

**“A Soul in Physical Stress”: Transgender Epistemologies in *Nightwood***

**Keywords:** transgender, queer, modernism, transition, camp, drag, gender

**Abstract:** The present article questions the common label assigned to *Nightwood*'s character Dr. Matthew O'Connor, widely analysed as a homosexual transvestite in spite of the various narrative implications that would reconfigure the ambiguities inherent to their gender identity. As a character in a novel considered to be as discriminatory as it is emancipatory, O'Connor is a main character treated as secondary and punished for their exclusion from standards of normativity. I employ the arguments brought forth by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910 in order to consolidate the understanding of O'Connor as a transgender woman, as well as the views of Esther Newton on drag and camp discourses, in order to retrace the reasons for O'Connor's critical interpretation as a mere male cross-dresser, a theatrical vision whose femaleness is assigned a performative rather than an identitarian value. Apart from the importance of demarcating transvestism from transsexuality, O'Connor's wretched treatment and the impossibility of their transitioning is equally relevant. Their transition is envisioned as a matter of embodiment, and their expressed wishes of patriarchal female ideals point to an essentialist transgender narrative that consolidates matters of 'passing' that follow mimetic gender ideologies. The path to recognition requires the displacement of hegemonic standards of normativity, in favour of the recreation of the masculine/feminine dichotomy and the fragmentation of expectations for a sexed transitioned product. O'Connor's pessimistic narrative arc could be seen within the context of an indirect and subverted call for political change coming from the author, whereby transphobia is both reinforced and negotiated.

Much has been written on the relationship between *Nightwood*'s two main female characters—Robin Vote and Nora Flood.<sup>1</sup> The lesbian implications of its obscene<sup>2</sup> development have been connected to notions of animalism and even homophobia, and a common understanding of the novel interprets it as “one of the most wretchedly homophobic in the canon of modernist literature” (Cole 391). This is all the more conflicting considering its source in a queer author, but at a closer look the novel does indeed initiate a reworking of standards of homophobia, racism, misogyny, ableism, and antisemitism for “an aesthetic purpose” meant to subvert the dominant discourses of normativity by recourse to the

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exploitation of the very bestiality of marginalities (Cole 392). The fortification of biased discourses in the novel seems to prevail through techniques of their personification under the form of marginal characters—the lesbians, the Jew, the transgendered man, the disabled child, the black man, as well as the periodically invoked cast of homosexuals—that experience their identities as their own demise. In the words of Jane Marcus, Barnes articulates a prose of “merging, dissolution, and, above all, hybridization—mixed metaphors, mixed genres, mixed levels of discourse from the lofty to the low” (223). This paradoxical interest in granting one’s character an (albeit ambiguous) voice only to later allow their punishment for the audacity to have used it seems to play a role in the understanding of history in the novel not as a mimetic “*representation* but as an instigator, a rupture in causality, an unrecoverable figure that absconds from the scene” and aims to bring about social change (Cole 392; emphasis mine). The grotesque remains an actively maintained locus within the interplay of the disenfranchised, and Barnes turns to a politicization of her freakish liminalities, as Alex Goody argues: “the political force lies in the becomings launched from such spaces, not in a nostalgia for a utopian public culture” (165). The seemingly discriminatory undertones of the novel subvert the claim to auctorial prejudice and the final scope overruns aestheticism in favour of implementing political progress. On the one hand, the understanding of the novel as homophobic—as well as racist, sexist, ableist, and anti-Semitic—is at least in theory meant to remain within the limits of its times. On the other hand, this culminates in common practice in a contemporary judgment which, all while considering the emancipatory merits of the novel, would sooner overlook the ambiguous force of its metaphors in order to underscore its lack of support for its non-normative identities. It is important to safeguard queer novels—as well as novels dealing with the subjects of race, sex, and disability—from the threats of their anachronistic reconfiguration, but it is equally necessary to maintain a conversation on their shortcomings, as well as on the dangers of their *lack* of reconfiguration within contemporary standards of criticism which, far the novel’s ethics of *obscene modernism*, points out that “it is the Doctor’s unwitting fate to be interminably engaged in relieving his friends of a romantic religiosity they suffer as a form of enlightenment” (177), a position that O’Connor is forced into and never relieved, never allowed their own enlightenment.

The starting-point is the common critical assumption that O’Connor inhabits the space of cross-dresser homosexuality, whereby drag and camp discourses aid in the understanding of the character. However, even though Barnes’s novel remains within the theoretical and psychoanalytical locus of the early twentieth century, it should be noted that its transgender

norms are not thoroughly faithful to prevailing transphobic discourses of the time. There remains a question concerning Barnes's intentions—was she transphobic? The trajectory of the novel is concerned with social progress by means of a pessimistic and apparently prejudiced line of auctorial judgment, as well as a violent punishment of its characters, which creates a difficulty in the analysis; a narrator that strives for political betterment in a mode of actively reinforced bigotry is paradoxical—even within modernist standards. French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman in his work *Confronting Images*, poses the following question: “is it possible, in practice, to interpret the realities of the past using categories from the past—from the same past, of course?” (36). In other words, should pieces of art or history be safeguarded as self-enclosed, in spite of the implications of their beliefs to the modern reader? Didi-Huberman argues for an “anachronistic” evaluation of history or art: “everything past . . . exists or subsists only through the figures that we make of it; so it exists only in the operations of a ‘reminiscing present,’ a present endowed with the admirable or dangerous power, precisely, of presenting it, and, in the wake of this presentation, of elaborating and representing it” (38). I argue that a modernist novel like *Nightwood* becomes complex when—under the weight of modern criticism—it produces a transparent suspicion that discrimination and punishment were meant to interweave in an intentionally crafted fabric. Extracting the standards of O'Connor's portrayal in the novel as either transphobic or emancipatory is a technique of rendering anachronism in literary analysis, whereby the past “must be negotiated, debated, and perhaps even turned to advantage” (Didi-Huberman 41).

