
OF DIVINE IDIOTS AND WISE MEN: IDIOCY IN DJUNA BARNES'S *NIGHTWOOD*

PRIYANKA DESHMUKH¹*Université Rennes 2*

1. The idiot is not a marginal figure in *Nightwood*. That is not to say that the idiot in the novel does not inhabit the margins of society. He or she is excluded in one way or another from society, both American and Parisian — most of the characters in the novel being American expatriates living in Paris. Unlike Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, or Melville's Bartleby, Barnes's idiot is not even a lone, singular figure that sets itself apart from other characters: idiots abound in Barnes's novel, making them central. The author brings together Felix (Baron Volkbein), Robin Vote, Nora Flood, Jenny Petherbridge, Guido Volkbein (Felix and Robin's son), and Matthew O'Connor, and makes them relate to each other in their idiocy. Each character's idiocy, as we will see, is not defined in opposition to the wisdom of the other (that is to say, he or she is not an outlier among the wise), but in relation to the other's idiocy. The center of the novel is thus splintered: the central figure of the idiot in *Nightwood* — usually a marginal figure in literature — is multiple. This marginal center also finds itself spatialized in the novel's setting: the idiots of the story, named above, live around and interact in the heart of Paris in the 1920s, near the Place Saint-Sulpice, but they remain separated from the core Parisian society of the time.

2. Although these characters, whose portraits Barnes paints for us², come together and resemble each other as idiots, they differ in their idiocy to the point of challenging the very notion that they embody. But idiocy is not merely a notion, and even less a simple *topos*, in the novel: it is a force that drives the characters towards knowledge which itself remains concealed, unattainable. The characters' attempt to learn — or at times, to teach — in order to be cured of their idiocy (for idiocy is their malady) only takes them back to it. Since idiocy in *Nightwood* is a dynamic process rather than an innate feature, not only can the characters come out of it, or be cured of it, but they can also move towards it. In this essay, we will attempt to follow these characters first in their movement towards idiocy, and then in their movement towards knowledge, which is the cure they seek. However, as this study will attempt to demonstrate, the process of cure fails, and in the end, they return to idiocy.

1 The author is grateful to Jonas Rosenbrück for enlightening discussions on the question of idiocy.

2 Kenneth Burke describes *Nightwood*'s story as unfolding in "a succession of character portraits," in his 1966 essay "Version, Con-, Per-, and In-: Thoughts on Djuna Barnes's Novel *Nightwood*," published in *The Southern Review* (337).

3. If their return to idiocy is the result of their failure to gain knowledge and to be cured, it is also symptomatic of the notion's own resistance to a fixed definition, rendering the attempt to define idiocy a perilous exercise that at times even leads us to think of idiocy as indistinguishable from knowledge. Like *Nightwood's* idiot characters, the definition of idiocy, and the form it takes in the novel, is multiple. An idiot is the name given to one who is ignorant, mentally deficient, foolish, simple, ordinary, but it also names one who is private, peculiar, and singular. Felix, Guido, Matthew O'Connor, Nora, Robin, and Jenny embody one or more of these senses of the idiot, often contradictorily, and their displacement in the text, be it physical or epistemic, indicates the volatility of the notion itself. But idiocy goes beyond the realm of the novel's characters. We will see how it informs the very gesture of narration, is inextricable from the poetic act, and winds up becoming a mode of reading *Nightwood*. Faced with a simultaneously elusive and wide-ranging notion, it will inevitably become a part our endeavor to reconsider idiocy in the plurality of its senses.

Becoming Idiot

4. *Nightwood* lays bare the process by which its characters become idiots. Idiocy is an action, a construct: it is not a pre-existing condition, but is arrived at. This process involves various types of movements: filial, narrative, corporeal, and even metaphorical. In the novel, idiocy, insofar as it signifies ignorance or lack of knowledge, first and foremost pertains to the private life of the characters, to their personal past. Baron Felix Volkbein's private life escapes him, and for this very reason, it becomes the object of knowledge. An idiot, in one of the many etymological senses of the term, also designates a private person.³ In his search for his private life — his past — Felix chooses to become an idiot. His movement towards idiocy is at once a movement towards knowledge.

5. The plot revolves around Felix's desire to procreate: "he wished a son who would feel as he felt about the 'great past,'" ⁴ the great past being the aristocratic history of Europe with which he (and his father before him) wished to identify. For Felix, the personal past follows from the "great past." In a way, Felix's attachment to the past is what drives the plot forward: he chooses to marry Robin Vote so that "she might bear sons who would recognize and honor the past" (40). In order to *recognize* the past, there must already be the knowledge of it. But the past is missing. The story

3 In one of its numerous etymologies, idiot (*ἴδιος*) signifies "private, own, peculiar" ("idiot, n. and adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 01 October 2016.)

