates, rather than rejects, traditional Christian signs. I examine how, in Eliot's poems of the 1920s and in Barnes's novel, these writers drew on Christian symbols to evoke a

nurturing, intercessory female parallel to the Virgin Mary to investigate the hope for redemption in a secular world. Yet Eliot and Barnes arrive at contrary conclusions.

Eliot's poems increasingly relate femininity to Christian transcendence; this corresponds with a desire to recapture a unified sensibility, which, Eliot argued, dissolved in the post-Reformation era. In contrast, Barnes's Jewish and homosexual characters find transcendence unattainable. As embodied in her novel's characters, the Christian feminine ideal fails because the idealization itself extends from exclusionary dogma; any aid it promises proves ineffectual, and the novel's characters, including Dr. Matthew O'Connor and Nora Flood, remain locked in temporal anguish. Current trends in modernist studies consider the role of myth in understanding individuals' creation of self or worldview; this perspective applies also in analyzing religion's role insofar as it aids the individual's search for identity and a place in history. Consequently, this dissertation helps to reinvigorate the discussion of religion's significance in a literary movement allegedly defined by its secularism. Moreover, in presenting Eliot and Barnes together, I reveal a kinship suggested by their deployment of literary history, formal innovation, and questions about religion's value. This study repositions Barnes and brings her work into the canonical modernist dialogue.

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For my husband, Barry Christopher Morgan



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CHAPTER I  
ALLYING ELIOT AND BARNES

Following a 1938 meeting with T. S. Eliot, Djuna Barnes wrote to a friend that the two “got on like two priests with only one robe” (Herring 243). Barnes’s statement implies that she and Eliot maintained an intimacy equivalent to sharing a garment. Barnes’s analogy may seem bewildering given the common perceptions of both authors, which casts them as near-polar opposites: Eliot as the “master” of a conservative, misogynist, and dogmatically Christian reactionary high Modernism (Blair 159),<sup>1</sup> and Barnes as a lesbian with “radical sociopolitical views” (Broe, Introduction 7),<sup>2</sup> who “makes a modernism of marginality” (Marcus, “Laughing” 223). In fact, these two expatriate Americans—who began their personal and professional relationship when Eliot edited *Nightwood* in 1935—remained friends until Eliot’s death in 1965.<sup>3</sup> Their affinity, however, extended beyond their friendship. As revealed by studying their works together, Eliot and Barnes’s writings suggest a suspicion of history as ordered by man, and they explore the possibility of cohesion offered by Christianity. Eliot and Barnes accomplished this, in part, through evocations of one of Western culture’s most potent female figures: the Virgin Mary. Yet while Eliot’s speakers find in religious orthodoxy a

means of obtaining personal and cultural unity, Barnes's characters discover the failure of religion to affirm identity or bridge social differences.

Eliot and Barnes's literary projects appear, initially, to differ dramatically. Throughout his early poetry, Eliot's speakers exhibit frustration and disgust with the human condition that reaches its apogee in *The Waste Land* (1922). Following that poem's publication, Eliot's poetic voices shift, and, in his work of the 1920s and 1930s, his poetic speakers increasingly express a desire to recapture tradition, and often via religious orthodoxy. In Eliot's view, Christianity offers redemption—an escape from temporality and modern anxiety. In contrast, Barnes explores and exposes the limits of temporal existence in fictions that defy generic identifications. The most famous of these works, *Nightwood* (1936), features a cast of characters from Christian society's borderland—homosexuals, transvestites, and Jews—who struggle with individual desires and repressive social expectations. Stylistically, the novel transgresses generic boundaries, as its language blurs distinctions between poetry and prose. The novel resists unfolding in a linear pattern, thereby reinforcing both the exterior world's chaos and the characters' interior isolation. As neither Christianity nor western tradition affirms their identities, they find no redemption and, therefore, no means of escaping modernist angst.

Eliot and Barnes's affinity grows evident in the former's famous introduction to *Nightwood*, which he wrote for its American publication. Eliot highlights aspects of the novel he considered most striking; for example, he praised its vitality and its "astonishing language" (Eliot xi), which, he claimed, carried "a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy" (xvi).<sup>4</sup> Eliot's attraction to Barnes's dense,

highly artificial baroque style reveals his own interest in the period's portrayal of excess and decay. However, what Eliot seemed most drawn to was *Nightwood's* suggestion, as he explained, that "all of us, so far as we attach ourselves to created objects and surrender our wills to temporal ends, are eaten by the same worm" (xv). Although critics, such as Mary Lynn Broe, suggest that Eliot's introduction equates with a "religious appropriation" of the novel (Broe, Introduction 7),<sup>5</sup> Barnes's work provides grounds for Eliot's reading. While *Nightwood* resists qualification as a "religious novel," it contains numerous, and significant, references to Christianity and Judaism that require attention.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, both Eliot and Barnes drew on Christian symbolism and imagery as they explored temporal identity, as history, and the possibility for transcendence, via religion, in their works. In this process, the noted misogynist and the radical lesbian employed the typology of the Madonna, an "icon of feminine perfection, built on the equivalence between goodness, motherhood, purity, gentleness, and submission" (Warner 335). Eliot and Barnes rewrote this essentialized, mythic figure, often through references to the Virgin Mary, to investigate temporal identity and the potential for redemption in a post-Darwin, post-Nietzsche, and post-Great War world.

Despite the prominence of the progressive "New Woman" in the period's discourse (and alluded to in name by Barnes's Robin Vote) the Christian "sacred feminine," along with its Victorian correlate of the "True Woman," whose characteristics include "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter qtd. in Gatta 72), remained surprisingly resilient. Because the "True Woman" represents a stay against cultural uncertainty, the Church encouraged the "True Woman's" role, for even while

religion points towards transcendence; it also reinforces social roles and status (Bynum 2). In reaction to women's greater social participation, for example, the Catholic Church, and some Anglican churches, further elevated the status of the Virgin Mary, who, spiritual attributes aside, served as a model of domestic virtue.<sup>7</sup> Progressive Protestant theologians, such as Shailer Mathews encouraged women's emancipation but lectured that without a distinctly Christian basis, such freedom would ultimately lead to cultural breakdown (Mathews 23). Consequently, religion remained a crucial means of reinforcing woman's traditional status. By promising temporal stability and spiritual transcendence, the Church defended its power in an increasingly mechanistic and secular world. Eliot relied on the Church's feminine ideal to indicate spiritual movement within his poetry; similarly, in her novel, Barnes references Christianity's model of female perfection as she explores the potential for unity or transcendence in the modern world.

Heavily invested with dogma and desire, this feminine figure resisted following Christianity's decline in the early twentieth century, when Modernist writers drew on myth much as their predecessors had drawn on religion to articulate, or to organize, a worldview. As Eliot explained in 1923, "using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" provides "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("*Ulysses*" 177). Certainly, mythic readings of Modernist works proved a critical mainstay throughout the twentieth century. Recent critics, such as Michael Bell and Peter Poellner, reinvigorated these studies by targeting what Bell calls Modernist "grounding," an author's use of myth to situate him or herself

within the present and, therefore, history (Bell, Introduction 1). Significantly, in looking at Modernist literature, including works by Eliot, Pound, and Yeats, Bell identifies an activity that he terms “self-conscious mythopoeia,” which, he argues, consists of a sort of double-consciousness as it involves “recognizing a worldview as such while living it as a conviction . . . .” (Bell, *Literature* 2). In other words, people accept the fluidity, the impermanence of any worldview, but adhere to one nonetheless, for mythmaking gives world view the appearance of stability. In Eliot’s 1920s poems, and in Barnes’s characters such as Matthew O’Connor, we see evidence of this mythmaking in practice, through the adoption of myth as religion, to offer both a secured historical identity as well as relief from chaos

Although myth remains an important area for investigation in Modernist studies, the matter of religion, particularly Christianity, remains largely unexamined. Such avoidance extends from the conception of Modernism as a secular movement influenced by Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity and the privileging of science and reason, which Pericles Lewis terms the “secularization hypothesis,” which “characterizes the emergence of modernity as the result of increasingly rational modes of thought and a rejection of belief in the supernatural” (673).<sup>8</sup> This characterization of literary Modernism, as Cleo McNally Kearns suggests, became ingrained, in part, as the “sober retrospective construct of critics of the second half of the twentieth century” (172), with the result that Modernist literature “is often defined in ways divorced from religious issues altogether” (173).<sup>9</sup> Yet, as a significant part of the early twentieth century’s cultural crisis involved a change in

religious sensibilities, it seems appropriate to examine how Modernist writers engage with that shift.

Considering the Christian elements of Eliot's pre-conversion period and in Barnes's exploration of the lives of Others complicates our current perceptions of literary Modernism by pointing out not only its paradoxical relationship with the past, but by reminding us that religion maintained a powerful cultural presence and that writers, whether celebrating or negating Christianity, continued a discourse with religion. Much as current scholarship revises the view that Modernism affirmed a divide between "high" and "low" culture by investigating how Modernists incorporate popular culture into their works, we should look anew at how literary Modernism carries on a discourse with religion. Rather than a monolithic era defined by its discarding of traditional values, Modernism's continuing engagement with Christianity illustrates how the movement exists within a continuum of literary, and cultural, history that eludes reductive categorization.

This dissertation relies on close readings of Eliot and Barnes's texts. Their radical reinventions of form illustrate cultural and personal chaos. For example, "Gerontion," built of fragments and references to seventeenth- and nineteenth-century literatures, confirms the speaker's lack of cohesion. Similarly, generic and linguistic shifts signify *Nightwood's* upending of social and sexual convention. Eliot and Barnes's journalism and correspondence aid in elucidating their ideas. To reveal how allusions amplify the materials of Eliot's poems and Barnes's prose, I've drawn on diverse texts, including *La Divina Commedia*, Elizabethan sermons, Jacobean tragedy, and the Bible, works that



Eliot and Barnes absorbed and recreated within their texts. Such literary references prove fruitful, for, although critics regularly attend to Eliot's allusions to Christian literatures, scholars often neglect them in Barnes's novels. When necessary, I further supplement my readings with reference to relevant socio-historical contexts, such as Vienna's anti-miscegenation laws, which help explain how *Nighthood* responds, for example, to Felix Volkbein's self-loathing, as well as to questions about Christianity's authority in the modern world. In other words, although cleaving as closely as possible to Eliot and Barnes's texts, this project reflects the cultural turn in Modernist studies, which enlists elements from the social sciences to inform literature. The "sociology of literature," as Rita Felski notes, "offers a rich repertoire of concepts for contextualizing and embedding aesthetic objects: institutions and public sphere, capitalism and commodification, alienation and anomie. To work in the sociology of literature is to slot artistic works into social and political frames rather than the other way around" (Felski 505-06). Doing so allows me to focus on Eliot and Barnes not as writers with radically opposing political perspectives, but as early twentieth-century colleagues who expressed a mutual concern with the place of oneself not only in the contemporary world but also within history, be that history secular or sacred.

The following chapter outline details my dissertation's argument for religion's significance in the modern era and analysis of how that significance plays out in Eliot and Barnes's literary productions. The initial chapters addressing each author focus on how Barnes and Eliot express discomfort with history. According to *Nighthood's* Matthew O'Connor, history consists of "'the best the high and mighty can do with [their fate]'"

(Barnes, *Nightwood* 244); the official record belongs to the nobility and the warriors. The rest can only hope to become an element of legend, “the best a poor man may do with his fate” (244). If Barnes suggests that history excludes “the poor man,” Eliot implies annihilation for moral cowards such as the speaker of “Gerontion.” Too disinterested to make a stand, he avoids both earthly and spiritual conflict. The opening chapters address questions of religion’s entwinement with history and the possibility of “others” to participate in that history.

In the following chapter, “‘The Skull Beneath the Skin’: Classicism, Unitarianism, and History in Eliot’s Criticism and *Ara Vos Prec*,” argues against the assumption that Eliot’s attraction to the church emerged in the mid-1920s. A brief review of tenets from his dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Works of F. H. Bradley* established Eliot’s concerns about the Absolute. Material from the same era, including Eliot’s Harvard essays, early book reviews, and the syllabi he created for an extension course in 1916, suggest his disdain for liberal religion, especially progressive Christianity, which eases believers’ ways to heaven by softening the message of Jesus; such theology, Eliot contended, effectively feminized Christianity. A similar contempt, even disgust, manifests in his 1919 book of verse, *Ara Vos Prec*. Institutions and sex become the targets of Eliot’s withering scorn in a collection that offers two satires on Christianity: “The Hippopotamus” and “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service.” As with his earlier works, *Ara Vos Prec* features caricatures of women who reflect moral and cultural breakdown, and who Eliot identifies as destroyers of the masculine art-impulse. A close reading of “Gerontion” confirms that Eliot’s speakers, facing corrupted nature

and feminized art, have no means of achieving unity or transcending temporality; instead, they fragment, thereby reflecting western culture's disintegration.

Chapter three “‘Destiny and History are Untidy: We Fear Memory of That Disorder’: History, Religion, and Self in *Nightwood*,” looks at Barnes’s treatment of history as both a punishing and unreliable influence on *Nightwood*’s characters. Cultural outsiders all, they exist in various states of suspension: Guido Volkbein and his son, Felix, remain tangled between Judaism and Christianity; Robin Vote, the sleepwalker, between beast and human; Nora Flood, between innocence and cynicism; and Matthew O’Connor, a seeming oracle and a veteran of the great war, between masculinity and femininity. They also remain haunted by the loss of the great past as well as the continuance of tradition’s voices of authority. By way of the Volkbeins’ “racial memories,” *Nightwood* argues that history, especially Christian history, traffics in the degradation of non-Christians, hence, the novel suggests, non-conformists, in order to define and elevate acceptable culture. Their cultural “illegitimacy” forces the novel’s characters to assume identities, as with the Volkbein’s false barony; however, Dr. Matthew Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O’Connor, a gifted and notorious liar, actively mythologizes the citizens of the nightworld in order to empower them: he lies people into history. O’Connor’s gift remains viable only as long as people receive his lies. Once Flood and an anonymous ex-priest challenge his stories, his ability wilts and the once voluble man ends the novel with a whisper.

A study of Eliot’s striving for unity makes up chapter four, “From the Desert to the Garden: Unity, Cultural Memory, and the *Perpetual Angelus*.” I review the evolution

of Eliot's theories on the "dissociation of sensibility" in order to explain a surprising shift in his 1920s poetry. Critics note, to varying degrees, Eliot's misogynist inclinations in poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations*, *Ara Vos Prec*, and *The Waste Land*. What receives less attention is this curious movement away from such blatant antifeminism as glimpsed in, for example, the Sweeney poems of 1919. With a poignant episode in *The Waste Land*'s a hyacinth garden, Eliot begins a gradual shift portraying women as "anti-art" to aligning them with "The Word." The poetry indicates this shift with the increasing presence of an elevated woman figured as Dante's Beatrice or the Virgin Mary.<sup>10</sup> Eliot enlists this mythic figure to characterize his growing inclination for Christian orthodoxy, as the Beatrice model permits him to rewrite sexual attraction, to sanctify it, under the aegis of Christianity. Eliot admires Dante's ideal woman as the "recrudescence" of a lover, as well as her role as model of Christian humility, which permits his speakers to approach the Divine. Effectively, Eliot uses Dante's key emblems in his 1920s poetry to reach for religious unity.

Chapter five, "'With a Christian, Anything Can Be Done': *Nightwood*'s Hopeless Madonnas" examines how Barnes's use of Christian imagery conveys her characters' personal disorder, for religious references tangle with issues of identity as well as spirituality. Yet while Eliot uses "the feminine" to represent a hoped-for integration, Barnes adopts similar images to denote disarray. I illustrate how *Nightwood*'s characters project their spiritual and secular desires onto the Madonna, whether figured as the fervent Catholic O'Connor's Virgin Mary, as Guido's wife, Hedvig, the embodiment of, and gatekeeper for, the Christian community, or as Flood, whom Vote recreates into a

type of Angel of the House. However, *Nightwood's* Madonnas prove inadequate. The Virgin fails to listen to O'Connor's pleas, the Angel reveals herself humanly fallible, and *Ecclesia* remains a soldier who gives her loyalty to the state. As a result, the novel ends with an apocalyptic whisper from O'Connor: "'now *nothing, but wrath and weeping!*'" (166). O'Connor seems to foretell the novel's troubling end, which finds Vote devolving into beast. The dissociation from the "great past" and religious exclusion exacerbates their isolation due to difference. What others might seek as shelter against the changing world, *Nightwood's* characters find incapable of offering sanctuary.

In studying Eliot and Barnes's works together, this dissertation illustrates not only how religious gender types, such as Christianity's "sacred feminine," work in Modernist literature, but why they endure in an increasingly secular society. Current trends in Modernist studies view myth as a means of understanding individuals' creation of a "'horizon' of the self," or worldview (Bell, *Literature* 225). This perspective applies also in analyzing traditional religion's role insofar as it aids (or hinders) the individual's search for identity. For Eliot, a shift from relating "feminine identification with self-loathing and sexual abjection" (Dekoven 177) to associating it with spiritual transcendence corresponded to his attempt to create a worldview that might order and spiritually unify a shattered post-war civilization. For Barnes, in contrast, such stability proves unattainable. Myths might be constructed, but should the mythmaker remove his or her "faith," desolation ensues. In questioning the value, and entangling of, history and religion, *Nightwood*, Barnes meets both the social order's limitations and the impossibility of transcendence.

This comparative study of two authors, often presented as opposites in form, theme, canonical placement, and personal background, reveals that, through their reinvention of obscure language, their dense allusiveness, and their deep concern with religion and modernity, Eliot and Barnes share a deeper kinship than previously thought. Additionally, as Benstock speculates in her introduction to *Women of the Left Bank*, “Once women Modernists are placed beside their male colleagues, the hegemony of masculine heterosexual values that have for so long underwritten our definitions of Modernism is put into question. Modernism may then be seen to be a far more eclectic and richly diverse literary movement than has previously been assumed” (Benstock 6).<sup>11</sup> Scholarship since Benstock’s proposal proves her correct. We appreciate “Modernisms” rather than a monolithic “Modernism,” and scholars consistently resituate Modernist literature by reconsidering works as elements in a cultural dialogue by considering its interactions with mass culture, anthropology, and geography.<sup>12</sup>

Studies of Modernism and gender, as well, have rethought distinctions between male and female writers. As Bonnie Kime Scott notes in the introduction to *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, current work illustrates that, “gender is most interesting as a system connected with and negotiated among various cultural identifiers. Understood within such complex intersections, gender has both greater and subtler implications. It is less often seen as a division between oppositional feminine and masculine traits or traditions” (B. Scott 2). Consequently, studies of writers once condemned as misogynists, such as Eliot, who “often expressed as a sexual disgust conflated with both anti-Semitism and class hatred” (Dekoven 178), becomes, in works

such as *Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T. S. Eliot*, the focus of questions about the relationships that make up his “engagement with various public and private worlds of women, eroticism, and the feminine” (Laity 2). Rather than dismiss Eliot out of hand for his reactionary inclinations, scholars seek to understand his work within a milieu that includes women.

This project participates in that dialogue and proposes to reconsider several assumptions about Eliot: that his conversion to Christianity emerged as part of a radical shift to conservatism, when, in fact, it appears that the event concluded a long period of incubation. In Eliot’s prose and poems, matters of religion or spirituality nearly always blend with his questions of history and order. Strikingly, what changes is his presentation of women within the poems written while moving towards his conversion. While Eliot continues to essentialize women, they become the emblem of unification and the healing of the Cartesian divide; notably, after *The Waste Land*, he leaves behind characterizing women as threatening, sexualized creatures in his poetry altogether.

The broad reconsideration of Modernism and gender focuses on women Modernists as well. Valuable explorations of *Nightwood* as a subversive political text, perhaps threatening “to the White Christian male [who] might read it” (Marcus, “Laughing” 223), brought Barnes a significant amount of critical attention and a wider readership. However, and ironically, some of this criticism also diminished her agency as *Nightwood*’s author due to two questionable claims about Eliot’s role as Barnes’s editor. First, that he changed her text’s title from *Bow Down* to *Nightwood* (Field 212), and, second, that he “reduced [the manuscript’s] bulk by more than two-thirds, eliminating—

among other things—scenes that expressed explicit lesbian rage and virulent anticlerical sentiment” (Benstock 428).<sup>13</sup> These claims enforced a view that Eliot “tried to reconceptualize [Barnes’s] text” (Fuchs 296) in order to make it conform to Eliot’s high Modernist schema.<sup>14</sup> Cheryl Plumb’s critical edition of the novel’s typescripts negates these assertions and confirms that Eliot’s “editorial hand was light. . . . meaning was not changed substantially, though the character of the work was adjusted, the language softened” (Plumb xxiii).<sup>15</sup> In other words, Eliot performed as an editor who wanted to ensure that *Nightwood* avoided conflicts such as those encountered by *Ulysses*, which clashed with obscenity laws, rather than as a cultural authority to whom Barnes responded with “resistance [and] acquiescence” (Fuchs 289). With a clearer sense of Eliot’s handling of Barnes’s manuscript, we can now approach *Nightwood* and its author not as oppositional to male Modernists or their work; instead, we may determine what Barnes shared with her masculine colleagues. For example, although she looks askance at the possibility of recuperating tradition like Eliot, and she draws attention to the church’s inadequacies, Barnes reaffirms the power of the institution as her characters persist in reclaiming a tradition that, ironically, having excluded them in the past, continues to exclude them in its present, broken form.

In this respect, my study contributes to the area of Modernist studies in two ways. Firstly, it places Barnes within the rank of Modernist writers from which scholars typically exclude her, although Barnes enjoyed the friendship and admiration of such “high Modernist” artists as Eliot and Joyce.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, my study complicates current perceptions of Modernism and reminds us that, despite its reputation as a movement that



disdained traditional Western religion and discarded its symbols, Christianity remained a potent force within literary Modernism. With the critical turn toward cultural studies, more attention ought now shift towards religion as a cultural institution and a social force, and towards reconsidering religion's significance in Modernist literature--a literary movement defined by its secularism, its conviction that God is dead, and that literature must serve as a substitute for religion in a Godless century.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While Gilbert and Gubar detect a subdued anti-feminism in Eliot's poems, Tony Pinkney, parodying lines from Eliot's verse-satire, *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932), asserts that "any Eliotic text has to, needs to, wants to, in one way or another, do a girl in; and if it fails to achieve that goal, it is itself murderously threatened by the girl" (18). Pinkney claims, in other words, that unless the female's presence is eliminated, Eliot's speakers' identities, and even his poetry, face obliteration. "Conversation Galante," in which the speaker ridicules a woman as "the enemy of the eternal absolute" (14), illustrates Pinkney's view, as the speaker accuses the woman: "With your air indifferent and imperious / At a stroke our mad poetics to confute—" (16-17). Essentially, she undoes both speaker and verse.

<sup>2</sup> Several critics, among them Jane Marcus, Susan Hubert, and Victoria Smith, characterize Barnes as sexually and politically subversive as her fiction focuses on outcasts who carve out existences at society's borders. In the groundbreaking essay, "Laughing at Leviticus," Marcus asserts that Barnes's presentation of *Nightwood's* characters "constitute[s] a political case, a kind of feminist-anarchist call for freedom from fascism" (221); Shari Benstock celebrates Barnes as a model of a "Sapphic modernism" who "invokes the underside of high [male-identified] modernism" and critiques patriarchal culture ("Expatriate" 102). As Christianity remains tightly bound with patriarchy, a reader might assume that Barnes would consistently attack the church, yet her writing often appears ambivalent about, rather than antagonistic towards, religion. This tendency resonates with Phillip Herring's assertion that Barnes "was deeply respectful of religion and envied those who had religious faith, but . . . for her, religion was essentially a mystery" (305).

<sup>3</sup> Herring, Barnes's biographer and critic, records that in the course of their work on *Nightwood*, "Barnes came to love and deeply respect T. S. Eliot and would depend on his advice for many years" (234). Likewise, Eliot kept a photograph of Barnes on his wall at Faber, "between his wife and W. B. Yeats, and just above Paul Valéry and Groucho Marx" (234).

<sup>5</sup> In his introduction, Eliot recalls "the Puritan morality" that assumes people who are "thrifty, enterprising, intelligent, practical and prudent . . . ought to have a happy and 'successful' life" (xv). In contrast, contemporary liberalism suggests "all individual misery is the fault of 'society,' and is remediable by alterations from without" (xv). Despite their differences, Eliot argues, the two positions "are the same" insofar as they focus on material existence; "surrender[ing] out wills to temporal ends" results in corruption and decay—consumption by the worm (xv).

<sup>6</sup> Much of the scholarship from the past twenty years ignores or minimizes the novel's use of religion. Notable exceptions include Laura J. Veltman's "'The Bible Lies the One Way, But the Night-Gown the Other': Dr. Matthew O'Connor, Confession, and Gender

in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," and Mairead Hanrahan's "Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*: The Cruci-Fiction of the Jew."

<sup>7</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, Catholicism featured what "had come to be seen as an inseparable part of Catholic piety . . . Marian devotions such as the Rosary, the thrice-daily recitation of the Angelus, and the practice of setting aside the month of May as the 'Month of Mary'" (Heimann 71). In a 1902 *Ladies Home Journal* editorial, J. Cardinal Gibbons exhorted American women to disregard hopes for enfranchisement, and to remember, "the model held up before you and all women is Mary, the mother of Christ. She is the great pattern of virtue, and all that goes to make her the perfect woman alike to maiden, wife, and mother" (277).

<sup>8</sup> In his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams notes Nietzsche's effect on early twentieth-century literature (175), as do James McFarlane in his exploration of "The Mind of Modernism" (79), and Michael Bell in his overview of "The Metaphysics of Modernism" (10).

<sup>9</sup> As Cleo McNally Kearns suggests, scholars who emerged after the movement's "first audience," such as Malcolm Bradbury, "approached modernism with discernment and respect, but they were often tone deaf to its religious roots, seeing its provocative and impious discourse as arising from nothing more than a kind of enlightened secularism" (Kearns 172).

<sup>10</sup> Certainly, Eliot's Christian verse has received plentiful critical attention; Ronald Schuchard, and A. David Moody, among others, have written extensively on Eliot's religious poems. However, when considering the feminine image, critics typically focus on "Ash-Wednesday" because the figure clearly contradicts Eliot's earlier representations of women. In several cases, critics, such as Colleen Lamos, read "Ash-Wednesday's" idealized female as a reflection of Eliot's own sexual unease. Chapter four explores this issue in detail.

<sup>11</sup> Astradur Eysteinnsson also suggests that reading male and female productions side-by-side both "challenge[s]" those works and "aggravat[es] their internal conflicts" so that we might pose new questions and understand the texts in a new way (99). Moreover, Eysteinnsson argues that such a challenge would precipitate a reassessment of the canon,

<sup>12</sup> Recent examples of such works include David Chinitz's *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, which discusses Eliot's literary conversation with mass culture; Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island: Modernity and National Culture in England*, analyzes Anglocentrism and "the late modernist anthropological turn"; Andrea Zengulys's *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage*, focuses on Modernist writers' imaginative geographies and the rise of the "heritage industry."

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough review of the critical misapprehensions about Eliot's role in *Nightwood*, please see Georgette Fleischer's "Djuna Barnes and T. S. Eliot: The Politics and Poetics

of *Nightwood*.” In his biography, *Djuna: The Life and Works of Djuna Barnes*, Phillip Herring also views Eliot's work as collaborative rather than dictatorial.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Chisolm's argument that, in his introduction, and in editing *Nightwood* with an eye towards potential censorship, “Eliot produces a ‘modernist’ (as opposed to a realist) text, and he legitimizes a ‘modernist’ (as opposed to a homosexual) identity. Eliot's Barnes is a ‘modernist writer’ whose treatment of perverse material is literary--not deviant” (175). While Chisolm persuasively argues that Eliot avoids asserting the characters' identities as homosexual, he also resists viewing the characters as “psychopathic,” the contemporary view of homosexuals. Significantly, as I will show, Barnes herself chose to structure *Nightwood* as an anti-realist text.

<sup>15</sup> Plumb also deflates another contention, that Eliot foregrounded O'Connor's character and minimized Vote's; as Barnes wrote to Emily Coleman in June 1935 that her revisions made *Nightwood* “still more the Doctors and Noras book” [sic] (qtd. in Plumb xiii). Eliot and Barnes came into contact only after October 1935.

## CHAPTER II

“THE SKULL BENEATH THE SKIN”: CLASSICISM, UNITARIANISM, AND  
HISTORY IN ELIOT’S CRITICISM AND *ARA VOS PREC*

Famously, Eliot converted to Anglicanism in 1927. The following year, in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), he asserted, “The general point of my view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion” [sic] (7). The contrast between the experimental, iconoclastic young modernist and the man who affiliated himself with “obsolete institutions” (Gordon 226) results in a perceived discontinuity in Eliot’s poetic and critical timeline, with 1927 as a date of rupture.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the progression from his early expressions of communicative impotence in works such as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady”; his brutal and despairing middle verse, such as “Gerontion” and *The Waste Land*; and his explicitly religious later poetry from “Ash-Wednesday” to *Four Quartets*, appears uneven. Additionally, his theories of literary tradition, initially based in aesthetics, and which, after 1927, turned toward “a moral and religious doctrine of orthodoxy” (Schuchard 52), implies an abrupt change. Recent opinions, however, reconsider such conventional wisdom, and view Eliot’s conversion, monarchism, and classicism as the end result of a long process—one which his poetic and critical work reflected all along.

Current scholars, including Rudolf Germer, A. David Moody, Jewel Spears Brooker, and Ronald Schuchard, “have been inclined to see the 1927 announcement as simply formalizing inclinations there from the beginning of Eliot’s public career” (McDonald 179). Eliot’s religious inclinations grew increasingly evident in 1916-1920, well in advance of those purportedly abrupt actions in 1927. If a rupture in Eliot’s poetic output exists, it lies not in the period between “The Hollow Men” and “Ash-Wednesday,” but in the years between the composition of the poems included in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and those of *Ara Vos Prec* (1920).

In 1917’s “Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry,” Eliot wrote that, “Any poet, if he is to survive as a writer beyond his twenty-fifth year, must alter; he must seek new literary influences; he will have different emotions to express” (177). Moody claims that the statement applies equally to Eliot, who turned 25 in 1913, “the year after he completed the ‘Prufrock’ group” (55). However, for Eliot, the pivotal year appears to have been his 27<sup>th</sup>. He wrote half of the poems gathered in *Prufrock and Other Observations* between 1909 and 1912, and the remaining pieces in 1914-1915 (Ricks, *Inventions* xxxvii-xli).<sup>2</sup> However, following the last of the “Prufrock” poems, Eliot found himself unable to write. As he related in a 1959 interview, “I thought I’d dried up completely. I hadn’t written anything for some time and was rather desperate” (qtd. in Svarny 71). This dry period lasted for approximately two years, during which Eliot completed his dissertation, wrote criticism, and immersed himself in materials he covered as an extension lecturer.<sup>3</sup>

Eliot's dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (1916) focused on philosophical Idealism, specifically, the ideas of F. H. Bradley and, incidentally, Bernard Bosanquet.<sup>4</sup> Eliot's thesis concerns the unity of knowledge—physical and mental, historical and contemporary, relational and individual—within the Absolute, “the all-inclusive experience outside of which nothing shall fall” (*Knowledge* 31). Eliot completed his dissertation in April 1916 while working as a schoolmaster in London (9). In the autumn of 1916, while still engaged as a teacher, Eliot taught a series of extension courses for Oxford University and the University of London. In 1917 and 1918, he also presented a series of lectures “under the auspices of the London County Council” (Gallup 343). Topics in these classes, including modern French literature, English literary history, and Elizabethan literature, merged with his philosophical queries about the nature of history and the possibility of an Absolute. Eliot drew on this pool of ideas as he began to develop a new poetic, and ideological, phase that included an inclination towards religious belief.

As Ronald Schuchard argues, “by 1916 Eliot's classical, royalist, and religious point of view was already formulated” (52). Evidence for this view exists in Eliot's syllabus for his 1916 Oxford-affiliated lecture series; Eliot took Modern French Literature as his topic. In that course's syllabus, Eliot set forth a number of definitions that signify his familiarity, and implicit agreement with, ideas expressed by the critic and Imagist poet T. E. Hulme and the leader of the reactionary political movement, *Action Francaise*, Charles Maurras; both men called for a return to catholicity of belief, a centralization in authority.<sup>5</sup> Key to their formulations of the modern world lay the

opposition of Romanticism and Classicism. In his syllabus, Eliot assessed that Romanticism “stands for *excess* in any direction. It splits into two directions: escape from the world of fact, and devotion to brute fact. The two great currents of the nineteenth century—vague emotionality and the apotheosis of science (realism) alike springs from Rousseau” (qtd. in Schuchard 27). In opposition, Eliot qualified “the ideals of classicism . . . as *form* and *restraint* in art, *discipline* and *authority* in religion, *centralization* in government (either as socialism or monarchy). The classicist point of view has been defined as essentially a belief in Original Sin—the necessity for austere discipline” (27-28). As humans are innately fallible creatures, “truth” must lie outside of the individual.