As an Irishman expatriate living in Paris, an unlicensed gynaecologist—more appropriately described as “a sham and an abortionist” (Barnes 13)—, a verbose raconteur of stories which “no one ever knew what was truth and what was not” (Barnes 131), as well as an ambiguous paradigm of the effeminate homosexual, Dr. Matthew Dante O'Connor becomes a concretisation of the queer essence of *Nightwood*. The present article is concerned with O'Connor's gender identity within the novel, an issue which remains relatively poorly exploited from a critical perspective that individualizes the character and grants them a full-fledged spotlight in the analysis, without recourse to tying their existence to a different character's narrative arc. Despite their status as a warden overseeing the awakening of Nora and Felix to the immoral reality of Robin's otherness, O'Connor is hardly paid any heed by the two enamoured characters. While performing the duty of listening to others, others do not reciprocate the act: “He began to scream with sobbing laughter. ‘Talking to me—all of them—sitting on me as heavy as a truck horse—talking!’” (Barnes 232). The matter of being heard is connected to the matter of being *seen* and *acknowledged* as a visible subjectivity in

its own right. However, O'Connor remains alienated until the end and his queer, trans individuality emerges as insoluble within the public sphere of normativity. In critical studies of the novel, the character is commonly labelled a homosexual cross-dresser, but there are multiple insufficiencies in comfortably dismissing O'Connor under this status. In an article on "Trans-identity in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," Nicholas Becht makes his case on the portrayal of O'Connor as a cross-dresser invert, the sum of the conventional medical views held by the author and her audience at the time the novel was written, such as the late nineteenth century theories of sexual inversion, perversion, and degeneracy. Homosexual identity was commonly conflated with sexual inversion, with the understanding that homosexuality and transsexuality were interdependent, two sides of the same coin: "'Sexual inversion' referred to a broad range of cross-gender behaviour (in which males behaved like women and vice-versa) of which homosexual desire was only a logical but indistinct aspect" (Chauncey qtd. in Rubin 483). Becht draws on Neil Miller's theorization of cross-dressing during the early twentieth century:

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. (qtd. in Becht 125)

It can be assumed that Djuna Barnes was familiar with these beliefs and that she materialized them in the homosexual cross-dresser O'Connor, but she might have been equally well-acquainted with a different line of thought as well, which could be gleaned in the pessimistic voice of the narrator as an intimation of emancipatory intentions. In this way, it is important to place *Nightwood* at the convergence of both early *and* contemporary views on transgenderism. Early understandings that hark back to the author's own early twentieth-century views on transsexualism as an expression of sexual fetishism—and outside of claims to gender identity—are particularly relevant considering the exceeding tension that surrounds O'Connor's narrative arc. Considering the dangers of what Michel Foucault labelled "historical retro-version," whereby sexuality is understood "on the basis of the techniques of power that are *contemporary* with it" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 150; emphasis

mine), it is not my purpose to circumscribe O'Connor within contemporary discourses that exceed the available twentieth-century conceptualisations of transgenderism. In the same way that critical understandings of O'Connor as a mere cross-dresser that evades sexual ontologies locate him within a restrictive and trivial category, so would an understanding of O'Connor as a transgender woman would force his identity into anachronism. However, O'Connor's at once complex and ambiguous gender identity would benefit from an analysis that ties in with the modern developments in studying cross-dressing and its transgendered implications. Marjorie Garber was one of the first to draw attention to cross-dressing as "a sign of the constructedness of gender categories" and signalling the critical tendency towards "look[ing] *through* rather than *at* the cross-dresser" by means of enclosing them "within one of the two traditional genders. . . for particular political and critical aims" (*Vested Interests* 9). Jay Prosser, too, underscores that essentialist strategies overlook "the complexities and difficulties that inevitably accompany real-life experiences of gender crossing and to the personal costs of not simply being a man or a woman" (11-12).

Here, I analyse the character of O'Connor with an interest in the transgender epistemologies embodied within their failed attempts at recognition and transition as a transgender woman. The intention of this article is to advance a two-fold analysis of the transgender potentialities of the character—within the limit of its times and in contemporary terms – with the purpose of countering critical perceptions of O'Connor as a cross-dresser that embodies camp ideologies but who does not preclude transgender identity. In other terms, the character's critical understanding embodies a modern bias within the transgender community, which sees cross-dressers as lesser than their transsexual and transgendered peers, outside of claim to transgender epistemologies. Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, who identifies as a "committed cross-dresser" (20) points out that transsexual individuals continue to "view the [cross-dresser] in a derisory light where the CD is considered at best a dilettante and at worst a sex-obsessed fetishist who smears the good name of transgenderism" (24). This perception of cross-dressing becomes a convenient critical choice within a novel whose "hysterical heteroglossia is a perverse and almost postmodern folk-text" (Marcus 145) and whose non-normative identities "merge the sacred and the profane, destroying the boundaries between the clean and polluted, the proper and the corrupted, masculine and feminine" (Goody 171).

Under these considerations, O'Connor's "homosexual cross-dresser" label would come across as a convenient and quick operation of enclosing a trans individual within a category that poses few difficulties or ambiguities, thus allowing one to easily explain away the queerness, or justify it as an aesthetic component of modernist deviation and obscenity.

Understandably so, Djuna Barnes's employment of the male pronoun could be taken as an act of clarification on O'Connor's real identity within the cisgendered framework, in spite of their repeatedly articulated wishes for embodying womanhood (thusly allowing critics to reconstruct these wishes under the form of the performative politics of drag). However, transgender individuals have always faced substantial difficulties in coming to understand, incorporate, and publicize their true gender identity. Oren Gozlan speaks of the fetishization of gender that occurs in essentialist narratives and medical understandings of transsexuality, where "the ideality of gender is animated by a fantasy of certitude" and transsexuality is forced into an act of securing its meaning by recourse to "politics of identity that essentializes difference and transforms the many manifestations of gender non-conformance into self-contained identities" (4). That a male-pronoun-individual comes to be critically taken for granted and enclosed within the common "mirror-style representation" that sees gender as a mimetic reflection of one's sex (Stryker 9) is not thoroughly surprising. While the novel plays on such matters of misrecognition to achieve its final brutal blow to its queer characters, individuals like O'Connor need to be analysed accordingly from a critical perspective, and given the space for playing out their gender ambiguities and materialize their path—or actively halt it—leading to the accomplishment of the reality of their gender identity, even though the concepts of gender "reality" and "realness" pose significant issues as well.

