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# Surviving the City: Resistance and Plant Life in Woolf's Jacob's Room and Barnes' Nightwood

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Surviving the City:  
Resistance and Plant life in Woolf's  
*Jacob's Room* and Barnes' *Nightwood*

Ria Banerjee

*Abstract.* In *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Nightwood* (1936), Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes use plant life to express a profound ambivalence about the masculine-inflected ordering functions of art and morality. They show that these processes codify lived experience and distance it from the feminine and sexual. To counter this turn towards the urban inauthentic, both novels depict non-urban spaces to upend conventional notions of usefulness. They fixate on evanescent flowers, wild forests, and untillable fields as sites of resistance whose fragility and remoteness are strengths. In *Jacob's Room*, I argue that the eponymous protagonist is destroyed by his conventional education and morality, trapped in a room he cannot escape. In *Nightwood*, the central couple flees a similar ideological room, leaving for a remote farm where genuine feeling is momentarily possible.

Literary modernism is so much about urban life that it is surprising how much two novels set in European capitals of the early twentieth century invoke the mute and vegetable. Both Woolf and Barnes use plant life to express a profound ambivalence about the ordering functions of education, art, history-making, and morality which codify lived experience and distance it from the vital, feminine, and sexual, recording and representing inauthentic versions of reality. To counter this, both novels situate themselves in the marginal and upend conventional notions of usefulness. They fixate on evanescent flowers, wooded parklands, and untillable fields as sites of resistance against the censoring and ordering functions of art, and these natural elements serve as reminders of the need for more authentic representation of lived experience. In what follows, I take up the question of the Greeks and education in *Jacob's Room* (1922) to show how the eponymous protagonist is shaped and limited by the same; in the second section, I turn to *Nightwood* (1936) as the ultimately more hopeful text that de-

picts a central couple's flight from the city into a private, marginal space where it is possible to avoid definitions in favor of genuine feeling, if only for a moment.

### **The Modernism of Marginality: The Flower Girl and the Beacon of Ancient Greek**

Foregrounding the confrontational nature of Barnes' novel, Jane Marcus writes that *Nightwood* engages with a "modernism of marginality" (88) that refuses the established conventions of the heteronormative Judeo-Christian world. It is only through absence that it figures "the authoritarian dominators of Europe in the thirties, the sexual and political fascists" (86) who dominate cultural and historical attention elsewhere. *Jacob's Room* is also intimately informed by a resistance that confines these "dominators" to its textual margins. Through attention to real and symbolic plant life, both novels construct a marginal modernist view that self-consciously circumlocates all contemporaneous political upheavals. Yet, the Great War is central to *Jacob's Room*, even more so perhaps than for *To the Lighthouse* (1927), since the loss of Jacob in combat is the core around which the novel's scheme of textual and formal innovations arises. Although the war is present only through absence, the text dwells upon other markers of prevailing authoritarianism<sup>1</sup>; in particular, it can fruitfully be read as a sustained

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<sup>1</sup> Mentions of war brewing, although central to the tragic structure of the text, are buried under veiled references to smaller political events: for instance, although doomed from the opening pages by dint of his proleptic last name, Jacob Flanders is never shown to enlist in the Great War. Instead, the passage of time in the novel and his brewing desire for action are hinted obliquely as he reads *The Globe* one evening: "Jacob took the paper over to the fire. The Prime Minister proposed a measure for giving Home Rule to Ireland. Jacob knocked out his pipe. He was certainly thinking about Home Rule in Ireland – a very difficult matter. A very cold night" (98). Jacob's mind might be wandering at the time of reading, on Florinda's particular deception as I suggest later (that "certainly" adds a hint of sarcasm), but this piece of news pegs the date of Jacob's reading to early-1912, when the Home Rule Bill was introduced to Parliament. As the question of Irish Home Rule never enters the text again, and knowing it was completely set aside with the advent of the War, this oblique reference is primarily to situate the reader in time without the usual markers. Vara Neverow notes another way that Woolf includes the War: through mentions of domesticated horses and cavalry (2010). Building on Jane de Gay and Laura Doyle's comments, she further relates the emasculated, doomed horses of the army with "transgressive and secretive sexuality" (119), specifically aligned against the homogenised and censored world that Jacob tries to inhabit.

critique of upper class education as embodied by the Oxbridge tradition, whose propagation of Ancient Greek texts as an escape from the present and aggressively monkish “cloistered” (82) attitude come under fire through those excluded from it: the poorer, sillier, sexualized, and feminine. This essay looks particularly at Florinda as a locus of this critique, named for her flower-like purity but appearing tawdry in the clinical light Jacob has been taught to live in. Ephemeral in the text, plucked, displayed, and soon discarded, without her Jacob’s life would nevertheless have been a “different affair altogether” (83).

Real truths are necessarily hidden and fleeting in *Jacob’s Room*. Almost exactly midway through the novel, a novelty item popular in the early 1900s, little paper flowers which open upon touching water, make their way into the dining tables of the novel. At the end of the meal, floating in bowls of water or sinking down to the bottom, these little novelties provided opportunities for jokes and flirting among the company, or were taken as omens and signs in developing love affairs. They were thus directly responsible for “the union of hearts and foundation of homes” (83) in some cases. However, these paper flowers did not oust “the flowers of nature.” Roses, lilies, and carnations continued to be popular because “real flowers can never be dispensed with. If they could, human life would be a different affair altogether. For flowers fade [...] [until they become] not fit to be seen” (83). In their decay, these “flowers of nature” become more than mere arrangements. They are rearticulated as memento mori which prophesy Jacob’s death and emphasize the tragedy that this young man who “might become stout in time” (153), actually cruelly runs out of it.