Eliot’s definitions echo those of T. E. Hulme; scholars disagree about the extent of Eliot’s knowledge of Hulme’s theories before the posthumous publication of *Speculations* in 1924, but Eliot assigned Hulme’s translation of Georges Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* (1916) for his lectures on French literature.<sup>6</sup> He also reviewed the work for the July 1917 edition of *The Monist*, in which Eliot drew the reader’s attention to Hulme’s preface, noting: “The footnotes to [Hulme’s] introduction should be read” (qtd. in Csengeri xxviii). These footnotes detail Hulme’s belief that the fundamental opposition between Classicism and Romanticism lies in “the conviction that man is by nature bad or limited, and can consequently only accomplish anything of value by discipline, ethical, heroic, or political. In other words, it believes in Original Sin. We may define Romantics, then, as all who do not believe in the Fall of Man” (Hulme 250). Further, Hulme explains that “Romanticism confuses both human and divine things by not clearly separating them. The main thing with which it can be reproached is that it



blurs the clear outlines of human relations—whether in political thought or the treatment of sex in literature—by introducing into them the Perfection that properly belongs only to the non-human” (250). In this respect, Hulme’s distinction between Romanticism and Classicism echoes the debate over immanent and transcendent theologies that began in the eighteenth century and continued into the twentieth.

Prior to the early nineteenth century, Christians comprehended the Deity as transcendent and immanent, at once distinct from and present within the physical universe; God, therefore, remained a dominating figure who ordered human lives—there existed a “strict division between natural and supernatural” (Hedley 31). Due to romanticist influences, however, “nineteenth century theology blurred the edges between the two” (31). By minimizing “transcendence,” or God’s role as an external authority, nineteenth century doctrine emphasized immanence, the innateness of God’s presence in all things, which permitted a more personal, affective view of God that relied on faith in human’s reason and innate moral sense. Effectively, man, through questioning his behavior and performing good works, could guarantee his own salvation. Such a view corresponded with that of T. S. Eliot’s New England Unitarian family, and which he rebelled against in his philosophy and, ultimately, in his acceptance of Anglican orthodoxy and the pursuit of a transcendent God that drove his middle and later verse.

In 1930, T. S. Eliot published “Thoughts After Lambeth,” a commentary on the recent Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops. Within the article, Eliot expressed his hope that “modern youth” might be attracted to Christianity, noting that “twenty years ago a young man attracted by metaphysical speculation was usually indifferent to

theology, I believe that today a similar young man is more ready to believe that theology is a masculine discipline, than were those of my generation. If the capacity for faith be no greater, the prejudice against it is less . . . .” (322). Eliot welcomes skepticism, then, because the perceived bias against religion lessened following the Great War; something shifted culturally, and Christianity underwent a redefinition of sorts. In Eliot’s view, this definition fell along gendered lines; if theology had failed as a masculine pursuit, then it must have succeeded as a feminine—or feminized—interest or activity.<sup>7</sup> Eliot reflects a view that emerged in America and Britain in the nineteenth century. As Joy Dixon notes, “the tendency to conflate women and the spiritual with the private is partly the legacy of early nineteenth-century evangelicalism, which helped to shape the divisions between public and private within middle-class culture and to identify both women and spirituality with the ostensibly private sphere of the home” (7). Similarly, Eliot’s perception of a feminized religion reflected a then-current point of view among actively religious communities and recalls his, and Hulme’s, division between Romanticism and Classicism insofar as many Christian communities privileged notions of immanence and the minimization of Original Sin; each of these arose with Romanticism’s revolt against the Enlightenment and the celebration of the individual.

As Ann Douglas notes, “American Calvinism possessed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and lost in the nineteenth, a toughness, a sternness, an intellectual rigor which our society then and since has been accustomed to identify with ‘masculinity’ in some not totally inaccurate if circular sense” (18). The shift away from an orthodoxy that exemplified God as a stern, paternal authority, Christ as the redeemer sacrificed for

human sins, and humans as tainted by original sin occurred with the Enlightenment stress on human reason and the subsequent, Romantic, belief in humanity's innate goodness. Consequently, the "gubernatorial" view of God became "a fundamentally maternal and affective one" (124). The Boston-centered Unitarian Church, a liberal branch of Congregationalism, exemplified this change in religious views, for Unitarians emphasized humanity's reason and moral nature rather than the figure of God as a controlling authority. In "Unitarian Christianity: Most Favorable to Piety" (1826), William Ellery Channing, one of the church's leading theologians, argued for a liberating faith free of a threatening Godhead, declaring, "Urge not upon us a system which makes existence a curse, and wraps the universe in gloom. Leave us the cheerful light, the free and healthful atmosphere of a liberal and rational faith . . . ." (391). Unitarianism developed as a reaction to evangelical pietism and the "Puritan conviction of man's innate sinfulness [and] doctrine of damnation, their tests of orthodoxy and heresy, and undemocratic distinctions between church members" (Gordon 19). Instead, Unitarians "spoke of the human moral nature, our rational capacity, our freedom to choose or reject the doctrines taught and the promises offered by the Christian religion" (Gaustad and Schmidt 158).

Indeed, Unitarians rejected primary tenets of Christian doctrine such as the tripartite nature of God; instead of a threefold Absolute, Unitarians privileged the oneness—the unity—of God. They also, importantly for Eliot, rejected the concept of original sin as "irrational and unscriptural" (Channing qtd. in Gaustad and Schmidt 158). Eliot's grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, a Unitarian minister, renamed it "original

imperfection,” which accounts for both the human tendency to perform evil as well as “the equally strong tendencies to good; amiable dispositions and a natural love of truth and purity” (133). The softening of doctrine, and the instinctual faith in human nature, required a certain amount of skepticism, which inspired critical inquiry. This skepticism could neutralize the power of religion by making it affective, as Douglas suggests, a source of emotional release and succor, rather than directive and authoritative.

Eliot included among his ancestors several notable Unitarians, perhaps most significantly, his grandfather, who relocated the family from New England to St. Louis, Missouri in order to establish the first Unitarian Church on the country’s frontiers. The theologian’s faith required him to query doctrine, to “prove all things and hold fast to what is good” and to “search both the Bible and his own conscience to do what is right” (Greenleaf Eliot 7). In the Eliot household, rather than following rigid doctrine, religion signified a dedication to pursuing good works and “the subordination of selfish interests to the good of Community and Church” (Gordon 14); Greenleaf Eliot stressed the sublimation of “the lower principles of our nature” for higher, spiritual ones that often manifested in good works. For the elder Eliot, God’s goodness operated through humanity, and so people “must work [for] His working is through our working” (139). Yet the focus on self-abnegation and community work failed to feed the spirit for many, among them, T. S. Eliot. Gordon claims that “Eliot’s fervent nature found no nourishment [in the Unitarian Church], and by the time he enrolled at Harvard he had become indifferent to the Church” (18). Although Gordon primarily bases her argument

on Eliot's later spiritual views, his articles in the periodical press within ten years of beginning his Harvard studies justify her argument.

In the years 1915-1920, Eliot's wrote numerous signed and anonymous reviews of theological, philosophical, and psychological texts. While it would be impossible to glean Eliot's religious perspective from the reviews alone, they do create an ambiance that, in conjunction with his poetry, indicates the direction his views on religion would take. In these reviews, Eliot aims his chief criticisms at liberal tendencies in religious matters. Of these tendencies, Eliot singles out "Unitarianism," a term that approaches the pejorative. For example, in his 1916 review of *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics*, written by Hastings Rashdall, Eliot summarizes the author's belief that "moral judgments come from the intellectual part of our nature" (111). Yet, rather than evaluating that statement, Eliot concludes, instead, that Rashdall ends up "taking up a position hardly different from Unitarianism" (112), in that "All that is anarchic, or unsafe, or disconcerting in what Jesus said and did is either denied or boiled away . . . ." (112). Rashdall liberalizes Christianity by minimizing asceticism and celibacy, but he also encourages materialism by denying Christ's perceived Socialist tendencies and by supporting private property (112). In his conclusion, Eliot presents the author's motive:

the following of Christ is "*made easier*" by thinking of him "as the being in whom that union of God and man after which all ethical religion aspires is most fully accomplished." Certain saints found the following of Christ very hard, but modern methods have facilitated everything. Yet I am not so sure, after reading modern theology, that the pale Galilean has conquered. (112)

Rashdall's minimization of Christ's role mirrors that of Unitarians; William Ellery Channing critiqued overemphasizing Christ's redemptive power, for such a view

“inclines to exaggerate the darkness and desperateness of man’s present condition” (393). De-emphasizing Christ’s role as redeemer, humanizing him and making religion easier, decenters and sentimentalizes faith, a perspective that Eliot scorns. His concluding statement includes an allusion to Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “Hymn to Proserpine,” in which a dying man laments Christ’s usurpation of Rome’s gods. The speaker concedes “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has gone gray from thy / breath; / We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death” (35-37). In wondering whether Christ had, indeed, succeeded, Eliot suggests that Christianity has strayed from its original intent; moreover, the review exemplifies the pull towards asceticism, and the belief in working for faith: ideals he later examined in verse.

The review also points towards Eliot’s reaction to *The Education of Henry Adams*, which he reviewed for *The Athenaeum* in 1919. In “A Skeptical Patrician,” Eliot implies that he identifies with Adams’s Unitarian upbringing; he wrote that Adams suffered from “the Boston doubt: a scepticism which is difficult to explain to those who are not born to it. This scepticism is a product, or a cause, or a concomitant, of Unitarianism; it is not destructive, but it is dissolvent” (361).<sup>8</sup> It is generally assumed that Eliot experienced a similar “doubt” (Skaff 8-9). Adams’s “doubt” precipitated a lifelong struggle to grasp a finite truth, an issue he initially grappled with at the age of ten, when he “found himself standing face to face with a dilemma . . . . What was he? Where was he going? Even then he felt that something was wrong, but he concluded that it must be Boston” (Adams 21). As he grew older, Adams experimented with travel, religion, history, and science in his search for a “force” that exemplified some ideal truth.

Adams's experience with Unitarianism began with clergymen who, "insisted on no doctrine, but taught, or tried to teach, the means of leading a virtuous, useful, unselfish life, which they held to be sufficient for salvation" (34). The placid self-assuredness confused the young man, if "the problem was worked out" by man, what was God's purpose? Unitarianism, then, failed Adams in his search for a foundational truth, who later wrote:

Of all the conditions of his youth which afterwards puzzled the grown-up man, this disappearance of religion puzzled him most. The boy went to church twice every Sunday; he was taught to read his Bible, and he learned religious poetry by heart; he believed in a mild deism; he prayed; he went through all the forms; but neither to him nor to his brothers and sisters was religion real . . . . The religious instinct had vanished, and could not be revived, although one made in later life many efforts to recover it. (34)

Adams's family shared the same commitment to public work as Eliot's, and the same devotion to reason; yet both men sensed a void formerly filled by "the religious instinct." Both men also shared "the Boston doubt," but Adams's skepticism reached extreme proportions. As Eliot noted, although "a great many thing interested [Adams] he could believe in nothing . . . . Wherever the man stepped, the ground did not simply give way, it flew into particles . . ." (361-62). Try as he might, Adams never found a means of filling the void left by religion's vacancy; his attempts always failed. Eliot's search to fill a similar void, begun at Harvard University where he focused on philosophy, eventually led him to embrace the Anglican Church. His approach to orthodoxy plays out in his poems, for Eliot examines not only the fragmented nature of reality, but also the inability, the lack, of various experiences and belief systems to provide an overarching meaning outside of oneself or outside of time. An Absolute proves impossible.

*Ara Vos Prec and Poems (1920)*

In 1919, the Woolf's Hogarth Press published Eliot's *Poems*. Its seven pieces later appeared in 1920's *Ara Vos Prec* (U. K.) and *Poems* (U. S. A.).<sup>9</sup> These volumes introduce ideas that Eliot continued to explicate and exploit well into the 1930s. As Eliot's first collected verse following the Great War's end, it reflects a level of brutality, satiric and metaphysical, quite distinct from the earlier works; as Eloise Knapp Hay describes the poems, the collection features "Eliot's ruthless airing . . . of animosities against religious, philosophical and sexual habits" (31). Certainly, the collection introduces a series of debased sexualized types that the poems identify as bestial. Perhaps the most noted of these types is the "apeneck" and "broad bottomed" Sweeney, who complicates, as "Sweeney Erect" implies, Emerson's assertion that "the lengthened shadow of a man / Is history"; if the Transcendentalist viewed "the silhouette / Of Sweeney straddled in the sun," he might think otherwise. Sweeney's female companions, prostitutes and gluttons, similarly reflect animalistic tendencies. In "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," Rachel *née* Rabinovitch "Tears at the grapes with murderous paws," and "Whispers of Immortality" features the "pneumatic" Grishkin whose "rank feline smell" exceeds the "subtle effluence of cat" emitted by a Brazilian jaguar. The poems' animalistic figures reinforce the brutality of a soulless contemporary civilization, where sensual gratification overwhelms the need to become, like the Donne of "Whispers," "Expert beyond experience," or to consider what exists beyond "mere" experience.

When not aligning humans with beasts, Eliot identifies them as reflections of a rotting culture, "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" for example, relies on



the promiscuous, “phthisic” Princess Volupine to indicate Venice’s moral and physical decay. Most problematically, the poem suggests that the root of Venice’s corruption lies with “the jew” who is “underneath the lot.”<sup>10</sup> Such corruption also finds itself the focus of Eliot’s two Church-centered poems in the volume, “The Hippopotamus” and “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Service.”

Both poems take a satiric look at the Church, which the poet clearly finds lacking. The biblical epigraph to “The Hippopotamus” signals the poet’s target: the epistle to the Laodiceans chastises the churchgoers for their lukewarm faith: “you are neither hot nor cold, Would that you were cold or hot!” (Rev 3.15). The poem’s argument, that despite its limitations and errancies, the Hippopotamus achieves a Heavenly reward: “Among the saints he shall be seen / Performing on a harp of gold” while, in contrast, “the True Church remains below / Wrapt in the old miasmal mist” (35-36). The True Church, although “based upon a rock,” remains indolent. It “need never stir / To gather in its dividends” (11-12), as “The Church can sleep and feed at once” (24). The institution forsakes its duty. As Smith suggests, “The church, if spiritually asleep, is incapable of good; the hippopotamus is awake at least part of the time, and, though capable of error, he is also capable of reform . . . .” (40). Eliot sets forth similar arguments in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service,” which, as Moody notes, opens with a word, “Polyphiloprogenitive,” which fails to address the Word; instead, “polyphiloprogenitive” “means to be busy about begetting, increasing and multiplying” (63). In other words, “the one” Word becomes “the many” words produced by “The sapient sutlers of the Lord” (2). “Sutlers” denotes people who follow armies with the intent of selling supplies to soldiers;

even in its widest sense, “sutlers” act as suppliers; the poem implies a corruption of the Word, motivated by pecuniary interests. As a result, people attend church services with “invisible and dim” souls while “Clutching piaculative pence.” The church no longer meets the people’s spiritual needs. In contrast, the cracked, browned, work of an artist “of the Umbrian school,” manages to retain its original image of Christ, where “Still shine the unoffending feet.” The artist successfully captures the idea of Christ, in Christian belief the Word become flesh, and the artist’s original image, although showing its age, remains visible over the centuries. In contrast, the Church becomes neutralized, for it no longer imparts its original message. The appearance of Sweeney, whose shadow might disprove Emerson’s optimistic view of human evolution, and who enjoys fleshly pleasures (unlike the self-castrated Origen) introduces a secular element into the poem. As Erik Svarny notes, the introduction of Sweeney “is a laconic and emphatic vision of insentient physicality, that serves to contrast a debased present with the spiritualized flesh of Christ” (160). The final result, perhaps, of the diluted Word, the simian Sweeney sits, “shift[ing] from ham to ham,” in a bath that echoes the baptismal font.

In the 1920 volume, history, as philosophical and religious tradition, and sexuality set up an opposition that distracts and complicates the possibility of a cohesive perspective; humanity can perform as Origen, who castrated himself in order to perfect his spirituality, or as a Sweeney or Grishkin, whose identity remains involved in the flesh. Essentially, rather than misanthropy, the 1920 volume deals with the inadequacy of past ideals to unify the post-war world and the improbability of repairing modernity’s rupture from the past. Though the quatrain poems all concern human frailties,

“Gerontion” fits these weaknesses together in the “dry thoughts” of an old man who lacks all other senses.

Of the 1920 poems, the first in the collection, “Gerontion” remains most significant. It represents not only Eliot’s then-current state of belief, but it also anticipates such poems as *The Waste Land* and “The Hollow Men,” in which Eliot further explored the dialectic between sense and intellect and the absence of spirituality. “Gerontion” also colors the poems that follow it in the 1920 book, painting the men and women with suspicion, as they exist in a physical reality where promiscuity—physical, intellectual, and spiritual—denies cohesion or transcendent hope. In “Gerontion,” as in the collection’s other poems, women play a type of *femme fatale* who leads men into physical or philosophical indiscretions as the speaker articulates an emotional barrenness and intimates a longing for—and fear of—spiritual atonement.

Eliot published “Gerontion” in all three collections between 1919 and 1920. He considered “printing Gerontion as prelude [to *The Waste Land*] in book or pamphlet form,” but when he asked Pound’s opinion, the “*cher maitre*” replied “I do *not* advise printing Gerontion as preface. One dont miss it AT all as the thing now stands. To be more lucid still, let me say that I advise you NOT to print Gerontion as prelude” [sic] (Eliot, *Letters* 504-05). “Gerontion” shares several qualities with *The Waste Land*, most prominently the themes of spiritual despair, immobilized will, and the horrors of living within history. The poem speaks of impotence in the face of dissolution—that of the “house” of Europe, of tradition, and of the self in modernity as it articulates one man’s “Thoughts of a dry brain” in an incoherent, rootless world lacking “the Word.” Its

replacements—aestheticism, eroticism, and emotional banality—result in a mechanistic view of humanity where souls become “fractured atoms.” Without faith, humanity, spiritually passionless, remains caught in the temporal world of deceptive, feminized history.

The poem focuses on present experience (both personal and cultural) in conflict with the historic past, and it appears to exercise Eliot’s knowledge of Bradley’s philosophy of the Absolute, in which “all the divisions of this world, subject and object, mind and matter, person and person, and in addition, all possible points of view, will be resolved” (Skaff 13). So long as we remain caught in a web of relational thought and experience, we cannot perceive the Absolute. As Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley explain, “Gerontion” applies Bradley’s notions of the Absolute in terms of history as a “closed system” that we experience and evaluate from an internal position (52). To impose order on that relational experience, we must seek a “higher view,” a point from which we perceive the whole system. Eliot wrote of a similar ordering in a contemporaneous essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Within the article, Eliot posits “existing monuments [of art] form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them . . . the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (38-39). The new work of art must be viewed as part of that closed system rather than as an independent work, for “No poet, no artist, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (38). Both history and literary

tradition are, in effect, closed, ideal systems that are modified by innovation, but the system corrects itself so that it maintains an ideal order, but one might only view that order from an outside position. “Gerontion,” a “little old man” who seems to reside both within and outside of history, attempts such a perspective, but he fails; the figure of Gerontion offers no “birds-eye” view as, for example, Tiresias provides in *The Waste Land*. Consequently, the poem lacks a coherent thematic pattern; “Gerontion’s” erratic stream-of-consciousness delivery indicates that the speaker remains trapped within history and unable to achieve a higher, ordering perception; consequently, “Gerontion” fractures and evades consistent meaning.

“Gerontion,” written entirely as an interior monologue, relies on dislocation and fragmentation so that the poem rejects linear, cohesive readings. The speaker moves abruptly between ideas and emotions, conflating past and present, personal and public. Because of the sudden shifts, highly connotative vocabulary, and thematic incoherence, “terrors and vacuities of great scope are suggested but nothing is identified or separated from the infinite web of possibilities, [the speaker’s ‘dry brain’] is simply a zone where more or less energetic notions are incorporated, to agitate themselves tirelessly . . . .” (Kenner 127-28). “Gerontion” fails to affix overall meaning as it fluctuates between personal experience, religious tradition, and European history; Gerontion, in a phrase from *The Waste Land*, ultimately “can connect nothing with nothing.”

Eliot intensifies the poem’s historical sense with archaicisms (“concoctions”), and mimicking of Jacobean syntax (“I who was near your heart was removed therefrom”). Such linguistic ploys suggest that humanity exists in both current and past history; the

phrasing also alludes to what he called the “dissolution and chaos” of the Jacobean period, which doubles back to the “dissolution” of Europe and “chaos” of war occurring during the poem’s composition. Eliot also relies on allusions to writers as diverse as Henry Adams, Lancelot Andrewes, and Jacobean playwrights such as Middleton and Rowley, to contextualize and reinforce meaning. While, as Bernard Bergonzi argues, Eliot’s “use of these sources is not obtrusive, and the reader who is unaware will not lose anything” (54), the allusions amplify thematic elements and connote a rich variety of meanings, so that both the moral chaos Eliot saw in Jacobean drama and Andrewes’s liturgical chastisements reflect onto modern society.

Eliot’s references to the Elizabethans emphasize what Gerontion sees—the futile existence of modern peoples, the misdirections and blind alleys offered by history or progress, and the lack of cultural or philosophical coherence in a world that prioritizes individualism over a communal system of belief to which one can attach oneself. As he noted in the essay “Four Elizabethan Dramatists” (1924), the 16th century mindset, “the general attitude toward life . . . is one of anarchism, of dissolution, of decay” (18). In Eliot’s view, this “dissolution” led to the “dissociation of sensibility” he discussed in “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921) and clarified in the 1925 Clark Lectures.<sup>11</sup> The dissociation of thought and feeling, “from which we have never recovered” led to Romanticism and the initiation of the glorification of individualism that produced, in Eliot’s view, the disintegration of the “mind of Europe” he wrote of in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (*Varieties* 158-59). As Eliot evasively notes, “The Elizabethans are in fact part of the movement of progress or deterioration which has culminated in . . . the

present regimen of Europe” (“Four” 18). Recalling Eliot’s ambivalence about post-Elizabethan culture, it might be supposed that Eliot agreed that “deterioration” led to the current state of Europe, which, when Eliot wrote the article, was only six years out of the Great War. “Gerontion,” written in the aftermath of the war, reflects on the results of cultural deterioration.

“Gerontion” pits the machinations of history (personified as a woman) against spirituality (in the figure of Christ) within the mind of an old man who lives in a dry wasteland (reminiscent of a battlefield) populated by “Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds” (12). The vegetation implies at once parasitism and sterility. Stonecrop, or sedum, grows on rocks, and its fleshy leaves store water for long periods to see it through drought. Most mosses, on the other hand, require moisture to survive. In other words, the vegetation might desiccate, but it awaits rain for renewal. Iron, which recalls battle weapons (as in the cutlass) adds an air of rigidity (oddly, if exposed to rain, iron rusts),<sup>12</sup> while “merds,” both toxic and fertile, indicate a sterile geography that reflects the speaker’s sterility of sense: he lacks “sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch” (59). The landscape reinforces his position in a borderland between spirituality and meaninglessness, one inhabited by voices correspondent to those in *The Waste Land* and “The Hollow Men.”

The old man defines his past not by his accomplishments, but by recalling historic battles in which he played no role:

I was neither at the Hot Gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought. (3-7)

The references to the “hot gates”—the Battle of Thermopylae—and to an apparently tropical naval fight (“warm rain,” “salt marsh”), which evokes 1914-1918’s muddy trench warfare, establish the speaker’s sense of failure, and the poignant repetition of “fought” underscores his heroic failure, for by not enacting the masculine role of warrior, he also declined enacting history. References to war recur throughout the poem, as in the allusions to the Great War, in which “the jew” was “Blistered in Brussels / Patched and Peeled in London.”

The little old man, a “dull head” without “sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch,” informs the reader, “My house is a decayed house.” The “house” connotes a variety of meanings that collapse, where “house” might well refer to the speaker himself—his physical self as an old, blind man, which “decays, however, like Europe; which in a hall of mirrors four old men in 1919 rearranged . . .” (Kenner 125). In this sense, *Gerontion* becomes the representative of a ravaged, aged, and ineffectual civilization, an idea emphasized, and complicated, in the following lines,

the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
Spawned in some estaminet in Antwerp,  
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London. (8-10)

The appositive “jew,” the landlord who keeps watch on the speaker,<sup>13</sup> provides some evidence of Eliot’s anti-Semitism; The words “squats” and “spawned” connote animalism, “blistered,” “patched” and “peeled” point to disfigurement, and “the jew’s” birth in a Belgian cafe, in a center of capitalism, recalls stereotypes of Jewish economic power.



Critics note that Eliot often used Jews to indicate “those in Western culture who are not integrated in place (a particular national tradition) or time (a particular historical tradition)” (Mayer 228). In Eliot’s work, Jews symbolize cultural disunity or decay—a rootless presence both within and without the larger cultural community. Anthony Julius’s analysis of Eliot’s anti-Semitic impulse in “Gerontion” emphasizes this symbolism by contending that Eliot establishes a “metaphoric relation” between the squatting, spawned Jew and the lines describing the landscape where a “goat coughs at night” in a field of “Rocks, moss, stonecrop iron, merds” (133). The juxtaposition identifies the Jew with the bestial, the sterile, and the excretory—all of which normative society excludes. Yet, while Julius notes that “the landlord is disfigured, possibly mutilated,” he fails to explain why: the terms “blasted,” “patched” and “peeled” point to injuries suffered in the Great War and their treatment in London; the Jew, therefore, offered himself to this event in history, unlike Gerontion who never participated in armed struggle.

At the same time, however, Julius argues that the poem’s anti-Semitism remains “subordinate”; that is, “the Jews are relegated to a supporting part. They are dismissed, not attacked; placed rather than challenged” (174). However, “the jew” plays a larger role in the poem than Julius’s reading permits. Moody suggests that the landlord represents “the Chosen People become a low modern type; his genealogy is a truncated parody, bearing witness to the Diaspora, and to the flight of refugees from Belgium in 1914; instead of the Promised Land, he has attained a rentable slum” (67). Moody’s interpretation maintains the Jew’s signification of cultural decay, but his sympathetic

reading bespeaks Western civilization's failure to recognize "the Chosen People," as well as the withholding of God's pledge. In this sense, the Jew's abjection might be seen as contributing to cultural decay; it almost certainly contributes to Gerontion's.

Rather than a background or supporting figure, as Julius argues, the "jew" becomes the poem's thematic backbone and the poem's most significant figure besides the speaker himself. As Hugh Kenner argues, "to the extent that the house is Gerontion's consciousness, the Jew is Christ waiting to take back what has been lent" (129).<sup>14</sup> The modern Christ, the pale Galilean, returns, but his rebirth parodies the nativity—rather than a stable, he arrives in a smoking café. As Kenner reads the poem, Christ is a "slum landlord," unrecognized, abject, and this explains the lack of "religious awe" during the sharing of the Eucharist (129). Christ becomes one of the Great War's walking wounded. He suffers from mustard gas exposure, and the great healer cannot heal himself; like many soldiers, having been "Blistered in Brussels," he receives treatment ("patched and peeled") in England. Debased in the post-war world, what can he sacrifice—in a devastated Europe—that might reawaken the spirit?

The brief second section introduces the poem's spiritual concerns more directly. Eliot based the stanza entirely on Lancelot Andrewes's nativity sermon of 1618, in which the bishop draws on the biblical books of Matthew and John to remind his congregants of miracles and humility's virtue: "Signs are taken for wonders. 'Master, we would fain see a sign' (Matt. xii.38), that is a miracle. And in this sense it is a sign to wonder at . . . . An infant; *Verbum infans*, the Word without a word; the eternal Word not able to speak a word" (200-01). Andrewes quotes the Pharisees' demand that Christ prove himself, to

which Christ responds, “an adulterous [e.g., turning away from God] generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah [an allusion to the three days between the crucifixion and resurrection]” (Mat. 12:39). Andrewes equates “the sign” with the Incarnation itself: the manifestation of the Word, which the book of John identifies as representative of God’s eternal power (1.1). The Incarnation, however, occurs only in the most humble of circumstances, “the Lord of glory without all glory” (Andrewes 201).

In a war-weary, cynical West that no longer recognizes the Messiah, and, consequently, requires a “sign,” Christ cannot return as a sacrificial lamb. Eliot emphasizes this idea syntactically: “In the juvescence of the year / Came Christ the tiger” Eliot’s neologism, “juvescence” implies both its “root ‘iuvare’ (to help, aid)” and “juvenescence,” the “youthful time of the year” (Moody 67). But the promise of the return results in a presentation of Christ’s nearly primal force—one that recalls Blake’s “The Tyger,” wherein the animal represents the terror and beauty of the deity’s power. Eliot also alludes to Andrewes’s nativity sermon of 1622, in which the latter chides the English for their religious laxity: “To Christ we cannot travel, but weather and way and all must be fair . . . . We love to make no very great haste. To other things perhaps; not to *adorare*, the place of the worship of God. Why should we? Christ is no wild-cat” (254). Without the threat of an angry god, people incline towards spiritual laziness and put off religious worship unless it is convenient.

Unlike the other stanzas, the second section ends with an enjambed line, maintaining Christ’s presence in the poem as “Christ the tiger” returns in “depraved

May” (the “juvencence of the year”). Several readers, including Grover Smith, point to “depraved May” as “the season of denial or crucifixion” (60). Such a reading is problematic, however, as Christians typically celebrate Christ’s Passion, which includes Peter’s denial, in April. May might echo with April’s loss, but it also follows the resurrection. Rather, the month symbolizes fecundity: in the nineteenth century, Catholics established the “practice of setting aside the month of May as the ‘Month of Mary’” (Heimann 71). In folk tradition, May is also associated with sexuality (as in the fertility rituals of May Day). Eliot’s poem focuses on the latter, with “dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,” images that he drew from *The Education of Henry Adams*, and which contrast with Gerontion’s dry waste.

In celebrating the “delicate grace and passionate depravity that marked the Maryland May” (268), Adams describes a licentious Washington spring, noting the “dogwood and the judas-tree, the azalea and the laurel. The tulip and the chestnut gave no sense of struggle against a stingy nature . . . . The brooding heat of the profligate vegetation; the cool charm of the running water; the terrific splendor of the June thunder-gust in the deep and solitary woods, were all sensual, animal, elemental” (268). Adams luxuriates in a fetishized nature; but while previous writers might have found the sublime in such beauty, for Adams it connotes primal, and pagan, erotic energies: he wrote that “he loved [nature] too much, as though it were Greek and half human” (268). Adams’s phrase recalls Hellenic nymphs, half human women who lived amidst nature and who consorted with satyrs and centaurs. Eliot complicates Adams’s portrait of nature within “Gerontion.” His allusions to Adams’s rampant vegetative eroticism, introduce a note of

sexuality as well as the suggestion of paganism, which Eliot exploits in the following stanza. Most significantly, however, alongside the sensuality of Adams's Maytime lays Christian legendry associating dogwood with Christ's cross and the eponymous Judas-tree with the betrayer's suicide. The references correspond to stanza four's "wrath-bearing tree," which at once recalls the cross, the tree from which Judas Iscariot hung himself, and Eden's tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Each of these signifies crime, punishment, and, for the latter two, sacrificial redemption.

The Christ whom Christianity had gradually feminized over the nineteenth century, and emasculated by the early twentieth, returns "To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk / Among whispers" (22-23) by a group representative of contemporary society. Kenneth Asher reads the lines as satirical references "to contemporary occult practice" (159), but he neglects to specify what practice he means. Donoghue also aligns the stanza with the occult, writing that the May verse introduces "a Black Mass of images and figures" (85). Yet of the several suggestive presences, introduced immediately after references to the whispered, mysterious debased Eucharist, only Madame de Tornquist evokes theosophy or spiritualism as she moves candles in the dark. The other presences indicate variations on aestheticism and sexuality: the tactile, restless, and suggestively sibilant Silvero who "caresses" as he participates in the Eucharist, the aesthete Hakagawa, who bows "among the Titians" apparently misplaces religious adoration, and Fräulein von Kulp (whose name, as many note, resembles the Latin *culpa*, or "guilt") who appears caught in some suspicious act as she turns in the hall with "one hand upon the door." Even so, although they evoke immorality, the group of "vacant shuttles" seems

not so much black magicians or trendy occultists as participants in a ritual from which meaning has vanished.