Throughout this paper, I will use the pronoun "they" for O'Connor—even though Barnes herself uses the male pronoun—in order to consolidate the view that *Nightwood* instantiates the very outer side of sexual binarism, as well as to allow a place of possibility within the gender trajectory of the character. I mean to unravel the transgender potentialities of O'Connor in accordance with modern views on the process of transitioning as explained by Atalia Israeli-Nevo and I employ "transgender capacity" as an epistemological standpoint, a concept defined as a capacity which "manifests its power as potentiality, incipience, and imminence," a mechanism for unravelling a knowledge of genders as "mutable, successive, and multiple" (Getsy 47). I consider Barnes's use of the "he" pronoun to grant little if any understanding on the reality of O'Connor's experience, and to use the "she" pronoun would fragment the ambiguities of the character's failed path to recognition, by *outing* them into a reality they have not fashioned for themselves. I envision O'Connor as an embodiment of the epistemologies of a closeted transgender woman whose prospects of definite transitioning are replaced by mere verbal and behavioural articulations underlying a truer gender. Even though O'Connor's narrative arc does not include any explicit hints at transitioning, the *transgender*

*capacity* of the novel exists without any statement that would attest it. David J. Getsy emphasizes this by noting that “a capacity need not be purposefully planted or embedded . . . and it does not just result from the intentions of sympathetic or self-identified transgendered subjects” but instead, “it may emerge at any site where dimorphic and static understandings of gender are revealed as arbitrary and inadequate” (48). In this way, the existence of capacitating discourses in *Nightwood* which directly point to the insufficiency of the initially male-gendered and later on cross-dressing identity enables one to further inquire into the ambiguities presented by the text. While one must not lose sight of anachronistic tendencies in analysis, transgender capacities have the power to reveal the “possibilities and actualities” which have always existed in history, the “bodily morphologies” that were rendered normative and thus invisible (Getsy 48). Sandy Stone materializes this point when she writes that “it is difficult to generate a counterdiscourse if one is programmed to disappear” (qtd. in Carroll 6).

By subverting typical modes of femininity, O’Connor arguably reinforces a class of the *feminized* woman lying outside the center of the *female*. There are certain possibilities as well as limits in advancing an epistemology of *female* embodiment in *Nightwood* that would be meant to replace the merely *feminized* body, in the context of normative standards of femininity which in Judith Butler’s terms, reveal themselves as “instruments of regulatory regimes” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 44), that is, instruments for the normalization of heterosexuality to the detriment of the marginalization of queer individuals.

In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam proposes a model of queer historiography derived from the writings of Michel Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *perverse presentism*, which she defines as “not only a denaturalization of the present but also an application of what we do not know in the present to what we cannot know about the past” (53). For the purpose of this article, this would imply that the knowledge we lack in the present about the complexity of male-to-female transition and cross-dressing is the same knowledge we miss about these concepts as they played out for historical subjects back in the day, but it is our “present-day intuition” (Halberstam 53) which might reveal how the writings of the “history of the present” —in Foucault’s understanding—need *not* configure “a history of the past in terms of the present” (qtd. in Halberstam 53), but rather a questioning of how the two paradigms can be accommodated. Thus, it would be relevant to begin with the history of the auctorial past and trace it to the present in order to understand how certain tensions were alleviated or maintained.

German sexologist and early sexual rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld, in his pioneering work from 1910, *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*, argues for the delimitation of transgenderism from topics such as homosexuality, psychopathology, and cross-dressing fetishism. On the former, he points out that among the observed homosexuals,

[in the case of] the homosexuals with feminine tendencies, . . . hardly 10 percent of them have a more intensified urge to put on women's clothing. To the contrary, the great majority of homosexuals, and not only the more virile ones, find cross-dressing thoroughly unpleasant. Still fewer are the number of those homosexual men who live fully as a woman. (29)

On the latter, he discusses the essence of fetishism as “concentrated without exception on a *specific* part of the body of the woman or also on *specific* pieces of women's clothing” (Krafft-Ebing qtd. in Hirschfeld 30; emphasis mine), rather than on the entirety of the female body and appearance, and he equally underscores that “we also see in fetishists, but not in cross-dressers, that the object of their tendency in the first place is loved in itself in relation to a second person, . . . but in no way mainly loved as a part of them themselves” (30). However, one can imagine that the understanding of cross-dressing in Hirschfeld's medical theories rather slides instead into the domain of transsexualism, before the two concepts under the same umbrella category of “trans-” were formally separated and theorized in accordance with their underlying ontologies and gender politics. Nowadays transgenderism defines an ontology which replaces the stability of transsexuality with “more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification” (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 28). Transsexuality inhabits the dominion of “realness” by its “appropriation of the attributes of the real” and it always represents “a fantasy of belonging and being,” while transgender individuals approximate realness by embodying “categories of their own making” (27) which often recreate narratives of cisgendered and often patriarchal oppression, a matter to be discussed in relation to O'Connor as well. The term *transgender* equally draws attention to the cohabitation of the individual's pursued gender—that is, O'Connor's appropriation of femininity—as well as their biological history, which in the novel takes the shape of O'Connor's ambiguously male public persona, as Halberstam signals the necessity of a gender archive which records the identity of “gender-ambiguous” subjects appropriately enough so as to avoid—in the context of the novel—O'Connor's equivalence to factual masculinity or the failure of “putting on” femininity (28).