4 *Nightwood*, 35. The term "great past" first appears on p. 8, and refers to the history of "'Old Europe': aristocracy, nobility, royalty."

opens with Felix's birth in 1880 in Vienna, and almost abruptly switches into his adulthood, thirty years later:

At this point exact history stopped for Felix who, thirty years later, turned up in the world with these facts, the two portraits and nothing more. His aunt, combing her long braids with an amber comb, told him what she knew, and this had been her only knowledge of his past. What had formed Felix from the date of his birth to his coming to thirty was unknown to the world, for the step of the wandering Jew is in every son (7).

6. This narrative ellipsis that forgoes the first thirty years of Felix's life participates in the process of constructing idiocy. The passage negates the opening of the novel — the moment of Felix's birth — and rewrites it. He is born into the world at thirty. His only knowledge of his past, the reader is given to understand, comes in the form of the "facts" about his origins (the brief account of his parents' life before his birth, in the pages preceding this passage) and "two portraits" representing his father's parents — anonymous portraits which his father had in fact purchased in an attempt to prove his barony. Felix's past is a construction; it is doubly fictional: it is a story told to him by his aunt about his father's invented, and therefore essentially false, origins. Not only is Felix's father, Guido, unknown to him (since he dies before Felix's birth), but the inherited knowledge of him is already entirely fabricated, constructed. In other words, the construction here is originary: it does not result from an inability to remember the past. The above passage's negation of his actual moment of birth further obscures, even obliterates, any semblance of his past, thus making it unknowable, ungraspable, and therefore, unrecognizable. His past is the blank that he tries to fill by engendering a son, and in naming his son Guido, he also fills, in a way, the void created by his absent, unknown and unknowable father.

7. For Felix, having a son implies a movement away from idiocy, a movement from ignorance of the past to knowledge of the past. However, the son that Robin bears him impedes this movement. The son, Guido Volkbein, is "[m]entally deficient, and emotionally excessive. [...] [Felix] knew that Guido was not like other children, that he would always be too estranged to be argued with; in accepting his son the Baron saw that he must accept a demolition of his own life" (96-97). Guido's mental deficiency is hinted at much earlier in the novel, when, in a prophetic and proleptic gesture, the doctor, Matthew O'Connor claims that "the last child born to aristocracy is sometimes an idiot" (36), when Felix expresses his desire to have a son. If Felix's aristocracy was false in the beginning (his barony, we are told within the first few pages, is a false title), Guido's birth as an "idiot," it

could be said, establishes it. But Guido's idiocy is not so much innate as it is part at once of a narrative and a familial movement: his birth moves the plot forward, and produces an heir to Felix's "past." Guido is an idiot in more than one sense of the term: not only is he "mentally deficient," different or strange, but, in his estrangement ("too estranged to be argued with"), he is also unable to participate in a reasoned exchange, and thus *becomes* private. Guido is not in the position of "recognizing" the past, let alone "honoring" it. With Guido's birth, therefore, is destroyed any chance of knowing the past, leading to the destruction of Felix's life. In his attempt to recuperate the lost unknown and to do away with idiocy by fathering a son, Felix might appear to only perpetuate it. But his "accepting his son," and therefore "a demolition of his own life," might in itself be a movement towards knowledge.

8. Singular in his idiocy — his privacy — the child does not fail to produce knowledge, and holds the key to Felix's wisdom. Guido is so private that he can be anyone other than his own self. Not only is he born to act as a stand-in for the absent father of Felix's inaccessible past, Baron Guido Volkbein, but he also acts as a reminder and the embodiment of his perpetually errant and unattainable wife, Robin Vote: "The Baron bought his boy a virgin in metal, hanging from a red ribbon, and placed it about his neck, and in doing so, the slight neck, bent to take the ribbon, recalled to him Robin's, as she stood back to him in the antique shop on the Seine" (97). For Felix, Guido's body points to Robin's whom he can merely see from a distance. Robin's position in his memory of her (her back turned to Felix) removes her further away from him, making contact impossible. In both instances — the father's and the wife's — Guido connotes the unknown, the unattainable, the ungraspable. As such, he is a form of knowledge — the knowledge of what cannot be known.
9. If the father is unknowable because of his irreversible and irretrievable absence, the wife is unknowable because of her uncertain presence; if Felix's past is inaccessible, so is his present. His wife, Robin, exists in the novel as an absent, errant presence, incapable as she is, among other things, of staying with her husband Felix, or her two lovers, Nora and Jenny, haunting the city streets and public places, moving "from table to table [at the café], from drink to drink, from person to person" (53). On the surface, she appears to be public, and therefore not an idiot. Yet, she remains private.
10. The chapter dedicated to Robin is entitled "La Somnambule," and her appearance in the story is sudden and unusual. The two characters Felix Volkbein and Matthew O'Connor first learn about Robin as "the lady in twenty-nine [who] had fainted and could not be brought out of it" (30),

through the Hôtel Récamier's *chasseur*. They hear about her before they, like the reader, get to see her. Her first appearance in the story describes the state in which she will remain throughout. The metonym "La Somnambule," or the sleepwalker, places idiocy (in the form of sleep) under the sign of displacement, as if to reinforce the idea that idiocy is a process, a movement towards a state. Robin's perpetual lack of consciousness, in its varying degrees, is emphasized in the novel: "her only power: a stubborn cataleptic calm" (41); "she leaned further forward in a swoon, waking and yet heavy, like one in sleep" (42); "Robin was dozing in a chair" (42). She is then shown lying on the hotel bed, having lost consciousness:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly oversung by the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten — left without the usual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives — half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and dishevelled. Her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance, the thick lacquered pumps looking too lively for the arrested step. Her hands, long and beautiful, lay on either side of her face.

