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*Modernist Literature and Modern Dance: Djuna Barnes Writing the Body*

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December 2019  
English: Senior Project

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## Foreword

The interaction of bodies with intellect has always fascinated me. We each come with an innate corporeal knowledge that cannot be detached from the intellectual knowledge we gain through experience and education. Our bodies react to rationality, they react to emotions and to significant changes. A body can represent something we once loved— acting as a metonym for the past. Often, ideas or emotions that cannot be expressed properly in words can be better expressed through movement or physical touch. As a dancer, I've always paid close attention to these connections; I've learned that a lack of words does not indicate a lack of communication, but the opposite: an opportunity to turn to my body to communicate. Arguably, dance and body language actually have a greater ability to communicate primary emotions and ideas, while also being a more widely accessible form of communication.

One of the reasons I initially became interested in modern dance, specifically the technique of Martha Graham, is its rejection of the rigidity that ballet represents. Ballet is the only branch of dance that has a standard of perfection for both body type and movement, inciting its participants to constantly strive for this state of perfection. I remember beating myself up after dance class, having been criticized for not having enough arch in my foot, or not sucking in enough at the barre. When I began to study Graham, I realized that dance is so much more than achieving perfection; it is the external expression of the internal. Graham wasn't trying to represent what was perfect or unachievable, but rather the rawness of human emotion— she did this through her new, modern form of expression that rejects past standards of movement.

I was contemplating this rejection of rigidity in my modern dance technique class during my sophomore year at Vassar, while simultaneously taking a course on modernist literature and sexuality. The literature course explicitly made the connection between bodies, expression, and writing although it mostly focused on sexuality. We read *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes in order to explore the abstraction of modernism. The novel was polarizing as many were repulsed by its impenetrable prose, while others enjoyed its obscurity. I sided with the latter group, finding myself re-reading Barnes's words, memorizing certain notable lines such as, "The night is not premeditated" or "Life, the permission to know death" (Barnes, 87, 90). I remember coming to class to discuss Robin Vote as a sex worker, and when I said the idea out loud my professor took a minute to think. She had never considered Robin a sex worker, but thought my interpretation could lead to a provocative reading of the novel. I was shocked that a novel so widely studied could still trigger new understandings and different interpretations. This discovery stimulated my interest in modernist literature, introducing the concept that I might never comprehend the words that are in front of me, but rather feel something significant from reading them.

When thinking about a topic for this thesis just before the start of senior year, I immediately thought of modernist literature but also wanted to find a way to include my passion for dance— a seemingly impossible task. I did some preliminary research, trying to find some sort of connection. Maybe I could write about how Walt Whitman inspired choreographers of the early twentieth century (though studying Whitman in depth seemed like it would become boring quickly), or maybe I could write about how Martha Graham was sort of poetic (which was not grounded in any kind of research). Nothing caught my

attention, so I went into my room to begin re-reading *Nightwood*— an intention I’d had since taking the course two years before. I was immediately drawn back into Barnes’s prose, remembering how impossible she was to understand. I found myself reading the first two chapters over again before moving on to the third, and repeating the process. I realized something: Barnes doesn’t need to be clear in her writing because she gives the reader clarity in other ways. She describes human movement in ways that are so imaginative that they directly prompt an image— not one that is static, but one that is dynamic and ephemeral, one that changes each time it is read depending on the lens of the reader. It was this realization that brought me to the link between modern dance and modernist literature; I had to learn to use a new dance technique and interpret it in the same way I had to learn to read Barnes’s prose.

As I dove further into the re-reading of *Nightwood*, I began to realize even more of a connection between the novel and dance: Robin is only described through the perspective of others, and even then, only through her corporeality. We only get to know Robin as a body, a body that is never fixed— shifting between genders, sexualities, geographical locations, and lovers. She somehow inhabits the space between binaries, situated in the liminal. This moment exists in Graham’s technique as well: the point between contraction and release, the moment builds the tension for your body to be able to release the energy in the form of movement. It is also present in the emotional aspects of modernist literature and modern dance, which both publicly display emotions or meanings that were considered more “private” at the time. The twentieth century became about investigating the discomfort that

exists in discussing “private” material, such as gender fluidity, sexual orientation, and primary instincts, in the public sphere.

I want this thesis to be for myself. I want it to be for my parents, one who is still with me and one who is with me in memory— my parents who have supported me and encouraged me to pursue my passions which have coalesced in this thesis. This thesis is also for my fellow dancers who are ultra-attentive to their bodies and how they interact with other bodies, how our bodies influence our everyday interactions and emotions. I am writing this thesis for those who don’t believe dance to be an academic or rigorous discipline; I want them to now acknowledge that dance and corporeal knowledge seep into every space of academia, whether it is done consciously or not. We cannot resist the roles our bodies play in each aspect of our lives, and here I have presented just one way that they inform both our intellectual and emotional endeavors.

*We were created that the heart might be made sensible of [our] inhuman taste; and love that the body might be so dear that even the earth should roar with it (Barnes, 90).*

Section 1:  
The Aesthetics of Modernism in Dance and Literature of the Twentieth Century

*It is not a matter of “representation”– much may be represented actually, but of separate existence.*

– William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*

The new, modern mindset of the twentieth century resisted romantic idealism– it worked towards a completely new way of observing the world, and thus writing the world. Many of the modernists were stimulated by World War I, latching onto the idea that destruction precipitates creation. As a result, modernism is essentially an aesthetic *rupture*– a time to rid literature of its old, romanticized tendencies and resurrect a fresh, more embodied style of language (Jones, 249). This denaturalization, or re-imagining, of language was one step in questioning the very act of representation. The Imagistes, namely Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, advocated for an end to mimesis– asking for writers to think of unique ways to re-imagine an image, a word, or a narrative, to create “a world detached from the necessity of recording it” (Williams, 207). Perhaps the image is heard instead of seen, or it is communicated through the body rather than through language; maybe the story does not have a linear narrative because it rests in abstraction. This new credo was also embraced in other forms of art, such as painting and dance. In each case, the authority of the creator was decentralized and the reader or observer was now asked to posit their own questions and produce their own interpretations.

The invent of modernist literature and modern dance coincides, creating an informative relationship that is often overlooked. Modern dance pioneers, such as Martha Graham, were also attempting to break away from mimetic inclinations, which were

previously associated with ballet. When analyzing Pound's advocacy of resisting representation and the use of traditional tropes, it becomes clear that dance is the embodiment of his ideal: "dance is simultaneously the sign itself and its production," meaning it lies outside of the need for language or explanation (Jones, 16). Dance's utilization of the body as a primary instrument also called upon the modernist idealization of the *primitive* and its connotations of "getting back to the physical." Graham's work, along with the work of modern dancers and choreographers that followed her, was not concerned with traditional plot nor classical aesthetic. She focused on what it means to use the body as a vehicle for communication, embracing "that tension, that intensification of a body in its stillness and in its movement" (Graham, 8). The modernist *rupture* in both dance and literature allowed for a new way of viewing both art forms, inviting readers and spectators to engage in the art-making process itself. Although not every modernist writer was explicitly involved with modern dance (and vice versa), the two disciplines inherently inform each other due to their analogous ideologies; I believe that analyzing the two art forms together allows the reader or viewer to develop a deeper understanding, and thus maybe find some sense within the abstraction of modernism.

Nineteenth-century figures such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Friedrich Nietzsche created a vocabulary that became the foundation for the twentieth-century modernist movement. A French symbolist poet in the 1890's, Mallarmé was preoccupied with the American dancer Loïe Fuller who was one of the first dancers to venture beyond the classical. Previous theatrical performances had not succeeded in stimulating Mallarmé because he believed in a "divine Idea" that he had previously only witnessed in poetry;

however, Fuller's performance seemed to resonate with the divine, which perhaps stemmed from the fact that her dance broke away from the traditional mimetic forms. Yet, Mallarmé still referenced her and her embodied expression in relation to poetry—his ultimate divine—naming Fuller's performance in Paris “la forme théâtrale de poésie par excellence” (Jones, 13). His fascination with, or rather fetishization of, Fuller led Mallarmé to theorize that the *dancer* could be an ideal model for the symbolist poets due to the fact that dance has an “economy of form akin to that of poetry,” or, as Mallarmé put it, “une écriture corporelle” (Jones, 13). One of his most crucial observations in relation to the modernist sublime was his perception of the dancing body as both the symbol itself and its production (Jones, 16). He went further to note that the dancer was not a static *symbol*, but instead, she embodied “a lack of completion which enticed the spectator to strive for meaning” (Jones, 16). This last remark invites the spectator into the dance or the poem itself, recognizing the validity of having many interpretations. The moving dancer does not allow for an objective reality, but rather opens up the possibility of having a variety of viable interpretations—equipping the reader or observer for the more abstract forms of dance and poetry that came with the twentieth century aesthetic.

