

THE BYZANTINE MODERNISM OF DJUNA BARNES

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IT WOULD BE easy – if it weren't tricky – to connect *Nightwood* to Christian texts. Djuna Barnes's 1936 novel is salient with religious imagery, symbolism and rhetoric. It frequently turns to religion and faith, and for some critics it even reads like some kind (admittedly a very unorthodox kind) of Christian parable.¹ And yet it is also and so very clearly a heretical, blasphemous novel, a text, as Daniela Caselli puts it, mixing understatement with Barnesian excess, 'not untouched by the bawdy, the blasphemous, and the obscene'.² *Nightwood* is not only irreverent but it is also a dense and slippery work, a work which resists productive meaning, prioritises surface over depth, and which therefore refuses any one reading – let alone a 'Christian' reading.³ *Nightwood*, in case it needs saying, is not a Christian text. This is not what I'd like to suggest here, nor is it to read Barnes's novel through the prism of Christian texts, finding similarities and differences along the way. What I'd like to do, rather, is read *Nightwood* and the fascinating characters that populate its world *with* some late antique and Byzantine Christian texts and the unlikely saints that these texts commemorate.

Why Byzantine? It has, of course, been common and natural for those interested in modern literature and religion to look back to earlier (and early) religious texts. Those within British and North American modernism have customarily looked to Western religious tales and sources. But what if we were to look eastwards and bring into our discussion of anglophone modernism, religion and myth texts of a different culture, geography and language? What would happen to our reading of *Nightwood* – and to our reading of modernism and religion more broadly – if we ventured towards Byzantium? What might this spatial and vertical expansion yield?⁴ What new unorthodox readings?

¹ Patricia Juliana Smith, "The Woman That God Forgot": Queerness, Camp, Lies, and Catholicism in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, in *Catholic Figures, Queer Narratives*, ed. Lowell Gallagher, Frederick S. Roden and Patricia Juliana Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 129. See also Celeste Jackson, 'Parables in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*', *The Explicator* 75, no. 3 (2017): 166–8.

² Daniela Caselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus* (London: Routledge, 2016), 156.

³ On *Nightwood* as resisting productive meaning, see Erin Holliday-Karre, 'Seductive Nights: The Circus as Feminist Challenge in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*', *Feminist Modernist Studies* 2, no. 3 (2019): 275. On *Nightwood* as prioritising surface over depth, see Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 159. See also Victoria L. Smith, 'A Story Beside(s) Itself: The Language of Loss in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*', *PMLA* 114, no. 2 (1999): 194–206, for whom the text keeps a loss of representation, including of meaning.

⁴ According to Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, this spatial (moving away from national to transnational modernisms) and vertical (pluralistic opening to other modernisms) expansion is what the new modernist studies has sought to do. See their article 'The New Modernist Studies', *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 737.

The texts I will be discussing alongside *Nightwood* are ‘Byzantine’ in the historical sense that they were written and spread within the Byzantine Empire, founded in 330 CE and taken over by the Ottomans in 1453. They are ‘Byzantine’ in the other sense of the term, too. In his recent book, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages*, Roland Betancourt, lingering on the connotations of ‘Byzantine’ as meaning devious, intricate, complicated and deceitful, teasingly suggests that the slur ‘Byzantine’ speaks to an ‘inherent queerness’ in Byzantine culture.⁵ The Byzantine texts I have in mind – stories of holy fools and of women crossing into men – record and celebrate queerness. This is a queerness that even the most anachronistic reading must of course acknowledge as different to the queerness of *Nightwood*, yet it is a queerness that, at the very least, gestures towards Barnes’s novel. Modern and Byzantine texts operate under ‘queer time’, thematise the lives of misfits, and transgress gender (and other) boundaries.

Out of this World: *Nightwood* and Byzantium

For all Barnes’s protestations to the contrary, it’s difficult to find anyone in *Nightwood* who’s ‘normal’.⁶ The novel is inhabited by people who don’t fit in, who are at once stifled and curtailed by normal life, and larger than it. Where to start? Felix is an imposter Baron, a Jew-turned-Christian. He is dressed ‘in part for the evening and in part for the day’ and is never at home in the world. He ‘had come upon the odd’, and insinuates himself ‘into the pageantry of the circus and the theatre’, for ‘Here he had neither to be capable nor alien’.⁷ At one point, Felix admits that

I wanted [. . .] to go behind the scenes, back-stage as it were, to our present condition, to find, if I could, the secret of time [. . .] One had to be a little mad to see into the past or the future, to be a little abridged of life to know life. (109)

A ‘little mad’ is a fair way to describe not only Felix but also the rest of the characters in *Nightwood*. One by one, these misfits walk in and out – and in again – our world. In order of appearance, these are: trapeze artist Princess Nadja, whose face had a ‘tense expression of an organism surviving in an alien element’ (11); fellow unreal circus artists Baron von Tink, Principessa Stasera y Stasero, King Buffo and the Duchess of Broadback; Dr Matthew O’Connor, ‘half-angel, half-freak’; Nora Flood, ‘disengaged’, ‘deranged’ and ‘By temperament [. . .] an early Christian’ (46); Robin Vote, ‘a woman who is beast turning human’ (33); and, finally, little Guido, who ‘was not like other children’ (97). Jenny Petherbridge, ‘one of the most unimportantly wicked women of her time’, is perhaps the only ‘normal’ character in the book.

