Nightwood and the “Terror of Uncertain Signs”

Teresa de Lauretis

“In every society,” writes Roland Barthes, “various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs.” That is the function of the linguistic message in the (advertising) image, whose polysemy would otherwise produce a traumatic suspension of meaning. Such an anchoring function is provided by narrative in literary fiction, where the rhetorical/figural dimension of language, in disrupting the stability of meaning, carries what Paul de Man calls “the persistent threat of misreading.” Or, as de Man puts it elsewhere, reading a literary text “leaves a residue of indetermination that has to be, but cannot be, resolved by grammatical means.”

Narrative, like grammar and logic, refers to an extralinguistic and generalizable set of phenomena; even as fiction, disbelief suspended, narrative reaffirms the stable, familiar ground of referential meaning. When narrativization, the construction of a narrative in the literary text, is not working properly, whether by fault or by design, “the terror of uncertain signs” threatens the reader as would an incomplete sentence or an illogical statement, and all the more so if the novel is figurally dense and highly wrought grammatically. Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood is such a novel, written in a style both stark and intensely allusive, at once lucid and obfuscating, as if only lan-
I approached this text several times over the years, but it was not until I
read Barthes that I understood why I could not go on reading Nightwood:
the narrative anchorage eluded me, was too weak or too dispersed; the chain
of signifiers would not halt, would not find a resting point where meaning
could temporarily congeal. And it was not until I read de Man that I could
let myself sustain the traumatic process of misreading—not looking for the
plot, that is, for narrative or referential meaning, but going instead with
the figural movement of the text and acquiescing to the otherness in it, the “in-
human” element in language.5

It is not that a plot is missing in Nightwood, for there is a narrative—as
Matthew says to Nora, who is eagerly waiting to hear with whom her lover
is betraying her—there is a narrative, “but you will be put to it to find it”
(N, p. 97). Indeed, the story is told with two contrary narrative strategies:
one stretches out the time of narration by excruciatingly protracted mono-
logues and punctiliously detailed descriptions of characters and locations,
like a film shot in long takes where we can see the minutest details of a scene
but what “happens” is next to nothing. To the dilation of the time of nar-
rative Barnes juxtaposes a second narrative strategy, a contraction of the
time of narrated events and their elliptical arrangement, such that the pas-
sage of months, at times years, can take up no more than three lines of text,
while the events of one night may spread out over two or more chapters, as
they are first told and then retold through a character, as in a flashback.

The story concerns a group of eccentric expatriates, mostly Americans,
who meet in Paris in the 1920s. They are marginal people, social misfits,
disasters waiting to happen, of the sort that history omits from the official
record and civil society confines to ghettos, psychiatric wards, or the urban
nightworld. They are among those whom Fascism destined to extinction—
the non-Aryans, the mentally or physically weak, transvestites, and ho-
mossexuals. They remind us that their story, though set in the 1920s, was
written in the 1930s under the impending threat of Nazi racial laws. The

5. De Man, “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” The Resistance to
Theory, p. 96.

Teresa de Lauretis is professor of the History of Consciousness at the
University of California, Santa Cruz. Her most recent books are Figures of
Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory (2007) and the forthcoming Freud’s Drive:
Readings in Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Film (2008).
night or the night wood, like la selva oscura in Dante’s Inferno, is the place literal and figural in which these derelicts meet; but their hell is inside them, as if the trauma of history reverberated in their souls. Nightwood’s characters are introduced one at a time in the first four chapters, and their lives and stories immediately intertwine.

The first to appear is Baron Felix Volkbein, a Viennese Jew who passes for Christian with a fake title and pedigree and an obsession for aristocracy and the imperial courts of old Europe; but he will never be able “to span the impossible gap” that separates him from the objects of his passion because Felix, the novel says, is “heavy with impermissible blood” (N, p. 3). The faux baron meets the self-styled doctor Matthew Dante O’Connor, a San Francisco-born Irish American and fallen Catholic, past middle age, poor, unattractive, and homosexual. Today we would say more precisely that the doctor is a queen and quite possibly transsexual. His social conversations, like the most private and intimate, are interminable monologues chockful of bawdy remarks and dirty jokes but also studded with learned references and quotations, lewd but self-ironic anecdotes, philosophical lectures on the world that suddenly morph into gossip, and a bragging drenched in desperation.

