

Université de Montréal

What Language is This?  
A Study of Abjection in Djuna Barnes's Nightwood and Anne Stone's Hush

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Ce mémoire intitulé:

What Language is This?  
A Study of Abjection in Djuna Barnes's Nightwood and Anne Stone's Hush

présenté par:

Julie Boulanger

a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:

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président-rapporteur

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directeur de recherche

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membre du jury

## Résumé de synthèse

Ce mémoire s'intéresse à la littérature abjecte : ces romans qui inspirent soit une forte réaction de frustration jumelée au dégoût, soit une profonde dévotion de la part de petits groupes de lecteurs qui considèrent ces textes comme des œuvres géniales. À l'aide de la théorie psychanalytique de l'abjection élaborée par Julia Kristeva, j'explore la littérature abjecte en analysant de manière approfondie deux romans abjects, plus précisément *Nightwood* de Djuna Barnes et *Hush* d'Anne Stone.

Pour ce qui est de la littérature, l'abject ne peut être écrit. Néanmoins, il peut être exprimé. C'est cette dernière expression qui porte l'affect de l'abject : l'ambiguïté, le résultat de l'état partagé entre le rejet et l'attraction, de l'aversion et de la sublimation. Le premier chapitre présente la théorie de l'abjection de Kristeva, les caractéristiques principales des textes abjects ainsi que leur rapport au lecteur.

Selon Kristeva, l'abjection se situe dans l'écriture même, fondée sur une rhétorique violente et obscène pareille à celle de la poésie. Ainsi, le deuxième chapitre se concentre aux niveaux lexical et syntaxique, là où s'inscrit la poésie dans le texte, et comporte des études grammaticales et structurales de certains passages clés de chaque roman. Le but est d'explorer comment la poétique et l'étrangeté de l'écriture de ces romans, comme l'excès lexical de Barnes et la façon de Stone de fragmenter ses phrases, disloquent et compliquent leur lecture et rendent leur signification ambivalente, donc abjecte.

Le troisième chapitre s'attarde au niveau narratif, plus particulièrement la narration et les personnages. L'analyse de la narration montre comment l'aspect non linéaire de ces romans, reflété par la structure et l'assemblage atypiques de leurs divisions (ou chapitres), rend leur lecture problématique; celle des personnages élabore leurs caractéristiques qui rendent ceux-ci foncièrement abjects. Ce chapitre se termine avec une étude des fins des romans, qui démontre comment elles perturbent la causalité narrative et dégénèrent là où la signification et le langage se perdent.

Le dernier chapitre se penche sur quelques thèmes qui se rapportent à l'abjection, tels que l'objet perdu du *jeté*, l'image du cadavre et la dichotomie animal/humain. La structure de mon mémoire vise à définir la littérature abjecte par l'analyse de deux romans qui sont stylistiquement très différents l'un de l'autre en partant des éléments plus

détaillés pour aller jusqu'aux thématiques plus générales. Ceci permet ainsi une évaluation méthodique et complète.

Mots clés: abject, écriture expérimentale, narrative expérimentale, Modernisme, Kristeva, psychanalyse.

## Abstract



This thesis is concerned with abject literature, that is, with novels that either inspire a violent reaction of frustration mixed with disgust, or are considered works of genius by a select and devoted few. Drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of abjection developed by Julia Kristeva, I explore abject literature by means of detailed readings of two abject novels, Djuna Barnes's Nightwood and Anne Stone's Hush.

In terms of literature, the abject cannot be written. But, it can be expressed; and its expression carries the affect of abjection: ambiguity, the result of the dual state of rejection and attraction, of aversion and sublimation. The first chapter introduces Kristeva's theory of abjection, presents the main characteristics of abject texts and explains their relation to the reader.

According to Kristeva, abjection emerges from within the writing itself, taking the form of a violent and obscene rhetoric akin to poetry. The second chapter therefore focuses on the lexical and syntactic level, where poetry is inscribed in a text, by way of close-readings and grammatical analyses. The aim is to explore how the unusual and poetical writing of these novels, such as Barnes's excessive use of words and Stone's fragmented sentences, disturbs their reading and renders their meaning ambivalent, hence abject.

The third chapter examines the narrative level, specifically plot and character. The analysis of plot considers how the non-linearity of these novels, conveyed by the structure and the assemblage of their divisions (or chapters), problematizes their reading. The review of the characters looks at what makes them inherently abject to the reader. This chapter ends with a short study of the ending of the novels, which shows how both novels disturb narrative causality and degenerate to a point where meaning and language have no foothold.

The fourth and last chapter examines several themes that are related to abjection, such as the deject's lost object, the image of the corpse, and the animal/human dichotomy. The structure of this thesis aims to define abject literature through the analysis of two stylistically very different novels, moving from the novels' most minute elements to their most general themes, which allows a methodical and complete assessment.

Key terms: abject, experimental writing, experimental narrative, modernism, New Narrative, Kristeva, psychoanalysis.

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## Abbreviations

*AS:* Artist's Statement by Anne Stone

*H:* Hush by Anne Stone

*N:* Nightwood by Djuna Barnes

*PH:* Powers of Horror by Julia Kristeva

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my 16 year-old self,  
who found in novels the pre-nominal and the nominal;  
and who had a dream, and was obstinate enough not to forget it.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis supervisors, Professor Lianne Moyes and Professor Andrew John Miller. Without Professor Moyes' constant help and encouragement, this thesis might not have seen light of day. I am much indebted to her for her time, her constructive criticism, her thorough proofreading of this thesis and her assistance in helping me mould my narrative. Professor Miller has been a constant help throughout my MA. His instruction has particularly influenced my understanding of Modernist writers and the improvement of the Englishness of my prose.

I have had the good fortune to work on Anne Stone, an author who is very responsive and helpful; thank you.

I also wish to express my gratitude to Maïa Cinq-Mars, Maïté Loinaz and Victor Rego for their help reading, revising and commenting drafts of my work.

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## Introduction

Djuna Barnes's novel Nightwood is known to be a difficult text. Nonetheless, it has had a cult following since its publication. And like all cult members, its followers seem to be enthralled, possessed by the book and very possessive of it and its author. The reception of Barnes's last published work, the play The Antiphon, exemplifies the reaction Barnes's writing inspires, and the reception it receives: on the one side, readers did not understand it and hated it; on the other, they might not have completely understood it but found the play to be illuminating and wonderful. About the process of its publication, Andrew Field writes that "In all the play had seven readers, a very high number, and the reactions ranged from enthusiasm to complete stupefaction" (221). Anne Stone does not share Barnes's notoriety, but her novel Hush has much in common with Nightwood. First, the use of language is both experimental and highly poetic. Their narratives are non-linear. Their chronological trajectories, though different from one another, are expressed mostly by means of memory associations. In the case of Nightwood, these associations tell the story in fragments, the reader being told of events sometimes before and sometimes after they occur. Hush is constructed with flashbacks, flashforwards, repetitions and interruptions, making the whole narrative seem somewhat circular. Barnes and Stone both tend to create mythic characters that are not so much larger than life as outside of it. Also, though Barnes is mostly described as decadent and Stone has been associated with the baroque, their writing shares a lavish carnality, exploring the limits of the human and the animal.

The best way to explain my interest in, or better yet my curiosity about the two novels treated in this thesis is to start with two anecdotes, one pertaining to each author. The first one is about the first time I encountered Djuna Barnes's novel. It was a few years ago now in a graduate Modernism class. While chatting in the hallway with my classmates before class on the day we were supposed to have read Nightwood, I soon discovered that practically none of the other students had read the book. One girl, whom I judged to be a thorough and intelligent student, went so far as to exclaim (with a hint of disgust to her voice), "I didn't read it! I couldn't even make it past the first chapter! The language is just



horrible! I just couldn't read the thing!" Seeing that I was the one appointed to present the reading to class that day, I had had no choice but to read it. I admit, the reading was arduous, but my frustration was mostly due to the second-to-last chapter, to O'Connor's rambling mono/dialogues. If anything, the first chapter is the one that most resembles a "normal" narrative. It sets the scene, presenting the main characters who will interact in the upcoming drama. The first chapter is the easiest one, the one that makes most sense. I could not comprehend what she found so objectionable about the first few pages.

As for my Anne Stone anecdote, it took place much more recently. This past summer, to be exact. The English Department was offering a summer class on contemporary Montreal women writers and Stone's Hush was included on the booklist. At the end of the class on Hush, when the academic talk drew to a close, I asked the students if they "liked" the book. A shuffling of "Yeah" and "Yeah it was really good" could be heard throughout, though not with much conviction. Then one girl spoke up and said, "I loved it but I also hated it." When I pressed her to explain she said that she found it very dark and haunting, and that it had given her nightmares. She then assured me that she still really liked the book and found it very beautiful. When I mentioned this to Stone in an email, she brought up a (not so positive) review that appeared in the Globe and Mail shortly after the book's publication. Part of the critique reads: "Roses at one point talks about the 'scars and bruises' burned in the brain of one of the other men in her life. The book leaves the same sort of troubling aftereffects (sic) in the memories of the reader" (O'Brien). The reviewer was clearly affected in a similar way, if just a bit less favourably, as my peer.

"What is it about Barnes's and Stone's writing that makes readers either love or hate it," I asked myself. Or, more precisely, to either adore or despise it? I knew from the get-go that to answer this question by stating that theirs is "difficult" writing, hence difficult to read, is too simplistic. First, it does not do justice to the writing. How "difficult" a text might be is always subject to interpretation; it is too subjective an argument to be valid. It also undermines the beauty, and maybe even the purpose of the difficulty of the text. Second, it

dismisses the opinion of intelligent and (usually) engaged readers. Some readers appreciate and seek out challenging texts, yet their reaction to these might still be ambiguous. Hence, to excuse these texts as merely “difficult” insults both the writing and the reader. There needs to be something more, an element that is missing from the equation. Something that is at the root of what makes these novels difficult to deal with, both with regard to their writing and their themes.

This missing element came to me surreptitiously, while reading an equally difficult piece of writing. I had actually read Gail Scott’s “Bottoms Up” several times in an effort to understand it before making the link between one of the narrator’s more straightforward statements and the question that had been keeping me busy. “[...] X and I sat. Discussing why our favourite writers of new and experimental fiction are not rich and famous. “Too abject,” we say” (n.pag.). Indeed, the narrator is asking the same question that I had been asking myself, with the difference of answering it. Yet in my mind this brought up a new question: “What is this abject?” In search of abjectness I came upon Julia Kristeva’s essay Powers of Horror, which soon proved to be the explanation and the tool of study I was looking for. She explains how the abject is the force that attracts and repulses. The force that through life shows us death, which then pushes us back into life in fear and disgust.

My analysis does not seek to label Nightwood and Hush as abject simply because they deal with the subversive, as others have already done. Nightwood has often been termed abject, yet a thorough study of its abjection remains unexplored. Jane Marcus in her article “Laughing at Leviticus: Nightwood as Women’s Circus Epic” looks at the novel with reference to Kristeva’s Powers of Horror, discussing the abject as a political case, that of the political and sexual fascism of the time. She offers no further definition of her “abject,” while sprinkling the word around in her essay. She claims that the book’s weapon is laughter, using the (Rabelaisian) grotesque of the circus/carnival<sup>1</sup>. She writes that,

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Blyn gives an interesting counter-argument to Marcus’s theories of Nightwood as carnival. She interprets the modern novel as one that puts the freaks of society on show in narrative. She writes that, “In Nightwood, this same freak is a spectacular subject, not a

“Dung and defecation, in the Rabelaisian tradition described by Bakhtin, are part of the carnival’s reversal of authoritarian values, the eruption of folk humor in a bawdy acceptance of decay as renewal, of death as part of life” (226). When looking closely at Kristeva’s theories of abjection, it is clear that refuse is not perceived as life renewing itself but as life rejecting what it cannot accept as self. Marcus is using the term to give weight to her theories of the carnival but her arguments conflict with the nature and definition of abjection. Furthermore, she writes that “By centering the marginal, Nightwood provides a spectacle of human bondage that articulates the angst of the abject so well that the absent upright, the pillars of society, are experienced unconsciously by the reader as the enemies of the human spirit” (Marcus 232). She defines the novel’s characters as abject simply because they are marginalized. Yet abjection, marginalization and subversion are not synonyms, and to think so is a gross generalization.

My aim is not to demonstrate a continuity between the works of Barnes and Stone, or to hint at a type of progression within “abject literature.” Such literature may be a twentieth century phenomena, as Kristeva states, but it evades any sense of artistic movement, and usually any goal of the author. What encourages me to look at these two novels is not their similarities of style but the similar type of affect they create in their readers. This analysis seeks to explore the abjection of Nightwood and Hush; what, in their otherness, makes them abject in content and in form. To analyze these two novels side by side is to look at how abjection may be expressed differently and how various stylistic forms cause similar affect in their readers. I wish to show the success of these authors in expressing abjection so succinctly that today, in a world filled with horror films and wars and where violence is deemed more acceptable TV programming for children than nudity, books such as these still thrill some and chill others, and to others like myself they do both.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: the first chapter looks at abjection as Kristeva defines it, how it may be used to analyze literary texts, and how such

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pathetic object [...]” (146). She does not read Nightwood as the carnival’s role reversals but as a permission to gaze at the fascinating Other.

texts come to effect readers as they do. The two next chapters are concerned with the structural study of both Nightwood and Hush. Chapter 2 explores their writing at the lexical and syntactic level, chapter 3 at the level of the narrative, meaning their plot, characters and ending. The last chapter examines the novels' thematic angle. Themes and recurring images such as corpses and loss promote the expression of abjection in these texts. Yet before exploring Kristeva's theories of abjection and how they apply to these novels, a portrait of their general storyline and their readership is *de rigueur*.

In the simplest of terms, Nightwood tells the story of an American woman in Paris as she enters and leaves the lives of three lovers, and the devastation she causes in each of them once departed. Though Robin is the central character, she is also the most silent. Felix, a Jew who poses as an Italian aristocrat, is the first to suffer from her absence. She leaves him with the care of their son Guido Jr., a child she never wanted and seems to forget about once gone. Nora, who is also American, is her second as well as what is made to be understood as her most serious relationship. Robin is eventually taken from Nora by Jenny, a woman in desperate search of strong emotions who in order to emulate the greatest love she knows of (Robin and Nora's), steals one of its players. Matthew O'Connor is the novel's "doctor." An abortionist by trade, an alcoholic by habit and a melancholic philosopher of the heart, he is the one Felix and Nora turn to for counsel.

In the teens and twenties Djuna Barnes was a moderately famous writer. Mostly renowned for her adventurist journalistic work, her first novel Ryder was also a bestseller for a short period of time. Nightwood was published in 1937 and knew some success before it and its author fell into almost complete obscurity. Nonetheless, Djuna Barnes and Nightwood, usually considered her most important work, have known a cult following since its publication. In the 1980's, an increase of interest in and re-readings of Modernist women writers by (primarily) feminist scholars has unearthed Barnes and established Nightwood as a major Modernist novel.

Before being published by Insomniac Press, Hush consisted of Anne Stone's Master's thesis in English Literature at McGill University. It was then

called De'ath Sound, after the name of the fictitious Quebec Eastern-Township municipality where the story takes place. Roses De'ath is the central character and the town she lives in is named after her mother, Maddie De'ath, who was the proprietor of De'ath Inn. When Maddie's lover Bathhouse Jones dies by drowning, she begins to slowly lose her senses. When Roses is twelve years old, Maddie brings her to Potter's field. Old man Potter is the town's outcast, being a dwarf with a scaly "bird leg." He is also Roses' biological father, though she is unaware of it. The townsfolk bring their lame old dogs to his field and pay him five dollars to dispose of the animals. When Roses shows up in his motor-home with a five dollar bill pinned to her shirt, Maddie is finally deemed an unfit mother. She is institutionalized while the wrath of the town's people unfairly falls upon Potter. Roses is brought to Faith's house, a benevolent neighbour and mother of Bat, a young boy who grows up loving Roses, until she recovers from "the incident." She is then returned to the hotel to the care of Harvey, the man who bought and now runs the inn, who permits her to stay there in exchange for cleaning services. The inn is also inhabited by August, Maddie's last lover, who is to Roses both a stepfather and an occasional lover as well as the man who taught her how to skin a rabbit in a minute flat. He works as the cook, though the only meal he successfully pulls off is rabbit stew. Loralie is the other main character, a somewhat oppositional yet complementary character to Roses. Scarred physically and mentally from a previous abusive relationship, she is De'ath Sound's local prostitute who works and lives in the inn, sharing both her bed and her profit (though unknowingly so) with August. The last character that demands mention is Love, Roses twin sister who was stillborn, attached to baby Roses' navel. Of Love, Roses carries her womb in her belly and her haunting presence as an alter-ego.