While at Harvard in 1913-14, Eliot attended Josiah Royce's seminar on comparative methodologies, for which he presented an essay on "The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual." Eliot's paper expounds on the ambiguity of defining religious experience and ascribing meaning to a religious ritual's participants.<sup>15</sup> According to Piers Gray, Eliot devoted much of the paper to critiquing sociologists who attempted to define a "science" or religion. Eliot thought this impossible, agreeing with Bradley that contemporary people might see "in the mind of the past . . . The views and beliefs of the present; or to think that we can reconstruct those beliefs; that would be to ignore the very nature of historical process" (Gray 130). As Eliot wrote in the introduction to his mother's work,

Some years ago, in a paper I wrote on *The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual*, I made an humble attempt to show that in many cases no interpretation of a rite could explain its origin. For the meaning of a series of acts is to the performers themselves an interpretation; the same ritual remaining practically unchanged may assume different meanings for different generations of performers; and the rite may have originated before "meaning" meant anything at all. (qtd. in Gray 127)

With each new community, and with each new individual, religious ritual changes—it shifts in such a way that, although the ritual in itself might remain static, its meaning resists fixity, with the result that "when we speak of the religious consciousness, we are simply unable to give any account of its development or evolution. The reason for this is precisely because there is no fixed vantage point outside the very process of historical change which can allow the objectivity integral to scientific description" (Gray 110).<sup>16</sup>

Because we exist within history, we remain related to those who lived and acted before us; the past, in a sense, remains a part of the present. As Eliot noted in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show” (39). To live in the “conscious present” means acknowledging this historical sense. Although, as Eliot argued in “*The Rite of Spring* and *The Golden Bough*,” the modern mind is “a continuation” of the “primitive” (qtd. in North 132); in terms of religion, we might describe its rituals, but we cannot *know* the rituals’ original meaning because with each new participant that meaning changes, and from our historical perspective, such interpretations become tainted with relativism based on modern assumptions and projections.<sup>17</sup> Spears Brooker and Bentley specify the seminar paper’s significance as it exemplifies Eliot’s view of “history as a sequence of varying interpretations of interpretations of interpretations, with subsequent interpretations blocking access to former ones” (117-18). Consequently, meaning becomes corrupt. In “Gerontion,” Eliot’s ideas from the seminar paper seep into the “Black Mass of images” who enact the Eucharist, for they do so after a series of interpretations and reinterpretations by generations of humans. With the onset of modern Christianity, which emphasized humanity’s power to “save” themselves, the rite’s meaning, if not lost, has certainly become diluted.

In an allusion to the book of Job, the speaker equates the figures with “vacant shuttles” that spend empty days, beaten about by the wind.<sup>18</sup> A motif throughout the poem, the wind symbolizes human futility in the face of an unseen force (Gerontion

describes himself as “a dull head among windy spaces” who lives “in a draughty house”). It also speaks of spiritual barrenness. Ronald Bush reads the wind motif as an echo of the *Inferno*’s punishment of sinners, such as Francesca and Paolo, who in life “*che le ragion sommettono al talento*” (“subject reason to lust”; 5.39; Carlyle 49), and which dooms them to an eternity in darkness, beaten about by a cold wind. Yet, as Marianne Thormählen convincingly argues, the poem fails to justify this reading: “Gerontion” may insinuate, but it fails to mention carnal sin (“What is the Wind Doing?” 125). She proposes, instead, that the wind echoes *Inferno*’s third canto, in which the Trimmers’ cries churn the air “*come la rena quando a turbo spira*” (“as sand when [it eddies in a whirlwind]”; 3.30; Carlyle 29). Thormählen’s suggestion seems well-suited to the poem’s context, and it certainly falls in line with Eliot’s numerous references to the Trimmers within his poetic work (e.g., *The Waste Land*, “The Hollow Men,” et. al.). Gerontion, like the Trimmers, seems to be neither sinful nor virtuous, and, as Thormählen asserts, “‘Gerontion’ is a poem concerned with cowardice, indecision, and inattentiveness—qualities characteristic of those whirling crowds whom both God and His enemies despise” (126). The allusion to Job reinforces such a reading by emphasizing Gerontion’s impotence, as well as that of Silvero, Hakagawa, de Tornquist, and von Kulp—representatives of the modern world who persist in enacting empty ritual.

The wind’s unseen force might also signify history, which we cannot direct, and which we cannot perceive while we live within it.<sup>19</sup> The poem focuses on this aspect of temporality in a passage that Smith identifies as a further allusion to Adams’s autobiography (62). The Bostonian’s search for a final truth in which to place his faith



included history, but, he discovered, history can be deceptive; historians “undertake to arrange sequences . . . assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect,” but Adams thought such assumptions “commonly unconscious and childlike, so much so, that if any captious critics were to drag them to light, historians would probably reply, with one voice, that they had never supposed themselves required to know what they were talking about” (382). The awareness of a synthetic past, composed of assumptions and false connections, disillusioned Adams, who decided “the sequence of men led to nothing, and the sequence of their society could lead no further, while the mere sequence of time was artificial, and the sequence of thought was chaos . . . .” (382). Gerontion appears to come to terms with a similar awareness as the poem shifts into series of directives (“Think now”) as the speaker discourses on the nature of history. In the tone and syntax of Jacobean drama that meshes the present and past, the speaker engages in further self-reflection while also directing the reader to consider history’s inadequacy as a source for meaning. Donoghue suggests that “History in this passage is the modern substitute for the large meaning traditionally offered by religion . . . . It is the nineteenth century project of replacing God by the secular interest of Progress” (87). The ideal of progress that inundated Christianity, including Unitarianism, relied on notions of innate morality and reason through which society could perfect itself. In Eliot’s poem, history, however, contorts and misleads.

Eliot evokes Eve in a stanza that opens and closes with references to Genesis (“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” and “These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree”), which recall a woman whose deception led to the expulsion. Similarly,

Eliot identifies history as a manipulative feminine principle of “many cunning passages, contrived corridors / and issues.” A note of frustrated eroticism runs beneath the stanza; history becomes a tease who gives only “when our attention is distracted,” and even then just enough so that the “giving famishes the craving.” As Kenner perceives it, history “metamorphose[s] into an immemorial harlot” comparable to Cleopatra (126). However, the section also resonates with Adams’s intimations that the subjective ordering of human experience, based on “ambitions” and “vanities,” results in a “contrived” cultural and personal past. In this understanding, history points away from “truth,” and what she divulges arrives either “too late” to be of use, or “too soon” to understand its purpose. Consequently, people “dispense” with it, but the disregard, the “refusal,” reveals the chaos of existence, and leads to fear of the unknown, of encroaching mortality, or the realization of a great loss. Such a refusal leads the speaker to attempt a “conclusion” before he “stiffens in a rented house.”

Critics disagree over whom Gerontion addresses in his attempt at “conclusion” or reconciliation in stanza six. Charles Williamson and John Crow Ransom believe he speaks to Christ, who figures so prominently in the second stanza, and who reappears “to devour” us in the opening verses of the fifth. Others, however, including Leonard Unger, Lyndall Gordon, and Donald Childs, think the speaker addresses a woman who may—or may not—be present. Childs’s argument extends from the poem’s pronouns, noting that because “Christ ‘the tiger’ devours ‘us,’ Christ is distinct from ‘us’ and presumably from the ‘we’ in the next line. There is no reason to assume that the ‘you’ addressed later is not one of those who apparently make up the ‘we’—the poet and at least one other person

who is not Christ” (101). The shift in pronouns complicates a theological reading but fails to exclude it entirely. As Smith asserts, “It would be easy to overstress the sexual content of the poem; much of what Gerontion is saying must be understood as pertaining also to his spiritual state” (63-64). Although Smith believes that Gerontion addresses a female, he acknowledges the mingling of the two issues in this highly connotative stanza that encapsulates sexuality and spirituality as the speaker mourns and excuses his inadequacies.

As Gerontion begins his apostrophe, “We have not reached conclusion, when I / Stiffen in a rented house,” he attempts to justify his defection—whether romantic or spiritual—from his communicant. “Stiffen” connotes both erection and morbidity; but while the “conclusion” may indicate orgasm, as Childs argues (102),<sup>20</sup> it also suggests resolution. Gerontion thinks ahead to his death, he tries to negotiate some understanding between himself and the person he speaks with. If a woman, Gerontion explains that: “I have lost my passion; why should I need to keep it / Since what is kept must be adulterated?” (57-58). These lines reflect those of stanza five, in which history “Gives too late / What’s not believed in, or if still believed, / In memory only, reconsidered passion” (40-41). Reconsidered passion, lackluster, proves unworthy for his partner, and so Gerontion discards it altogether rather than attempt to recapture it; with the loss of his senses, he lacks the resources to regain his adulterated passion, much less use that passion for his lover’s “closer contact.” Consequently, stanza six becomes a discourse on faded love, but that reading alone fails to account for the terror Gerontion expresses in verse and in the stanza’s elaborate references to Jacobean drama. At this point, sensuality gives

over to spirituality, and the stanza becomes an argument directed at Christ, “the landlord” of the rented house, Gerontion’s body, before the lease expires.

Having redefined Christ from a wordless infant to a “tiger,” a primal force, Gerontion addresses him in a series of allusions to Dante and Jacobean dramatists. Directing Christ to the speaker’s approaching death, and the lack of resolution between them, Gerontion insists upon his motivation and integrity by claiming “I have not made this show purposelessly” (51);<sup>21</sup> that is, he arranged the scenario with a specific reason in mind: that of explaining and excusing himself. Gerontion further emphasizes his honesty by claiming that that he speaks “not by any concitation / Of the backward devils” (52-53). The line alludes to *Inferno*’s canto 20, in which “Diviners, Augurs, Sorcerers & c.” are punished for “endeavour[ing] to pry into the future which belongs to the Almighty alone, interfering with His secret decrees . . .” (Carlyle 214).<sup>22</sup> Gerontion’s restatements of his intentions’ veracity hint at desperation and lead to a passive construction that signifies his loss of faith as something beyond his responsibility: “I that was near your heart was removed therefrom.” The line references Middleton and Rowley’s 1624 tragedy *The Changeling*, but while the verse signifies a literal death in the play, in the poem it signifies a moral and spiritual death.

Although it appears that Eliot alludes to only one line from the play, much of the drama’s thematic concerns underlie the poem’s fourth and fifth stanzas. In the play, Beatrice (ironically, “blessed one”), sleeps with the deformed De Flores in exchange for the murder of her betrothed, thereby freeing Beatrice to marry her lover Alsemero. Instead, Beatrice and De Flores become further entwined as the consequences of their

initial plot deepen and tangle, leading eventually to the discovery of their crimes.

Following this, De Flores stabs Beatrice; as she dies, Beatrice halts her father's approach lest he contacts her spilt blood:

Oh, come not near me, sir; I shall defile you.  
I am that of your blood was taken from you  
For your better health; look no more upon't,  
But cast it to the ground regardlessly:  
Let the common sewer take it from distinction  
Beneath the starres . . . . (4.3.149-54)

Beatrice's guilt poisons her blood; its presence threatens to contaminate others even through sight. Her pleas that her father turn away reflect Beatrice's awareness of her sin; they also proclaim a sense of humility. That her blood should be "indistinct," treated as waste and mingled with the community's refuse, proclaims a sense of humility.

Beatrice's father, with her sacrificial bloodletting, undergoes purification "for [his] better health." The notion of sacrifice appears true in Eliot's poem as well: the speaker, despite the passivity of his explanation, refuses to approach Christ for fear of defiling him. He maintains distance and curtails reconciliation. In an essay on Middleton (1927), Eliot described the play's value in terms of morality, especially that "of the not naturally bad but irresponsible and undeveloped nature caught in the consequences of its own action . . . . the unmoral nature, suddenly trapped in the inexorable toils of morality—of morality not made by man but by Nature—and forced to take the consequences of an act which it had planned light-heartedly" (90-91). In this light, "Gerontion's" "Unnatural vices" extend beyond the breaking of a social code; those vices indicate the shattering of natural morality rather than human convention. Moreover, as Eliot wrote, "Beatrice is not a moral creature; she becomes moral only by becoming damned" (91). In this, the verses

“Virtues / Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes” (1.45-46) become clear: our blindly immoral behavior, performed without introspection, leads too late to moral awareness. Gerontion expresses a realization of his own moral state, wherein his removal, from the heart he was near, led to an exchange of beauty for the “terror” of life, and the fear of “inquisition” and the discovery of his “impudent crimes.” However, he follows this with a series of justifications:

I have lost my passion; why should I need to keep it  
 Since what is left must be adulterated?  
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch:  
 How should I use it for your closer contact? (58-61)

Gerontion’s questions provide their own answers: no passion might be better than a corrupted, compromised emotion. His lack of senses leaves only his disordered mind as a way of rapprochement, and this he appears to back away from, for the following stanza finds Gerontion dismissing his thoughts as “a thousand small deliberations” that proliferate and “excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled, / With pungent sauces, multiple variety / In a wilderness of mirrors” (63-65). B. C. Southam identifies Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1612) as a source for these lines. In Jonson’s play, the character Sir Epicure Mammon plans to arrange numerous mirrors about his room so that he might view his sexual activities from a variety of angles (46).<sup>23</sup> For Gerontion, such pleasures remain inaccessible; instead, with his senses diminished, he attempts to revive similar stimulation through his imagination by reflecting, distorting, and multiplying his thinking. Such attempts prove ineffective, however, for he then undermines all of his utterances by qualifying them as, “Tenants of the house / Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season” (74-75).

While he disavows them, Gerontion's ideas keep him busy as nature takes its course, as the lines "what will the spider do / Suspend its operations, will the weevil / Delay?" (65-66) remind us.<sup>24</sup> In Gerontion's world, people meet their end not in an afterlife, but as material beings shattered and "whirled" about as "fractured atoms." Once again, Eliot alludes to Adams, of whom he wrote: "Wherever this man stepped, the ground did not simply give way, it flew into particles" ("Skeptical" 361-62).

In contrast to the lone gull that flies into the wind, Gerontion excuses himself, driven by the "Trades" (evoking the commercial world), "To a sleepy corner," where, lacking faith in either history or religion, Gerontion remains condemned to an existence both within and outside of temporality. His attempts at reconciliation with Christ fail for two reasons: first, Gerontion, caught within history, has no access to a higher perception that permits an ordering of, or some direction for, reality. He cannot transcend history. Secondly, Gerontion's skepticism, indicated by the questioning verses and lack of resolution, inhibits any ability to believe in either history or religion.

The poem's cynicism and instability reflect the skepticism of the early modernist era; having "lost" religion, finding history slippery or misleading, and lacking a cohesive sense of "tradition," humanity encountered a chaos similar to that of the English Renaissance; significantly, in 1919, Eliot began writing of the "dissociation of sensibility," which helped explain literature's, if not humanity's, slide into disorder following the Elizabethan period. With *Ara Vos Prec*, particularly "Gerontion," Eliot begins to pull together the various strands of his intellectual interests as he tries to activate, or to enlist, "tradition" through art, ritual, and, ultimately, religion, as a means of establishing some overarching definition that might order, or unify, a fragmented West.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kearns argues that “The political and social consequences of Eliot’s conversion seem ‘safe’ only in retrospect. At the time, his position was not only unfashionable but disturbing to friends Eliot valued, among them Babbit, Richards, and Pound” (*T. S. Eliot* 158). Eliot took a deeply unpopular stance at the risk of alienating those close to him.

<sup>2</sup> According to Christopher Ricks’s record of Eliot’s notebook manuscripts in *Inventions of the March Hare*, the *Prufrock* poems, in chronological order, include “Conversation Galante” (1909), “Preludes” (1910-11), “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1911), “Portrait of a Lady” (1911), “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” (1911), “La Figlia che Piange” (1912), “Morning at the Window” (1914), and, in 1915: “The Boston Evening Transcript,” “Aunt Helen,” “Cousin Nancy,” and “Hysteria” (323-46). In her study, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, Lyndall Gordon dates the completion of “Mr. Apollinax” as before February 1915 (540).

<sup>3</sup> At Pound’s encouragement in 1917, Eliot studied the works of Théophile Gautier (Medcalf 133). As a result, Eliot began to write in French, which inspired Eliot so that “I suddenly began writing in English again and lost all desire to go on with French. I think it was just something to help me get started again” (qtd. in Svarny 72).

<sup>4</sup> This period also features significant dates in Eliot’s personal life. He traveled to Merton College, Oxford, on fellowship in 1914. He met Ezra Pound on September 22 of that year, and, in June 1915, he married Vivien Haigh-Wood.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Asher notes of Eliot’s 1928 assertion of belief, “if we substitute Catholic for Anglo-Catholic, this is a verbatim echo, *fifteen* years later, of the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*’s accurate description of Charles Maurras’s beliefs” (3). In 1913, the periodical defined Maurras’s views as, “classique, catholique, monarchique” (36). In Eliot’s attempt to explicate his intended meaning, he acknowledged that “classicist” “easily lends itself to clap-trap,” that “royalism,” although “lending itself to something almost worse than clap-trap,” means a “temperate conservatism,” but the third—“anglo-catholic”—“does not rest with me to define” (*Andrewes* 7).

<sup>6</sup> In *Eliot’s Dark Angel*, Schuchard provides a thorough overview of the Hulme / Eliot debate (53-54).

<sup>7</sup> Such a view coincides with Eliot’s critiques of a feminized, affective literary and educational culture in his letters and poetry. In a 1915 missive to Ezra Pound, Eliot laments the American university’s focus on “Culcher and Civic Pageants” rather than “serious” work. Eliot derided the universities for emphasizing “How to Appreciate the Hundred Best Paintings, the Maiden Aunt and the Social Worker,” adding, “Something might be said . . . about the Evil Influence of Virginity on American Civilisation” (*Eliot, Letters* 96). Eliot implies a link between educational standards and popular fiction by noting that, “It might be pointed out again and again that literature has rights of its own



which extend beyond Uplift and Recreation. Of course it is impudent to sneer at the monopolisation of literature by women” (96). Eliot’s pointed reference to literature as an emotionally elevating leisure pursuit—as opposed to a serious one—frames art as a degraded, even victimized activity (by the infringement of its “rights”).

<sup>8</sup> In *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, Eliot described “the appearance of scepticism” as key to religious or cultural development, and he defined scepticism as “not mean infidelity or destructiveness (still less the unbelief which is due to mental sloth) but the habit of examining evidence and the capacity for delayed decision. Scepticism is a highly civilised trait, though when it declines into pyrrhonism, it is one of which civilisation can die. Where scepticism is strength, pyrrhonism is weakness: for we need not only the strength to defer a decision, but the strength to make one” (101-02).

<sup>9</sup> *Ara Vos Prec* and *Poems* matched in content with the exception of “Ode,” which appeared in the former, but Eliot replaced it with “Hysteria” in the latter (Gallup 27).

<sup>10</sup> One of the most debated issues in Eliot’s criticism, the use of Jewish figures to connote cultural decay deserves further examination. However, a thorough explication of “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar” lays outside the purview of this project.

<sup>11</sup> Eliot introduced the general concept behind the “dissociation of sensibility” in a 1919 essay on Christopher Marlowe (and republished in *The Sacred Wood* [1920]), in which he argued that Elizabethan blank verse “became the vehicle of more varied and more intense art-emotions than it has ever conveyed since; and that after the erection of the Chinese Wall of Milton, blank verse has suffered not only arrest but retrogression” (87). The following chapter will provide a more thorough exploration of Eliot’s theory.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps trivial, but in nautical terms, “in iron” means “lying head to the wind and unable to turn either way,” a meaning that echoes the fourth section’s seagull.

<sup>13</sup> In the 1963 edition of the poem, “Jew” replaced “jew” (Donohue 77).

<sup>14</sup> Eliot suggests a similar identification of a Jewish man with Christ in “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar”:

But this or such was Bleistein’s way:  
A saggy bending of the knees  
And elbows, with the palms turned out,  
Chicago, Semite, Viennese. (13-16)

Bleistein’s posture mimics that of the crucified Christ.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot’s paper holds a curious provenance; he referred to it in the introduction to Charlotte Eliot’s dramatic poem *Savonarola*, but it remains unpublished. Philosopher Harry Costello attended Royce’s seminar in 1913-14 and took copious notes—including

references to Eliot's paper. Grover Smith edited and published Costello's notes, but he believed Eliot's essay lost. Piers Gray "rediscovered" the essay in the Hayward Collection at Cambridge and gained Valerie Eliot's permission to cite substantial excerpts in his 1982 volume on Eliot's intellectual development.

<sup>16</sup> Gray's use of "evolution" regarding religious development relates to shifts and modifications that occur to ritual through time rather than improvement or progress; Eliot himself "protest[ed] against the use of the expression 'Evolution of Religion' . . . we have the right to take human biological value as the standard for natural evolution, but what standard have we for religion and society?" (qtd. in Gray 110).

<sup>17</sup> Eliot complicates this argument by extending his theory to include all forms of human expression: "So far as there is an external order in ritual and creed and in artistic and literary expression, this order can be reconstructed and cannot be impugned. But the 'facts' which can be thus arranged are decidedly limited, and consist historically in a certain order—we never know any too exactly of what the order is" (qtd. in Gray 129). We can, therefore, based on the existence of rituals and cultural artifacts, describe and order such expressions, but this is merely superficial, for, steeped as we are in constantly fluctuating interpretations, we have no means of realizing the true meanings of those human expressions.

<sup>18</sup> Job 7.6-7 reveals the man lamenting life's transience and futility: "My days are swifter than a weaver's/ shuttle, / and come to their end without / hope" (7.6-7).

<sup>19</sup> According to Donoghue, the poem's manuscript shows Eliot initially wrote that "nature" rather than "history" deceived mankind (78). Although the variance forces different readings of the poem, the futility of human experience remains an underlying theme. Donoghue suggests that Eliot changed "nature" to history after "reading the two chapters of *Ulysses*" (78), the second of which features a sustained discussion between Deasy and Dedalus. As Donoghue notes, "Stephen tells Deasy 'history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,' and Deasy responds 'All history moves towards one great goal, the manifestation of God'" (78).

<sup>20</sup> Childs's argument might rest on a misreading: he contends that Gerontion "has performed sexually ('made this show' of stiffening) such that the act of intercourse has 'reached conclusion'" (102). Firstly, Childs inverts the lines: the conclusion precedes the stiffening, and, secondly, Gerontion claims that "we *have not* reached conclusion" (49).

<sup>21</sup> The line alludes to Cyril Tournier's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1608), which Eliot compared to *Hamlet* inasmuch as "the play's cynicism, the loathing and disgust of humanity . . . are immature in the respect that they exceed the object" ("Cyril Tournier" 129). In a 1919 essay on *Hamlet*, Eliot explained that "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear" ("Hamlet" 48).

<sup>22</sup> Exemplifying Dante's *contrapasso* assignment of penalties, the soothsayers' heads are twisted so that they forever look backwards so must walk in reverse, only ever seeing what is behind them. Tiresias appears among these figures.

<sup>23</sup> In the lines Southam cites from Jonson's *The Alchemist*, Sir Epicure Mammon describes his bedroom:

My glasses  
Cut in more subtle angles, to disperse  
And multiply the figures, as I walk  
Naked among my succubae. (2.2.45-8)

<sup>24</sup> These lines evoke Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, in which the protagonist Vindice considers human vanity as he gazes on his wife's skull: "Do's the Silke-worme expend her yellow labours / For thee? For thee dos she undoe herself?" (3.5.71-72). Vindice essentially sees the bones beneath the dress. In Eliot's poem, spiders and weevils, ominous creatures, replace the silk-worm and compound the sense of mortality (and, ultimately, decay).

## CHAPTER III

“‘DESTINY AND HISTORY ARE UNTIDY: WE FEAR MEMORY OF THAT  
DISORDER’”: HISTORY, RELIGION, AND SELF IN *NIGHTWOOD*

*“Melancholy, the only sign of loyalty to something they once believed”<sup>1</sup>*

Djuna Barnes

At the time when Eliot began revising “Ash-Wednesday,” Barnes began *Nightwood*, a novel that addresses questions and concerns similar to those raised in Eliot’s poems of the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> Like the voices in Eliot’s poem, the characters in Barnes’s novel deal with the inadequacy of past ideals to unify the post-war world and the improbability of repairing modernity’s rupture from the past. Because of that rupture, the novel’s characters find their identity unloosed; they seek to reaffirm their selfhood by re-establishing links between the present and the past, most often using religion, albeit to varying degrees and none of them successful. Ultimately, if the novel must be compared to any of Eliot’s works, *Nightwood* comes closest to “Gerontion” in the collapse of structural continuity and spirit that mirrors the fragmentation of self and history in a distinctly pessimistic tone.<sup>3</sup>

*Nightwood*’s structure appears fractured because it resists anything approaching realism. Barnes articulated her distaste for realism, at least realism in drama, in a 1930 article, “Hamlet’s Custard Pie,” published under the pseudonym of “Lady Lydia Steptoe” in *Theatre Guild Magazine*. Barnes argues that, although modern playwrights and

audiences inherited a dramatic tradition “fashioned by the vision in the heart of man” (34), future generations will inherit a tradition of less subtle, or rougher, representations of human “fumbling.” In previous eras, a dramatic character “was what you might call slightly groggy as to the condition of his soul, he probed that sickness with his wit, and came forth with a soliloquy or an argument that made of him, no matter how ludicrous his situation, a figure of ponderable value” (34). In Barnes’s view, traditional drama relies on words to stimulate the imagination and to “probe the sickness” of the soul. In contrast, modern theater demonstrates a state of mind: spectacle replaces thought. A character might smash an item onstage to communicate his rage, thereby “act[ing] instantly on momentary desire” and removing the ambiguities of a character’s motivations that, Barnes suggests, make the character human. In *Nightwood’s* approach to “probing the sickness” of the human soul, Barnes largely discards any attempt at realism.

*Nightwood’s* critical difficulties stem, in part, from its ambiguous generic categorization. The novel’s form reflects an attempt to burst through binaries; neither poem nor prose, it circles in upon itself, relying on linguistic ornamentation, dense imagery, and literary allusion to communicate its “story” rather than on conventional, chronological, or realist presentation.<sup>4</sup> In her study of Barnes’s “radical narrative,” Donna Gerstenberger writes,

[*Nightwood*] is a book that relentlessly undermines grounds for categorization. The ideal and real, the beautiful and the ugly, subject and object become irrelevant distinctions; even the language of the novel works to slip the acculturated binary assumptions of signifier and signified, and the nature of narrative itself is destabilized as traditional categories are emptied of meaning. (“Radical” 130)

In undermining binary constructs, *Nightwood* inverts norms on nearly every formal and thematic level. In its various definitions, “inversion,” remains the prevailing thematic tone of the novel: the focus on descent, on bowing and falling, spiritually, sexually, and socially, turns the reader from the world of sunlight, realism, and reason to that of night, phantasmagoria, and melancholy that threatens madness.<sup>5</sup> Barnes underscores this element as she upends traditional narrative order: the novel turns inward, relying on self-reference rather than on traditional chronology to unveil the characters and their motivations.

Rather than an orderly representation of reality, dislocation and inversion present themselves throughout the novel in its characters, its theme, and its form. *Nightwood* maintains a self-contained, but negative, unity, which continually reinforces a sense of dislocation. This sense derives, primarily, from Barnes’s juxtaposition and layering of images, which often appear without explanatory messages. In a recent volume, *Late Modernism*, Tyrus Miller describes the “ultimate form” of *Nightwood* as “a montage of fragments, partly overlapping and in a contingent order” (148). Similarly, James Scott describes Barnes’s use of “the apprehended tableau,” a “complex” image presented as a set piece “charged with meaning” that readers only comprehend fully when provided with additional information over the course of the novel (106). Miller’s and Scott’s descriptions echo that of Joseph Frank, whose essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (1945) holds *Nightwood* up as an exemplary modernist text.<sup>6</sup>

Frank theorizes that artworks exhibiting “spatial form” break free of their particular medium’s constraints. When literature, a “time-art,” breaks free of traditional narrative chronologies, it becomes ahistorical. Authors accomplish this through

juxtaposing images and ideas to bring the past into the present, thereby fusing the two into “a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates every feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition” (59).<sup>7</sup> Because spatial form avoids traditional narrative patterns, a work’s meaning emerges from the overall whole. Frank finds *Nightwood*, which largely eschews chronological coherence, an exemplary text to illustrate spatial form.

As Frank suggests, Barnes ignores the traditional unities to pursue a self-referential text, wherein readers locate meaning by referring to other elements in the novel. As he points out, *Nightwood* “cannot be reduced to any sequence of action for purposes of explanation” (31); instead, the novel behaves discursively, so that the “eight chapters . . . are like searchlights, probing the darkness each from a different direction yet ultimately illuminating the same entanglement of the human spirit” (31-32). Further, Frank asserts that “these chapters are knit together . . . by the continual reference and cross-reference of images and symbols that must be referred to each other spatially throughout the time-act of reading” (32). Vote’s initial entry into the novel exemplifies Frank’s theory. Although the narrator describes her character in decidedly human terms as “the born somnambule who lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 34-35), the visual and olfactory imagery suggest RobinVote’s more complex role as “the beast turning human” (35). She exudes the natural world: “The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness, and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seems as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire” (34). Vote’s association with the deep and alien sea communicates her distance

from the temporal human world. The narrator intensifies Vote's otherness by comparing her to "a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau," a "Primitive" artist whose works present thick, lush vegetation, "for she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room. . . . thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration. . . ." (35). Vote, identified with sea and plant life, evokes the natural world untamed by human laws and morality. As Frank surmises, the descriptions used to introduce Vote imply that she "symbolizes a state of existence which is before, rather than beyond, good and evil. She is both innocent and depraved. . . ." (Frank 33).<sup>8</sup> As she sleepwalks through her life, the innocent, desperate, and lawless Vote, "the infected carrier of the past" (*Nightwood* 437), struggles to find a place in the cultural order.

Frank provides a compelling strategy for understanding the novel despite its apparent discontinuity. It also explains the significance of Barnes's linguistic choices. Eliot famously drew attention to the novel's "style, the beauty of its phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterisation, and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy" (Eliot, Introduction xvi).<sup>9</sup> This "quality of horror and doom" harkens to Barnes's major influences: Decadent art and Elizabethan literatures. The two overlap to a degree, insofar as both Decadent and Elizabethan literatures exploit decay and darkness to communicate a sense of worldly corruption. Indeed, Barnes's linguistic choices often echo the rhetoric and flourishes of the Jacobean or Elizabethan ages.<sup>10</sup> Monika Kaup terms Barnes's linguistic style "Baroque," which, "as a non-exclusive, decentering principle, joins, however self-consciously and awkwardly, contradictory impulses of the premodern and the modern, faith and reason, the scientific and the mythic, marking the crisis and outer limit of modernity" (87).<sup>11</sup> In



yoking such “contradictory impulses,” Barnes questions traditional dichotomies; however, rather than producing a “third way,” or a successful negotiation between these binaries, such questioning, as *Nightwood* suggests, succeeds only in reaffirming the vacuum that lies at the heart of modernity.<sup>12</sup> *Nightwood*'s characters struggle against this void, but they find that instead of healing the opposition between themselves and the normative (or the One and the Other), they reproduce that divide.

As Dianne Chisolm suggests in her study of *Nightwood* and obscenity, “New women, no less than decadent aristocrats, are haunted by modernity’s destruction of past forms of life and its failure to create new ones” (184). The evacuation of tradition troubles people liberated by modernity as well as the diminished aristocracy; *Nightwood*'s major characters, Jews, lesbians, and a homosexual transvestite, outsiders in the old tradition, and yet without a place in the new order, remain, as Diane Warren observes, “suspended between states. . . .” (120). Each character, then, suffers from living within a changing culture, and this instability registers in their unique identities.