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. [...]

Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape, thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration [...]) (30-31).

11. Suddenly, yet privately, discre(e)tely — discontinuously and secretly — she appears. Robin is seen but cannot see. And just as soon as she appears, she is made to disappear: the moment she appears on the bed, the narrator dives into a description of the space that surrounds her — a description mostly of what is invisible, what is not there (the birds, their cages...) — to the point that the space engulfs her. Soon after, she nearly ceases being seen and is perceived through the olfactory sense: as "perfume," as "odour." Since the space that is described and brought to the foreground is not real, we could say that perhaps, as an idiot, as the private one, she can only appear on a paradoxical mode of near invisibility and multiplicity, not in the "here" of narration, but in an elsewhere, in

a space so private that it cannot be shown but merely conjured up through metonymical substitutions: “the unseen birds,” plural, are contiguous to the lone R(r)obin.

12. This metonymical substitution, multiple as it may be, does not disrupt her unity. Instead, it reinforces her “stupefying singularity,” to borrow Clément Rosset’s words. In his discussion of Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*, Rosset, taking up the case of the drunk’s idiocy, or rather his wisdom, writes:

L’ivrogne perçoit simple, et c’est plutôt l’homme sobre qui, habituellement, perçoit double. L’ivrogne est, quant à lui, hébété par la présence sous ses yeux d’une chose singulière et unique [...]. Une chose *toute simple*, c’est à dire saisie comme singularité stupéfiante, comme émergence insolite dans le champs de l’existence.⁵

13. Robin is the sudden and unusual emergence of an extreme simplicity in the story. Throughout the novel Matthew O’Connor is shown consuming alcohol and therefore constantly being in a drunken stupor. Like Felix and Doctor O’Connor who see her, the reader is shown a very simple thing: a woman lying on a bed. Idiocy here becomes a force exerted by the narrator on the reader. Through the narrator’s description of her human-vegetal hybridity, we are put in the position of the drunk. In a way, we become Matthew O’Connor and perceive her as a stupefying singularity. But she remains simple, even in her hybridity. She evokes the primordial world, and is presented as being composed of the simplest living matter: fungi, plants. So singular is she in her simplicity, her privacy, her idiocy, that she loses her humanity. Not only does she become vegetal, but through the allusion to Henri Rousseau’s jungle painting, *Le rêve*, is also turned into an image — a mere representation, a purely aesthetic object deprived of life.

14. Thus presented in her state of unconsciousness, Robin is rendered incapable of thought. Conversely, it could also be said that she is capable of thought only in her lack of consciousness, only in her incapacity to think, as she is seen walking around the streets in a state of trance:

Once out in the open Robin walked in a formless meditation, her hands thrust into the sleeves of her coat, directing her steps toward that night life that was a known measure between Nora and the cafés. Her meditations, during this walk, were a part of the pleasure she expected to find when the walk came to an end. [...]

5 “The drunk perceives simply, and it is rather the one who is sober who, habitually, sees double. As for the drunk, he is astounded by the presence before his eyes of a singular and unique thing [...]. A *very simple* thing, that is to say, grasped as stupefying singularity, as an oddity suddenly emerging in the field of existence.” (Rosset, *Le Réel: Traité de l'idiotie*, 49. My translation; original emphasis.)

Her thoughts were in themselves a form of locomotion. She walked with raised head, seeming to look at every passer-by, yet her gaze was anchored in anticipation and regret. A look of anger, intense and hurried, shadowed her face and drew her mouth down as she neared her company; yet as her eyes moved over the façades of the buildings, searching for the sculptured head that both she and Nora loved [...], a quiet joy radiated from her own eyes; for this head was remembrance of Nora and her love, making the anticipation of the people she was to meet set and melancholy. So *without knowing* she would do so, she took the turn that brought her into this particular street. (53-54; my emphasis)

15. Robin thinks in motion and as motion. Yet, her thoughts are never disclosed to the reader. So private are her thoughts that we see Robin only through her movements and through the emotions displayed in her gaze and on her face: “anticipation,” “regret,” “anger,” and “joy.” The intensity of her emotions brings her to resemble her “emotionally excessive” son, Guido. In her somnambulism, she is not so much an idiot as she is its semantic cousin: a mad(wo)man, which for Deleuze is one of the main features, after the Idiot, that make up a “conceptual persona:” “a kind of madman, a *cataleptic* thinker or “mummy” who discovers in thought an inability to think.”⁶ Robin’s attempt to think only produces “formless” thoughts, and in those formless meditations she encounters the inability to think, returning her to a state of innocence. And this privacy, this idiocy (for “the idiot is the private thinker”⁷) resulting from her inability to think, produces, in its turn, a certain happiness, a “pleasure.” Later in the novel, the doctor, Matthew O’Connor, quoting Thomas Browne, says of Robin: “happy are they whom privacy makes innocent,” and in so doing, absolves her from being the cause of suffering of her husband Felix, and her two lovers, Nora and Jenny. Robin’s privacy, and therefore her idiocy, appears to be a *pharmakon*: it causes her to inflict suffering by abandoning her lovers and to have it inflicted on her⁸, but it also leads to her absolution.