One of the other stimulants of the modernist sublime was the “rediscovery of the Dionysian” in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy in the Spirit of Music* published in 1872 (Jones, 44). In this text, Nietzsche rejects the Apollonian ideology that is associated with the individual or “the restraint of rationalism,” pushing instead for humanity's movement toward the impulsive—exemplified in his vision of the Greek chorus. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he celebrates “the will of the unconscious” and “the emergence from the earth of the darker and

wilder elements of corporeal expression”: the liberation of the body through movement (Jones, 46). Following this thread, Nietzsche claims the body and dance as forms of the *primary*—pointing to the instinctual tendencies of humanity. He validates the idea of *primary* inclination, stated here by Jones: “existence can only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon: humanity itself ultimately constitutes the aesthetic” (Jones, 47). In the final form of expression, Jones observes Nietzsche’s claim of the aesthetic as a “pre-linguistic form of embodied expression,” which validates dancing, yet also attempts to privilege the body over the written word as the primary form of communication (Jones, 49).

Nietzsche and Mallarmé’s writings suggest a reciprocal relationship between writing and dancing or movement, but movement theorist Rudolf Laban of the early twentieth century was a pioneer in working with both mediums simultaneously. Laban came out of the practice of eurhythmics: a focus on physical awareness and liberation that worked to “deconstruct the boundaries of what might be called exclusively ‘dance’, and to give rise instead to a far broader category of ‘movement’” (Jones, 75). Laban worked within the Dionysian impulse to liberate the body while also working to put dance into writing, so to speak, with his work in dance notation. He believed that a written documentation of dance might allow the art form to reach a higher status within the intellectual and academic spheres, working against Mallarmé’s understanding of dance as secondary to poetics. Laban’s goal was to examine the “particular relationship between language, gesture, and rhythm” (Jones, 77). It was his understanding that over the course of history, humanity’s progression to the written word has resulted in a diminishment of the moving body, or a corporeal language: “with time, [human] speech becomes more articulate, his body less so” (Hodgson, Jones, 78).

In order to re-create body language, Laban turned his focus to the individual dancer rather than the communal dance of Nietzsche's Greek chorus.

Dance's transition back to the individual raised the question of original expression in contrast to the mimetic expression of the past. Mary Wigman, a successor of Laban in the 1930s, was a main proponent of dismantling *mimesis* as the foundation of dance (Jones, 78). She began her work with the spatial and temporal aspects of performance, noticing that ballet was almost always choreographed to face front (*en face*) and that each balletic narrative was linear. In contrast, Wigman dismantled the "'illusion' of depth," using the body and its movement "to *create* the notion of space and its boundaries or limitations, rather than placing the body in an already articulated framework" (Jones, 79). In a sense, Wigman was not only subverting the principles of classical dance, but also generating a brand new framework that would become the groundwork for modern dancers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham. Concurrently, writers like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and T.S. Eliot were conceiving a new framework of literary aesthetic which complemented that of modern dance.

Much of the literary innovation, or destruction, of the twentieth century was happening simultaneously under two different titles: imagism and vorticism. Both movements seem to contain the underlying objective of putting the act of mimesis or re-presentation to bed, and allowing for the words, gestures, movements, or subjects to speak alone as a new and individual creation. Ezra Pound, the writer credited with putting together the anthology *Des Imagistes*, defined the commandments of imagism as such:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation

3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome (“A Retrospect”).

Pound’s 1918 essay, cleverly named “A Retrospect” given that the movement started in 1912, clarifies his methodology in choosing which poems were *imagiste* and which did not apply. While it may seem contradictory that a “liberating” movement such as imagism would put forth a set of rules, it is actually this set of rules that is the impetus for creativity. Not only do these stipulations open a writer up to exploring the use of words not yet invented, or words used in a new way, but they also create a clear link between the act of writing and the act of movement or dance as it was also deviating from the movement vocabulary of ballet by creating a new set of vocabulary— a new set of rules. As Pound puts it, the rules are “fixed points of departure” or simply “cautions gained by experience” (“A Retrospect”). He strongly believed in breaking boundaries now, so that more can be broken in the future.

One of Pound’s most notable specifications is his acknowledgment of the physical engagement that exists both in the act of reading and in the act of writing. An embodied reader is activated through the rules of imagism that Pound set forth, especially in the rule of musicality. In his mind, both poetry and prose should flow in the way music does, allowing for a natural dance to precipitate from this musicality. According to Jones, “Pound tended to use dance as a metaphorical aid to imagining a revitalized modern aesthetics” (205). In Pound’s essay “On Criticism in General” he defines three terms used to achieve “poetic accuracy”: *melopoeia*, “wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property”; *phanopoeia*, “a casting of images upon the visual imagination”; and finally, *logopoeia*, which is “the dance of the intellect among words.” The image of a dancing intellect— “the concept of dance as motion, speed, the play of the image”—

recognizes the liberating quality of dance, validating an inherent reciprocity between dance and writing (Mccaren, 80). In order to expand on the idea of movement, or poetry as a moving entity, Pound created a new word: vorticism.

An off-shoot of the imagist movement was the idea of the vortex that Pound proposed in 1914. In his essay “Vortex” he returns to the idea of the *primary* that Nietzsche had mentioned, re-centering modernist aesthetics with his conception of imagism. He articulates that “the vortex is the point of maximum energy” towards which all energy rushes; energies both from the past and the present are thrown into the vortex, and the art form is dispersed. He describes the process,

EVERY CONCEPT [...] PRESENTS ITSELF TO THE VIVID CONSCIOUSNESS IN SOME PRIMARY FORM. IT BELONGS TO THE ART OF THIS FORM. IF SOUND, TO MUSIC; IF FORMED WORDS, TO LITERATURE; THE IMAGE, TO POETRY; FORM, TO DESIGN [...] MOVEMENT TO THE DANCE OR TO THE RHYTHM OF MUSIC OR OF VERSES (“Vorticism”)

“The vivid consciousness” he is referencing can be interpreted as the “vortex,” thus giving each individual capability of this artistic drive. He finishes the manifesto with the thought that “the vorticist will not allow the primary expression of any concept or emotion to drag itself out into mimicry.” Here, it is clear that re-presentation is no longer tolerated by Pound, he yearns for a completely unfamiliar way of expressing “things,” an emancipated approach to description which naturally lends itself to the realm of dance— an escape from written language altogether. Connecting with Nietzsche, Laban, and Wigman, Pound emphasizes the demand for originality that was so present in the twentieth century— the desire for unique, embodied expression.

William Carlos Williams also criticized the symbolists' aesthetic in 1923 with his text, *Spring and All*, which functions as another manifesto for those of the imagist tradition. Williams calls out "crude symbolism" for "associat[ing] emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning, flowers with love" (188). He continues by chastising the use of "like" or "as" in the effort to evoke an image—urging writers to invoke the imagination instead of searching for these "almost" images (188). The idea of ridding literature of similes coincides with the movement to end mimesis; it is to acknowledge "the oneness of experience" that Pound was also alluding to in his claim that each individual art form is necessary to accomplish something different from another art form (W.C. Williams, 194). *Spring and All* manages to capture the essence of the modernist sublime in privileging the individual and undoing the symbolists' reliance on mimesis. Williams puts into concise words the goal of the imagists: "The representation was perfect, it 'said something one was used to hearing' but with verve, cleverly" (199). Each mode of art or art-making should be able to communicate its subject in the purest, yet most creative way possible. This task is up to the individual. Dancer must create a new movement, writer must create a new image: "it is not a matter of 'representation' – much may be represented actually, but of separate existence" (Williams, 204).

T.S. Eliot embraces the idea of the human body as a constant reference point in a turning world through his conception of the "stillpoint." In his 1936 poem "Burnt Norton," one of the *Four Quartets*, he explores the idea of movement and fixity as occurring at once. He describes the dance as "both of the body, and bodiless," referring to the notion that dance is an embodied form of expression that creates "a moment of existence outside time and

language” (Jones, 223). The dichotomous nature of dance, as a result, is the perfect form of the modernist sublime: “a finely poised equilibrium of physiological and intellectual states” (Jones, 224). In this way, dance is a mode of transcendence, or further, a culmination of the poetic journey. It is within a sublime moment that we find the dance: liberation from the written word, liberation from the moving body, liberation from space and time altogether. In the second movement of “Burnt Norton,” Eliot writes,

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only dance.

Eliot situates us, the readers, within a series of paradoxes— perhaps asking us to feel comfortable in the uncomfortable. The “still point” embodies the modernist aesthetic of abstraction and destruction as it ruptures any concept of reality; it allows for paradoxical ideas to exist at once. This was a concept also embraced by Djuna Barnes in *Nightwood*.

The early twentieth century cultivated an unfettered form of dance that rejected traditional balletic practices of mimesis (Jones, 17). Choreographers such as Ted Shawn, Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham were at the forefront of creating new dance techniques that broke away from the re-productive movements of ballet, encouraging each individual dancer to focus on their own reason for dancing. The choreography also included an attention to the stillness of dance— a dancer continues dancing even when they are still— nodding to Eliot’s “still point.” As a result, dance began to focus on itself as a discipline independent of design details (costumes, music, lights, etc.) which

facilitated “its transition to a modernist aesthetic that increasingly privileged abstraction and its non-representational, non-narratological potential” (Jones, 40). Now, dancers and choreographers were seeking “purity” of movement, focusing solely on the body and its capabilities rather than the narrative—reminiscent of the imagist poets’ focus on purity of word choice (Jones, 41). Stripping down each discipline, whether it be literature or dance, to its rawest form, its “primary pigment” as Pound would have put it, allowed for a more open interaction between dancers and their bodies, as well as between the dancers and the audience.