This being said, one of the doctor's key personality traits in the novel is his verbosity. The writing style of the novel itself is peculiar and expansive, with an overload of information that would veil the void at the center. The emptiness at the heart of the narrative plays on dichotomies of male/female and mind/body, in order to represent the final incapability of the individual—and especially the queer individual—to render themselves truthfully in writing. O'Connor instantiates this semiotic shortcoming by bemoaning the destinies awaiting the community of seeming circus “freaks” who are marginalized and punished by their own misbelonging to the center discourse of either heteronormativity or cisnormativity: “we who are full to the gorge with misery. . . should look well around, doubting everything seen, done, spoken, precisely because we have a word for it, and not its *alchemy*” (Barnes 122; emphasis mine). Despite his praise of the “poetic” language of *Nightwood*, it was T. S. Eliot's warning in his introduction to the novel that its prose “demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel-reader is not prepared to give” (Eliot x) that excluded the novel from sitting at the same table as other seemingly impenetrable modernist works. However, Eliot believed that the doctor “alone gave the book its vitality” and that “at first, we only hear the doctor talking; we do not understand *why* he talks” (Eliot xi; emphasis mine). Along these lines, the doctor's long-windedness is meant to underscore a surplus of significance in the novel's inquiry into non-normative identities, and this overload ultimately threatens the stability of the novel itself. For Jay Prosser, autobiographies of transgenderism and transsexuality are “body narratives” which “engage with feelings of embodiment” and “allow changes to somatic materiality,” thus materialising an identity in-flux (16). However, as he stresses, since they portray cultural values of belonging or misbelonging, they are prone to recreating “not the revelation of the fictionality of gender categories but the sobering realization of their ongoing foundational power” (11), a component of autobiographical transgendered writings resembling O'Connor's monologuing himself *into* being. This equally explains *Nightwood's* surplus of significance which accomplishes no more than what it is intent on challenging, since within the novel, transphobia—along with other discriminatory practices—becomes the tragic result of its own failed subversion.

Before the demarcation of the boundaries of cross-dressing from the beginnings of identity politics, Charles Shepherdson described the cross-dresser as an exemplification of “the symbolic mobility of gender,” the owner of an identity that can be “orchestrate[d] and enjoy[ed],” while the transsexual functions as “a more radical example of this mobility” due to their living “in limbo” and “in a time of suspension in which the body has not yet been

constituted” (100). In this context, O’Connor finds themselves in this very “time of suspension” which is rendered as a blockage in their gender acquisition. As the self-proclaimed “soul in physical stress” (Barnes 49), O’Connor bears testimony to a dimension of language and discourse that favours normativity and bans deviations. *Nightwood* subverts the clear-cut relationship between the mind of the individual and the physical markers of their bodies in order to render the complexity of queer identities. When O’Connor calls themselves “the last woman left in this world, though I am the bearded lady,” they reveal the opposition between nature—the restricted limits of one’s sex—and culture—the impositions of gender—, while showcasing “the other side of culture,” which is, however, still culture (Martins 115). In accordance with Butler’s argument that there is no subject prior to discourse, what opposes culture is the pre-cultural state of nature which produces the Other. There is in *Nightwood* a “non-historical ‘before’” which reinforces the primitive, the natural, the outlawed (Martins 115) through the presence of the array of queer “freaks.” It comes as no surprise that the female body desired by O’Connor is a “culturally produced and constrained” (Martins 116) patriarchal product. The domesticity imposed on the female gender (and sex) is defined by an illusion of solid and definitive standards which repudiate O’Connor as an unnatural woman. As transgendered transition becomes a matter of embodiment, the acquisition of a body whose appearance and functions align with socially-determined gender prerequisites will condition recognition in society as a man or a woman: “priceless galaxy of misinformation called *the mind*, harnessed to that stupendous and threadbare glomerate compulsion called *the soul*, ambling down . . . the holy *Habeas Corpus*, *the manner in which the body is brought before the judge*” (Barnes 213; emphasis mine).

O’Connor’s identity during the day is marked by a performance of maleness, and characters address them as such, even though they are aware or suspect a more complicated identity of O’Connor, given that their nickname is Mighty-Grain-of-Salt. O’Connor offers rather unsubtle hints at their real identity: “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? . . . There are only confusions” (Barnes 19). This is the distinction between the body and the mind, contested by Barnes with the purpose of, on the one hand, “reinserting the body into discourses that privilege the mind” (Martins 113) and on the other, questioning the physical markers of the body itself. When these visual markers of the bodily affiliation to either female or male identities are questioned, it reveals the consequences of the misperformance of gender in society, as well as the unstable footing of the sex *and* gender binaries in themselves. While Shepherdson’s views come closer to what

one could assume to have been Djuna Barnes's own beliefs by virtue of their circulation at the time, O'Connor's distinction of the body and the mind comes closer to discourses that bemoan the assigning of the "wrong body" to a transgendered individual, a framework which fails to challenge the notion of gender binarism in itself. According to Judith Butler, "the presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice" (*GT* 10). However, the theorisation of the performativity of gender binarism within queer studies implies that the transgender individual—a symbol of the "split between sex and gender"—is the most truthful manifestation of the constructedness of gender (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 26). Jay Prosser argued against this conceptualisation by indicating that the "higher purpose" of queer performativity disregards the importance of gender factualness for transgendered and transsexual individuals: "there are transgendered trajectories. . . that aspire to that which this scheme devalues. . . who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be*" (32). *Being* is within transgender epistemologies a matter of recognition and appropriation, an in-betweenness that is undertaken through the outward presentation of "cultural genitals" (Kessler and McKenna qtd. in Nordmarken 154). This appropriation can take the form of clothing, which O'Connor employs in the novel and which could explain his labelling as a cross-dresser instead of further considerations of a transgendered ontology. According to Nicholas Becht, O'Connor manipulates appearances in order to "physically and visually [express] his conceptions and descriptions of himself both as a woman, as well as desiring to be or become a woman, through cross-dressing" (125).