Barnes’s characters, like many of Eliot’s speakers, seem to exist in a transitional place. The narrator provides minimal information of the characters’ past and only intimates at their dismal future. *Nightwood*'s personae, caught in a specific time and place but haunted by history, long for a transformation that remain unsatisfied; as Herring argues, each figure “seems to be caught midway in some metamorphosis” (Herring 305). Guido and Felix Volkbein remains tangled between Judaism and Christianity; Robin Vote, the sleepwalker, between beast and human; Nora Flood, between innocence and cynicism; and Matthew O’Connor, a veteran of the Great War, between masculinity and femininity. Louis Kannenstine describes the characters existing in “a middle region . . .

and implicit in their situation are the novel's intertwined themes" (87). In *Nightwood*, these themes revolve about loss—loss of love, dreams, ideals, and identity—and the search for cultural legitimacy and the necessity of meaning. However, *Nightwood* concludes without a defined ontology. In the void left by tradition's collapse, *Nightwood's* characters look to the "Great Past" as a source of identity, most nakedly in Felix's desperate quest for tradition. He argues that, "To pay homage to our past is the only gesture that also includes the future . . . . The modern child has nothing left to hold to, or, to put it better, he has nothing to hold with. We are adhering to life now with our last muscle—the heart" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 40). Without a place determined by tradition, in any of its aspects, we survive only through biological function or we continue to live by, and through, our emotions. Yet the characters seek meaning by sampling several types of experience: romantic love, religious tradition, and Western history; in several cases, the novel conflates religion (as spirituality and orthodoxy) with history (as the official record and myth).<sup>13</sup>

*Nightwood's* broad approach to the past strives to include Otherness. Julie Abraham proposes that, for Barnes, "history always had a double meaning" insofar that her "sense of 'history' incorporated both the official record and the stories of those who were either marginal to or completely excluded from that record" (254). Abraham proposes a binary construction of history. Early in *Nightwood*, O'Connor expounds upon a similar construction while entertaining guests at a party:

"think of the stories that do not amount to much! That is, that are forgotten in spite of all man remembers (unless he remembers himself) merely because they befell him without distinction of office or title—that's what we call legend and it's the best a poor man may do with his fate; the other . . . we call history, the best the high and mighty can do with theirs." (15)

However, *Nightwood* disproves O'Connor's binary division of "history" into the stories of the "high and mighty" and those of "the poor man" because the novel's complex view of time also includes "racial memories," elements of the collective unconscious through which we instinctively "know" the ancient past.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the novel examines the performance, or construction, of history not as sequential chronology, but as an uneasy negotiation between the official record, legend (or myth), and "blood" or "racial" memories communicated by and through religion; however, even this religion remains unreliable. O'Connor, holding forth on the differences between the Catholic and Protestant faiths, frames the different churches through the potential for falsehood. He explains that humans wish for "one of two things: to find someone who is so stupid that he can lie to her, or to love someone so much that she can lie to him" (17). He identifies the Protestant church as, "the girl who loves you so much that you can lie to her," which also makes the church, in O'Connor's figuration, "stupid" because "you can . . . pretend a lot you don't feel" (17). O'Connor implies that man can use the Protestant church for his own ends, and she will thank him for it. O'Connor bases this conclusion on his belief that the church itself relies on performance over liturgical substance: "What do you listen to in the Protestant church? To the words of a man who has been chosen for his eloquence—and not too eloquent either, mark you, or he gets the bum's rush from the pulpit, for fear that in the end he will use his golden tongue for political ends" (17). O'Connor's suggestion that Protestantism relies on superficialities contrasts with his view of Catholicism, the "girl you love so much she can lie to you," the rituals and stories of which O'Connor identifies as genuine, because one can,

“go into mass at any moment—and what do you walk in upon? Something that’s already in your blood. You know the story that the priest is telling as he moves from one side of the altar to the other, be he a cardinal, Leo X, or just some poor bastard from Sicily . . . it doesn’t matter. Why? Because you are sitting there with your own meditations *and* a legend.” (18)<sup>15</sup>

Here, Catholicism becomes a racial memory awakened by ritual as well as meditation.<sup>16</sup> Equally important, however, is O’Connor’s evocation of ritual as something inherent; he later claims that, “Ritual itself constitutes an instruction” (150), a means of learning one’s place in the world and gaining a sense of identity within the continuum of time. However, like the “vacant shuttles” of “Gerontion,” people of disparate nationalities who bow amongst paintings, move candles in shadowy rooms, and stand suspiciously in corridors, *Nightwood’s* characters continue to enact rituals that, now debased, lack their former power. *Nightwood’s* rituals, like those offered by the circus or Robin Vote’s disturbing display before a chapel altar, might attempt to re-form or redefine tradition; instead, they exacerbate the individual’s sense of alienation. Although the novel investigates religion or religious faith as a “calk” that might repair individuals torn asunder by modernity, religion itself fails utterly in comforting, protecting, or saving the strong individuals who people Barnes’s work.<sup>17</sup> This critique coincides, most clearly in *Nightwood*, with a perception that religion—whether belief or the monuments to religion—represented a link with the historical past that had been shattered, at least partially, by the Great War. Religion, recalled in the “racial memory” of Guido or the ritual “in the blood” of O’Connor, haunts our present.<sup>18</sup>

The entwinement of racial memories (as the novel suggests, history communicated through blood), religion, and the official record emerges most explicitly in the first chapter, “Bow Down,” which introduces the figure of Guido Volkbein, a

feminized, self-loathing Jewish man who exemplifies the work's concern with cultural legacy and identity.<sup>19</sup> As Victoria Smith recognizes,

‘Bow Down,’ stands as a mininovel, an anatomy of a loss that provides a pattern for understanding the rest of the novel. The chapter not only illustrates the novel's rhetorical in-direction but also implies that we can understand the individual losses experienced by Felix, Nora, and Dr. O'Connor only in the context of historical loss—the loss of Jewish history, identity, and culture by the Volkbein family. (196)

Smith's persuasive observation suggests that the characters' various dilemmas reflect those of Jews whose “historical loss” evolved from the ascension of Christianity. Relegated to the borders of the official record, Jews must create an identity to achieve recognition within “official society.” Similarly, *Nightwood's* characters consistently attempt to break into history, to acquire an “appropriate” identity. The novel explicitly explores the conflict between proscribed and constructed identities, both of which remain entwined with proscribed and constructed, or official and mythic, pasts.

#### Guido and Felix Volkbein

Guido's name itself carries significant weight: it denotes “I guide” in Italian, and “Volkbein” suggests the translation “people's foot” or “people's bone.” The pairing of Italian and German names suggests the lack of a specific heritage or community, thereby evoking the novel's ideas on rootlessness and isolation. Guido weds an Austrian Christian named Hedvig, and works to enter Vienna's Christian society. In his quest for acceptance, he claims an identity as “an Austrian of an old, almost extinct line,” calls himself Baron, and invents a lineage, “a list of progenitors . . . who had never existed” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 5). Guido also possesses two portraits that, he asserts, represent his

father and mother; however, the narrator reveals that the likenesses record “two intrepid and ancient actors,” and that Guido purchased them secondhand (7). Revealing the vagaries of history, Guido’s “official record” proves unreliable; his authentic history relies on “racial memory,” and legend; yet it is Christian, rather than Jewish, legend that informs Guido and, later, Felix—the son born months after Guido’s death.

The narrator feminizes Guido from the outset by noting that Guido’s shirt buttons reveal, “the exact center of his body with the obstetric line seen on fruits” (1). This line hints at Guido’s hand in nurturing the unborn Felix. It also completes a description of Guido that depicts him as “small, rotund, and haughtily timid”; moreover, Guido, a flaneur, “a gourmet and a dandy” whose emotionalism the narrator likens to the “florid ecstasy” of flowers achieving full bloom, qualifies Guido as “degenerate” according to contemporary race theory. In *Degeneration*, Nordau borrows Morel’s definition of degeneracy as:

a morbid deviation from an original type. This deviation, even if, at the outset, it was ever so slight, contained transmissible elements of such a nature that anyone bearing in him the germs becomes more and more incapable of fulfilling his functions in the world; and mental progress, already checked in his own person, finds itself menaced also in his descendents. (16)<sup>20</sup>

In Nordau’s estimation, Guido threatens his offspring with the taint of “germs” from his “type.” The child inherits an exaggerated version of his father’s “condition” and finds his ability to “function in the world” irreparably harmed. Indeed, Guido takes ownership of the developing fetus. In a physiological shift, the narrator reveals that Guido, rather than Hedvig, nurtures and shapes the unborn child, having “prepared out of his own heart for his coming child a heart, fashioned on his own homage to nobility, the genuflexion the

hunted body makes from muscular contraction going down before the impeding and inaccessible, as before a great heat" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 4).

In this way, Guido participates in the transmission of "racial memories" and the recollection of Jewish degradation at Christian hands. Thus we recognize Guido's compulsion to suppress his Judaism and Felix's pursuit of "resuscitation" as "He felt that the great past might mend a little if he bowed low enough, if he succumbed and paid homage" (9). Christians, having appropriated Jewish history and redefined the official record to diminish Jewish authority and emphasize anti-Semitic feeling, inflict a crisis of identity Guido inherits. The narrator explains that, "A race that has fled its generations from city to city has not found the necessary time for the accumulation of that toughness which produces ribaldry, nor, after the crucifixion of its ideas, enough forgetfulness in twenty centuries to create legend" (10).<sup>21</sup> Because of persecution, beginning with the death of Jesus, the Jewish record remains serious, tormented, and present; the narrator claims that Jews cannot distance themselves from the past sufficiently to embellish it with untruths; therefore, Guido's "racial memories" illustrate that Jewish history remains immediate and painful.

The first, and most evocative, instance of inherited Jewish pain occurs in the novel's opening pages. Guido walks in the Prater, with "The autumn, binding him about, as no other season, with racial memories, a season longing and of horror, he had called his weather" (3), where he clutches an:

exquisite yellow and black linen handkerchief that cried aloud of the ordinance of 1468 issued by one Pietro Barbo, demanding that, with a rope about its neck, Guido's race should run in the Corso for the amusement of the Christian populace, while ladies of noble birth, sitting upon spines too refined for rest, arose from their seats, and, with the red-gowned cardinals

and the Monsignori, applauded with that cold yet hysterical abandon of a people that is at once unjust and happy; the very Pope himself shaken down from his hold on heaven with the laughter of a man who forgoes his angels that he may recapture the beast. (4)<sup>22</sup>

The memory of these races and the linen mementoes symbolize, for Guido, “the sum total of what is the Jew” (4), for they mark the Jews’ exclusion. They also pull together the three elements of history that *Nightwood* emphasizes: the inheritance of pain, the official record of Christian abuse, and the Christian legend of the Wandering Jew, all of which served to appropriate Jewish history (“the crucifixion of [Jewish] ideas”) whilst elevating Christians.

The text remains ambiguous about others’ awareness of Guido’s religion. The narrator acknowledges that “in the Vienna of Volkbein’s day there were few trades that welcomed Jews,” which forces Guido into businesses stereotypically associated with Jews: dealing in used goods, collectibles, and “money-changing” services successfully enough to purchase and furnish a grand home in the “Inner City,” a primary part of Vienna (6).<sup>23</sup> Although he marries an Austrian woman, in 1880, the time of the novel’s opening, Viennese law forbade marriages between Jews and Christians: “for a mixed couple to marry, one of the partners had to convert either to the religion of the other or to the neutral category, *Konfessionslos*, ‘without religious affiliation’” (Rozenblit 128). As Guido “adopted the sign of the cross” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 5) the text implies that he converted prior to marrying Hedvig, and it intimates her ignorance of Guido’s Judaism. When she discovers his collection of handkerchiefs, Guido explains, “that they were to remind him that one branch of his family had bloomed in Rome” (3). Guido’s vague response to his wife, as well as his hiding of the handkerchiefs, suggest that he buries the



evidence of his Jewishness. The handkerchiefs represent the “Jew badge,” a medieval method of differentiating between Christians and Jews, which the Nazis appropriated and mandated the badge in 1939.<sup>24</sup> The primary motivation of this edict lay in the prevention of accidental sexual relationships between “Jews and Saracens” and Christians (Kisch 111). Hiding the handkerchiefs results in the same end as “adopt[ing] the sign of the cross”: it clears the way for marriage to Hedvig and acceptance in Christian society.

Notably, aside from the handkerchiefs, the only other occasions on which Hedvig questions Guido evoke issues of identity and Jewish history: “She believed whatever he told her, but often enough she had asked ‘What is the matter?’—that continual reproach which was meant as a continual reminder of her love. It ran through his life like an accusing voice” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 5). Hedvig questions Guido because something *seems* wrong, and her unconscious suspicion reinforces his outsider status. Despite Guido’s efforts to “be one” with Hedvig, and the culture she presents, he remains alien. Guido feels “tormented into speaking highly of royalty,” and the presence of aged generals prompts him to quiver “with an unseen trembling” (5). Such reactions illustrate how the memory of Jews’ pain makes him “heavy with impermissible blood” and the history of Christian abuses force him, “from muscular contraction,” to bow before Christians whose ascendancy relies on the exploitation of Jewish history.

The narrator asserts that the Jewish memory remains strong because of exclusion and exploitation. Christian identity relies on the “crucifixion of [Jewish] ideas,” which, “in twenty centuries” prevents Jews from owning their collective past. Christians, “standing eternally in the Jew’s salvation” create “charming and fantastic superstitions through which the slowly and tirelessly milling Jew once more becomes the ‘collector’ of

his own past. His undoing is never profitable until some *goy* has put it back into such shape that it can again be offered as a ‘sign’” (10). The Christian reconstructs the Jew in order to define and affirm Christianity, and the Jew reconstructs himself according to Christian “superstitions” about Judaism. Hence, Jews lose their agency, the power to control their own fate. Moreover, “The Christian traffic in retribution has made the Jew’s history a commodity, it is the medium through which he receives, at the necessary moment, the serum of his own past that he may offer it again as his blood” (10). Consequently, a tension exists between Christianity and Judaism for each needs the other in order to achieve definition; in this exchange, the Jew offers up his past but cannot partake of it except as the Christian world allows. As Mairead Hanrahan contends, “it is by means of a Christian intermediary that the Jew receives, without ever being able to make his, his (own) middle condition” (45). Moreover, the exchange between Christian and Jew promises no end. Meryl Altman explains that the passage indicates that “Jewish culture is forever to be sold and resold, and that assimilation—which will never really work—is nonetheless the best the Jew can hope for” (168). Hence, Guido invents his ancestry and strives to mimic Hedvig and society, and Felix “hunt[s] down his own disqualification” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 9). Yet, for both men, seeking entrance to a society that abhors them only results in further alienation.

The narrator’s claim that “Christian[s] traffic in retribution” highlights an element of vengeance. Christians, who “stand eternally in [Jesus] the Jew’s salvation,” mete out punishment to Jews for refusing to acknowledge the Christian Messiah (10). This punishment entails the loss of “home” bound with the loss of history. The idea of rootlessness, of wandering, runs throughout *Nightwood*, and, as noted previously, it

appears first when the text emphasizes Guido's links to Jewish, Italian, and German cultures, but his membership in none. Guido's condition recalls views such as those codified by Pope Innocent III in 1205, that declared Jews' condition of "eternal servitude" as punishment for their role in Christ's death: "Like Cain, they were to be wanderers on earth, moving from place to place until their countenances should be filled with shame and they should seek the name of the Lord" (Kisch 102). Such beliefs were widely popularized in the Christian legend of the Wandering Jew.<sup>25</sup>

While this Christian legend points most directly at Guido and Felix Volkbein, it implicates the novel's other characters as well, not only because of their expatriate status, but because none enjoy a "home" or an autonomous identity. Like the novel's characters, the Wandering Jew represents unfulfilled metamorphosis, for he is neither living nor dead, and, in Barnes's use of the myth, the Jew exemplifies those who exist simultaneously within and outside of history, and, therefore, remain caught in the present.<sup>26</sup> O'Connor thus describes Vote, for example, as "the eternal momentary"; her status as "*la somnambule*," Catherine Whitely argues, "prevent[s] her from acknowledging the past or the future, she becomes stuck in a continual present, becoming . . . incapable of forming any lasting attachments" (97). Unsurprisingly, Felix most explicitly reflects elements of the Wandering Jew's story: primarily, he travels so widely and broadly that, "When Felix's name was mentioned, three or more persons would swear to having seen him the week before in three different countries simultaneously" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 8). Significantly, details from the legend further tie Felix to the Wandering Jew; his life before age 30 "was unknown to the world, for the step of the wandering Jew is in every son" (8). This statement compares with claims that "at the time

of our Lord's Passion [the Wandering Jew] was 30 years old; and when he attains the age of 100 years, he always returns to the same age as when our Lord suffered" (Wendover qtd. in Anderson 19).<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the novel reveals that Felix, who works for the *Crédit Lyonnais*, "knew figures as a dog knows the covey and as indefatigably he pointed and ran" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 8). Felix's instinctual approach to "figures" evokes "The ability of the Wandering Jew to smell out treasure . . . .an intuitive gift" (Anderson 27). The mystery about Felix's youth, and his intuition about finances, add to the air of "difference" that surrounds him. Like his father (and perhaps more so), Felix remains alien and alone.

Of all the novel's characters, Felix represents cultural discontinuity and the longing for cohesion most immediately. Carrie Rohman argues that "the crucial point about Felix, the trait that sets up the larger philosophical problems of the text, is his desperate desire for identity—an identity fixed by language and culture, an identity whose meaning is guaranteed by the symbolic order, an identity that constitutes a stable subject position in relation to humanist systems of value . . . ." (59). Felix's search for a "legitimate" identity, one of which the larger culture approves, stems primarily from his ambiguous religious heritage. Born of a Christian mother and a Jewish father (with a fictional history), people, including the narrator and O'Connor, nonetheless refer to Felix as Jewish. However, in consideration of Jewish tradition practiced since the second century CE, Jewishness might only be conferred along matrilineal lines, and the identity of "Jew" passes from mother to child (Cohen 263).<sup>28</sup> Consequently, although Christians view him as Jewish, Jews would recognize Felix as Christian; a child of miscegenation, Felix "fits" nowhere. Ironically, Felix's name and family context evoke the famous

phrase “*bella gerant alii; tu felix Austria nube*” (“where others make war, you, lucky Austria, marry”), which speaks to the Hapsburg family’s practice of wedding their rivals, and thereby consolidating their empire. Felix, the product of a Judeo-Christian, Italian-Austrian alliance, the joining of the rootless and the entrenched, echoes the sprawling, but crumbling, Hapsburg Empire. Felix reproduces such expansiveness in his dress and manner. Desperate for approval, Felix attempts to appeal to others by being appropriately equipped for any potential event or conversational opening. His wardrobe’s eclecticism stems from “wishing to be correct at any moment,” so Felix “was tailored in part of the evening and in part for the day” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 9). He becomes a “pedant” of a multitude of disparate subjects (10), from wines and ancient books, to graveyards, roads, and castles (10). Rather than propel him into Christian society and towards the tradition he longs for, Felix’s oddness makes him unpopular and isolated. The narrator characterizes Felix as “racially incapable of abandon” (36), “embarrassed,” confused. The title he “clings to” emphasizes his awkward status and his compulsion towards the Great Past.<sup>29</sup>

Felix’s compulsion toward the past might be explained, as well, in relation to his parents’ deaths. Felix arrives in the world essentially untethered except for an aunt, of whom we learn nothing besides that she tells Felix his parents’ story whilst combing her hair “with an amber comb” (8). In a nod to the ambiguities of history and storytelling, the narrator refrains from informing us if Felix’s aunt relates an accurate picture of the Volkbein saga or if she simply concocted it out of whole cloth. Even if she is telling a “true” family history, her knowledge is certainly limited: she “told [Felix] what she knew, and this had been her only knowledge of his past” (8). This unreliable narrative of

the official record provides Felix with his only link to the past, The “racial memory” that figures so strongly with his father, Guido, seems absent in Felix. When he attempts to tell Robin “about what Vienna had been like before the war; what it must have been like before he was born,” he finds that “his memory was confused and hazy, and he found himself repeating what he had read, for it was what he knew best” (40). Felix fails to access any information excepting that which he learned secondhand and codified—in books. Felix knows only the official record, and that record excludes him. Consequently, he chooses to marry Vote, for “with an American, anything can be done,” and she might provide Felix with a child who could provide him with a way into history. Ironically, Felix chooses his antithesis for a wife. While ruminating on the disorganization of history, O’Connor explains to Felix that, “our faulty racial memory is fathered by fear,” which leads people, such as Felix, to seek an ordered past against which they define themselves. Vote, however, “did not” fear history’s “disorder” (118), and when she seeks to order her existence, with Felix and with Flood, she quickly flees.

#### Matthew O’Connor

*Nightwood*’s most flamboyant character remains overtly tied to the great past, most specifically the religious literature of the past, by virtue of his name, Matthew, which he shares with the apostle, evangelist, and author of the first book of the New Testament. Additionally, O’Connor refers to himself as “Matthew Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O’Connor” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 70), thereby equating himself with the deeply Catholic poet.<sup>30</sup> The chronicler of hell’s environs now records the hell of modernity as it manifests in the Parisian night. O’Connor, the would-be disciple and mythographer

indulges in lengthy monologues, which shift between frivolity and gravity, satire and horror. O'Connor's stories and musings carry the novel's philosophical weight as he struggles to answer *Nightwood's* questions about history, religion, and identity.

O'Connor's words serve as his most potent weapon against the pain of his, and others', outsider status. As Judith Lee argues, language provides O'Connor with the means "to heal, to absolve, to entertain, and to transform experience" (216). In speaking, O'Connor ever aims to entertain, but he also attempts to bridge the divide between Otherness and Christian culture through lying: his tales elevate "those stories that don't amount to much" because they revolve around people "without distinction of office or title" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 14). O'Connor gives himself and others power by mythologizing Otherness. Doing so, he claims, strengthens the audience of his lies: early in the novel, he tells Felix of the Irish, "we lie . . . . We say someone is pretty for instance, whereas, if the truth were known, they are probably as ugly as Smith going backward, but by our lie we have made that very party powerful, such is the power of the charlatan"(32). O'Connor intends his lies to produce, if not happiness, comfort, as his stories of the disabled, the homosexual, and the oppressed lift outcasts to the realm of legend, which brings them into history. O'Connor also lies to himself for the same reason: he discloses to Flood that, "I am my own charlatan," which allows him "to tuck myself in at night, well content" (96).

An immediate example of O'Connor's mythologizing occurs shortly after his introduction. He memorializes the rape of a Mademoiselle Basquette, "who was damned from the waist down, a girl without legs, built like a medieval abuse" (22). O'Connor undercuts the barbarity of the image by describing her also as "gorgeous and bereft as the

figurehead of a Norse vessel that the ship has abandoned” (22). Thus he lends dignity and beauty to a female others might regard as freakish.<sup>31</sup> When O’Connor exclaims to God later in the novel that, “I know there is beauty in any permanent mistake,” he refers to himself, but he also refers to others whom the Christian world scorns or mocks; he also calls forth Sir Thomas Browne’s noted declaration that “there are no *Grotesques* in nature” [emphasis original] (Browne 20).

Felix recognizes the significance of O’Connor’s exaggerations and inventions as associated, somehow, with the past: “Felix thought to himself that undoubtedly the doctor was a great liar, but a valuable liar. His fabrications seemed to be the framework of a forgotten, but imposing, plan; some condition of life of which he was the sole surviving retainer” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 31). Indeed, O’Connor weaves his mythologies onto the scaffolding of the past, represented by literary history, in an attempt to explain or to order the experience of Otherness—to make it comprehensible—by framing that experience within the context of the Great Past.

O’Connor’s allusions run throughout the novel to illuminate the struggles of *Nightwood*’s characters by linking it to the wider culture. He references Robert Burton’s definition of melancholy to universalize misery and take it out of the arena of degeneracy, Browne’s appreciation of the grotesque to illustrate nature’s inclusiveness, and John Donne’s Easter sermon of 1619 to emphasize mortality and the melancholy of the night, “wherein we die manifold alone” (97).<sup>32</sup> However, the allusion that most completely confirms O’Connor’s role as mythmaker involves his adopted middle name, Dante. Indeed, several critics invoke O’Connor as an equivalent to Dante, relating his experiences of hell and purgatory for the uninitiated (however, unlike Dante, he never



approaches any state resembling “paradise” despite his desire to do so). Kannenstine nominates O’Connor as “a chronicler of purgatory” (95); Warren concurs that O’Connor “takes on the role of poetic guide to the underworld, which he fulfils until the later stages of the novel” (121). But O’Connor invokes Dante to stress to Flood her role in Vote’s self-destruction, for her amnesia.

The person who creates a myth, however, also holds the responsibility for maintaining it. O’Connor explains as much to Flood when he pinpoints her role in the demise of her relationship with Vote, who, he says, could ““never provide for her life except in [Flood]”” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 128). In O’Connor’s view, Flood made it possible for Vote to exist, and in a manner exceeding material concerns such as a home: Flood provided Vote with a story, and that story vanished when Flood, seeing Vote “turn befouled before me,” acknowledged her corruption (145). O’Connor explains to Flood that Vote possessed, ““Only your faith in her—then you took that faith away! You should have kept it always, seeing that it was a myth; no myth is safely broken. Ah, the weakness of the strong! The trouble with you is you are not just a myth-maker, you are also a destroyer, you made a beautiful fable, then you put Voltaire to bed with it. . . .”” (140). O’Connor’s invocation of the satirist testifies not only to Flood’s agency in deflating her fairy tale, but also to the disappearance of the Flood once reckoned “to know little or nothing about” cynicism (53). The awareness of Vote’s corruption taints Flood insofar as she exchanges her former naïveté and tolerance for self-reproach and accusation, becomes a part of time rather than outside of it. But O’Connor’s warning also alludes to his theory of mythmaking: to mythologize someone means to remember her, to grant her identity; to deconstruct a myth means to condemn the object to oblivion.

O'Connor illustrates his theory about the mythmaker by alluding to Dante's portrayal of women, and perhaps specifically to Beatrice.<sup>33</sup> O'Connor addresses Flood, the destroyer of myth, asking, "If you, who are bloodthirsty with love, had left her alone, what? Would a lost girl in Dante's time have been a lost girl still, and he had turned his eyes on her? She would have been remembered, and the remembered put on the dress of immunity" (148). Flood's demythologizing of Vote ensures that she exists as "a target forever." Because Dante not only remembered but refigured the "lost girl," she becomes, as Abraham explains, "part of the official history literature and history he represents . . . ." (Abraham 260).<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the girl recalled through Dante's imagination lives on, protected and safe. Ironically, Flood wished to provide these latter two for Vote all along, with Flood "tr[ying] to come between and save her" from what Flood viewed as Vote's living nightmare (Barnes, *Nightwood* 145). But, as O'Connor realizes, no myth continues, at least, no modern myth.

O'Connor's lies begin to lose their power, having no effect on the grieving Flood, who complains, "with the violence of misery," that "There's something evil in me that loves evil and degradation—purity's black backside! That loves honesty with a horrid love; or why have I always gone seeking it at the liar's door?" (135). Flood suspects that her love for honesty equates with dread of the truth; hence, she seeks not "power" from O'Connor, but evidence of "evil and degradation" that conforms to, and justifies, her own misery. Thus insulted, O'Connor responds, bitterly,

"Look here . . . . Do you know what has made me the greatest liar this side of the moon, telling my stories to people like you, to take the mortal agony out of their guts, and to stop them from rolling about, and drawing up their feet, and screaming, with their eyes staring over their knuckles with misery which they are trying to keep off, saying, 'Say something, Doctor,

for the love of God!’ And me talking away like mad. Well, that, and nothing else, has made me the liar I am.” (135)

O’Connor becomes the redeemer for the miserable, for his stories do more than distract those who, drawn into a fetal position and blocking their cries, seek his voice:

O’Connor’s stories heal and absolve his audience. When Flood rejects this, O’Connor’s powers slip away; when he leaves Flood, he does so wordlessly: standing “in confused and unhappy silence—he moved toward the door. Holding the knob in his hand he turned toward her. Then he went out” (158).

His further lies push his audience’s credulousness too far; towards the novel’s end, once again in the *Café de la Mairie du VI<sup>e</sup>*, he embarks upon a tale about a time ““when Catherine the Great sent for me to bleed her,”” and an “unfrocked priest” interrupts him to admonish, ““For heaven’s sake . . . remember your century at least!”” (164). The extremity of O’Connor’s lie prompts more than immediate suspicion for, as Lara Trubowitz notes, “The validity of stories that the doctor has told previously is also contested” by the priest (159). O’Connor, on the defensive, asserts that “the reason I’m so remarkable is that I remember everyone even when they are not about” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 164). Yet his reaffirmation of his mythmaking powers fall flat even as he whispers, asking of his audience, not simply the people in the café, but all those who sought his lies, “Now that you have all heard what you wanted to hear, can’t you let me loose now, let me go? I’ve not only lived my life for nothing, but I’ve told it for nothing—abominable among the filthy people” (165). When O’Connor loses his audience, he loses what seems to be his single surety: his power as a charlatan. When this is stripped away, he crumbles; lying on the floor, he utters a final, apocalyptic statement,

a prophetic claim of a tearful, angry end (166). With O'Connor's power dissipated, so too the possibility of hope.

Through the mingling of the official record, legend, and racial memory, *Nightwood's* characters attempt to acquire history, to collect its fragments much as the décor of the Volkbeins' Vienna home and Flood and Vote's Paris apartment feature eclectic assemblages of cultural artifacts; the narrator describes both homes as "the museum of their encounter" (6, 50).<sup>35</sup> Through their acquisitions, they maintain an intimacy with an imagined past against which, and as a part of, they construct their present and attempt to define themselves. In a surprising elision, the narrator refers to the Volkbein Vienna home as "Felix's hearsay house [that] had been testimony of the age when his father had lived there with his mother" (56). While "hearsay" suggests the house contains objects that Guido and Hedvig only know secondhand, it also comes close to "heresy." In this case, the narrator associates the home with concepts opposed to conventional Christian dogma. Significantly, both "hearsay" and "heresy" imply falsity. Similarly, *Nightwood's* characters acquire "hearsay" identities through performance, as the Volkbeins act out nobility, or though storytelling akin to O'Connor's mythmaking. However, such identity proves fragile; nobility diminishes, lies revealed, and, as chapter five, explains, heresy punished.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barnes, “Becoming Intimate with the Bohemians” 243.

<sup>2</sup> Although unpublished until 1936, Barnes began drafting *Nightwood* much earlier. Plumb, relying on Barnes’s correspondence, estimates the date as between 1927 and 1931 (ix). Barnes initially gave her novel the title *Bow Down*, and, later, *Anatomy of Night*. Herring comments that Eliot “rejected the alternative title ‘Anatomy of Night,’ [sic] preferring *Nightwood* because he ‘wanted “something brief and mysterious giving no clue whatever to the contents”’ (223). The novel evokes Robert Burton’s discursive, tangent-filled, discussion of melancholy, a disease common to all as it “is the character of Mortality” (125). While common to all, melancholy poses a threat when it becomes a habit and, therefore, “a serious ailment, a chronick or continue disease. . . it will hardly be removed” (127).

<sup>3</sup> Bonnie Kime Scott reports that in 1937 Barnes “found a line from “Gerontion” applicable to [*Nightwood*’s] introduction, which she still cherished: “Unnatural vices / are fathered by our heroism” (142).

<sup>4</sup> *Nightwood*’s generic instability led many publishers to refuse the novel. In a 1934 letter to Emily Coleman, Barnes complained of publishing houses: “all say it is not a novel; that there is no continuity of life in it, only high spots and poetry—that I do not give anyone an idea what the persons wore, ate or how they opened and closed doors, how they earned a living or how they took off their shoes and put on their hats. God knows I don’t” [sic] (qtd. in Plumb x-xi). Barnes’s objections mirrors those of Virginia Woolf in “Modern Fiction” (1919); Woolf critiques “materialist” writers, for whom “So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception” (149). The emphasis on material issues overrides the authentic representation of life. Significantly, Eliot’s speculation that Barnes’s novel “will appeal primarily to readers of poetry” stemmed, in part, from the novel’s resistance to realism. In comparing *Nightwood* to contemporary novels, Eliot declared that “an accurate rendering of the noises that human beings currently make in their daily simple needs of communication; and what part of a novel is not comprised of these noises consists of a prose that is no more alive than that of a competent newspaper writer or government official” (Eliot, Introduction xii).

<sup>5</sup> Barnes’s reliance on metaphor and dislocation suggest inversion, as an archaic definition for “invert” means “to transfer (words) from their literal meaning,” or to upend signification (Def. I. 2d.) Additionally, the characters illustrate inversion in numerous ways. Most explicitly, in the Victorian era “inversion” entered the lexicon of sexology to differentiate between casual and “congenital” homosexuality. In 1897, Havelock Ellis defined “inversion” as “sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality towards persons of the same sex . . . .” (Ellis 1). Yet, in a broader sense, all of the novel’s

characters exhibit “inversion” as they enact the “wanderer,” moving from location to location and seeking a secure position within history in a world “turned upside down” and heritage “misplaced” (“Invert,” def I. 1a.). The characters of Guido Volkbein and his son, Felix, communicate this upheaval most directly, although their experiences as Jews traditionally set them outside of Christian culture. The men might be described as “inverted,” for, as self-loathing Jews, feminized by anti-Semitism, they deny their heritage and dissociate from the past. More persuasively, Christian appropriation of Jewish culture and history in order to elevate that of Christianity, forces Jews into a “descent,” creating “[a] reversal of position, order, sequence, or relation” from their former state (“Invert,” def. I.2a.).