Hush was published in 1999 by a small Canadian press. At the time of its publication it received reviews from the Montreal Gazette, the Globe and Mail, the Montreal Review of Books, the Canadian Literature journal and the Montreal Hour Magazine. It has yet to know a second edition. Stone published her first novel, jacks: a gothic gospel, in 1998 and is currently finishing her third novel.

Comparable in scope to the work done by New Narrative writers, Stone unfortunately has yet to find her public. With the exception of the class previously mentioned, this is the first academic work to focus on her writing. Though this fact offers me much opportunity to explore the novel on my own grounds, it also involves the added difficulty of not being able to inform my reading or second my interpretations on previous works, which bears both advantages and disadvantages. This is definitely not the case with Barnes on whose texts much scholarly work has been published.

## Chapter 1

### The Theory of Abjection in Relation to Reading and Literature





Abjection is a state of insecurity. More precisely, it is the affect of the state of insecurity. By affect I mean the general state of unease caused by the ambiguous, the incongruous. To help the reader visualize the abject, Kristeva cites physical examples such as vomit, refuse, corpses, and the repulsion of milk. They are examples of the abject because they are what a living subject must push away in order to survive. The body retracts from them in order to live. The corpse, that which *shows* death, is the most appalling refuse because it bears witness of the border that cannot be transgressed; the subject cannot expel it for she is expelled. The border becomes the object of the abject, therefore a non-object. The corpse is death infecting life, the most abject of all refuse. It is a part of you that you cannot accept as yourself. What you always and forever violently reject from yourself because, though it fascinates, it equally repulses. This rejection is repeated every time this non-object is encountered.

The terms “border” and “ambiguity” are important to the definition of abjection. The border is that which lies between two states, the point where the subject vacillates, where she might tip to one side or the other. The border is a non-object because it cannot prescribe to the relationship of desire between a subject and object. A subject cannot desire a state of vacillation, a non-tangible entity that cannot be defined or even perceived. Ambiguity is that which has double (or more) meanings. With regards to literature, these terms denote a language that can multiply meanings in the mind of its readers and bring the reader to an edge where she vacillates between two states: fascination and repulsion. The multiplicity of meanings implies more than just themes, it is at the very core of the story(ies), of the narrative(s). This multiplicity is also engrained in the writing. Its style and the way the text communicates meaning would be the very basis of how an author subverts meaning and renders it ambiguous. Also, these meanings do not denote simply seeing things one way or another; they involve a meaning that attracts and fascinates, yet, due to its potential horror, also repulses. The reader wonders “Is this what the author means?” and then answers herself “No, it can’t be! ... Can it?” That doubt attracts. It keeps the reader reading, even if she is reading on the verge of repulsion. For example, when the

narrator of Hush writes, “Another time, in a very dark room, maybe, she will find words for the shape a persimmon can take under the blade. Just now she is laid bare by it and cannot move, the flat of the blade parting her, and she cannot breathe, can’t afford the gap stop that would measure one breath spent so long ago” (*H* 110), the reader can only guess at the torture Loralie endures. With a faint image of what happened to Loralie, the reader is repulsed, and then reads on, tantalized by her own repulsion and her need to clarify the image she has made and questions.

Before going any further into the specifics of abjection and psychoanalysis, a few concepts about readerly versus writerly and pleasurable versus *jouissance* texts must be recalled. These terms are needed to understand the modes of production and of reception of abject texts. To do this I will refer to several ideas expanded upon by Roland Barthes. In his book S/Z, Barthes differentiates between the two existing types of text: the readerly text and the writerly text. This differentiation is of major consideration when looking at the distinction between experimental writing such as Nightwood and Hush and traditional forms of literature, or avant-garde literature as opposed to literature as a consumable good. The readerly text imposes a binary structure, the authority of the author over the reader. It is a serious relationship in which the reader is a receptacle of a finite text. According to Barthes, all Classical texts are readerly. They are products, and not productions, and compose the mass of all literary works. Readerly texts call for interpretation, by which Barthes does not mean the elaboration of its meaning, but the exposing of its plurality of possible meanings. It is a galaxy of signifiers. The reader of the writerly text is not a mere literature consumer but a creator of literature by her act of reading. The writerly text invites its reader to play with its text, with meaning. He calls writerly texts “limit-works” (which evokes the term border-works, another name for the abject works that situate their readers on a border). They are a structure of signifieds. Barthes explains that a text with a sort of secret signified(s) also calls for interpretations. The signifier as deferred action is that of an infinity of signifieds, a state that

allows interpretive playfulness. To read a text as one would consume a good has nothing to do with “playing” with a text.

In The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes differentiates texts that bring pleasure to their readers to those that provoke *jouissance*. To take pleasure in a text is to consume it, to read it while knowing that one cannot re-produce or re-write the text. The *jouissance* of a text would be pleasure without such separation. A readerly text is read with pleasure; a writerly text provokes *jouissance*. Pleasure can be pointed out, whereas *jouissance* cannot be said, described or critiqued. Such a text cannot be spoken of, but only spoken within. *Jouissance* is not pleasure brought to a certain point; both are located on different scales. He cites Leclaire: “Whoever speaks, by speaking denies bliss,<sup>2</sup> or correlatively, whoever experiences bliss causes the letter – and all possible speech – to collapse in the absolute degree of annihilation he is celebrating” (21). Therefore, *jouissance* would be experienced in the not-said of a text, its gaps and silences and it cannot be said or described or critiqued because its language belongs to a non-language: to speak of a *jouissance* is to lose it.

A visual of the landscape of the writerly text that provokes *jouissance* could be likened to the landscape found in a Spider-Man comic book or a sci-fi movie like *The Matrix*: a New York-type city crowded with skyscrapers. The reader of the writerly text would be the super-hero, swinging or jumping from rooftop to rooftop. The rooftops are the words of the text and the height of the skyscrapers, the number of storeys that make them up, represent their layers of meaning. The act of reading the narrative corresponds to the act of jumping from one rooftop to the other. The twenty-(or-more-)storey plunges between each skyscraper are the gaps and silences of the text, those found between words, between the lines, within its fragmented structure. To miss a step, to fall short of the next ledge due to a miscalculated distance or, more likely, to a fleeing ledge would cause a free-fall. This falling into the gaps and subsequently the reader’s adrenaline rush exemplify reading into *jouissance*.

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<sup>2</sup> In the English translation of Barthes’s text, *jouissance* has been translated as ‘bliss.’ I have kept the French word throughout my thesis because I find its sexual connotation better encompasses the physical experience of bliss.

To understand abjection one must be acquainted with a few fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, psychoanalysis is based on the Freudian Oedipal triangle that consists of the father as the stronghold of the Law and the mother as the prototype of the object. The mother as object is the other subject, the first signified example of a subject with whom the first mimetic relationship is established. Three states of being are recognized: the subject or Self, the object (as would be the mother) and the Other (as would be the father). Also, the mother as object is the expression of the subject's desires whereas the father, and Law, expresses the prohibition of such desires. The subject is caught in a structure of prohibited desires and usually deals with it by repressing his desires (the origin of neurosis) or rejecting them (the origin of psychosis). The abject, as we will see, disrupts this basis.

Before a mimetic formation of the subject is possible, creating the image of self by imitating others (or more specifically the mother-object), "I" does not exist but repeats, rejects and divides. In the case of the abject there would be two forms of repression, the primary one taking place before the creation of the ego and being a repression of its objects and representations; the secondary repression taking place after the ego's creation on an unsettled foundation. The abject would be the object of the primary/primal repression that is made manifest in the secondary repression (basically the ego's fundamental instability). But if the primal repression takes place before the formation of the ego and its signs, its nature can only be speculative. Kristeva states that abjection is a pre-condition to narcissism and that it is a narcissistic crisis. It is when the narcissistic object is unsatisfying, as it must be, that the secondary repression seeks its source, exposing the primal repression's tools (repetition, rejection and division) and including them in a symbolic order. It is then that the object is seen as abject, and so becomes a pseudo-object.

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<sup>3</sup> Kristeva's psychoanalytic background is foremost Lacanian. I do not address Lacan in this thesis because Kristeva's theories of abjection function on their own, without requiring a rapport between the two. The fundamental concepts I offer are Freudian and very basic; their purpose is to set the premise of the human's psychoanalytical make-up from which Kristeva's theories arise.

The abject is a pseudo- or non-object because though it does not exactly act as an object it does oppose the subject. Whereas the object plays a stabilizing role as a pole opposed to the subject in the give-and-take structure of desire, the abject is a fallen object that is radically excluded yet draws the subject to a land where sense is obliterated. The abject fascinates yet worries. It appeals yet revolts. It seduces though frightens. The subject feels both attraction and disgust, is drawn to and radically pushes away the abject.

Kristeva describes it as:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucinations, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (*PH 2*)

For the abject, the separation of object and subject is not strong enough to allow a solid differentiation, yet is strong enough to put the subject in the defensive, to reject yet also sublimate this now pseudo-object.

To understand this dynamic in terms of reading, the subject must be substituted by reader, and the (non-)object by text, or (non-)narrative. This is true in that the text, though it exists in a material form, does not exist until read, much like a play truly exists only once performed. This object comes into being through the reader and through her engaging the text by the act of reading. When reading a text, the reader re-creates it and makes it manifest. This is all the more true for writerly texts that demand to be re-created for any sense to be made of it. The reader gives it life and forces it into a subject-object relationship. Within the dynamic of the abject, the subject and the (non-)object, or the reader and the non-narrative, confront each other, repel each other, and collapse upon one another. They are inseparable, contaminated and condemned.

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible

within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing of the abjection of the self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want*<sup>4</sup> on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. (*PH* 5)

In the process of reading these stories, hence of re-creating them, the reader is placed in a position of identifying with the text. The novels are no longer external media but internalized situations, stories, places of being. It is by internalizing the abject narrative that the subject/reader finds this “impossible within,” finds that this “impossible constitutes its very being.” The process of reading an abject novel causes the reader, through the internalization of the abject novel, to experience abjection of self. It is this experience, this expulsion of self expressed through the act of rejecting (yet after coming back to) the writing that constitutes the experience of reading the abject<sup>5</sup>. According to Kristeva, expulsion is an act of self-expulsion, of self-abjection that exposes us, exposes our “becoming,” through the means of a violent outcry, of vomit, of abjection (*PH* 3).

Abjection is the realization of the fundamental lack of all being, language, and desire. Kristeva states that such a fundamental lack predates the subject and the object (both poles of the interchange of desire), that “abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship” (*PH* 10), so that it could only possibly be signified by abjection. The non-object conserves a kind of relationship

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<sup>4</sup> In the English version of Kristeva’s text, the word “want” is translated from the French “manque.” As a French speaker, I find this translation to be questionable. “Manque” can be interpreted as ‘want,’ but a closer definition to the noun would be ‘lack.’ I prefer this term not only because I find it a more natural translation, but also because the word ‘want’ signifies the action of desiring. If the subject’s objects are based on the inaugural loss, I believe the recognition of the basis of its being, of meaning, language and desire should not be infused with such an active word, so closely related to desire. If all objects are based on loss, then all means of expressing and knowing these objects are based in the result of loss: lack.

<sup>5</sup> The act of rejecting the writing referred to here can be interpreted quite literally. As discussed in the Contemporary Montreal Women Writers class, the physical act of rejecting a piece of writing such as *Nightwood*, *Hush* or Scott’s *My Paris* has been done by either choosing not to read the book, changing one’s reading pattern by sporadically reading different chapters, reading the novel from end to beginning or by alternating reading it from the beginning and from the end until the centre is reached, or by simply throwing the book against a wall or the floor. I myself once reverted to the last option while reading Stein’s *Tender Buttons*.

with the unknown that predates the “normal” subject-object relationship. The abjection of oneself is the experience that best indicates how all objects are based on fundamental loss. Abjection is built because of the subject’s failure to recognize her familiars. She demonstrates this with the description of a child who has “eaten up” his parents too soon (*PH* 5-6). Being alone, he saves himself by rejecting all gifts and all objects; he is propelled by a spasm of rejection. He lives in fear. He has no sense of the sacred. The object of the phobic is the abject. She describes fear as possibly originating in the unsettling of the “bio-drive,” or bio-impulse, for this original fear, the one that precedes all other fears that are often but substitutes, is primal and unknown, possibly unknowable.

As for the subject of the abject, or the deject, the one who lives with abjection, she lives in perpetual exile. “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (*PH* 8). The question of the deject’s existence is not “Who am I?” but “Where am I?” because the space in which she lives can never be total and complete. The exiled deject applies to both Nightwood and Hush seeing that the former is populated by American expatriates and a Wandering Jew, while the latter takes place in a hotel where strangers come and go, and that offers no sense of stability to the characters, especially Roses. The deject is “essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic” (*PH* 8). This lack of stable ground propels the deject to keep building, to keep searching (as Robin who wanders the night) and to keep starting anew (as Roses who repeats everything she knows as true in order to cling on to a truth). She describes the deject as a stray, the motion of which is what saves her. For the deject strays from a land of oblivion that is continually remembered yet which she perpetually loathes. She is “on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding” (*PH* 8).

The deject’s notion of time is twofold: a time of past oblivion and a time of thunder, an illumination that is both veiled and revelatory: the sublime, or *jouissance*. Also, by entering into a subject-object relationship with a non-narrative, the reader makes herself the deject. By reading the non-narrative, she

experiences this dual time of past oblivion and *jouissance*. The abject is situated between the somatic symptom and the sublime, where the symptom is described as an alienated existence within the body that is not heard from the unconscious because its subject is located outside “the paths of desire” (*PH* 11), and the sublimation is, on the contrary, the ability to name the pre-nominal. Kristeva writes that “In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control” (*PH* 11). Therein lie the workings of the abject text. The reading of a non-narrative causes in the reader a permeating sense of self-abjection that is kept under control by the sublimation of the writing; hence, the reader is afflicted with the spasm of rejection, and then of attraction. Abjection and sublimation share the same subject and speech, and share a lack of an object. The object of the sublime is lost within the transports of a bottomless memory where it becomes a sort of phoenix. To name the sublime is to be picked up in its rapture of words. The subject forgets herself and is carried into an other-world. The sublime serves to split the subject as being simultaneously in the world, as deject, and in an other-world, as sublime.

The deject associates herself with the Third Party, the Other, incorporating its power and judgment and using it to make the object deplorable. Kristeva writes that “I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be ‘me.’ Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be” (*PH* 10). For the reader, the Other would be the laws of story-telling that always precede her. The very idea of telling a story allows her own narrative to exist as well as the narratives by which she comes to know the world around her. The Other inhabits her Super-Ego, which interferes with her reading of the non-narrative by trying to recall order and reinstitute the laws of writing, that have moulded the laws of reading and are at the origin of reader expectations. Further on Kristeva explains that “the abject appears in order to uphold ‘I’ within the Other. The abject is the violence of mourning for an ‘object’ that has always already been lost” (*PH* 15). The abject is an amalgamation of both judgment and affect. The deject’s pseudo-object, which is a border, becomes a repugnant



offering from the Other that the deject can only come to know through *jouissance*, through a sublime alienation. The subject is engulfed by *jouissance*, but the Other keeps it from reaching its depths. In other words, the reader experiences *jouissance* while the Other keeps her from losing herself in it.

Many Nightwood critics have studied and underlined the perverseness of the novel, too often than not using the words perverse, transgressive and abject interchangeably. Yet Kristeva states that:

The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life—a progressive despot; it lives in at the behest of death [...]. Corruption is its most common, most obvious appearance. That is the socialized appearance of the abject. (*PH* 15)

Abjection is perverse not because it breaks a law (Law) but because it corrupts it, manipulating it to use it to its advantage. Abject texts suppose the ability to imagine the abject, meaning to see oneself as abject yet keeping abjection at bay through the means of the games of language.

For the subject firmly settled in its superego, a writing of this sort is necessarily implicated in the interspace that characterizes perversion; and for that reason, it gives rise in turn to abjection. And yet, such texts call for a softening of the superego. Writing them implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacements of verbal play. (*PH* 16)

If we are to understand that the reader re-creates the text while reading it, the writer referred to in this passage means both the novelist and its reader. Writing novels that fragment sentences, confound linearity and deal with border-subjects are the trespasses of the Law that provoke many readers and critics to define these texts as perverse, no more and no less. Some critics and scholars go a bit further and examine this perversity. Yet to lose oneself in the corrupted Law of these novels, to read the abject as more than a perversity that disturbs, the writer and reader must let go just a bit of the laws of language, communication, the novel and acceptable (and archetypical) topics. Basically, the affect of the abject novel

is felt, but to find meaning in it the reader must let go of... meaning, as defined by language. And that is where *jouissance* is experienced.