Flowers are everywhere in Woolf’s work, as a recent exhaustive critical intervention points out<sup>2</sup>. Bonnie Kime Scott writes that in Woolf, there is a move towards unified multiplicity that distances itself from the ordinary conception of nature and culture as being opposed to each other. Borrowing the term “naturecultures” (4) from Donna Haraway, she suggests that represented images of the natural “form a strong relation to the primordial” (5). Jacob experiences the interconnectivity of life, sex, and death on his first holiday to the beach as a child, but this primordial triad is dissolved through years of

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<sup>2</sup> Elisa Kay Sparks, “Virginia Woolf’s Literary and Quotidian Flowers: A Bar-Graphical Approach” from the Twentieth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf, 2010

systematized education, first Latin with Mr. Floyd, then Rugby, Cambridge, and finally the learning within the “enormous mind” (Woolf 108) of the British Museum. Woolf’s recurring flowers, fields, and natural motifs are set up in opposition to “deconstruct patriarchal ideas of power and domination” as represented by these institutions, “and at least briefly defy spiritual defeat and death” (Scott 5).

Florinda is another floral manifestation in the text, Jacob’s sometime lover and an artist’s model who lives on the fringes of social and sexual respectability. Named so by a painter who “wished it to signify that the flower of her maidenhead was still unplucked” (77), Florinda herself is almost forgettable—she has no surname, and she drifts unmoored through London with the old and unreliable Mother Stuart as her only confidante. Florinda’s thoughts are hardly as weighty and charged as those of the other women: Mrs. Durrant, Betty Flanders, and Mrs. Jarvis display depths of passion and insight beyond her. Fanny Elmer is more educated, taking up a Fielding novel on Jacob’s recommendation (he gives Florinda a Shelley poem that she barely gets through (78-9)). Jinny Carslake is more confident and capable, a New Woman reveling in her urban freedoms, and Sandra Wentworth Williams is both older and more sophisticated.

Florinda is one extreme of unschooled womanhood whose opposite is Miss Julia Hedge, “the feminist” who watches Jacob copying out a passage of Marlowe in the British Museum (106-7) and experiences a frustrated irritation at him. Julia Hedge’s reaction is not unlike that of the narrator in *A Room of One’s Own* who also finds herself marginalized at the Museum because she is unable to come to any easy conclusions about her topic through research. Instead, she draws a doodle of the angry Professor von X (*ROO* 31) in her notebook, a sketch that is set up in opposition to the neat lists of notes compiled by the scholar working next to her. Julia Hedge is the locus of tutored feminine knowledge in this text, but in her own way she is as incomplete as Florinda who exists as simply as a cut carnation in someone’s drawing room.

Susan Harris has written astutely about the politics of irony and parody in Woolf’s novel, noting that it self-censors Jacob’s sexual life to comment upon the functionings of power. For Harris, drawing on Foucault, the novel is complicit in Jacob’s disgust with Florinda precisely because her low stature “makes it possible for sexuality (and anyone identified with it) to be apparently ‘banished from reality’”

(423-4). That this artificial (censored, then normalized) reality is created and sustained by Jacob's educational background makes it possible to extend Harris' reading to suggest that Florinda (and the frustrated Julia) are at the opposite pole of value from Jacob's old professors, emblematic of particular social and economic class positions. The struggle of Florinda against Professor Sopwith, that she will inevitably lose, is a larger struggle between two principles of valuation. By highlighting the throwaway nature of Florinda's tragedy as compared to the aching loss of Jacob that suffuses the text, the novel sharply questions the standards that allow such a simple division of events into the macrocosmic (i.e., public, political, death at war) and the microcosmic (personal, domestic, an unwanted pregnancy). Hence, Florinda and the professor are implicated in Woolf's critique of the tyranny of plot conventions that writers are subject to, conventions that are themselves the result of a system of value.

In "Modern Fiction," Woolf argues emphatically for a new kind of "spiritual" literature (her example is Joyce's *Ulysses*, then appearing in episodic form) to counter the "materialist" urge in writers like Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. She suggests that "the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it" (*CR* 150), and fiction that accurately engages with the real must accommodate this. She is critical of all attempts to impose an external order on the chaotic stuff of lived experience through literary conventions of ordering, such as the narrative arc of the bildungsroman. *Jacob's Room* refuses to foreground the war as a more conventional novel might because it refuses to "take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" (*CR* 150). Instead, the novel searches for artistic freedom to do away with conventions of plot and genre (what one critic calls "art's ordering function"<sup>3</sup>) to reflect reality in truer and fuller ways.

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<sup>3</sup> This point is suggested by J.Scott Bryson in his reading of *To the Lighthouse*: "While Woolf does appear to be open to, at times even longing for, the possibility of art's ordering function, a keen ambivalence also exists within the novel, as she points out both the limitations and the destruction that result from an attempt to use art to order the world" (593). In *Jacob's Room*, a text written five years previous, that "keen ambivalence" is more pointedly employed as subversive irony, and art's "ordering function" is shown to be ultimately powerless and dangerous, unable to save Jacob from any of the pains he wants to avoid.

This problem of ordering can be reiterated as a problem with surfaces – that instead of simply registering sensory information, an internal, learnt system of story-making interferes to impose a narrative on events. Consider, for instance, Mrs. Pascoe, a tenant of the Durants who is described by some tourists walking by: “Her face was [...] hard, wise, wholesome rather, signifying in a room full of sophisticated people the flesh and blood of life” (54). To the tourists, her life in a lonely corner of Cornwall smacks of the quaint and romantic (“Look – she has to draw her water from a well in the garden,” they say to each other, 53). The tourists perceive her as the other half of a dialectic they inhabit, constructing a story about the “wholesome,” honest villager to contrast with their urban sophistication. However, the very next line exposes their essentializing for what it is: “She would tell a lie, though, as soon as the truth.” They have been fooled by the story of the picture of Mrs. Pascoe, failing entirely to grasp any real truth about her<sup>4</sup>.

Flowers resist this story-telling by being impermeable to it, existing alive or wilted, fit or “unfit” to be seen. Unlike the tourists who view Mrs. Pascoe through filters of tyrannical plot, Florinda reaches an essential truth about Jacob almost as an afterthought: “Jacob. You’re like one of those statues,” she declares “dreamily” (80), comparing him to the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. Francesca Kazan has detailed how Jacob turns into a “corporeal icon” (714) in the narrative which performs and parodies his ossification. Eventually, even Fanny Elmer echoes Florinda’s insight, visiting the statues like one obsessed, trying to recapture some essence of Jacob from the depths of her loss. Jacob’s education seeps through him, turning him into stone, and Fanny’s emotions recognize him in the Marbles, themselves fragmented and transplanted relics of a lost age.