16. Contrasting with Robin’s privacy is that of Nora — the lover, the other. While Robin’s privacy coincides with her disappearance, as seen in the first instance of her appearance, Nora is deprived of it:

There is a gap in ‘world pain’ through which the singular falls continually and forever; a body falling in observable space, deprived of the privacy of disappearance; as if privacy, moving relentlessly away, by the very sustaining power of its withdrawal kept the body

6 Deleuze, *What Is Philosophy?*, 70. My emphasis.

7 Deleuze, 62.

8 In the chapter (“The Squatter”) dedicated to Jenny, Robin’s lover after Nora, Jenny, in a fit of rage spawned by jealousy, physically attacks Robin till she bleeds as they ride through Paris in a carriage.

eternally moving downward, but in one place, and perpetually before the eye. Such a singular was Nora (46).

17. Whereas Robin's body is presented as fallen (lying on the bed, having fainted — the fall being broken by the bed), Nora's is caught up in a perpetual movement of fall, and therefore perpetually visible, eternally public. Privacy gains a new sense here: privacy, we may understand in this passage, is its impossibility. Nora's visibility caused by her suffering (her perpetual fall) makes her private, "singular," that is to say, absolutely unique and peculiar, that is to say, idiot. Her suffering, which sends her to the Doctor in search of a cure, presented through the metaphor of the fall, is brought about by her inability to know Robin, linking up suffering and idiocy. But as we are about to see, suffering and idiocy do not relate to each other through the absence of knowledge or the incapacity for it, but precisely because of its presence, or even its excess.

The Cure: Escaping Idiocy

18. While *Nightwood* seems to show the process by which the characters become idiots, an equally significant portion of the text is dedicated to their sessions with the doctor. The characters seek to be cured of their idiocy, to escape their idiocy. We are thus led to consider the question of cure that poses itself in the text: how to be cured of idiocy? Is cure reached by gaining knowledge, as would be the most obvious answer, or at least the most immediate hypothesis?
19. In the process of cure, the figure of the doctor, and his participation in the trajectory of cure, is indispensable. The doctor is not only someone who cures, but also someone who knows. As such, he is doubly opposed to idiocy. We will now examine the interactions that take place in the novel between the suffering characters and the figure of the doctor embodied by Doctor Matthew O'Connor, for in their relationship with the Doctor, the characters are also shown in their relationship with knowledge. The notion of knowledge, troubled by idiocy, is constantly called into question in the novel. But the relationship between idiocy or stupidity and knowledge is inherently problematic. As Avital Ronell puts it: "stupidity does not allow itself to be opposed to knowledge in any simple way, nor is it the other of thought. It does not stand in the way of wisdom, for the guise of the wise is to avow unknowing."⁹ In their search for cure, the characters of *Nightwood* blur the boundary between idiocy and knowledge, making these notions inextricably linked.

9 Ronell, *Stupidity*, 5.

20. The afflicted Felix (“I’ve been in mental trouble,” 99) seeks out Doctor Matthew O’Connor in the manner that an analysand would the analyst.¹⁰ His suffering, he explains to the Doctor, is related to his inability to know Robin:

If I should try to put it into words, I mean how I did see her, it would be incomprehensible, for the simple reason that I find that I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time. I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties. I had gathered, of course, a good deal from you, and later, after she went away, from others, but this only strengthened my confusion. The more we learn of a person, the less we know (100).

21. What hinders Felix’s understanding of Robin is to be found in the difference he makes between “idea” and “image” — an anti-Cartesian move, since for Descartes, ideas and images were indissociable. For Felix, Robin is a signifier without a signified. Understanding her is therefore impossible for him, since, as a simple signifier, she erases all possibility of signification. And this is the very knowledge he possesses: that he can never know Robin. In his suffering, which materializes in his inability to express himself (“If I should try to put it into words [...] it would be incomprehensible”), his idiocy becomes his wisdom. His putting into words for the Doctor his perception of Robin, then, can be read as a gesture that subjects the Doctor to incomprehension, turning him into an idiot. But he cannot become an idiot, because what Felix tells him is something that he already seems to know and that he imparts to Nora in his monologue several pages earlier.