Kristeva does relate contemporary literature to the perverse, stating that modern authors use, deviate and play with the Law in their writing, but that literature is not abject per se. An author may try to portray the logic of the abject and might succeed in making his writing perverse (its content and its form), but because the abject is both judge and accomplice of its own abjection, so too would be that of literature. To write of the abject would suppose knowing the abject, which is an impossibility. Yet she continues by explaining that the crisis of Christianity coupled with Western thought locates abjection within an archaic situation prior to sin, or prior to a primitive society's defilement. The aesthetic effort, now prioritizing the symbolic order, would be to explore the being's origin, meaning her primal repression. This experience finds the subject and the object attracting each other, contaminating each other, pushing each other away; hence this experience finds the abject. Modern literature therefore writes of the abject not as itself, but as its movement, of what can be witnessed. It is an act of expressing the abject, and not of representing it. Therefore to write abjection is impossible, but an abject writing is not. The narrative stance would transverse abjection, suffering being its intimate side and horror its public one.

Kristeva states that the Russian Formalists have shown us that writing is the attempt to situate the speaking being within the Oedipal triangle, meaning in a situation between his desires and their prohibition. Yet according to her, "abject literature" is a twentieth century phenomenon, as is, I would add, experimental writing.<sup>6</sup> The theme of suffering-horror would be the ultimate indication of a narrative representing abjection. If a text is characterized by stylistic intensity, and she describes this as using a "language of violence, of obscenity, or of a rhetoric that relates the text to poetry" (*PH* 141), this indicates that the author is

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<sup>6</sup> A distinction should be made between experimental and innovative writing, the latter of which has always existed and denotes a progression in the stylistics of writing. Innovative writing reflects the ideas of communication at the time a text is written and how those can be addressed in the written language. Experimental writing involves a breaking away from those ideas of communication in order to express something other than what can be communicated with language.

not merely narrating but crying out his identity and surroundings. A crying out theme juxtaposed with abjection would result in a theme of suffering/horror. An abject narrative would be a story of suffering, fear and disgust. Abject literature would have taken up where the apocalypse and the carnival left off. As O'Connor warns Nora, and by extension the reader, "I have a narrative, but you will be hard put to find it" (*N* 97), Kristeva explains that "If one wished to proceed farther still along the approaches to abjection, one would find neither narrative nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary—the violence of poetry, and silence" (*PH* 141). That narrative should lose its linearity, be constructed with flashes and cuts and be generally tangled as compared to a traditional narrative, is the logical extension of a narrative where boundaries (subject/object) have been challenged.

The stylistics of an abject writing therefore includes the use of a poetic language that stretches and makes strange communication, a language that has shifting meanings and where signifieds are unclear, blurry and uncanny. Ultimately, the poetics of the language renders it ambiguous. Another way of creating such ambiguity is to have meaning articulate itself in the gaps of the narrative, in its silences. The "not said" tells of the "possibly said" (also the "not sayable"). Different writing techniques are used to express silences, or to conceal them. Barnes does this with an excess use of words whereas Stone interrupts meaning by fragmenting her sentences. Furthermore, the ambiguity of a text is enhanced by a narrative form that challenges the reader's narrative expectations. This is done by breaking up traditional<sup>7</sup> narrative causality. Barnes's text moves from description and action, to language through mono/dialogues, to a discombobulating of meaning. Stone confuses all notions of temporality and chronology, with a narrator on which the reader always seems to lose focus. The language of the abject is one of poetry, fragments, silences, disjointedness, ambiguity, multiple signifieds and at a loss of narrative causality, all of which is used to express a crying out of a lost-object, which is always enmeshed in violence, suffering and terror.

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<sup>7</sup> By traditional I mean any form of narrative that has come to be known as familiar at a certain point in time, in progression with innovative writing.

Abjection is what disturbs identity, system and order. It is that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (PH 4). Abjection confronts us on two levels. On the societal level, the abject confronts us “with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of the *animal*” (PH 12). On the personal level, it confronts us with our first attempts to separate ourselves from the maternal, a relationship that is as securing as it is oppressive. According to Kristeva, abjection originates from the affect of the violence of the original separation of one body from the other: the child from the mother. Therefore abjection is irrevocably linked to the body, as are our personal realms of signs and objects that are produced in the land of oblivion of the pre-objectal.

Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another in order to be — maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out. To be sure, if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me. That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an affect and not yet a sign. [...] But when I *seek* (myself), *lose* (myself), or experience *jouissance* — the “I” is *heterogeneous*. Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. (PH 10)

The reading of an abject novel has the reader searching for these signs and objects, has her return to this land of oblivion in order to create meaning from and for the text, in order to re-create it for herself. Conditioned by rules that structure the self, one’s comprehension and definition of the world and the lines drawn between the conceptions of the real and the fictitious, in other words the rules of language by which all is defined and articulated, the reading of the abject which searches for signs in the land of oblivion will rather, and obviously, find the affect of the abject. For what sign can be found in oblivion? This affect is discomfort, unease and dizziness. It produces the physical response, the violent rejection of the abject, of the novel being read. The very process of reading that is bound to

the reader's seeking of herself in the novel through the search of meaning, losing herself in the maze of meanings and experiencing *jouissance* in the gaps between this perpetual search and loss, acquaints the reader with her own diversity and multiplicity, therefore her own lack of unity and all other comforting notions that accompany such a term. The reader finds herself to be ambiguous, discomfoting and uneasy. Through the reading of the abject novel the reader becomes immoral, equivocal, shady. Ultimately, she becomes abject. (Not I, but not nothing, either...)

Chapter 2  
Analysis of Lexis and Syntax

When looking for the abject in writing at the lexical and syntactic levels, two elements of writing come to the fore. The first of the two is the poetry of the language, the way the writing corrupts the laws of syntax to modify meaning and make it strange, make it possibly other than what it appears to be. From book reviewers to, in the case of Barnes, literary critics, Barnes's and Stone's writing have repeatedly been described as poetic. Yet the workings of their poetry have seldom been explored in a precise way. A case in point is Barnes's often mentioned use of excessive words. From Rebecca West's 1936 review of Nightwood for "The Newstatesman and Nation"<sup>8</sup> to Tyrus Miller's 1999 account of Barnes as a late-modernist,<sup>9</sup> all seem to agree that Barnes's text is formed with an excessive flow of words, a feature that adds to the overall poetry of the novel. But a thorough account of how she does this, how this excess is displayed in her writing, is never scrutinized. Rather, readers of Nightwood are expected to understand this effect as they invariably have in the past seventy years. Indeed, one needs only to read Nightwood to understand the dizzying effect of its lengthy sentences, original use of words and disjointed dialogues. This chapter works towards an understanding of the poetical uses of both authors.

The second element of abject writing, somewhat an extension of its poetics, refers to how the writing creates ambiguity. In other words, how the texts produce ambiguity within the very structure of their sentences and their choice of words. Furthermore, how such ambiguity creates a border-text, a text wavering between two limits, two quasi opposite states: fascination and repulsion. As previously mentioned, one way of creating ambiguity is to have meaning articulate itself in the gaps and silences of the narrative. Different writing techniques are used to express silences and to conceal them. This chapter examines the various writing techniques these two authors use at the syntactic

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<sup>8</sup> "Miss Barnes has an almost Elizabethan flow of words. She is the kind of modern writer whose prose-style appears to have been founded on a close study of the mad-speeches in Webster and Tourneur" (quoted in Broe 198).

<sup>9</sup> "Barnes's extreme stylistic mannerism and runaway figural language obtrude through her ramshackle large-scale forms, hinting at the radical loss of boundaries, the promiscuous blurring of categories, the setting in play of the signifier often associated with later modernism" (Miller 125).

level to create ambiguity. This is done by way of an in-depth analysis of exemplary sections of the novels. Due to stylistic differences, Barnes and Stone will be examined slightly differently: with Barnes we break down a significant continuous section while with Stone, several short passages are scrutinized. Such an analysis will demonstrate how their language is poetic and how this poetry creates ambiguity, which ultimately serves the writing in its abject-ness.

Barnes's foremost writing style that provokes a sense of ambiguity is her excess use of words. All Barnes readers have noticed her lengthy sentences, composed with subordination upon subordination. Not having had a formal education, Barnes's spelling and her punctuation were always problematic.<sup>10</sup> Her liberal use of commas and dashes do set her writing apart from other writers of the English language, yet her choice of words as well as her choice of what she describes of her characters have defined her style as sophisticated and unique. The language she uses, this exuberant excess of words, has been likened to the rococo "as an art of ornamentation, where sense of a pattern is uppermost" (Kannenstine 100). These patterns obscure the text while ornamenting it, hiding behind it what cannot be said. This excess of words, this too much, this "trop c'est comme pas assez,"<sup>11</sup> brings the reader full circle to a land void of straightforward meaning. She does this not only in O'Connor's mono/dialogues, which are renowned for their excesses, but also in her descriptions of places and characters. This fanfare of words dizzies the reader, or confounds her. It leaves her feeling unsteady. It makes her doubt any point the author might appear to be making. Just as Robin's birth in the narrative happens among a civilized jungle of potted-plants, the reader is caught in a thick jungle of words, searching for meaning while haunted by a sneaky suspicion that it lurks in the trees above, behind the next frond, staring back at her. Yet while Barnes infuses her writing with an excess of the said, it also

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<sup>10</sup> Hank O'Neil reports in a journal entry dating October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1978, Barnes commenting her punctuation: "her wonderful style of punctuation (...) is, she says, neither unique nor wonderful. She simply doesn't know any of the rules or how it is supposed to be done properly" (quoted in Broe 353).

<sup>11</sup> The translation of this French-Canadian saying is "too much is not enough," except with a more negative connotation than its English translation, which usually tends towards the plentiful. The French meaning is that too much information is similar to too little, it comes full-circle to a point where comprehension is impossible.



displays an economy of the unsaid. In other words, this excess is imbued with silences, with what the characters omit saying while dropping words of a story that are just enough to keep the reader guessing, to keep her strangely interested in this text.

To show the ambiguity brought about by the use of excess, how the text works mainly with overabundance rather than the particular, one must invariably work with large sections of the text. The examined passage takes place in the first chapter and recounts the initial meeting of the three main characters: doctor Matthew O'Connor, Nora Flood and the Baron Felix Volkbein.

The young woman, who was in her late twenties, turned from the group, coming closer to Felix and the doctor. She rested her hands behind her against the table. She seemed embarrassed. "Are you both really saying what you mean, or are you just talking?" Having spoken, her face flushed, she added hurriedly, "I am doing advance publicity for the circus; I'm Nora Flood."

The doctor swung around, looking pleased. "Ah!" he said, "Nora suspects the cold incautious melody of time crawling, but," he added, "I've only just started." Suddenly he struck his thigh with his open hand. "Flood, Nora, why, sweet God, my girl, I helped to bring you into the world!"

Felix, as disquieted as if he were expected to "do something" to avert a catastrophe (as one is expected to do something about an overturned tumbler, the contents of which is about to drip over the edge of the table and into a lady's lap), on the phrase "time crawling" broke into uncontrollable laughter, and though this occurrence troubled him the rest of his life he was never able to explain it to himself. The company, instead of being silenced, went on as if nothing had happened, two or three of the younger men were talking about something scandalous, and the Duchess in her loud empty voice was telling a very stout man something about the living statues. This only added to the Baron's torment. He began waving his hands, saying, "Oh, please! please!" and suddenly he had the notion that he was doing something that wasn't laughing at all, but something much worse, though he kept saying to himself, "I am laughing, really laughing, nothing else whatsoever!" He kept waving he arms in distress and saying, "Please, please!" staring at the floor, deeply embarrassed to find himself doing so. (N 18-19)

The first sentence can be broken down in four segments. The first is the subject "the young woman." The second, placed between commas, is a defining

relative clause of the subject. Then comes the predicate, another comma and the final segment is a participle clause that acts as an adverbial to the predicate. Two things are of note in this sentence. The first is the abundance of commas. The use of commas is generally limited in the English language. Moreover, according to Thomson and Martinet's A Practical English Grammar, "there is no comma between a noun and a defining relative clause" (81), so those that contour the second segment are ungrammatical. Barnes's use of commas is therefore two too many. On the other hand, if she were writing in French, this "overuse" of commas would be perfectly correct. One can only speculate that after close to ten years of Parisian living, Barnes's ear was made attuned to the rhythm of the French language. In any case, this rhythm would appear as strange to the English reader because it is not usually cut up in such a way. Secondly, a participle clause may be separated by a comma but "adverbial participle clauses are usually rather formal" (Swan 406). This sentence carries a different rhythm than usual English sentences and ends on a tone of formality; these qualities help render her language strange and poetic.

The next sentence does not include any commas yet it is still lengthened by two prepositional phrases that act as sentence-final position adverbials. The next sentence, a straightforward S-V-C sentence, tells us that the young lady appears to be embarrassed, using a past participle adjective to describe her state. Interestingly, the most grammatically simple and straightforward sentence tells us how the subject feels, or at least how she seems to feel. We are not told what is the cause of her embarrassment, the group from which she just departed or the one she just joined. Nor are we told how long she had been listening to Felix and O'Connor's conversation. So when she asks them if they are "both really saying what they mean" or if they are "just talking," the reader might ask herself whether this question is in response to the conversation of the group she left or to Felix and O'Connor's. One way or the other, Nora's first words in the novel are an enquiry into truth. If we side with the version that this question pertains to Felix and O'Connor's conversation, one that O'Connor undeniably dominates, she is first presented to the reader as someone who questions the veracity of O'Connor's

talk, the novel's great orator and liar. Basically, she is questioning O'Connor's (and by extension, the author's) excessive use of language. It can also be suggested that she voices the question the reader might be asking herself at this point: "Should she really engage with what O'Connor is saying, or is his talk merely a superfluous element of style?" Here arises the central issue of ambiguity with regards to the writing of the novel: the possible meaning(s) in and of its style. In other words, does the writing have a purpose, and should the reader seek to understand it?

The next sentence is also heavily punctuated. Beginning with another participle clause, the sentence follows up with two independent clauses, an S-V and an S-V-C, which are separated by commas. The independent clauses of compound sentences are usually connected by a coordinating conjunction which is sometimes joined with a comma or by a semicolon, not only by a comma. A period could easily separate these two independent clauses. Seeing that the character, now the centre of attention, becomes flushed and adds her next statement hurriedly, one can assume that the use of these commas serve to hurry on the sentence, creating a sense of hurriedness by reading it. Nora's second statement consists of presenting herself, which she either does to change the subject or to state her authority, or lack thereof, on the subject matter. Her purpose is not clear. Interestingly, she chooses to present herself first by what she does, using the formal un-contracted structure "I am," as if this might add more weight to her statement. Only after stating what she does for a living does she say her name, now using the informal contracted "I'm." The use of a semicolon to separate these two independent clauses informs the reader that they are related but that one does not clarify the other. This plus the different use of formality separates the professional from the personal, which in turn strengthens the character's plurality. So even if Nora first presents herself by what she "does," what she does does not define her. This informs the reader that Nora is a multi-dimensional character; she is not what meets the eye. She is potentially ambiguous.

The next sentence, which describes O'Connor's reaction to Nora's interjection, is relatively straightforward with only a participle clause appended to the end. It describes O'Connor changing his position, most likely to face Nora, and being pleased with her statement. Mentioning her name when he says "Nora suspects the cold incautious melody of time crawling" tells us that he is not only addressing her, but Felix and maybe a larger audience as well. As for what he says, its structure is clear enough, yet its meaning, produced by juxtaposing mixed metaphors, muddles and slows the reading. Can a melody, which speaks of music and sound, be cold? Can it be incautious? Does time have a melody? And can time crawl? Here is a perfect example of O'Connor's confounding words. We know these words. Their meanings, their signifieds on their own make perfect sense. They are comprehensible. Yet assembled the way he has them, a way one would call poetic if it were not for the fact that his assemblage goes even beyond what we commonly recognize as metaphor, meaning either devolves into a sort of black hole, or splits like shattered glass. O'Connor either destroys meaning, or allows it to multiply. Not only does his language engender ambiguity, his very way of going about doing this is ambiguous. His is an abject talk that breeds abjection, which makes him both the most fascinating and repelling character of the book.

For the purpose of this analysis, to make some sense of O'Connor's meaning, it is helpful to read this sentence backwards: 1) time is moving unusually slowly because it is crawling; 2) what is heard while time moves on is a melody (which is possibly a metaphor for O'Connor's talk); 3) the melody of time crawling appears cold and incautious, hence as careless and lacking "the warmth of normal human emotion" (Merriam-Webster Online). Therefore Nora suspects that O'Connor's conversation is nothing more than an impersonal oration that weighs time down, slowing it down. In other words, that no meaning lies beneath his talk and it is only used to fill space. O'Connor then adds "I've only just started," prophetic of the narrative that awaits. If O'Connor seems pleased it is because his method is being questioned; someone is seeing past it. This cleverness humors him, yet so does his knowledge that he still has many tricks up his sleeve

and still much time to perform them. Then he reacts to her second statement, to her presentation. Barnes adds the indirect object “with his open hand” even if this is implied by the action of striking his own thigh. His second exclamation is composed of a string of noun phrases separated one from the other by commas, which serves to emphasize each word, breaking up the rhythm into a staccato. This string of noun phrases ends in a complete sentence. When he says that he helped bring her into the world, one can interpret this literally given that they are both American, he is older than she and he claims to be a doctor. The reader who knows Ryder will also remember his presence in Barnes’s first novel, where he is also portrayed as a doctor. At the same time, one can interpret this figuratively as O’Connor’s role of bringing the character of Nora about in the narrative, as a primordial figure that makes her existence possible.