These characters inhabit a world that is itself ‘a little mad’. In a little over 150 pages, Barnes takes us across cities, countries, continents and historical periods. The

⁵ Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 15.

⁶ Djuna Barnes to Emily Coleman (undated): ‘if you think [. . .] that the people here are not normal, hadn’t you better read the history of mankind (slightly at least) and then see how you would come up yoxx statement [sic].’ Quoted in Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 170.

⁷ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (London: Faber, 2007), 8, 9, 10. References to *Nightwood* are drawn from this edition and hereafter cited in parentheses.

story begins in 1880 in Vienna and ends in New York in the late 1920s, but narrative time keeps spiralling out of control. Some of the many boundaries that *Nightwood* bends to breaking point are those of ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’. The plot, the characters, the language, they all peregrinate; time is at once arrested and free flowing. For example, we start with Felix’s parents – Guido and Hedvig – but the linear narrative is quickly interrupted, as we learn that ‘At this point exact history stopped for Felix who, thirty years later, turned up in the world’. For Caselli, Felix is ‘frozen in a time of narration that nobody will be able to recapture’.⁸ This does not stop us – or Felix – from looking backwards. ‘To pay homage to our past’, Felix says at one point, ‘is the only gesture that also includes the future’ (36), and for Dr O’Connor, too, the ‘remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future’ (81). Time in *Nightwood* is queer, to use José Esteban Muñoz’s term for time that is not straight, not reproductive, but which still somehow looks forward: queerness for Muñoz is ‘an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future’.⁹ For Jeanette Winterson, the people in *Nightwood* ‘live on into the future because they were never strapped into time’, an assault on linearity that Winterson finds to be a very modernist affair.¹⁰ For Carolyn Dinshaw, however, this type of time – time that does not demarcate past and present, that exists beyond linearity, that collides different time frames or temporal systems in a single moment – is the exact opposite of modernist time: it is non-modern time.

According to Dinshaw, the study of medieval texts – Dinshaw has in mind Western medieval Christian texts from the twelfth through to the fifteenth century – reveals different temporalities, and ‘our exposure to, or contact with such temporalities’, she argues, ‘can expand our own temporal repertoires to include extensive nonmodern – okay, call them queer – temporal possibilities’.¹¹ Drawing on a range of thinkers, chiefly Bruno Latour, Dinshaw defines the modernist idea of time as time-as-measurement, an idea she in turn sees as at the heart of specialisation, professionalisation and the cult of the expert.¹² Against this modernist time, Dinshaw proposes a different non-modern time scheme, that of amateurism: ‘Amateur temporality starts and stops at will; tinkerers and dabblers can linger at moments of pleasure when the professionals must soldier duly onward.’¹³ Time in *Nightwood*, we may say after Muñoz and Dinshaw, is queer and is amateur, just like the characters in it are, and none more so than the doctor who ‘is not a licensed practitioner’ (32), is ‘my own charlatan’ (86), and whose whole existence defies all binaries. And it is this queer time, this ‘mad’ and unhinged time, that we find also in some Byzantine sources, in Christian texts that reveal different temporal possibilities.

⁸ Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 166.

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1. See also Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 31–3.

¹⁰ Jeanette Winterson, ‘Introduction’ to *Nightwood*, i.

¹¹ Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 6.

¹² Cf. Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1–23.

¹³ Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 22.

It is not only narrative time that fluctuates in *Nightwood*. In this world populated by ‘inverts’ and irreverents, Barnes constantly mixes voices, registers, points of view and locations.¹⁴ Critics continue to struggle to find the words to describe *Nightwood*’s language of excess. Victoria L. Smith calls it ‘torrential and Byzantine’.¹⁵ Smith doesn’t explain what she means by ‘Byzantine’, but it’s yet another opening towards the hagiographical texts from the Byzantine period I consider below. In Byzantine Greek, the word for fool, σαλός (*salos*), is etymologically connected to the kind of movement – the rocking, the fluctuation – we encounter in *Nightwood*.¹⁶ *Nightwood*, we may say, is a foolish text, and its characters fools of a kind – not for the way they act but for how they ridicule and cross norms and boundaries. This is also, as we’ll now see, what holy fools and holy transgressors do.

Holy Fools

The holy fools we encounter in Byzantine texts are misfits in several different ways. They act crazy, they shock, they rant and prophesise and blaspheme, they scandalise and they sin – and lead others into sinning. These are of course Christian fools: they only *act* as if they were mad, they only *apparently* sin, and they lead those who sin into repenting. Though they may have total power over their own nature and not bend to its demands, however, and though they may be absolute models of Christian morality, their scandalous behaviour enacts, in the words of Stavroula Constantinou, a ‘reversal of social and ecclesiastical order’.¹⁷ Holy fools are transgressive, dangerous things, even for Christianity.

