“Excrement, Blood, and Flowers”
Visceral Imagery in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*

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Love is of all other the inmost and most viscerall affection; and there~fore called by the apostle, ‘Bowels of love’. —Bishop Edward Reynolds

*Nightwood* brims with vivid depictions of the filthy, the odoriferous, and the anatomical. Djuna Barnes’s relentless, startlingly evocative images, usually delivered by middle-aged “medical student” Dr. Matthew O’Connor, stain the reader’s mind indelibly. Though detailing the deviant erotic lives of its characters, Barnes’s narrative does not incorporate such imagery for mere shock value, rather a correspondence between emotional love and the gross physical body seems to be implied. Dr. O’Connor declares “the stench of excrement, blood and flowers, the three essential oils of [our] plight” (96) evoking idealized, romantic love inseparable from the undeniable physicality of coupled bodies. A number of writers (Carrie Rohman, Susana S. Martins, Bonnie Kime Scott, Karen Kaivola) have commented on Barnes’s dismantling of mind-body and human-animal binaries, but her prolific references to organs, appendages, and bodily effluvia suggests an additional layer to the author’s “reinserting the body into discourses that privilege the mind” (Martins 113). What then, are we to make of *Nightwood*’s blood and guts imagery and its relation to the characters’ emotional interiors?

The association of emotions with bodily organs is a familiar concept. The heart continues to symbolize romantic love—both in its stylized pictorial representation and use in expressions such as “broken-hearted.” The Greek physician Galen’s (b. 131 C.E.) experimental work in anatomy and physiology particularly influenced this tradition. As R. J. Hankinson notes in his discussion of Galen’s philosophy, he saw no essential separation between the physical and psychic (Hankinson 199), and

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envisaged the brain regulating logical thought, the heart governing passions such as love and anger, and the liver responsible for pleasure and appetites (200). This physical situating of emotions formed the basis of the pre-modern theory of “humors”—distinct fluids within the body whose varying mixtures influenced character. Wolter Seuntjens describes in a recent article how proto-scientific physicians imagined that the burning of humors such as phlegm, blood, and bile within the body produced vapors which were then manifested as fever, tears, or sighing by the emotional individual (Seuntjens 38). Interestingly for our discussion, he indicates that this notion of the humor-filled body was understood as a metaphor by the time of the seventeenth century, though still indicative of an imbalance in the controlling organ

Later in the early-modern age, [vapors] arose from the hypochondria in particular (literally “under the cartilaginous parts of the inferior ribs”), where they occasioned the notorious spleen; in women they originated from the womb, where they caused the no less notorious hysteria. (42).

Of course for the religious and the moral, the spirit is above the sphere of unregulated emotion, and strives to overcome the base desires and impulses of the humor-tossed physical body. For the Romantic, love belongs to the sanitized heart, the face, and the exterior form. Nightwood questions such denials of the gross body.

As Susana S. Martins points out in her discussion of gender in Nightwood, Dr. O’Connor readily associates emotions with the physical body

I, as a medical man, know in what pocket a man keeps his heart and soul, and in what jostle of the liver, kidneys and genitalia these pockets are pilfered. There is no pure sorrow. Why? It is bedfellow to lungs, lights, bones, guts, and gall! There are only confusions. (25, q. in Martins 111).

She interprets this as the doctor’s (and Barnes’s) belief that the body defines identity and that thought and emotion cannot be confined to the realm of the psyche (111). Also commenting upon Barnes’s “deconstruction of the mind-body binary” (Martins 110), Carrie Rohman notes “the text’s insistence on the inclusion of animality as an essential part of human identity, as inseparable from it.” (Rohman 65). The novel’s Robin Vote, the natural being never tamed by her heartbroken lovers, is of course the archetype of this human-animal hybrid (65–66). Bonnie Kime Scott neatly summarizes this blurring of dichotomies in her paper on Barnes’s novel

[Barnes] insists further that nature does not stay conveniently separate or “other” from culture, and that evolution has not safely or permanently delivered human beings into civilization. She constructs a blurred middle ground between the bestial and the human, disrupting these categories, and the very process of categorization. (Scott 42).

Whilst such writers argue convincingly that Nightwood’s corporal and animal imagery challenges boundaries between natural and cultured states in human behavior, as mentioned above it is the very visceral quality of those images that intensifies the body’s presence in the novel. Barnes’s bodies are not just physical, they are filthy and stinking; the repulsive organs and secretions within them are all too apparent. Human physicality is undeniable—religious abnegation, Dr. Matthew O’Connor tells us, is nothing more than an attempt to “hide the body so the feet won’t stick out.” (143). He has little time
for romantic delusion either, telling Nora that her desperately devoted love for Robin was like “sitting up high and fine, with a rose-bush up your arse.” (161). Matthew does not deny what is in every human being however beloved: dirt and death. Visited by Nora in his squalid garret, the doctor’s own feculence is on display in “a swill-pail … brimming with abominations” (85); he goes on to tell her “we all carry about with us the house of death, the skeleton” (138). The agonies of romantic love are no different from the grubbies of physical ailments—in response to Nora’s anguish over the loss of Robin the doctor exclaims “A broken heart have you! I have falling arches, flying dandruff, a floating kidney, shattered nerves and a broken heart!” (164). Matthew even imagines his own autopsy, picturing the emotions readily discernable in his bodily organs

What an autopsy I’ll make with everything all which ways in my bowels! A kidney and a shoe cast of the Roman races; a liver and a long-spent whisper, a gall and a wrack of scolds from Milano, and my heart that will be weeping still when they find my eyes cold, not to mention a thought of Cellini in my crib of bones … [a]nd the lining of my belly, flocked with the locks cut off love in odd places that I’ve come on” (107–8).