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<sup>4</sup> This concern with pictures that lie informs much modernist thought, as if the advent of motion pictures made modernist literature doubly aware of the ordering function and dynamics of power in a still image. James Joyce famously tried and failed to run a movie theatre; D. H. Lawrence has written scathingly about “photographically-developed perfection” that turns the eye away from true vision and turns “[t]he picture of me, the me that is *seen*” into the essential “me” (“Art and Morality” 1925, 165). In *Nightwood*, Dr. Matthew O’Connor makes several references to women presented as beautifully arranged pictures, and the argument against regulated arrangement – and therefore for messiness and multiplicity – is a crucial part of that book.

Florinda – the only poor, pregnant, single woman in this text and thus a symbol of the unlettered, biologically-determined, class-oppressed feminine – is more than someone for readers to pity. Presented in “collages of modernist fragments – bits and pieces, or a rapid series of apprehensions,” she (and Fanny Elmer to a lesser degree) are “characters in crisis or survivors of trauma – outsiders in search of a survivable system” (Scott 9). She is a crucial part of the book’s arguments for different structures of knowledge and learning to “[protect] oneself from civilization” (146). Although Jacob is lost, a victim to his education and his times, perhaps this text holds out “some hope that, by touching back to the primordial, the semiotic, sensual, or material [...] a new and different cycle of human nature... may arise” (Scott 10).

In his limited and patronizing way, Jacob thinks of Florinda as a naïf who “could no more pretend a feeling than swallow whisky,” a “little prostitute” with “inviolable fidelity” (94). Earlier, looking at her, he decides that “[b]eauty goes hand in hand with stupidity” and finds her suddenly very vulgar: “In spite of defending indecency, Jacob doubted whether he liked it in the raw” (82). Jacob is drawn to her, but his Cambridge education has trained him to deny the sexual instinct – watching her, “He had a violent reversion towards male society, cloistered rooms, and the works of the classics; and was ready to turn with wrath upon whoever it was who had fashioned life thus” (82). His education, although excellent, has done little to prepare him for the world, and further, has given him a sense of entitlement and competence that is dangerous. It is this complacency that Julia Hedge cannot stomach, his “regal and pompous” assumption that the “flesh and blood of the future depends entirely on six young men” (107) and that he is one of them. He fits perfectly in the world of the British Museum, next to the Elgin Marbles; Florinda brings his inflated ideals down to touch the messiness of lived experience, serving as both reminder and critique of the artificial world to him represented by Cambridge.

Cambridge occupies a unique position in this text which is so minutely concerned with depictions of spaces. If London (the streets, Jacob’s and his friends’ rooms) and Scarborough (Betty Flanders’ establishment, Dodd’s Hill) are two symbolic spaces in which this novel develops, then Cambridge is the third point of that triangle. Even more than classical learning, it represents a conglomeration of



social and sexual signifiers that together generate meaning in much the same way that Oxbridge does in *A Room of One's Own*. It represents a particular sequence of learning and form of access; Jacob, too, finds that “the inevitable sequel” to Oxbridge is the British Museum (*ROO* 25). As pointed out above, Jacob is romantic about his education, admiring Fielding but actually responding to his curriculum with the haphazard intensity more associated with a Byronic hero. The most nuanced response to Cambridge doesn't come from Jacob but Chucky Stenhouse, the “unsuccessful provincial” (41) studying with the Old Professors Huxtable, Sopwith, and Cowan.

The narrative voice is loaded with irony when it describes Cambridge as a beacon of knowledge, asking: “Is it not simple, or pure, or wholly splendid, the lamp of learning, since if you see them there under its light (whether Rossetti's on the wall or Van Gogh reproduced, whether there are lilacs in the bowl or rusty pipes), *how priestly they look!*” (39-40, my emphasis). This text depicts the sublime in the small epiphanies of Mrs. Durrant or Mrs. Jarvis, and is an indictment of the “priestly,” male-dominated yet sexless atmosphere of Cambridge that is so precious to Jacob. Cambridge presents itself as the only and best source of enlightenment – “We are the sole purveyors of this cake” (39) – and it convinces provincials like Chucky Stenhouse with “[t]alking, talking, talking” that “everything could be talked – the soul itself slipped through the lips in thin silver disks which dissolve in young men's minds like silver, like moonlight” (40). Sopwith is hypnotic to the young undergraduates, like Huxtable or Cowan who sings Virgil and Catallus “as if language were wine on his lips” (41).

*Nightwood* provides a pertinent comparison here. At the philosophical crux of that novel, Dr. Matthew O'Connor and Nora Flood engage in their most intense argument about the nature of love, its inherent egotism, and the damaging power of expectations to shape and reify the beloved. Matthew eventually bows down in the face of love while Nora finds reserves of strength to understand and bear up her own burden, to love Robin without the accumulated weight of socialized expectations. When Nora bemoans her love for Robin, which thus far has brought her only pain, Matthew admonishes her: “There is no truth [or single ideal of love], and you have set it between you; you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known” (Barnes 145). Making a

formula to respond to the ineffable is precisely the problem of education Woolf is most concerned with, whether at Oxbridge or elsewhere. To define and make rigid, to turn an idea (or, “the soul”) in all its multiplicity into a singular sliver of silver that can be easily slipped into the mouth is the chiefest of ills. Cambridge stands in for a denunciation of dogmatic education in all forms that aim to dress “the unknowable” of lived experience in “the garments of the known.” In Barnes’ conception, Nora can only understand and accept Robin’s love when she moves beyond the conventional, the spoken, the egocentric. The couple finds each other in the wilderness of her country estate; Jacob, by contrast, is lost.