The first sentence of the third paragraph is a complex sentence that is particularly long and wordy. Right after the subject comes a dependent clause, separated by a comma. This clause serves to portray Felix’s emotional state. The use of the word “as” in “as disquieted as” serves to show how his feelings of anxiety and worry are equal in some way to the anxiety and worry he feels when he is expected to pose an action. Then comes another “as” at the head of a new dependent clause. This one is placed in parentheses and serves to explain the anxiety and worry felt when expected to pose an action by comparing it to another situation, that of a drink about to spill into a lady’s lap. Barnes writes this clause in a very verbose fashion, appending adverbials by substituting “spill” for “is about to drip over the edge of the table.” Though this helps the reader visualize the catastrophe, one may wonder whether Barnes’s purpose is truly to give a lot of detail about Felix’s reaction or rather to postpone declaring what makes him disquieted. What is the purpose of such detail? The next independent clause begins with the adverbial “on the phrase ‘time crawling’” without the expected comma between the two, which results in a run-on sentence. The next two clauses are independent and can easily form a compound sentence on their own, yet Barnes links them with commas. The reader has finally understood what makes Felix anxious: his uncontrollable laughter at the words “time crawling,” which he

cannot explain to himself. The gap here is that as Felix can't explain it to himself, nor can the reader. Barnes goes into great detail to describe Felix's anxiety, and we are told what makes him so, but we cannot figure out why. Indeed, the language seems superfluous because no true meaning is ever really attained. The reader is left looking into a hole, wondering where it leads.

The next sentence is again very long. It is made up of three independent clauses and could easily be separated into three sentences: "The company, instead of being silenced, went on as if nothing had happened. Two or three of the younger men were talking about something scandalous. The Duchess, in her loud empty voice, was telling a very stout man something about the living statues." Also, commas should be added to enclose the adverbial "in her loud empty voice," which Barnes does not do, resulting in another run-on sentence. Again, she uses a very verbose and lengthy prose, adding adjectives and details wherever she can. She is here describing the (lack of the) effect of Felix's laughter on his surroundings. The piling on of descriptors serves to strengthen this lack of effect. It also creates a rhythm that is again strange to English and more akin to French.

As with Nora, Barnes then writes a relatively simple and straightforward sentence (S-Adv.-V-Oi-Od<sup>12</sup>) to explain how her character feels: he is tormented even more by his lack of effect. As with Nora, this short and direct sentence is located in the middle of its paragraph, surrounded by multiply complex and drawn-out sentences. Because of this, these sentences and their statements should stand out, and maybe they are meant to. But instead they seem lost among the flow of words that surrounds them, just as Nora and Felix are lost among their surroundings, and just as meaning in the text is lost among them all. Interestingly, neither Nora nor Felix is made very comfortable by the situation they are in. Nora seems embarrassed and Felix is tormented, as the reader might very well be.

The two last sentences are again overlong. They describe Felix's reaction to his lack of effect as he continues to laugh uncontrollably. He waves his arms, pleading. But pleading to whom? O'Connor? Himself? In such situations one

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<sup>12</sup> This (Subject) – only (Adverb) – added (Verb) – to the Barron's (Indirect Object) – torment (Direct Object).

would usually plead with the joke teller, the cause of the laughter, to stop so that the one laughing can catch his or her breath. But in this situation, no joke was told. The laugh seems a nervous one. Its missing origin might be what makes Felix suspicious and doubt that he is actually laughing. The suggestion is then that he is doing something far worse, and though Barnes greatly describes Felix and repeats his exclamation and the fact that he is waving his arms, the nature of this laughter-that-is-not-laughter is alluded to, but not explained. This laughter caused by “time crawling” is the silence that lies behind and beneath Barnes’s long sentences, her exuberant descriptions, her rococo style pronounced to the rhythms of French. This laughter and its origin are part of the crying-out, done uncontrollably, that is covered up by the excessive, ambiguous and poetic language. Barnes’s writing is indeed like a tapestry spread out over the unnamable, yet the fabric has holes in it which disturbs its design and allows the reader a glimpse of the darkness that lies behind.

Before passing on to Stone, a notable mention is due to O’Connor. The book is not about him yet he is the most present character in the narrative. His voice is practically equal to that of the narrator’s. Sarah Henstra writes that “Those who read Nightwood for its rebellion against linguistic and novelistic traditions see his oration as a modernist exercise in rhetoric virtuosity, a brilliant and beautiful lament whose solipsism finally underscores the gap between language and life and leads to futility and impotence” (127). He is an oracular figure whose ornamental language forms, for the most part, the novel’s excessive style and abundant layering of meanings, which creates a strong maddening effect. Furthermore, his words are the Law of the father articulated in the narrative, though a perverse and non-phallic law. It is the law of the deject, the melancholy and the effeminate transvestite homosexual. There is no account of the symbolic phallus in Nightwood. As Marcus writes, Barnes is obsessed with the penis, but the limp one of the transvestite (228). The failed patriarch exemplifies the failure of traditional and stable (gendered) identities and roles. As for O’Connor’s language, it is strange in content and form. His language is not appealing but infectious because, although not always comprehensible, it is

fascinating. The reader must endure him because Felix and Nora, in their quest to understand Robin, turn to him for help. The reader must listen to him because they do. The reason he talks is revealed towards the end of the narrative. At the end of the second to last chapter, after having been finally silenced by Nora's obstinate obsession with Robin, O'Connor goes to a bar where, drunk, he voices at last his own anger and despair directed toward those who come to him seeking solace. He cries out "I talk too much because I have been made miserable by what you are keeping hushed" (*N* 162-63). It is the holes in the characters' personal stories that urge him to fill them in the text. It is the violence of their silence that incites him to cry out. His language, pronounced by a character invested in melancholy and abjection with the purpose of covering up what cannot be admitted, is a language of abjection.

As mentioned in the introduction, Barnes's and Stone's stylistics are quite different. Indeed, to place holes in her writing and to create a sense of ambiguity, Stone uses a writing technique rather different from that of Barnes. Stone interrupts meaning at the sentence level, which then works its way up, so to speak. In other words, she fragments her sentences, much like free-verse poetry does. This fragmentation is done in a variety of ways. Stone's sentences sometimes stop where they should not and at other times they begin where they should be continuing another one. Or, the end of a sentence and the beginning of another may be punctuated with a period and a capital letter, but this structure is defied by the meaning that traverses the sentences. This fragmentation serves to change meaning by rearranging emphasis. At other times, Stone relies on incomplete sentences to succinctly express her narrative. In other words, where Barnes has sentences go on for several lines, punctuating them with commas where periods should be, Stone uses periods liberally to cut her sentences up, sometimes by phrase, sometimes by clause. Stone also marks her text with physical indicators. Meant to express meaning on a different level than the intellect, she does this with the use of certain words and the recasting of punctuation.



As we will see, her sentences elude the logical structure of sentences, which interrupts our reading of them and makes our interpretation of them problematic. They throw the reader off balance, giving her multiple ways of interpreting the sentences of the narrative. This ambivalence of meaning tends to accumulate rather than elucidate. The reader makes her way through the narrative with a build-up of meanings rather than an understanding of a meaning, making the whole experience of the novel ambiguous.

To explore in-depth all of these techniques, varying passages will be examined. This first passage demonstrates how Stone uses the structure of sentences to rearrange and unbalance the emphasis of meaning.

His consciousness is attuned to sudden declivities, and he follows Roses' narrative without difficulty. As she tells him that a man's penis resembles a blind baby rabbit, he senses a cul-de-sac, knows she hasn't begun to tell him what is really on her mind. (*H* 17)

The first sentence is complete. When the reader arrives at its end, she understands the meaning it has as a complete whole, a complete sentence. Then the second sentence starts with "as," a word that is used to begin sentences when the phrase it introduces is a dependant clause to the independent clause of the sentence, such as is the case here. What strikes us off-balance as we read these two sentences is that the clause beginning with "as" can be dependant on the one it follows, the one from the previous sentence, as well as the one it precedes. This structure joins the meaning of this dependent clause to the meaning of the two surrounding independent clauses, creating a link. At the same time, this bridge is isolated from the clauses it links by a period and then a comma, which makes it and the statement it expresses stand out. As the reader stumbles while reading this sentence, disturbed by its lack of a linear and regular flow, she reflects on the meaning expressed in this passage, affected by its structure, and she senses her own cul-de-sac. The meaning of the two independent clauses create an unreliable link because the first one claims that Bat follows her narrative and the second one that he senses a dead-end, a trap. Though not directly contrary, the meaning of each of these two statements seems to somewhat contradict each other. Furthermore, the declivity in this passage would be what lies under the bridge,

under Roses' statement that stands out among the rest: that a man's penis resembles a blind baby rabbit. The reader is left feeling that Roses and the narrative have not begun telling her what's on their mind. It gives the impression that these words and sentences are not articulating everything that they should, hinting at the underlying silence that is not being voiced. Sense is blurred. The reader comes away from the narrative with this feeling of blurred sense that can be interpreted any way, though no one certain way.

One of Stone's most poetical devices is the way she creates images and meaning through the writing of incomplete sentences, or by clauses separated by commas that seem more related by their imagery than a continued logical idea. This occurs when a character shares information in an intuitive way, by a flash or a sensation or a memory, then another one and another until a sense can be made up. Though intuitive to the character, the reader must make sense of these flashes, these snippets of information shared in an inverted fashion. Furthermore, the spaces that exist between these short and incomplete sentences are linguistic holes. They are drops in the narrative. The next mini-sentence tries to recuperate the meaning that has fallen into the hole, remodelling it through the rewording of it into another incomplete sentence. As with poetry, meaning is created by the accumulation of related images. For example:

A word like a hung dog.  
Strung dog. Bodies supine, floating in sleep. As if. The  
room Loralie sleeps in, the one she finds inside of her, has curtains  
of strung dogs hung over windows, each soft furry body at odds  
with the stark angle struck by its neck. (*H* 39)

The reader must first make sense of a word that's "like hung dog." Would this mean a word that reminds Loralie of a hung dog, or one that rhymes with it? Then "strung dog" as a sentence. The lack of a predicate urges the importance of the statement and makes what appears to be a subject stand out. The assonance between "hung dog" and "strung dog" is clear. The reader is then presented with the position of these dogs followed by the words "as if," that are also isolated in their own sentence. These three sentences should normally form one, resulting in something along the lines of "The supine bodies of dogs strung, as if floating in

sleep.” Yet Stone chops it up, creates three out of the one and places them in an order where images are stacked one atop of the other. Finally, the last sentence makes sense of the tentative image that has formed in the reader’s mind: these floating bodies are the curtains of Loralie’s interior space that shield her from the outside world. The connection of the image of soft furry bodies with that of necks struck at a stark angle is morbid indeed, yet clear if slightly metaphorical. It is at the end of this passage that the reader understands that “hung dog” is a synecdoche that stands for Loralie’s interior room and that the “word,” a simile of “hung dog,” also represents this room. This process of accumulation repeats meaning, and by this repetition recreates it until there is a clear image in the reader’s mind without sacrificing the character’s (or the author’s) sense of priority, or emphasis. From this point forward, when the reader is presented to the words “hung dog” she knows that what is being referred to is Loralie’s interior space.

Stone uses a similar technique of layering and repeating images through the use of shortened sentences when characters are concerned with the formulation of language. As is evident in the scene where Bat finds Roses in her room in her skinned-rabbit-skin dress, Stone’s text creates thought out of external and sensory evidence.

He thinks: Roses is dreaming. With the lights on. Yes. Roses is.  
Dreaming with the lights on. There is a lot of. Money on the night  
table, and Roses is dreaming with the lights on. (*H* 71)

The fragmentation of these sentences is used to denote the construction of thought. Bat realizes what happened with the evidence he picks up: Roses is lying on the bed, her eyes are open, the lights are on and there is a lot of money on the night table; but he does not want to admit what he knows: Roses has prostituted herself. He prefers thinking that she is simply dreaming with the lights on, the idea his thought ends with. The fragmentation of these sentences has allowed the reader to realize that Bat knows what happened yet he chooses to deny it. This way, Stone succeeds at portraying a character’s interior battle and its settlement in the span of four lines. She is also pointing a finger to how things come to be

silenced, how words come to formulate narratives that cover up and hush what cannot be admitted, the unsayable. This shows the regenerative nature of cover-ups (or lies, if you will). Contrarily to *Nightwood*, *Hush* is not equipped with one character (O'Connor) who serves as liar. In Stone's novel, lies permeate the narrative. Every character is implicated with lies one way or another. Her novel is not only involved with what has been silenced, but also with the actual process of silencing; therefore it is not only involved with the mask but also with the masking.

A common feature of Stone's writing is the way she composes her sentences to designate physicality by using words that point to it. When Loralie awakes from her seizure she reflects "Crazy messed up, here, her mind" (*H* 42), the "here" pinpointing what is crazy and messed up. When the narrator explains about Maddie that "The memory is felt as a longing for touch, here and here" (*H* 8), two locations are made precise even if the words to designate them are left to the reader to imagine. Or again, when Roses and Loralie are folding sheets in the basement: "Maybe one bends the head, just so, into the hand. Nothing of the girl Mother De'ath led out to Potter's field, here. Nothing of the whore, here" (*H* 78). The reader is told that there is a specific way to bend the head into the hand, a way "just so," making the action precise while the act remains allusive. Then the author locates the subjectivity of the characters in space by appending "here" following a comma to their general description. Here in this space, these bodies, these subjects are not how they are described in other spaces. Words such as "here" and "just so" are sprinkled throughout the narrative as flairs the author uses to attract attention, to pull the reader closer to the physical and bodily realms of the characters. This serves the purpose of fleshing out the characters in a way that at first seems more ambiguous than by straightforward descriptions, yet by pointing to *a* physical makes the physicality seem more explicit.

Stone also occasionally uses slants (/) to express the overlapping of actions and desires, or the overlapping of memory with present action. They are used to express the memory of a sex scene between Roses and August from Roses' point of view:

Her body ticking out a steady *adagio*: I want / I want / I want. [...] The touse of sheets under her calves straining the long of her torso into / *press here* / his fingertips find her throat [...] August's mouth is small in her mouth / grasps her slim purchase and stands / pressing dried flower lips close to seal away the memory. (H 25)

These slashes are used to punctuate what cannot be written: the language of the body. A period or a comma could not do because they stop, they separate meaning. What is expressed here is a language that knows no language, yet voices itself while the mind articulates thought. This is an interesting feature because in her aim to recall the body in her text, she expresses with words multiple modes of knowledge: that of the mind and of the body. This presupposes that the mind and the body do not “think” alike and do not “remember” alike, and that in one’s own subjectivity we are involved with varying forms of knowledge and memory. The writing of these forms is invested with the will to affect these forms in the reader. In other words, the reader is not meant to understand the text only with her mind, she is also meant to feel it. This novel actively seeks out the physical in the reader. Meaning is split not only on an epistemological level, but in the very way meaning is understood. The ambiguity of meaning goes beyond comprehension; it is physical. This enhances the reader’s sense of self-abjection. Coupled with its abstruse structure and its layering of meaning, this makes the whole experience of reading the novel feel all the more personal, hence all the more abject.

A sense, a meaning is there. The reader feels it, but does not (and sometimes cannot) precisely know it. Stone’s style has the reader continually plunging into voids trying to grasp meaning, like plunging into a sea and then coming up for air and wondering if she saw correctly under the surface. With the next plunge and the next resurfacing, the reader tries to make sense of the meaning grasped, tries to plug the suggested meanings into a coherent narrative that can be understood. These eclipses are not only intentional, they are meant to express the narrative as it is read. In other words, this writing is the point of the narrative. When Stone writes, “Under all her talk, he hears a single phrase. The rhythmic fragments slur, elide. [...] Out loud her words fall flat. A disappointment she hadn’t anticipated...” (H 17), she is expressing and explaining

what she is doing in her writing. Stone, through Bat, is talking about the effect of stories told bluntly, without rhythm or modulating undertones. Without a sense of poetry. Blunt, linear and journalistic writing is not experienced the same way as a writing that is blurred. The poetical writing, the one that pulls the reader into the narrative (and by doing so better integrates itself into the reader) through a continual layering of images and a (re-)construction and (re-)ordering of multiple meanings, incites a more profound connection between itself and the reader. Ultimately, such writing will generate a more authentic experience of the message being conveyed by the narrative.