Though the doctor is realistic (even scientific) in his approach to love, he does not deny its power and is by no means immune to its effects. That the heart’s very fibre compels it (and thus the human being) to love is apparent in his observation that “if one gave birth to a heart on a plate, it would say ‘Love’ and twitch like the lopped leg of a frog.” (30). For Matthew, wisdom is learnt through the pain of love experienced directly through this physical organ: “You beat the liver out of a goose to get a pâté; you pound the muscles of a man’s cardia to get a philosopher.” (94). The doctor expresses his own torment through the (imagined) body—his desire to be a woman is revealed not only in the grotesque cross-dressing session that Nora intrudes upon, but in his yearning for actual female organs: “a womb as big as the king’s kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner” (97).

Dr. O’Connor’s keen interest in gynecology (17) predisposes him to concentrate upon the physical body, but why does Barnes employ such an intensely corporeal narrator to deliver her text’s philosophy? Matthew, unlicensed medical practitioner and denizen of Paris’s seedy pissoirs is no cherubic messenger of love. The three women who make up Nightwood’s unhappy love triangle—elusive, promiscuous Robin, romantic, adoring Nora, and Jenny, the tawdry love scavenger—all fail to love successfully. Robin flees from body to body, unable to give her feral self to any one person; Nora, unable to domesticate her, is condemned to state of constant anguish. Jenny, “snatching oats from love’s droppings” (107) is incapable of experiencing a love of her own making. As Matthew O’Connor performs his public dissections, he reveals that which is hidden within the body’s dark interior. Nora, preoccupied with the heart rendered intangible, Robin with the exterior body made superficial by repetition, and Jenny with void excreta are ignorant of its inner workings. Matthew recognizes both the solidity of love and its concealed secrets. Size matters—even for the self-deprecating doctor, whose personified flaccid generative organ “Tiny O’Toole” (140–1) is derided as “that short dangle” (148). He challenges Nora’s romantic notion of love with its concrete actuality

Suppose your heart were five feet across in my place, would you break it for a heart no bigger than a mouse’s mute? Would you hurl yourself into any body of water, in the size you now are, for any woman that you had to look for with a magnifying glass (144).
The darkness within the human body’s unseen organs relates to Matthew’s other field of specialization: the night. In the novel’s lengthy middle chapter, Nora consults the doctor on this subject, having trawled the nocturnal streets in search of her errant lover. Surrendering to sleep and the night, the individual relinquishes self-control and “berserks a fearful dimension” (87). The night, like love, renders those who imbibe it capable of any crime and indiscretion. Dr. O’Connor explicitly links the night to the body’s unlit and mysterious interior: “His heart is tumbling in his chest, a dark place!” (87). The unseen, murky world within the body is thus the home of secrets, depravity, and the authentic heart.

Odor and dirt also feature in O’Connor’s discourse. Americans, cleansing themselves “with every thought, every gesture” are devoid of the “good dirt”, the “sediment” of “a tuft of hair, a bretelle”, a rumpled bed” by which the French define the individual self (91). “The French are disheveled and wise … [the American’s] soap has washed him too clean for identification.” (96). For the doctor, dirt is an indispensable nutrient for love: “the slovenliness that is usually an accompaniment to the ‘attractive’ body, a sort of earth on which love feeds.” (126). However, he believes that we have lost the keenness of smell possessed by animals “in order not to be one of them, and what have we in its place? A tension in the spirit which is the contraction of freedom.” (127).

Barnes warns us via Matthew O’Connor’s colorful tirades that love must be experienced in and of the belly and bones and not just the heart or external body. The anarchy of night, the stench of bestial humanity, and the repulsiveness of our lover’s offal have to be embraced. We cannot blind ourselves to the flaws—physical and emotional—that are present in every individual. Yet the doctor is no heroic proponent of this doctrine, he knows full well the seductive power of romance. For a moment, he feels he could even forgive the loathsome Jenny: “if she were dying, face down in a long pair of black gloves, would I forgive her? And I knew I would forgive her, or anyone making a picture.” (112–3). Of course, the acerbic doctor soon assures himself that Jenny is “no picture” (113), as he screams in his final, drunken harangue: “You think you are all studded with diamonds, don’t you? Well, part the diamonds and you’ll find slug’s meat.” (171). Matthew sees, smells, and touches the guts of humanity, but his only happiness comes from lecturing on the subject to his enraptured audiences. The doctor’s inability to hold his tongue as Nora, Robin, and Jenny’s catastrophic relationship unfolds eventually deprives him of his very raison d’être.

Barnes expresses one of the book’s most illuminating statements not through voluble Matthew O’Connor, but via the musings of Baron Felix Volkbein. Clinging desperately to his questionable family heritage, Robin’s discarded husband is at the novel’s close, humiliatingly reduced to mothering his sickly first-born. At the beginning of Nightwood, Felix accompanies the doctor, who is attending an unconscious Robin. Noting with discomfort Matthew’s pilfering of a hundred franc note from her table, the Baron

knew that he would continue to like the doctor, though he was aware that it would be in spite of a long series of convulsions of the spirit, analogous to the displacement in the fluids of the oyster, that must cover its itch with a pearl; so he would have to cover the doctor. He knew at the same time that this stricture of acceptance (by which what we must love is

2 “Each of the ornamental shoulder-straps extending from the waist-belt in front to the belt behind of a woman’s dress.” Oxford English Dictionary.
made into what we can love) would eventually be part of himself, though originally brought on by no will of his own. (40).

This is the means by which we fail to love as authentically as the doctor prescribes. What we must love—the ugliness within the body and of undesirable emotions and behaviors—is transformed by skin-deep beauty and the romantic imagination into what we can love. We make of our loved one a precious pearl, forgetting the grain of dirt at its core. The skin covers the viscera beneath.
Works Cited


Works consulted