Ted Shawn and Doris Humphrey worked in different ways to expand the vocabulary and the aesthetics of dance. Shawn’s main goal was to utilize male dancers in order to show the music and culture of America; his purpose in dance veered towards evangelical (Mazo, 88). He was essentially trying to embody the American mythos through his choreography, and he founded the Denishawn School in Los Angeles in 1915 with Ruth St. Denis in order to pass along his ideas (Mazo, 116). Doris Humphrey was a student at Denishawn, but never felt that it fit her own dance mission, although she did not quite know what that was. After taking time to explore her own body through dance, “she concluded that dance happens in the frightening moment between falling and recovering [...] between equilibrium and uncontrol” (Mazo, 117). Humphrey latched onto the abstract and advocated that emotion must drive one’s life; however, she rejected impulse. Her choreographic work rests in the second generation of modern dancers and choreographers at Denishawn; she danced under Shawn and Denis, and alongside Martha Graham who came to be one of the most recognizable dance names of the twentieth century. Graham differed from Humphrey in that she thrived in

the impulsive, embracing a more Nietzschean mindset: “she danced Dionysus to Humphrey’s Apollo” (Mazo, 178).

Martha Graham was not only a proponent of the modernist sublime, but was also a direct participant in the dance/literature exchange of the twentieth century. In *The Notebooks of Martha Graham*, she actively acknowledges her literary influences and also tends to write down her choreography in a style that resembles poetic form. Graham directly calls upon Eliot at one point, naming her choreography as the “embodied form” of his poems in *The Four Quartets* (Jones, 239). In addition, Graham worked, as did the other modernists, with the concepts of “primary” and “primitive,” often using them interchangeably, disregarding the important distinction: *primary* refers to an innate, instinctual form of movement while *primitive* suggests the colonialist tendency to idealize the past, usually non-Western cultures (Jones, 239). Graham invoked both words as she created expressive moments with the most basic form of movement while also allowing for moments of silence or stillness— using the body as a constant point of reference (Jones, 239). At the beginning of the 1930’s, Graham’s movement became stark and nonlinear, and the moments of stillness that she was able to locate gave the audience a glimpse of temporal reality. She liked to rest in that tension, or as she put it, “that intensification of a body in its stillness and in its movement” (Graham, 8). She even cited Eliot saying,

When a dancer is at the peak of his power he has two lovely, fragile, and perishable things. One is the spontaneity that is arrived at over years of training. The other is simplicity, but not the usual kind. It is the state of complete simplicity costing no less than absolutely everything, of which T.S. Eliot speaks (Graham, 17).

Graham also aligned with Humphrey in believing that dance “reveals the inner landscape, which is the soul of man”; it reveals human emotion in a way that had not been done before (Graham, 4).

Graham was not the only modern dance choreographer to directly cite modernist writers; Merce Cunningham was a student of Graham, but took her interrogation of time a step further with his interrogation of space in the 1950’s. Cunningham began by “eliminating narrative gesture and the emphasis on psychological drama in favour of a greater formal economy and a poetics of abstraction” (Jones, 247). However, he did inherit the tradition of exploring stillness within motion or the “inner conflict of stillness verses motion” – recalling Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” (Jones, 247). He argued that this conflict, or tension, that lies within a paradox hints at a more realistic form of dance because it “does not impose an arbitrary order on events but shows things as they occur and people as they are” (Mazo, 229). His dancing not only decentralized the idea of linear narrative and temporal constructs, but also used the stage in new ways– exploring the space with new movements and eliminating a point of focus. This complete shift away from rationality and tradition was a result of Graham’s technique, as well as the modernist writers’ explorations of form. When centering the discussion through the body, it becomes clear that modernist notions of abstraction and exploration informed the rise of modern dance, and vice versa.

Section 2:  
Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

*Nightwood is a place where much can be said— and left unsaid.*  
– Jeanette Winterson, “Preface”

Djuna Barnes emerged out of, as well as within, the aesthetics of Pound, Joyce, and Eliot, but she was successful in creating her own aesthetic: grotesque and enigmatic. Known for her black cape-like coat, Barnes had a “gothic personality” that crept into both her writing and her drawings, and ultimately influenced the atmosphere of her most well-known novel, *Nightwood*, which was published in 1937 (Field, 15). A child of artists and intellectuals, Barnes inherited an artistry that embodies the modernist tradition of remembering the canonical past while working to create a new, resurrected aesthetic. She constructed her own style, beginning with a career in journalism, that reached its full form in *Nightwood*; she was able to use her understanding of the human experience to create authentic characters that inhabit the grim atmospheres of Paris and America that Barnes reimagines. Barnes is also known for her fascination with death and its inevitability. In her life, and in her conception of *Nightwood*, Barnes maintains the idea that “life after death possesses even less sense than life before death” (Field, 34). Therefore, if death is inescapable, is it also our final form of transcendence?

This question certainly informs her own literary praxis, as well as her attitude towards the literary community of the twentieth century. Barnes criticized her peers for their reliance on the public’s opinion, as it would ultimately not matter when they die. Her concept of transcendence through death— a concept that accounts for the escape from public opinion and material reliance— embraces Pound’s and Williams’s method of employing destruction as a

means of triggering a renaissance. Barnes associates her main character with death and temporary relationships, placing Robin in an in-between state that provokes her readers to find comfort in liminality. She also challenges the conventional by writing Doctor Matthew O'Connor's and Robin's gender and sexuality as fluid. Her prose engages with the framework of paradoxes that both Eliot and Graham introduced; the "nighttime" is employed as a space where binaries are blurred, distinctions are abandoned, and temporality is eliminated. The erasure of time noted in both the dance and literary spheres of the twentieth century is seen here—Barnes's true ideal appears to be that the past, present, and future exist in one moment.

Robin represents the vortex of *Nightwood*, Pound's point towards which all the energy rushes. Some critics read Robin's silence as passivity, but I disagree. Her ability to inhabit two worlds—to be a living paradox—permits her a certain form of agency: an escape from the need for labels or words and therefore, a transcendence from rationality itself. Modern dance accomplishes a similar goal, employing the body as a vehicle of communication. Bodies are open to different interpretations, but ultimately remain independent, and may always remain a mystery.

### **Doctor Matthew O'Connor**

Much of what we know about Robin Vote is delivered to us through Doctor Matthew O'Connor's verbose rants. In contrast to her portrayal of Robin, Barnes illustrates the doctor as an intellectual, as well as someone with a complex physicality; the very fact that he is a doctor by occupation demonstrates his attention to the body. In addition, he is often described as being a "performer," whether that means a literal performer on a stage, or in reference to

the performance of gender. One of the first descriptions we get of the doctor is through the eyes of Felix.

[He] saw the doctor, partially hidden by the screen beside the bed, make the movements common to the ‘dumbfounder,’ or man of magic; the gestures of one who, in preparing the audience for a miracle, must pretend that there is nothing to hide; the whole purpose that of making the back and elbows move in a series of ‘hostesties,’ while in reality the most flagrant part of the hoax is being prepared (Barnes, 39).

It is through the doctor and his rants that we learn why Robin is so unknowable, why she seems to be both present and removed; he has these discussions with both Felix and Nora in their greatest hours of distress, neither knowing why they cannot let go of Robin even when she has already left them. It is the doctor who vocalizes the connection between Robin and the night— establishing the existence of liminal space and its ability to liberate the body.

The doctor even implicates those who are listening to his speeches into the world of sleep and death that Robin inhabits— inviting Felix and Nora, as well as the reader, to accept the knowledge that Robin represents. He tells Nora,

We are but skin about a wind, with muscles clenched against mortality. We sleep in a long reproachful dust against ourselves [...] Life, the permission to know death. We were created that the heart might be made sensible of her inhuman taste; and love that the body might be so dear that even the earth should roar with it (Barnes, 90).

As owners of human bodies, we are all subject to death and returning to the earth. This recalls, once again, Williams’s notion that destruction precipitates creation— a type of resurrection. This motif is present in Robin as well because “Robin had come from a world to which she would return. To keep her (in Robin there was this tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray) [...] there was no way but death” (Barnes, 63). It is only through

death that Robin and her lovers can be free to be with one another: “In death Robin would belong to [them]. Death went with them, together and alone; and with the torment and catastrophe, thoughts of resurrection” (Barnes, 63). In essence, Robin is the destruction before the resurrection, she is the vehicle of liberation that the modernists were searching for. The closest state to death, without actually “achieving” death, is sleep, therefore Barnes places her most transcendent character in a state of sleep as the somnambule, letting the doctor dictate her essence as sleeper of the night.