In his long study of the holy fool, Sergey A. Ivanov explains how the holy fool is a singular – and contradictory – phenomenon. Like the jester, the holy fool is a spectacle. Both jester and holy fool ‘inhabit a topsy-turvy world and neither can survive without spectators’. However, ‘the jester is part of the crowd whereas the holy fool is entirely alone even in the midst of the urban bustle; the jester is immersed in “festival time”, or “carnival time” whereas the holy fool is outside time’.¹⁸ Moreover, holy fools are characterised by a certain contrariness: they display an eccentric behaviour which is sacralised, yet as in Christianity there is free will, it’s never entirely clear what leads the holy fool to take on such eccentric behaviour. As Ivanov explains, there’s plenty in the Bible to warrant the foolishness of the holy fool, not least Paul’s insistence that the ‘wisdom of the world is foolishness with God’; by acting mad, the idea is, the holy fool reaches unprecedented levels of humility, a condition of holiness.¹⁹ Still, the lengths

¹⁴ On the recuperation of this terrible term, see Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 81.

¹⁵ Smith, ‘A Story Beside(s) Itself’, 196.

¹⁶ See Sergey A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, trans. Simon Franklin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 33.

¹⁷ Stavroula Constantinou, ‘Holy Actors and Actresses: Fools and Cross-Dressers as the Protagonists of Saints’ Lives’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography, Volume 2: Genres and Contexts*, ed. Stephanos Efthymiadis (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), 352.

¹⁸ Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 5.

¹⁹ Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 37. Leontios quotes Corinthians in the opening of the *Life*: ‘If one wishes to be wise in this age, let him be a fool that he may become wise’ (1 Cor. 3: 18); ‘We are fools for Christ’s sake’ (1 Cor. 4: 10); ‘For the foolishness of God wiser than men’ (1 Cor. 1: 25).

to which holy foolishness goes – the violence, the obscenity, the lying, the deception – never seem entirely warranted.

We owe the first proper holy fool *Life* to Leontios of Neapolis, the seventh-century Cypriot Bishop who put down the story of Symeon Salos, or Symeon the Fool.²⁰ It's an extraordinary text written in a language (Greek) that is rich, dense and, at times, breath-taking. Leontios braids together vivid narration and Christian gospel to tell the spectacularly burlesque and miraculous story of this early Christian saint from Emesa (modern-day Homs) in Syria. *The Life of Symeon the Fool* paints in gaudy detail the portrait of a man whose act and actions were for those around him – and the modern reader alike – scandalous. For whatever the theological justifications offered by Leontios, Symeon's transgressions are shocking. But it is also a story about friendship and desire, about misfits and those living in the margins of society, and about social conditioning and judgement. The text is also intriguing for the way it disrupts narrative time and layers narration. The story Leontios tells moves back and forth: from Emesa to Jerusalem, to holy Jordan and a place called Arnonas in the Dead Sea, back to Emesa, and with several flashbacks and relocations in between. It is also relayed to us as hearsay, introducing the idea of unreliable narration. As Leontios explains, the old Symeon related his life to a certain deacon named John in Emesa, who in his turn recounted it to Leontios. Deacon John, Leontios tells us, narrated to him 'almost the entire life of that most wise one, calling on the Lord as witness to his story, that he had written nothing to add to the narrative, but rather that since that time he had forgotten most things'.²¹ John may have added nothing to the story, but he left some things unsaid. To add to that, in several moments in the narrative, and as is common with many texts commemorating the incredible lives of Christian saints, Leontios admits that words fail to account for Symeon's extraordinary life.

The story of Symeon starts in Jerusalem during the reign of Emperor Justinian (527–565), who at the time of Leontios's writing is 'faithfully departed' (134). Two young men from Emesa, Symeon and his friend John (a different John), arrive in Jerusalem for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (which takes place on 14 September). John is about twenty-two years old, so we can surmise that Symeon is around that age too. They are both from 'very wealthy' (134) families, both 'thoroughly instructed in Greek letters', and both 'endowed with much intellect' (135). John had an ageing father and a new wife while 'Symeon did not have a father, only a mother, a very old woman about eighty' (134). We are not given any more detail about Symeon's mother or age – how old must his mother have been when she gave birth to him? – but we quickly know not to look for any 'objective correlatives'. During the feast, John and Symeon grow so close together to the point where they are no longer able to part from

²⁰ According to Ivanov, Scholasticus gave an earlier account of Symeon but Leontios was the first to write it. Leontios in turn must have relied on a vernacular narrative from the 560s or 570s (see Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 104). The *vita* of Symeon survives in few manuscripts, none of them earlier than the eleventh century. According to Stavroula Constantinou, 'The first holy fool appearing in Byzantine hagiography is an anonymous nun later known as Isidora whose short story is narrated by Palladius in ch. 34 of his *Historia Lausiaca*. However, the role becomes exclusively male when the holy fool becomes the protagonist of the genre of *Life*.' See Constantinou, 'Holy Actors and Actresses', 346.