A writing of abjection is concerned with the affect of abjection, the object state of insecurity it brings about in the reader. The principal way of creating such an affect is to disturb reader expectations, to manipulate the reader's response. On a syntactic level, expectancy is disturbed in two ways: a problematic rearranging of the syntax and its punctuation, and a juxtaposition of words that carry meaning that do not seem to go side by side. Another way writing becomes object is by being invested in ambiguity. This can be done in a variety of ways. First, by writing a punctured narrative. The holes of a narrative, expressed through the writing, are gaps where meaning is lost. And where meaning is lost, it may be substituted and formed by the reader in a multitude of ways. This, as well as the layering of images, create the second way ambiguity is infused into a text: by the multiplying of meaning. A text is ambivalent when it conveys more than one interpretation; it is more so when among this multitude, meaning can never be fully grasped. Last, these texts are imbued with silences, the not said and/or the nonsayable. The way the texts articulate these silences by their stylistics, the way they write their holes and the way they cover them up, also makes the texts vacillate between various meanings and possible interpretations. All these writing techniques are integral to poetry. As they refer back to poetry, they infuse poetry into the texts. Yet there is more at work in a text of abjection than its poetic language. The narrative is also affected.

Chapter 3  
Analysis of Narrative

Traditionally speaking, the word narrative calls upon all the elements of a story that drives its telling. These elements of narrative generally comprise plot (beginning – middle – end, or in other words the sequential structure of events), character (protagonist, antagonist and allies), setting (place of action) and narrator (point of view). Furthermore, narrative has often been described as a recurring structure of these elements, one that readers come to know and expect from different stories. The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Thought writes that the notion of a narrative grammar or logic “implies that any given set of narrative structures will display recurrent features that can be identified as distinctive regularities” (265). This suggests that readers expect not only a specific order to the narrative, but also a recurrence in the relationships that exist between the various elements of narrative. This means that readers do not only expect a beginning, a middle and an end with a hero and an enemy; they expect specific types of actions to occur in these loci, specific actions taken by specific characters as well as specific types of relationships between the different characters. These expectations vary somewhat by genre, but within a genre narrative is generally recognizable.

These ideas of narrative become problematic when addressing twentieth century literature in general and experimental writing in specific. Point of view has been displaced to the extent of having inanimate objects or insects act as narrators; characters have become trans-gender and trans-temporal; conscious-writing has forgone punctuation and linearity and unity of plot have been challenged on more than one front (of which the novels of this study are a case in point). To speak of narrative as the term is traditionally used, especially with regard to reader expectations, becomes an inappropriate, not to say frustrating, way to examine texts. On the other hand, if we abstract the idea of recurring elements from the definition of narrative and satisfy ourselves with “narrative consists of the way a story is told,” we find ourselves with a much more freeing definition of narrative, one that can include all forms of story-telling: lyrical poetry, short stories, novels, advertisements, jingles, jokes, etc. This also means that it can apply to those stories that do not nicely fit into any of the categories



listed above. If novels such as Nightwood and Hush are to be read by readers of poetry, as T.S. Eliot suggested of Nightwood in his introduction to the novel (*N* xi), how are we to define them in terms of genre? Should we even try to associate them with a genre? The term narrative (or narrativity, as the New Narrative authors would have it<sup>13</sup>) allows us to speak of the way these novels tell their stories without pigeonholing them to a specific genre and/or archetypal mode of storytelling.

Regarding the abject narrative, as stated in chapter 1, it is not specifically concerned with “playing” with the narrative. At the same time, a narrative that defies the reader’s narrative expectations is not necessarily abject. Experimental writing plays with and disturbs the laws of writing; abject writing corrupts the laws of writing, yet it is more than just that. Both types of writing challenge reader expectations. They create unsettling storylines. Yet where experimental writing confronts the reader with the unexpected, the ambiguity caused by abject writing goes so far as to lose the reader in the narrative, so that the creation of new expectations from the disturbed (or new) narrative is impossible. To be lost in the narrative is to experience *jouissance*. As James B. Scott writes of Nightwood:

Instead of being shown “what happened,” we discover we are lost in a welter of words and of passions having to do with events which have already occurred, or which have yet to happen. Or have they occurred? Where, that is, is the present time? About whom or what is the novel constructed? Ultimately, we orient ourselves to ‘what happened’ in some fashion which does not correspond to the words printed on the pages in consecutive order. (103-04)

Moreover, abject writing lies in the aesthetic efforts to explore the origin of being, the primal repression. This is expressed in Nightwood primarily through Nora’s obsession with her lost object Robin, who as beast-turning-human is abjection unfolding. Hush features Roses whose birth caused her the loss of Love, her lost

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<sup>13</sup> The New Narrative authors write, generally speaking, prose works that follow in the vein of the Language Poets. They also tend to be highly aware of contemporary literary theories and engage such theories in their works of fiction. A number of narrative manifestos written by authors in and around this group can be found on the narrativity website: <http://www.sfsu.edu/~poetry/narrativity/home.html>

object, and from then on has lived with the torment of an ever pervasive and nameless violence. This violence precedes the narrative and its characters, and in turn permeates them. It is in these ways that both novels express abjection throughout their narrative. To identify these expressions, this chapter looks at how the narrative is constructed using as tools the two main narrative elements, plot and characters. A specific part of the plot of each novel, the ending, is examined to exemplify how the writing of abjection is the realization of the fundamental lack of language and meaning.

The foremost feature of both these novels is their lack of linearity. Neither of these novels is equipped with a direct beginning, middle and end. Also, neither uses flashbacks in a way that has characters remember past events so as to inform the present, the story at hand. Barnes and Stone are not concerned with the telling of a readerly story. They write their narratives in a way that suits their narrative, in a way that best conveys what the stories are saying. Again, their modes of narrative, like their words, vary greatly from each other.

Of the two novels, Nightwood is the one with the less demanding narrative. It is separated into eight chapters of various lengths and modes of narrative. The complete narrative roughly spans sixty years. The first chapter, "Bow Down," is written very much like one of Barnes's short stories. Its general purpose is to set the stage, to portray all of the major characters except for Robin (unless, of course, we consider the young woman who accompanies the Count to be Robin, but that is only speculation). Using the story of the (Wandering) Jew, "Bow Down" introduces the notion that history is a construction, in which some are included and others are not. This story sets the stage for the other characters of the book who are, like the Jew, marginal and also excluded from the dominant cultural construction of history: the lesbian, the transvestite, the Negro, the amputee, etc. Meanwhile Robin, the beast-turning-human, is a marginal entity that does not yet bear a name. Victoria L. Smith claims that the first chapter sets down the pattern of loss that enables the reader to understand the rest of the book (196). Indeed this chapter not only presents the main characters, it also displays the main

themes in which much of the novel is invested and gives a taste of the language to be expected from the other chapters, mostly through O'Connor's speech.

The first 78 pages recount the story behind the novel, how the characters are linked to one another and their emotional involvement. The first chapter, as mentioned, sets the stage. The second, "La Somnambule," describes the relationship between Robin and Felix, their marriage, their parenthood and her departure. "Night Watch" tells of the relationship between Robin and Nora. It begins with a description of Nora, then recounts her relationship with Robin from its beginning to its end. "The Squatter" presents Jenny, Robin's lover, and describes from their perspective what happens the night Nora sees them in the garden. Apart from the last paragraph, which tells us that Robin and Nora broke up soon after that night and that Nora and Jenny leave for America, this chapter ends at the same point as "Night Watch." All these chapters are concerned with the construction of the characters' subjectivities and the description of their relationship with the other characters, though mainly with Robin. When portraying a character, the narrative tends to evade time, pulling away from the story to be able to get and give a global perspective of him or her. The descriptions of Robin's serial relationships respect chronological time. "La Somnambule" and "Night Watch" end with a foot into the next chapter, portraying Robin with her next lover and creating a chain effect, a loop that binds one chapter to the next. "The Squatter" ends with Jenny and Robin in America where, in the final chapter, Robin and Nora are reunited. Between these two chapters, action stops. The first part of the novel describes the ever-recurring loss of the initial abject-object (Robin) through the repetition in the narrative of its loss. The second part articulates this loss and the sense of abjection that incurs.

Nora first seeks counsel from O'Connor in "Watchman, What of The Night?" She comes to him to try to understand the night and its creatures, hence Robin. Felix seeks counsel from O'Connor in "Where The Tree Falls." In "Go Down, Matthew" we again have Nora and O'Connor discussing Nora's fixation on Robin. According to Kannenstine, in this part of the novel the characters fall into the night and the unconscious, to eventually find themselves in the

preconscious and ahistorical (94). These three last chapters are those that comprise O'Connor's mono/dialogues, his advice to Nora and Felix. They are those that use the most difficult language, where Barnes's "stylistic strategies of excess" (Whitley 85) flourish. A quote from A. Desmond Hawkins in Jane Marcus's "Mousemeat" chapter perfectly sums up the relation of the last chapters to the first ones: "Whatever action there is occurs as something now being relived in dialogue" (Broe 201). Indeed, Nightwood begins with a tight description of people and places in "Bow Down." This style continues in the three next chapters, even if their relation to one another is superimposed. The novel's story is told in these four chapters. From there on the narrative unravels. Action stops. Talking begins, until the last chapter where even talk no longer stands as a mode of narrative. From beginning to end, the narrative fragments. The last chapter, "The Possessed," is the novel's shortest and most controversial. Anne Stone's opinion of it succinctly sums up the controversy: "meaning in Barnes' (sic) text devolves to the level of image by the end. That last scene (barking) suggests to me that sometimes a text can go somewhere that the reader cannot follow."<sup>14</sup> After having been swirled by the language and structure of the novel, the last chapter finds the reader sucked into the maelstrom that is the narrative, where meaning has no language.

Where Barnes's narrative has been likened to the musical pattern of a dramatic fugue,<sup>15</sup> Stone's narrative can be compared to jazz where any variation is permitted as long as it respects the underlying musical theme or melody. Hush is not separated into chapters but rather into 76 sections that range from several lines to five pages in length. To call these sections chapters is misleading because usually several sections in a row pertain to one same narrative stance, or story. These groupings of narrative stances, which I call clusters, would form chapters as we usually read them. Meta-textually, the sections look like chapters. Textually, Stone interrupts her narrative by separating the would-be chapters (clusters) into these sections. This way of breaking up her narrative into minute

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<sup>14</sup> Personal email interview with Anne Stone, 7 August 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Hirschman quoted by J.B. Scott, 105.

sections, dispersing holes within the narrative, is comparable to the way she fragments her sentences. The process of making meaning within or beyond the lapse of such holes becomes problematic, and where meaning is lost in the narrative, meaning multiplies in the mind of the reader. Furthermore, these clusters comprise several sections that continue or complement the one it follows, unfolding a story for several sections that seems linear. Then without warning the reader finds herself reading another point of view, in another place and at another time. Stone's narrative unfolds like a rhizome. Its fragmentation confounds linearity as well as any sense of chronology within the narrative; it promotes the effect of losing the reader in the narrative, and the narrative in the underlying theme that permeates it: violence.

The chronology of the clusters is loosely based on Roses' age when the events of the various stories take place. The novel is made of roughly fourteen clusters.<sup>16</sup> These clusters are not readily apparent on a first reading. Also, the general linearity of these clusters does not restrain the narrative of indulging in flashbacks and flashforwards within each cluster. For example, on page 114 the reader is told that Loralie "is dreaming and God, it's enough to make you fold, draw you knees up to your chest and hold yourself in your own arms – because it's gone" (*H* 114). The section continues with two paragraphs that speak of Loralie and Stay, forgetting the dream. Yet in the next section, a very short one on page 115, the dream is explained. The reader is moved back in time to learn of a dream that caused a reaction that is already in the past as far as the reading is concerned. In such ways, the narrative feels fluid and is always and forever moving the reader from one place to another. Once the reader feels as if she is on steady ground, as if she understands the story in a way that allows her to

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<sup>16</sup> The overall layout of these clusters is as so: 1) pp. 7-14: Maddie's story when Roses is 18; 2) pp. 15-22: Roses' (& Bat's) story when she is 18; 3) pp. 23-36: Roses' (& August's) story when she is 17; 4) pp. 37-51: Loralie's seizure when Roses is 17; 5) pp. 52-77: Roses' & Bat's story when she is 17 (Roses-in-the-rabbit-skin); 6) pp. 78-79: Folding of sheets #1; 7) pp. 80-102: Roses's childhood when she is 12; 8) pp. 101-02: Roses's story when she is 18; 9) p.103: Folding of sheets #2; 10) pp. 104-125: Loralie's relationship with Stay (Roses and her age are absent from this cluster); 11) pp. 126-135: Roses' rape when she is 18; 12) pp. 136-39: Maddie's suicide when Roses is 18; 13) pp. 140-48: Roses' remembering Sol when she is 18; 14) pp. 149-150: Ending when Roses is 18.

reconstruct it linearly in her mind, the narrative shifts and has her once again unbalanced and guessing. About linearity, Stone writes,

I knew linearity would *pull* the story I wanted to tell in directions I didn't want to go. The linear can pull you in the direction, for example, of the case study, which represents a person's life from point 'a' to point 'b' and does so in an 'interested' way (say with an investment in a particular brand of knowledge (medical, psychoanalytic, etc)). In terms of a story, the linear's 'interest' might be redemption – the straight ahead motion of the text requiring that full stop, that point 'b,' or resolution, which both gives the reader his/her reward and lets him/her know that the text has come to a close. (AS 1)

The lack of linearity in Stone's novel has the precise purpose of articulating the story in a non-interested way, giving the narrative a multifarious dimension. This quality serves to convey the suffusion of violence. It also has the effect of both confounding readers and allowing them to personalize the narrative in their reconstruction of it.

In Hush, gaps and holes mark the text on many levels. In every instance where the reader's position shifts, where a cluster ends or where the reader is brought to the past or the future, she finds herself in a gap, a void where she tries to grapple with a fleeing meaning. What is being told in Hush? Stories are recognized but most readers would be hard put to find a narrative. The reading of this novel has the reader in a constant state of ambiguity – of meaning, of place, of time, of people and of language. In this way, Hush is a fleeing narrative, yet the narrative is fleeing what it cannot escape. The gaps of the narrative, its silences, while trying to conceal, expose the violence that inhabits the narrative. This violence that nobody dare speak of, that is hushed, is etched into the very way silence is articulated. It causes the suffering that is found everywhere in the novel, an abject crying-out from its gaps, its silences, and its double meanings.

Barnes's characters have repeatedly been termed perverse and outcasts. As seen above, perversion does not equate abjection. Read in a context where lesbians and "queens" are no longer considered perverse social outcasts, where circus people are considered as circus artists instead of freaks, where the myth of the Wandering Jew exists as a myth and not a social reality and where tattooed

blacks are not considered savages, though these characters might still fringe the norm, their perversion no longer seems striking. Yet there is still something bothersome about Barnes's characters. Their abject-ness does not stem from their marginality, the definition of which does not stand the test of time. Rather, there is something bothersome about who they are and where they come from, not how they act in the novel. Theirs is an abjection of origin. As we will see, they are drenched in it, and reek of it.

Felix is the first main character the reader encounters and his genealogy, which takes up most of the first chapter, is the only true sense of origin described in the novel. Felix is born in abjection. His birth was his mother's deathbed, the "rich spectacular crimson" (*N* 1) of which was the blood that brought him to life and her to death. Felix is life edged into death, death infecting life: abject. Furthermore, he is born outside of the Oedipal triangle. The death of his mother leaves him without a proper first object and mimetic subject. The death of his father, an Italian Jew who claimed to be of aristocratic Austrian descent, six months prior leaves Felix without a Law of the father. Felix's mother and father are lost before any sense of self, of "I," can begin its initial formation. His nurse's milk was his being but not his birthright. His psyche is based on an unstable foundation, which has him constantly uncomfortable about some thing or another. This lack of stability has him revere institutions he considers to be solid: the Great Past, aristocracy, and royalty. He is attracted to Robin because of her accumulation of youth and the odour of memory about her, as if she came from a far away place one wishes to remember: a pre-nominal place one wishes to return to. Her "most formless loss, gave me [Felix] at the same time pleasure and a sense of terrible anxiety" (*N* 113). Felix is a deject, estranged and looking to be judged. The law he seeks he finds in O'Connor, to whom he turns for counsel.