New structures of education are required to resist the old structures of power. Jacob’s contemporaries, however, are powerless to withdraw from the system they are implicated in<sup>5</sup>. Chucky Stenhouse is drawn to Professor Sopwith like a moth to a flame despite the embarrassment of being addressed by his first name. There is a petty-minded menace in the professor’s calling him “Chucky,” a reminder of hierarchies of class and education in his refusal to address the younger man formally. Still, Stenhouse persists. In those evenings with Sopwith, the professor twined “stiff fibers of awkward speech – things young men blurted out – plaiting them round his own smooth garland, making the bright side show, the vivid greens, the sharp thorns, manliness” (41). For plaiting and arranging what they have said in half-understanding, for giving them a clear and singular vision of manhood that they can believe in, these young men worship all he stands for.

It is only when Stenhouse buys his newspaper the next day and catches the early train to university that “it all seemed to him childish,

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<sup>5</sup> Christina Alt’s careful study of lepidoptery in *Jacob’s Room* points to the complex ways that Woolf uses natural plant and animal motifs to comment upon Victorian ideals of self-improvement through education and their relationship to the colonialist impulse to categorize and catalogue the Other in order to render it safe and controllable. On the one hand, Woolf’s use of plant motifs is related to subverting dominant hegemonies of thought and action. At the same time, we see Jacob himself keeping a collection of moths and butterflies, sometimes staying out so late that it is past midnight by the time he returns home. However, Jacob’s passion is related to the Victorian pastime of bug-hunting as an improving activity for children, focused on collecting and classifying what they find. For Alt, this is crucially related to the imperialist impulse to capture and codify, and thus Jacob’s childish activity reproduces the structures of power that will ultimately lead him to death. “The *renunciation of capture* is central to Woolf’s literary project” (Alt 133, my italics), a kind of collecting that is inherently different from, and opposed to, the colonial project.

absurd; the chocolate cake, the young men; Sopwith summing things up.” Sopwith’s method of adding up all the knowledge he deems necessary and leaving out what he doesn’t echoes the clinical manner of the researcher at the British Museum who so frustrates the narrator in *A Room of One’s Own*. That reader made “the neatest abstracts, headed often with an A or a B or a C while [the narrator’s] own notebook rioted with the wildest scribble of contradictory jottings” (ROO 30). Although the narrator is distressed, bewildered, and humiliated by her lack of precise conclusions, it is exactly that riotous, living disorder that is reality itself. Like the contemporary writers belittled in “Modern Fiction,” Sopwith is a writer constrained, “not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall” (CR 149), returning inexorably to the same conclusions he was himself taught. There is a taste of old hat in Sopwith’s “vivid greens” so that sometimes his silver disks of knowledge “tinkle hollow, and the inscriptions read a little too simple, and the old stamp look too pure, and the impress always the same – a Greek boy’s head” (41). And yet, Stenhouse acknowledges the material advantages that Cambridge can give, which is perhaps a little other than the gift of knowledge: respecting still, he vows to “save every penny to send his son there” (41).

Any woman meeting Sopwith, “divining the priest” whose worldview leaves neither room nor agency for her, “would, involuntarily, despise” (41) him in a parallel reaction to that of Julia Hedge towards Jacob. But simplification has its attractions: Old Miss Umphelby, who sings Virgil as well as the other professors, attracts fewer student followers than Cowan. What she would most like to say in elucidation of the text, the lived details of “men’s meeting with women which have never got into print” (42), cannot be said. Her attempts to bring the ancients off their lofty pedestal are more truthful but ultimately disappointing to youths like Jacob who are searching for clarity from the masters, craving a distance between themselves and that ancient civilization that would turn the words of the dead language into a magical antidote against the present. The tragedy of *Jacob’s Room* is this realization that no antidote or elixirs exist and the ineluctable modality of the visible must be confronted.

Florinda, flower-like, is the agent and locus of this confrontation. Immediately after Jacob thinks of Florinda as a clichéd prostitute with a heart of gold, helplessly truthful about her love for him, he sees her

“turning up Greek Street upon another man’s arm” (94) in a moment of delicious narrative irony. Racked with jealousy, Jacob has a bad night and a bad week: socializing, riding in the country while “cursing his luck” (101), and having tea with his mother’s friends, the Misses Perry and Rosseter. But Florinda haunts him and makes him judgmental and caddish until he finds himself in a room with the real prostitute Laurette. Even she allows him to sustain his careful avoidance of the sexual and vulgar, and only when he leaves he feels “that quake of the surface... which threatens to spill the whole bag of ordure, with difficulty held together, over the pavement.” He has the profound sense that, “In short, something was wrong” (105).

The weak and silly Florinda possesses Jacob in ways that neither Betty Flanders nor Clara Durrant, Fanny Elmer or Jinny Carslake can. She is the spiritual realist core of the novel who exposes the “something wrong” that Jacob wants to avoid by enveloping himself in Greek. Jacob’s end remains determined, but “that quake of the surface” continues to affect Jacob even when he reaches Greece and falls helplessly in love with the married Sandra Wentworth Williams. To Sandra, he eventually becomes one of a series of books on her shelf, reduced to an object for egotistic possession (161), but through his love for her and their shared love of Greek, he begins to glimpse a world of sense beyond the monkish world of talk he is familiar with. Miss Umphelby’s unspoken insight manifests itself, although too late to deter the flow of the narrative towards its final, impossible confrontation with loss.

Just arrived from Paris, flush with the chatter of his friends there, Jacob enters Greece constantly editorializing: “‘You ought to have been in Athens,’ he would say to Bonamy when he got back,” and “[make a] comparison between the ancients and moderns, with some pretty sharp hits at Mr. Asquith – something in the style of Gibbon” (136). Already an enthusiastic essay writer, Jacob collects sights and impressions that he twines into garlands for himself, imitating not only the tastes but also the methods of his Cambridge professors. The landscape speaks to him but he is busy recording only his own voice. Only gradually he finds “how tremendously pleasant it is to be alone; out of England; on one’s own; cut off from the whole thing” (141). He climbs to the top of lonely mountains in the intense Mediterranean afternoons, but instead of planning a letter, thinking about what to say to friends, or plotting the next impressive but dull essay, Jacob de-

scends into a deep silence so that “[s]tretched on the top of the mountain, quite alone, Jacob enjoyed himself immensely. Probably he had never been so happy in the whole of his life” (144). In keeping with the ironic spirit of the novel, the Grecian afternoon landscape takes him farthest from his ideals and is perhaps closest to the dumb muteness embodied by Florinda.

