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Trans-identity in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*

Nicholas Becht

In her novel, *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes presents the reader with Dr. Matthew O'Connor, a character whose identity is so richly contradictory and complex that he arguably has no fixed identity or true self. On the surface, he is a cross-dressing, homosexual gynecologist with no medical license who inserts himself in and mediates between the lives of the main characters in the novel. Although the narrator, the other characters, and he himself often associates him with homosexuality, Barnes never represents O'Connor engaging in a specifically homosexual sex act. Also problematic are his various acts of transvestism and/ or cross-dressing, as well as his identification(s) with femininity and seeming desire to be or become a woman. He sometimes even expresses that he already is a woman, and other times refers to himself as "the girl that God forgot" (Barnes 73). Several sources help to make sense of –or, perhaps further complicate—Dr. O'Connor's identity.

Neil Miller's chapter, "Pioneers of Sexology," provides contextualizing information about the prevailing 'knowledge' and attitudes regarding non-normative gender identities and sexualities around the time that *Nightwood* was written and is set –1936, and the 1920s through the 1930s, respectively. Of particular interest is the notion of sexual inversion or of the soul being in the wrong body (Miller 14). Miller, through his use of Foucault, also makes relevant observations about the trend toward the categorization of identities by acts or actions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Miller explains the medical categorization of the homosexual identity and explores its conflation with the feminine identity due to notions about sexual inversion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

Ulrichs assumed that because male homosexuals had a female soul in a male body, they therefore possessed the personality characteristics of women...according to him, homosexuality was not just an "inversion" in the choice of sexual object but an "inversion" of one's broader gender characteristics as well...his theory of the "third sex" gave these gender stereotypes a quasi-scientific basis, confounding sexual orientation with gender and homosexuals with hermaphrodites. (Miller 14)

Barnes reflects these attitudes in her characterization of Dr. O'Connor, who frequently remarks that he is, "just the girl that God forgot" (Barnes 73), "the bearded lady" (Barnes 100), "the Old Woman who lives in the closet" (Barnes 138), "the other woman that God forgot" (Barnes 143), and "a lady in need of no insults" (Barnes 151). It is interesting to note that while Dr. O'Connor makes these repeated identifications with women and femininity throughout the novel, he always uses masculine pronouns when referring to himself. One must wonder then, if he is using the popular and prevailing medical notions of the time about homosexuality, inversion, and "contrary sexual feeling" (Miller 13) in order to make sense of himself for himself and for others, or if he is merely expressing that which he feels to be his truest, most interior identity.

There are two major scenes in which Dr. O'Connor physically and visually expresses his conceptions and descriptions of himself both as a woman, as well as desiring to be or become a woman, through transvestism. In each scene, a different character – The Baron Felix first, and Nora Flood second—perceives, reacts, and responds to Dr. O'Connor's transgressions of gender. Following a deconstructionist approach, I will attempt multiple readings of each scene in order to further complicate Dr. O'Connor's identity, which arguably, given his existence in an authored fiction, is already unstable. I will also connect Felix and Nora's desire of and discomfort about Dr. O'Connor and his transvestism to Marjorie Garber's notion of the transvestite as "both terrifying and seductive," found in her writing, "Dress Codes, or the Theatricality of Difference." While the transvestite is generally held to be strictly haunting and unattractive, it is often the case that the transvestite is found to be in some ways very attractive, which contributes to an individual's sense of horror. Categories and identities are troubled when one discovers how much –or perhaps, how little-- changes when as little as one signifying article is added or switched. Garber argues that the transvestite is, "a crisis of "category" itself" (Garber 32). The following passage is Barnes' eroticized account of Felix observing Dr. O'Connor's transgressive actions in the hotel room of Felix's fiancée, Robin Vote:

Experiencing a double confusion, Felix now saw the doctor, partially hidden by the screen beside the bed, make 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 of making the back and elbows move in a series of “honesties,” while in reality the most flagrant part of the hoax is being prepared. Felix saw that this was for the purpose of snatching a few drops from a perfume bottle picked up from the night table; of dusting his darkly bristled chin with a puff, and drawing a line of rouge across his lips, his upper lip compressed on his lower, in order to have it seem that their sudden embellishment was a visitation of nature...the doctor’s hand reached out and covered a loose hundred franc note lying on the table. With a tension in his stomach, such as one suffers when watching an acrobat leaving the virtuosity of his safety in a mad unraveling whirl into probable death, Felix watched the hand descend, take up the note, and disappear into the limbo of the doctor’s pocket. He 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 made into what we can love) would eventually be a part of himself, though originally brought on by no will of his own. (Barnes 35-36)

Barnes’ choice of words is evocative and insinuating. Felix’s “double confusion” could be his reaction to Dr. O’Connor inhabiting the double, or dual role(s) of the transvestite as both male and female as well as “both terrifying and seductive” (Garber 32). Barnes emphasizes the performative aspects of Dr. O’Connor’s transvestism through her comparison of him to a magician and to an acrobat. The application of cosmetics themselves often precedes or signals a performance. It is interesting that Dr. O’Connor is described as preparing a “hoax” and attempting to have it seem that his suddenly rouged lips are a “visitation of nature,” when we take into consideration the fact that even when someone we consider to be or accept as a woman puts on perfume, powder, and rouge, she is also preparing a “hoax” and affecting a “visitation of nature;” Dr. O’Connor’s actions, which are

considered feminine, a “hoax,” and ‘unnatural’ for him to perform, are themselves deceptive, artificial, and ‘unnatural’ acts. These acts, as well as Dr. O’Connor’s theft of the hundred franc note, both “terrify” and seem to “seduce” Felix. Garber’s quotation and vivid summary of Dr. John Rainolds provides a possible explanation for what appears to be Felix’s uncomfortable attraction to and desire of Dr. O’Connor as the perfumed, powdered, and rouged thief:

For Rainolds, women’s clothes act as transferential objects, kindling a metonymic spark of desire: ‘because a women’s garment being put on a man doeth vehemently touch and moue him with the remembrance touch and imagination of a woman; the imagination of a thing desirable doth stir up the desire’ (Rainolds 96-97).’ (Garber 29)

In this case, Dr. O’Connor is not wearing women’s clothes, but a particular woman’s cosmetics and fragrance. That particular woman is Felix’s fiancée, Robin Vote, whose cosmetics and fragrance --one can imagine-- would kindle a rather large “metonymic spark of desire,” as well as a strong sense of discomfort and/ or “terror” for Felix. It is perhaps ironic to note that Robin is characterized by Barnes as being rather masculine, as well as bisexual and perhaps truly a lesbian. Given notions at the time of male and female sexual inversion, Dr. O’Connor’s appropriation of Robin’s identity through his appropriation of her cosmetics and fragrance strangely situates both his (sense of) identity as well as Felix’s desire(s) and (sense of) identity.

Felix’s feelings about and reactions to Dr. O’Connor’s transvestism and theft are described by Barnes in terms which are sensually and sexually suggestive, such as the image of Felix’s convulsing spirit, and the accompanying image of an oyster displacing its fluids in order to form a pearl. The word convulsing evokes the gyrations, thrusting, and orgasm which often accompany sexual intercourse and the formation of the pearl serves as a metaphor for ejaculation; the oyster itself is a gynecic image. It is fitting then, that Felix would consider his desire and accompanying discomfort in terms of a convulsing spirit, or soul, rather than --or perhaps within-- a physical body, when confronted with homosexuality and/ or male sexual inversion. The “stricture of acceptance,” or rigid demands of a heteronormative society, is what in part inspires the concept of inversion, “By which what [Felix] must love is made into what [he] can love” (Barnes 36). Dr. O’Connor is a man who is made into a woman

both through his sexual inversion and through his transvestism, which renders Felix acceptably vulnerable to the “metonymic spark of desire” (Garber 29) which he justifies to himself as having been, “brought on by no will of his own” (Barnes 36). This locates Felix’s desire(s) within an unconscious mind, and perhaps within the soul of an unwitting male sexual invert.