The issue of "*becoming* a woman through cross-dressing" does little to elucidate the character's motivation to "become a woman" in the secrecy of their own apartment. Magnus Hirschfeld delineates clothing "as conspicuous, intentional indications of an inner striving" and "as symbol, as unconscious projection of the soul" (34). Miqui Alicia Gilbert, too, emphasizes that cross-dressing "involves choice and decision" (13) and it is done in secret, a fact which leads to isolation and shame (21). When Nora happens to walk in on O'Connor dressed as a woman, and she sees them "in a woman's flannel night gown" and with their face "framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders," "heavily rouged and his lashes painted," her first reaction is: "'God, children know something they can't tell, they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed!'" (117). She interprets O'Connor's performance of femininity in a mode of terror, which is produced by

her association of their image with the image of the masculinized wolf dressed in grandmother's clothing. The fairytale is conceptualized as a tale of taboo, where "the bed, the eating metaphor, and the cross-dressing by the wolf, provide a gridlock closure of any early thoughts of transgressing gender roles" (Case 304), a culmination of horror. Gilbert explains that the urge to wear women's clothing begins around puberty, even though "[the cross-dresser] may have felt feminine yearnings earlier," and that as he starts experimenting with different clothing choices, "his taste will go to the erotic and exotic since he has never had the usual girl-to-girl social limitations placed upon him" (19). Considering that these characteristics in the behaviour of the cross-dresser seem to apply to O'Connor's habits in an unequivocal manner, O'Connor was kept within its boundaries and never reassessed. Gilbert draws attention to the possibility of cross-dressing to develop into "adult-onset transsexualism" (25), but O'Connor's transgender immanence is expressed by multiple statements and episodes that do not all give the impression of fetishism and supposedly trivial cross-dressing. As the doctor quickly takes off their wig and hides themselves behind the bed sheets, but as they recognize the divulgence of their secret, they announce sardonically: "You see that you can ask me anything" (Barnes 117), and the two of them quite tellingly advance a conversation about the night – as Nora wanted them to tell her everything they "know" about the night. O'Connor reveres night-time as they say that "every day is thought upon and calculated . . . the night is not premeditated" and that night "does something to a person's identity" (Barnes 119). Night allows the blurring of one's objective identity, but the act of blurring forbids identification; the only freedom afforded during night-time is "charlatanerie," that is, *passing*, rather than genuine embodiment: "to think of the acorn it is necessary to become the tree. And the tree of night is the hardest tree to mount" (Barnes 123). For Nora, her surprise at the revelation is triggered by the undermining of the female system by masculine signifiers (Becht 128); in other words, O'Connor does not manage to *pass* for a woman, and the result is a mere illusion of femininity, a vision of drag, where appearance is feminine, but the essence remains masculine (Newton 124). In the absence of more actively political strategies that could be employed in the public sphere by O'Connor in order to express their female identity, clothing serves the purpose of a rather intimate and the sole technique for expressing their longing and suffering.

However, in another episode when a male character, Felix Volkbein, catches O'Connor in the middle of their performance, as they were "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" (Barnes 57), O'Connor is recognized more truthfully.

The male character experiences what he calls a “double confusion” performed by O’Connor the “acrobat,” “dumb-founder” or “man of magic,” which arguably evokes a process whereby the masculine signifiers evaporate in order to cast a “magical” (Barnes 57) veil on Felix’s eyes. Felix believes O’Connor to be as truthful a woman as *Nightwood* allows in that moment, but this victory is far from a conquered assumption of femininity, and more of a momentary victory that fades into an awareness of O’Connor’s seeming performance and their status as a “gender pretender” who cannot evade accountability for their *misperformance* of femininity, a femininity in line with essentialized images created by and for the cisnormative regime (Bettcher qtd. in Nordmarken 154). As Butler emphasizes, individuals are only rendered “intelligible” when their gendering aligns with “recognisable standards of gender intelligibility” (qtd. in Gilbert 20), thus showing how transgendered individuals, too, only become intelligible when their outward presentation approximates a successful picture of cisgendered norms.

The breach between cross-dressing and transgenderism as motivating O’Connor’s cross-dressing lies in the scope of the gender shift, or in whether one can speak of transformation/performance or transition/identity. Magnus Hirschfeld mentions the case of a patient with a “mania for women’s clothing, to look absolutely like a woman on the outside as the desire of his feminine side for corresponding forms,” as a process of reliving themselves of the burden of a male appearance: “Then, when I throw off all that is the man and put on the woman externally, I can almost physically feel how the false, the violence, leaves me and disappears like fog” (34). A similar sense of this violent sentiment of sex/gender asymmetry is voiced by O’Connor as well: “When we are born, we are but born to the liberty of the house— all our life is but a going out to the place of execution and death” (Barnes 140). The house remains the peaceful intimacy where one’s gender essence can be played out with no repercussions, but leaving the house forces one to adjust their gender according to the regulations of the “outside world.” Misadjustment of gender to sex leads to “execution”—a manner of exemplifying a life lived as if severed from the point of view of essentialized gender identity—“and death”—as an either literal or metaphoric understanding of the punishment of the biologized gender misconduct. However, while Hirschfeld’s patient is a cross-dresser who “wear women’s clothing because they are women’s clothing” (Gilbert 24), O’Connor’s behaviour betrays desires of a different kind, and a transgendered ontology of femininity which escapes them.

One can see that within the context of *Nightwood*’s critical response, cross-dressing and transgenderism remain almost fundamentally different, but it is important to emphasize that

in fact they are not. Cross-dressers are transgendered individuals, even though they continue to face discrimination within their own community (Gilbert 25). However, for the purpose of this article, a distinction will be kept in order to discuss the discriminatory understanding of cross-dressing as a mere fetishist drive, as well as the multiple insufficiencies of applying it to O'Connor. Cross-dressing may also be seen as an embodiment of drag and camp discourses, whose purpose is “not to conflict reality with another reality, but to abandon the notion of reality through roles and their seductive atmosphere and lightly manipulate appearances,” as a strategy of creating pretences that evade the appropriation of truth (Case 304). In other words, a cross-dresser guards his masculinity even under the pretence of feminine appearance, for he represents “the extreme limit case of ‘male subjectivity,’ ‘proving’ that he is male against the most extraordinary odds” (Garber “Spare Parts” 324). In her study of drag queens, *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton discusses the traits of drag and camp as ideologies that dictate cross-dressing performances. Inside the world of homosexual cross-dressing, dressing as a woman comes with a controlled binary system of masculinity-femininity, where each side stands for “the inside” – the real self which is “stigmatised” during the performance—and “the outside”—a social self that comes with a “calculated respectability”—respectively (122). The two levels on which the oppositional system can be enacted are “within the sartorial system” by recourse to a feminine costume mingled with masculine elements, and outside the sartorial system, when a fully feminine appearance has its illusion shattered by a revelation of the impersonator’s male essence, such as vocal dropping, sexed references to maleness, etc. (Newton 122). The substance of drag inhabits a place of gendered illusion, where a homosexual male places himself as a male in female attire, and there is a permanent awareness in the performer and audience that the male essence remains on the same level as the female appearance (Newton 123). Alternatively, camp ideologies work on the incongruity expressed by drag queens in order “to achieve a higher synthesis,” and the drag stigma of the homosexual becomes visibly “loaded with contempt” in camp (Newton 125).