The essay writer, the copier of passages from Marlowe, finds himself now robbed of words. Confronted by the “extreme definiteness” (148) of the Parthenon and those obdurate stones on which “the emotion of the living breaks fresh [...] year after year” (161), Jacob’s ego-centric security is rocked for the first time. He is in the grips of something bigger than a fleeting affair with a married woman. To himself, he calls it “this sort of thing” without being able to elucidate further. It’s hard to write to his mother, and to Fanny he only sends postcards. Even with Bonamy, something stops him from asking his friend to rush to Athens and share “that uneasy, painful feeling, something like selfishness – one wishes almost that the thing would stop – it is getting more and more beyond what is possible.” Cambridge has shown Jacob – like Stenhouse – that it is possible to climb ladders both of learning and social standing. It gives them the power of Greek against their deadening day jobs; only now, Jacob feels trapped by his circumstances in face of the Parthenon. Add to this tumult are his love for Sandra and the attendant problem of sex.

Jacob continues thinking in disjointed sensual fragments, severely discomfited: “– the sight of Hymettus, Pentelicus, Lycabettus on one side, and the sea on the other, as one stands in the Parthenon at sunset, the sky pink feathered, the plain all colors, the marble tawny in one’s eyes, is thus oppressive” (149). Betty Flanders has had similar trance-like moments upon Dodd’s Hill, as does Mrs. Durrant in Cornwall with the boy Curnow at her side, and Mrs. Jarvis on her rambles on the moors at night. Even Sandra Wentworth Williams asks herself a profound “What for? What for?” (161). In dealing with “this sort of thing” that refuses to be quelled with simple common sense or reading the newspaper, in his own way Jacob is at his most feminized. He loses the accumulated baggage of his education and is confronted by “an unseizable force” that is lived experience. Like novelists, he can “never catch it” because “it goes hurtling through [his] nets and leaves [him] torn to ribbons” (156). Florinda is the true priestess of this unseizable force in her animal sexuality and untutored thoughts, her

mawkish letter-writing and her dullness. Years after Jacob is gone, mad Jinny Carslake shows strangers her box of ordinary pebbles picked off the road, beribboned by that unseizable force herself. But looking steadily at the stones, she knows what Jacob only dimly senses, that “multiplicity becomes unity, which is somehow the secret of life” (131).

I began this section with the idea of *Jacob's Room* as well as *Nightwood* being implicated in the poetics and politics of a modernism of marginality. Multiplicity becomes unity in Woolf's text, as Jinny's pebbles remain discrete in marked difference from Sopwith's plaited garland, where all ideas are bent and woven into a dominant master pattern. It is significant that none of the feminine voices in the text meld together but remain singular even when they are related. Florinda and Fanny move in the same circles but, despite loving the same men (Jacob and the painter, Nick Bramham), do not see each other favorably. Clara almost betrays her mother to Mr. Bowley and only narrowly recovers herself (165-6). Betty Flanders “knew precisely how Mrs. Jarvis felt,” even though “she never listened to her discontent” and usually counters the latter's deeply-felt restlessness with some homily or home remedy (91). Even for this closest of pairs, there is much left unsaid; for instance, when the two women walk the nighttime heath in a culminative moment, each remains locked in her private subjectivity. Betty Flanders wonders about the garnet brooch Jacob gave her which she lost; without intruding on her friend's hidden quest, Mrs. Jarvis watches her stoop to pick up something and thinks, “Sometimes people do find things” (132). In its allusive style and the way it insists on allowing each of these half-submerged lives its own subjectivity, *Jacob's Room* tries to find a moment of truth in the marginal as well as the marginalized.

### **Leaving for American Wilds: Silence and the Rejection of the Old World**

While Jacob is en route to Greece and experiencing a concurrent rejection of language, the narrative voice muses on the relationship between human life and the environment to suggest, “Though the opinion is unpopular it seems likely enough that bare places, fields too thick with stones to be ploughed, tossing sea-meadows half-way between England and America, suit us better than cities” (144). Implicit in this statement is a move away from spaces chosen for their useful-

ness (defined commercially), as it articulates a movement towards marginal, feminized spaces and away from the masculine city where so many are ruled by the markings of the workday clock face. The final move from urban commercial centers to useless wilds that Jacob is unable to sustain is the driving impulse of *Nightwood*.

*Nightwood* is similarly implicated in the ways artificial narration imposes an order from without that doesn't fit lived experience. In Barnes' book as in Woolf's, there is a pervasive sense that we are "doomed all [our] days to write letters, send voices, which fall upon the tea-table, fade upon the passage, making appointments, while life dwindles" (*JR* 93). Both texts fixate on talking – *Jacob's Room* in the figures of Sopwith and Jacob, and *Nightwood* in the almost-unstoppable flow of Dr. Matthew O'Connor – and yet both have a deep-rooted consciousness that most "words have been used too often; touched and turned, and left exposed to the dust of the street," while those words that we really seek nestle "sweet beneath the leaf" hidden "close to the tree" and are only visible at dawn (*JR* 93). For Woolf, those sweet, new, hidden words hold out the possibility of true communication; Barnes goes a step further, showing those words to be tacit, embodied, unspoken. The closest that narrative can venture into describing that level of communication is to report the mimicked barks of a dog; it stands mute at the threshold with words it cannot reach as if confronted with the depths of the unconscious.