Robin Vote is the young woman Matthew is called to assist when she faints in the street. The title chapter defines her as a sleepwalker; in fact, she spends the nights getting drunk in bars and wandering in the streets. The reader is told nothing of her background except that she is an American. Robin hardly ever speaks in the novel and is most often presented from the point of view of other characters. What we know of her is through the effect she has on the others: she is the empty center around which their lives and passions spin. For example, Felix marries her so she can give him sons who will honor the past he worships. But shortly after the birth of a child, a small and sickly boy, Robin walks out on husband and son and disappears. The novel laconically states: “When she was seen again in the quarter, it was with Nora Flood” (N, p. 49).

Nora Flood is in her late twenties, well-to-do, politically progressive, and from the western United States. Her house was “the strangest ‘salon’ in America. . . .” The ‘paupers’ salon for poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love; for Catholics, Protestants, Brahmins, dabblers in black magic and medicine; all these could be seen sitting about her oak table before the huge fire, Nora listening, her hand on her hound” (N, p. 50). The storyline develops around Nora’s love for Robin and their disastrous relationship, from its halcyon years through its breakup—when Robin leaves Nora for Jenny, an older and very rich American woman—to Robin’s return to Nora in the last chapter, and the shocking ending of the book.
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The fifth and seventh chapters, the longest in the book, each consists of a conversation between Matthew and Nora, although they are rather monologues than dialogues. It is tempting to read them as a kind of theoretical or philosophical core of the novel, for they are thematically focused on what Barnes calls “the night,” a figure for sexuality as a traumatic, unmanageable excess of affect leading to object degradation.6 And indeed I read them as a sustained meditation on what Freud called drives (Trieb), but in fact the thematic of the night dominates the novel as a whole, including, and perhaps especially, the last chapter with its notorious enigmatic ending.

The inscription of sexuality as trauma and enigma occurs throughout the text in figures such as an “odour of memory,” “the echo of some foray in the blood that had no known setting,” “the shudder of a past that is still vibrating” (N, pp. 118, 44, 119), and countless other tropes—metaphors, catachreses, daring conceits—that make up the figural weave of Nightwood, whether they are attributed to a character or not. To both the narrator and the characters, however they might rationalize it, sexuality remains unfathomable, and satisfaction or knowledge unattainable. It is as if its enigma could only be expressed in a dense, oracular language, in conceptually elaborate metaphors harking back to John Donne and the metaphysical poets (“the foetus of symmetry nourishes itself on cross purposes” [N, p. 97]), in the hybrid visual images of animal and human (“an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear” [N, p. 37]), or in the endless stream of allusions, parables, and prophecies with which the doctor attempts to fill the void in his life, hiding the chasm between language and the real.

The radical alterity of the night is fully dramatized in the short last chapter, almost a coda, entitled “The Possessed.” Here the events, which take place in North America, are compressed into a mere four pages written like the script for a film sequence. After leaving Jenny, Robin heads west into Nora’s part of the country, circling closer and closer to her house and sleeping in an abandoned chapel nearby. One night, hearing her dog run about the house barking and whining, and then run off, Nora follows him and, like him, starts running, “cursing and crying” (N, p. 169). At last she reaches

6. Barnes’s first title for the book was Anatomy of the Night, and it was T. S. Eliot, her editor at Faber, who persuaded her to go with Nightwood instead. While Andrew Field’s biography credits Eliot for the title Nightwood—see Andrew Field, Djuna: The Formidable Miss Barnes (Austin, Tex., 1985), p. 212—Cheryl Plumb states that Barnes herself came up with it and so announced in a letter to Emily Coleman on 23 June 1935: “Only later in October 1936 did Barnes write Coleman of her discovery that the title was Thelma’s name: ‘Nigh T. Wood—low, thought of it the other day. Very odd’” (Barnes, Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts, ed. Cheryl J. Plumb [Normal, Ill., 1995], p. 13).
the chapel. And there, freeze-framed on the doorjamb, Nora sees Robin on all fours inciting and inviting the dog, crawling after him and barking “in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching.”