The importance of discussing camp ideologies within the context of *Nightwood*’s transgender character lies in the necessity of reconciling a vision of humorous cross-dressing with the excruciating struggle for female recognition within a novel that punishes not deviation, but self-manifestation and self-acceptance. The character is vocal about their identity, as well as the marginalization of the queer community to which they belong: “‘And do I know my Sodomites? . . . and what the heart goes bang up against if it loves one of them,

especially *if it's a woman* loving one of them. What do they find then, that this lover has committed *the unpardonable error of not being able to exist*” (Barnes 79; emphasis mine). The presence of camp discourses in the novel, far from validating a universal demonstration of O'Connor's cross-dresser—rather than transgendered—ontologies, is testimony to the complexity of a novel fraught with ambiguities. That O'Connor *passes* as a homosexual cross-dresser rather than a (transgender) woman shows both the author's standing as far as transitioning ethics are concerned—within a novel that could easily be considered transphobic by its own as well as today's standards—but it equally reveals the lack of transparency and the universally-imposed experience of transgendered individuals, who are meant to simulate specific ideas of womanhood or manhood in order to be—at least partly—acknowledged.

Esther Newton theorizes the camp system as reliant on three elements: incongruity (the subject matter), theatricality (the style), and humour (the strategy) (125). As far as incongruity is concerned, any juxtaposition of clashing elements creates a campy contrast, and queer ontologies are particularly campy because they rely on “moral deviation”: “One informant said, ‘Camp is all based on homosexual thought. It is all based on the idea of two men or two women in bed. It's incongruous and it's funny’” (Newton 126). O'Connor plays on incongruous contrasts whenever they refer to themselves as a woman while behaving and being dressed as a man: “Just the girl that God forgot” (Barnes 109), “the last woman left in this world, though I am the bearded lady)” (145), “I, the Old Woman who lives in the closet” (196), “I'm the other woman that God forgot” (202), “‘I'm a lady in no need of insults’” (214). Theatricality exposes a core of the queer experience, the stigma, which is dramatized so as to allow the individual to put on a mask of heteronormativity all while guarding “distance” in the role-playing of shifting appearances (Newton 127). The two elements of camp are bound together in O'Connor's public persona: the homosexual male that betrays a sympathetic identification with femininity, in line with betrayed drag illusions that concretize the image of the manly man putting on a feigned mask of womanhood for humorous purposes, a lustrous veneer concealing O'Connor's despondent self-pity. This would imply that O'Connor the transgender woman is playing the role of an effeminate homosexual in order to gain acceptance and a considerable sense of recognition inside a sexual category that is significantly more familiar and accessible for O'Connor's acquaintances. It should be noted that the performance of drag by gay cisgendered people *is* a performance, while transgender people perform drag outside the pretence of performativity (Carroll 19). For Butler, drag is a system which “both appropriates and subverts” oppressive systems, but it is

“not first an appropriation and then a subversion” but rather often “both at once; sometimes it remains caught in an irresolvable tension, and sometimes a fatally unsubversive appropriation takes place” (*Bodies That Matter* 128). This practice becomes naturalized in transgendered ontologies because the emulation of “realness” becomes “the site of the phantasmatic promise of . . . rescue” from discriminatory narratives (130).

Considering this, humour is an essential strategy in camp performances because it enables a “system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying,” a position whereby queer experience loses its despondent dimension in favour of “a positive homosexual identity” (Newton 128). In the novel, humour loses its positive allure of cross-dresser camp in order to better suit the hurtful impossibility of transitioning. An important occurrence of humour is to be found in O’Connor’s statements regarding their ideal—and desired – standard of femininity, which aligns itself with a replica of domestic patriarchy. O’Connor’s confessions betray domestic desire and once again reinforce “wrong body” discourses: “God, I never asked better than to boil some good man’s potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar” (Barnes 133). The ardent yearning for a humiliating life tied entirely to procreating and catering to a man—who is equally supposed to embody an exceptional standard of virile masculinity, as personified earlier under the symbol of a “sailor” (Barnes 132)—reveals less an active and vehement condonement of patriarchal femininity and more a desperate desire of fashioning themselves an identity of a woman that *passes* unmistakably for a woman. Domestic life is conceptualized as desirable because it entails a coherent and productive existence, as opposed to a life bound to the “night” of queer and transgendered ontologies. In line with Elizabeth Freeman’s theorisation of “chrononormativity” as an articulation of the “interlocking temporal schemes necessary . . . for the mundane workings of domestic life” (xxii) and as the organizer of “individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (3), O’Connor yearns for a life that – through ceaseless repetition – acquires the undeniable status of gendered truths, timeless patterns of femininity or masculinity (4). Femininity is assured by the rhythm of love, financial security, heteronormative attraction, and motherliness, which become “primal. . . human conditions” (Freeman 5), but O’Connor inhabits not the timeless, but instead the fractured temporality (7), distinctly marked on the body through a morphology of “hurt” and desire (11-12). Since passing entails “telling a story, living an identity, that is supposedly seamless and unambiguous” (Sullivan 106), the reinforcement of sexist standards of feminine behaviour tied to the domestic home, motherhood, housekeeping, and submission to a husband all represent unquestionable and widely encouraged pictures of femininity which the transgender

community have been known to slide into in order to avoid social complications. According to Sheila Jeffreys, transgender individuals are “more loyalists than rebels. They demonstrate the extraordinary power of heterosexuality as a political system and are involved in the constant reproduction of its basic dynamic, masculinity/femininity” (qtd. in Sullivan 106). Transitioning into an accepted norm of femininity and femaleness leaves out the prospect of being sanctioned for “appropriating” gender in ways that remain marred in society by sexed individuality. Gender standards regarded as oppressive by cissexual women secure transgender women a stable identity inside the entered gender, as “passing means being accepted as the gender one presents oneself as. It means not being denied a job, laughed at, beaten up, or even killed because one is ‘weird’” (Sullivan 105). By condoning patriarchal notions of the feminine, and by speaking “a language that is already speaking, even if one speaks it in a way that is not precisely how it has been spoken before” (Butler, “Doing Justice” 190), O’Connor safeguards an embodiment of womanhood via transgendered emulation. Patriarchal womanhood remains desirable because it represents an unquestioned, ‘timeless’ standard, as O’Connor points out: “Take away a man’s conformity and you take away his remedy” (Barnes 207). Thus, it becomes clear that O’Connor does not simply desire signifiers of femaleness but the appropriation of the female body, and the patriarchal restrictions imposed on women are revealed as desirable as well.