The progression of Felix's sentiment for O'Connor demonstrates the multiple roles the doctor plays in the narrative. His first opinion of O'Connor is that he is a "volatile person who called himself a doctor" (*N* 17). A man who rambles on primarily because he enjoys hearing himself speak. His second opinion is that he is a "great liar, but a valuable liar" (*N* 30). O'Connor claims that

to be a great liar makes the mystic and the great doctor for “by our lie we have made that very party powerful, such is the power of the charlatan, the great strong!” (*N* 31), yet he confesses to Nora that he is a liar because he must talk like mad to those who come to him in despair asking him questions. Henstra speaks of the power of lying as a way to invert symbolic order and to claim power through the irony of the lie (138). Lying would be the liar’s access to signification. Also, lying and admitting to lies confuses the binary of “true and false,” a way to blur the limits and show that there is no true or false but multiple versions of the same stories.<sup>17</sup>

Felix perceives the melancholy that lies behind O’Connor’s “every jest and malediction” (*N* 39). Victoria L. Smith writes that “Melancholia is a tool that sculpts the ego in moving back and forth between the psyche and culture. And this movement reveals both the normative patternings of social life and the self’s resistance to them” (196). This movement makes O’Connor the perfect ‘in-between’ character, the “embodiment of the mystery of intermediate being” (Kannenstine 110). According to Freud’s definition of melancholia, all individuals’ egos are constituted with/by an internalization and an identification that replaces a lost object-cathexis. So the Self is constituted out of loss. Ultimately, this loss helps define the ego, meaning the individual’s character. O’Connor’s self is based on loss, but he, unlike the novel’s other characters, acknowledges it.

Finally, Felix sees in O’Connor something prehistoric, fabricated “to be the framework of a forgotten but imposing plan; some condition of life of which he was the sole surviving retainer” (*N* 30). In other words, Felix sees him as a stronghold, as Law. Nora tells O’Connor: “You know what none of us know until we have died. You were dead in the beginning” (*N* 152). O’Connor is a character composed of loss. He is a being in which binaries are not mutually exclusive: truth and lies, male and female, life and death; and this is what makes him abject.

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<sup>17</sup> Another way the narrative portrays this is in the multiple retellings of Robin and Jenny’s encounter. O’Connor knows one version which he dilutes when he recounts it to Nora. On the other hand, the reader knows that Robin and Jenny’s affair had been going on for more than a year, but Jenny feigns (lies) the differ by playing out a first encounter when in the presence of the doctor. Multiple stories show multiple truths, all embedded with lies, truths and half-knowledge.



Contrarily to the other characters, his abjection is not problematic, which is how he comes to embody the Law of Nightwood.

Robin is the novel's central character, yet she is the most absent and most silent one. She is central because she embodies the other characters' lost object, the abject-object they all desire. Robin enters the narrative sleeping. When O'Connor awakens her, she enters the world in spasms and with shock, like a foetus leaving the comforts of the womb to enter into the cold world. Her first words: "I was all right" (*N* 35), imply that she did not want or need to be awakened. She is introduced in the narrative as "a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person's every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience (*N* 37). She lives in two worlds, that of the child and that of the desperado. She is the "infected carrier of the past" and has "eaten death returning" (*N* 37). She makes our jaw ache because "we feel that we could eat her" (*N* 37). Those who see her ache with the desire to consume her. Smith explains that Robin is "infected because she reminds others of (dis)ease of loss and desire while she remains unaffected by it" (200). Judith Lee, in her article "Nightwood: The Sweetest Lie," points to the fact that Robin calls "to mind a moment that is preverbal, prerational, almost prehuman, a moment after death and before birth, Robin represents a consciousness which cannot be understood in terms of ordinary modes of differentiation" (215). It is because Robin is infected with the past, with a history we cannot remember yet long to possess, that those who come in contact with her wish to consume her. Robin then becomes remembrance, myth, representing the void of the past – the lost object – that is substituted by memory. She is prehistoric memory personified, the abject-object existing before the ego's creation and before the primal repression. She is abjection because she is the inexplicable loss all are looking for. As an invert, Robin embodies the myth of romantic love. As a person, she is a beast, uncontrollable by human structures such as history and morality. As a lover, she is time past, prehistoric, always to come and so always youthful. As a character, she is un-fixed and ambiguous, she is abjection unfolding.

Nora is involved with abjection because of her object of desire, but she is the only character that does not originate in abjection. If Robin is considered the infected past, Nora is “an undocumented record of time” (*N* 50). Her nature is “savage and refined” (*N* 50), giving her equilibrium, yet a deranged one, the derangement of which saves her from her fall. She has a healthy give-and-take structure of desire, though her object of desire is perverted. Nora reproaches and accuses no one. Her lack of judgment reveals that her Superego is not in command of her psyche; if she knows a Law, its power over her is not overbearing. Her lack of a dominating Superego makes her somewhat amoral, which ultimately enables her to fall in love with an invert. Barnes writes that “She was by fate one of those people who are born unprovided for, except in the provision of herself” (*N* 53). She will therefore fall from grace, but due to her ego’s solidity she will not notice her fall. Indeed, Nora clings to the abject object. Her obsession over its loss and her internalization of it keeps her in a convoluted stability.

Her predicament is that her object of desire, which becomes her obsession, is Robin, abjection unfolding. O’Connor articulates this sad plight when he tells her that “Night people do not bury their dead, but on the neck of you, their beloved and waking, sling the creatures, husked of its gestures. And where you go, it goes, the two of you, your living and her dead, that will not die; to daylight, to life, to grief, until both are carrion” (*N* 89). Nora turns to O’Connor for some sense of Law, some sense of order. She wishes to understand the abject and the night. O’Connor suggests that she “Be like the Frenchman [...]—he can trace himself back by his sediment, vegetable and animal, and so finds himself in the odour of wine” (*N* 84). He claims that Nora’s American Puritanism cannot call upon the filth of her past to find herself in the night, that it has her cleaning away all dirt, erasing all roadway for understanding the night, hence the beast. But Nora has washed herself so clean that she cannot locate any remnant of her (prehistoric) past. Instead, when Nora sees Robin from her window, she moves into the different psychic state of melancholy. Going from Nora’s arms to those of another woman’s, Robin is protected from death. From now on Nora can live with the

fossil of Robin without fearing what the death of Robin might cause her. This internalization emblemizes Nora's melancholy. When describing the role of melancholy in the formation of gender, Judith Butler writes that, "The melancholic refuses the loss of the object, and internalization becomes a strategy of magically resuscitating the lost object, not only because loss is painful, but because the ambivalence felt toward the object requires that the object be retained until differences are settled" (61-62). As O'Connor puts it: "So love, when it has gone, taking time with it, leaves a memory of its weight" (*N* 127). Smith quotes Freud explaining that the melancholic patient may know *whom* they have lost, but not *what* they have lost (202). Nora is aware of having lost Robin, but the implication of having lost what Robin represents, the infected past, the being's primal and forgotten knowledge, baffles her. Internalizing Robin helps her deal with her bafflement.

After their break-up, Nora obsessively writes to and of Robin, which is a process of remembering, it "narrativizes the loss into being" (Smith 201). She admits to O'Connor that the death of Robin would now "stop nothing" (*N* 128) of her misery, affirming Robin as her now internalized lost object. She says that she can find Robin only in her sleep or in Robin's death, that "In death Robin would belong to her. Death went with them, together and alone; and with the torment and catastrophe, thoughts of resurrection, the second duel" (*N* 58). Talking and writing obsessively of her lost object, Nora continually invests herself in the object. But abjection cannot be found out with the tool she uses: language.

Stone's novel does not portray an array of dejects as vast as Barnes's. The object originates from Maddie and spreads to the other characters, particularly Roses for whom there is a hereditary factor and who, smart and stubborn, does her best to oppose its effect on her. This disease that unfurls on the town involves all characters, including the minor ones, with abjection. For a lack of a better tool, their response to it, as is Roses', is violence. Violence in the novel is articulated in many ways, but it exists with most force in the silences that inhabit it, in all that is being hushed. Yet the unease that arises from Stone's characters does not originate so much in who they are as in the relationships they have with each

other. The levels of complicity that exist between her characters strongly defy the binary relationship readers have come to expect from a novel. This section looks not only at the main characters but also the types of relationships that exist among them.

The first cluster of the novel is appropriately concerned with Maddie, the matriarch of the novel. She is an important presence in the mythology of the town and the people who live there, though she surfaces only occasionally in the narrative, usually through the memory or speech of the other main characters. The town, De'ath Sound, wears her name, and in a way she is the one who brings the hushed sound of death and violence to town, cursing it. After the death of her lover Bathhouse, Maddie goes crazy. The loss of her love-object, a reminder of the original loss, has the effect of blurring Maddie's notion of reality. She is then on visited by his revenant and haunted by the whispering of the dead. Her world is divided between the living and the dead. Her craziness situates her in a perpetually un-recognizable land where desire surfaces through the vague memory of "the gutting of fish, maybe, a love of flesh so taut it slices the belly open" (*H* 7). Of this childhood fishing trip memory, she remembers finding in the belly of a fish what she mistook for a green gem. It eventually smeared against her throat to expose what it truly was: a dull metal bauble. "The memory is felt as a longing for touch, here and here. The simple want of more than the clean starch-white of hotel room sheets" (*H* 8). This memory marks the disillusionment of Maddie's being, the bauble she mistook for a jewel, the jewel that is not hers to have. Likewise, love (of Bathhouse) is not hers to have. Like Nora, Maddie internalizes Bathhouse. Unlike Nora, Maddie's object is already dead and instead of fossilizing, his decay progresses. His visits are those of the revenant, the walking-dead whose physique is altered for having spent too much time at the bottom of the river, his skin hanging and his eyes sewed closed. Maddie's love object is the corpse, the most appalling refuse because it embodies the border of life and death. It is death infecting and rejecting life; it is the worst form of abjection. She is not melancholic because she does not internalize her object to settle a difference between the states of have and have-not. On the contrary, she

takes it as it is, and it invades her, pushing her over the border of sanity. This is the legacy she leaves for Roses and De'ath Sound. It is one of the main causes of the violence that permeates the narrative.<sup>18</sup> She is, as she believes Roses perceives her, a strange infectious disease.

In the narrative, Maddie is looking for an object. Her lost object. "Somewhere, an object whose bare insistence will restore her. Whose simple dimensions will assert nothing more than its own existence and, not implicating her in textures, offering no shape to hold her, will reassert the content of her skin" (*H* 8). But the only shape there is is her own sad one, and there are no words to soothe. In the land oblivion where her madness detains her, she finds nothing and nobody against whom she can define herself and construct her subjectivity. It is in this absence that her pyromaniac tendencies arise, scarring herself and the spaces she inhabits. These "discrete measures of oblivion" (*H* 14) help her keep the symptom of abjection under control. Eventually they will lead her to her suicide.

Early on in the narrative Roses' subjectivity is summed up in a few lines: she is a pulsing gap; she constructs herself out of holes; she is a hushed silence; since she "turned the wrong end of the gun" (*H* 15) against herself, people have paused in their speech every time she enters a room. It is this silence, this hush-ness that precedes her that has taught her to construct herself out of holes, to "become nothing more than a series of deflections, postures, gestures struck to occlude just what it is she thinks she knows" (*H* 15). Roses is a smart girl and has strength of character. Like Maddie, Roses has "half-crazed urges for touch" (*H* 21). Unlike her mother, Roses "knows that if it's coming, nothing but nothing is going to stop it, so she'll look it into the face. That way it can't slide into her slow, like it did Mother De'ath" (*H* 74). She is also very angry. This anger pushes her to confront violence, to use herself and her body to denounce it. Yet her criticism is usually wrongly interpreted, and usually seen as insolence. Bottled up

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<sup>18</sup> As far as Roses is concerned, Maddie's instability is the main cause of violence. The other causes of the narrative are not so clear-cut, and they are not made to be so. In her novel, Stone deals with violence as a social situation and not as a singular and remote event caused by one person victimizing another. She does this to show how violence grows like a rhizome. Its causes and effects are often obscure and muddled.

anger she does not know how to express is expressed in ways that make her again and again the receptacle of violence. Roses ultimately makes a violence of herself.

Roses was born with her Siamese twin attached to her stomach. Her twin, Love, was born without bones. Says Maddie, "The forceps tore her open, so there was no helping her, either way. I fell asleep as you were born, and when I woke up, they'd already cut Love away" (*H* 91). The loss of her object (so significantly named Love) denotes Roses' entry into the world of violence, where her mother is asleep hence not in a position to help her or offer comfort. With a father she believes to be dead, Roses is left to her own devices to deal with the loss of Love and the violence in which she is immersed. The only part of Love that remains is her womb, which Roses carries in her belly. Roses has internalized Love, regarding her as an alter-ego. Love is both a perfect alternate to Roses and an ash-taste in her mouth that has her heave out her innards almost every morning. Love makes Roses' life both bearable and sickening; she is both the symptom and the sublime of Roses' abjection.

Adding to the loss of Love is a trauma Roses lives at the age of twelve when Maddie brings her to Potter's field with the intent of having him dispose of her. Roses is aware of this and obstinately seeks to face her fate, even when Potter discards her and tells her to go home. As he scans his field for a rabbit to shoot, Roses kneels in front of him and adjusts the barrel of the gun to her scalp, slightly opening her mouth to make a passage for the bullet. In other words, she turns "the wrong end of the gun," which comes to be used in the novel as a metaphor to turning violence inwards. Two young boys in the field witness this scene and retell it in flawed and delayed ways. When August comes to pick up Roses, the townsfolk gather against Potter, believing that he was the cause of the incident. For a time, there was nothing Roses could do wrong. Then they started wondering if she was the one who had turned the wrong end of the gun on herself. They started feeling guilty for what they had done to Potter for her sake. They started talking against her. This is how violence is transcribed in the narrative as a social, and not just a personal, phenomenon. It is also what mainly lies behind the town's silence. This event has the town's folks realize their role in the perpetuation of

violence, and this makes them resentful towards Roses. Her subjectivity is twofold: herself, composed of loss, anger, and the memory of trauma that forgets what it cannot bare to remember, and her story(ies), composed and shared by others, though denied to her.

Loralie comes from a place of dispossession. Contrarily to Maddie, Loralie's sense of shape of the death that inhabits her is very clear to her: "Inside of her, this thing is as precise in its dimensions as any object. Perhaps it is as round as an orange and lodged just under her ribs. She is careful of this object because it is dead. Not like a bird, but like the sound of a dead thing falling to the dead earth" (*H* 123). Like O'Connor, her knowledge of her abjection protects her from being engulfed by it. Before coming to De'ath Sound, she lived with Wade Stay, an abusive boyfriend who disfigured her inner-thighs and her sex. The memory of Stay pursues her relentlessly and has all beds she lies in seem like his. She is accustomed to violence, but the harsh kind that knocks unconscious. The violence in De'ath greatly disturbs her because it is always threatening, and never concludes in one straight blow. Loralie comes to long for this blow, the only release she sees possible from the pervading violence of De'ath.

Contrarily to Roses, Loralie is not a smart woman. She lacks the subtlety to understand metaphors and idiomatic expressions. On the other hand, her literal interpretations of these tend to alter language, changing meaning into something new. She is rather corporeal in the sense that her understanding of the world and her memory of it tend to come from her body. Inversely, her body works in the narrative as a soothing space that can "wipe the mind clean" (*H* 78), offering a sense of oblivion to the men of De'ath Sound, yet herself never finding such oblivion or redemption. As a prostitute, she and her body are subjected to the laws and desires of men, but in a strange way they do not affect her.

"You've got the feet of a whore," Mike the Pike once told her, admiring them, and with a certainty that was surprising. Eyes half-closed, she considered turning to him, to show him where the quality of a whore lay, in the turn of her lip, the anger that would move her to clench his hair in a gesture as cold as a dollar bill. A gesture that would have had about as much to do with Loralie as

her fingernail clippings, a glass of water forgotten by her bedside, or the Pike, after he'd paid his bill. But she'd just laughed [...].  
(H 60)

For Loralie, words and actions do not register as the same. Instead, words in particular affect her, their signifieds isolated from the context of sentences. Her words of dispossession: hunger, fatigue, loss, train, bus stop, and stop. These are the words that haunt her, the only ones she understands when language confounds her. The words that vilify her are: cunt, slut, and whore. The words "I am a whore" she at times repeats to herself until they become senseless, dissipating their meaning. Whereas the deeds in the quotidian become abstracted from meaning, these words, used by others to designate her, express her failed sense of self.

There are two seemingly contradictory aspects to Roses and Loralie's relationship: Roses' cruelty towards Loralie, illustrated when she binds Loralie to a chair, causing her seizure which leads to her biting off of the tip of her tongue, and the lesbian relations they sometimes have in the mornings when Roses slips into Loralie's bed once August has left it. Yet their relationship is multi-faceted, which makes the cruelty and love between them blur into each other, hence blur into a relationship that is indefinable.