If Woolf's text can be read primarily as a struggle against the effects of an entrenched education, as I suggest, then Barnes' text is an indictment of notions of stable history imposed "upon time and open air" which also uses plant life to locate its resistance. *Nightwood* begins by likening its protagonist to an enormous, exotic house plant, and repeatedly conjures what Teresa de Lauretis describes as the *selva oscura* for its literal and psychological landscape. As she argues, the associations with Dante's more famous forest aligns Barnes' use of the trope of vegetation with another quest to leave behind disorientation in search of knowledge and truth. More concurrently, Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* "has reinscribed the trope of the journey in an altogether different dark wood" so that "the journey is henceforth interminable, reversible, discontinuous and intertextual" (de Lauretis 118). The journey in *Nightwood* has a different tenor from those previous masculine journeys; here the dark wood is not terrifying and uncanny, but the living space of freedom.

The positivism of this non-linear sequence (the lovers find each other, albeit perhaps momentarily, at the end) allows *Nightwood* to be read as strongly anti-fascist, reacting against the dominant master narratives shaking Europe in the late 1930s. Barnes' characters return to the dark forests of their minds and in their frankest moments are drawn to the woods closest to them in Paris, the Bois de Boulogne. In this section, I will focus on three sequences: Felix's provenance, his first look at Robin, and the concluding chapter (including Dr. Matthew O'Connor's breakdown), to suggest that *Nightwood's* struggles against historical determinism locate useless plants and wooded spaces as sites of resistance and polysemy. Its warning against seeing in pictures recalls Jacob's petrification, and its final scene is a discarding of the ill-fitting garments of tutored language for a truer communion between the lovers.

At a critical juncture in the novel, midway through Matthew's second conversation with Nora, the former offers an insight that is central to this text. Selecting a story as if at random, he tells her of a priest, Father Lucas, who advised him to "be simple like the beasts and yet think and harm nobody" (140). This statement carries at its heart a central paradox: to be beastly and yet sentient, rejecting neither the animal nor human. It is a statement that recalls the simplicity of mad Jinny Carslake's box of pebbles, and carries the impulse to find unity within multiplicity. Robin is on this very quest to straddle the fine line between the human and animal, and yet while she remains in Paris, the closest she reaches to her essential nature, where the two naturally commingle, is through her contact with plant life. Before turning to Robin-as-plant, however, let us examine Felix and the problem of historical determinism against which Robin and Nora react.

Felix is born orphaned of a Jewish Italian father passing as a Protestant German nobleman, "heavy with impermissible blood" (5), and a Christian mother who unconsciously "stalked" (7) her husband's assurances about his family history even while she claimed to believe them. Guido's search for authenticity had been warped and twisted so that, instead of being "simple like the beasts," he embarks upon an unending journey for outward legitimacy by embracing his fictitious family history and attempting to continue a line he was always already dispossessed of. Jacob pursues and embraces an education that allows him to claim a place in the world rather better than his roots would otherwise allow; Guido senior and his son Felix fabricate their entire



past in another manifestation of the same impulse. Ultimately, both attempts to find and fix one's place result in failure.

When Felix meets Matthew, the latter immediately diagnoses him as having "something missing and [being] whole" at the same time, "damned from the waist up" (29). He likens Felix to the poor legless Mademoiselle Basquette, inviting us (because his audience, the drunken Frau Mann, is barely listening) to draw the implication that Felix's search for legitimacy has halved him and left him helpless to the whims of powers beyond his control. Because he doesn't believe himself whole, he is liable at any moment to be violated by sailors of circumstance like the disabled Mlle Basquette. If Jacob is figuratively petrified by dogmatic education, Felix is halved and left incomplete by his adherence to a too-narrow conception of history. Recall the terms of Woolf's denunciation of "modern fiction" – Felix is the ultimate manifestation of an author in the thrall of "some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant" (CR 149) that insists that life exists more fully in the "commonly thought big" than in the small. His insistence on naming himself a baron and addressing his wife as "the Baronin" (retaining and normalizing the German term) is an act of ultimate self-renunciation, rendering both himself and Robin hollow. It is Felix's misfortune that he sees this giving up as its opposite, an act of supreme self-fulfillment; his punishment is that instead of finding a wife like Hedvig, who would be content to outwardly discipline her discontent, he marries Robin, a woman deeply engaged in escaping this same determinism. Robin recognizes the Mlle Basquette in herself and her personal quest to escape unitary towards the wholeness of multiplicity must come at the expense of her husband.

Barnes' description of Guido and Hedvig's house recalls Woolf's obsessive return to the Elgin Marbles: "The long rococo halls...were peopled with Roman fragments, white and disassociated; a runner's leg, the chilly half-turned head of a matron stricken at the bosom, the blind bold sockets of the eyes given a pupil by every shifting shadow so that what they looked upon was an act of the sun" (8). Later, the selfish passion between Robin and Jenny Petherbridge similarly locks them in place "like [sculpted] Greek runners, with lifted feet but without the relief of the final command that would bring the foot down – eternally angry, eternally separated, in a cataleptic frozen gesture of abandon" (76). In both cases, the narrative emphasizes that these figures are in a state of agonized waiting, expecting or relying on an out-

side impetus (“the sun”) to give them direction (“what they looked at”). Felix tries to insert himself into an extant history thinking that doing so might lend him authenticity and authority. In a novel that so aggressively marginalizes authoritarian dominators, history is rendered as yet another (dominant) fiction, and Felix as a character who tries to enter a story that is not his. He is thus confined to being a mere “foot soldier of history” (Marcus 95), a ridiculous figure who cannot help bowing to whoever looks most distinguished in the cafes he frequents “with the abandon of what a mad man knows to be his one hope of escape, disproof of his own madness” (131). Despite achieving some insight into his marriage and the state of his son by the end of the narrative, Felix remains trapped by his old habits. To give them up at that advanced stage would be a too-great abnegation for a personality built on such shifting sands of fiction.

The love triangle created by Jenny Petherbridge lies outside the purview of this essay, but it is worth noticing how closely her dilemma of self-representation echoes Felix’s. Where the latter chooses public history to insert himself into, she vampirizes and inscribes herself into the “commonly thought small” stories of other loves. Jenny hopes to replicate and surpass the relationship between Robin and Nora, and therefore also fails. To her, theirs is a story she wants to make hers, as if their relationship is a tangible thing to wrap around herself. She plays a role even when in love: “One inevitably thought of her in the act of love emitting florid *commedia dell’arte* ejaculations” (74), substituting genre clichés for what Woolf names “spiritual” realism. Like Felix, Jenny is uninterested or perhaps unable to create her own story and remains on the outside of her own life. Jenny is no Florinda; by immersing herself in other people’s lives and stories, she drifts away from truth helplessly.