²¹ Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 135. References to *Symeon* are drawn from this edition and hereafter cited in parentheses.

each other. On their way home, they find themselves ‘on the wrong road, leading back into the holy Jordan’. One road leads to life and the other – the ‘main road’, the ‘one their parents had preferred to take’ – to death. To choose which way to go, they pray, draw lots, and agree that ‘whichever is chosen, we shall convey ourselves on that path’. It is finally decided that they should both head to holy Jordan to join a monastery and, ‘overjoyed, forgetting all their property, wealth, and their parents, as in a dream, they embraced and kissed each other’ (135).

Choosing the road less travelled, they spend the next twenty-nine years living as *boskoi* (hermits who live on what grows around them) when one day Symeon – having conquered many ‘unutterable temptations’ and having ‘nearly exceeded the limits of human nature’ (148) – decides to up and go, leave the anchorite life behind him, and move back to the ‘inhabited world’ (155). Despite John’s objections (‘I think, brother, that Satan is jealous of our silence and suggested this thought to you’), Symeon is determined to go to Jerusalem: ‘Believe me, I won’t stay, but I will go in the power of Christ; I will mock the world’ (148). Again, it is not clear from the text why Symeon decides to become a fool and mock the world. Leontios insists that this is what God commanded him, but such a command is not articulated clearly in the story. Whatever the case or the reason behind it, mock the world is what Symeon does. ‘The manner of his entry into the city was as follows’, Leontios writes:

Symeon found a dead dog on a dunghill outside the city, he loosened the rope belt he was wearing, and tied it to the dog’s foot. He dragged the dog as he ran and entered the gate, where there was a children’s school nearby. When the children saw him, they began to cry, ‘Hey, a crazy abba!’ And they set about to run after him and box him on the ears. (151–2)

Symeon follows up his spectacular entrance into the city with a series of other crazy performances. He pelted women with nuts and ‘put out the candles’ in a church (151), he ‘overturned the tables of the pastry chefs’, he danced ‘outside with the members of a circus faction’, smashed wine pitchers, ‘grabbed the ear’ of a monk ‘and gave him such a blow that (the bruise) could be seen for three days’, danced naked and whistled (160), threw stones at passers-by (161) and dirt at a woman (158), and, ‘when his belly sought to do its private function, immediately, and without blushing, he squatted in the market place, wherever he found himself, in front of everyone’ (159).

Many of his transgressions were sexual. He ‘had a habit of visiting the houses of rich men and amusing himself there’ and ‘Often he pretended to kiss their slave-girls’. Leontios’s explanation for Symeon’s harassing is that Symeon ‘had advanced to such a level of purity and impassivity’ that he could not sin. He touched and danced with and kissed women but, ‘like pure gold, was not defiled by them at all’ (159). This is because he had been cured of desire. Back when he was a monk, his flesh troubled him with ‘burning desire’. His mentor Nikon, however, ‘took some water from the holy Jordan and put it beneath Symeon’s navel sealing the place with the sign of the precious cross’. From then on, Leontios writes, ‘neither in his sleep, nor while awake, did he experience burning desire or bodily arousal’ (159). Cured of desire, Symeon was able to cross genders seamlessly. Once, he went to the bath-house, ‘stripped off his garment and placed it on his head, wrapping it around like a turban’ (153), and headed straight for the women’s baths. When his companion asked ‘Where are you going, Fool?’, Symeon

coolly retorted that ‘it doesn’t matter at all whether (I use) this one or that’ (154), because he had become incorporeal, just like a ‘piece of wood’.

Symeon lived his life like a maniac, a moonstruck and a ranter: ‘language’, Leontios says, ‘is not sufficient to paint a portrait of his doings’. He ‘pretended to have a limp’, he ‘jumped around’, he ‘dragged himself along on his buttocks’ and ‘when there was a new moon, he looked at the sky and fell down and thrashed about’ (155). Symeon, Leontios explains elsewhere, ‘did not want to do anything in a clear manner; instead he always did things through clowning’ (167). And his preferred crowd were madmen, slaves, prostitutes, fornicators, Jews, and other sinners and outcasts; he even frequented, according to Ivanov, ‘an unidentified place [. . .] an asylum for the insane’.²²

And so he lived his foolish, sacrilegious and blasphemous life scandalising those around him until his death, which, in Leontios’s version of the *vita*, comes about in hard-won obscurity.²³ When Symeon perceived the ‘profane hour’ of death, he withdrew to his hut and died quietly under a ‘bundle of twigs’. On seeing him, those who knew him thought he was just ‘beside himself’ and wondered if his death was not ‘another idiocy’. He was eventually taken to be buried ‘in the place where strangers are buried’, without any ceremony or fanfare. But a former Jew, whom Symeon converted to Christianity, could hear ‘music such as human lips could not sing, and a crowd such as all humanity could not gather’ (170). It is this Jew-turned-Christian who buries Symeon – with his own hands.