While the doctor is not himself characterized as a sleepwalker, nor as death incarnate, he does exist in the liminal space of the nighttime. The same logic of the “twilight zone” as a space where binaries “blur their distinctive boundaries” applies to the doctor but in a very different capacity than it does for Robin (Chrysochu, 139). The doctor’s act of blurring binaries takes place in his performance of gender. Barnes does not fix the doctor’s gender, as he often is either characterized as sexless, or places himself in both the roles of male or female, interchangeably. The doctor is initially characterized as “an Irishman from the Barbary Coast... whose interest in gynaecology had driven him half around the world” (Barnes, 17). He also claims to know the desires of men: “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” (Barnes, 23). However, as the novel progresses, the doctor’s gender is fluid, exhibiting characteristics of both genders. In the chapter entitled “Watchman, What of the Night?” Nora walks into the doctor’s bedroom, looking for answers about Robin’s whereabouts, but finds something unexpected:

In the narrow iron bed, with its heavy and dirty linen sheets, lay the doctor in a woman’s flannel gown. The doctor’s head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long

pendent curls that touched his shoulders [...] he was heavily rouged and his lashes painted (Barnes, 85).

Nora is surprised to find the doctor in such a state “when he had evacuated custom and gone back into his dress” (Barnes, 86). This line suggests that the doctor’s natural state is actually more feminine than he presents, as he must exist on the cis-gender binary when in public. However, it is only at night– alone– that he can truly be who he is, exempt from social construction.

This kind of gender performance and the breaking down of social constructions of gender, is evocative of the breaking of the strictures of ballet through the transition into modern dance. Ballet is often defined by its rigid form and adherence to heteronormative standards; however, modern dance strives to “[reveal] the inner landscape, which is the soul of man,” or, in other words, use the body to reveal what is inside, even if it does not fit the image that had been originally imagined (Graham, 4). Perhaps in this way, modern dance is the queering of dance standards and expectations. The doctor embodies Graham’s sentiment by resisting the traditionally rigid confines of gender– he is “the confrontation of opposites” that Joseph H. Mazo attributes to modern dance (14). Twentieth century choreographers viewed ballet as the enemy because of its “artificial, aristocratic, and un-American” qualities (Mazo, 162). The doctor resists the gender binary in the same way, highlighting its artificiality and accentuating how easily one may perform gender. If gender and the body are so malleable, why must the expectations for each remain so rigid?

Through the doctor, Barnes explores the idea of gender performativity– a concept that attempts to privilege the unwritten body. As Judith Butler theorizes, gender “is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in

which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 519). In this way, gender is completely dictated by social constructions of movement that are historically feminine or historically masculine. As a result, “one does one's body” because gender is inherently a kind of performance, whether a person is conscious of it or not (Butler, 521). Barnes utilizes this idea in the personification of the doctor; in fact, he directly identifies himself as a member of the “third sex,” an umbrella term used in the early twentieth century for someone who does not identify with the male sex nor the female sex, who identifies as both, or who is some combination of these two genders (Russell, 31). Therefore, especially in the case of the doctor, gender can be viewed as a “corporeal style,” or a way in which one chooses (consciously or unconsciously) to move or dress (Butler, 521). In following this line of thought, a body outside of social constructions would be genderless; thus, it is really the physical choices, including one's movement, that determine one's gender in society. Noticing that the body and its movements are of particular importance in gender performativity, one can point out the “pre-linguistic form of embodied expression” that is dance (Jones, 49). Both the presence of gender performance and the practice of embodying expression through dance affirm my theory that Barnes paid particular attention to the body and its implications. They also allude to her idea that one may make a choice to reject, and thus work against, societal expectations; as Butler articulates, “one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well” (Butler, 521). In *Nightwood*, the only setting in which it is acceptable to be “transgressive” in this way is at night— a time when the

unconscious, or the most natural state, can take over, and societal standards or expectations seem to dissolve.

It is useful to pair the ideas of gender construction and the unmarked body with Barnes's conception of the nighttime. She strives to construct a liminal space, "beyond distinctions— a space where there is complete undifferentiation" (Crysochu, 145). This kind of space verifies Robin's ability to inhabit two worlds, two levels of consciousness, two states of being without issue as there is no need to differentiate or to identify as one thing or another. The night setting allows for both Robin and the doctor to assume their natural, or most primal, states without criticism from the daytime inhabitants; "the night is a skin pulled over the head of day that the day may be in torment" (Barnes, 91). It is only the doctor, however, who articulates this notion. As Smith states, "The doctor reads the night as a kind of precipitate of the unconscious, insofar as the contents of the unconscious are representative of the instincts, primal fantasies of polymorphous perversity displaced onto other scenarios" (199). Due to this quality, the night also contains a sense of mystery. The doctor, a creature of the night, seems a bit elusive— we do not know much about his background or even his present actions; we just hear his metaphysical/philosophical rants. Similarly, Robin's whereabouts are indeterminable at night; no one can pin down who she is with or if she will come home. Barnes's iconic line, "The night is not premeditated," evokes her modernist intention behind writing this novel: disrupting traditional social constructions and thus, creating a space for things to be unidentifiable and nonconforming (87).

## Robin Vote

Barnes's construction of and fixation on Robin Vote are exhibited in the way Robin is personified. From the first encounter with her, the reader receives a complete sensory experience; Barnes moves from the sounds of the hostel room, to the image of Robin's body, to the "perfume that her body exhaled," and finally ends with a tactile description of Robin's flesh. Each moment of this description seems to bring the reader closer to the figure of Robin Vote while maintaining some distance—creating a dissociative atmosphere surrounding Robin herself and establishing the paradox of the character: a figure who is both there and not there, "the eternal momentary" (Barnes, 135). Barnes distinguishes Vote through this body-centric description, as she does not do the same for any of the other characters in the novel. It is in Robin that we understand Barnes's use of "night," as well as her own understanding of the body as a vehicle that is both self-possessed and open to being possessed by others. Somehow Robin's body is both completely separate from the existence of others, and in need of other bodies to validate her own existence—"she is lost but simultaneously remembered and therefore desired, an image whose very mutability is dangerous" (Smith, 200).

*Nightwood's* Robin grounds the notion of Barnes as a part of the traditions of modernism, imagism, and modern dance, while also validating her ideological and formal distinctiveness. Barnes adheres to the ideas set forth by Pound by establishing Robin as the "vortex" or the central point of the novel, but she works to shift the discussion away from word choice to privilege a discussion grounded in the body that resides more in the development of modern dance during the twentieth century. Barnes's grotesque style

manifests itself in the way Robin's body is illustrated in that first moment. Upon entering the room, Felix hears "the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten," silenced as if "cloaks on funeral urns" are "cast over their cages" (Barnes, 37). Right away the reader is situated in such a way as to suggest that in the next moment one might stumble upon a corpse. However, the "corpse" is alive, "her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance [...] looking too lively for the arrested step" (Barnes, 38). Barnes reveals the paradox of Robin here: a forgotten moment, in decay, yet alluring to look at as is a dancer on stage. The description continues with the odor as a "captured dampness and yet so dry" coupled with the smell of the "oil of amber, which is the inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire" (Barnes, 38). This is the first moment of comparison between Robin and sleep, which becomes the predominant description of Robin throughout the novel: "la somnambule." Robin's very flesh is described as "the texture of plant life" that only seems to weakly entomb a body that is "porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface" (Barnes, 38). Barnes chooses to conclude the sensual, almost disturbing allure of Robin with Robin's main quality: she lives in two worlds, in two states of being, at all times.

Throughout the narrative, Robin is a constant object of desire— a desire that is all-consuming, obsessive, and virulent, yet inescapable. Her three lovers— Felix, Nora, and Jenny— all unconsciously fall into this intrigue in search of something they are missing. Robin's ephemeral existence provides the perfect occasion for each of these characters to find in her what they most need; Robin's purely physical form is merely a screen for each of their desires to be projected upon, establishing the precedent that a body in its purest form is

subject to influence. Through this, bodies become a vehicle in which both the past and present are exhibited, allowing them to exist in one moment— the body is paradoxically a synthesis of the past and the present and atemporal, presenting yet another paradox that we must accept. This allows the body to be a site of exploration, a means of expression that is distinct from traditional ideas of rationality or intellect. It seems to be that the complete escape from words and temporal constructs is the ideal that the modernists/imagists were trying to achieve; they wanted to be outside of mimetic tendencies, to create or describe something in a way that had never before been done. Robin embodies Pound's goal in refusing to be subject to the constructions of time and intellect, refusing to be tangible as an image. Robin's personhood is only established through the perception of others, through Barnes's somatic language, and through Robin's nonexistence in the intellectual world of the doctor— we never really understand the world from Robin's perspective, allowing her to remain an impenetrable mystery.

Barnes's desire to blur temporal lines places her within the modernist aesthetic; she asserts her individuality by taking Robin's transitory existence— “the past, present, and future exist in one moment”— and equating it to the states of sleeping and dying (Field, 34). Barnes's morbid credo that “life after death possesses even less sense than life before death” echoes in Robin who, in essence, functions as a shadow of death (Field, 34). Death is both dreaded and welcomed within her person and in relation to her lovers.