<sup>6</sup> In an unpublished interview with James B. Scott in 1971, Barnes reported that of all the critical responses to the novel, including Eliot’s, the critics Joseph Frank and Edwin Muir are “the only two people who have got it right” (qtd. in Herring 233).

<sup>7</sup> In his essay, Frank marks the eighteenth century codification of literary rules, such as the three unities, as the beginning of a focus on “external form” (Frank 7). As discussed in the following chapter, Eliot also marked this era, and “the Chinese wall of Milton,” as the primary boundary between metaphysical and technically brilliant, but soulfully lacking, poets.

<sup>8</sup> Vote’s status outside of normative morality recalls heroines of Jacobean tragedy, such as *The Changeling*’s Beatrice, who, being amoral, can only become moral by sinking into sin. Unlike Beatrice, Vote never recognizes the pain she causes to those who love her.

<sup>9</sup> Muir agreed, writing that

Miss Barnes is one of those few writers whose thought and expression become more felicitous, the more painful the theme she is dealing with; here she resembles Webster. . . . There is no trace of a hopeful or even a hope-inspiring philosophy in her book: her vision is purely tragic, with that leavening of sardonic wit which comes from long familiarity with tragedy: the almost professional note which one also finds in Webster. . . . but which, though a source of pleasure in itself, does not alleviate in the least the force of the tragic emotion. (149-50)

Additionally, an unsigned review in *The Newstatesman and Nation*, which Marcus suspects Rebecca West authored, the reviewer notes of Barnes: “she is the kind of modern writer whose prose-style appears to have been founded on a close study of the mad-speeches in Webster and Tourneur; for she has the same gusto, the same topsy-turvy eloquence, the same wealth of grotesque and lively imagery” (qtd. in Marcus, “Mousemeat” 198)

<sup>10</sup> Barnes’s preferred reading included Elizabethan and seventeenth century works. Her biographers note that Barnes included Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici* (1642) among her favorite books. Herring notes

that Barnes's library also included volumes by Donne, Herbert, Jonson, and Herrick "and many other works of the period" (Herring, Introduction 12). Like Eliot, Barnes esteemed the language and style of Elizabethan writers. In 1978, Barnes spoke of Eliot to her assistant Hank O'Neal, who records that "She is not fond of T. S. Eliot's poetry but feels his literary criticism is the finest in the English language" (O'Neal 36). Barnes body of work lacks much in the way of literary criticism proper. Although she spent her early career as a journalist interviewing authors and playwrights, Barnes's voice largely remains second to her subjects'. On occasion, however, the interviewee's responses that Barnes chose to publish seem significant. For example, in 1922, Barnes interviewed James Joyce, with whom she shared a lasting friendship. At one point in the interview, Joyce remarks of language: "'All great talkers . . . have spoken in the language of Sterne, Swift, or the Restoration. Even Oscar Wilde. He studied the Restoration through a microscope in the morning and repeated it through a telescope in the evening'" (qtd. in Barnes, "Joyce" 293). Barnes neglects to mention her response to Joyce's praise of seventeenth and eighteenth century language; she also fails to comment on the link between such language and the model aesthete, Wilde (notably, each of the men Joyce names hail from Ireland). Yet Joyce's emphasis on late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century writers relates to Barnes's own interests.

<sup>11</sup> Kaup presents a convincing, albeit more sympathetic, updating of Dr. Johnson's definition of metaphysical literature, which also enumerates the decentering, the artifice, and the juxtaposition of dichotomous concepts within "Metaphysical" poetry:

If the father of criticism has rightly denominated poetry . . . an *imitative art*, these writers will, without great wrong, lose their right to the name of poets, for they cannot be said to have imitated anything: they neither copied nature nor life, neither painted the forms of matter, nor represented the operations of intellect . . . . Of wit . . . they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous [sic] ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for their illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises . . . . (Johnson 218)

<sup>12</sup> In this, Barnes's adaptation of the Baroque mirrors the effect of much Decadent literature, which also acknowledges the centrality of the void in a decaying world. In Eliot's qualification of Elizabethan literature, such writers as Donne, Torneau, and Webster, although not direct influences upon the decadent movement, meet in "decay." *Nightwood*, in its inversion of literary and social convention, adheres to the tenets of Decadent literature, insofar as it echoes Decadent privileging of urban settings, artifice, and the non-normative, to reflect what Max Nordau described in his influential 1895 monograph, *Degeneration*, as a *fin de siècle* attitude "of imminent perdition and extinction . . . and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world" (2). In a 1919 interview with Barnes, Guido Bruno introduces her as one of the "Followers of the decadents of France and of England's famous 1890s" (Bruno 388). Barnes appears to endorse Bruno's characterization in saying that, "life I write and draw and portray is life as it is, and therefore you call it morbid. Where is this

beauty I am supposed to miss? The nice episodes that others depict? Is not everything morbid? I mean the life of people stripped of their masks. Where are the relieving features?" (386). Barnes reinforces her point in suggesting that, ultimately, all efforts remain futile because "What's the use? Today we are, tomorrow dead" (386). Barnes's pessimism bleeds into her work, for, especially in *Nightwood*, as it presents a parade of characters who strive to find and apply a mask that might provide some sense of stable identity, but who, when "stripped of their masks," remain victims of the void.

<sup>13</sup> Evidence suggests that Barnes developed *Nightwood* from a proposed work of historical fiction about a Viennese "Court Jew." In late 1930, Barnes applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship in order "To visit Austria, Vienna, to make a study of pre-war conditions, intrigues, and relations then existing between the Jews and the Court, tracing the interweaving between the two, for a book in progress whose chief figure is an Austrian Jew" (qtd. in Trubowitz 311). Barnes also proposed a second project, "a creative religious history" (qtd. in Plumb x). The two projects appear to merge in *Nightwood*.

<sup>14</sup> In a 1922 lecture, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology in Poetry," Carl Jung defines the collective unconscious as "a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the inheritance of all mankind . . . a potentiality handed down to us from primordial times in the specific form of mnemonic images or inherited in the anatomical structure of the brain" (Jung 80). There are no inborn ideas, but there are inborn possibilities of ideas . . . *a priori ideas*, as it were, the existence of which cannot be ascertained except from their effects" (80-81). In a later essay on Pablo Picasso, Jung praised the artist's abilities to evoke "memories of the blood" that, if recalled, might "restor[e] the whole man" (140). In *Nightwood*'s evocations of "blood memories," such recollections offer no restorative effect: associated with Guido's pain and O'Connor's Catholic anguish, "blood" or "racial memories" reinforce individuals' misery.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Leo X, or Giovanni de Medici, and Martin Luther were opponents during the Protestant schism.

<sup>16</sup> According to Edward Gunn, O'Connor's explanation of the Catholic Church focuses on the "impersonality" of Catholic ritual, which "suggests that one is in contact not merely with men but with God. Behind its form and ritual it promises a true, ultimate form by which we were created and which we may obtain" (548). In O'Connor's case, it removes the potential for human rejection; in a scene later in the novel (and discussed in chapter five), O'Connor removes the priestly middleman and addresses "the mystery" himself.

<sup>17</sup> Despite the religious undercurrent, Barnes soundly rejected perceptions of *Nightwood* as a "religious novel." When her friend Emily Coleman reviewed the text as a profoundly Catholic work and foregrounded the characters' religious quests, Barnes tersely refuted her. Barnes's lover Charles Henri Ford refused to publish Coleman's unedited essay in his journal *View* (Herring 254). Rightly, Barnes worried that reading *Nightwood* as a



fundamentally religious work opens the potential for minimizing the characters' plights, which involve all aspects of physical and metaphysical agony. Even so, many of Barnes's early readers, including Graham Greene, viewed the novel as distinctly colored by religion (Marcus, "Mousemeat" 196). Barnes scholars comment on the profusion of religious references in the novel to varying extents. For example, Pericles Lewis only briefly mentions that "churchgoing plays an important role . . . in *Nightwood*" (Lewis 692 n 33). In contrast, Edward Gunn attempts to explain the characters' motivations, noting that "The characters are repeatedly defined by religious allusions [and] The religious references are themselves linked to the basic religious longing to be other than what one is; the individual is lost, unfulfilled" (547-48). Rohman asserts that "Religion—particularly Catholicism—continues as a significant discourse through which Barnes renders the entanglement or interimbrication of hierarchical opposites" (64). Rohman argues that religion appears in opposition to "the bodily" (65), and that, in bringing the physical into play with the spiritual *Nightwood* "insist[s] on the inclusion of animality as an essential part of human identity, as inseparable from it" (65). Yet the novel remains ambivalent about the possibility of any achievement of such a linkage between the animal and the human. Those who attempt such a balance, such as O'Connor and Vote, find misery. At the novel's end, even Vote must reject "balance" and choose between the two states of being.

<sup>18</sup> In one instance, someone's appearance calls forth the religious past. Flood, "known instantly as a Westerner" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 47), evokes the history of the American past with its adventurous, and religious, associations: people gaze on her and think of, stories they had heard about covered wagons; animals going down to drink; children's heads, just as far as the eyes, looking in fright out of small windows, where in the dark another race crouched in ambush; with heavy hems the women becoming large, flattening the fields where they walked; God so ponderous in the hearts that they could stamp out the world with him in seven days. (47)

With the weight of God heavy upon them, the pioneers might either crush out the world with their heavy tread or mark out the New World according to how they saw it as good. This speaks not only to the early Puritans, but also the later Christians who explored and colonized the west under the aegis of Manifest Destiny.

<sup>19</sup> While Barnes's thoughts on race remain largely unknown, evidence suggests that she may well have been racist and believed that particular races maintained certain essential qualities transmitted by blood. For example, she seems to have considered the need for cultural or social acquisition a specifically Semitic one. She wrote of Gertrude and Leo Stein that, "A Jew is always running both before and behind you, that he may 'catch' everything" (Barnes, *Collected* 236). Throughout *Nightwood*, Barnes relies on Judaism to connote cultural displacement and decay. Critics evade Barnes's responsibility for continuing anti-Semitic imagery and claim, variously, that Barnes "refers to dangerous and disturbing stereotypes, yet she does so in the form of parody" (Rupprecht 96). Carlston suggests that Barnes deliberately employs such stereotypes to

draw an association between Jews and homosexuals; she points out that, according to contemporary stereotypes, Jews and homosexuals, “are both marked physically” and both participate in sterile sexuality (76). However, twice in the novel’s opening chapters the narrator espouses anti-Semitic asides. In describing Felix’s birth, the narrator presents it as occurring “in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 1). The narrator neglects to explain why the suspicion might be “well-founded.” In the second, the narrator relates how Guido’s acquaintances, upon meeting Felix, greet him with a “slight bend of the head—a reminiscent pardon for future apprehension—a bow very common to us when in the presence of this people” (8). The narrator creates an opposition wherein “us” and “this people” recreates the opposition between Christian and Jew. Significantly, Barnes knew that readers picked up on the anti-Semitic elements. When Clifton Fadiman, a reader for Simon & Schuster, reviewed Barnes’s manuscript in 1935, he wrote to her that “he thought it rather anti-Semitic” (Herring 223). She responded by accusing him of not understanding Judaism. Fadiman was Jewish.

<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Geoffrey Howes, in his study of Austria’s presence in *Nightwood*, views Guido as “a stereotype of the Viennese bourgeois at the end of the century: corpulent, hedonistic, and both arrogant and fearful” (260).

<sup>21</sup> The narrator’s defining the elimination of Jews’ history as “the crucifixion of its ideas” places the death of the Jewish past directly at the feet of Christians.

<sup>22</sup> Pietro Barbo, a Venetian elected Pope in 1464, instigated the races as an element of the winter festival of Saturnalia in 1466 (Kertzer 74). Plumb notes the discrepancy in Barnes’s dating of the event in 1468, and suggests that the 1466 races “appear to be the ordinance that Barnes refers to, though the dates are not exact” (Plumb 212). Hanrahan further questions how Barnes arrived at 1468 and claims that “No explanation has ever been proposed for the enigmatic date of the ordinance, which corresponds to no recognizable historical referent” (36). However, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the date of 1468 appeared in numerous publications about Rome. One example, an unsigned article titled “The Story of the Ghetto,” appeared in an 1858 volume of *Bentley’s Miscellany* and states that Pietro Barbo “in 1468 ordered the Jews to take part in the Corso races” (84). Several years later, William W. Story wrote in his travelogue, *Roba di Roma* (1887), a description of the Corso races, that closely parallels that of Barnes:

It was Pope Paul II. (Pietro Barbo), however, who in 1468 first ordained the races of this wretched people in the Corso, and gave form and law to the cruelty of the mob [. . .] Noble ladies, and purple-robed cardinals and *monsignori* applauded this degrading spectacle, while the Pope himself looked down from his decorated balcony, and smiled his approval, or shook his holy sides with laughter [. . .] a piquancy was afterward added to it by forcing the Jews to run with a rope round their necks and entirely

naked, save where a narrow band was girt round their loins. (440-41)  
 Story also notes the cries of “*Roba Vecchia!*” in the Piazza Montanara that Barnes refers to: “[Guido] felt the echo in his own throat of that cry running the *Piazza Montanara* long ago, ‘*Roba Vecchia!*’—the degradation by which his people had survived” (Barnes *Nightwood* 4).

<sup>23</sup> Poignantly, Guido and Hedvig’s home—“a house in the Inner City, to the north overlooking the Prater . . .” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 6)—also overlooks the Viennese ghetto. Vienna’s grand park, the Prater, is located in the zone known as Leopoldstadt, which made up a large part of the ghetto in the seventeenth century. In the 1920s, Jewish writer Joseph Roth wrote that the Leopoldstadt, the home of “immigrant Jewry,” acted as “a sort of voluntary ghetto” (Roth 55). Regardless of whether Barnes knew of the past or contemporary status of the Leopoldstadt, the symbolic effect of Guido’s home, lying in the heart of Christian Vienna but overlooking the site of the Jews’ historic exclusion, evokes his search for place and his prostration before tradition and nobility.

<sup>24</sup> The details of the badge’s color and shape varied according to nation; for example, in England, Henry III (1217) decreed that all Jews should bear “on the front of their upper garment the two tables of the Ten Commandments made of white linen or parchment [in 1275, the king changed the color to yellow]” (Kisch 104). In France, Jews wore a badge of “saffron yellow,” which was changed to “parti-colored red and white” by King John (105). In fifteenth century Germany and Austria, people termed the badge “*gelber Fleck*” (“yellow stain”) and, from 1761 until Joseph II’s edict of emancipation in 1781, the state directed Jews wear yellow cuffs (108, 113, 122), and in Rome, according to Story, Jewish men wore “a yellow hat, and the women a yellow veil” (Story 442). The first directive of such “badge laws” emerges in Canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council’s edicts from 1215: “Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress” (qtd. in Kisch 102).

<sup>25</sup> The Wandering Jew’s story emerged in the early middle ages. In its most basic form, a Jewish man berated Jesus for “tarrying” on his way to crucifixion. In response, Jesus doomed the man to live throughout time: “I will go, but you shall wait until I will come again” (Edelman 5). Theologians and pamphleteers elaborated on this story by incorporating rootlessness into his punishment: the Jew must await Jesus’s return while wandering the earth. Neither in nor out of time, but condemned until the Resurrection, the Wandering Jew perpetuates two major points for Christian propaganda: it “become[s] the symbol of the Jew” and “serves . . . as a testimony to Jesus’ sufferings and death and as a *warning* for the godless people and the unbelievers [emphasis original]” (7). The legend threatens those who fail to conform to “the Word” to doom.

<sup>26</sup> As Linett recognizes, “*Nightwood* constructs Jewishness as a kind of scaffolding that allows the text to approach its most painful and important subjects” (172), it follows that

non-Jews who question or reject proscribed cultural identities find themselves similarly threatened.

<sup>27</sup> Notably, the Book of Luke asserts that Jesus “began his ministry” at about thirty years of age (3.23). Like the Wandering Jew and Jesus, Felix’s life prior to the age of thirty remains a mystery.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen locates the first mention of the “matrilineal principle” in Mishnah Qiddushin 3:12, which Cohen translates as: “And any woman who does not have the potential for a valid marriage either with this man or with other men, the offspring is like her. And what . . . is this? This is the offspring of a slave woman or a gentile woman” (273-74). In this case, the “valid marriage” occurs between a Jewish man and a Jewish woman, any children from the union remain Jewish. The non-Jewish woman wed to a Jewish man bears non-Jewish children.

<sup>29</sup> Felix’s attraction to the past, and his claim to the aristocracy, also draws him to the circus, where the performers appropriate aristocratic titles such as “Duchess of Broadback” and “Principessa Stasera y Stasero” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 11). However, the performers’ motivation for adopting titles differs from Felix’s: they hope to “dazzle the boys about town” and to increase the gap between public and private identities, for, as the narrator explains, their “public life . . . was all they had” (11). On the other hand, Felix “clung to his title to dazzle his own estrangement,” or to blind himself to his alienation (11).

<sup>30</sup> The juxtaposition of “mighty” and “grain of salt” gestures at O’Connor’s swagger and insecurity. The narrator introduces this trait via O’Connor’s stance, explaining that he has “a heavy way of standing that was also apologetic” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 13). Despite his grandiosity, O’Connor remains plagued by fears of inadequacy and exclusion due to his identification as a member of the “third sex.” Chapter five examines this facet of O’Connor’s character and its religious implications.

<sup>31</sup> O’Connor also invokes a circus performer, “Nikka the Nigger,” a circus performer whose head-to-toe tattoos describe seamy and violent subjects from European literature, religion, and empire. Roses, birds, vine-work, and “an angel from Chartres” provide the illustrations, but Nikka’s tattoos include text, such as the word “Desdemona” on his (impotent) penis, and a citation from “the book of magic, a confirmation of the Jansenist theory” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 14-15); the quote affirms humanity’s essential wickedness, or the belief that only “special grace from God” might rectify the human predisposition for evil (“Jansenism”). Similarly, O’Connor adds that “over his *dos* [rear]” one tattoo, “in monkish” or “Gothic” script, describes, “the really deplorable condition of Paris before hygiene was introduced, and nature had its way up to the knees” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 15). Nikka’s tattoo, with its portrayal of the medieval city’s “common habit of throwing waste into the streets and gutters” (La Berge 208), reminds us that history holds more than the stories of the high and the mighty: history also contains the abject. For Nikka, loveliness

also contains the abject: O'Connor explains of Nikka's tattoos, "he loved beauty and would have it all about him" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 15). For Nikka, the ugly and the elevated meet in value. Jane Marcus's essay, "Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic," takes Nikka's tattoos as a major focus as she explores *Nightwood's* challenges to Levitical prohibitions, including the admonition to not "tattoo any marks upon you" (Lev 19:28). Marcus reads *Nightwood* as a political statement in its rejection of patriarchal norms, "a kind of feminist-anarchist call for freedom from fascism" (221).

<sup>32</sup> In his discourse on the night, O'Connor quotes:

"Donne says: 'We are all conceived in close prison; in our mothers' wombs we are close prisoners all. When we are born, we are but born to the liberty of the house—all our life is but a going out to the place of execution and death. Now was there ever a man sent to sleep in the Cart, between Newgate and Tyburn? Between the prison and the place of execution, does any man sleep?' Yet he says, 'Men sleep all the way.'" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 97)

O'Connor fails to complete Donne's sentence, which concludes: "from the womb to the grave we are never thoroughly awake; but passe on with such dreams and imaginations as these: I may live as well, as another, and why should I dye, rather than another?" (Donne 148). O'Connor intensifies his reminder that people forget the inevitable by adding, "How much more is there upon him in a close sleep when he is mounted on darkness" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 97). After implying that people of the night suffer from a deeper blindness than those of the day, O'Connor reveals that he witnessed Petherbridge's "collection" of Vote, stealing her from Flood.

<sup>33</sup> O'Connor speaks generally, so he might refer to both *La Vita Nuova* and *La Divina Commedia*. Certainly critics associate O'Connor with the *Commedia*, and Warren sees a correspondence between the novel and the *Inferno*, if nothing else than for its use of the "powerful folk image of being lost in the forest" (Warren 121). However, a more intriguing correspondence involves the names of Robin Vote and Nora Flood: both feature three syllables and nine letters, which evokes Dante's use of "three" and its multiples throughout the *Commedia* to evoke the Divine Trinity.

<sup>34</sup> In discussing Dante as "the poet of religious and social judgment," as well as "the poet of heterosexual love," Abrahams suggests that Dante might have recalled Vote as a "lost girl, he might have remembered her only to record her as a lesbian, a sinner, making her a 'target forever' in the appropriate circle of Hell" [*italics original*] (260). However, while persuasive in describing the ambiguity of "lost girl," Abraham also claims that "it is clear that being made part of a lesbian record is 'fearful'" (260). What O'Connor notes as "fearful" is Flood's judgmental eye, which Vote invests with moral authority.

<sup>35</sup> The Volkbein residence includes fragments of Roman statuary, "impressive copies of the Medici shield, and, beside them, the Austrian bird" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 6). Flood and

They decorate their flat with, among other items, circus chairs, “cherubim from Vienna, ecclesiastical hangings from Rome, [and] a spinet from England” (50). Beyond reflecting a wish to “collect” history, the homes’ décor evoke degenerate aestheticism. Nordau described the decadent home as consisting of “stage properties and lumber-rooms, rag-shops and museums” (Nordau 10). The mixing elevates pleasure over what might be deemed sensible or practical; hence, it becomes another signal of cultural deterioration.

CHAPTER IV  
FROM THE DESERT TO THE GARDEN: UNITY, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND  
*THE PERPETUAL ANGELUS*

The chaos of “Gerontion,” a reflection of the war-traumatized west, offers a glimpse of Eliot’s ideas on the unity of experience. Eliot offered a further illustration of those ideas shortly after composing the poem.<sup>1</sup> An article on the Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe, presents Eliot’s initial foray into his oft-revised theory of the “dissociation of sensibility,” the split between thought and feeling (or sensation), made famous with the 1921 publication of “The Metaphysical Poets.” In this and following essays, Eliot proposed that a division between reason and sensation, entwined with morality, philosophy, and mythology, corresponded with the rise of Puritanism and the poetry of John Milton, whom Eliot chose as the dissociation’s insurmountable marker.<sup>2</sup> Although Eliot pinpoints the English civil war era as a turning point, he fails to explicate this period’s significance in detail; instead, he evasively links the disintegrating cohesion of thought, emotion, morality, and myth to the rise of Puritanism, a disintegration Eliot believed to lead to “the present regimen of Europe” (Eliot, “Four Elizabethan Dramatists” 18). As Eliot revised his ideas on the unity of thought and feeling, he chose Dante as the ultimate model: a poet who alchemized disparate elements into an absolute whole, and who transformed a human woman into an agent of the Divine.

Eliot's article, "Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe," implies that the English Civil War and Cromwell's Commonwealth (1649-1659) bore responsibility for fragmentation not only within England's population, but within its aesthetic culture as well. In describing the artistic fracture, Eliot argues that blank verse from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, "became the vehicle of more varied and more intense art-emotions than it has ever conveyed since; [and] after the erection of the Chinese Wall of Milton, blank verse has suffered not only arrest but retrogression" (87). In likening Milton to a monumental stone edifice, Eliot demarcates the front between "associative" and "dissociative" poets.

In 1920's "Phillip Massinger," Eliot wrote that successful authors of blank verse, such as Donne and Webster, present "permanent" works of art, although they relied on moral conventions, or "traditions of conduct" such as fidelity and honor (133) for their plots. Such conventions change, but, Eliot asserts, these authors treated those moral conventions as "a framework or an alloy necessary for working the metal; the metal itself consisted of unique emotions resulting inevitably from the circumstances, resulting or inhering as inevitably as the properties of a chemical compound" (133). Massinger, Eliot argued, brought nothing of his own experience, his own emotions, to the framework, which Eliot equates with a "paltry . . . imagination" (134).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, he fails to transcend the conventions, and therefore renders his work specific to a place and time; moreover, the lack of "feeling" opens Massinger up to charges of immorality, whereas, in contrast, a play such as Middleton's *The Changeling*, despite its litany of corruption



(including murder and adultery), redeems itself due to the artist's emotional sense. The problem, according to Eliot, is that,

What may be considered corrupt or decadent in the morals of Massinger is not an alteration or diminution in morals; it is simply the disappearance of all the personal and real emotions which this morality supported and into which it introduced a kind of order. As soon as the emotions disappear the morality which ordered it becomes hideous. Puritanism itself became repulsive only when it appeared as the survival of a restraint after the feelings which restrained it had gone. (133-34)

The morality ordered the emotions, and the entwining of morality and feeling justified the existent conventions. Yet when the feelings disappear, the morality remains as an inadequate framework for the transmission of art.

In Eliot's view, those writers who followed Milton, and the rise of Puritanism, illustrated a diminishment of the power of English verse because poetry's communicative scope narrowed. As Eliot proposed, poets tended to technical ability at the expense of finely expressed feelings--poets portrayed "art-emotions," unevenly at best. Eliot argues, for example, that Tennyson's work suffers because his poetry "is cruder (*not* 'rougher' or less perfect in technique) than that of a half a dozen contemporaries of Shakespeare; cruder because less capable of expressing complicated, subtle, and surprising emotions" ("Marlowe" 87). Eliot's bases his distinction between the later sophisticated, yet coarser verse and that of the seventeenth century on the ability to convey "art-emotions." This statement coheres with the most well known figuration of the "dissociation of sensibility" in the 1921 essay "The Metaphysical Poets," which appeared anonymously in *The Times Literary Supplement* of October 20, 1921.<sup>4</sup> Eliot argued that in literature written prior to the English Civil War the intellect, emotion, and physical sensation coalesced. Poets

“incorporated their erudition into their sensibility: their mode of feeling was directly and freshly altered by their reading and thought . . . there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling, which is exactly what we find in Donne . . .” (63). Eliot believed that the poets of the seventeenth century possessed an ability to “devour any kind of experience” and to represent that experience in art as a unified whole.

Following these poets, Eliot claimed, famously, that “a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of two of the most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden” (64). Formally, poetry benefited from these poets’ linguistic innovations, but, despite their technical prowess, their advancements failed to include a similar “refinement” in feeling or sensibility. Instead, these two “masters of diction . . . triumph with a dazzling disregard of the soul” (66). The Romantics, reacting in part to Neo-Classical artificiality, “revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced, they reflected” (65). The fault here, according to Eliot, lies in not turning one’s interests into poetry, but, instead, “merely meditat[ing] on them poetically” (65). To remedy this imbalance between thought and feeling, Eliot prescribed that the modern poet “become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (65). Eliot’s belief in the “dissociation of sensibility” provided him with an overarching theme that lasted throughout the 1920s and, in a sense, a justification that he, too, enacted tradition as he sought to reintroduce metaphysical poetry--his own--into the modern world.

As he revised his theory of the dissociation, Eliot moved the date of its occurrence back to the thirteenth century and the poetry of Dante. For Eliot, this poet exemplified the coalition of thought, feeling, and, importantly, constructed his poems using a framework of myth and theology.

Evidently, one of the reasons Eliot found Milton lacking resulted from a paucity of mythology. Eliot noted of *Paradise Lost* that “Milton’s celestial and infernal regions are large but insufficiently furnished apartments filled by heavy conversation; and one remarks about the Puritan mythology an historical thinness” (“Blake” 157).<sup>5</sup> Because the seventeenth century divide “impoverished mythology,” it consequently impoverished culture. Poetry begins to ponder, to ruminate (as Eliot would refer to it in “The Metaphysical Poets”) rather than achieve a balance between art and philosophy, a marriage between objectivity and subjectivity that reflects the wider tradition. Despite Milton’s linguistic strengths, his anorexic treatment of myth and of the past’s influence renders him prosaic rather than poetic. Likewise, William Blake’s poetry suffered from the “dissociation,” but responsibility here, Eliot claimed, rests with Blake’s emphasis on mythology and philosophy.

#### Myth, Religion, and Dante

In an essay on Blake’s poetry (1919), Eliot argued that Blake directed his energy into inventing a philosophy, therefore, he was “inclined to attach more importance to it than an artist should”, and, as a result, his poetry “inclined to formlessness” (155).<sup>6</sup> Although innovative, Blake might have benefited from cultural continuity. He wonders if

“it would not have been beneficial to the north of Europe generally, and to Britain in particular, to have had a more continuous religious history” (157). Although this reference alludes to the Reformation, Eliot pushes the idea of “religious continuity” even further back as he contrasts the fates of pre-Christian gods in the Latin south and the Saxon North. Eliot asserts that, “local divinities in Italy were not wholly exterminated by Christianity, and they were not reduced to the dwarfish fate which fell upon our trolls and pixies. The latter with the major Saxon deities, were perhaps no great loss in themselves, but they left an empty place; and perhaps our mythology was further impoverished by the divorce from Rome” (157). Until the rise of Puritanism, if not Protestantism itself, Britain and northern Europe culture maintained a link with their pre-Christian culture. Severing the link with Rome also cut the British off from the roots of their history or the communal mind of the past.<sup>7</sup> Eliot discovered just such a link in Dante.

As an example of the poet who successfully melded mythology, theology and philosophy, thought and feeling, Eliot reached to Dante, whom he first read in 1910,<sup>8</sup> and incorporated the Italian poet into his theory of poetic unity. Eliot’s first published thoughts on Dante appeared in an April 1920 review of Henry Dwight Sidgwick’s monograph, *Dante*; Eliot revised and republished this essay as “Dante” in *The Sacred Wood* (1920). In both versions of the paper, Eliot disagreed with Sedgwick’s perception of Dante’s allegory as “significan[t] for the seeker of ‘spiritual light’ . . . . Mr. Sidgwick magnifies the ‘preacher and prophet,’ and presents Dante as a superior Isaiah or Carlyle . . . .” (“Dante” 164). Likewise, Eliot argued with critics who divorce Dante’s poetry from his philosophy, such as Walter Savage Landor, who “deplore the spiritual mechanics and

find the poet only in passages where he frees himself from his divine purposes” (164).

Eliot claimed that either perspective limits *Commedia*'s achievement, for its value might rest beyond both the structure and the philosophy. Eliot argued that:

The poem has not only a framework, but a form; and even if the framework be allegorical, the form may be something else. The examination of any episode in the “Comedy” ought to show that not merely the allegorical interpretation or the didactic intention, but the emotional significance itself, cannot be isolated from the rest of the poem. (165)

Dante's emotion, then, becomes a necessary formal element that overrides other considerations: Eliot suggests that a reader does not need to grasp the allegory or Dante's cosmology, but “the emotional structure within this scaffold is what must be understood” (168). The emotions Dante present fit along a continuum of human feeling, from the despair of the Trimmers and the misery of the damned, to the hope of souls in purgatory and the joy of those in paradise. The structure, the emotion, as well as the purpose, cohere into a unified whole that, in Eliot's view, remains unsurpassed.

Although an initial experience occurs with the simultaneity of thought and feeling, individual unity only plays a small part, for “the Absolute will be, for Eliot . . . a state of unity and comprehensiveness toward which the universe tends, and which does not at all resemble the Appearances of our world, since they are all reconciled and transformed in its harmony” (Skaff 39). Eliot found a model of such unity in *The Divine Comedy*, which, he claimed, was a work of such complete harmony not only because of its formal qualities, but for its emotional and philosophical qualities as well. He argued that, despite the more sensational elements of the *Commedia*, Dante “does not aim to excite—that is not even a test of his success—but to set something down . . . Dante, more

than any other poet, has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy not as a theory (in the modern and not the Greek sense of that word) or as his own comment or reflection, but in terms of something *perceived*" ("Dante" 171). Because Dante "had the benefit of a mythology and a theology which had undergone a more complete absorption into life than those of Lucretius" (163), we find in Dante a completely internalized, rigidly ordered world view, of which "the absorption into the divine is only the necessary, if paradoxical, limit of [mystical] contemplation" (171).