22. Like Felix, Nora appeals to the Doctor’s wisdom, when Robin abandons her and starts roaming the streets of Paris at night: “Doctor, I have come to ask you to tell me everything you know about the night” (71). The object of Nora’s epistemic quest is Robin — the “night” being a metonymical substitution for her. In response to her request, the Doctor offers her a curious form of the “talking cure.” Frenzied¹¹, he plunges into a “tirade” (80) that goes on ceaselessly: “Wait I’m coming to the night of nights” (80), “I’m coming to something” (81), “I have a narrative but you will be put to it to find it” (87). From Nora’s point of view, knowledge is promised, but never arrived at. Nora, who is in the position of the reader, is left with what is essentially a proliferation of signifiers flooding the pages of the novel. But it is this unstoppable idiocy of the Doctor’s speech

10 Jane Marcus is one among a large number of critics to write about the parallel with psychoanalysis in *Nightwood*. In her essay “Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman’s Circus Epic” published in *Cultural Critique*, she reads *Nightwood* as “a brilliant and hilarious feminist critique of Freudian psychoanalysis and a parody of the discourse of diagnosis of female hysteria.” (*Cultural Critique*, 144).

11 For Deleuze, the frenzied man, like the Idiot and the Madman, is also one of the features of the “conceptual persona.” (*What Is Philosophy*, 70)

(producing signifiers whose signifieds are impossible) that seems to hold the key to knowledge: Robin *is* this excess of signs. She is, as seen above, from Felix's point of view, a signifier without a signified, and in the Doctor's monologue, she proliferates. She can only be understood in the movement of her escaping the characters' comprehension, *as* incomprehension: she is to be understood not only as an idiot (as the private one), but as idiocy. This turns her into the very gesture of narration, rather than merely its object. Idiocy is thus the mode of narration in *Nightwood*. The Doctor therefore seems to tell Nora what Felix will tell him a few pages later. Nora, none the wiser, will continue to look for Robin until the very end of the novel — a moment where she finally seems to know Robin.

23. If Nora seems to come to understand or know Robin, it is independently of the help of the Doctor. This occurs in the closing scene of the novel, when Nora sees Robin in a church near her own house in America:

[Nora] began to run, cursing and crying, and blindly, without warning, plunged into the jamb of the chapel door.

On a contrived altar, before a Madonna, two candles were burning. Their light fell across the floor and the dusty benches. Before the image lay flowers and toys. Standing before them in her boy's trousers was Robin. Her pose, startled and broken, was caught at the point where her hand had reached almost to the shoulder, and the moment Nora's body struck the wood, Robin began going down. Sliding down she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out [...]. And down she went, until her head swung against [the dog's] (152).

24. Nora's running into the jamb is described as a fall ("plunged"). Coinciding with this fall is Robin's. But this coincidence is described as an identification between the two falls, as a single fall: the referent of the deictic "she" in "Sliding down she went" could be either of the two women. Nora and Robin unite imperceptibly in this instance of the fall. Nora, who is merely an observer in this scene, now participates in it, and indeed, the narrator will only use the deictic "she," and will no longer refer to Nora (nor Robin, for that matter) by her proper name for the rest of the scene, and therefore, the rest of the novel. Nora comes to grasp the ungraspable Robin by becoming one with her, by becoming her in her fall.

25. This fall gestures towards Nora's perpetual fall, her "eternally moving downward" (46), which is the representation of her suffering. Her fall, literalized in the above scene, is also broken by the end of it, when Nora, one with Robin, becomes one with the dog, and finally lies down:

The dog, quivering in every muscle, sprang back, his lips drawn, his tongue a stiff curving terror in his mouth; moved backward, back, as she came on, whimpering too now, coming forward, her head turned completely sideways, grinning and whimpering. [...] Then, head down, dragging her forelocks in the dust, she struck against his side. He let loose one howl of misery and bit at her, dashing about her, barking [...].

Then she began to bark also, crawling after him — barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her; soft and slow his feet went. He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees (152-153).

26. In this scene, Robin (thus Nora) and Nora's dog metamorphose into each other — through cries ("howl," "whimpering," "barking," "crying") and bodily gestures ("moving," "grinning," "lying"). If she is "beast turning human" (33) in the scene of her appearance, she is human turning beast in this final scene. Seeing this transformation towards a primordial bestial state as a movement towards idiocy questions the relationship between animality and idiocy. In itself, the animal is not idiot; it is anything but idiot, for the very definition of idiocy relies on human language, intelligence, or behavior. Humanity seems to be the condition of possibility of idiocy. As Derrida, taking up the difference between "*bête*" (beast) and "*bêtise*" (stupidity, and even idiocy) in relation to the distinction between man and the animal, writes in *The Beast and the Sovereign*:

at bottom what is irreducibly *bête*, [...] is life pure and simple, which is both infinitely *bête* and cunning, intelligent, *bête* and anything but *bête*: it is the living in life itself which outplays the opposition between *bêtise* and its supposed contrary, the decidable limit between the two, both in what is called man and in what is called the animal, the living being in general that is both *bête* and not *bête*, idiotic and cunning, naïve and smart, etc.¹²

27. In placing man and the animal at the same time under the sign of intelligence and idiocy, he places them at once within and outside of knowledge, within and outside of idiocy. But in *Nightwood's* final scene, Robin's (and thus Nora's) transformation into an animal is not so much a transformation into a *bête*, as it is a movement towards *bêtise*. Robin's metamorphosis does not obliterate her human nature — her animality exists only in juxtaposition, contrast or even hybridization

12 Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 176.

with her former human nature. Animality is not a new state she reaches, but rather a symptom of a loss or decay of human language, in favor of a private, incomprehensible language (“howl[ing],” “whimpering,” “barking”), which is the language of idiocy. Idiocy is the process that Nora has to undergo in order to know Robin, through the loss of language.