However, O’Connor’s fantasized portrait of desired femaleness equally bears the mark of an old transsexual narrative that sees the transgender individual’s true gender identity as trapped in the wrong body,

*In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps it’s that memory that haunts me. The wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future, and am I to blame if I’ve turned up this time as I shouldn’t have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king’s kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner? (Barnes 132; emphasis mine)*

Firstly, this soliloquy is laden with the humorous picture of “the high soprano” which reconfigures *cross-dresser* camp through its displacement of wretchedness in favour of light-heartedness. From the fairly typical images of the domestic wife and the French young girl, O’Connor invokes an instantiation of femininity which more closely resembles a comical

type to be found in French novels and plays. The plump opera singer is, too, a reinforcement of female essentialism due to the emphasis placed on the shape of her body, and she exhibits a model of commanding, sensual femininity, an ideal that reveals both O'Connor's dissociation from embodying socially-accepted femininity within herself, as well as their despondent powerlessness in imposing themselves as a subjectivity worthy of acknowledgment and respect (if not admiration, as well) from their fellow characters and from the world at large. For Butler, this image would constitute a "phantasmatic attempt to approximate realness" which "exposes the norms that regulate realness as themselves phantasmatically instituted and sustained," a "sanctioned imaginary" (130). The rococo visuals of the plump opera singer situate themselves along an anti-feminist rationale because they depict physical traits that are for the most part unattainable for O'Connor—blonde curly hair, pregnancy, large breasts – and which place worth in society on appearance and the female reproductive function and ability to give birth. Realness in this case extends into parody and one can trace a return to patriarchal systems more oppressive than in O'Connor's twentieth century, but nevertheless largely unquestioned. O'Connor seems to not only derive satisfaction from desiring feminine embodiment as outlined in the plump, pregnant "high soprano," but also desire the signifiers of a femininity left untouched by social and political emancipation as they would be reflected on the body. More than this, the baroque or rococo imagery of the female singer subverts claims to a stable femininity distinct from masculinity, because the historical period is renowned for effeminacy, "male-looking women" and "female-looking men" whose attractiveness resides in their androgynous and highly manipulated appearance.

Secondly, O'Connor's belief that they "have turned up this time as I shouldn't have been" could be interpreted as either the author's condonement of a prevailing medical narrative that aimed at untangling "the transsexual tension" by originating it in a hidden "real" gender trapped within a false body, or *the character's* direct condonement, which has negative implications for their own self-recognition. It leads to a conviction that the present struggle with transgender acknowledgement has its roots in a culpable past temporality in which the female gender "has been there all along as an affective force of the past in the present" (Sundén qtd. in Israeli-Nevo 61). Inhabiting a *past* temporality implies halting the *present* as well as *future* process of gender potentiality and experiencing them as closed and as personal presents, thus "allow[ing] an indeterminacy to the subaltern subjectivity" (Israeli-Nevo 62). This dissociation from the present locus of potential experience materializes from a belief that happiness is to be found in the past—in a previous life in O'Connor's case, for whom 'remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future'—or in the future—after

one has “passed and found a bodily and social home”—thus enforcing an “out of time” dimension on the transgender body (Israeli-Nevo 62). O’Connor articulates this fear that the queer body remains atemporal and, despite their placement under the public eye at all times, unseen and unheard: “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 eternally moving downward; but in one place, and perpetually before the eye*” (Barnes 79; emphasis mine). For Elizabeth Freeman, “hurt is what histories” and what signals the “fractured time” inscribed on the queer or transgendered body (12). In this way, suffering becomes a temporality in itself which pushes the transgendered body outside of its claim to historicity, outside of any claims to transition or recognition.

The transgendered body is permanently exposed and regulated, and for O’Connor, privacy itself comes to belong to the public sphere of cisnormativity. However, O’Connor equally expresses a future fear regarding the transitioned female body that they are forbidden to embody but which would pose the threat of a “deprivation of the privacy of disappearance.” Atalia Israeli-Nevo discusses the importance of “taking one’s time” in transition, which holds the potential of “pull[ing] him/her/them back into the time cycle” (62). In O’Connor’s case, their repeated identifications with womanhood disturbs the assumption that “what O’Connor wants is not a female body, but the signifiers of femaleness” (Martins 113). For a transgender woman, the signifier of maleness generates anguish because its visibility represents “an outward sign of gendered subjectivity” (Garber “Spare Parts” 324). At the same time, the transgender experience challenges the claim of sexual origin in order to call into question the expectations of transitioning: “the body moves from being a historical entity determined by an originary point to a body that incurs its history through a re-creation, a body, that is, that comes to terms with the instability of its own archive” (Gozlan qtd. in Gozlan 4). The reform in the linearity of transitioning narratives implies both “taking one’s time,” and reconfiguring the final product of the transition as an engendered subjectivity, thus removing the possibility of being othered when one does not mirror gender expectations. O’Connor’s patriarchal standards of femininity recreate the anxiety of gender ideologies imposed upon the transitioning subject. According to Israeli-Nevo, this “distorted movement between perceived norms of trans bodies and their counterparts in reality allows to pause and linger on the subversive politics of trans subjectivity, and the fluidity of gender itself” (64) as a means for remodelling the expectations of a sexed transitioned product into a *gendered* subjectivity that abandons universal paradigms of masculinity and femininity, and

“deconstructing cisgenderism as the hegemonic and, therefore, invisible ideology of sexual difference” (Gozlan 4).