Eliot echoed these views eight years later in a review he submitted to the *Times Literary Supplement*. The text argued that contemporary audience of *La Divina Commedia* labored under a misconception regarding the fundamental idea of Divine justice, which, he asserted, not only underlay the work's theme but its aesthetic and allegorical structure as well. Eliot concurred; in fact, he repeated an argument he made in his 1920 review: that readers regularly misinterpreted the *Inferno*'s Paolo and Francesca, an adulterous couple tormented by infernal winds.<sup>9</sup> Rather than sighing over the pair's romanticism, or pitying their fate as victims of love, Eliot points out that readers should recognize "that all of these damned are damned *voluntarily*; they prefer damnation because they prefer to remain in their several states of mind rather than make any motion of discipline or surrender . . . . The damned choose the mental state which implies torment [whereas] the souls in purgatory choose the torment which will purge the mental state" ("Two Studies" 372). Hell's inhabitants, then, chose to relive or reenact their sins instead of restraining them or releasing them in order to approach the Divine.<sup>10</sup>

According to Eliot, the fusion of thought, feeling, philosophy, theology, and

mythology in art accomplishes more than intellectual unity; it also provides a means of establishing a relationship with the past. Eliot singled Dante out as exemplar of this idealized union of elements; his appreciation of the Florentine began to seep more clearly into Eliot's work as he attempted to reinvent Dante's poem in order to allegorize the present. This application of Dante appears most blatantly in *The Waste Land*, but it also manifests in the majority of Eliot's poetry after 1920. In 1950, Eliot explained his allusions to Dante, saying "Certainly I have borrowed from him, in the attempt to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader's mind the memory, of some Dantesque scene, and thus establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life" ("What Dante" 128). Eliot relied on Dante to order and represent his speakers' views of experience.

Dante's influence on Eliot seeps into his prose as well. In June 1921, Eliot published a "London Letter," titled "The True Church and the Nineteen Churches," in *The Dial*. In the letter, Eliot took umbrage with the City of London Diocese for its plans to demolish certain City churches and to sell the land to the district's commercial houses. After discussing the aesthetic and communal value of the edifices, Eliot writes that if a man wishes for sanctuary from the Square Mile's noise and angst, he might find it inside these churches: "To one who, like the present writer, passes his day in this City of London (*quand'io sentii chiavar l'uscio di sotto*) the loss of these towers, to meet the eye down a grimy lane, and of those empty naves, to receive the solitary visitor at noon from the dust and tumult of Lombard street, will be irreparable and unforgotten" ("London" 691). Even if deserted, Eliot argues, the churches retain value as places of solitude and

introspection beyond the City's fog and chaos. To lose "these towers" means more than a change in London's physical landscape; it also signifies a disconnection from the human past that anchors identity--an anxiety evoked in *The Waste Land*.

Eliot's citation of Dante's *Inferno* 33.46 further informs his "Letter."<sup>9</sup> Count Ugolino utters the line "*quand'io sentii chiavar l'uscio di sotto*" ("when I heard the door below locked up" [Carlyle 373]) while relating how authorities left him, and his children, to starve within a locked tower.<sup>11</sup> Eliot's Dantean reference reinforces the idea that the churches offer an escape from the imprisoning financial district as well as providing a connection to the past. As with *The Waste Land's* allusions, the juxtaposition of the Medieval allegory, the Restoration church, and the modern City, conflates past and present and illustrates an essential sameness that defies historical distance, and which roots the modern Western world to its origins.

Eliot's most evocative use of Dante as a source appears in his poetry as unframed, unnoted references, as Eliot builds his poems, incorporating Dante as a pointer towards meaning, or as a means of enlarging the reading of a poem. Although numerous critics offer readings of Eliot's works through a Dantean lens, among them B. C. Southam and Dominic Mangianello, none have traced the progress of a key Dantean figure that features prominently amongst Eliot's allusions: Beatrice. Eliot's poems of the 1920s increasingly focus, via references to the *Commedia*, on Dante's beloved. Eliot's increasing use of the figure corresponds with his growing attraction to Anglo-Catholicism, culminating in his 1927 conversion to the faith and the publication of "Ash-Wednesday" in 1930.



### The Eyes of Beatrice, The Prayers for the Lady

In order to give meaning to “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot, “*Ulysses*” 177), Eliot attempted to recapture a unifying philosophy in his 1920s poetry by filtering religious orthodoxy through Dante’s mythic vision, which, he asserted, “extend[ed] the frontiers of this world” so that it encompassed the divine (*Varieties* 95). Eliot attempts to reconstruct a pre-Reformation religious unity, thereby providing his speakers with a hope of escape from the modern malaise, by evoking Dante’s idealized women: the Virgin Mary and Beatrice.

When considering Eliot’s idealized female figure, critics typically focus on “Ash-Wednesday.” In several cases, critics read her as an extension of Eliot’s earlier treatments of degraded women who mirror moral and cultural breakdown,<sup>12</sup> as well as his personal response to women. For example, Colleen Lamos describes the 1930 poem’s “virginal Lady” as an anxious reaction to female authority (78). Similarly, Laurie J. MacDiarmid explains the appropriation of a Marian or Beatrician figure as a result of Eliot’s “hysterical impotence in the face of the feminine” (90). Subsequently, Eliot’s idealization is merely the removal of the “women’s bodies [that are] sites of entrapment and pollution” (Lamos 82). By de-sexualizing the female, Lamos contends, Eliot’s erotic anxiety is defused, which permits spiritual association with, or sublimation to, a higher power. In comparison, several critics foreground the women in Eliot’s life, such as his friend Emily Hale, who, they claim, inspired the Beatrice image--the polar opposite of Eliot’s wife, the “dark muse,” Vivienne Eliot (Christ 36).<sup>13</sup> The focus on Eliot’s psychology or biography, however, is reductive. Rather than exemplifying the poet’s

misogyny or reflecting a shift in his love life, Eliot's glorification of the feminine figure, in contrast with his earlier treatments of women, illustrates his transition towards a unified Christian philosophy. Rather than strictly reducing feminine voice or physicality, Eliot uses Dante's key emblems in his 1920s poetry to achieve religious unity.

Eliot recuperates the idealized woman with the mythical method, the literary application of myth to "manipulat[e] a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" ("*Ulysses*" 177). Conflating past and present beliefs orders experience and might provide "release from a merely repetitive history and from a perpetual present lacking in any hope of transformation" (Nicholls 253). Eliot draws on medieval Christianity's structures to present his speakers with the potential for spiritual transcendence. The Marian and Beatrician figures represent passivity, emotional release, and self sacrifice to the Absolute. Significantly, the women exist on two planes: they are each "a celestial and a terrestrial phenomenon" (Guzzo qtd. in Pelikan, *Mary* 5). Consequently, the figures function as models for humans who seek spiritual rebirth and divine unity. Although idealized souls, their historicity enables the women to mediate between humanity and God; the figures sympathize with the supplicant and lead him towards redemption. However, while they share a purpose, the women diverge in meaning. The Virgin Mary is "theologically and doctrinally defined as wholly unique and yet set up as a model of Christian virtue" (Warner 334). Unlike any other human, her piety, obedience, and humility, make her an archetype of self-abnegation to the Absolute. For this negation, she was, of course, rewarded on earth with her maternity and later as Queen of Heaven. Similarly, Dante's Beatrice epitomizes the reconciliation of spiritual and physical natures,

a quality that Eliot praised in the 1926 Clark Lectures. While he declined to call Beatrice “heavenly,” Eliot claimed that Dante’s treatment of her “enlarge[d] the boundary of human love so as to make it a stage in the progress toward the divine” (*Varieties* 166). In the 1929 essay, *Dante*, he elaborated that Dante “express[ed] the recrudescence of an ancient passion in a new emotion, in a new situation, which comprehends, enlarges, and gives a meaning to it” (43). Seeing Beatrice in *Purgatorio* reignited Dante’s earthly love, but his supernatural experiences forced him to reflect upon and redefine his emotion so that it became inextricably bound with the Absolute—“*l’ amor che move il sole e l’ altre stele*” (“the / Love that moves the sun and the other stars”; *Par.* 33.145; Wicksteed 409).<sup>14</sup> Eliot considered Beatrice the *Commedia*’s focal point, for, he wrote, “The Beatrice theme is essential to the understanding of the whole . . . because of Dante’s *philosophy* of it” (*Dante* 44).<sup>15</sup> Beatrice signified temporal desire transfigured as a “higher love” that brought Dante into the Empyrean realm. Eliot’s poetry evokes these figures to fulfill much the same role, for they offer a chance of escape from modernity’s chaos and entry to the peace, light, and timeless moment of the Absolute.

*The Waste Land* illustrates Eliot’s theory in terms of the poet’s “consciousness of the past,” seen in his dense use of allusion. These references, articulated by (and amongst) a throng of isolated voices, represent a blistered, patched, and peeled culture that fails to nourish humanity’s emotional and intuitive senses. Deprived of a consistent cultural--that is, communal--tradition that provides some shared meaning, the voices of neurotics, automatons, and the sickly speak of modernity’s remoteness and isolation, distant from the past and uncertain about the future.<sup>16</sup> As in “Gerontion,” *The Waste*

*Land's* barren land offers no indication of regeneration. If "Gerontion's" "squatting jew" parodies Christ, it could follow--as *The Waste Land* follows "Gerontion"--that Christ, as one of Frazer's year gods, is the Fisher King who cannot heal, and who cannot die, in order to regenerate the land. On the other hand, Eliot indicated in his notes to the poem that he associated the Hanged Man with the sacrificial god as well as "the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part IV" (*Complete* 50).<sup>17</sup> Instead, *The Waste Land's* population remain, in a sense, in a state of suspended animation--death in life, life in death--withering, like the land itself, with thunder, tantalizingly close yet still distant, promising *shantih*.

*The Waste Land's* world is one of corrupted meaning--for its citizens, ritual, whether religious, social, sexual, or emotional, remains but its meaning forgotten. Among the representatives of a world afflicted by spiritual *aboulie*, the speaker of the hyacinth garden alone offers a glimpse of something potentially enlightening or rewarding, but he fails to grasp his experience fully as it overwhelms him into insensibility. Eliot distinguishes this evocative scene from the rest of the poem by bracketing it with quotations, in German, from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, thereby distancing it from Madame Sosostris and the anxious couple in "A Game of Chess." The hyacinth garden's relative isolation, as well as its singularity in contrast to *The Waste Land's* other experiences, encourages a reading informed by, but outside of, the overall poem. Moreover, addressing the hyacinth garden alone enables us to trace Eliot's use of the Dantean female figure with greater clarity.

Eliot's 1920s poetry associates Dante's feminine ideal with flowers, sight, and illumination; for example, eyes, stars, and profound brightness typically indicate the figure's presence as representative of supernatural promise. The brightness often contrasts with (and reinforces) the speakers' existence in a "dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying" ("Ash-Wednesday" 4.6),<sup>18</sup> where, as the living dead, they agonize over longing for change and a fear of action. *The Waste Land's* remembered moment, "when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden" (1.37) exemplifies this dilemma. Notably, the scene briefly describes the hyacinth girl's wet hair and full arms, but it details her impact on the speaker:<sup>19</sup>

I could not  
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (1.37-40)

Both physical sensation and the ability to reason are nullified as the speaker experiences an apparently mystic moment. That his senses prove inadequate as he gazes into the "heart of light" mirrors Dante's recollection of gazing upon Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* as well as in the *Commedia*. Upon setting eyes on Beatrice at a wedding, Dante writes: "Then were my senses so destroyed by the might which Love assumed on beholding himself so nigh unto that gentle lady, that no more than the spirits of sight remained alive: and even these were left outside their organs because Love would dwell in their most noble place to behold the wondrous lady . . ." (43). The personification of Love possesses Dante so completely that his sense evacuates; Love even displaces Dante's eyes in order that he, rather than the poet's own "spirits" of sight might view Beatrice. Similarly, when Dante gazes upon Beatrice in the *Commedia*; for example, her

appearance “*senza la vista alquanto esser mi fê*” (“made me remain / a while without vision”; *Purg.* 32.11-12; Okey 405), and affects him so that “*che passar mi convien senza costrutto*” (“I must needs / pass it unconstrued by”; *Par.* 23.22-23; Wicksteed 283).<sup>20</sup> Like Dante, Eliot’s speaker is paralyzed because, “neither living nor dead,” like a man possessed (literally robbed of reason), he glimpses something both in and out of time. Robbed of reason, he is incapable of fully grasping, and thereby resolving, the moment’s significance.

Eliot argued that Dante and his contemporaries believed “divine vision” was, in part, a rational exercise; “it was through and by and beyond discursive thought that man could arrive at beatitude” (*Varieties* 99).<sup>21</sup> The hyacinth man, who “knew nothing,” cannot process his experience as it occurs. Such inadequacy corresponds with Eliot’s thoughts on Dante’s experience. Dante only fully comprehended his adoration when he reconsidered it as an older man (*Dante* 59). Eliot characterized Dante’s “contemplation of the beloved” as a Platonic meditation on “absolute beauty and goodness partially revealed through a limited though delightful human object” (*Varieties* 114). Dante’s deliberation of Beatrice as representative of the ideal directed him toward the final cause--“the attraction towards God” (*Dante* 59). In the typescript of “A Game of Chess,” the speaker hints at noting such, albeit missed, potential in his past experience. After his hysterical companion demands, “Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / nothing?” The speaker reaches for his timeless moment, and he awakens to its significance as he replies that he remembers, sees, and knows: “I remember / The hyacinth garden. Those are pearls that were his eyes, yes!” (49-50). The speaker links the

hyacinth garden with transformation, evidenced in the allusion to Ariel's song from *The Tempest* and the emphatic "yes!" In its final published version, however, *The Waste Land* avoids such reflection, or, in any case, completion.

The hyacinth garden's speaker, unable to move beyond paralysis, mourns for what he has lost, which is reinforced by citations from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* that frame the sequence. The first quotation, a sailor's song, notes a lover's melancholy: "*Mein Irisch Kind, / Wo weilest du?*" ("My Irish child / Where do you wait?") (1.33-34). The second citation, "*Oed' und leer das Meer*" ("Desolate and empty is the sea") (1.42), closes the hyacinth garden episode with the dying Tristan's words as he waits for Isolde. The allusions underscore the hyacinth garden's speaker's own sorrow for something briefly held but lost before it might be resolved. Because he only partially understands the moment's significance, the speaker's recollection only emphasizes the experience's "defeating doubleness: this ecstasy annihilates ordinary sense, and afterwards it is its desolation which persists" (Moody 118). The hyacinth garden's speaker remains locked, like his fellow inhabitants in an emotionally and spiritually sterile landscape where love betrays--if it exists at all. Lil's friend in the pub who threatens, "if you don't give it him, there's others will" (2.149), the typist, and the Thames Daughters, among others, echo "Gerontion's" dark women who both mask truth and illustrate earthly love's futility. The redemptive emotion that holds transcendent potential eludes the hyacinth garden's speaker (Saha 32). The failure to act on his intimation of the timeless leaves him emotionally, and spiritually, impotent. Like the poem's other voices, this speaker is more inclined to experience life-in-death than break the tendency towards inertia.

“The Hollow Men,” first published in its current form in 1925, originated as a series of independent poems. Eliot published the earliest of these in November, 1924, when two poems appeared nearly simultaneously in two publications: “*Poème inédit*” (“unpublished poem”) in the French magazine *Commerce*, which became the opening section of “The Hollow Men,” and a sequence titled “Doris’s Dream Songs,” a trio of short pieces, in *Chapbook*.<sup>22</sup> Both works evolved into Eliot’s first major post-*The Waste Land* verse, “The Hollow Men,” but much of the final poem consisted of stanzas from the “Dream Songs.” Eliot revised, rearranged, and republished the “Dream Songs” as “Three Poems” in January 1925,<sup>23</sup> before incorporating them into an early version of “The Hollow Men” in March 1925. In both “Doris’s Dream Songs” and “Three Poems,” a short piece, “Eyes that Last I Saw in Tears,” introduces the eyes, suggesting Beatrice, which haunt “The Hollow Men.”

The first piece, now relegated to one of Eliot’s “minor poems,” “Eyes that Last I Saw in Tears,” finds the speaker, situated in “death’s dream kingdom” (3), grieving at his inability to see the tears of a “golden vision” last seen “through division” (2). The eyes of the poem echo those of Beatrice in both *La Vita Nuova* and in all three volumes of the *Commedia*: Beatrice’s gaze communicates celestial distress, ire, or joy at Dante’s spiritual condition. For example, when Beatrice concludes her request to Virgil to seek Dante, “*gli occhi lucenti lagrimondo voles*” (“she turned away her bright eyes weeping” *Inf.* 2.116; Carlyle 21).<sup>24</sup> When she confronts Dante in *Purgatorio*, she admonishes him sharply, saying that, while she lived, her gaze proved sufficient to inspire Dante towards virtue: “*il sostenni col mio volto; / monstrando gli occhi giovenetti a lui*” (“I sustained



him with my countenance / showing my youthful eyes to him”; *Purg.* 30.121-22; Okey 387). When she died, and the scrutinizing eyes vanished, Dante strayed. Only through Beatrice’s tears might Dante achieve redemption, for she claims “*piangendo, furon porti*” (“weeping / my prayers were borne”; 30.141; 387). The tears suggest her pity. In Eliot’s poem, the eyes represent a moral examination akin to Beatrice’s: words associated with the eyes—“division,” “affliction,” “decision,” and “derision”—signify their significance in their power to judge, and the speaker longs for judgment, for otherwise he faces apathy. Underscoring this idea, the speaker asserts that the inability to see the eyes “is my affliction” (6).<sup>25</sup> He grieves not only for his lost love, but also for what she signifies: the opportunity of wholeness he cannot attain except “At the door of death’s other kingdom” (11), or purgatory, where “the eyes outlast a little while / A little while outlast the tears” (13-14). Beatrice, God’s intermediary, might disdain the pilgrim’s degradation, but she also offers guidance to spiritual renewal.

The significance of “Eyes That Last I Saw in Tears” extends beyond introducing the “eye” motif Eliot includes in “The Hollow Men.” It appears to be Eliot’s first attempt at constructing a poem centered on a Beatrice figure. While the focus remains on a memory and the suggestion of paralysis, as with the Hyacinth Garden’s speaker, the poem leaves open the possibility for change: the eyes may reappear if the speaker approaches purgatory. Although a “minor poem,” this short piece marks an important shift in Eliot’s perspective, as it appears to be his first composition that employs the figure of Beatrice to suggest not loss, but the possibility of redemption and movement out of the wasteland.

“The Hollow Men” initially seems to develop further *The Waste Land*’s sense of futility and barrenness as its spiritually paralyzed speaker refuses to act on his desire for transition. MacDiarmid argues that women are responsible for this paralysis (99). On the contrary, the poem implies that women, albeit idealized ones, represent the hollow men’s hope for transformation; the speaker alludes to several typically Dantean tropes, including star and eye imagery, to recall Beatrice and the Virgin, the “hope only of empty men.”

The poem’s setting, “death’s dream kingdom,” is an inversion of “death’s other Kingdom.” Images from Dante’s Earthly Paradise and Heavenly City are reduced to fragments that indicate the land’s sterility: *Purgatorio*’s sylvan fecundity becomes a single swinging tree (which also recalls Genesis’ Tree of the Knowledge), and *Paradiso*’s joyful heavenly choir changes into remote “voices . . . / In the wind’s singing” (2.6-10). Eliot also invokes Dante’s star imagery to reflect the hollow men’s spiritual desert: as Dante journeyed through the supernatural regions, he grew closer to *Paradiso*’s starry realm; in contrast, the hollow men live “Under the twinkle of a fading star” (3.6), which indicates their distance from divine union and spiritual rebirth. Similarly, “The Hollow Men” alludes to Dante’s use of eyes. While Eliot neglects to identify the eyes as feminine, his use of them corresponds with Dante’s focus on Beatrice’s sympathetic scrutiny. In “death’s dream kingdom,” the gaze becomes “Sunlight on a broken column” (2.5). Eliot reduces Beatrice’s brilliance to a ruin’s spotlight, which, like the other fragments mirroring the higher world, suggests the speaker’s distance from a transcendent realm.

Locked in the “cactus land,” the speaker, like Prufrock and *The Waste Land*’s personae, exists as “Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion” (1.11-12). Immobilized by a lingering fear of death, he lives apathetically in a twilit, barren plane, “on the beach of [a] tumid river” (4.9) that recalls the *Inferno*’s landscape; on the banks of the river Acheron, Virgil points out to Dante those “souls who lived a life / but lived it with no blame and no praise” (3.35-36) as well as the angels who were “neither faithful nor unfaithful to the God, / who undecided stood but for themselves” (3.38-39). These shades wait, fruitlessly, for Charon to take them across the river and into “Death’s other kingdom”--Limbo and Hell proper. Like Dante’s Trimmers, the hollow man “behav[es] as the wind behaves” (2.17) rather than staking his own moral ground. To mask his cowardice, he dons “deliberate disguises” (2.14)--a scarecrow’s dress--to hide himself in the dead land to avoid moral (and mortal) ultimatums.

The speaker reveals his paralysis as he considers the “Eyes I dare not meet in dreams” (2.1). His dread of them, however, is countered by a lament that, “The eyes are not here” (4.1). The paradox recalls Dante’s joy and shame upon meeting Beatrice in *Purgatorio*. When the pair reunites, Beatrice reprimands Dante for forgetting her, and the moral path, after her death. He even ignored visions she sent: “*Nè impetrare spirazion mi valse, / con le quali ed in sogno ed altimenti / lo rivocai*” (“Nor did it avail me to gain inspirations, with which in dream and otherwise, I called him back”; 30.133-35; Okey 387). Having ignored those looks in dreams, Dante, overwhelmed, resists facing Beatrice, who demands that he confront her glance, “*per che sia colpa e duol d’ una misura*” (“so

that sin and sorrow be of one measure"; 30:108; 387). However, once he meets, and surrenders to, Beatrice's eyes in *Purgatorio*, Dante initiates his salvation.

Unlike Dante, the speaker of "The Hollow Men" remains divided by thought and action (between which "falls the shadow" of death). He appears to realize that willfully avoiding the eyes, which might lead him toward the final cause, will leave him "Sightless," in the "valley of dying stars" (4.3). Left with the other hollow men, who "grope together" in silence, the speaker acknowledges that their only hope would be for the eyes to "reappear" in a new form, and in the image of the Virgin Mary, the "perpetual star / Multifoliate Rose" (4.11-13). Dominic Mangianello and Marja Palmer, among others, have identified the Virgin Mary as the poem's "Perpetual Star," echoing Dante's description of her as "*viva stella*" ("living star") in *Paradiso* 23.92. Notably, in the *Commedia*, it is the Virgin Mary who initially takes pity on Dante and requests that Beatrice seek Virgil. Once Dante approaches Paradise, St. Bernard advises him to redirect his attention from Beatrice to the Virgin Mary, "on whom his progress now depends" (Musa 569). "Multifoliate Rose" is more complex, for it refers both to the Virgin Mary (who, throughout the *Commedia* and Christian orthodoxy, is typed as a rose) and to Dante's Empyrean, where a rose-shaped choir is lit with the "Living Flame" of divine love--the "heart of light." Here, the Virgin Mary holds the center, highest seat (*Par.* 31:132-34). However, the Virgin Mary's sympathy prompted Beatrice to arrange Dante's journey. In the course of his experience, Dante developed emotionally and shifted his attention from Beatrice exclusively to the Virgin, whose final intercession completed his salvation (*Par.* 33.40-51). If the speaker of "The Hollow Men," like

Dante, fears to meet the eyes he longs for, his only chance is that they will be exchanged for the Virgin Mary's, "the hope only / Of empty men" (4.15-16), who might act on his behalf.

Ultimately, the poem suggests that the hollow man both desires and resists escape from "the dead land," for actually meeting the eyes "calls for strength and an endeavour to seek forgiveness, which is impossible to the 'sightless' hollow man. . . ." (Palmer 222). Rather than confront the eyes and "truth," the speaker's spiritual paralysis blunts any opportunity to escape, and he reacts much like *The Waste Land's* speaker in the hyacinth garden (Mangianello 64). As the hollow man fails to act, the poem ends not with salvation, but with the specter of death, which banally ends an impotent world.

If *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men" feature the speakers' passive rejection of the female figure, the speaker of "Ash-Wednesday" (1930) shows determination to welcome it.<sup>26</sup> The speaker has moved beyond the earlier poem's apathetic souls as he strives to reject the temporal world's envy and avarice (1.4-5). He prays for mercy--that "the judgment not be too heavy upon" him (1.33), and he turns to the feminine image to mediate between himself and the Absolute. As in "The Hollow Men," the Virgin Mary and Beatrice figures are similar in "Ash-Wednesday"; they "convey like attributes of merciful intercession" and can be said to blend into one figure by the poem's end (Matthiessen 116).<sup>27</sup> Rather than specifying identities, the poem focuses on the woman's virtues as, in reverential tones, the speaker appeals to the figure's role as divine intercessor.

The woman initially appears in the poem's second part; the speaker, having been sacrificed to three leopards, has become a pile of bones offering praise to "the goodness of this Lady" for whom they "shine with brightness" (2.8-11). The speaker acknowledges the lady's virtues as he lays "dissembled" and aspiring to "forgetfulness" so that, having shed material concerns, he might leave temporality to join the Absolute. To this end, his bones sing to the "Lady of Silences," into whom Beatrice and the Virgin merge as one idealized figure identified, as in "The Hollow Men," with the rose. The Virgin manifests as the "Exhausted and life-giving / Worried reposeful" flower (2.30-31). The Mother of God, fatigued from aiding humanity and anxiously watching them re-offend, remains key to rebirth as "she continues to offer hope and life to mankind" (Gordon 45). However, Eliot invokes Beatrice as the "Rose of memory / Rose of forgetfulness" (2.29); at Beatrice's death, Dante forgot her and fell into sin; re-experiencing his love for her ultimately led to Paradise. Yet it was not merely love's reawakening that prompted Dante's salvation, but his renunciation and refiguring of that former emotion into a "higher love" that occurs in *Purgatorio's* Garden of Eden.

Eliot refigures the rose as "the Garden / Where all loves end" (2.33-34), which alludes to Dante's Earthly Paradise at Purgatory's summit. Dante bathed in the garden's River Lethe to remove memories of his own sin (*Purg.* 31.85-99), thereby preparing him to join Beatrice and enter Paradise. No rivers appear in "Ash-Wednesday," yet the garden "terminate[s]" all previous loves and "inconclusible" concerns. Temporal loves, having been renounced, become transcendent here (Maxwell 143). In gratitude, the poem's speaker honors the Lady: "Grace to the Mother / For the Garden" (2.45-46). He blesses

the women for the garden, the Earth and Paradise's nexus, where earthly love enlarges to embrace the divine love that resides at Paradise's center, which Dante only glimpses after redefining his earthly love for Beatrice. Similarly, Eliot's Lady beckons the speaker of "Ash-Wednesday" speaker toward purgation.

Further blurring the image's identity, a veiled woman appears, dressed in white and "blue of Mary's colour" (4.4) and, like Beatrice (who was also veiled) in *Purgatorio* and *The Waste Land's* hyacinth girl, encased in "White light" (4.15). The poem's penitent says the Lady talks "in ignorance and knowledge of eternal dolour" (4.6). But he asks her to pray for souls tormented "between season and season, time and / time" (5.22-23). Paralyzed in the temporal moment, people both "choose" and "oppose" the "veiled sister" and the authority she signifies because they "are terrified and cannot surrender" (5.32). These figures recall Dante's Trimmers and *The Waste Land's* population, the living dead and hollow men, for whom the Lady weeps.

The woman's "bright cloud of tears" echoes Beatrice's "*gli occhi lucenti lagrimondo volse*" ("bright eyes weeping") at Dante's immortality (*Inf.* 2.116). After hearing of her tears, Dante commits to the otherworldly expedition and, finally, salvation. Like Beatrice, the Lady's tears might help to "Redeem / The unread vision in the higher dream" (4.19-20). Eliot defined the "higher dream" as the grandeur associated with "serious pageants of royalty, of the Church, . . . and the splendour of the Revelation of St. John" (*Dante* 225). According to Eliot, *Paradiso* exemplifies the "higher dream" (225).<sup>28</sup> The rituals that enact belief and reaffirm faith, such as the Empyrean's Mystic Rose, reveal mysteries average humans are not otherwise privy to. *Paradiso's* pageantry

culminated with God's presence. Desiring a similar encounter with the divine, Eliot's speaker pleads "not to be separated" from the Absolute (4.35). Caught in a "dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying" (4.6) that anticipates the timeless moment, he prays to the Lady, the "Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, and spirit of the / garden" (4.25-26), that he might surrender himself to find "Our peace in His will" (4.31). The penitent's plea signifies the figure's value, for with her mediation, he might discard temporality and achieve rebirth in divine union.

Eliot's use of the feminine figure waned in poetry after "Ash-Wednesday," with the exception of a prayer to the Virgin Mary in "The Dry Salvages." The poem's speaker asks "figlia del tuo figlio / Queen of Heaven" (4.9-10) to "Pray for all those who are in ships," women left behind, and the dead who cannot hear "the sound of the sea bell's / *Perpetual angelus*" (4.14-15).<sup>29</sup> Although he calls on the Virgin, Eliot's focus has shifted; rather than indicating a speaker's longing for transcendence, he invokes the Virgin for others' comfort rather than his own. However, in transitioning between skepticism and committing himself to a consciously conservative Christianity, Eliot reached for Dante's mythic structure, which provided a scaffolding over which Eliot might construct his own imaginative vision as he reworked tradition so that it might give order--spiritual and philosophical unity--to a shattered post-war civilization and might provide an escape from modern relativism and chaos. In his poetry of the 1920s, Eliot reinvented Dante's Virgin Mary and Beatrice as contemporary models of mercy, transcendence, and as answers to modern skepticism--the hope only of modernist men.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eliot completed “Gerontion” no later than 9 July 1919 (*Letters* 312)

<sup>2</sup> Gordon claims that Eliot’s grandfather viewed Milton as a Unitarian poet (19).

<sup>3</sup> In his 1920 essay on Massinger, Eliot critiqued Massinger’s literary talent as lacking imagination, and coincidentally used his subject to justify his own allusive technique. Massinger’s plays contain numerous allusions to Shakespeare’s work, and in defining Massinger as an “immature” writer, Eliot explains that “One of the surest of tests is of the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different” (182).

<sup>4</sup> Critics debated the “dissociation of sensibility” throughout the twentieth century. While some, such as L. C. Knights, embraced Eliot’s theory, others, such as F. W. Bateson and Frank Kermode, complicated or rejected it. Kermode, for example, viewed the “dissociation” as an artificial means by which Eliot justified his preference for pre-Renaissance--and pre-modern--culture as well as defending modern poetry; the “dissociation of sensibility” existed to carve out a “golden age when the prevalent mode of knowing was not positivist and anti-imaginative” (170). In locating the golden age’s end in the Renaissance, modernist authors, including Pound and Hulme, found a group of writers whose poetic values echoed theirs: “a historical period possessing the qualities they postulate for the Image: unity, indissociability; qualities which, though passionately desired, are, they say, uniquely hard to come by in the modern world” (172-73). Eliot admitted as much in the introduction of *To Criticize the Critic* (1965); he noted that students often wrote to him asking what he meant by “the dissociation of sensibility” and the “objective correlative.” He explained the phrases as conceptual symbols for emotional preferences:

Thus the emphasis on tradition came about, I believe, as a result of my reaction against the poetry, in the English language, of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and my passion for the poetry, both dramatic and lyric, of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries . . . the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ may represent my devotion to Donne and the metaphysical poets, and my reaction against Milton. (19-20)

Although Eliot declines to mention precisely how these poets affected his own body of work, he relates that, along with Jules Laforgue and Dante, the Elizabethan poets and dramatists had a great effect upon his work: Eliot wrote that, “in my earlier criticism, both in my general affirmations about poetry and in writing about authors who had influenced me, I was implicitly defending the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote” (16).

<sup>5</sup> The balance of objectivity and subjectivity leads to a universality; this looks to the poet’s “extinction of personality” in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

<sup>6</sup> Eliot acknowledges Blake's poetic gift but critiques Blake's attempt to wed poetry and mythology. Eliot explains that in his longer poems, such as "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Blake became too preoccupied with philosophy, which distracted him from the "problems of the poet" ("Blake" 158).

<sup>7</sup> Eliot observed that, "Blake's genius" lay in the gift of "understanding of human nature, with a remarkable and original sense of language and the music of language, and a gift of hallucinated vision," but a lack of restraint, the control of "impersonal reason" or scientific objectivity, undermines his poetry ("Blake" 157). The latter might have been supplied by a tradition that would provide a scaffolding, and would enable "the concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy" that makes a poet classic; lacking that, Blake becomes "only a poet of genius" (158).

<sup>8</sup> Eliot first read Dante while at Harvard; his Temple Classics pocket edition (reprinted 1909), includes the Italian text with the English translation on the facing page, remains at the Houghton Library (Ricks, *Inventions* 4). Eliot continually carried this edition of the *Commedia* with him until, at least, 1922. The misprinted title of *Ara Vos Prec*, which substituted "*Vus*" for "*Vos*," came from a typographical error in the Temple Classic edition (Eliot, *Letters* 338 n2).