28. Knowledge and idiocy also coincide in Jenny’s quest to grasp Robin. Unlike Felix and Nora, Jenny is the only one of Robin’s lovers who, when she is subjected to Robin’s constant errantry, does not turn to the Doctor. Not turning to the Doctor, however, does not mean that she is devoid of suffering, but that her suffering is different from the other two characters. Jenny suffers from knowing Robin. Distressed, she turns to Felix, instead of the Doctor, in order to talk about Robin: “I don’t understand her at all, though I must say I understand her better than other people. [...] She always lets her pets die. She is so fond of them, and then she neglects them, the way that animals neglect themselves” (103). On the surface, Jenny seems aware of her inability to understand or to know Robin. It is astounding for the reader to find this sliver of wisdom coming out of an idiot, for Jenny is presented in the novel as an idiot — as someone “who cannot think for [herself]” (61)¹³. But this passage could also be read as Jenny’s almost accurate understanding of Robin. Her resorting to the animal metaphor to describe Robin’s tendency to neglect her lovers seems to come from the awareness and the understanding not only of Robin’s animality, but also her own. Soon after she first appears in the novel, Robin is described as a “beast turning human” (33) and at the end of the novel, becomes one with the dog. The narrator at one point, describing Jenny says: “somewhere about her was the tension of the accident that made the beast the human endeavor” (61). Jenny’s use of the animal metaphor could be seen as the sign of her understanding of the identification between herself and Robin as animals, or more precisely, as seen earlier, as creatures devoid of human language. The metaphor here becomes the marker of this knowledge. Knowledge is imparted figuratively, indirectly, secretly, privately. The fact that Felix does not grasp this imparted knowledge, since he takes Jenny’s words literally (“I did not like her to talk about this subject, as Guido is very sensitive to animals.” 103), reinforces the idiotic mode on which knowledge operates. True knowledge, it appears, can only be communicated on the mode of impossibility, secrecy, privacy, or idiocy: idiocy and knowledge thus coincide.

29. In *Nightwood*, idiocy and wisdom coincide in the affect of suffering. As mentioned above, a novel predicated on suffering and cure implies a dynamic in which positions of the characters are

¹³ The whole chapter “The Squatter” is dedicated to Jenny in which she is presented as a character whose life is nothing but an appropriation of the lives of others: everything that she says, does, or is borrowed or stolen from others. For instance, she steals Robin from Nora (62).

more or less fixed: there are those who suffer, and there is the one who cures — the patients and the doctor; the analysands and the analyst. Analogous to the analysand-analyst relationship in *Nightwood* is another one: that of the sinner and the priest. The parallel between psychoanalysis and the practice of confession is hinted at towards the beginning of the novel:

you can get yourself into the confessional, where, in sonorous prose, lacking contrition (if you must) you can speak of the condition of the knotty, tangled soul and be answered in Gothic echoes, mutual and instantaneous — one saying hail to your farewell. Mischief unravels and the fine high hand of heaven proffers the skein again, combed and forgiven!
(19)

30. The description of confession presented through the textile metaphor of threads and weaving (“knotty,” “tangled,” “skein”) also recalls Derrida’s discussion in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* of Freud’s metaphor of weaving used to talk about the unconscious: “there is a tireless insistence on the texture of interwoven threads, on a skein of knots that cannot be untangled.”¹⁴ What the Doctor calls “soul” is analogous to what Freud calls the “unconscious.” This parallel between the Catholic practice of confession and the practice of psychoanalysis is not surprising given that *Nightwood* is, as Jane Marcus has argued in her essay “Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman’s Circus Epic,” a critique and parody of Freudian psychoanalysis. Through the character of the Doctor, Barnes subverts the framework of psychoanalysis by transposing it into a religious context, by suggesting the Christian pardon (“combed and forgiven”) in place of psychoanalysis’ bringing to light what is hidden. In *Nightwood*, it is up to Matthew O’Connor to comb the skein, and untangle the knotty souls of Felix and Nora. But in so doing, he finds his position as the Doctor (or alternatively, the analyst, or even the priest) inverted, and interchanged with that of the patients (or the analysands, or the sinners): “May they all be damned! The people in my life who have made my life miserable, coming to me to learn of degradation and the night” (145). His patients cause his suffering, turning him into the patient. But his suffering is not necessarily or strictly a result of his having been in the position of the Doctor.