Robin had come from a world to which she would return. To keep her (in Robin there was this tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray) Nora knew now that there was no way but death. In death Robin would belong to her. Death went with them, together and alone; and with the torment and catastrophe, thoughts of resurrection, the second duel (Barnes, 63).

Not only is Robin liberated as a purely physical being, but she is also the living essence of death, which is the greatest liberation according to Barnes. The end of the quotation nods to William Carlos Williams's idea of destruction before resurrection, the idea that "destruction and creation/ are simultaneous" (Williams, 213). He advocated for "the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth [...] None to remain [...] Then at last will the world be made anew" (Williams, 179). Williams, as well as Pound, used this concept to describe the goal of the imagist movement— striving for a new way to create images without the act of imitating or re-presenting the object being described. Susan Jones finds remnants of this idea within modern dance of the twentieth century stating, "Dance is simultaneously the sign itself and its production," which takes imagism a step further, allowing something to be in a state of constant change (16). Robin is the epitome of this goal due to her multidimensional nature that can seem as if it fits in one image, yet never truly remains fixed.

Robin can be thought of as an idea or an image, but it is only through her physical form that we can get any details regarding her personhood. The emotions that are attributed to her are typically only projections of the emotions of others, namely Felix, Nora, or Jenny. When talking to the doctor about his plight with Robin, Felix says,

If I should try to put it into words, I mean how I did see her, it would be incomprehensible, for the simple reason that I find that 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 (Barnes, 119) (emphasis added).

By following this line of thought, Barnes is making a statement on the validity of imagism: Why attempt to construct an image through words, if an image is always in a state of fluidity, if it is always changing, never static? This suggests why Barnes may have decided to place

particular emphasis on Robin's movement throughout the novel. Not only are her literal physical movements described with precise detail, but also her tendency to move in and out of spaces, never seeming to land in one particular place or in one particular set of arms. Barnes capitalizes on this idea by constantly comparing Robin to a "somnambule" that is decaying: the living dead. Both of these states seem to capture her two modes of movement—physical, bodily movements and movement between spaces and people.

The invocation of the "nighttime" or the "twilight" allows Robin to inhabit both of these states. Within the space of the nighttime, Robin returns to a more primal or animalistic state—she is often described as beastly. Panayiota Chrysochu characterizes the twilight as "a space of indeterminacy marked by its own liminality and transience" (140). Robin captures this as we have discussed in "the eternal momentary," but also in her tendency to shift from human to beast. Felix refers to Robin's lack of stasis when he describes his inability to picture Robin in her fullest sense. Nighttime is used here to establish Robin's condition of transience as it "is the site of a dialectics between binary opposites, a dialectics which can incorporate two opposing values and blur their distinctive boundaries" (Chrysochu, 139). Through this, Robin is able to be both human and beast, both present and not present, both moving and static.

Robin represented as beast appears subtly throughout the novel, usually accounting for why she acts a certain way or why she cannot be a part of a relationship for long; she must return to her natural, instinctual form—a form that is both reminiscent of the past and perhaps points to a hope for the future. Robin's primal qualities can be attributed to the modernist tendency to idealize or fetishize the past, indicating a modernist primitivism that

neglects to acknowledge the racial and colonial associations of the words “primitive” and “bestial.” Often, Western culture conflates “going primitive” with “getting physical” or returning to a reliance on the body (Targovnick, 228). Further, primitive people and cultures are repeatedly categorized as non-human or animal-like. I think this is the aspect of primitivism that Djuna Barnes was most trying to capture within Robin, as from the moment Felix lays eyes on her she is described as “a woman who is beast turning human.” He continues, “Such a person’s every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience, a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory” (Barnes, 41). Barnes captures the trends of describing the primitive through voyeurism, as Robin rarely speaks and is described entirely through the perception of others. Robin is the modernist ideal of embodying a moment from the past, usually associated with the primitive, returning to her beast form at the end of the novel.

When discussing the primitive, I want to critique modernist primitivism for its fetishizing, voyeuristic, colonial, and reductive tendencies. As Targovnick points out, “the West seems to need the primitive as a precondition and a supplement to its sense of self” (247). A “return to the primitive” is often characterized as a means of reliving, or reclaiming a sense of the past. Words such as “savage,” “uncivilized,” or “bestial” are used when describing non-Western/non-European societies. Robin certainly embodies the past, and as Barnes describes, she “carried the quality of the ‘way back’ as animals do” (Barnes, 44). She is portrayed later in the novel as exhibiting a “sort of primitive innocence” due to her ability to disregard matters of the mind, and return to a reliance on the body; “Robin was outside the ‘human type’— a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin” (Barnes, 155). The novel ends with

Robin being called back into her past, or primary, state by Nora's dog. She "walked the open country [...] pulling at the flowers, speaking in a low voice to the animals. Those that came here, she grasped straining their fur back until their eyes were narrowed and their teeth bare, her own teeth showing as if her hand were upon her own neck" (Barnes, 177). She seems to be frustrated with her human state, performing acts of violence on the animals with an agenda to be like them. Finally, Barnes gives Robin the thing she has been trying to find throughout the course of *Nightwood*: her past, more corporeal self. Robin interacts with Nora's dog in a way that proves her connection to the animal. When seeing Robin,

The dog stood there, rearing back, his forelegs slanting; his paws trembling under the trembling of his rump, his hackle standing; his mouth open, his tongue slung sideways over his sharp bright teeth; whining and waiting. And down [Robin] went, until her head swung against his; on all fours now, dragging her knees [...] Then she began to bark also, crawling after him— barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry then, running with her, head-on with her head as if to circumvent her; soft and slow his feet went padding. He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees (Barnes, 179-180).

The novel ends with this: a direct association of Robin with the beast— leaving the reader left to contemplate Robin's existence in each of her transient states.

I recognize that modernist primitivism is reductive, and Barnes was probably pulling from this same propensity of thought, but I want to bring the focus onto the idea of how one naturally moves, or how one behaves instinctually. Rather than use the term *primitive*, I want to redirect the focus to examine Robin as corporeal in nature— as a person who relies on bodily instinct rather than intellect. This aligns with Martha Graham's own view of dance

and the human body: “The instrument through which the dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived— the human body. It is the instrument by which all the primaries of life are made manifest. It holds in its memory all matters of life and death and love” (Graham, 4). In a way, Graham’s words capture Robin’s essence— legitimizing her malleable nature through her use of her body. Graham recenters Robin as a metonym for memory thanks to her body and her types of movement; in Graham’s ideology, Robin is able to exist as a person of both the past and the present, as a celebration of life and as a symbol of death. I like her use of the word “primaries” which recalls Pound’s theory of vorticism: the idea that each concept should be first presented in its *primary form*. In our *primary form*, we are bodies that move through space and time, bodies that may or not not serve to reproduce memory, bodies that are alive but will inevitably die. Barnes reproduced Pound’s theory in allowing Robin to exist as a physical body that communicates through movement, so much so that she may resemble an animal. As Graham states, “You get to the point where your body is something else and it takes on a world of cultures from the past, an idea that is very hard to express in words;” words are fixed in the moment they are said or printed, but a body and its meaning can change and evolve through movement (Graham, 13).

The idea of being still and in motion at the same time is important to the development of modern dance. Susan Jones describes dance as “the visual embodiment of [an] inward expression of transcendence” (Jones, 3). For Barnes, transcendence means both an escape from the emotional/intellectual realm, and from the living world: transcendence is death. Robin is “born at the point of death” as well as “beyond timely changes, except in the blood that animated her” (62, 105). These qualities manifest in her physical form and the way she

interacts with others. Barnes locates an eroticism of death within Robin's physicality; she posits that a living person who inhabits the world of the dead would resemble a person walking in their sleep. A sleepwalker, or a person who is dead, is no longer fixated on what is happening in the mind—both inhabit purely physical states, uninhibited by the weight of the mind. Barnes describes Robin's movements, but does not allow her to speak: "It was in her walk, in the way she wore her clothes, in her silence, as if speech were heavy and unclarified" (Barnes, 127). Barnes clearly privileges the body, deconstructing the idea that power or wisdom only results from written and spoken words—hinting at the modernist ideal of completely escaping existing words, finding unique forms of description. Barnes, again, reaches further, grasping at the idea that the body can be a site of intellectual escape, while acknowledging that the real form of escape is in death—recalling Eliot's idea of being "both of the body, and bodiless" as death is considered a departure from the body (Jones, 223). Robin's association with death allows her to inhabit this paradox: she relies on her body to communicate, yet is simultaneously independent of her body and its wandering.