<sup>9</sup> In the fifth Canto of *Inferno*, the second circle of Hell contains the lustful that are blown about by fierce winds in utter darkness. Here, Dante and Virgil meet the shades of the lovers Francesca and Paolo; Francesca explains to Dante that one day the two sat reading a chivalrous romance; when the romance's hero, Lancelot, kissed his lover, Paolo kissed Francesca. The poem implies that this action lead to adultery ("*quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante*" ("that day we read in it no further"; 5.138; Carlyle 57). Francesca's husband discovered and murdered the pair. Francesca's story so overcomes Dante that he faints.

<sup>10</sup> In the same review, Eliot also discusses Gratia Eaton Baldwin's *The New Beatrice; or, The Virtue that Counsels. A Study in Dante*. Eliot disliked the work, a discourse on Dante's *Vita Nuova*, for, he thought, Baldwin treated *Vita Nuova* as strictly allegorical rather than as allegory entwined with autobiography; he asserted that "Baldwin is one of the allegorizers," the interpreters who read the work "as pure allegory without biographical foundation" ("Two Studies" 372). This comment, of course, undermines Eliot's own claims about the impersonality of the artist.

<sup>11</sup> Eliot misquotes Dante slightly, writing: "*quand'io sentii chiavar l'uscio di sotto.*" In the original, Dante writes: "*ed io sentii chiavar l'uscio di sotto / all'orribile torre*" (*Inferno* 33.46-47). Compare Ugolino's imprisonment within the "horrible tower" with Eliot's lament of "the loss of these [church] towers." Eliot also alludes to Ugolino's line in "The Fire Sermon": "I have heard the key / Turn in the door once and once only" (*The Waste Land* 410-11).

<sup>12</sup> Tony Pinkney, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, among others, have written critical studies of Eliot's misogyny. Teresa Gilbert, provides an overview of such criticism in "T. S. Eliot and the Feminist Revision of the Modern(ist) Canon" in *T. S. Eliot and Our Turning World*.

<sup>13</sup> Lyndall Gordon popularized this perspective in her critical biographies of Eliot; Carol Christ and M. Teresa Gibert-Maceda are but two scholars who cite her view that the female figure is a glorification of Hale.

<sup>14</sup> All translated citations from the *Commedia* have been taken from the Temple Classics version that Eliot consulted.

<sup>15</sup> Dante wrote "the purpose of the whole [*Commedia*] is to remove those who are living in this life from the state of wretchedness, and to lead them to the state of blessedness" (Wicksteed 607, n. 11). Such aims clearly echo Beatrice's literary role.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, however, denied intending for the poem to speak for lost youth; in 1931's "Thoughts After Lambeth," he explained: "when I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed 'the disillusionment of a generation,' which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form any part of my intention" (324). He reinforced this point later in a Harvard University lecture, saying "Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it is only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmic grumbling" (*Facsimile* 1).

<sup>17</sup> Eliot's notorious endnotes to the poem both aid the reader and complicate interpretation. In 1957, Eliot remarked that, initially, he'd planned to footnote the poem "with a view to spiking the guns of critics of my earlier poems who had accused me of plagiarism" (qtd in North 113). He changed his mind, for *The Waste Land* first appeared in periodicals *The Dial* and *The Criterion* without notes; in a letter to John Quinn on 25 June 1922, Eliot related that he planned to add notes to *The Waste Land* before sending it off to Boni-Liveright for its publication as a book (*Letters* 530). Later, Eliot backed away from his major "sources" for the poem, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, and claimed to "regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail" (113). Moreover, Eliot's opinion of the poem's second major source, James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, weakens the reliability of that text for interpreting *The Waste Land*. Although Eliot acknowledges Frazer's "erudition, and his ability to manipulate this erudition . . . I cannot subscribe for an instant to his interpretation with which he ends his volume on the Dying God" (qtd in Gray 130). Despite Frazer's intellect, he, too, falls prey to the fallacy that he might understand the meaning of an ancient ritual based on nineteenth- and twentieth-century assumptions.

<sup>18</sup> Leonard Unger noted that “intimations of the [timeless moment] are always characterized by a dreamlike, twilight atmosphere” in Eliot’s poetry (78). However, he only discusses such moments in “Ash-Wednesday.”

<sup>19</sup> Eliot’s treatment recalls Dante’s “attempt to suggest the beauty and dignity of the object contemplated by stating the effect of that beauty and dignity upon the lover in contemplation” (Eliot, *Varieties* 107-8).

<sup>20</sup> Dominic Mangianello’s *T. S. Eliot and Dante* addresses the hyacinth garden episode’s correspondences with the *Commedia*, yet he neglects discussing the feminine figure’s overarching significance in Eliot’s work.

<sup>21</sup> Eliot also described this process as “divine contemplation, and the development and subsumption of emotion and feeling through intellect into the vision of God” (*Varieties* 103-4).

<sup>22</sup> The *Chapbook* sequence consisted of “Eyes that Last I Saw in Tears,” “The Wind Sprang up at Four O’clock,” and “This is the Dead Land.” After he completed “The Hollow Men,” Eliot included the first two pieces as “minor poems” in his collected works, while the third became part of “The Hollow Men.” The Hayward Bequest includes Eliot’s own typescript of “Doris’s Dream Songs,” which, though undated, Eliot marked as “early.” This typescript featured only two poems: “Eyes that Last I Saw in Tears” and “The Wind Sprang Up at Four O’ Clock.” On the paper’s back, Eliot handwrote the entirety of “This is the Dead Land.”

<sup>23</sup> “Three Poems” included “Eyes that Last I Saw in Tears” and introduced two other “eye” poems: “Eyes I Dare Not Meet in Dreams” and “The Eyes Are Not Here,” both of which appear in “The Hollow Men” (parts II and IV, respectively).

<sup>24</sup> Beatrice asks Virgil, “*con la tua parola ornate, / e con ciò, ch’ è mestieri al suo campare, / l’ aiuta sì*” (“with thy ornate speech, and with / what is necessary for his escape, help him so”; *Inf.* 2.67-69; Carlyle 19).

<sup>25</sup> This word choice evokes both the standard understanding of “affliction” as grief or pain, but it also evokes a now-obsolete definition we might conclude Eliot knew: “Self-infliction of religious discipline; mortification, humiliation” as written in a 1611 version of the English Bible, 2 Chronicles 18.26 (“Affliction,” def. 1).

<sup>26</sup> Eliot wrote “Ash-Wednesday” between 1927 and 1930. Prior to 1930, he published parts of the final version as independent compositions (Schuchard 150).

<sup>27</sup> Matthieson asserts that the figures’ interchangeability is because “readers to-day [sic] who no longer believe in the elaborate hierarchies and gradations of Dante’s system, the figures of the Lady and the Virgin, though distinct, have similar connotations” (116).

There is no longer a divine hierarchy, so contemporary readers cannot distinguish between the images as an earlier reader, or Eliot himself, might have done.

<sup>28</sup> According to Eliot, "the modern world only seems capable of the low dream" (*Dante* 225).

<sup>29</sup> Devotees sing the *Angelus*, a meditation on the Virgin, three times daily "as a memorial of [Christ's] Incarnation" ("Angelus").

## CHAPTER V

WITH A CHRISTIAN, ANYTHING CAN BE DONE: *NIGHTWOOD*'S HOPELESS

## MADONNAS

*"The people love their church and know it, as a dog knows where he was made to conform, and there he returns by his instinct"*<sup>1</sup>

Matthew O'Connor

While Eliot relied on Dante as scaffolding around which to construct his poems of the 1920s, any such framework collapses in *Nightwood*. Although the novel's characters strive to organize their lives according to traditional structures, and chief among these Christianity, they find neither consolation nor order: the old methods no longer apply, and any attempt to reconstruct them intensifies the characters' isolation and interior fragmentation. Significantly, Barnes presents Christianity as embodied in the female characters, and she investigates the value of the Christian feminine ideal as a mediator to self-unity, if not transcendence from the seamy Paris nightworld. Barnes's conclusions illustrate the ineffectuality of the ideal and the impossibility of religion's ability to bridge essential binaries, whether beast and human, Jew and Christian, or male and female.

O'Connor offers the novel's most direct study of how religion fails to ease modern agony, even for one who strives to maintain his faith in the Church and its teachings. He characterizes himself as "as good a Catholic as they make" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 127) and feels that attending Mass means to experience "Something that's

already in your blood” (18). O’Connor’s Catholicism seems as physiological as the Volkbeins’ Judaism insofar as religion relates to “blood.” Unlike the Volkbeins, O’Connor needs not find acceptance within Catholicism itself; rather, O’Connor seeks validation from the Virgin, calls to whom pepper his speech. However, despite O’Connor’s hope in the Church, he fears, and ultimately realizes, that the boundary of his exclusion rests at the wall of the Christian breast.

That O’Connor finds something secure in Catholicism becomes evident when he glimpses Flood’s furtive, nighttime pursuit of Vote, he says, ““There goes the dismantled—Love has fallen off her wall. A religious woman . . . without the joy and safety of the Catholic faith, which at a pinch covers up the spots on the wall when the family portraits take a slide. . . .” (60-61).<sup>2</sup> O’Connor’s claim that the Church provides security when self-doubt and fear set in, however, appears to apply to others rather than himself. O’Connor’s personal experience of Catholicism remains anguished because of the schism between his religious and sexual longings; O’Connor’s most painful moments occur when he tries to bridge that divide. This conflict appears most succinctly when the narrator describes how,

Sometimes, late at night, before turning into the *Café de la Mairie du VI<sup>e</sup>*, he would be observed staring up at the huge towers of the church, which rose into the sky, unlovely but reassuring . . . Standing small and insubordinate, he would watch the basins of the fountain loosing their skirts of water in a ragged and flowing hem, sometimes crying to a man’s departing shadow: “Aren’t you the beauty!” (29-30)

The scene encapsulates O’Connor’s predicament. Against the substantial, looming church, which he literally looks up to, O’Connor appears insignificant, “small” but also insubordinate”: the fountain’s basins, “loosing their skirts,” hint at sexuality and distract

him. Men walking by prove another distraction, and O'Connor forgets the church and focuses on flirting. O'Connor remains bitterly divided between the spiritual and the carnal; as he tells Flood, "The Bible lies the one way, the night-gown the other" (80).<sup>3</sup>

O'Connor illustrates this binary throughout the novel by aligning himself with Biblical figures; however, such alignments only reinforce his isolation, for he becomes not simply an apostle, but a homosexual apostle. For example, O'Connor calls himself a "fisher of men" whose "gimp is doing a *saltarello* over every body of water to fetch up what it may" (97).<sup>4</sup> O'Connor clearly alludes to Jesus's direction to the Apostles Simon Peter and Andrew, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:18-9, Mark 1:16-7); that is, Jesus would teach them to save human souls. O'Connor lures not souls but flesh. To a roomful of men, he disdains choosing partners based on looks, because "if you fish by the face you fish out trouble, but there's always other fish when you deal with the sea. The face is what anglers catch in the day, but the sea is the night" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 93). To "fish by the face" means to seek trouble, for it personalizes the partner, and thus invites love. Yet to fall in love with a "sodomite" leads to the pain of discovering "that this lover has committed the unpardonable error of not being able to exist . . ." (93). In a world that quashes difference, to fish in the "sea" of night, with its anonymous, transient lovers, precludes trouble but invites loneliness.<sup>5</sup>

In one of the novel's more poignant scenes, O'Connor addresses God directly in an effort to reconcile the divide between his bestial and rational, or carnal and spiritual, natures. O'Connor enters a small, darkened church "where there are no people, where [he] can be alone like an animal, and yet think" (131).<sup>6</sup> Inside, O'Connor exposes and



holds his genitals, which he calls “Tiny O’Toole,” with a hand he believes blessed—at least for the day—in order to ““make him face the mystery so it [the mystery] could see him [Tiny O’Toole] as clear as it saw me. So then I whispered, “What is this thing, Lord”? And I began to cry . . . . I was crying because I had to embarrass Tiny like that for the good it might do him”” (132). O’Connor prays for validation of his difference, asserting that, ““It is I, lord, who knows there’s beauty in any permanent mistake like me. Haven’t I said so? But . . . I’m not able to stay permanent unless you help me . . . . So tell me, what is permanent of me? Of me or him?”” (132).<sup>7</sup> O’Connor’s tearful exhibitionism in bringing Tiny face-to-face with God seeks not forgiveness for sin, but Divine permission to live according to his nature. Moreover, O’Connor seeks God’s assurance that *beauty* might reside in the non-normative.<sup>8</sup>

Although the novel presents no evidence that the Church rejects O’Connor, O’Connor argues that God, Jesus, and the Virgin reject him. After informing Flood that he goes to bed comforted by his lies, he slips and tells her: ““Yes, I, the Lily of Killarney, am composing me a new song, with tears and with jealousy, because I have read that John was his favorite, and it should have been me, Prester Matthew! The song is entitled, ‘Mother, put the wheel away, I cannot spin tonight.’”” (96). O’Connor’s confession of jealousy conflates spirituality and sexuality. Firstly, he identifies himself as “the Lily of Killarney,” which, as Plumb points out, alludes to an opera by Jules Benedict, first performed in 1862 (225).<sup>9</sup> Although the opera concludes with reunited lovers, O’Connor’s “new song” deflates potential happiness. In actuality, O’Connor’s “Mother, put the wheel away, I cannot spin tonight” refers to a parlor song titled “Oh Mother! Take

the Wheel Away,” by the lyricist Charlotte Arlington Barnard, which relates a jilting from a young woman’s point of view.<sup>10</sup> In O’Connor’s telling, however, the claim that “it should have been me!” suggests that Jesus jilted O’Connor in preferring the disciple John to himself, “Prester Matthew,” or “Priest Matthew.”<sup>11</sup>

O’Connor, speaking according to popular, and literary, belief, initially references John as “the beloved disciple” (“John”). However, as described in John 13:23, the disciple “whom Jesus loved” remains unnamed; the text identifies him simply as “One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, [who] was lying close to the breast of Jesus” when Jesus attempted to discern who might betray him. The disciple in this intimate scene might not be named, but the text assures readers of the disciple’s masculinity: upon the cross, Jesus sees his mother beside “the disciple whom he loved” (John 19.26) and commands: “‘Woman! Behold your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home” (John 19. 26-28).<sup>12</sup> This verse sheds light on O’Connor’s later poignant outburst, when he interrupts Flood’s recollection of a dream: “Suddenly Dr. Matthew O’Connor said: ‘It’s my mother without argument I want!’ And then in his loudest voice he roared: ‘Mother of God! I wanted to be your son—the unknown beloved second would have done!’” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 149-50). Despite his earlier identification of John as the beloved, O’Connor returns to the original verses in John, which cloak “the beloved disciple” in anonymity, as his wish for recognition shifts from Jesus to Mary. In O’Connor’s view, such anonymity—the “unknown beloved second”—illustrates his need: while he earlier longed to be John, the

named apostle, he now he longs to be the unknown associate—just as long as he is beloved.

O'Connor, despite his devotion and clinging to “every confection of hope,” ultimately admits that, “I know well, 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 . . . who is anybody!” (154). O'Connor's pessimism, coupled with his slackening abilities as mythmaker, result in his final, explosive assertion, “now, *nothing but wrath and weeping!*” [italics original] (166). O'Connor's emphatic cry echoes the opening words of the *Dies Irae*, the Latin hymn that speaks of the earth's final days: “*Dies irae! dies illa*”—“days of wrath, days of mourning.” More significantly, O'Connor's pronouncement reflects the closing lines of Matthew 24, which relates Jesus's warning of the last judgment: “men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Matt 24:51). O'Connor's exit sets the tone for the novel's perplexing, disturbing, and brief final chapter, in which a woman, positioned between an altar and a dog, identifies with the dog.

The other characters enact dilemmas similar to O'Connor's, insofar as each of them struggles with a destabilizing set of binaries—Guido and Felix, the Jews-turning-Christian, and Vote, the beast turning human. The three share a desire to complete their transitions, therefore acquiring a secure identity and, consequently, an entry into history. Each of these characters attempts to accomplish this goal via identification with a Christian woman. Guido, Felix, and Vote each partner with a woman whom they figure as a type of Madonna by whose grace they might be “saved” from their wandering, their

isolation, and their “outsider” status based on their true, rather than performed, identities.<sup>13</sup> Essentially, these characters reify the Virgin Mary to the extent of removing “transcendent” qualities and replacing them with qualities valued in the material world. Rather than transcendent figures, *Nightwood*’s Madonnas become intermediaries for the characters’ social salvation. However, each of the three characters, Guido, Felix, and Vote, remains unfulfilled, for the conflation between woman and divine fails to work; each of the characters’ projections for the future collapses, signifying the futility of projecting onto a human woman the powers of the Divine.

#### “By Adoring Her”: Hedvig the Sentry

Guido’s story again foreshadows the novel’s later focus on the relationships between Felix and Guido, Vote and Flood.<sup>14</sup> His relationship with Hedvig establishes the crucial role that religion and its emblems play in the novel’s major romantic relationships; his wife also portrays the novel’s most explicit blend of society, religion, and authority.

Throughout Hedvig’s appearance in the novel, the narrator employs martial terms to identify her with secular power, for example, when describing her as “a woman of great strength and military beauty” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 1).<sup>15</sup> From this metaphoric comparison with the broader military, the narrator proceeds to identify Hedvig as akin to a general.

The novel relates Hedvig’s death following childbirth in language that evokes a warrior’s passing. She rests under the sign of the state, a crimson canopy valance decorated “with

the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg,” and upon a feather coverlet featuring the Volkbein arms (1). Using a term that denotes both a heraldic flag as well as open space for battle, the narrator describes Hedvig as “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 [the infant] Felix, thrust him from her, and died” (1).<sup>16</sup> From the novel’s opening paragraphs, Hedvig, compared generally to the military and specifically to a general under the sign of the empire, embodies Austrian power. She becomes a personification of the state akin to Germania or Britannia: a woman with sword who personifies the nation.<sup>17</sup> In pursuing Hedvig, Guido pursues Austria.

Critics of *Nightwood* often discuss Hedvig’s signification with official authority, including scholars such as Marcus, who identifies Hedvig with “German militarism” (“Laughing” 229), and Abrahams, who broadens the argument in asserting that “the institutions of the official record—the aristocracy, the military, and Christianity—are temporarily embodied in the female figure of Hedvig Volkbein . . . .” (264). Although Abrahams includes Christianity in her description of Hedvig, in general, the matter of the character’s religious significance remains largely unexamined, presumably because the wealth of martial language minimizes any religious role. For example, Margaret Bocking argues that Barnes “employs military metaphors to create a figure that neither reproduces nor even resembles the stereotypes of woman as seductress or Madonna” (34).<sup>18</sup> However, while the use of martial language to describe Hedvig remains dominant, Barnes also uses religious language and references when relating Guido’s perceptions and

actions with his wife's. Hedvig plays the role of intermediary between her husband and the dominant Christian culture.

Hedvig presents the conflation of secular and Christian authority. In the blend of martial and religious lexicons, Hedvig connotes *Ecclesia*—the Christian community that defines and scorns Jews—as well as the state that enforces Jews' exclusion.<sup>19</sup> One episode in particular reveals this role. At a dance, Hedvig echoes the soldier on the battlefield: “the dance floor had become a tactical manoeuvre; her heels had come down staccato and trained, her shoulders as conscious at the tips as those which carry the braid and tassels of promotion; the turn of her head had held the cold vigilance of a sentry whose rounds are not without apprehension” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 4). Hedvig experiences a lurking apprehension, much as the sentry she resembles while dancing. She remains uncertain of Guido's heritage: “The thing she stalked, though she herself had not been conscious of it, was Guido's assurance that he was a Baron” (5). She believes her husband's claim to the aristocracy “as a soldier ‘believes’ a command” (5). Also like the sentry, Hedvig acts as a type of gatekeeper: as Guido's wife, she becomes both bridge and barrier to Guido's secular and sacred redemption. At the time of his death, “Her body at that moment became the barrier and Guido died against that wall, troubled and alone” (4).<sup>20</sup> Hence, despite his hopes in social transfiguration, Guido's marriage to Hedvig reconfirms his isolation.

Hedvig offers Guido an historical redemption defined with language from the Christian lexicon and signified by the ascription of Guido's son as the “promise that hung at the Christian belt of Hedvig” (3). Hedvig also presents Guido with an opportunity for

cultural redemption—a means of entering the history of the official record. The novel implies this by conflating the lexicons of romance and religion; the language describing Hedvig’s appeal to Guido, and their relationship, connotes an underlying religious significance. For example, the text follows Guido’s “adoption of the sign of the cross” with his attempts “to be one with [Hedvig], by adoring her, by imitating her goose-step of a stride” (3). While this desire speaks of Guido’s romantic longing it also implies that Guido elevates his perception of Hedvig and, through worship and imitation, he might “be one with” Hedvig, to assimilate with her. Curiously, Guido’s desire “to be one with” Hedvig also recalls the Judeo-Christian belief in atonement (literally, “at-one-ment” [“Atonement”]), by which the supplicant strives to remove the distance between himself and God. Guido redirects this to Hedvig, thereby redefining the final object as historical affirmation. His attempts, however, seem heavy handed and artificial, “dislocated and comic” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 3). Rather than assimilative, Guido’s adoration and mimicry draw attention to, and thereby reinforce, his difference.

Hedvig receives Guido’s overtures to oneness as “a blow,” the violence of the term underscores the depth of Guido’s estrangement by representing his attempt to become one with Hedvig as a physical assault. In sharply divisive terms, she responds to this attack correspondingly: “as a Gentile must—by moving toward him in recoil” (3). Hedvig rebounds from Guido’s supplications as though struck, a result of her “sensing something in him blasphemed and lonely” (3). Although Guido adopts the signs of Christianity, and assures Hedvig that his black and yellow handkerchiefs only serve as mementoes of his Roman family, Hedvig senses something abused and isolated in Guido.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which Barnes studied conscientiously,<sup>21</sup> the verb “blaspheme” comes from the Latin “blasphemare” and evolved into the English word “blame” (“Blaspheme,” etymology). That the Christian Hedvig senses something “blamed” in Guido evokes the guilt that Christians place on Jews for the Crucifixion. In other words, Hedvig senses the Judaism that Guido denies, and rebounds from his “blow” in repulsion. Guido’s attempts at atonement fail, and, thus disunited, he dies upon the wall of Hedvig’s breast.

Hedvig, the embodiment of the official record in all of its guises, fails to provide Guido with historicity, the culturally legitimate identity that he craves. The intermediary fails, and, as the religious connotations underscore, reinforces Jewish exclusion. Felix repeats his father’s errors in endowing his wife, Robin Vote, with the ability to mediate between himself and the larger culture and to give him a child who might contribute to Felix’s historical salvation or consecrate his identity. One of the reasons why he ultimately fails in this endeavor rests with Felix’s pinning his hopes on an assumption, for he maintains a “faith that Robin had Christian proclivities” (Barnes *Nightwood* 44). He idealizes Vote, so that she becomes the passive vessel of his salvation, an image of a woman rather than a cognizant being.<sup>22</sup>

#### Felix’s Windowpane

Felix, a child of religious miscegenation who, as Abrahams argues, “functions as a paradigm of Barnes’s understanding of the relationship of the powerless to the record of the ‘high and mighty’ (255), suffers from his exclusion not only from Christianity but



from Judaism as well: Felix belongs neither to the high nor the mighty, for, unlike Guido, his Jewish heritage provides no anchor of identity, for even if that identity is painful and “disapprov[ed] of [by] the people” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 1), it offers community. Instead, “embarrassed,” or confused and constrained, Felix pursues an association with the “Great Past,” “bowing, searching, with quick pendulous movements, for the correct thing to which to pay tribute . . . .” (9). This all-encompassing quest leads Felix to become acquainted with a disparate knowledge that equates with his mismatched dress, clothes selected so that Felix might be prepared for any event at any time of day. Felix acquires an eclectic stock of facts and figures, including “edicts and laws, folk story and heresy,” as well military and urban design, that, essentially, prepare him for any type of conversation he might encounter (10). Most tellingly, Felix becomes “a pedant of many churches and castles” (10). This twin topic establishes the link between religion and authority, sanctuary and fortification, which later receives a fuller articulation when Felix tells O’Connor that ““God and the Father—in Austria they were the Emperor”” (33). Rather than independent estates, the corporeal and the spiritual entwine in the social nobility. For Felix, whose title remains nebulous, to find acceptance in the Church offers social redemption, for the one necessarily incorporates the other.

The conjoining of the aristocracy and the church in Felix’s imagination partially accounts for his attraction to Christianity, which, in turn, accounts for his attraction to the circus. The circus, with its “old and documented splendour,” offers Felix “that sense of peace that formerly he had experienced only in museums” (11). Like the museum’s relics, the performers echo, in a contained, material arena, the Great Past. The circus,

“linked [Felix’s] emotions to the higher and unattainable pageantry of Kings and Queens” (10). At the same time, the circus, as degraded ritual, evokes within Felix feelings of “longing and disquiet,” words that echo his father’s experience of autumnal “longing and horror,” which imply that Felix yet remains alone and excluded. At the same time, Felix’s response to the circus’s “emotional spiral,” which begins with its disqualification and transitions into “illimitable hope” (12), testifies that “something in his nature was turning Christian” (12). Just as the circus parallels, in a degraded form, the pageantry of the “higher dream,” the church parallels the public ritual of the circus in a more intimate space: Felix finds himself “drawn to the church,” where “the arena he found was circumscribed to the individual heart” (12),<sup>23</sup> a word choice that reflects the theatricality of ritual. This sentence implies that Felix’s attraction for Christianity extends from something more than a decadent appeal; Wallace Fowlie attributes this attraction to “the Catholic Church as a center of security and social affirmation” (140). Through the church, Felix might satisfy his undefined longing and settle the disquiet.

Having all access, except as a spectator, to normative society, to history, blocked, Felix determines that through a woman, and any child she might bear, he might enter history. Vote, the sleepwalker and *tabula rasa*, personifies the link between antiquity and modernity; she represents the forgotten past and manifests the past in the present. Her name notes contemporary suffrage movements, but the woman “carrie[s] the quality of the ‘way back’ as animals do” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 40).<sup>24</sup> Marrying such a woman, Felix concludes, gives him hope to transcend his middle state and permit him to enter history. Further, once he begins to court Vote, Felix grows aware that “his love for Robin was not

in truth a selection . . . . He had thought of making a destiny for himself, through laborious and untiring travail. Then with Robin it seemed to stand before him without effort” (42). Not only does Felix view Vote as his fate, but her entry into Felix’s life also removes the “laborious and untiring travail” he deemed necessary to achieve his destiny. Long after Vote’s desertion, Felix notes that the quality that drew him to her, “gave me a feeling that I would not only be able to achieve immortality, but be free to choose my own kind” (112). Felix endows Vote with a power that extends beyond the symbolism of America’s promise of equality and social mobility; he sees in her, instead, the hope of transcending his corporeal misery and achieving immortality.

To fulfill his, and, as Felix sees it, Vote’s destiny, Felix requires a son, one “who would recognize and honour the past. For without such love, the past, as he understood it, would die away from the world” (45). In a seeming parody of the Christ story, the child, born of the passive vessel of Felix’s hopes, would redeem the past by honoring it, thereby ensuring its perpetuity. However, Felix must prompt Vote to his plans and her duty, to which she conforms without argument. She “prepared herself for her child with her only power: a stubborn, cataleptic calm, conceiving herself pregnant before she was” (45). The choice of “cataleptic” to define Vote’s state offers two readings. Firstly, as a medical term, “cataleptic” indicates that Vote entered into a trance-like state lacking sensation, which coincides with the image of Vote as “la somnambule.” “Cataleptic” also appears as a Stoical term describing a state of “apprehension” or “comprehension” (“Cataleptic,” def. A2). The sleepwalking Vote forms the idea of her pregnancy in advance of its occurrence. Vote effectively self-annunciates.

Vote's pregnancy leads her to public displays of faith and to meditations on her son's future. Abruptly, she converts to Catholicism, entering a church, unnoticed by parishioners, until, "as if some inscrutable wish for salvation, something yet more monstrously unfulfilled than they had suffered, had thrown a shadow, they regarded her going softly forward and down, a tall girl with the body of a boy" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 46). Yet Vote finds no hope of salvation in her approaching motherhood. She tries to think on "the consequence to which her son was to be born and dedicated" (46) but finds herself distracted; her thoughts shift to Vienna and to "women in history" (46-47). Edward Gunn contends that for Vote, "conception and pregnancy are a confrontation with her mortality and consciousness, not the illusive achievement of a myth" (551). Hence, Vote, because Felix appropriated her "destiny," cannot fix her thoughts on her child. Her prayer in a convent chapel (that of *L'Adoration Perpétuelle*) suggests that Vote rejects the sacrifice Felix demands: "her prayer was monstrous because in it there was no margin left for damnation or forgiveness, for praise or for blame—those who cannot conceive a bargain cannot be saved or damned" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 46).<sup>25</sup> Vote recognizes that to receive either damnation or salvation requires an offering in return. Consequently, Vote, who "could not offer herself up" (47), falls into a "swoon" during her attempt at prayer, which seems to mark some realization, for, later that evening, she gives birth in a fit of rage. Recognizing her forced sacrifice, she repeatedly cries, "Oh, for Christ's sake, for Christ's sake" (48). Vote's declamation serves as both a curse and an assertion, for she rejects the infant, Guido, a child "born to holy decay" (107). Soon after his birth, Vote raises the child in one hand, "as if she were about to dash it down,

but she brought it down gently” (48). Rather than destroy the infant, however, Vote leaves her husband and child to seek refuge with Flood, whom she meets at a circus.<sup>26</sup> Although she fulfills the biological destiny Felix designs for her, Vote refuses to sacrifice herself further by adjusting to Felix’s idea of his imagined wife. She abandons husband and infant, following which Felix finds his plans, and the promise of his son, crumble about him.

Felix and Vote’s child, a “small” and “sad” infant, personifies a statement O’Connor offers earlier in the novel; he tells Felix that “the last child born to the aristocracy is sometimes an idiot . . . .” (40).<sup>27</sup> The last child signifies both the apex of a family and the beginning of its decline. Rather than the last child of an aristocratic line (although Guido is the last child of an assumed aristocratic line), Guido, and his disabilities, indicate both the height of tradition and its decay--the inability, despite Felix’s hopes, of “the modern child” to find a sense of permanence in the great past. The novel marks this loss of permanence most nakedly in religious references. The promise at the Catholic belt of Vote, born to redeem Felix and tradition, remains unfulfilled. Felix attempts to groom the boy to honor the past, taking him to churches and palaces, but Guido, “Mentally deficient and emotionally excessive,” small in stature, clumsy, and in need of spectacles (107), proves ill-equipped for Felix’s plans. Because of Guido’s disabilities, Felix surrenders both his chosen destiny and his hopes that Guido might act as a cultural savior; instead, Felix “accept[s] the demolition of his own life” (108) and commits himself to his son.

Guido displays a difference more extreme than that of his father or of his grandfather (and namesake), and his difference marks him as profoundly estranged. Guido's physical weakness and his tendency for "trembling with an excitement that was a precocious ecstasy" (107) suggest that he embodies "degeneration," but within his excess, the narrator suggests, exists a glimpse of renewal. The boy, an "addict to death," exhibits a preoccupation with the church, "staring at paintings and wax reproductions of saints, watching the priests with the quickening of the breath of those in whom concentration must take the place of participation, as in the scar of a wounded animal will be seen the shudder of its recovery" (107-08). The text hints that Guido's recovery shall occur through his obsession with "death," which explains his fascination with Catholicism—its martyrs and miracle workers rendered in wax as well as its living representatives who privilege death, through which believers gain access to God and eternity. However, although Felix hopes that Guido might find a place within the Church, he recognizes that "in all probability the child would never be 'chosen'" (109).

While the elder Guido Volkbein introduces and drives the novel's major ideas, his grandson, the younger Guido, ill-equipped to lead, seems a guide only to ideas hinting of dissolution and degeneration, for the child, weak and ineffectual, the transition between past and future that he represents remains uncertain, undefined, but he yet signifies what "hope" there might be in the nightworld. O'Connor, in his capacity as seer, proclaims Guido as exceptional, that, unlike the rest of humanity, "'born damned and innocent from the start,'" the boy "'is not damned . . . he is blessed—he is peace of mind—he is what you [Felix] have been looking for'" (121). To O'Connor, Guido equates with the

aristocracy, the “something better,” that Felix longs for.<sup>28</sup> O’Connor assures Felix that “Guido’s shadow is God’s,” and that he, who “is not made secure by habit—in that there is always hope” (120). At least, he ought to. Felix cannot help but succumb to his inherited tendency to bow down before a possible Russian Royal (123). But in assigning Guido as an aristocrat, O’Connor also implies that Guido fulfills Felix’s wish: he will redeem Felix and grant him immortality. Indeed, Felix’s attempts to affiliate Guido with a church go beyond an attempt to locate Guido within a tradition; Felix, acknowledging the boy’s religiosity and his motherless state, provides Guido with a medallion of the Virgin Mary, a mother in absentia,<sup>29</sup> which he wears “beneath his shirt” and presses “against his stomach” while sitting with Felix and Frau Mann as they drink in cafés. In this, the powerless Guido seeks comfort amongst the raucous and drunk while his father drinks and struggles with his former dreams.