Leontios concludes his narration with an admission and a parenetic epilogue, as is common with hagiographical texts, in which he reflects on the significance of the saint’s life. He once more concedes the shortcomings of language: ‘what language could praise one who is honored beyond language, or how can fleshly lips (praise) one who, while in the flesh, appeared plainly without flesh?’ As for the moral of the story, Leontios pleads with his fellow Christians to refrain from judging others, for ‘Truly no one knows a person’s deeds without knowing the person’s spirit’ (170). Do not condemn, Leontios says, and do not engage in judicious assessment or analysis.

T. S. Eliot, who never shied away from dispatching wisdom himself, asked readers of *Nightwood* not to judge its characters too harshly or through their own biases. They were not a horrid show of freaks, he insisted, and he encouraged readers not to ‘harden our hearts in an inveterate sin of pride’. In fact, Eliot, who admittedly could see religiosity wherever he wanted, found in the character of the doctor qualities almost saintly. Dr O’Connor has a ‘desperate disinterestedness and a deep humility’, Eliot wrote, which, rather than making the doctor indifferent to others, actually endowed him with a ‘hypersensitive awareness’.²⁴

The doctor lives near the church of St Sulpice (in the Latin Quarter, named after Sulpitius the Pious). The small square off the rue Servandoni is his ‘city’ (26): ‘Here he had been seen ordering details for funerals [. . .] buying holy pictures and petits Jésus

²² See Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 120.

²³ The Syriac version has Symeon’s dead body placed in a marble urn in the Church of the Forerunner in the Cave monastery.

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, ‘Preface’ to *Nightwood*, xix. In her own introduction to the novel, from 2007, Winterson wrote that little Guido reminded her of a ‘holy fool’. This is a teasing thought which, however, Winterson did not pursue further. ‘Introduction’ to *Nightwood*, i–ii.

in the boutique displaying vestments and flowering candles. He had shouted down at least one judge in the Mairie du Luxembourg after a dozen cigars had failed to bring about his ends.' Moreover, 'He walked, pathetic and alone [. . .] was seen coming at a smart pace down the left side of the church to go into Mass' and he was also seen 'bathing in the holy water stoup as if he were its single and beholden bird' (26). Barnes has him not only buy holy pictures and shout at people, but also be drunk in public, prophesise and rant, speak in favour of depravity (106) and of suffering ('Ah, to be able to hold onto suffering, but to let the spirit loose'), and, of course, disguise and outright lie – what the holy fool does so well.²⁵ Felix thinks the doctor a 'great liar, but a valuable liar', with the doctor himself admitting that 'by his own peculiar perversity God has made me a liar' (67). Elsewhere in the novel, we read that 'His fabrications seemed to be the framework of a forgotten but imposing plan, some condition of life of which he was the sole surviving retainer'. There is a 'seriousness' and a 'melancholy', Felix thinks, 'hidden beneath every jest and malediction that the doctor uttered' (35).

Like the holy fool, and being a misfit himself, the doctor feels comfortable among outcasts, but like the holy fool once more he remains an ascetic. Explaining the ascetic way of life, Ivanov says that 'By abandoning everything and going away, it is as if the saint is saying: "you may live with your mundane joys and woes; marry, raise children, accumulate wealth – none of this is forbidden by the Gospels. But please, do this without me"'.²⁶ In this sense, it is not just the doctor who's ascetic but almost everyone in *Nightwood*. Robin, Nora and Jenny all shun societal norms of marriage and family and all refuse to live by any one standard of gender and sexuality. This makes them queer and also, in a sense, martyrs, because all martyrs, as Bill Burgwinkle and Cary Howie argue, are queer: queer in the sense that they stand out of heterosexual societal norms (marriage, reproduction, extended families built on biological ties) and because they are always on the verge.²⁷ Robin, Nora, Jenny, the doctor – they all give up heteronormative life, as does the text, which also forcefully rejects reproductive meaning. Characters and text share something with those theories of lesbianism that read lesbianism as a form of 'desire which functions as excess within the heterosexual economy' and as a form of 'nomad desire', to use Elizabeth Grosz's term, that is 'productive, though in no way reproductive [. . .] that makes but reproduces nothing'.²⁸

By comparison to Symeon, who's also an ascetic living amidst the buzz of an inhabited place but who has close confidants and of course an unwavering faith in God, the doctor seems far lonelier – a holy fool in a godless world. As Eliot recognised, the sadness of the doctor lies in his realisation that he gets no sustenance (Eliot's word) from those around him, that his not-so-quiet work remains unrecognised, however miraculous it appears to Felix (32). Towards the end of the novel, a drunk doctor mutters to himself: 'Matthew, you have never been in time with any man's life and you'll never be remembered at all, God save the vacancy!' (143). At this

²⁵ On this point, see Constantinou, 'Holy Actors and Actresses', 349. The holy fool and the cross-dresser, she argues, are 'the greatest "liars" in Byzantine hagiography'.

²⁶ Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 84.