Each of Robin's movements, whether it be bodily movement or spatial movement, indicates longing for another world, a longing to be both loved and unloved. It is within her that we find the meeting point of life and death, which is the reason for her ability to ensnare those who love her; she seems to possess the ideal, but it is unclear whether she is happy in her isolation at the end of the novel. Throughout the novel, Robin falls into loving partnerships, but almost immediately feels the need to flee. She escapes at night so that she may embrace all of her dualities: living/dead, asleep/awake, there/not there, heterosexual/homosexual, and beast/human. Barnes seems to be exploring both the benefits

and consequences of this modernist ideal— ultimately leaving us, as readers, to interpret whether it is achievable, or even worth achieving. Robin is no longer dependent upon the world of the day that requires one to live within a binary; The “borderline area of the twilight zone [becomes] the site of a dialectics between binary opposites, a dialectics which can incorporate two opposing values and blur their distinctive boundaries” (Chrysochu, 139). During the day, she cannot assume her true form and “there [is] a withdrawal in her movement and a wish to be gone” (Barnes, 77). This explains why Felix is unable to hold onto Robin’s image, as she is constantly shifting form. It is only at night, when she is separated from her lovers, that she can be everything at once which is why Felix, Jenny, and Nora all have such an intense desire to possess Robin. On the surface, her purely physical form and her lack of speech seem to make her the perfect, passive candidate to possess. Their intense desire turns into a kind of sadistic impulse towards Robin. The Doctor captures the impulse in saying, “We feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers” (41). He almost suggests that she possesses some kind of access to higher knowledge, a knowledge of the past that everyone longs for, yet maybe not everybody should possess. Barnes returns to the notion that this kind of knowledge only comes from the corporeal:

When she touched a thing, her hands seemed to take the place of an eye. [Felix] thought: “She has the touch of the blind who, because they see more with their fingers, forget more in their minds.” Her fingers would go forward, hesitate, tremble, as if they had found a face in the dark. When her hand finally came to rest, the palm closed; it was as if she had stopped a crying mouth[...] The sensuality in her hands frightened him. (46)

Robin's body is able to acquire a knowledge that neither her mind, nor that of Felix, is able to comprehend and that is ultimately frightening. Perhaps this is why the modern and contemporary tendency is to privilege the intellect over the body, as the body provides information that may be horrifying.

It may also be for this reason that corporeal knowledge is so linked to death for Barnes. Robin is affiliated with death and thus, has the knowledge of death— a knowledge that is an innate human fear. Barnes invokes an eroticism in death by linking others' love for and relationship with Robin to an obsession with death. This would explain why her three lovers all want to know her in a profound way, yet are terrified of what she might reveal to them. It is almost as if she holds the knowledge of death along with a deeper knowledge of the past, “drawing attention to the fact that love and death are linked through ‘memory’” (Crysochu, 144). Robin becomes a metonym for memory. To add to the horror, Robin represents a part of the past that is inextricable from her three lovers— she knows death, but she also knows what Felix, Nora, and Jenny have experienced and thus, reminds them of this. Their love for her stems from an intoxicating, yet repulsive attraction to Robin; Nora claims, “Love is death, come upon with passion; I know, that is why love is wisdom. I love her as one condemned to it” (146). This in conjunction with her “quality of the ‘way back’” creates a kind of perfect storm in Robin— she can both remind us of our past, frighten us with knowledge of the future, and warn us of all of this in the present moment. This evokes Martha Graham's theory that

Each of us from our mother and father has received their blood and through their parents and their parents' parents and backward into time. We carry thousands of years of that blood and its memory. How else to explain those instinctive gestures and thoughts that come to us, with little preparation or expectation (Graham, 10).

Regardless of whether the memory is joyful or incites fear, it is communicated best through body language— body language that is coded within us.

Bodies have a particular capacity to articulate emotions and history in a way that is so intensely intimate that it becomes overwhelming, yet inspiring. For example, “Lamentations” by Martha Graham personifies the human emotions of grief and loss, potentially reminding the audience of a past experience with these emotions. Graham believes, “The instrument through which the dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived— the human body. It is the instrument by which all the primaries of life are made manifest. It holds in its memory all matters of life and death and love” (Graham, 4). The single dancer on stage in “Lamentations” cannot escape from the fabric, and never leaves the space of the bench, making the weight of the grief even more tangible. The dance seems to convey similar emotional experiences as each relationship with Robin does in *Nightwood*. Victoria Smith captures this idea when she says,

We are told that Robin's movements remind us of forgotten experience, an insupportable joy, so that she becomes emblematic of a plenitude in the past, a past she returns to us through our own memory and projection. She is lost but simultaneously remembered and therefore desired, an image whose very mutability is dangerous (Smith, 200).

Both the dancer in “Lamentations” and Robin embody a glimpse into the past, and therefore become immortalized in the memory of their audience. The act of reminding through a corporeal form, whether it be dance or in the physical form and movements of another person, makes reality what was previously only a memory.

The recollection of or reckoning with the past through our bodies is an objective often cited by modern dance choreographers. Dance of the twentieth century was developed in order to “use the articulations of the body to explore the motions of the mind”– a task I believe is similar to that of Barnes (Mazo, 167). As seen in “Lamentations,” emotions, fears, reservations, and joys are often more freely portrayed through the body, specifically through dance, as meaning or intention can be easily misunderstand when using words. The caveat, however, is that there is not one meaning to express, but rather a multitude of meanings that are open for the audience to connect with. Robin is an enigma; the meanings behind her movements and the reasons for her transient nature are almost as impenetrably dynamic as Barnes’s prose. Dance and literature in the “twentieth century witnessed the breakdown of distinctions that a tradition of scientific thought had established: between human and animal (via language), between organism (human or animal) and machine, and between physical and metaphysical” (Mccaren, 194). Now, neither discipline has to respect the rigid binaries of the past. As a result, Barnes and modern dance choreographers work together to explore the different ways in which the body communicates, whether consciously or unconsciously, yet also maintains a distance from the observer in its tendency to resist comprehension.

Robin’s ability to provide intimacy while maintaining some distance invokes modern dance. She manages to have intimate, maybe even loving, relationships with Felix, Jenny, and Nora– compelling them to fall deeply in love with her. However, once the relationship becomes too close, Robin flees; she is never really able to feel completely present due to her dual natures. As the doctor discloses, “all her life she has been subject to the feeling of ‘removal’” (Barnes, 105). However, her silence throughout the novel also presents Robin as

seemingly passive, and in turn each of her partners, as well as the readers, “[seek] to interpret the image she presents in order to control her” (Glavey, 757). Modern dance’s abstraction of traditional form and narrative also allows the audience to indulge in its own interpretation—dance is intimate in the subject or emotions that are expressed; however, these things are not explicit due to the abstract nature of modern dance. As Mallarmé put it, dancers embody “a lack of completion which entice[s] the spectator to strive for meaning” (Jones, 16). In this way, both Robin and modern dance possess a quality of mystery that draws the spectator in—an intimacy that is momentarily attainable, but not fully comprehensible. Robin is the manifestation of “death is intimacy walking backward” and her lovers “are crazed with grief when she, who once permitted [them], leaves to [them] the only recollection” (Barnes, 137). She only lets her lovers in part of the way, giving them a glimpse of what might be, then pulls it away before they are able to fully understand.

Robin’s physicality lends itself to being a site for others to project their own needs and desires of both the present and the past. Each of Robin’s lovers—Felix, Nora, and Jenny—serves a specific purpose for Robin, yet each needs her for different reasons. They serve to validate Robin’s existence, reminding us that she is still present in the novel even if she only exists in the “eternal momentary” or at night, or even just as a memory. However, Robin serves each of them as a reminder of the past, of what could have been. She reenacts the abandonment they experienced from something or someone in the past;

Each seeks the time before abandonment, but there is no such time—ironically, the sense of time before subsists only in the encoded repetition of the abandonment: the curiously immobile descent. This descent cites the moment when unity with the beloved, first apprehended as lost, seemed almost unattainable (Dustin, 111).

This idea of perpetual abandonment also explains the reason why Robin cannot remain in any relationship. She exists as a body that is transient, encapsulating the “mutability of the night” within her existence (Dustin, 117). Therefore, perhaps it is not Robin with whom these characters are so consumed, but rather what she represents and what she can become due to her lack of a fixed identity.

Robin’s unstable identity allows her to assume many different positions— spatially, temporally, physically, and emotionally. Dustin claims that one reason for Robin’s mutability is her gender fluidity, similar to that of the doctor. However, Robin is set apart by the fact that the word “invert” is only utilized in reference to her. The doctor ascribes meaning and significance to the word *invert* in an attempt to understand Robin’s physical existence in the world, as well as her existence within the lives of her lovers. The doctor references the reasons for “our” intense desire for someone like Robin and her ability to re-produce the past when he states,

They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting; it was inevitable that we should come upon them, for our miscalculated longing has created them. They are our answer to what our grandmothers were told love was, and what it never came to be; they, the living lie of our centuries (Barnes, 145).

He even goes as far as to say that Robin, and people like Robin, are “the sweetest lie of all,” which epitomizes Robin’s influence in all three of her lovers’ lives (Barnes, 145). Each of the three lovers latches onto her in hopes of finding something that abandoned them or that they might have lost— maybe even referring to a lost form of themselves: “[her] very lack of identity makes [her] ourselves” (Barnes, 94). While this is how Barnes describes Robin, I want to qualify that Robin’s refusal or inability to conform to one gender, or one space, or

one time of day does not in fact mean a lack of identity, but rather a new kind of agency; Robin possesses agency in a way that was not accepted nor recognized during Barnes's time. I think that, in a way, Barnes was attempting to explore Robin's multi-dimensionality by giving her a new form of agency— one that no one could really understand or explain, although they tried. This need to understand, or to categorize Robin, may explain why Felix, Nora, and Jenny could not seem to give up on their own relationships with Robin; they could not stand the idea of never being able to fully comprehend her, and thus tried to “write” her how each of them needed her to be.

