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À Peindre Avec Des Mots (To Paint With Words)

There is a tradition of writers also being visual artists. Many writers including Sylvia Plath, William S. Burroughs, Elizabeth Bishop and Khalil Gibran developed their visual artistic skills as they developed their literary skills (Friedman, Wronoski). Writers like them find an overlap between the visual and literary mediums. Words become as malleable as paint or charcoal. These writers discover a way to paint with words, i.e. compose their words to create a certain image without concern for formal structure and/or if the reader will have difficulty understanding the work. Through this technique, these writers/artists not only deconstruct the idea of art, but they also deconstruct the concepts of seeing and communication, thus forcing the reader/viewer to rethink traditional definitions of art and experience.

Singer/songwriter Alanis Morissette summarized the idea in an interview when she said for her song *Head Over Feet* she was “just using the words like paint and very conversational and not precious and not adhering to any structure or craft as such” (Jagged Little Pill (Spotify Landmark Edition)). In *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes uses her words in a similar way. She uses words as a medium that can be juxtaposed on paper (just like paint on canvas) to paint a picture. The picture that Barnes paints in Nightwood is of the *Night People* or people who “turn the day into night” (Barnes 94). Those people are Robin, Mathew, Nora, Felix and Jenny. These characters were radically different from those in conventional novels and therefore required a radically different method from conventional writing styles to portray them.

Joseph Frank accurately describes the complexity of *Nightwood* when he writes “Miss Barnes abandons any pretensions to...verisimilitude, just as modern painters have abandoned any attempt at naturalistic representation; and the result is a world as strange to the reader, at first sight, as the world of Cubism was to its first spectator” (Singer 66). Reading *Nightwood* for the first time is similar to seeing Pablo Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’ Avignon*, his earliest attempt at Cubism,for the first time. Even Picasso’s friend and collaborator, Georges Braque, was horrified when he first saw the painting. Part of the reason why people were shocked when they saw the painting was that it was a radically different way of portraying the world compared to the traditional and realistic classical style that dominated painting for so long. The Cubists were using their visual art to find a new way to see the world. These artists had to find new ways of seeing the world because the old ways were sinking quickly into a sea of new theories. Even things as seemingly certain as space and time was called into question. When Albert Einstein published his theory of general relativity in 1915, in which he said that space and time were intertwined into one invisible fabric that was malleable, he was not only reversing scientific theories that could be traced all the way back to Isaac Newton, but he was also providing the public an opportunity to consider what other things they should look at differently.

In *Nightwood*, Barnes applies the idea of seeing differently to writing. Time, space, history and national identity are fluid in the story. Characters move often and freely between countries. They weave sentences in Spanish, French, German and Italian into their conversations. How history is constructed is talked about often in the novel, such as when Dr. O’Connor says:

think of the stories that do not amount to much...that are forgotten in spite of all man remembers...merely because they befell him without distinction of office or title- that’s what we call legend and it’s the best a poor man may do with his fate. we call history, the best the high and mighty do with theirs. Legend is unexpurgated, but history, because of it’s actors, is deflowered (Barnes 15).

For the Doctor, history and memory, much like time and space for Einstein, is malleable. Even today, many people assume that these things are fixed. Time is seen as linear with a clear past, present and future. Barnes, however, challenges that fixedness with what one writer calls “a general tropological sensibility: the novel functions through a series of swerves away from plot, convention, received meanings” (Smith 195).

**The Night and Night People**

Many of those swerves are delivered by the Doctor, Matthew. They are people that, in the words of the Doctor, “turn the day into night” (Barnes 94). At times, Matthew talks so much that he seems to drown the listener in words. Somewhere in the deluge, however, are points of pure genius. He says something that is profound and those profound statements keep the reader from drowning in the more elusive parts of the novel.

Matthew describes what the night is and why the *Night People* are important. He says they are,

the young, the drug addict, the profligate, the drunken and that most miserable, the lover...these can never again live the life of day. When one meets them at high noon they give off, as if it were a protective emanation, something dark and muted...it is as if they were being tried by the continual blows of an unseen adversary (Barnes 94).

The Doctor does not think that the night just naturally happens or that the setting of the sun is what causes it. He thinks that certain people create night. Most of the people that he mentions- the drug addict, profligate, and drunken- are thought of in a negative way by more conservative people, who are the opposites of the people who turn the day into night. The more conservative people can be seen as the ones who turn the night into day.

If people are what make night and day, then these two things are more than just when the sun goes down and when the sun comes up. There is a difference between the physical night and day and the metaphoric one. People create a metaphoric night and day- two very different states of mind. The people who create the night are outsiders, radicals. The night is freer, more experimental, more creative than the day. The *Night People* are guardians of this space.

He asks Nora, “Have you ever thought of the night?” (Barnes 80) and then he talks about how different night is from day. In fact, the night is “his favourite topic, and one which he talked on whenever he had the chance” (Barnes 80).

He says, “Every day is thought upon and calculated, but the night is not premeditated” (Barnes 80). Most businesses are open only during the day, like banks and schools. People plan their schedules during the day- work, meetings or practice- then go home to rest during the night. There are the expressions “busy days” and “wild nights”. The days are packed with things to do. The nights are left to chance. Nora later says “now I see that the night does something to a person’s identity, even when asleep” (Barnes 81). People relax at night. Many clubs- where people can dance, relax, party and socialize- only open at night. And then there is what happens when people sleep, when subconscious thoughts can appear in dreams. Issues that a person may not even know they are thinking about can appear symbolically in their dream. When people dream, anything that they may be holding back can move through their mind freely, things that they may not be able to think about or say during the day.