²⁷ Bill Burgwinkle and Cary Howie, *Sanctity and Pornography in Medieval Culture: On the Verge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

²⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, 'Refiguring Lesbian Desire', in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 79.

point, Matthew runs into a friend of his, an ‘unfrocked priest’ to whom he confides his solitude and bitterness, speaking of ‘The people in my life who have made my life miserable, coming to me to learn of degradation and the night’ (145).

Symeon requires no recognition; instead he thrives on society’s negative view of him, which is also what sets him apart. Leontios is keen to set the saintly qualities of Symeon against the community’s view of him: to those ‘more impassioned and more fleshly he seemed to be a defilement, a sort of poison, and an impediment to the virtuous life on account of his appearance’ (132). Equally, the doctor is not ‘cured’ of any desire, and there’s nothing sadder than desire unfulfilled or unrequited. In one of the *Life*’s most striking metaphors, Leontios calls Symeon ‘a pearl which has traveled through slime unsullied’ (133). The slime is both the city and its trappings and the reactions he causes to those around him. Felix uses a similar metaphor – that of a pearl – to describe the doctor. But the doctor is a different kind of pearl, vulnerable and uneasy. There is in the doctor, Felix thinks, ‘a long series of convulsions of the spirit, analogous to the displacement in the fluids of the oyster, that must cover its itch with a pearl’ (33).

Holy Crossers

Though the doctor might be the most scandalous character in *Nightwood*, in many ways the most ascetic is Robin – someone who lives not so much in the margins of society but who hovers over it. She comes and goes as she pleases, traverses time and place. She walks ‘in formless meditation’ (53) and her ‘engagements’, Barnes tells us, ‘were with something unseen’ (151): it was as if she had come ‘from some place that we have forgotten and would give our life to recall’ (106). She is ‘the infected carrier of the past’ (34), someone who has ‘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’ (107). Robin could have easily had her own *Life*; it’s as if she walks into the world of *Nightwood* straight from an early Christian tale:

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. (33–4)

Crucially, and as is common with Byzantine texts commemorating charismatic men or women, Robin is also someone who crosses worldly gender binaries. This is what holy fools do. As we’ve seen, one of the different ways in which *The Life of Symeon the Fool* is transgressive – there are many – is in the way the protagonist adopts traditional (which is to say patriarchal) female characteristics: he is irrational, promiscuous, hysteric. Mad that he is, Symeon’s behaviour spurns gender binaries. This should not come as a shock – despite the Christian church’s long commitment to fixed gender norms and binaries. Holy fools, as Constantinou explains, have always been associated with ‘cross-dressers’, saintly figures of late antique hagiography who, like holy

fools, have their origins in the early Eastern monastic culture.²⁹ Ivanov agrees: ‘the holy fool’, he claims, ‘has a tendency to blur the boundary between male and female’.³⁰

Although there are exceptions, holy fools are on the whole men and those who cross gender are women.³¹ We encounter women who transition to men in at least nine *Lives*, the majority of which were written in late antiquity (after the first century) and passed down to the Byzantine era in various versions. Such texts are even more provocative than the *Lives* of holy fools. For while feigning madness was not formally condemned until the seventh century (in the sixteenth canon of the Council of Trullo in 691–2), cross-dressing was already prohibited in the Bible, in Deuteronomy 22: 5, which asserts that ‘A woman shall not wear a man’s garment, nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God’. And again in 340, the Council of Gangra condemned women who ‘under pretence of asceticism’ wear men’s clothing (Canon 13) or cut their hair ‘which God gave as a reminder of subjection’ (Canon 17).³² For Betancourt, this is another ‘perplexing contradiction’ in Christian texts, for transgenderism is at once explicitly prohibited by the Church and venerated in several hagiographical texts.³³

In thinking about women who first disguise themselves and then live as men, scholars have traditionally invoked the principle of ‘masking’. Just as with holy fools, who, according to Peter Hauptmann, wear the ‘mask of foolishness’, so these women have been thought of as masking their birth-assigned gender through costume.³⁴ In this sense, they are like actors aware of what Constantinou calls the ‘Costume’s power to enhance a role and to contribute to its successful performance and perception’.³⁵ Like with actors, there is also a certain kind of ritual involved in their transgendering. While the holy fool performs always in public, women crossing into men do so in private, a ritualistic transformation that hagiographers tend to capture in a quick, paratactic way. As regards the reasons for women changing gender, these are different, and the majority are social. In a patriarchal society, women disguise themselves as men to escape male control and to ensure easy and safe passage.³⁶ But there are also theological reasons (though of course also explained by patriarchal structures) for this, with hagiographical texts drawing on the Bible and patristic texts emphasising holy women’s ‘manliness’.

In late antique and Byzantine texts, women cross gender to escape arranged marriage or to exit abusive relationships. The anonymous *Life of Euphrosyne* (sixth or

²⁹ Constantinou, ‘Holy Actors and Actresses’, 343.

³⁰ Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 63.

³¹ Two exceptions are Onesima, who starts her monastic career as a holy fool, and Marina, who feigns madness to get herself out of an arranged marriage and then switches to a man, calls herself Marinos, and enters a monastery in Jerusalem. On their stories and lives, see Constantinou, ‘Holy Actors and Actresses’, 347.