### *Felix Volkbein*

Felix, the Baron, is the first lover that is introduced in *Nightwood*. The novel opens with a brief family history, explaining how the Baron came to be— namely, after the death of his mother, Hedvig. Barnes establishes the centrality of the human body and its features in this first chapter describing Felix in relation to his mother: “One feature alone spoke of Hedvig, the mouth, which though sensuous from lack of desire as hers had been from denial, pressed too intimately close to the bony structure of the teeth” (Barnes, 11). Hedvig died seven days after giving birth, while Felix's father had died six months previously— leaving Felix alone with the pressures of the barony. Because of this, Felix seeks some kind of reconciliation with his parentless childhood, perhaps seeking a lost love that he was never able to experience; he finds this in Robin. Upon first seeing her in the hostel bedroom, Felix is transfixed because “the woman who presents herself to the spectator as a ‘picture’ forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger [...] such a person's every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience” (Barnes, 41). The original

image of Robin lying prostrate in bed, in “arrested step,” places Robin in the position of an object— something Felix, as well as the reader, can project his own desires onto (Barnes, 38). Moreover, her voice is “enchanted with the gift of postponed abandon,” although we never actually get to hear her speak in this scene. It is only through this comment from Felix that we get any sense of Robin’s voice and what she might say. Thus, it is already established through this initial interaction that Felix assumes his right to construct Robin into something he has always desired: an object to love and one that can love him back.

Robin marries Felix, becoming a Baronin, and they produce a sickly child: Guido. Soon after, Felix comes home to find Robin “standing in the centre of the floor holding the child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down, but she brought it down gently” (Barnes, 52). The child itself is sickly, described as “an addict to death,” so it appears that he is in fact a shadow of Robin— providing Felix with a surrogate Robin for when she inevitably leaves him. (Barnes, 115). She could not stay with Felix any longer as the child has the potential to handcuff her to this married life, so she “took to wander again,” returning to her natural habitat of the nighttime (Barnes, 52). It was Felix’s idea to have the child, to create a family that he never had and Robin’s silence, and lack of perceived agency, prompted him to believe she lacked a real identity, as if she were a two-dimensional object, and thus would agree to his plan. To Felix, Robin becomes a convoluted version of his past, “preserved because [he] ha[s] it only from the memory of one single woman [...] therefore it is clear, single, unalterable” (Barnes, 119). For him, Robin assumes the form of his past, as an “odour of memory,” allowing him to displace the love of his parents onto Robin and their child (Barnes, 126). As a result, he devotes the rest of his life to the child. It is this “dream of a

transcendent present” that Felix latches onto, but ultimately, “the eternity promised by such an image cannot save anyone” (Glavey, 757). Essentially, the more one tries to hold onto Robin, the more she takes to wandering away.

*Nora Flood*

Upon leaving Felix, Robin wanders into the arms of Nora Flood: an American, introduced in the first chapter during Felix’s first encounter with the doctor. However, it is not until the third chapter, “Night Watch,” that we really understand who Nora is.

There is a gap in “world pain” through which the singular falls continually and forever; a body falling in observable space, deprived of the privacy of disappearance; as if privacy, moving relentlessly away, by the very sustaining power of its withdrawal kept the body moving downward, but in one place, and perpetually before the eye. Such a singular was Nora. There was some derangement in her equilibrium that kept her immune from her own descent (Barnes, 56).

Nora, then, is established as one who needs something or someone else to cling onto for stability, some other force to bring her happiness as she cannot control her own. She moves through life behind a glass wall, so to speak. Even her eyes contain “that mirrorless look of polished metals which report not so much the object as the movement of the object” (Barnes, 57). It is exactly here that we elucidate Nora’s dependence on Robin: Robin is pure movement, pure physicality due to her “bestial” qualities, thus Nora feels she can understand Robin and maybe hold onto her in a way she has not been able to with other people—recalling the thought tendencies that coincide with primitivism. Their relationship is purely transactional. As Allen puts it, “one leads, one follows, one looks and one is looked at” (184). From their first encounter at the circus, Nora feels a passionate pull towards Robin as she watches a lioness stare into Robin’s eyes.

Then as one powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite the girl, [the lioness] turned her furious great heat with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars, and as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface (Barnes, 60).

Nora immediately becomes emotional with Robin by her side. Barnes describes the effect as “two spirits [that] were working in [Nora], love and anonymity” (Barnes, 60). However, she clarifies that these spirits are “so ‘haunted’ of each other that separation was impossible” (Barnes, 60). Nora is hooked. Throughout the novel, the interactions between Nora and Robin resemble a game of tag; Nora tries to catch a person/creature that barely exists and, as a result, “in her zeal to protect, she becomes to Robin both accusatory ideal and invasive savior” (Allen, 194).

Eventually, Robin’s longing to keep moving and be alone takes over again and she leaves Nora at home to mourn. Robin comes back a couple times initially, but Nora feels her pulling away and, “unconsciously at first, she went about disturbing nothing; then she became aware that her soft and careful movements were the outcome of an unreasoning fear— if she disarranged anything Robin might become confused— might lose the scent of home,” which again alludes to the animalistic aspects of modernist primitivism (Barnes, 61). A home was the one thing that Robin had ever expressed to Nora that she needed: “she kept repeating in one way or another her wish for a home, as if she were afraid she’d be lost again” (Barnes, 60). However, we can note that it is still only through Nora’s perspective that we hear this need for a home. As readers, we know that Robin cannot stay in one place too long, let alone make a home with someone and yet, as a wanderer, Robin needs the validation that she is still a concrete being— that she is still someone that can be loved and desired. On the other

hand, Nora needs a person to need her, otherwise she is empty and “disengaged” (Barnes, 58). Perhaps this is a symptom of displacement from her American home, or the loss of her family, namely her grandmother.

Robin’s departure from Nora triggers a new behavior that is meant to combat the feelings of abandonment and loss that weigh on Nora: Nora attempts to *become* Robin, in any way she can. She feels she has lost any sense of who Robin is and that the only time she feels close to her again is in sleep, referencing Robin’s true nature: “I can only find her again in my sleep or in her death; in both she has forgotten me” (137). Here, it is clear that Nora misses the depth of Robin’s nature— she is somehow aware of the somnambulant/ half-dead qualities that shape Robin, but refuses to acknowledge their influence in the way Robin navigates space, time, and relationships. Even so, Nora recognizes the liberation of the night and thus, follows Robin’s nighttime pathways in hopes of “becoming” her or at least getting closer to understanding how she functions. She tells the doctor, “I haunted the cafes where Robin had lived her nightlife; I drank with the men, I danced with the women, but all I knew was that others had slept with my lover” (166). The idea of becoming Robin follows the same vein as Felix’s assumption that he can “make” Robin into what he needs her to be. Each of them “is captivated by Robin's silence and passivity, and each seeks to interpret the image she presents in order to control her”— they both attempt to appropriate her, taking from her what each of them need. However, Robin is far from a passive being; “Robin refuses to participate in the narratives these other characters— not to mention readers— devise for her” (Glavey, 757). She does this by maintaining her ephemerality, her tendency to drift in and out of spaces and relationships. In a way, she subverts the traditional understanding of agency by

providing a “screen” for others to interpret, yet her own motivations and intentions remain separate from her relationships with these people.

The end of *Nightwood* sheds light on Nora and Robin’s complicated relationship. We are aware that Robin and the doctor are only their true, non-binary, homosexual selves at night and that Robin’s proximity to death throughout the novel is communicated through her movements and her corpse-like body, but Nora only truly acknowledges this at the end of the novel. Nora interprets Robin’s corpse as a death sentence– a kind of love that is inevitable and inescapable in the same way as death: “Love is death, come upon with passion; I know, that is why love is wisdom. I love her as one condemned to it” (Barnes, 146). From the moment of passion at the circus until this final moment in the chapel, Nora seeks reconciliation for her past of abandonment– placing the power in Robin’s hands as she controls whether Nora ends up left alone again at the end. When Robin re-assumes her final form as “beast,” Nora is confronted with the fact that Robin is in fact “a fixed dismay.”

At that moment I stood in the centre of eroticism and death, death that makes the dead smaller, as a lover we are beginning to forget dwindles and wastes; for love and life are a bulk of which the body and heart can be drained, and I knew in that bed Robin should have put me down (Barnes, 167).

This final acknowledgement is the only kind of resolution the novel provides. Nora seems to finally understand that Robin is not one that can be possessed (something Felix never truly understood) and that she will always find a way to return to her natural state of being at night: “[Nora] knew that Robin was singing of a life that she herself had no part in” (Barnes, 63). The “rationality” of their relationship has no hold on the present reality due to Robin’s purely physical and primal nature.