31. Indeed, Matthew O’Connor’s suffering precedes his encounter with the other characters. When he first appears in the novel, he is not much different from when he exits the story in the penultimate chapter: standing around a table, addressing an audience of eleven people, he is first heard “telling of himself, for he considered himself the most amusing predicament” (13). He presents himself not only as an object of philosophical discourse (if “predicament” may be taken as a refer-

14 Derrida, *Resistances to Psychoanalysis*, 14.

ence to Aristotle's *Categories*), but also, metonymically, as the situation of suffering itself. He later exits the Café de la Mairie du VIème, addressing an audience, talking about his suffering. Between these two moments, the Doctor presents himself as “Dr Mighty O’Connor” who “knows everything” (74). In talking about himself thus, he likens himself and the figure of the doctor to God.

32. However, his apotheosis of himself is in fact a negative one. In pronouncing himself God in his assumed role of doctor, he does not equate himself with infinite wisdom. In the midst of a monologue about the difference between Judaism and Irish Catholicism, he says to Felix (the audience of his monologue): “the great doctor, he’s a divine idiot and a wise man” (28). Not only does he present the doctor as both, wise and idiot, but the asymmetrical epithets qualifying asymmetrical nouns in his aphorism operate a chiasmus that links the divine to idiocy, and wisdom to man. In God, then, wisdom becomes idiocy.

33. Not only is Dr Mighty O’Connor a questionable God — an idiot god — but his identity as a doctor is itself questionable. In the scene in which he is brought to the hotel room to treat the fainted Robin, we are told in a nearly veiled reference, as a parenthesis, that “(he was not a licensed practitioner)” (31-32). The Doctor is an impostor, a liar. Because he is a fake doctor, there are characters that seem to be able to heal without his help. As seen above, Nora and Jenny attempt to take their cure into their own hands: whereas Jenny does not even consult the Doctor, Nora, despite the Doctor’s advice to renounce her love for Robin (“Can’t you be quiet now. [...] Can’t you be done now, can’t you give up?” 112), insists on writing to her (“‘I’ve got to write to her,’ Nora said. ‘I’ve got to.’” 114), or going towards her in the final chapter. But as a result, his lies seem to become part of the remedy. As Felix thinks to himself: “the doctor was a great liar, but a valuable liar. His fabrications seemed to be the framework of a forgotten but imposing plan; some condition of life of which he was the sole retainer” (27). The condition of life to which he refers seems to be idiocy, or rather, idiocy as wisdom, for the Doctor himself says later in the novel: “Love is the first lie; wisdom the last” (125). In order to be cured — of love, of ignorance — the doctor prescribes accepting wisdom as a lie.

34. Do these characters, then, recover successfully? Is cure even possible? Escaping idiocy, as we have seen, implies simultaneously returning to it. In the attempt to be cured, there is always a return to the malady: a movement towards knowledge is always a return to ignorance, to idiocy. The ailing characters in the end all follow the same trajectory of cure: in their attempt to learn — to know Robin — they encounter an impossibility to know her. Or in other words, to know Robin, they must

acknowledge the impossibility of knowing her. The reason for this, however, is not specific to the characters, but is intrinsic to idiocy. The only cure, then, would be to recognize the impossibility of cure, to have the wisdom of remaining idiot.

35. What does this imply for the reader who follows these characters in their trajectory simultaneously away from and towards idiocy? The answer may be a certain idiocy of reading, or what critics of Djuna Barnes's work have called "illegibility."¹⁵ For Daniela Caselli, Barnes's illegibility stems from

a crisis of critical mastery, in which the reader is uncomfortably poised between complicity and collusion. In Barnes's work, there is always gain and expenditure but no proper bookkeeping; the balance is never equal and the reader is forced to doubt of her accountability.¹⁶

36. Barnes's text indeed "bewilders." *Nightwood* involves the reader in the process of idiocy. In other words, idiocy is not merely the illness of ignorance that sends the characters in pursuit of a cure, but is also a force that the text exerts on its reader. But the readers' idiocy is called on before the novel even opens.

37. In his 1937 preface to the text, T.S. Eliot seems to imply that the reader of *Nightwood* could find himself in the position of an idiot. The reader enters into Djuna Barnes's 1936 novel through the wavering, almost apologetic wisdom of Eliot's double introduction. The first of his two prefaces begins by instituting a division in the readership of Barnes's work. He outlines the distinction, if not the opposition, between the two modes of writing — "prose" and "poetry" — that do not so much define as they trouble *Nightwood* in order to separate the prosaic readers, that is to say, the ordinary readers of novels, of prose, from their supposedly more discerning counterparts: readers of poetry. The first preface is, in a way, a word of caution issued to the unfortunate ordinary readers of novels who may find themselves in the position of an idiot when confronted with Barnes's writing:

In describing *Nightwood* for the purpose of attracting readers to the English edition, I said that it would "appeal primarily to readers of poetry." This is well enough for the brevity of advertisement, but I am glad to take this opportunity to amplify it a little. I do not want to suggest that the distinction of the book is primarily verbal, and still less that the astonishing language covers a vacuity of content. [...] A prose [such as Barnes's] that is altogether alive

15 See, for instance, Tyrus Miller's chapter on *Nightwood*, "Beyond Rescue: Djuna Barnes" in *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*, 121-168.