³² On the Church’s attitude towards madness and cross-dressing, see Constantinou, ‘Holy Actors and Actresses’, 345.

³³ Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 205.

³⁴ Peter Hauptmann, ‘Die “Narren um Christi Willen” in der Ostkirche’, *Kirche im Osten* 2 (1959): 27–49, cited in translation in Constantinou, ‘Holy Actors and Actresses’, 348.

³⁵ Constantinou, ‘Holy Actors and Actresses’, 349.

³⁶ See Stavroula Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women* (Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 9) (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2005), 106.

seventh century) tells the story of a young girl who disguises herself to avoid marrying her father's chosen one, the son of a rich nobleman. And so Euphrosyne becomes Smaragdus, passes as a eunuch, and enters a monastery. Matrona (mid sixth century) becomes Babylas to escape an abusive marriage; when her identity is revealed, she leaves the monastery and joins a convent in Emesa, where, however, her abusive husband tracks her down, and she has to escape once more. And Marina (eleventh to twelfth century) first feigns madness to avoid having to marry and then – after her solitary life in a cell is interrupted by fame – switches to Marinus and boards a ship. On the ship, Marinus is attacked by a sailor, but that sailor becomes possessed. Marinus then joins a monastery in Jerusalem before – eventually – returning to Sicily to die. For Constantinou and others, monasteries act as a kind of shelter from everyday patriarchy.³⁷ Still, and no matter how good the disguise, these women never have it easy. As again Constantinou emphasises, these women always live a life of suffering and humiliation and, like holy fools, they reside in the margins. As W. H. Auden said about the 'Old Masters', late antique and Byzantine hagiographers were never wrong about the suffering of women and of transgender people.³⁸

One of the ways in which these female-to-male saints are discriminated against is, unsurprisingly, sexual. The *Life of Theodora of Alexandria* (c. mid fifth to sixth century) tells the story of a married woman who dresses up as a monk to repent for 'betraying' her husband. Somehow Theodora, now Theodore, is accused of fathering a child. She does not deny the accusation and ends up instead raising the child. Susanna/John (her *Life* is probably from the fourth century) is the daughter of a pagan man and a Jewish woman. She changes her gender to enter a monastery, where she finds herself accused of raping a woman. She reveals herself to be a woman to escape the charges, but now that she's outed she is made to leave the monastery. Mary (known in the West as Marina, and her *Life* dating from about 525–650) becomes Marinus to follow her father to a monastery. She is accused of impregnating an innkeeper's daughter, a charge that she, like Theodora, does not deny. Euphrosyne (fourteenth century) turns into John to again enter a monastery, but when she's asked to become the monastery's Abbot, she leaves to become the disciple of an old hermit. When Satan threatens to disclose her womanhood, John runs away, switches back into a woman, and spends the rest of her life an ascetic.

These stories and texts can be (and have been) parsed in many different ways. Women crossing into men is a phenomenon that goes back to ancient religious ceremonies, during which women would carry out sacrifices in men's clothes, and men in women's clothes. It's a transformation that betrays a male monk fascination and fantasy for women in the monastery, and which has also been seen as a historical event motivated by pragmatic reasons: an attempt on the part of some women to imitate the 'superior' gender and so elevate their status. For Betancourt, this pattern stretches back to early Christianity, the idea being that 'Since the feminine is seen as entwined with the earthly and sensual desires of the flesh, women should aspire to become like men,

³⁷ Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*, 101.

³⁸ See W. H. Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Arts': 'About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters, how well they understood.' In *Selected Poems*, new edn, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1979), 79–80.

unmoved by passions'.³⁹ Yet the phenomenon carries a theological valence, too, having its roots in Jesus's telling his disciples that they will enter the Kingdom of Heaven only if they manage to make male and female one and the same. For Constantinou, 'the cross-dresser has its origins in the patristic doctrine of the holy woman's manliness'.⁴⁰

We encounter this idea, that holy women are androgynous, in several hagiographical texts. The most exciting of these is the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, an early third-century text written partly as an autobiography (although the modern term has no ancient analogue), which tells the story of the Carthaginian martyr Vibia Perpetua.⁴¹ Perpetua's narrative voice makes up the largest part of the text and recounts the story of a woman who shuns traditional roles (of daughter, of wife, of mother) and attitudes, and whose body becomes a site of suffering and miracles. Perpetua's break from oppressive male structures coincides with her being relieved of her duties as a mother. Having already fended off her father (who pleads with her not to martyr for Christ), she is miraculously freed of her motherly duties: 'As God willed,' she says, 'the baby no longer desired my breasts.'⁴² While in prison, Perpetua has a vision in which she is taken to an arena to fight a man 'foul in appearance'.⁴³ Not only does she triumph over this man easily, but, when stripped naked, she has to her astonishment – and to ours – become a man. Her metamorphosis complete, she from now on displays characteristics that were for the Christians of her time traditionally male. As Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Mieke Bal have separately argued in their deconstructive readings of the *Passion*, it is not only Perpetua but the entire text that is transgressive: in Cotter-Lynch's words, 'the text as a whole [. . .] dismantles binary categories so that Perpetua can represent herself as simultaneously male and female'.⁴⁴