In these cafés, Felix, caught between his new vocation and the old, drinks, “calls for military music . . . for Wagner,” and strives “to not look for what he had always sought, the son of a once great house” (122). Despite his self-conscious lapse into old behavior in bowing to “Russian royalty,” Felix follows this act by applying oil to Guido’s hands, an action that echoes the anointing of the blessed with oil, and which implies, as Kannenstine argues, that “it is not through Robin that Felix becomes a votary, but through their son . . .” (124). Felix’s shift in devotion offers what might be the only glimpse of hope in this novel. However, if Guido parodies the Christ story, he arrives not to save the world, but to signify its deterioration, for, unlike Eliot’s (and Andrewes’s)

“Christ the tiger,” Guido emerges as a lamb born to a man bent on entering history and a woman who exists outside of time and place.

Although Vote partially fulfills the destiny Felix crafts for her, her inability—despite her passivity—to sacrifice herself and become a votary to Felix’s desire for immortality, leads to dissolution. In reconstructing Vote, in shaping her to fit the image he maintains, Felix creates a Madonna; however, her son, rather than a savior, points to dissolution. Guido then, personifies what the modern child can hold onto: little more than a medallion representative of past hopes.

Ironically, Vote commits the same offense as Felix when she meets Flood. Both Felix and his father inject their hopes for a legitimized historical identity into a Christian woman, similarly, Vote, caught between two natures, seeks a stable identity via Flood. The narrator relates the Vote and Flood relationship in decidedly religious tones to describe how Flood becomes the mediator of Vote’s identity. Vote engages Flood in a role play that exaggerates characteristics of Flood’s personality, and which extends to excluding Flood from human society; as a result, Vote grows alienated from the idealized Flood, which prompts, in turn, her compulsion for escape. Vote’s increasing distance from Flood, signified by her numerous forays into the nightworld’s cafés and one night stands, affects Flood profoundly and painfully: her name alludes to her voluminous tears as well as the Biblical deluge that essentially recreated humanity.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the novel indicates that applying the Madonna’s characteristics to human women, idealization, leads to isolation and existential misery.



## Nora Dolorosa

Numerous scholars point out the correspondences between Vote and Flood's relationship and either religious feeling or religious orthodoxy. Kenneth Burke, for example, defines Vote as the "unmoved mover," the center towards which Flood's "secular variant of the religious passion," her love, aims (333).<sup>31</sup> Fowlie also acknowledges Flood's feeling for Vote as "a religious worship, but there is no safety in the object of her faith" (141). O'Connor describes Flood's obsession with Vote in religious terms, telling her "'You've made [Vote] a legend, and set before her head the Eternal Light . . .'" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 125). In both Judaism and Christianity, an "Eternal Light" signifies a Divine covenant.<sup>32</sup> Pointedly, just as Flood transfers her religious faith to Vote, Vote transfers her love to an idealized Flood. In the course of a discussion between O'Connor and a heartbroken, deserted Flood, the doctor tells Flood that Vote "'put you cleverly away by making you the Madonna'" (146). Setting Flood above herself and others, Vote creates a woman both inviolable and threatening; moreover, in idealizing Flood, Vote effectively dehumanizes her. Vote's qualification exaggerates, but also verifies, aspects of Flood's character revealed early in the novel. The narrator presents Flood from the start as a withdrawn but generous woman with roots that extend deeply into American myth, history, and the Puritan experience.

The narrator associates Flood with the American West's pioneer women, who carried "God so ponderous in their minds that they could stamp out the world with him in seven days" (46). The recollection of these women mirrors Flood's own religious sense and her strength of faith, both in her religion and in other people. Flood's emotiveness

extends to her religious sensibilities, which include a touch of mystic ecstasy. The description of her involvement with the Seventh Day Adventists also further indicates a separation from temporality by confusing chronological expectations.<sup>33</sup>

[Flood] was the only woman of the last century who could go up a hill with the Seventh Day Adventists and confound the seventh day—with a muscle in her heart so passionate that she made the seventh day immediate. Her fellow worshippers believed in that day and the end of the world out of a bewildered entanglement with the six days preceding it; Nora believed for the beauty of that day alone. She was by fate one of those people who are born unprovided for, except in the provision of herself. (274)<sup>34</sup>

This revelation illustrates both the intensity of Flood's emotion and her quality of accepting things as they are rather than out of settled expectations. That her fellow congregants "believed in" the seventh day out of an "entanglement" of the preceding days of the week suggests that their belief results from their experiences during the days preceding the Sabbath. They exist materially within time, from which the Sabbath and the end of the world permit an escape.<sup>35</sup> Flood "confounds" the seventh day because she appreciates it with an emotion shorn of other considerations: she meets the day with a sensibility untainted by historical or material concerns. Her "passion" for this day of religious communion renders it intimate.

Flood's choice of Christian denomination illustrates her disposition, her emotionality, and her disengagement with temporal preoccupations. The narrator reveals that "By temperament, Nora was an early Christian: she believed the word" (273). The ambiguity of "word" makes possible three interpretations. Flood might believe in the "Word" as recorded in the Book of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1); manifest in flesh and blood, the Word

became Jesus Christ (1:14).<sup>36</sup> “The word” of Flood’s belief also might indicate Biblical authority, which certainly corresponds with Flood’s ties to Seventh Day Adventism. Yet Barnes’s lack of capitalization renders the “word” ambiguous; she possibly intended “word” to mean language in general, thereby suggesting that Flood places her faith in what others tell her or in what she reads: she reveals herself as a literalist in many ways throughout the novel. She believes in people.

The text presents Flood as nurturing and self-sacrificing—a prime candidate for idealization, “one of those deviations by which man thinks to reconstruct himself” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 53). She “robbed herself for everyone; incapable of giving herself warning, she was continually turning about to find herself diminished. Wandering people the world over found her profitable in that she could be sold for a price forever, for she carried her betrayal money in her own pocket” (51-52). Overeager in love, and lacking “ignominy,” “a sense of humor,” or “cynicism” (53), Flood presents a picture of merciful sympathy, for she listens to others’ confessions and responds “without reproach or accusation” (53).<sup>37</sup> In her acceptance of, and optimism in, people’s natures, Flood appears, as Frank suggests, a “hopeless Rousseauist” (38).<sup>38</sup> However, this optimism also opens Flood up to exploitation. She becomes, in her submission to others and her lamentations, the Mother of Sorrows.<sup>39</sup>

The episode that, perhaps, best represents this identity occurs towards the end of her relationship with Vote. When she glimpses Vote’s betrayal with Jenny Petherbridge, Flood finds herself “Unable to turn her eyes away, incapable of speech, experiencing a sensation of evil, complete and dismembering . . .” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 64). Yet, nearly

simultaneously Flood “knew an awful happiness. Robin, like something dormant, was protected, moved out of death’s way by the successive arms of women . . . .” (64).

Flood’s relief at knowing Vote remains safe, “protected,” overwhelms her own misery and self-pity, but her awareness of Vote’s plight, that she requires the safety provided by women who love her, fails to stopper her own pain. She nurtures her grief at losing Vote and feels compelled to communicate with her continually; in answer to O’Connor’s reproachful, repeated question “Can’t you rest now, lay down the pen?” (124), Flood responds, “If I don’t write to her, what am I to do? I can’t sit here for ever—thinking!” (125).<sup>40</sup>

Flood’s willingness to submit to others and to sorrow signifies a type of “sacred mother who will take on the suffering of consciousness represented by birth” (E Gunn 552). Flood’s relationship with Vote exemplifies her maternal inclinations. When the pair first meets at a circus, Vote tells Flood that she wishes to leave, but “she did not explain where she wished to be” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 55). The statement confirms Vote’s uncertainty about her position in the world, which leads to her expression of a “wish for a home,” which “she kept repeating in one way or another . . . .” (55). Flood concedes, but she quickly finds domesticity lonely, for the home becomes “a womblike retreat to which Robin returns only when she is drunk and only to sleep” (Lee 211). Vote effectively constructs Flood into a maternal figure.

Vote proscribes for Flood a narrow role outside of “other people” in saying ““only you, you musn’t be gay or happy, not like that, it’s not for you, only for everyone else in the world”” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 155). Flood describes her life with Vote as a happy

confinement, as Vote ““was watching me to see that no one called, that the bell did not ring, that I got no mail, nor anyone hallooing in the court, though she knew that none of those things could happen. My life was hers”” (155). But this elevation damages the women’s relationship, for after “setting” Flood up as the Madonna, Vote grows to resent her, and, finally, condemns Flood for her “goodness” when Flood pulls Vote from a café where people enjoyed groping the drunk woman. Vote shouts at Flood on a Paris street, “you are a devil. You make everything dirty . . . you make me feel dirty and tired and old” (143). Vote’s accusation conflicts with her desire to sanctify Flood, and she rejects any limits to her freedom, just as she assents to Felix’s expectations of her as a wife until, essentially, she snaps following Guido’s birth. The idealization backfires. Vote, whether as the idealized or as idealizer, suffers from the impossibility of maintaining the image. As Felix limits Vote, so Vote limits herself by projecting her needs, or what she thinks she needs, onto Flood. Her ambivalence manifests when Flood and Vote encounter “a poor wretched beggar of a whore” on a Paris street (144). Vote tells the woman, ““They are all God-forsaken, and you most of all, because they don’t want you to have your happiness. They don’t want you to drink. Well, here, drink! I give you money and permission! These women—they are all like her . . . They are all good—they want to save us!”” (144). Vote apparently directs “these women” at Flood.

By setting Flood apart from “everybody else in the world,” Vote finds a way to distance herself from Flood and the hope of domesticity. Flood acknowledges this point by relating her glimpse of a young woman, draped across a chair in a manner partially reminiscent of the crucifixion: “leaning over its back, one arm across it, the other hanging

at her side, as if half of her slept, and half of her suffered” (157). The decadent pose and setting—a “cheap heavy satin comforter” over a bed, candles, and a print of the Virgin—stirs an awareness in Flood. She recognizes by “Looking from her to the Madonna behind the candles, I knew that the image, to her, was what I had been to Robin, not a saint at all, but a fixed dismay, the space between the human and the holy head, the arena of the ‘indecent’ eternal. At that moment I stood at the center of eroticism and death” (157-58).<sup>41</sup> Kaivola argues that, in this moment, Flood realizes herself from “Robin’s point of view, as a ‘fixed dismay,’ or a contradictory subject, Nora begins the painful process of deidealization. She sees herself not as pure, spiritual, and disembodied but in the split between body and spirit” (92).<sup>42</sup> Having turned Flood into a two-dimensional figure, Vote begins seeking escape. Lee argues that “Paradoxically, by idealizing Nora, Robin reifies her, and by making her thus inaccessible, she allows her own, self-defined (narcissistic) identity to remain inviolable” (213-14).

Vote refers to her as “devil,” for the morality that defines Flood reflects poorly on Vote’s promiscuity and hedonism. Following Flood’s “rescuing” Vote from someone’s wandering hands, Vote accuses, “You are a devil!” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 143), but a short time later, she refers to Flood as “Angel, angel” (144). According to Flood, Vote only becomes “dirty” the second time that Flood slaps her. Flood perceives that the blow knocks Vote out of her unconsciousness on both the literal level as well as an awareness of Vote as “befouled,” “No rot had touched her until then, and there before my eyes I saw her corrupt all at once and withering because I had struck her sleep away . . . .” (144). Flood’s recognition of Vote as corrupt seems questionable as Flood relates, on several

occasions, Vote's hedonistic behavior. It indicates that the slap wakes Flood rather than Vote, who remains "in her own nightmare" within which everyone else participates as a shadow.<sup>43</sup>

The recognition of Vote's corruption, and Vote's subsequent desertion, strips away Flood's naïveté: she moves from lacking cynicism to outright pessimism. In a statement that signals the loss of her religious tendencies as well as her glorified view of love, Flood tells O'Connor: "Man . . . conditioning himself to fear, made God; as the prehistoric, conditioning itself to hope, made man—the cooling of the earth, the receding of the sea. And I, who want power, chose a girl who resembles a boy" (136). The three share a view of the future: man made God to avoid death and guarantee immortality, the earth evolved to fulfill its potential, and Flood, to achieve power, entered into a relationship with a someone who looked male, but over whom Flood might exert control and, as Veltman suggests, "have power within a patriarchal order" (217). With this admission, Flood sheds the mantle of Mater Dolorosa. She loves Vote still, as "one condemned to it" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 137), but she can no longer act as Vote's haven or her intercessor.

Flood's powerlessness becomes evident in the novel's troubling final scene, in which she remains passively observant while Vote grapples with her twin natures. Vote, having lost Flood, and, therefore, "the motive power which had directed [her] life," begins to haunt churches as she did while pregnant with Guido. Vote grows distracted, anonymous, and abandons Petherbridge. Vote, who still identifies Flood with the Madonna, seeks communion with her. The need to reacquire Flood's blessing becomes

apparent when, after making her way to Flood's wilderness home, Vote haunts the surrounding woods and the "decaying chapel" on the estate (168). When Flood, accompanied by her dog, discovers Vote's hiding place, she finds "a contrived altar, before a Madonna . . ." (169). Gifts to the Virgin, "flowers and toys" lay "before the image" (169), and in front of them. Vote. Standing before these offerings, and in the presence of Flood and the dog, Vote, "beast turning human" and "a thing outside the human type," struggles with her duality.

Flood, having "plunged into the jamb of the chapel door," watches as her dog, "hackles standing" engages with Vote. Vote regresses to an animal state as she goes down "on all fours," and, with veins engorged, begins hitting her head against the dog. The animal appears panicked, as it "reared as if to avoid something that troubled him to such agony that he seemed to be rising from the floor; then he stopped, clawing sideways at the wall, his forepaws lifting and sliding" (170). Vote, who continues to strike the barking, biting, and miserable dog with her head, grows manic and begins to mimic the animal: "she began to bark also, crawling after him—barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching" (170). The dog and the woman run with each other about the room, both "crying," until Vote, out of breath, collapses, weeping on the floor. The narrator relates that Vote "gave up," she surrenders to the beast and lays flat, with "her hands beside her," while the dog rests his head "flat along her knees." Vote lays prostrate before the Madonna—and Flood—but she gives herself to the animal.<sup>44</sup> While Vote indicates recognition of her "fallen" state—signified by her offerings before the chapel's Madonna--she never fully acknowledges her complicity in others' pain or her own moral



transgression. As a consequence, she defaults to the beast. Having emerged amongst plants and birds, the “beast turning human,” who conforms to demands for maternity, takes the Catholic vow, and pled for a home, no longer requires intervention. She chooses to invert the transition: Vote becomes the human turning beast.

Vote’s ultimate rejection of culture in a religious environment matches the conclusions of other characters. Flood abandons her religion in her obsession with Vote, If, as O’Connor alludes, the novel concludes with a day of judgment, then that judgment fails to elevate any of the characters: Felix ends up a drunk, Flood a cynic, O’Connor verbally impotent, and Vote regresses. The novel’s only hope resides in the innately religious child Guido; considering the child’s emotional and physical weakness, this implication hardly bodes well for modernity. Despite their efforts to enlist Christianity or its emblems as a means to achieving wholeness and security, each character fails. The Madonna has her limits, neither equivalent to a human woman nor, in O’Connor’s experience, available to “permanent mistakes,” she offers little comfort. Ultimately, because of their otherness, and because of the distance between the Great Past and the present, any approach to salvation—Christian or cultural—collapses.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barnes, *Nightwood* 39.

<sup>2</sup> Burke asserts that “The motives of Christian vigil become transformed into the ‘night watch’ of women like Nora in love or like Robin prowling” (339). The Christian vigil, a nocturnal devotional exercise, likely began due to “the widespread belief that the Second Coming would take place at midnight” (“Vigil”) O’Connor’s commentary on Flood’s lack of Catholic faith as he watches her pursue Vote through the alleys, seems to confirm Burke’s observation.

<sup>3</sup> Veltman adopts this phrase as title for her study of the confessional as a “site of sexual transgression” (206) that reflects nineteenth century anti-Irish and anti-Catholic rhetoric. Veltman also proposes that O’Connor achieves “the transformation of the sexual act into discourse” (221).

<sup>4</sup> A type of wire-reinforced fishing line, “gimp” also denotes a “Silk, worsted, or cotton twist with a cord or wire running throughout it. Now chiefly applied to a kind of trimming made of this . . . ; sometimes covered with beads or spangled” (“gimp,” def. 1). That O’Connor’s fishing line doubles as beaded trimming seems appropriate.

<sup>5</sup> In O’Connor’s experience of *pissoirs*, you “choose your feet” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 91), and you fish in the most promising waters. He claims the ability to distinguish the geographical origins of anonymous lovers based on his partners’ physical attributes: “though your normal fellow will say all are alike in the dark, negro or white, I say you can tell them, and where they come from, and what quarter they frequent, by the size and excellence . . . .” (94). O’Connor compares this to the “gourmet [who] knows, for instance, from what water his fish was snatched” (94). O’Connor proclaims, “the best port was at the *Place de la Bastille*” (92).

<sup>6</sup> O’Connor chooses the church of a seventh century priest, St. Merri, also known as St. Medericus or St. Mederic, the patron saint of Paris’s Right Bank. Traditionally the saint’s name is shortened to “Merri” or “Merry”; the feminization of the saint’s name corresponds to O’Connor’s struggle between his spiritual desire and his conviction that he should have been born a woman.

<sup>7</sup> Rohman describes the scene as illustrative of the novel’s “linking of the spiritual and the bodily,” but she adds that this episode, along with Vote’s conversion while pregnant and the novel’s concluding scene, contribute to “the text’s insistence on the inclusion of animality as an essential part of human identity, as inseparable from it” (64-65). Yet while the novel certainly argues for the overlap of human and animal, the novel never releases its essentialist views of people; as such, it negates the possibility that the two

may be bridged or merged. Those who attempt to dissolve the binary grow ever more anguished, or even more bestial.

<sup>8</sup> O'Connor relates a second incident illustrating his conflict. He explains that “once, in my youth, [I] rated a *corbeille* of moth-orchids . . . I sat beside them a little while having my tea, and saying to myself, “you’re a pretty lot, and you do my cupboard honour, but there’s a better place awaiting you—” and with that I took them by the hand around the Catholic church . . .” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 100). Using the language of physical death and spiritual rebirth, “there’s a better place awaiting you”—O'Connor reallocates a lover’s gift to an offering to God, and in a place that shames his body but extols his soul.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict based *The Lily of Killarney* on an 1860 play by Dion Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn*, a melodrama about a man, his secret wife, and class deception. This allusion reinforces the idea of betrayal and jealousy. However, O'Connor’s reference might also signal an attempt to align himself, an Irishman, with the Madonna, with whom the lily has long been associated. Also, the *OED* explains that in the early twentieth century, “lily” came into usage “as a term of abuse, esp[ecially] of a man to imply lack of masculinity” (“Lily,” def. 3b).

<sup>10</sup> A popular composer of parlor songs, Barnard published her work under the name “Claribel.” *Mother Put the Wheel Away*, an 1877 anthology of Barnard’s work includes the song as “Susan’s Story.”

<sup>11</sup> While Barnes might use “prester” to suggest O’Connor as priest, an early meaning of “prester” (“Prester John,” etymology), she might also allude to the Christian legend of Prester John (Presbyter Iohannes), a mythical, Christian king, who ruled over an eastern kingdom of fabulous wealth. Stories about Prester John emerged during the crusades, ostensibly as Christian propaganda, as an “oriental potentate and pillar of the Christian faith who yearned to come and help the Europeans in the good enterprise in downing the miscreant Moslems” (Nowell 436). The legend successfully nudged the Pope toward providing additional funds for the Christian forces.

<sup>12</sup> According to the Book of John, after she discovers that someone had removed the stone before Jesus’s tomb, Mary Magdalene ran to find Simon Peter. This apostle, along with “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved,” raced to the tomb. The “unknown beloved” “outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in” (John 20:4-6). The beloved disciple first discovered that Jesus had shed his bindings; upon viewing the empty tomb, he was the first to believe that “[Jesus] had been transformed without corruption into his resurrection body” (*New Oxford* 1316 n.8). In this light, O’Connor’s envy of the loved disciple also indicates a desire not only to be the privileged first, but also for that disciple’s absolute faith: “for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (John 20:9). The disciple believed by faith alone.

<sup>13</sup> Carlston argues that “The Madonna is the focus of . . . all the characters’ fantasies of immaculate love, an eternal intimacy without threat of loss, their reincorporation into the maternal body that would turn time backward in its course” (53). The novel bears out Carlston’s claim; however, the figure of the Madonna illustrates the characters’ wish for social and cultural legitimacy rather than the desire for re-entering the womb.

<sup>14</sup> In her study of *Nightwood* as a parody of fairy tales, Lee argues that Guido and Hedvig, Felix and Robin, parody the prince/princess stereotypes, where Guido and Felix become “a ‘prince’ who rescues [the woman] from oblivion by providing her with a name; like Hedvig, Robin is a ‘princess’ who offers the promise of a son” (209).

<sup>15</sup> Hedvig’s very name suggests an Aryan, militant Christianity. “Hedvig,” a Scandinavian variation of the German “Hedwig,” evokes the bellicose: “hadu” meaning “contention” and “wg” denoting “war.” Coincidentally, Queen Hedwig of Poland (1374–99), born in Hungary and betrothed to a Hapsburg prince, married, instead, a Grand Duke who converted to Christianity just prior to their wedding. Notably, Queen Hedwig remains one of the few married women beatified as a saint (Farmer n. pag.).

<sup>16</sup> The narrator twice compares Hedvig to a general. Guido, while looking at his wife standing beside a “general in creaking leather,” notes that: “Hedvig had the same bearing, the same though more condensed power of the hand . . . . Looking at the two, he had become confused as if he were about to receive a reprimand, not the officer’s, but his wife’s” (4). The anecdote further confirms Hedvig’s identification with military power.

<sup>17</sup> Despite the military dress, as George Mosse points out, such figures remain ultimately passive, and, like national monuments, point “backward in time” as a reminder of past glories (Moss, *Confronting* 32). Hedvig, in her passivity and military bearing, fulfills this function.

<sup>18</sup> Bockting argues astutely that Barnes aims to “challenge the gender binary” by framing Hedvig in “the stereotypical pattern of marriage and childbearing” while describing her as a warrior (34). However, throughout history, various armies adopted the Madonna to imply their superiority. The historian Trevor Johnson notes that in early modern Europe, “Rulers and soldiers adopted the innocent *Immaculata* or the nurturing Madonna as a figurehead of the militant (and militaristic) Counter-Reformation” (Johnson 366). Significantly, the Habsburg monarchy encouraged the cult of the Virgin, thereby claiming her patronage. In the seventeenth century, Ferdinand III, erected a column known as the *Mariensäule*, in Vienna’s Am Hof, which prompted “the erection of countless Mariensäule in town squares throughout the monarchy” (Ingrao 38). The *Mariensäule* typically feature a base of angels battling monsters and, at the top, a figure of Mary.

<sup>19</sup> Theologian Catherine Halkes notes that “In the symbolical language of bridegroom and bride, God and Israel or Christ and the Church, Mary stands for Israel and the community or *ecclesia*” [italics original] (68).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. O’Connor’s declaration that “‘God’s chosen walk close to the wall’” (19).

<sup>21</sup> In his introduction to Barnes’s poems, Herring notes that Eliot objected to Barnes’s predilection “for arcane vocabulary, gleaned from her reading in the *Oxford English Dictionary*” (Herring Introduction 7).

<sup>22</sup> Toward the end of the novel, Felix acknowledges his error in idealizing Vote, explaining that, during their marriage, “‘I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time. I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties’” (111).

<sup>23</sup> The use of “arena” reinforces the theatricality of ritual.

<sup>24</sup> An irony for Felix, who seeks to regain the Great Past, he marries the representative of the “primitive” past.

<sup>25</sup> This phrase echoes an earlier description of Vote’s religious affect: when she visits the nuns at *L’Aodratiou Perpetuelle*, the sisters encounter a “feeling that they were looking at someone who would never be able to ask for, or receive, mercy . . . .” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 43). The nuns bless Vote “in their hearts” and offer her a small bouquet of flowers.

<sup>26</sup> Vote later repeats this action: she raises a doll, the symbol of her relationship with Flood, but this time she smashes it against the floor (147).

<sup>27</sup> Barnes clarified O’Connor’s statement in a note to her French translator, writing that O’Connor’s statement means “high as a nobleman can go—no higher” (qtd. in Plumb 219 n.38.21).

<sup>28</sup> Trubowitz’s interpretation of how Guido represents “something better” focuses on miscegenation: “While Felix and the first Guido struggled to pass as gentiles, the second Guido is presented as fully Christianized from the start [and] is Jewish *only* in so far as Jewishness suggests the loss of, even the expunging of, Jewish identity . . . .” (316). Consequently, when O’Connor tells Felix that “[Guido] is what you have always been looking for,” he speaks to Felix’s desire to avoid identification as a Jew (Barnes, *Nightwood* 121).

<sup>29</sup> In a drunken soliloquy directed at a defrocked priest, O’Connor speaks of “the boy holding on to the image of the Virgin on a darkening red ribbon, feeling its holy lift out of the metal and calling it mother” (162). O’Connor’s statement alludes both to the boy’s religiosity and to his abandoned state.

<sup>30</sup> Flood's first name, Nora, also evokes the character from Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, Ibsen's heroine, and Joyce's wife. Notably, in May, 1930 Barnes interviewed the African-American cast of *The Green Pastures*, a play retelling the story of Genesis. Addressing one of the performers by his character's name, Barnes asks, "Noah, do you believe there should be another Flood?" (Barnes, "Green Pastures" 348). The question points out the similarity between "Noah" and Nora." The actor responds that he does not "believe another Flood is called for" (348).

<sup>31</sup> Reesman uses similar language when she defines Vote as, "the still center of *Nightwood*" (144), but she enlarges the scope of Vote's power, arguing, "All characters act through her and against her and because of her. She is something different to each character, and, although she is 'La Somnambule,' the unmoving sleeper, she is a catalyst for either damnation or salvation, a frightening figure to those who behold her" (144). While not all of the novel's characters act through Vote, Reesman aptly figures Vote as catalyst for actions committed by Felix, Flood, and Petherbridge. Vote's fearsomeness, what terrorizes her associates, results from Vote's lack of fear in chaos.

<sup>32</sup> In synagogues, the light, known as *ner tamid*, hangs above the Holy Ark. In churches, the light hangs above the tabernacle ("Tabernacle").

<sup>33</sup> The Seventh Day Adventists believe in the Bible's authority and call for a doctrinal return to the basics of early Christianity. (Dick 159-60). This recuperation includes a rejection of Constantine's edict in 321 CE that proclaimed Sunday as the day of Christ's resurrection, hence the Sabbath (cf. Luke 23-24). The women who attended Christ's tomb "rested according to the commandment" on the day following Christ's death--a Saturday; the next day, the first of the week, the women returned and met the resurrected Christ). Prior to Constantine's proclamation, practicing Christians, like Jews, observed the Sabbath from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday ("Sabbath").

<sup>34</sup> Later in the novel, O'Connor directs Flood to "think of Robin, who never could provide for her life except in you" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 128).

<sup>35</sup> The congregants' "entanglement" of days might also allude to the confused nature of Seventh Day Adventism's origins in Millerism. In 1843, the sect's founder, William Miller, announced: "I am fully convinced that some time between March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1843 and March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1844, according to the Jewish mode of computation of time, Christ will come and bring all his saints with him; and that then he will reward every man as his works shall be" (Miller qtd. in Bliss and Hale 172). The Second Advent, Jesus Christ's return and history's end, would occur in the year beginning March 1843 and ending March 1844. He later revised that date of the Second Advent to Tuesday, October 22, 1844. On the latter day, his followers were sorely distressed by what became known as The Great Disappointment: Christ failed to appear. As Ahlstrom notes, "To the hard core of true

believers who survived, the Great Disappointment was only a challenge” (480): the group later reconvened and took the name of Seventh Day Adventists.

<sup>36</sup> According to the notations of the Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version of the Bible, “the Word [or logos] of God is more than speech; it is God in action, creating . . . , revealing . . . , redeeming . . . , Jesus is this Word” (1286).

<sup>37</sup> The narrator notes that Flood “would have been impossible” in court, for “no one would have been ‘accused’” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 53). Flood’s seriousness and lack of cynicism suggest Flood, rather than Vote, may be seen as the true “innocent.” Vote’s “innocence” stems from amorality, from, as O’Connor tells, her ability to escape and her lack of empathy: “she can’t ‘put herself in another’s place,’ she herself is the only ‘position’ . . . . She knows she is innocent because she can’t do anything in relation to anyone but herself” (146). In contrast, Flood’s innocence stems from her ability to empathize.

<sup>38</sup> Scott asserts that, “Nora has personal integrity and a personal commitment outside of Self—her love for Robin—which endows Nora with human significance. With her human responses and her capabilities of fidelity and love, Nora is the least eccentric, the most ‘normal,’ of *Nightwood*’s characters” (J Scott 92). Scott’ persuasively views Flood as “the least eccentric” of the novel’s characters, his allowance of her human responses both affirms the stereotype of self-sacrificing womanhood and dismisses the humanity within the other characters.

<sup>39</sup> Significantly, the image of the Mother of Sorrows finds a “correlative doctrine of Mary as the Mediatrix” (Pelikan, *Mary* 125). Thus Hedvig’s tears over the dead, “outcast” Guido, and Flood’s tears over the “sins” of Vote imply a connection with their roles as mediators. Vote, who responds to her outcast husband with indifference or rage, underscores Felix’s misapprehension of Vote’s role in his life.

<sup>40</sup> Flood’s refusal to “move on” from Vote suggests that she partially relishes her “love melancholy.” At one point, O’Connor mocks her, saying: “‘O Widow Lazarus! Arisen from your dead!’” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 137), but later he says, “‘You have died and arisen for love . . . . But unlike the ass returning from the market you are always carrying the same load’” (143). He critiques Flood’s misery as unchanging and, perhaps, excessive. She refuses to “let go” of Vote.

<sup>41</sup> The image of the young woman draped across the chair, before the Madonna, evokes the Pietà; however, whereas the Virgin cradles Christ in representations such as Michelangelo’s, here she remains distant, two dimensional, much as Flood becomes two dimensional to Vote.

<sup>42</sup> Benstock argues that “like other ‘good’ women, Nora imposes her moral principles on all women. She becomes the unknowing instrument of the patriarchy” (*Women* 263).

Further, Benstock contends that “Unaware of the patriarchal crimes against her own nature, [Flood] allies herself with her oppressors—the church . . .—in trying to ‘save’ Robin, to make her answer for society’s claims” (263). More harshly, “Nora’s ‘crime’ is her effort to make Robin confirm to a moral code based on patriarchal self-interest and misogyny” (263).

<sup>43</sup> Prior to this, Flood, frustrated at Vote’s unwillingness to go home, slaps Vote. Flood relates that Vote “started, and smiled, and went up the stairs with me without complaint” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 144). A similar event occurs during a carriage ride with Petherbridge, O’Connor, and a young woman named Sylvia. Petherbridge reacts to Vote’s gentle ridicule by “striking her, scratching and tearing in hysteria, striking clutching and crying” (76). Shortly thereafter, Vote deserts Flood and leaves for America with Petherbridge (77).

<sup>44</sup> Because of the scene’s electricity and ambiguity, some scholars qualify it as sexual. For example, De Lauretis writes that, “This enigmatic ending, shocking in its unequivocal simulation of a sexual act from frenzied crescendo to (failed) orgasmic release, likely contributed to the ostracism *Nightwood* suffered in the U.S” (121). O’Neal recalls Barnes’s concern about such readings: “The final scene was crucial and it annoyed [Barnes] that many people thought the girl and the dog were sexually engaged. She told me repeatedly the girl was drunk, the dog confused, and that she had witnessed the scene herself. It involved her friend ‘Fitzie’ (M. E. Fitzgerald) and her dog Buff” (104).



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