The dog began to cry then, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her; soft and slow his feet went padding. He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees. [N, p. 170]

This enigmatic ending, shocking in its unequivocal simulation of a sexual act from frenzied crescendo to (failed) orgasmic release, likely contributed to the ostracism Nightwood suffered in the U.S. It is as if Barnes wanted to deal a final blow to her country’s puritanism, which is legible throughout the novel in Nora’s Christian-liberal views and repeatedly underscored by the doctor. The novel refuses to explain the scene or to rationalize Robin’s behavior. It merely describes in her the physical manifestations of an excess of affect that cannot be bound to a suitable object or to its immediate object (the dog). In Freud’s metapsychology, psychic affect is the essence of the drive, and it is the function of the ego to keep its quantity constant by binding affect to objects or to the ego itself (in narcissism). Throughout the novel, and more so in the ending, Robin behaves as one in thrall to unmanageable impulses. Her childlike, unreflective, and unaccountable acts bespeak an unachieved symbolization that, were we interested in clinical diagnosis, would be suggestive of the loss of reality characteristic of the ego in psychosis. But we are not dealing with a clinical case history, and our interest lies rather in tracing the textual inscription of the drive through the novel’s “stereographic plurality.”

With Barthes, then, we might say that Nightwood denies the reader the pleasure of the text by refusing to explain the enigma of Robin, the enigma of a sexuality reaching a traumatic paroxysm in the final scene in the chapel. But the doctor, that other American pervert, who knows the abject degradation of the ego confronted with the ungovernable force of the night, has given us many a clue. While Nora remains speechless and uncomprehending before the spectacle of Robin’s “brawl with the Beast” (by “Beast” I do not mean the dog, mind you, but the excess of affect or unbound psychic energy that racks Robin’s body and makes her run and laugh and cry and bark and weep), Matthew has words for it that in their very figularity ar-

ticalate the figural nature of the drive. For instance: “The roaring lion goes forth, seeking his own fury” (N, p. 132), as he tells Nora earlier about his own inability to refrain from masturbation in a church. By denying psychological explanations for Robin’s actions and leaving the reader with only the doctor’s obscure pronouncements as a guide, the text inscribes in the narrative the figure of sexuality as an undomesticated, unsymbolizable force, not bound to objects and beyond the purview of the ego—a figure of sexuality as, precisely, drive.

The pervasive references to animals of all sorts that punctuate the text are both mythical and diegetic. While the former color the doctor’s parables with biblical or surrealist overtones, the actual, diegetic animals the narration presents in conjunction with Robin have a different expressive function. Next to “the night,” the doctor’s favorite metaphor for sexuality is “the brawl of the Beast,” and the two may reappear combined in a conceit such as the following: “Life, the pastures in which the night feeds and prunes the cud that nourishes us to despair” (N, p. 83); or in his remark about women at the opera “dropping their cloaks rather low to see the beast in a man snarling up in his neck—and they never guessed that it was me, with both shoulders under cover, that brought the veins to their escorts’ temples” (N, p. 103). Robin herself is often compared to animals in the doctor’s direct discourse: she is “a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin” (N, p. 146); she smiles “sideways like a cat with canary feathers to account for” (N, p. 103); she has “temples like those of young beasts cutting horns as if they were sleeping eyes” (N, p. 134). And again, her eyes have “the long unqualified range of the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye” (N, p. 37), as stated in what appears at first to be a free indirect discourse linked to Felix, “who had been looking into [her eyes] intently because of their mysterious and shocking blue.”

Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person’s every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey.

Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers. [N, p. 37]
Only at the end of the passage does the reader realize that such reflections belong to the narrating voice, as it distances itself from Felix: “Something of this emotion came over Felix, but being racially incapable of abandon, he felt that he was looking upon a figurehead in a museum” (N, pp. 37–38). Remarkably, the movement away from Felix to the third-person narrator does not result in a shift in tone or a greater or lesser figural density. Indeed, the allusion to familial cannibalism resonates with the doctor’s statement, “The dead have committed some portion of the evil of the night” (N, p. 86), and with Nora’s: “Robin is incest too . . . a relative found in another generation” (N, pp. 156–57). The stylistic continuity of the narrating voice with that of Felix and Nora, and more markedly with the doctor’s speech, effects a prismatic, ironic diffraction of authorial consciousness through the characters who spin in Robin’s orbit, as if to approach her enigma from diverse angles.