While Felix witnesses part of the process of Dr. O’Connor’s transvestism which physically and visually represents –or, perhaps only hints at-- his gender transference and inversion, Nora encounters Dr. O’Connor at what seems to be the height of his transvestism:

In the narrow iron bed, with its heavy and dirty linen sheets, lay the doctor in a woman’s flannel nightgown. 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 and falling back against the pillow turned up the shadowy interior of their cylinders. He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted. It flashed into Nora’s head: “God, children know something they can’t tell; they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed!” But this thought, which was only the sensation of a thought, was of but a second’s duration as she opened the door; in the next, the doctor had snatched the wig from his head and sinking down in the bed drew the sheets up over his breast. (Barnes 79)

Dr. O’Connor uses his wig and other feminine signifiers to show his inversion and to turn up his “shadowy interior,” much in the same way that the curls of his wig show theirs; in this way, he expresses the woman that he is and/ or identifies with. Nora’s immediate reaction comparing Dr. O’Connor to “Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed” again reminds us of Garber’s notion of the transvestite as “both terrifying and seductive” (Garber 32), whereby he represents the dual role(s) of both the “seductive,” female Red Riding Hood as well as the “terrifying,” male wolf. Further troubling category and identity, Dr. O’Connor also represents, for Nora, the way(s) in which Red Riding Hood is fascinated, “terrified,” and “seduced” by the wolf’s transvestism as her grandmother, in her grandmother’s bed. Much in the same way as it does for Felix, Dr. O’Connor’s transvestism also troubles Nora’s (sense of) identity. Is Nora’s “*sensation* of a thought,” a brief, immediate observation, or is it a pleasurable, uncomfortable feeling like that which Felix

experiences in response to Dr. O’Connor’s transvestism? Nora is, however, unlike Felix in that she is a lesbian and/ or a female sexual invert. It would follow then that she might be “seduced” by Dr. O’Connor’s female interior and “terrified” by his still –despite his transvestism— overwhelmingly male exterior. The fact that she is Robin’s lover and is fascinated, “terrified,” and “seduced” by Dr. O’Connor’s transvestism again troubles his identity as well as her desire(s) and (sense of) identity.

Dr. O’Connor’s transvestism might also be considered cross-dressing, or drag. Esther Newton’s concepts about and explanations of the sartorial system which functions within drag – which she studied as an ethnographic anthropologist and wrote about in “Selection From Mother Camp”-- prove useful in an analysis of the two, previously quoted scenes which feature Dr. O’Connor’s cross-dressing and/ or drag transgressions:

The principle opposition around which the gay world revolves is masculine- feminine... There are two different levels on which the oppositions can be played out. One is *within* the sartorial system itself, that is, wearing feminine clothing “underneath” and masculine clothing “outside.” ... It symbolizes that the visible, social, masculine clothing is a costume, which in turn symbolizes that the entire sex-role behavior is a role –an act... A second “internal” method is to mix sex-role referents *within* the visible sartorial system. This generally involves some “outside” item from the feminine sartorial system such as earrings, lipstick, high-heeled shoes, a necklace, etc., worn *with* masculine clothing... The feminine item stands out so glaringly by incongruity that it “undermines” the masculine system and proclaims that the inner identification is feminine... The second level poses an opposition between one sex-role sartorial system and the “self,” whose identity has to be indicated some other way. Thus when impersonators are performing, the oppositional play is between “appearance,” which is female, and “reality,” or “essence,” which is male... a drastic step is taking off the wig. (Newton 122)