When August puts Loralie out of the hotel and she awakes in the yard, she knocks on the door and screams for him to let her in, but she doesn't think to turn the knob. She eventually gives up and settles for sleep in a wicker chair. When Roses comes home and sees that Loralie "hadn't thought to try" (H 36) the door, she gets frustrated over Loralie's complete lack of initiative. "Loralie couldn't tell the difference between a locked door and a closed one. No better than a dog, Roses thinks. This morning she'll wake caged and smell the coffee" (H 37). Roses decides to teach her a lesson. She binds and gags her, physically establishing Loralie's entrapment. The seizure and the mutilation were not expected. This brutal gesture has the reader ask the same question as Bat: "Why?" Yet since the accident Loralie's hand flutters over her mouth when she laughs, as if she were happy. If the sweet of blood had left her when she was with Stay, her loss of salt



allows her not to taste blood, the taste of violence. Though Roses “didn’t mean a thing by it” (*H* 46), this apparent act of cruelty is actually a strange gift, from one victim of violence to another. “Roses has loved a scar right into Loralie’s mouth” (*H* 51). Likewise, when Roses stages her skinned rabbit scene so that Billy Loach and his son Junior may face the violence they inflict on women, she does this following Loralie’s shameful avowal that “He looked between my legs as though it was something a dog chewed up” (*H* 53). Her resolve to teach them a lesson stems both from her disdain of men of the sort and a sense of revenging Loralie. Strangely, these two women, who share the same lover, are bound by an unspoken complicity rather than rivalry.

As for their early morning love-making, it is special to both women because together in Loralie’s bed they find a safe haven, a place that is calm and securing. Her bed is compared to a cloud where violence is forgotten:

Loralie’s hands brush the inside of her thighs, scored as the surface of the moon, an awful aching want to her. The scars were larger and more careless the deeper into her you got, it seemed. Loralie’s fingers flicker over minute pocks, and sliding in, muscled walls contract to shape this broken place. The ribboned flesh swelling to her crescent touch, and the illusion, as it swelled, soft and vicious wet, that there were no scars at all. So long as it was Roses and Loralie alone in the bed, and Roses’ hands were warming into her, Loralie believed it. Then Roses withdrew and the flesh flagged once more under the touch of Stay, so that in the place where memory was lodged, Loralie found nothing but tissue damage. (*H* 113)

Loralie describes their love-making as not-love, a feeling made manifest by its lack of feeling, or lack of a violent feeling which has come to be known as love. This not-love has the same effect on her that a violent blow would have: it allows her to be in a state of consciousness far from violence, where she can sleep. This not-love is where they find solace.

Instead of being characters that exist in opposition, within a binary rapport defining one against the other, Roses and Lorelie exist in a multitude of reflections of one off the other. They are not rivals yet not accomplices. They are not friends, nor family, nor lovers. They are shared narratives of violence that fold

one into the other, which “creates the possibility of movement *together* in the face of what is now either to be understood as a common condition, or in its shared telling, remade into a communal condition” (AS 2). This is especially apparent during the folding of the sheets scene. This scene is repeated twice in the novel at the beginning of the sections pertaining to the retelling of either character’s traumatic past. It is precisely the conflicting relationship that exists between the two that gives them strength in the face of the violent world in which they live. This multiplicity is disconcerting for the reader but necessary to give the confusing impression of the intractability of violence and its just as intractable modes of defence.

Of all of Stone’s characters, August is the one that best evades stereotyping. On the one side, he is portrayed as an incestuous father figure to Roses, a wheeler-dealer gambler who makes Loralie his girlfriend only to pimp her. He arrives in De’ath Sound to set a floor in the Inn to dance on. He is a man’s man who specializes in skinning rabbits and making barrel whiskey. Yet this perspective of him is problematic. First, his affair with Roses is only ever remembered by her. The novel is written in such a way that their incestuous relationship is revealed through Roses and her desire for him. In the scenes where they actually figure together, their rapport seems more like one of friendship or mentor/teenager. Also, her desire for August never blinds her to his relationships with the other women of the narrative. In a way, she blames August for not giving Maddie the emotional environment she needed and for putting her away in an institution. She is also somewhat irritated with the way he treats Loralie, like a consolation prize once Maddie is gone. Roses’ desire for him does not dovetail her other feelings towards him, which greatly complicates a reader’s interpretation of their relationship. As for August’s attitude towards Roses, he comes off as a caring if somewhat inappropriate father figure who might not realize Roses’ sensual interpretations of his tales of skinning her like a rabbit, and who always seems happy when she has a boyfriend her own age.

On the other hand, August is also portrayed a very sensitive man, someone who, unlike the townsfolk, can see beyond Potter’s deformities and perceives the

softness in him. He is a man of little words, but never in a malicious way. In their intimacy, he is kind to Loralie. Even Bat, who envies the affection Roses has for him, finds comfort in his company. As corrupt and offensive as he might be, his character shows much tenderness. The plurality of the relationships he shares with the other characters destabilizes any binary notion of male/abuser versus female/victim. All the characters in Hush challenge in some way the concepts of dichotomy within narratives: protagonist/antagonist, good/evil, and abuser/victim. This plurality is a factor that confounds readers and heightens the novel's sense of ambiguity, for how can readers establish an idea of a character if they keep evading definition? These characters and their relationships to one another form a fluid mass, a movement that cannot be grasped, and in this quality of motion, it spells out the workings of violence in a society and of abjection in a text.

Nightwood's final chapter, "The Possessed," is most likely the aspect of the novel that has drawn the most ink and created the most controversy. In it, Robin goes down on all fours and performs a type of play-dance with Nora's dog in the chapel on Nora's American estate. The usual interpretation is that by the end of the novel Robin gives into her bestial nature, becoming the beast she is. Diane Chisholm suggests that Robin indeed "goes down," but she does so to such a point that she ends up below Nora's dog, "devolving into a species of the lowest moral order" (185). In Refiguring Modernism, Scott puts forward the idea that it is a religious ritual involved with healing. Many critics have described this last scene as sexual, an interpretation Barnes had herself deplored. Hank O'Neil reports in a journal entry dated October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1978, Barnes commenting the ending:

She then became very upset because of the way some people interpret this part of the book. People say Robin is making love to the dog. This is nonsense. There was nothing like that in her mind when she wrote the scene. In fact, it was taken from an actual scene she once observed: a lady named Fitz was drunk as a hoot and crawling around on all fours and her dog, Buffy, was running around her, growling and barking. She talked about how animals get all worked up when they see their masters in an unusual state. She then spoke about how animals feel, how people feel, and how their reactions to certain situations are based on

“things they really don’t recall but simply know from long, long ago, like the way children really like to see the wolf in bed in ‘The Little Red Riding Hood.’” (Broe 353)

This quote is interesting because not only does Barnes refute the sexual connotation of the ending, she also hints to the fleeting memory of the pre-nominal object, the domain of abjection.

This last scene is perverse, “obscene and touching” (N 170). It is beyond sexual, and ultimately more bothersome than a sexual act would be, whether bestial or not. It is more of a communion. This dance between Robin and the dog tells of an unspoken language that is understood in their racial memory,<sup>19</sup> but to which we the reader have no access. This scene is bothersome because it evades common sense. This chapter exemplifies the fundamental lack of language. Defiantly, Nightwood’s conclusion crumbles into meaninglessness. Contrarily to most endings, Nightwood’s offers no redemption, no solution, or no conclusion as we have come to understand them. The reader has no hold because the narrative does not offer a language to hold on to. The reader slips into meaninglessness, into a freefall of *jouissance*.

Hush’s ending begins with Roses’ first attempt to leave the hotel by finding a job in a factory. This integration fails and ultimately leads to her firing and then to her rape by several men outside a bar. Roses knows she could have avoided the rape. She knows these men would have turned on the ex-boss if she had played her silence well. She could have won their sympathy. But she could not swallow her anger, and it is her anger as well as all the stories they have heard about her that attract them. It leads them on. Violence feeds violence like fire feeds fire.

Roses’ rape scene is the first and only depiction of physical violence while it is being enacted on the body. Roses’ thoughts during the rape are that “if she

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<sup>19</sup> Barnes uses the term “racial memory” in reference to human races. I am applying it, for lack of a better term, to denote species’ memory, hence human versus animal. Robin and the dog have a common racial memory because of their animalness. It is a memory that not only originates in the pre-verbal, but also exists and is communicated in the non-verbal. It is therefore a pre-verbal memory that never finds its way into language; its articulation is always and forever an impossibility, as is the human’s knowledge of it.

could just catch her breath, she could get her head around it” (*H* 132), trying to make sense of violence as it is being played out on her body. The rape takes place within the time of a Patsy Kline song, yet her senses are confused and the scene expands in such a way that muddles actual time.

And with Patsy singing so loud she can only see their lips moving, can't hear what they say. No, she is deaf. There is her, and Patsy singing, and she'd be moving her lips to the song, maybe, but for the pull at the roots of her hair, his fist coiled in her hair and pulling her at him, like that. But that's okay, she says. She's just wishing she'd worn the dress she'd worn for Junior, the one that skins her open that way, so that she could shame them gone.  
(*H* 132-33)

The strength of this scene lies in the depiction of physical violence and the mental process of the one being subjected to it, trying to make sense of something that is, ultimately, incomprehensible. It exemplifies the chasm between the body and the mind, and the tricks the mind plays to protect itself from the violence that scars and bruises the body.

After the rape, Roses recalls a love affair she had the year before with Sol. The relationship was doomed because “It wasn’t just how she’d turned the wrong end of the gun by then either, so much as how she’d been, just been, all over” (*H* 144). When Sol hears her stories and confronts her, asking her for the truth, she evades answering because words fail her as narratives do. She only realizes after her rape that “He’d been begging her, just begging her to say it. Make up any old story for him [...]. A simple story, from A to B” (*H* 145). Roses realizes that she could have changed her fate if only she had given in to telling the “truth,” any truth. Basically, to annul the stories said about her by making up her own. But she didn’t know how to defend herself with stories. And as Roses wonders if she can outlive the violence at De’ath, obstinate to stay in the town, the reader realizes that Sol represents our hero(ine)’s possible happy ending. The end of the narrative not only confuses normative narrative causality by having the main character raped, but also annihilates any perspective of a resolution because the possible happy ending is expropriated from Roses before the narrative even begins, or

before the reader reads the novel's first page. The happy ending has never been an alternative.

Loralie is the character for whom we would expect a negative end because she is a prostitute, and so portrays the moral weakness or downfall of society, and because she is not intelligent, so not mentally capable of finding her way out of a difficult situation. Yet she is the one to escape De'ath. However, as she packs she keeps falling asleep. Her departure is unsatisfying because it is done lethargically and without conviction. Her escape is done with little persuasion and serves no resolution. Basically she leaves, and we do not know why. The reader finishes this novel wondering how such endings could befall the two main characters. Both Roses' and Loralie's lack of resolution confounds narrative causality and reader expectations. By doing so, this ending illustrates the erraticism of events and the fundamental lack of meaning; and with these crumble all sense of purpose because we know that Roses' existence will continue as a receptacle of violence, accumulating it through her defiance of it, and that Loralie's will forever be one of dispossession. Unless, of course, we are to understand in the last lines of the novel Loralie's intention of killing herself. In such a case, life driving her towards death, her dispossession would be complete and Hush would end with a death sentence.

J. Hillis Miller writes in his work on narrative that, "in fictions we order or reorder the givens of experience. We give experience a form and a meaning, a linear order with a shapely beginning, middle, end, and central theme. The human capacity to tell stories is one way men and women collectively build a significant and orderly world around themselves" (69). Yet the question can be raised whether order actually exists in the world around us. If not, the linear plot might try to establish order to give us a sense of direction, but the non-linear plot better demonstrates the reality of human experience. When I asked Stone why she does not write linearly she quickly replied, "Because I don't think linearly."<sup>20</sup> Her novel is involved with the search and use of tools to protect oneself from violence, any tool that can be unearthed in childhood memories, skewed

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<sup>20</sup> Personal interview, August 20th 2004.

rationalization or ill advice, basically any tool that can offer any sense of protection. Barnes articulates in Nightwood through the structure of her narrative the psychic state of any broken-heart: after the fact of the break-up, the one who mourns is caught in a mental deadlock until some kind of sense can be made of the experience and the rupture can be accepted.

Kannestine seconds Joseph Frank when he says that Nightwood's narrative is exposed to the reader as cross-references of images and symbols that are found spatially throughout the novel (95), stating that the difficult passages render the action subordinate to sensation and reflection. Therefore the sheer difficulty of the text helps create its sensation of spatial time. Furthermore, Smith considers Nightwood "beside itself" because it narrates something other than its basic narrative. This is also true of Hush. This other to the narrative is a narrative that is understood *elsewhere* than the mind, beyond it. It is the abject that evades language but is nonetheless very much present in the novel, a second narrative that acts as counterpart to the one that is written. The affect of the abject cannot be understood, only felt. And though both novels are invested differently with abjection and express it differently, not only in the poetical workings of the writing but also in their narrative structure and their character construction, they have in common a writerly approach to texts, a desire to show reality with language and the ability to express abjection. Both these novels are grounded in loss, which reflects the initial loss of all beings and the subsequent realization that language and meaning are absent, trying to communicate the uncommunicatable: the abject, the non-narrative.

Chapter 4  
Analysis of Themes



The abject narrative explores the primal repression, the being's origin that always occurs in loss. As we have seen, this loss is articulated in Nightwood by the characters', especially Nora's, loss of Robin, who represents the initial abject-object. In Hush, Roses' lost object is Love, her dead Siamese twin who's womb remains in her belly. As demonstrated by Nora's internalization of Robin through the psychic workings of melancholy and Roses' psychical (as alter-ego) and physical internalization of Love, the abject-objects constitute the very being of these subjects, or characters. As these characters attract, push away and collapse on their abject-object, they are expressing the violence of mourning these non-objects that have always already been lost. This violence is conveyed through the language of poetry, the narrative that negates itself and a thematic of suffering-horror. This chapter explore several significant themes that relate abjection to Nightwood and Hush.

The loss of the original object is, for the abject, always unknowable because the object inhabits the pre-nominal. That is why Nora, who claims that there is something evil in her that loves degradation and that "Everything we can't bear in this world, some day we find in one person, and love it all at once" (*N* 135), exits the narrative talking. We (and O'Connor) know that she will talk on compulsively trying to divine what she can never possibly know. As for Roses, the unknow-ability of the object has her forget her dreams, and the mornings she forgets have her throw up this abject-object with her coffee, her "spill of love" (*H* 54), rejecting what she cannot swallow. Yet Love implies more to the narrative of Hush than only Roses' non-object, and for this reason she is worth looking into a little more.

As Roses' lost object, Love is described as having one day sealed herself up into Roses' belly and disappeared. "But as her memory slowly atrophied, Roses woke with the urge to slam fists into Love, over and over again. And then that was gone and she awoke forgetting a dream, though the dream itself hovered over her; the wings of Love, angry and flying" (*H* 97). Love represents "a dream she [Roses] once had, for an instant" (*H* 97), hence the pre-nominal object that leaves a slight feeling of remembrance but is forever forgotten. The fear of losing

more of her memory has Roses desperately repeat what she alone knows as true. Yet before forgetting Love, which occurs in the narrative shortly after the time Maddie leaves Roses in Potter's field, Roses pictures Love as a thread trailing from her belly with beads on it. The beads represent bits of stories, or details of life. Love has the ability to append events outside of it/her, trailing behind her instead of incorporating them like Roses does. Contrarily to Roses, Love would not turn anger inwards. In this way it/she is opposite to Roses and becomes a sort of ideal alter-ego. "Love wouldn't have deserved an unkind word, a slap, wouldn't have deserved anything of the harshness of Roses' world" (H 94). It is Love's thread "fat with scraps and debris it swept from Roses' mind" (H 94) that has allowed Roses to "keep it all together." Love, by appending events from Roses' life to the thread and having them exist outside of Roses, has enabled young Roses to deal with the violence that surrounds her. This is how violence and trauma are registered by Roses, as either on a thread trailing behind her or locked in her mind. But at the same time, by being an ideal alter-ego, hence an ideal daughter and better person, Love poses a threat to Roses. This threat is the annihilation of Roses' world as she knows it, this violence and anger to which she is accustomed. This has Roses also describe Love as a monsterhead, a class VIII parasitic terata, something that haunts her and invades her. Roses "would have ripped Love from her belly" (H 94) before losing her world to it/her. But Love had not thought of it because it/she "liked Roses. It/she possessed her, but it/she also gave her dreams" (H 94). This alter-ego is described as having a will of its own that can be at odds with the ego it overshadows, as if Roses had a double-personality.