Robin is the figure of their obsessions and of the text’s obsession, a figure of sexuality as trauma and unrecoverable loss. “Psychical trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work,” wrote Freud in the early Studies on Hysteria (1893–95), linking sexual excitement in childhood to seduction, and seduction to trauma, symptom, and neurosis. Later, after decades of psychoanalytic work, he would extend the link and generalize it: “No human individual is spared such traumatic experiences; none escapes the repressions to which they give rise.” In other words, all human sexuality originates as trauma, in the excitation produced in the infantile body by the actions of the mother or caretaking others, which the infantile psychic apparatus is not yet able to handle or adequately relieve


and stores away (primal repression) as a mnemic or memory trace (Erinnerungsspur). The excitations thus inscribed in the psychic apparatus, and constituting the first nucleus of the unconscious—or what Freud also calls the psychical other (das andere Psychische), as distinct from der Andere, the physical, caretaking other(s)—remain active, though latent, as an internal alien entity; they are like "an agent that is still at work," in Freud's simile, or in Laplanche's felicitous figure, like a "spine in the flesh," "a veritable spine in the protective wall of the ego."  

Developing Freud and Breuer's statement that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (SH, 2:7), Laplanche argues that the reminiscences act like "an internal object constantly attacking the ego" (LDP, p. 42). They take the form of scenes or fragments of scenes, impressions, or fantasies from childhood whose sexual content is clouded by repression, as the pleasure derived from them was inadmissible to consciousness; but precisely because they are "preserved from all attrition by the process of repression," they become "a permanent source of free excitation." Thus, while the cause of the trauma cannot be recovered, nonetheless its effects continue through the agency of the unconscious. When a new event or experience awakens the memory of an earlier scene, "that memory acts from then on like a veritable 'internal alien entity,' henceforth attacking the subject from within, provoking within her sexual excitation" (LDP, p. 42). In this manner does the repressed return, in a recurrence afterward (nachträglich or après coup) that is not simply the delayed effect of an earlier bodily event but a new, psychic event.

Not unlike the mnemonic traces that constitute the unconscious, the "reminiscences" are not actual memories but rather intimations, vague recollections without specific content, bearing affect and often a sensory component, such as is conveyed in the figures with which the text of Nightwood seeks to capture the enigma of Robin: the "mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory," "the echo of some foray in the blood that had no known setting," "the shudder of a past that is still vibrating," an "odour of memory." Robin, we might say, is the splinter in the skin of the text. Her enigma is insoluble just as the cause of sexual trauma is unrecoverable. The novel can only refer to it as it is refracted in the emotions, desires, or reminiscences she elicits in the other characters, evoking for them the feeling of a past "not yet in history," of experiencing love as "the inbreeding of pain," or the self as an "uninhabited angel" (N, pp. 44, 129, 148).

In Felix, Robin awakens the "mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the

racial memory”; she is “the infected carrier of the past,” which haunts him and excludes him and which he hopelessly pursues. “He felt that her attention, somehow in spite of him, had already been taken by something not yet in history. Always she seemed to be listening to the echo of some foray in the blood that had no known setting.” And again, remembering her years later, he will tell the doctor: “The Baronin had an undefinable disorder, a sort of ‘odour of memory,’ like a person who has come from some place that we have forgotten and would give our life to recall. . . . There was in her every movement a slight drag, as if the past were a web about her, as there is a web of time about a very old building” (N, pp. 118–19). To Nora, Robin is the condition of self-love, the object shoring up the ego in narcissistic identification: “she is myself” (N, p. 127); “a woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own” (N, p. 143). “For Robin is incest too. . . . In her past time records . . . she was like a relative found in another generation” (N, pp. 156–57). And the narrator comments: “In Nora’s heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora’s blood” (N, p. 56).

To Matthew, the fallen Catholic, Robin embodies the sensual innocence of animals unfettered by civilized morality and the constraint of civility, sociality, or rationality; she is a creature of the night, “outside the ‘human type’—a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain” (N, p. 146). The text itself introduces Robin in the figural setting of an inhuman nature, a physicality already, necessarily, trapped in representation:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds . . . lay the young woman, heavy and dishevelled. . . . Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. . . . Like a painting by the douanier Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of an unseen dompteur, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-winds render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness.