Barnes’ description of Dr. O’Connor’s impressive collection consisting of “laces, ribands, stockings, ladies’ underclothing and an abdominal brace” (Barnes 78) suggests that he more than likely --and perhaps always— plays out the opposition of

masculine-feminine within the sartorial system and underneath his masculine clothing. He also mixes gendered signifiers within the visible sartorial system, such as when he puts on powder and rouge in front of Felix while wearing masculine clothing, or even when he receives Nora in almost full drag – except for his beard. In the first instance with Felix, however, feminine signifiers “undermine” the masculine system,” while in the second instance with Nora, a masculine signifier “undermines” the feminine system. The latter instance is similar to, but not quite the same as the second level oppositions which occur “between one sex-role sartorial system and the “self” (Newton 122). Dr. O’Connor does, however, perform this second level of opposition when he removes his wig in Nora’s presence, as well as when he presumably speaks to her in his male voice.

Dr. O’Connor’s repeated and varied drag transgressions further destabilize his identity both for his audience within Barnes’ novel – predominantly Felix and Nora—as well as for the audience, or readers, of Barnes’ novel. His speech, actions, and ‘hints’ become so absurd, contradictory, and muddled, that one might even wonder if Dr. O’Connor is perhaps a woman in drag as a man in drag as a woman, or perhaps has no knowable identity, after all. On the destabilizing qualities of drag with respect to identity, Newton states:

At the most complex, it is a double inversion that says “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says, “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion: “my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine.” (Newton 124)

It is Dr. O’Connor’s “double inversion,” or double role(s) as a homosexual or male sexual invert, who is also a transvestite, and in some ways performs drag transgressions, which causes Felix’s “double confusion” (Barnes 35) which is also experienced by Nora, as well as the readers of Barnes’ novel. Dr. O’Connor’s “double inversion” exists in the form(s) of his incongruous gender and sexual identities, and the resulting “double confusion” is merely a perception of and reaction to those incongruities.

Newton examines two related, though separate manners, in which such incongruities are addressed and suggests that “The drag queen simply expresses the incongruity while the camp actually uses it to

achieve a higher synthesis” (Newton 125). She then defines camp as “the tension between that person or thing and the context or association” (Newton 126). Both in Barnes’ presentation of Dr. O’Connor and in Dr. O’Connor’s presentation of self –or selves—he appears to achieve some form of this “higher synthesis.” Dr. O’Connor and his incongruous signifiers of gender and sexuality both in the context of Robin’s hotel room and his association there with Felix, as well as in his bedroom and his association there with Nora, exhibit a tension which can be considered camp. The former example can even be considered “unintentional camp” (Newton 125), in that Dr. O’Connor is either not aware that Felix is witnessing his transgressions or truly believes that he is deceptive enough to commit his transgressions without drawing any attention to himself. The latter example exhibits the transformative quality of camp. Newton explains, “Camp humor is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms.” (Newton 127). When Dr. O’Connor observes Nora’s shock and discomfort at having found him dressed and made up as a woman, he jokes, “You see that you can ask me anything,” thus laying aside both their embarrassments” (Barnes 80). He both acknowledges and laughs, thus inviting Nora to laugh, at his gender incongruity, and in doing so transforms the context of and removes the tension from their situation.

Drawing from her ethnographic experience and observations, Newton also adds: “I saw the reverse transformation –from laughter to pathos— often enough and it is axiomatic among the impersonators that when the camp cannot laugh, he dissolves into a maudlin bundle of self-pity” (Newton 127).

In Dr. O’Connor’s final scene, he comments in a drunken tirade on the nature of camp humor in a way that is maudlin and –perhaps unintentionally- campy: “Only the scorned and ridiculous make good stories,” he added angrily, seeing the habitués smiling, ‘So you can imagine when you’ll get told! Life is only long enough for one trade; try that one!’ (Barnes 159). In a way, camp humor is a story about the scorned and ridiculous told by the camp figure, Dr. O’Connor, who –through his sexual inversion, transvestism, drag transgressions, and expressions of camp-- is and renders himself both scorned and ridiculous: A grotesquely fascinating spectre of gender and sexual incongruity.

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