

THE QUEST FOR HOME IN *NIGHTWOOD*

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A strong and almost omnipresent sense of exile is a defining feature of Djuna Barnes' novel, *Nightwood*, as it is in all of her work. In this paper, I will look at the relationship between home and exile in this novel. My thesis is that *Nightwood* can be read as a quest novel in which the search for "home" constitutes an impossible quest since "home," though always *present* in the *text*, is never located in the *geographical* or *temporal* present of the text. We can know it only from the contrastive point of view of exile. I will deal with how exile functions geographically and how it functions temporally.

But first, some background on Barnes.

Though Djuna Barnes is not well known now, she was one of the most prominent writers of the nineteen twenties and a member of the group of writers Gertrude Stein called The Lost Generation. This is the generation of American writers which achieved fame in the years after World War One and included Hemingway and Fitzgerald among others. In *Exile's Return*, Malcolm Cowley's book about this group Cowley typifies the writers of this generation as moving from the small towns of America to the cities, particularly to New York, then leaving in a mass exodus for Europe in the early twenties, particularly for Paris. This kind of voluntary exile from the country of origin typically happens when a writer feels he needs to distance himself from his home in order to write. For many Lost Generation writers, including Barnes, it was, in fact, the perspective of distance and loss which enabled them to define and write about home.

Barnes was not only a member of the Lost Generation but also a high Modernist in the sense in which David Perkins uses the term. The high Modernist mode, as Perkins defines it, was dominant from the early 1920's to the 1950's and one of its characteristics was that it was "more intense—more packed, dense, polysemous" (*A History of Modern Poetry*, 450) than what preceded it. This is a good description of

Barnes' dense metaphoric style, a style often compared to James Joyce's.

Exile has been frequently associated not only with Lost Generation writers but also with Modernist aesthetics in general. As Raymond Williams writes, the immigration of artists from many countries to the metropolises had much to do with the development of a Modernist aesthetic:

It cannot be too often emphasized how many of the major innovators were...immigrants. At the level of theme, this underlies, in an obvious way, the elements of strangeness and distance, indeed of alienation, which so regularly form part of the repertory. But the decisive aesthetic effect is at a deeper level. Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or native visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices. (*Unreal City*, 21)

In Barnes' case, her self-imposed exile in Paris was clearly positive and important for her emergence as one of the most important and influential writers of her time. The fact that exile in Paris acted as a catalyst for her creativity is indicated by her literary productivity there. Before going to Paris in nineteen twenty, the only work of Barnes which had been published was her journalism and one short pamphlet, *The Book of Repulsive Women*, consisting of eight poems and five drawings. According to Andrew Field, this book was "scarcely noticed" (14). The majority of Barnes' published literary work was written in Paris during the twenties. The central setting of her most successful text, *Nightwood*, is also Paris. And finally, when she was forced to leave Paris in World War II, she wrote that she regretted having to return to America and, in fact, published comparatively little afterward.

Paris was not only the place which enabled Barnes to write successfully. It also consolidated her fame and influence on other writers of her generation. Barnes has been called "the most famous unknown writer of this century." This is because she has had a strong influence on many writers, though she has never been widely read by the public. Other writers of her generation have cited her enormous importance for them, an importance which began to take shape in the twenties, first in New York and then in Paris. Joyce admired her. T.S. Eliot, in his 1937 introduction to *Nightwood*, praises "the great achievement of a style, the beauty of phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterization, and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan Tragedy." In *Light and Dark*, Dylan Thomas calls

Nightwood “one of the three great prose books written by a woman.” Finally, Lawrence Durrell writes in 1972, “One is glad to be living in the same epoch as Djuna Barnes.” For Barnes, as for the other writers of her generation, the distance that exile in Paris brought was what enabled her to become the writer she became.

As with other American writers, in Barnes the period of voluntary exile in Paris is also important in triggering what we might call writing about home, particularly in *Nightwood*.

Geography

Nightwood raises questions about what constitutes a geographical “home” and suggests that one’s nationality does not necessarily imply the sense of belonging to the geographical or historical niche associated with that nationality. Barnes shows this, first, by defining how her two main characters are American and, then, by showing how, at the same time, they are excluded from a sense of community based on nationality.

In her descriptions of both Nora and Robin, Barnes shows that they are American in quite different ways.

In Robin’s case, America connotes newness, the lack of historicity. It is the place of new possibilities which Robin’s European husband envisions when he says, “With an American anything can be done” (39). Robin’s American nature here connotes the lack of connection to any defining history, tradition, or community.

In contrast, Nora embodies a certain stoicism, also American: “She was known instantly as a Westerner. Looking at her, foreigners remembered stories they had heard of covered wagons...one felt that early American history was being reenacted” (50-51). However, though Nora, unlike Robin, embodies American history, American tradition, she is, at the same time, outside history: “The world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified” (53).

What is interesting here is that the very characteristics which define these characters as American are also what cut them adrift from the sense of belonging to American history—if we think in terms of the past—, or the American community—if we think in terms of the present. This sense of placelessness is compounded since Nora and Robin, despite their shared desire for a home, are unable to settle permanently in either the United States or Europe, and exist, most of the time, in an ongoing state of exile.

Even the conclusion of the book, after both characters have returned to America, does not resolve the problem. In this chapter, Robin returns to the States. But that in no way suggests that she is coming home. In fact, the first thing she does is to reject a home which is offered to her. Instead, she chooses to circle through the woods around Nora's home, never seeming either to be able to or to want to enter the house. Even when Nora comes out into the woods to meet her, the reconciliation that could reestablish a sense of home does not occur. In the last sentence of the book, Robin is left outside lamenting her failure: "she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping."