In *Nightwood*, Barnes drives gender binaries to breaking point. Just as the Byzantine *Lives* of women/men demonstrate gender to be performative, so too in *Nightwood* gender exists as performance. And it is again the doctor who's at the centre of this decentring of sexual norms. He is variously described as the 'last woman left in this world' (90), 'the Old Woman who lives in the closet' (124), 'the other woman that God forgot' (129), a 'girl' (81), 'the bearded lady' (90) and 'a lady in no need of insults' (137). In that famous passage in the novel, Nora walks into the doctor's flat to find him in a 'wig with long pendent curls', 'heavily rouged and his lashes painted' (71). For Erin Holliday-Karre, the doctor's 'transvestism underscores the artificiality of gender difference'. 'The radical potential of the transvestite', she argues, 'lies in the ability to overturn the laws of sexuality and the sexual binary upon which these laws rely through prodigality and play' (282). Like in the Christian texts just invoked, clothing is crucial, as are the moments in which the 'disguise' takes place, which, as in the older texts, are presented quickly: 'In the narrow iron bed, with its heavy and dirty linen

³⁹ Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 97.

⁴⁰ Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*, 100.

⁴¹ *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 126.

⁴² *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 128.

⁴³ *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 130.

⁴⁴ Margaret Cotter-Lynch, *Saint Perpetua across the Middle Ages: Mother, Gladiator, Saint* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 9. See also Mieke Bal, 'Perpetual Contest', in *On Story-Telling: Essays in Narratology*, ed. Mieke Bal and David Jobling (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1991), 227–41.

sheets, lay the doctor in a woman's flannel nightgown' (71). Robin's transformation, as relayed by Nora, is even quicker: 'Sometimes, if she got tight by evening, I would find her standing in the middle of the room in boy's clothes' (133). In this moment, Robin, already described as 'a tall girl with the body of a boy' (41) and as 'a girl who resembles a boy' (123), and already freed of her motherly duties, shatters the girl doll she gave Nora. She 'put her foot on it, crushing her heel into it', Nora tells the doctor, 'and then, as I came crying behind her, she kicked it, its china head all in dust, its skirt shivering and stiff, whirling over and over across the floor'. Any facile gender binaries are forever crushed.

We find Robin dressed in boys' clothes one more time in the final scene of the novel, which takes place in a chapel. In New York, where she came with Jenny, Robin had been 'going into many out-of-the-way churches, sitting in the darkest corner or standing against the wall, one foot turned toward the toe of the other, her hands folded at their length, her head bent'. She eventually took herself to 'Nora's part of the country'. Having 'frightened the woods into silence by her breathing', she hears Nora's dog barking. The doctor had already prophesied that 'though those two' – Nora and Robin – 'were buried at opposite ends of the earth, one dog will find them both', and it of course does (95). Dogs, and animals in general, are important in Byzantine Christian texts. Thinking about the dog Symeon ties around his belt as he enters Jerusalem, Constantinou claims that it points 'to the empty meaning that social values, such as worldly wisdom and order, have for Symeon'.⁴⁵ Many Christian women saints, Perpetua included, have to fight off wild beasts in the arena, beasts that are either tamed or who end up fighting on the side of female martyrs.⁴⁶ *Nightwood*, a text which refuses the closure offered by Christian tales, ends with Robin fighting both against Nora's dog and with Nora's dog on her side (literally and metaphorically). In an image reminiscent of what happened when Nora and Robin first met, when a 'powerful lioness [. . .] turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and [. . .] as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface', Nora's dog in the chapel 'began to cry [. . .] and she grinning and crying with him' until the moment when the dog 'lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees' (153). This is not quite the same as the martyrdom of Christian heroines, but it retains the power and pathos of those Christian women martyrs who fought for their freedom, and their death.

To speak of the Byzantine modernism of Djuna Barnes (and *Nightwood* in particular) is not to impose traditional Christian ideas of sacrifice, suffering, love and redemption onto a text that refuses the banal and the obvious. It is rather yet another way of going into such a rich text, an attempt at welding the text's religious mood with its irreverent transgressions, its deep Christian symbolism with its torrential language of extremes, its flawed yet also impressive characters. Read with some Byzantine texts, Barnes's misfits become part of a longer tradition of unreal characters whose freakishness is engrossing and even perhaps meaningful. Like holy fools, like

⁴⁵ Constantinou, 'Holy Actors and Actresses', 351.

⁴⁶ See, for example, the case of Thekla, in *Acts of Paul* (second century). Thekla is made to fight against a 'fierce lioness' but the lioness ends up fighting on her side. *New Testament Apocrypha, Volume 2: Writings Relating to the Apostles, Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1992), 244.

holy crossers, the characters in *Nightwood* live on the verge and operate under a time that is different, queer. To the long list of religious sources lurking behind anglophone modernism, we must add Byzantine texts that commemorate the lives of misfits.

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