[N, pp. 34–35]

These metaphors and similes, alluding to an instinctive animality in Robin, have been read as suggestive of a pre-Freudian view of sexuality in which animal is opposed to human as instinct to drive, body to mind, or the carnal to the spiritual. Even a reader as attentive to language as Kenneth
Burke interprets the ending as "Robin's ambiguous translation into pure beastliness" and the novel as aiming at "a kind of 'transcendence downward.'" Reading Nightwood as "Nora's conversion to perversion or inversion" ("Nora's romantic passion is a secular variant of the religious passion"), Burke finds "a Rhetorical problem" with its "stylistics of lamentation"—namely, its "reliance upon ethical or religious values, even though they are exemplified in reverse," and concludes: "In celebrating the modes of invert love (in the course of taking on Biblical accents to the ends of artistic entertainment), it must find ways to make the plot 'serious' (spoudaios). Devices for harping on love's sorrow and its attendant degradations serve this purpose. The impression of 'completion' (the teleios) is sought through the absoluteness of Robin's translation into identity with sheer beast" ("V," pp. 243, 241, 253).14

I want to argue that this is too conventional a reading. Consider, to begin with, how Robin herself interacts with animals in the novel. There is between them a sort of communication that is highly charged with affect but is not verbal or otherwise symbolically coded, a kind of exchange that takes place on the sensory register alone, without recognizable meaning—which is to say, outside representation. Consisting of inarticulate sounds, bodily movements, looks or gestures expressive less of conscious emotions than of intensities of affect, the "exchange," if so it can be called, is entirely outside the symbolic and imaginary registers, as if it were carried out through the primary process alone.

Furthermore, the relationship of Robin and Nora is framed by two such moments. When they first meet, by chance sitting next to each other at a circus show, a "powerful lioness" stops in front of Robin and locks "her yellow eyes afire" on her. Then, "as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface. At that the girl [Robin] rose straight up. Nora took her hand. 'Let's get out of here!' the girl said, and still holding her hand Nora took her out" (N, p. 54). Their last encounter occurs when Robin, in the chapel,
wakes up to the barking of Nora’s dog “half an acre away” (N, p. 168); the dog, sensing Robin’s presence, runs to her unrestrainably; and Nora follows him to the chapel, there to witness, benumbed, the scene that ends the novel—a scene without words but full of sound and fury, signifying something beyond, or before, representation.

In Nightwood, under the cultured, highly wrought discourse of the doctor, and the differently inflected discourses of Felix and Nora, runs a layer of nonverbal or presemiotic communication that the novel registers in Robin’s relation to animals and children. One might want to explain the Robin character by reading the lioness and the dog as fantasmatic figures or stand-ins for the repressed pre-Oedipal wishes that both instigate her attachment to Nora and make their adult relationship impossible. But a psychological reading falls short of appreciating what I think is the novel’s more original achievement, namely, the figural inscription of sexuality as drive, a psychic excitation that the ego, in the case of Robin, is unable to bind to itself or to external objects, and in any case (specifically in Nora’s case but in the doctor’s as well) disrupts the emotional coherence and threatens the self-possession of the ego by the violence of its affective charge. It is in this violence, in this unmanageable quantity of affect and the shattering effects it has on the ego, that sexuality is figured in Nightwood as a psychic force that is at once sexual drive and death drive. The latter, according to Freud, is precisely something beyond representation, something that pertains to the primary process alone and typically remains unconscious, “silent,” having no psychic representative (Vorstellungsrepräsentanz): “So long as [the destructive] instinct operates internally, as a death instinct, it remains silent; it only comes to our notice when it is diverted outwards as an instinct of destruction.”

15. Robin never sees again the child she gives birth to, but there is another child in the novel, a little girl living in Jenny’s house, of whom the novel offers only brief glimpses. Sylvia’s relation to Robin is summed up in their first encounter: the girl “sat, staring under her long-lashed eyelids at no one else [but Robin], as if she had become prematurely aware” (N, p. 70; emphasis added).

16. Carolyn Allen has shown how the erotics of loss between Nora and Robin is articulated in relation to the two axes feminine-masculine and mother-child but tilting toward the latter. She argues that it is the preeminence of the maternal in Nora’s fantasy, overlaid by the culturally scripted trope Mother, that makes Robin leave her. Allen further examines seduction and the erotics of nurture in Barnes’s short stories “Cassation,” “The Grande Malade,” and “Dusie,” reading them as sketches or studies toward Nightwood. See Carolyn Allen, Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), pp. 21–45.

17. See the description of Nora’s reaction to seeing Robin with Jenny: “Unable to turn her eyes away, incapable of speech, experiencing a sensation of evil, complete and dismembering, Nora fell to her knees, so that her eyes were not withdrawn by her volition, but dropped from their orbit by the falling of her body. . . . As she closed her eyes, Nora said ‘Ah!’ with the intolerable automatism of the last ‘Ah!’ in a body struck at the moment of its final breath” (N, p. 64).