16 Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 10.

demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel-reader is not prepared to give. To say that *Nightwood* will appeal primarily to readers of poetry does not mean that it is not a novel, but that it is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it (ix-x).

38. Eliot's preface is a performative gesture — a speech act that makes the reader of *Nightwood* an idiot, provided that the text is read prosaically. But a paradox seems to be at play in this statement, since its corollary — that one escapes idiocy by reading *Nightwood* “poetically” — is oblivious to the argument that all poetry is inherently idiot. In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben writes:

[L]anguage also — in particular in the figure of the mother tongue — appears for each speaker as what is the most intimate and proper; and yet, [...] language happens to the human being from the outside [...]. [L]anguage is something with which the living being must be familiarized [...]; and yet [...] it has always remained to some degree external to the speaker.

This is all the more evident in those — the poets — whose trade is precisely that of mastering language and making it proper. They must for this reason first of all abandon conventions and common use and, so to speak, render foreign the language that they must dominate [...]. The appropriation of language that they pursue, that is to say, is to the same extent an expropriation, in such a way that the poetic act appears as a bipolar gesture, which each time renders external what it must unflinchingly appropriate.¹⁷

39. The poetic act, insofar as it constitutes making language proper and intimate, is, in fact, the creation of a mother tongue, since it involves creating an intimate and private language proper to the poet, incomprehensible to any reader. As such, the poetic act (each poetic act) is an act of idiocy — the idiocy of the mother tongue — an act that renders both, the poet and the reader, idiot. Idiocy is style.¹⁸ T.S. Eliot does not seem completely blind to this paradox. As a celebrated poet and reader of poetry, he admits to the stupefying force of Barnes's style — her private and intimate language — when he qualifies it as “astonishing.” What appears to be a marginalization of the less sophisticated reader (“ordinary novel-reader”) is in fact Eliot's confession of an inescapable idiocy in the face of *Nightwood*'s prose: “it took me, with this book, some time to come to an appreciation of its meaning as a whole” (ix). Whichever side the reader might be on in Eliot's dichotomy does not matter, as the text is ultimately always read through idiocy. The second preface, written twelve

¹⁷ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 86.

¹⁸ Although Deleuze does not appear in Agamben's thinking of poetic language here, the latter's discussion is reminiscent of Deleuze's definition of style that involves creating a foreign language within one's mother tongue, the experience of the proper within the foreign.

years later, is the renunciation of an opportunity to revise the first, “to remove or conceal evidences of [his] own immaturity at the time of writing” (xv), presenting idiocy as the very condition of possibility of reading *Nightwood*: the novel can only be read on the mode of idiocy, by abandoning oneself to the text’s language and its movements, by renouncing the possibility of knowledge.

40. Knowledge and idiocy are bound up already in the writer of the preface who also embodies the reader. In a sense, both prefaces read as Eliot’s acknowledgment, in an almost Socratic move, of his lack of knowledge, and a justification for his idiocy. Being unable to do away with his idiocy, he then resorts to the gesture of *captatio benevolentiae*, with which he captures not only the reader’s benevolence but also his or her idiocy, suggesting that reading *Nightwood*, even multiple times, does not necessarily produce knowledge about the book¹⁹. Eliot’s prefaces thus perform what is at stake in Barnes’s novel: the fact that summoning the reader’s wisdom only makes his or her idiocy prevail; or perhaps that the great reader, he or she is a divine idiot and a wise (wo)man.

Works cited

- AGAMBEN, GIORGIO. *The Use of Bodies*. 2014. Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016.
- BARNES, DJUNA. *Nightwood*. 1936. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.
- BURKE, KENNETH. “Version, Con-, Per-, and In-: Thoughts on Djuna Barnes’s Novel *Nightwood*,” *The Southern Review*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, Winter 1966.
- CASELLI, DANIELA. *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus*. Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009.
- DELEUZE, G., GUATTARI, F. *What Is Philosophy?* 1991. Trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- DERRIDA, JACQUES. *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1*. 2008. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

¹⁹ “As I said at the beginning, I am conscious of impertinence in introducing the book at all; and to have read a book a good many times does not necessarily put one in the right knowledge of what to say to those who have not yet read it” (xiv). “I have thought best to leave unaltered a preface which may still, I hope, serve its original purpose of indicating an approach helpful for the new reader” (xv).

DERRIDA, JACQUES. *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*. 1996. Trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

MARCUS, JANE. "Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic." *Cultural Critique*, No. 13. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

MILLER, TYRUS. "Beyond Rescue: Djuna Barnes." *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 121-168.

RONELL, AVITAL. *Stupidity*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

ROSSET, CLÉMENT. *Le Réel: Traité de l'idiotie*. 1977. Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 2004.