### *Jenny Petherbridge*

Robin's relationship with Jenny Petherbridge develops out of her need to flee Nora; however, Jenny seems to have two aspects that none of Robin's other lovers have: an essence of death and an attention to movement.

She seemed to be steaming in the vapours of someone else about to die [...] But put out a hand to touch her and her head moved perceptibly with the broken arc of two instincts, recoil and advance, so that the head rocked timidly and aggressively at the same moment, giving her a slightly shuddering and expectant rhythm (Barnes, 72).

Jenny is significantly older than the other lovers and has experienced life in a way that attracts Robin; Jenny is not fixed on the idea of a "forever" love. She is "a middle-aged woman who had been married four times" and "each husband had wasted away and died" (Barnes, 71). In addition, she does not seem to lead her own life, as almost everything she owns belongs to someone else— including Robin— which is indicated in the chapter title, "The Squatter." Even the "words that fell from her mouth seemed to have been lent to her" (Barnes, 73). Due to this lack of self-ownership, Jenny searches for other things and people to "own," for anything to grasp onto that might validate her own existence; both Robin and Jenny strive for some sense of being by looking outward. However, Robin contains a greater sense of herself than Jenny. Robin initiates each of the three relationships, and in turn has the most visible power, inciting the others to follow her lead— both consciously and unconsciously. The main difference in Robin's relationship with Jenny is that the two need the same things and exist in similar spaces in the novel: they are both always looking for love, they exhibit qualities of death, they can morph between states (or at least attempt to), and neither of them is capable of staying in one situation for too long. This mutual and

comparable need for each other is what makes their relationship so volatile in the end— they are much too similar to be able to maintain a long-term love in the context of *Nightwood*.

When examining Jenny and Robin together, it becomes clear that they both need each other and are repulsed by each other. Jenny assumes the role of lover and benefactress, or mother, to Robin which complicates their relationship in the end. On the surface, the two women balance each other:

They presented two halves of a movement that had, as in sculpture, the beauty and the absurdity of a desire that is in flower but that can have no burgeoning, unable to execute its destiny; a movement that can divulge neither caution nor daring, for the fundamental condition for completion was in neither of them [...] eternally angry, eternally separated, in a cataleptic frozen gesture of abandon (Barnes, 76).

In the case of Jenny, Robin was not only a metonym for the past, but also a constant reminder of her own self-abandonment, or rather lack of self. Robin reminded Jenny of her inherent position as the subordinate and as one who had lost everything that she had ever had, including herself. The difference between Robin and Jenny lies in the fact that Robin is content with her state of transience and her lack of stability, while Jenny craves control: “she wanted to be powerful enough to dare the world— and knowing that she was not, the knowledge added to that already great burden of trembling timidity and fury” (Barnes, 76).

The climax moment of their relationship takes place in a carriage that Jenny called in order to get air from all of the people arriving at her house. This is one of the few, if not the only time we get to hear Robin speak and it is in reference to Jenny’s state. She says, “Now she is in panic, and we will have to do something,” which immediately causes “a withdrawal in [Robin’s] movement and a wish to be gone” (Barnes, 77). Robin tries to enter a different carriage than the one Jenny has already taken her seat in, which infuriates Jenny. She calls

Robin to her own carriage and begins to tell a story of her past— trying to imprint her past onto Robin— which Robin actively does not listen to, only paying attention to the young girl, Sylvia, seated next to her. Jenny weeps and lashes out verbally, to which Robin replies “Shut up,” prompting Jenny to strike Robin in front of everyone in the carriage (Barnes, 82).

It is in this moment of violence that we are brought back into Robin’s physicality. She is silenced once again, and “as Jenny struck repeatedly Robin began to go forward as if brought to the movement by the very blows themselves, as if she had no will, sinking down in the small carriage, her knees on the floor, her head forward as her arm moved upward in a gesture of defense” (Barnes, 83). The reminder of the possibility of abandonment proves too much for Jenny to handle; she realizes that she has never really “owned” Robin and thus, she never really had any power in relation to Robin. The violence in this scene also contributes to a reading of Robin as “a fetish object to reinforce [her lovers’] melancholic disavowal of lost love” (Dustin, 121) . The caveat with Jenny, however, is that Jenny understands Robin’s nature in a way that neither Felix nor Nora could and so Robin decides to move with Jenny to America— a move that is all too temporary, disintegrating at the bark of Nora’s dog.

In any case, Robin ends the novel alone, in her primary state. Each of her lovers needs her for different reasons— to feel power, to fill a lost love, to feel needed, to feel desired, to not be alone— but none of them understand Robin’s innate need to be independent. Robin necessitates liberation, a liberation desired by the twentieth century modernists and the modern dancers that exists outside of any binary, blurs the lines of binaries, and creates a new mode of communication altogether. Pound, Eliot, and Williams imagined this through the obstruction of the way we imagine reality, creating a “separate existence” (Williams,

2014). The modern dance pioneers captured the idea of a “separate existence” as dance insists on a freedom of expression that was previously unavailable in the rigidity of ballet; it rejects understanding and shifts into the abstract, exploring space and time through corporeal paradoxes: modern dance “depend[s] on the confrontation of opposites, such as fall and recovery or contraction and release” (Mazo, 14). Further, “modern dance continues to swing in the arc between introspection and didacticism, between cool and hot, between emotion filtered through the mind, and intellect communicated through emotion” (Mazo, 152). Simply put, modern dance is an attempt to simultaneously reckon with and fight against everything that existed before, using the body as the conduit in this process.

## Concluding Remarks

When I began this work of analyzing the relationship between modern dance and modernist literature, I could not have predicted every avenue that it would lead me down or even where I would end up. The major connection between the two is their contentment in the uncomfortable, whether that means their tendency towards the abstract, or their insistence that readers and spectators accept the notion that two seemingly contradictory elements exist at once. The very task of the modernist thinkers to eliminate the need for language is paradoxical in that writers such as Williams, Eliot, and Pound rely on language to communicate. Barnes is able to capture this aesthetic in Robin, a character who is solely described through torrents of verbiage by both her lovers and the particularly garrulous doctor, and yet who herself remains silent. It is only at the climax of the novel, after the third lover tries to manipulate her once again, that Robin finally says “Shut up,” silencing the ranting, silencing the others that feel they have power over her; Robin maintains her agency by remaining an enigma. Perhaps my attempt to label Robin as a sex worker was misguided at the time, but it led me to the idea that I must accept abstraction without assuming or creating labels. She affirms the modernist ideal by stating, *language cannot contain me*, nodding to both the escape from language and the return to a more primal state. Her words also affirm the modernist belief that self-consciousness and the tendency to overthink are the disease of the modern human; one cannot make sense of everything— sometimes two seemingly incongruous things exist at once; sometimes the natural body, in its apparent incoherence, is the only verifiable source of information.

It is not surprising that Eliot agreed to write the “Introduction” to *Nightwood* as he subscribed to a similar series of contradictions and abstractions. The second movement of T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” captures the idea of not being able to define, of residing in a series of paradoxes. He validates Graham for being both still and in motion as a dancer; he joins Barnes in questioning the need for and the authority of temporality, and he even references the “compulsion” of the flesh.

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for at the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only dance.  
I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say *where*.  
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,  
*Erhebung* without motion, concentration  
Without elimination, both a new world  
And the old made explicit (Eliot, 5)

Barnes embraces the same paradoxes in *Nightwood*, letting the tension remain as it is. We do not get a conclusion or even a real resolution to the story as Robin is never “figured out.” Graham speaks about the tension between the contraction and the release that is the very catalyst for her movement. The physical tension of the body in conjunction with the tension of the “inner landscape” of each human being reveals just how complex and incomprehensible humans can be.

*Nightwood*, though not explicitly connected to modern dance, provides a useful lens to begin the discussion on the intersections of dance and literature in the twentieth century as it calls upon both the objectives of the modernist poets and writers, as well as the intentions of modern dance choreographers. Its abstraction and complexity leave us asking even more questions than we began with— questions about the novel itself and the general connection between dance and literature. Is Robin’s silence coupled with her reliance on the body Barnes’s version of the ideal, or is Robin just one theory or form of the ideal? In the same vein, is modern dance a true escape from language or is my very act of trying to categorize it an acknowledgement of human reliance on language?

I like to think that my existence as a dancer and a writer affirms the continuity of the dance/literature connection. The notion of dance and writing being privy to a variety of interpretations maintains the connection, even if every other link is destroyed— but then again, destruction precipitates creation. The beauty lies in the abstract, it lies in the feeling of discomfort and unknowing. *Nightwood* cannot be understood in its totality and neither can the human body and its movements. I ask both you and me to resist the inclination towards what is comfortable and to accept mystery, to accept the idea that sometimes in order to understand we must allow ourselves to remain open to interpretation. Rather than looking for an explanation, we should be striving to find *meaning*— a word that implies the malleability and multidimensionality of art. Each time we engage with a piece of art, the significance changes; *meaning* is not static and comes from the unconscious. *The night is not premeditated.*

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