Recognition remains out of reach until the end of the novel, when O’Connor shows up at the *Café de la Mairie du VI<sup>e</sup>* and expresses their frustrations with a world that made them narrate themselves dry, but never truly *listened*: “‘May they all be damned! The people in my life who have made my life miserable, coming to me to learn of degradation and the night’” (Barnes 227). As O’Connor is getting more and more drunk, they confess their identity to an audience that mocks them, including an old friend, an ex-priest who threatens O’Connor: “‘Well, there’s something in that, still I like to know what is what.’ ‘You do, do you?’ said the doctor” (Barnes 226). O’Connor admits to having never taken the steps to reveal themselves to the world, but they are equally aware of the impossibility of the act, which renders them miserable and willing to come out in front of a jeering crowd, during a night that is painted as their last: “Yet there are some that I have neglected for my spirit’s sake. . . the kind of boy who only knows two existences—himself in a mirror—back and front” (Barnes 227). The singular freedom granted to the character was a degree of flexibility in their role as a story-teller, but the universality behind their stories failed to express them fully to an audience that could grasp the hidden layers of O’Connor’s stories. While the philosophy of camp is one of “transformations and incongruity” (Newton 124), O’Connor’s destiny seems to be more closely tied to a philosophy of *encampment*, an isolation within themselves, where the few humorous attempts at queering their self-contempt remain experienced as painful thrusts “eternally moving the body downwards,”

God, take my hand and get me up out of this great argument—*the more you go against your nature, the more you will know of it*—hear me, heaven! *I’ve done, and been everything that I didn’t want to be or do*—Lord, put the light out—so I stand here, beaten up and mauled and weeping, *knowing I am not what I thought I was, a good man doing wrong*. . . I talk too much, because *I have been made so miserable by what you are keeping hushed*. I’m an *old worn out lioness, a coward in my corner*, for the sake of my bravery *I’ve never been one thing that I am*, to find out what I am! Here lies *the body of Heaven*. (Barnes 229; emphasis mine)

The end of O’Connor’s narrative arc culminates in disembodiment, in a shedding of their aspirations to enter a female gender to which they are not allowed access. “The body of

Heaven” is the sexed male body that ceased to desire passage onto female recognition. O’Connor’s merely feminized body is rendered through performances of identity that are constrained by sexual and gender ideologies, and the attempt to challenge the status quo render queer identities unintelligible for the hegemonic discourse of cisnormativity. As O’Connor laments: “I have not only lived my life for nothing, but I’ve told it for nothing—abominable among the filthy people” (Barnes 233). Judith Butler argues that individuals outside of the sphere of normativity do not benefit from a language that appropriately expresses their own identities, as “there is some core of the subject who speaks, who speaks beyond what is sayable, and it is this ineffability . . . of the other who is not disclosed through speech but leaves a portentous shard of itself in its saying, a self that is beyond discourse itself” (AT 192). O’Connor’s voice is ultimately silenced as they announce that there is nothing left, “now *nothing, but wrath and weeping!*” (Barnes 233). According to Tyrus Miller, the narrative surplus characteristic of *Nightwood*’s style indicates the impossibility of “‘rescue’—both as an issue of plot and as a problem of interpretation” (151), and thus “presenting existing redemptive strategies, for the modernist text and for the marginalized, as fundamentally insufficient” (Goody 171).

On the matter of reconciling transphobic lines of thought in the novel with the reality of the century, that the mere representation of the transgender woman *within* the ambiguities and insufficiencies of her reconceptualization as matters of inversion, degeneracy, or effemination, bearing the mark of sexed male politics, makes of *Nightwood* a novel interested in what Michel Foucault called “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (81). Granting the spotlight to a transgender character is an act meant to unravel “historical contents that have been masked or buried in functional coherences or formal systemizations” (Foucault 81) and the fact that O’Connor’s transgender epistemologies are reworked into a complex pessimistic philosophy debating the dichotomies male/female and mind/body as interlinked with a traumatic, exploitative view of history, describes the prioritization of queer ontology, as “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges, naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (82). For O’Connor, all deviant discourses of queerness and transgenderism represent the stuff of “legend,” made up of the stories that “do not amount to much,” whereas heteronormativity and cisgenderism are “history, the best the high and the mighty can do with theirs” (Barnes 30). In other words, legends remain circulated locally and can be stories of deviation and “trivial” *defiance*, but history remains in place and continues to enforce its hegemonic power.

In conclusion, *Nightwood* reinterprets transphobia as a discourse that is both reinforced and negotiated, and O'Connor articulates an epistemology of the transgender woman whose genuine realization is forbidden by sexually normative and essentialising discourses. Queer and transgender knowledges amount to stories that do not find a suitable place in the historical archives, and since deviation is outlawed, *Nightwood* speaks from outside of history. Transgendered self-expression was analysed in accordance with both early and contemporary perspectives in order to reassess O'Connor within the "transgender capacity" of its ambiguous and complex gender unfolding which includes tensions of drag and camp narratives and which becomes voiced through patriarchal desires for domestic femininity. However, the end sees O'Connor remaining unrecognized and shunned, a despondent symbol of unattained feminine realness.

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest scholarship on the novel focuses on the functions of inversion and lesbian desire: Carolyn Allen's article on "The Erotics of Nora's Narrative" conceptualizes the "lesbian erotics" of the novel within the framework of Freudian critique and argues for its reconfigurations of lesbian desire and subversion of hegemonic discourses, Alex Goody places the lesbian couple in conversation with narratives of "abjection" and the rendering of "the grotesque body" (165), while Susana S. Martins understands Robin as the "beast turning human," a narrative of primeval desire (122-123).

<sup>2</sup> This term aligns with Dianne Chisholm's conceptualisation of "obscene modernism" as a notion of transgressivity that derives not only from its illegality (167) but also its subversion of the "ubiquitous gaze of panoptic power" (169). For Chisholm, modernist authors configure obscenity as a "particular practice of transgression that shocks and disperses the reactive forces of the sexual status quo while mobilizing radical, historical, and political insight" beyond the "profane limit of bourgeois decency" (170).

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