The theoretical import of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is Freud's reconceptualization or refiguration of the drives in relation to the ego and to the social. While in the earlier hypothesis the sexual drive was associated with the primary process and unbound or free-floating psychic energy, threatening the disruption or the coming apart of the ego, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and thereafter it is to the death drive that he consigns the function of unbinding psychic energies, detaching them both from the ego and from objects/others and reducing psychic excitation to a zero level or inert state. Thus, as Laplanche has argued in metapsychological terms, the death drive ultimately appears in Freud as the recasting of the radical, unbinding psychic force that he had first associated with the sexual drive (see *LDP*, pp. 103–24).

The death drive is perhaps the most unnerving conceptual figure in Freud's metapsychology and certainly the least understood. I do not intend here to tread heavily on this terrain, but I do wish to take Freud's speculations back to my reading of *Nightwood* and, first, to Matthew's statement: "We will find no comfort until the night melts away; until the fury of the night rots out its fire" (*N*, p. 85). He is speaking to Nora, who is in agony with love and jealousy, in the throes of sexual passion; this is her "night," and the fury of the night is the excess of psychic affect that in Nora is bound to Robin. However, Matthew's phrasing, "We will find no comfort until ... the fury of the night rots out its fire," does not allude to sexual satisfaction but rather to the extinction of passion, its reduction to rot and ashes, to a burnt-out, inert state. Of his own night and its fury, the doctor speaks throughout the novel. I will give just one example.

The doctor's aphorism cited earlier, "The roaring lion goes forth, seeking his own fury," apparently accounting for his compulsion to masturbate in church, is prefaced by a sentence, in French in the text ("C'est le plaisir qui me bouleverse"), which in English would be something like "pleasure is my ruin" (*N*, p. 132). If sexual pleasure is ruinous, it is not so for moral reasons; the doctor's character all but disallows such a reading. Might it be so, instead, because sexual pleasure cannot be ultimately dissociated from that tendency of the drive to trespass beyond the pleasure principle, that is, beyond satisfaction? Because pleasure itself, which is the very aim of the drive in relation to the ego, is paradoxically part and parcel of the drive's surreptitious, "silent" work to reduce all psychic excitation to zero, thus causing the waning of desire and the coming undone of the ego? Indeed Matthew is speaking of masturbation, the solitary pleasure, and in the episode he recounts, his body does not respond to his wish and his penis remains limp: "And there I was, holding Tiny, bending over and crying, asking the question until I forgot and went on crying, and I put Tiny away then, like a ruined
bird” (N, pp. 132–33). The sexual drive is indistinguishable from the death drive.

Crying and weeping in *Nightwood* are the expression of an affect directly linked to sexuality as drive. Matthew is crying as he tries to masturbate. Nora, too, is “cursing and crying” as she follows her dog to Robin in the chapel. And again crying is a mark of the excitation she witnesses in both Robin and the dog during their physical interaction (“and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head”). But weeping is referred to Robin alone, when all movement in her body is over (“until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping” [N, p. 170]). Early on, at the circus where Robin and Nora meet, a lioness looks at Robin and “her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface,” Barnes writes, “as if a river were falling behind impassable heat” (N, p. 54).

If the weight of this last image—a waterfall contained by a translucent barrier of heat—carries into the final scene of the novel, then the tonal modulation of internal tears, crying, and weeping reiterates the doctor’s final words, which prophesy the ending of the novel: “now nothing, but wrath and weeping” (N, p. 166). And if, as I read it, the figural weave of the text inscribes sexuality as drive, as trauma and enigma, then weeping is both the bodily manifestation and the textual signifier of the psychic drift beyond the pleasure principle toward a zero level of tension and the silent quiescence of inorganic matter. In their peculiar punctuation, the doctor’s words, “now nothing, but wrath and weeping,” do not indicate an endpoint to the drift. Denying the comfort of quiescence after “the fury of the night rots out its fire,” they join together wrath and weeping, the sound and fury of sex and the silent drive to death, in the emphatic negation of any possible redemption (“Now nothing”). Just as Barnes refused to provide the text with the comforting closure of a narrative resolution.

In retrospect, I think that “the terror of uncertain signs” that made *Nightwood* unreadable for me was the disturbing, spectral presence of something silent, uncanny, unrepresentable, and yet figured—something with which I could only come to terms as the textual inscription of the death drive.