“Your devotion to the past,” Matthew says to Felix as they are driving to the *Bois* one evening long after the separation of Felix and Robin, “is perhaps like a child’s drawing” (119). And indeed, a child’s simple sketch of the past, with its definite outlines and skewed perspective, is what Felix (also, Jenny) has been chasing. Although troubled, Felix agrees with Matthew: “My family is preserved because I have it only from the memory of one single woman, my aunt; therefore it is single, clear and unalterable... through this I have a sense of immortality” (119-120). But although the Judeo-Christian world is about separation, “*Nightwood* is about merging, dissolution, and,

above all, hybridization” (Marcus 88). Felix’s conception of domesticity is not only inappropriate for the needs of his estranged wife; within this novel, it denotes a dangerous rigidity.

In a parallel to Jacob’s love for the Greeks, which is formed without consideration for their social and political history (*JR* 76) and culled from what he has haphazardly absorbed, Felix wants the unthinking absorption of routine, a childlike harking for stability established through familiarity. By the end of their conversation (significantly, held at the upscale restaurant in the *Bois* of Paris), Felix is momentarily unglued from his stasis. He admits to Matthew, “I wanted [...] to find, if I could, the secret of time” but “that is an impossible ambition for the sane mind. One has, I am now certain, to be a little mad to see into the past or the future [...] to know life.” Accepting the loss of his wife and his son’s ruined mind, he speaks for the first time with understanding about Robin: “[To know life] may also be the errand on which the Baronin is going” (130).

Robin herself is in America at this point, moving away from Jenny and towards Nora, who has left Europe to return to her ancestral estate, a bare place also “too thick with stones to be ploughed” (*Woolf* 144). It is fitting that the lovers, who meet in New York and travel east to Europe before this final journey doubling back westwards, return finally to a place resisting commercial usefulness. Turning their back on commerce, the triumph of the final scene is latent in the vegetable way that Robin is described at first. This first look of Robin has received much critical attention. Robin’s appearance as a dancer arrested mid-step (38) can be read as a parody of Charcot’s methods of hypnosis (Marcus), a rewriting of the birth of Venus (Capelli), and a parallel to the opening scene with Hedvig (Rupprecht), to name a few.

For the purposes of this paper, what strikes me most powerfully is the degree to which Robin has taken on the aspect of the “confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers” (37) as she sleeps. Her body exudes a smell “of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry.” Even her skin is “the texture of plant life,” the frame beneath “broad, porous and sleep-worn,” with the “troubling structure of the born somnambule” (38). It is almost as if she is conscious in her sleep—although they were having trouble rousing her, once Matthew and Felix arrive, she slips easily between speech and oblivion like one recuperating by being lost in dream. Marcus points out the historical connection between Bellini’s

nineteenth century opera and the concurrent belief that sleepwalking proved the existence of a spirit by showing that consciousness is not all (108-9). Robin's urge towards a personal version of Catholicism, her longing "to know life," are manifestations of an aggressively twentieth century reiteration of this eighteenth century belief in the existence of the soul. Her likeness to plant life distances her from the marbled, fragmented Felix; her organic soul, unlike his, is able to retreat and find a momentary peace.

But this first look at Robin is problematic too, because she is not simply of the texture of plant life. The two men, seeing her mad dancer's pose on the bed, immediately place her in a more familiar frame: "a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau" (38). There is a hint of ridicule in the French descriptive and mad laughter in the subsequent changed view of Robin as "thrown in among carnivorous flowers as their ration" in a place owned by "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" (38). In contrast to the previous attention to surfaces<sup>6</sup> – her trousers, shoes, smell, skin – these attendant observations present a single picture that turns Robin into an actress in a melodrama of exoticism and music.

Hiding behind the palms out of decency, Felix is taken with this chain of signification (recall Woolf's parody of the tourists' view of Mrs. Pascoe). He is already a lover of the circus, mistaking its carnivalesque upending for the "particular *Comédie humaine*" (12) he was in search of. The circus performers "took titles merely to dazzle boys about town, to make their public life mysterious and perplexing" while "Felix clung to his title to dazzle his own estrangement" (14). Felix misses the parodic and campy elements in circus life entirely, instead, he goes going among them for "that sense of peace that formerly he had experienced only in museums" (14). As Jane Marcus discusses with attention to Nikka and Frau Mann, the camp aspects of

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<sup>6</sup> Rupprecht notes this attention to surfaces to do a thorough anti-Nazi, resistant reading of *Nightwood's* aesthetic: "Barnes insists on the importance of art and culture by depicting things in terms of their surfaces (rather than their 'essence'). The narrator frequently describes people submerged by the texture of their environment, as in the case of the trapeze artist Frau Mann [...] Hedvig is [similarly] described in terms of her reproductive capacity, a capacity which seems, however, vital to the environment in which she appears" (102).

their performance is the locus of their power: shifting, evanescent, embedded in lies, and as hard to pin down as reality itself. But, like Woolf's tourists, Felix's eye converts their emphasis on surfaces into one of essences, seeing them as relics to be placed in yet another metaphorical museum. Similarly, when he sees Robin as a primitive exotic half-beast, half-woman controlled by an unseen circus tamer, "he felt he was looking upon a figurehead in a museum" (41)<sup>7</sup>. Grasping this picturesque impression, he pursues her in an inevitable slide into disillusionment that ends with Robin rejecting both her marriage and her baby with a feral, "I didn't want him!" (53). Her final "him" expands and envelops all – the infant Guido and expectations of maternity, Felix and his imposition of domesticity, and all manner of dominant aggressors to which she is subjected.