The plot of *Nightwood* is a constant search on the part of Nora for a setting which might make a reconciliation between herself and Robin possible. She searches for the possibility of re-establishing the home they briefly shared in Paris. But, all attempts to re-establish this home, whether in France or America, wind up, in the end, frustrated. These final lines of the book emphasize the failure of Nora's search for home and the triumph of exile.

Temporality

In the temporal sense, the quest for home in Barnes is more complex than it generally is in the writing of her contemporaries. This stems from the impact of her experience as an incest victim on her writing. Incest is a theme which appears repeatedly throughout Barnes's work, though it is often camouflaged. The repeated documenting of this experience, added to the sense of a lost past so often evoked by Lost Generation writers, compounds this sense of loss, since, in Barnes, the desire for a home located in the originary past of childhood is a desire for something which was *already* missing in childhood.

As Mary Lynn Broe writes about daughters who are victims of incest.

the daughter is exiled *within* the community of the family...Child bride of the father, the mother's husband, the daughter is the hierophant into the underworld of adult womanhood... "Home" for her is the stark, threatening prison of intimates in power over her. (50)

Barnes' major texts return again and again to the same story in which exile is a defining feature of her earliest home. She writes about unresolved episodes in the past as if in an attempt to articulate the unspoken issues, and thereby understand and resolve them. But,

despite the fact that these texts function as inquests directed towards finding out the truth, the issues often remain buried.

In her novel *Ryder*, for example, she rewrites her own family history, including her father's rape of her at the age of 14. But, the novel is written in a bawdy style which treats the story as a series of Tom Jones-like adventures and almost erases the point of view of the raped daughter.

Her play "The Antiphon" is the story of the confrontation between a woman and her mother and brothers. The obscure source of the quarrel between them, what we might conjecture to be the same events not quite addressed in *Ryder*, is constantly circled around but never exposed.

In both of these texts, we are never able to get at the central issues. In *Ryder*, the rape is never fully articulated and discussed. In "The Antiphon," the nature of the issue which stands between Miranda and her mother and brothers is never fully brought to light. Despite her many attempts to do so, Barnes is never able to return to the initial home ground of her past, successfully confront this trauma and clearly articulate it in her writing.

Nightwood, like Barnes' other major texts, requires careful reading because of its dense language. But it is among the most accessible of her major works and is considered her masterpiece. It is successful because it showcases the rich, complex style and striking characterizations that T.S. Eliot praised, and because it provides the linguistic tools necessary for its own interpretation to a much greater degree than the other two works do.

Nightwood follows a pattern similar to Barnes' two other important works in its emphasis on the importance of a past event from which the problems of the present derive. However, in this case, home is not the originary home of childhood or the primary family relationships addressed in her incest texts. It is a home in the more recent past—the home which houses the relationship between Nora and Robin, a fictional representation of the relationship between Barnes and the sculptor Thelma Woods during the twenties.

Nightwood does not deal with the most important theme of Barnes' work, incest. Perhaps *because* it is not an incest text, it does not obscure the nature of the past event to the extent which *Ryder* and "The Antiphon" do. The central event, Nora's loss of her lover Robin, is the clear subject of the novel. Yet, even in *Nightwood*, we can observe the same obsession with the past typical of the Barnes texts which *do* deal with incest.

In *Nightwood*, as in other Barnes texts, there is a struggle between the present and the past in which the past tends to dominate. While many other American writers emphasize the youth and energy of the twenties, Barnes' texts are fraught with displaced specters of the past who refuse to die. *Nightwood* and her collection of stories, *Spillway*, are peopled with decaying Russian and German aristocrats, refugees from the nineteenth century still desperately clinging to outdated traditions in the nineteen twenties. Even Robin, who seems an embodiment of the young, modern, expatriate artist, exhibits the interpenetration of the past and present in, among other things, her dress:

Her clothes were of a period that he could not quite place. She wore feathers of the kind his mother had worn, flatly sharpened to the face. Her skirts were moulded to her hips and fell downward and out, wider and longer than those of other women, heavy silks that made her seem newly ancient. (42)

When Barnes writes about the past, it is in Bloomian terms that suggest that it is dangerous and all-consuming yet seductive in the same way that Robin is:

Such a woman [i.e. Robin] is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers. (37)

Here, Nora is drawn backwards into a dangerous and destructive past which is inextricably intertwined with her attraction for Robin. This is reminiscent of the attraction that past history holds in Barnes' incest texts.

The past is decaying, seductive, and dangerous. But the most important thing about the past is that it contains home, not the home of childhood in the case of *Nightwood*, but the home in Paris that Nora and Robin share for the brief moment in the text when they live together.

Barnes writes of the finding of this home: "They travelled from Munich, Vienna and Budapest into Paris. Robin told only a little of her life, but she kept repeating in one way or another her wish for a home as if she was afraid she would be lost again...Nora bought an apartment." (55)

If one reads carefully, one realizes, not only that this home existed only in the unreachable and unchangeable past, but also that this home, present for barely a page in the condensed narrative time of the book, actually existed for eight years in the "real time" of the story. Barnes has structured time so that the relatively short period of

time during which the relationship falls apart takes up the majority of the narrative. The book does not focus on the relationship which occurred. It tells the story of the loss of this relationship, the loss of home.

So, to conclude, the focus of the book is consistently on exile and loss. Home, in *Nightwood*, is absent even when it is present in the text, since we can know about Robin and Nora's relationship only from the perspective of the time when it no longer exists. The consistent attempt in the novel to re-establish home by re-establishing the relationship is an impossible quest. In the end, this search for a home located irrevocably in the past only emphasizes its loss more strongly.

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