Doctor O’Connor also says:

Take history at night...was it at night that Sodom became Gomorrah...All through the night Rome went burning. Put that in the noontide and it loses some of its age-old significance, does it not? Why? Because it has existed to the eye of the mind all these years against a black sky (Barnes 86).

If the reader imagines Rome burning in the day, the flames would not be as bright as during the night. The contrast between a bright, glowing light source against dense, dark background adds drama to any visual scene. The strong chiaroscuro of the images of Rome burning at night is part of what makes them so memorable.

**Painting With Words**

The technique of painting with words has been used by many writers who draw or paint as well. Sylvia Plath, for example, used the technique in her book *The Bell Jar.* She wrote in one paragraph:

Cursing whatever friend, relative or stranger had sniffed out my homecoming, I padded barefoot downstairs. The black instrument on the hall table trilled its hysterical note over and over like a nervous bird.

I picked up the receiver.

This is an unusual way of saying the phone was ringing. She abstracted the phone by calling it a “black instrument” instead of a telephone. A black instrument is nonspecific- it could be anything. The instrument is alive and sinister- it “trilled” an “hysterical” sound repeatedly. Only in the last sentence does Plath tell the reader that the instrument is a phone. This abstract way of describing the phone ringing does more than just tell what is happening, it creates an atmosphere. It is an uneasy, ominous atmosphere.

Barnes also creates atmospheres and moods in *Nightwood*. When describing Nora’s house, Barnes writes:

The strangest “salon” in America was Nora’s. Her house was couched in the centre of a mass of tangled grass and weeds...it had its own burial ground, and a decaying chapel in which stood in tens and tens mouldering psalm books, laid down in a flurry of forgiveness and absolution. It was the “paupers” salon for poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love; for Catholics, Protestants, Brahmins, dabblers in black magic and medicine (Barnes 50).

Barnes put the word salon in quotation marks- telling the reader that Nora’s house is similar to but not exactly like the traditional French salons of the past, where members of the upper class met to discus art, science and politics. Instead of having members of the upper class, this salon was for people that many considered to be paupers, for radical people, for the *Night People*. Barnes turns Nora’s house into an instrument, like Plath did with the telephone. The house is “couched” in the middle of the plants, ready to be used.

Barnes later introduces Nora by saying:

Of all that ranting, roaring crew, she alone stood out. The equilibrium of her nature, savaged and refined, gave her bridled skull a look of compassion...though her skin was the skin of a child, there could be seen coming, early in her life, the design that was to be the weather-beaten grain of her face, that wood in the work, the tree coming forward in her, an undocumented record of time (Barnes 50).

This passage is a multilayered painting of Nora’s character. The references to wood, trees and time invoke the science of dendrochronology- the study and dating of rings in trees (University of Arizona). Scientists use tree rings “to put the present in proper historical context, to better understand current environmental processes and conditions [and] to improve understanding of possible future environmental issues” (University of Arizona). Tree rings are also used to date wooden artifacts and track natural events that happened both before and after the invention of writing and recorded history. They are an unofficial and undocumented record of time.

Nora has this unofficial record, this wood that links all parts of time together, within her. All of the *Night People* have a history that is counter to what is recognized as official history- a history of the radicals who question tradition. Therefore “nightwood” is the wood inside of the night people, the alternative history to the one used in dominant discourse.

**The Last Paragraph**

The last paragraph of *Nightwood* is the best example in the book of Barnes painting with words. It is a whirlwind of chaos. Yet in this chaos, Barnes crystallizes the deconstructionist theme that is woven through the entire novel. Barnes paints what Jacques Derrida called the *absolute break* in this paragraph. According to Derrida:

the paradox is that the instituting moment in an institution is violent in a way, violent because it has no guarantee. Although it allows the premise of the past, it starts something absolutely new, and this newness...is a risk...and it is violent because it is guaranteed by no previous rules. So at the same time you have to follow the rule and to invent a new rule...we have to invent the rules... There is no responsibility, no decision, without this inauguration, this absolute break. That is what deconstruction is made of: not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break (Caputo 6).

Barnes maintains the tension that Derrida speaks of (between memory, identity, history, legend, identifying with the past, editing the past) throughout the novel. However, she creates the absolute break in the last paragraph. Robin and Nora’s dog bark, run and cry together until they are drain all of their energy out of their bodies. They move in unison, untamed in an explosion of emotion. There is both the violence of the barking and crying and the violence of the uncertainty of what is happening. The human and the dog are not shown as separate species, but as connected living organisms that are communicating in a language that is very different from the inherent languages of their individual species. Traditional ideas of communication and language are broken down and rearranged in this paragraph. How are Robin and Nora’s dog able to understand and act as one when the dog can’t speak human words and Robin can’t speak “dog”? They have to be speaking in a language that is new, possibly one that only the two of them can understand. Robin is the most enigmatic of the *night people*, the one who travels most freely. Therefore, it is fitting that Barnes uses her character in the final break from conventional artistic form.

The last paragraph of *Nightwood* is a fitting last brushstroke to Barnes’ literary painting. As with a painting, there is no end to this novel, only a final stroke. The technique of painting with words can be disorienting to readers, but this is because Barnes uses a radically new method to open a dialogue with tradition. Painting with words helps further the intent of deconstruction, which is:

to show that things- texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs and practices of whatever size and sort you need- do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always to come (Caputo 31).

How far this technique can break through the boundaries of visual art, writing, seeing and communication is still unknown. However, if the idea of painting with words continues to evolve, the most radical work has yet to come.

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