The central problem here, as in *Jacob's Room*, is that of clarity. It is perhaps not so bad that Sopwith is constantly "talking, talking, talking," but it is dangerous that he condenses and eliminates the different in favor of the same. Similarly, by missing the camp performative elements of the circus and Robin's essential plant-like nature, Felix turns both into homogenous elements of his own search for authenticity. As the narrative cautions, "The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a 'picture' forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger" (41). The clarity each achieves through this simplification is false (see also: footnote ii), and in Felix's case, by the imposition of a birthing on Robin, violent. Hence, when she gives birth "[a]mid loud and frantic cries of affirmation and despair," not the

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<sup>7</sup> An interesting side note: Djuna Barnes is said to have approved of Joseph Frank's assertion about this novel's reliance on spatial form and apparent lack of sequential organisation. Instead of using time as an organising principle (which even *Jacob's Room* does, as the novel is largely sequential), Barnes uses space, weaving her text together through a "continual reference and cross-reference of images and symbols" (Frank 32, also Rupprecht 95). Here, the recurring instances of ancient, broken, de-contextualized marble sculptures acquire a palimpsestic quality that allows us to see the couples Felix-Robin, Nora-Robin (first time), and Jenny-Robin as essentially manifestations of the same relationship based on ego and power, desiring to rid the beloved of agency, objectifying her into paralysis. Carolyn Allen asserts that by showing not only heteronormative, but also same-sex desire, the text creates this palimpsest of differences that produce "a doubled subjectivity of resemblance" (22-3). It is only the second iteration of Nora-Robin that breaks out of rigid causality and a new kind of love relationship emerges at the moment of the novel's closure.

child but “*Robin* was delivered” (52, my emphasis). This ultimate reduction to her biological function at the cost of all else stirs her out of the “stubborn, cataleptic calm” (49) that she assumed was her only power. It pushes her to reject motherhood as her first major assertion. Her wild search for Nora is the second, even more radical than this first.

Felix should have read his wife for what she said and left unsaid. Spying her one day in a small tapestry shop facing the Seine, he thinks he has discovered the secret behind her clothes, which were “of a period that he could not quite place” (46). This episode is quintessential Barnes, combining philosophical depth with a prosaic explanation of Robin’s financial situation. To Felix, the mystery of Robin’s clothes is solved as soon as he sees her “reflected in a door mirror of a back room, dressed in a heavy brocaded gown which time had stained in places, in others split, yet which was so voluminous that there were yards enough to refashion” (46). He places her financially and socially, then asks her to marry him and is surprised she accepts.

And yet, Robin’s dressing style is an assertion against allowing herself to simply be converted into a series of significations. Recalling Walter Benjamin on translation, the folds of her dress cloak her true self like language does meaning; de Lauretis invokes Jean Laplanche to assert that “subjectivity may be understood as a process of self-translation, detranslation and retranslation” (120). Even when she is with Nora in Paris, she walks “in *formless* meditation, her hands thrust into the sleeves of her coat” (65, my emphasis) so that both her figure and her thoughts escape definition. In other words, “Meaning is oblique and camp, but it is not a [singular] secret to disclose; language’s lack of transparency is, paradoxically, there for all to see” (Caselli 161). *Nightwood* parallels *Ulysses* in its use of “mixed metaphors, mixed genres, mixed levels of discourse from the lofty to the low, mixed ‘languages’ from medical practice and circus argot, church dogma and homosexual slang” (Marcus 88). In it, meaning escapes definition and remains immanent, in direct contrast to Felix’s doomed method of self-fashioning.

This is why, ultimately, Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O’Connor (Barnes 87) suffers a violent breakdown despite his acuteness. He remains trapped in the world of “talking, talking, talking” even as he is instrumental in setting his friend Nora free. He reinscribes the Freudian world of sexuality, and pines for the reproductive

function that *Nightwood* has already discarded (Rupprecht 107). “Why doesn’t anyone know when everything is over, except me?” he cries in a drunken anguish, and the sad irony is that his “Mighty-grain-of-salt” is not ultimately large enough to allow him the freedom of Robin and Nora. He circles around the *selva oscura* trapped in a deterministic universe. Addressing an audience that is in turns mocking and pitying, he lays out the depths of his agony: “Now that you have all heard what you wanted to hear, can’t you let me lose now, let me go? [...] it’s all over, everything’s over, and nobody knows it but me” (175). With the hindsight of history, this section is chillingly prescient as the old certainties emphatically vanish. The doctor clings to the past in his own transvestitism, dreaming of a happy domesticity where he “boils some good man’s potatoes and tosses up a child for him every nine months by the calendar” (91).

But *Nightwood* calls for new ways, and Robin’s return to Nora is a reminder that “the human condition is a sister- and brotherhood of difference, and that ideologies that seek to erase those differences and define only themselves as human are indescribably dangerous” (Marcus 118). It answers Molly Bloom’s yes with “Robin Vote’s no to marriage, no to motherhood, no to monogamous lesbianism. Robin’s no is a preverbal, prepatriarchal primitive bark” (Marcus 96). It is ideologically opposed to fascist aesthetics even when the same are coolly extirpated from the text, its “structure of reflexivity, which is related to the figure of irony, [not allowing] any kind of totalizing vision, since by definition [totalizing] creates a split within the subject” (Rupprecht 96-7). Sexuality, which remains problematic at the end of *Jacob’s Room*, is more happily resolved here, and the false dialectic between monkish learning and feminine knowledge dissolves in *Nightwood*’s highly-cinematic closing scene.

In *Jacob’s Room*, history’s debris are left in the European capitals to continue as they must, confronting the everyday with confusion and pain. By contrast, *Nightwood* offers the possibility of an organic holism at a distance from historically-sedimented urbanity. Matthew’s vision of “now *nothing, but wrath and weeping*” (175) is countered by the two “Possessed” (the name of the brief final chapter) with an “excess of affect” (de Lauretis 137) that is so far beyond the bounds of signification that it can only exist, even if for a moment, in the desolate, disused chapel that Nora possesses. Plant life, which sustained Robin at the beginning of the novel, surrounds the couple in that final

scene, offering hope that it is possible to survive the city. Unhappy Felix retreats from his insights but Nora and Robin retreat into them, becoming finally as wordless as vegetable life itself.

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