The personification of Love in the narrative is very nebulous. It/she is portrayed as a thread, a membranous sac, a monster, a dream fluttering above Roses and as "the hole that was her sister" (H 91). The "hole" is a recurring theme throughout the narrative, both in its narrative structure and as a topic that concerns all the women of the narrative. Loralie interprets holes as men's inborn urge; they are born seeking to open holes and to fill them, and the best of men are those who can open and fill holes at once. She presumed that men invented prostitutes so

that they may compensate for the misplaced things they swallowed when they were children in the effort of filling their hole that started at their mouth. Maddie warns Roses when she leaves her at Potter's to "remember everything in this world except his hands, which will fill the hole you've failed to stumble on" (*H* 67). These holes represent lack, and by remembering such lack they become want. August makes them manifest in Maddie and Roses. Loralie is used as compensation of holes. Love personifies it as a haunting entity that dictates desire and makes life both bearable and repugnant. These holes house the pre-nominal, the abject. The entity of Love cannot be clearly defined because the abject cannot be known, which explains the plurality and sometimes oppositional nature of her descriptions. The reader comes to know it/her as an ambiguous entity, one that is present even if we are not sure how or why. Reading Love is reading the border of language that evades narrative. Just as the end of Nightwood brings the reader where language cannot go, Love articulates holes in the narrative where meaning disintegrates. Its/her presence is read like gaps scattered throughout the narrative, as tokens of *jouissance*.

Kristeva cites vomit, refuse and corpses as physical examples of abjection, and though she does not relate these precisely to abject literature, it is interesting to note their existence in these novels. For example, Roses vomits when she cannot remember the dream she had the night before. Her body physically and violently expulses the abject-object. Her dream brings her close to it, her awakening pushes it away and her body rejects it through the act of vomiting. This reflex is also triggered when she is being raped. Like anger, what Roses cannot swallow, she throws up. Catherine Whitley finds a relation between excrement and the construction of self and history in Nightwood. She states that the process of rejecting the excremental, rendering it external and Other to ourselves, and which is essentially a vital part of life, exemplifies the being's process of construction through the inclusion of some matter and the exclusion of other. Likewise, the formation of identity is based on what we include and what we exclude, what we decide we are and are not. According to her, Barnes would be using excremental elements in her text to show that identity may include what

is considered exterior and strange (93). And while Jane Marcus claims that Nightwood is filled with references to bird droppings (especially in relation to Jenny, I would add), the most prevalent physical example of abjection in both novels is the corpse.

Many of Nightwood's characters are inscribed with death. In addition to the novel beginning with the death of Felix's parents, Felix chose his apartment because a Bourbon died in it. His valet and cook were hired on account of their looking like deceased members of royalty. Nora says of O'Connor that he knows "what none of us know until we are dead. You [O'Connor] were dead in the beginning" (*N* 152). Jenny is "born at the point of death" (*N* 98) and Robin has "eaten death returning" (*N* 37). In addition to dreaming of death and burials, Nora, who when with Robin lived with the intolerable fear of her dying, internalizes Robin after their break-up so that they may be, in the death of their relationship, inseparable. She tells O'Connor that she and Robin "love each other like death" (*N* 139) and that she can only find Robin in her sleep and in Robin's death, that "In death Robin would belong to her. Death went with them, together and alone" (*N* 58). O'Connor goes so far as to tell Nora that "we all carry with us the house of death, the skeleton" (*N* 130), implying that death is found within all of them. Yet the theme of the corpse goes even further in Nighwood than in the description of characters and relationships. The corpse infiltrates other levels of the text.

Robin's identity is manifold. The chapter that introduces her in the novel is "La Somnambule," the sleepwalker. Sleepwalking is defined as the automatic movement and gestures of the body while asleep that are not remembered when awake. Marcus mentions that the original meaning of somnambulism implies hypnotism (241), a condition wherein the subject is in a different state of consciousness yet not bound by the usual lethargy of sleep. Sleepwalking is done in a different state, a different level of consciousness in which the sleepwalker, though living, is unaware of life. This duality of living yet not being aware of life likens the sleepwalker to the walking corpse, the resuscitated body that moves but does not know life because it is beyond it. Herein lies the complete abjectness of Robin's being: as the somnambule, the walking-corpse, Robin not only defies the

border of life (by being a corpse) but also defies the border of death (by retaining the movement of the living). As Whitley writes, “Instead of arriving at an overall conception of Robin’s personality, the reader is left with a generalized impression of disease, decay, and submersion, of unconsciousness and unhealth” (91) This decay and disease is all the more loathsome because its ability to move gives it the ability to move towards you. It poses the potential threat of death that, in its gesture towards you, cannot be rejected. It emblemizes the abjection that is potentially invading, against which the subject (be it character or reader) is powerless.

Another symbol of death and the corpse in Nightwood is the doll. Nora tells O’Connor that “We give death to a child when we give it a doll — it’s the effigy and the shroud; when a woman gives it to a woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane” (*N* 142). The doll therefore represents the product of the barren lesbian relationship. Yet if Robin is Nora’s non-object, the doll likewise represents the product of the sterile subject-ject relationship. Materially speaking, a doll is a figure that is not adult or child, but some sort of mix between the two. It is not a stunted growth because it does not look like a baby that is fixed in time. It is a miniature human. In its reduction of the human lies its ambiguity, and its monstrosity. It is what could never have grown because it is beyond time, beyond any sense of chronology attributed to growth. It is non-growth for which any idea of growth is futile because growth evades it. To give death in a doll is to give what cannot flourish. It represents the atrophy of the relationship. That the product of their relationship be an effigy, that it be death incarnate, demonstrates their futile effort to create a symbol of their life together out of death, a process that ultimately makes manifest the abjectness of their relationship. Just like a real child is the mixture of its two parents, this death-doll is the result of their bonding, and abjection not being a creative force, it only creates more death. In this way, the baby of their relationship is a corpse.

Images of the corpse also abound in Hush. Though they do not perceive themselves as living-dead, both Loralie and Roses are inhabited by some form of death. For Roses, this is Love and her twin’s womb that remains inside her. For

Loralie this is the shape that is lodged in her chest, dead like a dead thing falling to the dead earth. Corpses particularly plague Maddie, what with the visitation of Bathhouse's revenant and the whispers of the dead that her madness has her hear. Further to these, the novel retells a significant event where Roses evidently uses the symbol of the corpse to reveal violence played out on the female body.

After Loralie admits to Roses that Billy Loach had looked between her legs "as though it was something a dog chewed up" (*H* 53), Roses decides to stage an event that will show him what he makes of women. She uses herself to embody his disparaging opinion of the female body. She imagines that his son, Junior, is more of the same so includes him in her plan. She knows that Tuesday nights are the nights Billy Senior comes to spend some time with Loralie. His son, whose bedroom window is opposite Roses', will be studying for a mid-term, attentively sitting at his desk and spying on her. Her plan is to prostitute herself to Junior with the goal of having him pay not so much for sex with her, but for the opportunity to witness the effect such violence has on the female body. She does this by wearing a dress that opens down the front. When their intercourse is finished and Junior moves away from her, Roses lays on her bed, as if blind, with her dress partly opened. She does not cover herself. Instead, she just lays there, partly exposed and looking like a "half-skinned rabbit" (*H* 65): like a corpse. Roses' pose is at first successful: it scares Junior. For him, the whole situation becomes ambiguous. He does not know what to make of her. He cannot comprehend why she stays like that, without looking at or speaking to him. By eclipsing herself in such a way, Roses succeeds in establishing a sense of the eerie malaise that accompanies the presence of the corpse, of the abject.

Billy, on hearing his son's voice on his way up to Loralie's room, stops in front of Roses' door. When Junior opens the door, planning on leaving because he does not have enough money, father and son confront each other. With the door open, Billy can see Roses-in-the-rabbit-skin, but he is not affected by her exposure. Instead, he reverts to his son, seeing him as an image of innocence lost. This situation has him reflect on the deterioration of his own family bliss. Instead of perceiving himself as a perpetrator of violence, he sees the result of this

violence as a negative and exterior reality that threatens his stability and happiness. Basically, he rejects the object. Roses' display has the unwanted effect of reinforcing Billy's hypocrisy about his own implication in perpetrating violence.

As for Junior, he asks his father for the money and then returns in the room to finish his transaction, closing the door behind him because he feels it is somehow wrong for others to see Roses in such a state, and feels somewhat protective of her. To be civil, and to act as if the matter is as common and usual as dining out or getting a haircut, he leaves her a tip for her services. Looking at her now, he wants her to acknowledge the tip, this money that serves to alleviate the violence of their exchange and render it banal. But she still does not move. He becomes unnerved and backs away. He starts wondering if she laid like that, like a corpse, while he entered her, as if his passage over her was completely insignificant to her. "Maybe he has been screwing a blind, half-skinned rabbit, not Roses. Roses slipped away and left the half-skinned corpse on the bed. Nobody can know this but Junior" (*H* 66). Junior at first feels guilty about what he has done until he realizes that it is what *he has done*, and not what has been done to him. He is the subject, the actor, the instigator. This role, the one of "the real man," gives him a new sense of pride. It redeems him from any act of violence he may possibly have committed. "After all, it is not something she is doing to him, but something he has done to her, already. A thousand times" (*H* 67). When he leaves the room he feels much better about himself and leaves the door open so that all may see what he has done.

Roses aims to portray herself as a dead half-skinned rabbit in order to demonstrate the violence caused by men's disrespect for and denigration of the female body. By portraying herself as half-skinned, she increases the morbidity of the image because it implies that her carcass is the result of a job left unfinished. A rabbit completely skinned suggests that its meat is separated from the skin for a purpose: the meat may be eaten and the hide may be used for its leather. It suggests that the process of death is completed for the purpose of rejuvenating life, and the utility of death decreases its morbidity. A half-skinned carcass has no

use; its meat and its skin become soiled and wasted. It represents a bloodied mess, slaughtered for the purpose of slaughtering. A half-skinned rabbit demonstrates the unaccountability of violence.

Roses' scheme is clever, if rather self-abusive. To depict herself as the corpse of a half-skinned rabbit is indeed a morbid and disturbing way to demonstrate the abuse of violence. Unfortunately, she fails to consider all the reactions that result from the abjectness of the corpse. She does create a sense of the uncanny, but the unease this generates causes an extreme reaction in both Billy and Junior: that of rejection. Sensing themselves invaded by the abject, their reaction is to push it away. This gesture, this motion of "not I," renders the abject object external and restores their imagined legitimacy of their own sense of Self. Billy and Junior may walk away. They may return home and sleep soundly, safe from the recognition of their true agency. Roses, on the other hand, is left dreaming-in-her-rabbit-skin, in the corpse she embodies as the symbol of the violence that forever surrounds her. As the Other pushed away, she is again the abject vessel of the violence of others. Her lesson is ineffective. It only serves to worsen her lot.

As seen in chapter one, abjection confronts us on a personal and a social level. The personal level entails the subject's first efforts to separate from the maternal. Both Nightwood and Hush articulate through their main character, Nora and Roses, the attempts at separation from this securing yet oppressive relationship. In Hush, Roses attempts are signalled by the way she defies the violence that is (mainly) the result of Maddie's abjection, trying to escape it by out-smarting it. She does this by positioning herself in conflicting situations, such as when she shows herself as a half-skinned rabbit to Billy and Junior, or when she insolently replies to a co-worker's query implying that she is white trash. Roses' goal is either to use herself as a mirror so that the violence she lives in reflects off of her, or merely to separate and differentiate herself from Maddie's world, hence the external world. Unfortunately for Roses, her attempts usually backfire. The violence she tries to reflect is aimed back towards her, making her over and over again the receptacle of violence. What more, Roses is aware of this.



When August tells her, “Look at yourself, Roses, you ain’t got it in you to stay,” she thinks to herself, “He had it backwards” (*H* 32). In other words, Roses knows that the violence that surrounds her will not let her go. She knows that she does not have it outside of her to leave. In the end she resolves on staying in De’ath with the comforts of swish whiskey and the new motto, “Whatever gets you through the night” (*H* 146).

This effort of separation is made a bit peculiar in Nightwood for two reasons. The first is that in her relationship with Robin, Nora is the one depicted as the mother figure. We know this by how Nora perceives Robin as an overgrown child, and how O’Connor tells her, “You, who should have had a thousand children and Robin, who should have been all of them” (*N* 101). Yet their symbiotic relationship, made clear by its lesbian nature, blurs the lines between mother and daughter. Nora tells O’Connor that “a woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own. If she is taken you cry that you have been robbed of yourself” (*N* 143). Their lesbian relationship has it that both Nora and Robin may be mother, as both may be daughter – one role not excluding the other.<sup>21</sup> The second reason is that Nora, holding on to her object through the psychic workings of melancholy, does not wish to let go of Robin. Before Nora exits the narrative she tells O’Connor that “Robin should have put me down. In that bed we would have forgotten our lives in the extremity of memory, moulted our parts, as figures in the waxworks are moulted down to their story, so we would have broken down to our love” (*N* 158). Nora is obstinate in reliving her past to the point of finding solutions to what could have been. Unlike Roses who is unable to separate herself for external reasons, Nora is unwilling (and arguably unable) for internal reasons.

The societal level on which abjection confronts us is concerned with the territory where the human and the animal border each other. This duality is an important theme in both novels. The animal is especially made salient in Nightwood in relation to the beast, particularly with regards to Robin. The

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<sup>21</sup> With that in mind, and though in no way requisite for this thesis, it may be interesting to look at the psychical effects of this bodily separation from the mother’s point of view. How can having a “piece of you” detach itself, in effort and in pain, affect the mother’s psychic life?

negative connotation attributed to the word beast has been deplored by Barnes. She once wrote to Emily Coleman that her connotation of beast was not necessarily negative and that “she regretted the ‘debased meaning now put on that nice word beast’” (B.K. Scott 102). The Webster's Dictionary offers three definitions of the word beast. They are: 1) A four footed mammal as distinguished from the human being; 2) A contemptible person; 3) Something formidably difficult to control or deal with. I would suggest that Barnes had all three definitions in mind when using the word beast and that generally speaking the beast should be understood as that which does not comprehend prohibition. This is especially how Robin, the beast-turning-human, should be understood.

Before Robin appears in the narrative, the term beast is used twice in the chapter “Bow Down.” The first time it is used in relation to Jews as the beasts of Christianity (*N* 2). The second time when referring to circus folk and their “beast life” (*N* 11). The beast is later described as a simple being that does not think, and it is by its simplicity that it comes to harm others (*N* 131). This term is employed to designate not only Robin but also others who do not live in accordance with Western dictates, or in other words, those who are misunderstood by the ones who make the latter edicts. Dana Seitler lists in her article “Down on All Fours” quotes from Nightwood that serve to identify all of its main characters as, in a way, beastly (50). Though I agree to an extent with the idea that all characters are made to incorporate both the human and the animal, I oppose her idea that all characters are “in a state of bestial devolution” (50).<sup>22</sup> That each character be part animal

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<sup>22</sup> Seitler also confuses the terms “bow down” with “go down,” considering them synonymous to promote her idea of every characters’ devolution. Georgette Fleischer relates the position of “bow down” to that of animals on all fours, whereas humans have risen to the two-legged upright position. She quotes Freud when he remarks that humans “have recoiled from the genitals’ position inter *urinas et faeces*, developing a disgust that must be overcome in the sexual act” (419). The upright stature would be that of humans and of pride and the one on all fours would be that of animals and all they imply (sex, humility to the components of nature and one’s bestial nature). Bonnie Kime Scott states in the second volume of her Refiguring Modernism that to bow down is for Barnes a “gesture of recovery” (100). But the action to bow down is also one of humility, lowliness and self-abasement. It shows respect to authority and to the higher power. As for “go down,” it has a very different signified than all those above. Barnes commented in a letter to Wolfgang Hildesheimer that the chapter name “Go Down Matthew” “refers to the song ‘Go down Moses, Let My People Go’” (Broe 205). This song retells the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt after the Lord had instructed Moses to go down to the pharaoh and tell him to let the Lord’s people go. This song was also used by African-American slaves in the nineteenth century

simply underlines the fact that the human is, essentially, an animal, and that for centuries the human has tried to separate himself from any identification with his bestial nature. This reality demonstrates the confrontational element of the border between human and animal. I agree with Bonnie Kime Scott when she writes that Barnes “constructs a blurred middle ground between the bestial and the human, disrupting these categories and the very practice of categorization” (73). By transcribing this border into each of her characters, Barnes is inscribing them with the abject. Furthermore, I think that Barnes writes her characters with different degrees of bestial-ness, as well as different relationships to their own dual nature. The way she measures these elements in her characters gives them shape and distinction one from the other. And though every character can be analyzed in opposition to another, the main distinction, hence the main conflict, between the animal and the human, as well as nature/culture or body/language, is brought to the fore in Robin and Nora.

Robin as beast turning human (*N* 37) is human so far as her human form accounts for it. She is beast by nature; it is her racial memory. O'Connor says of her that she is “outside the ‘human type’—a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain” (*N* 146). As a beast, she is unaware of human history (so cannot determine the difference between “good” and “bad” art) and does not share the moral values or ideals of the society in which she lives. She knows no prohibition. Kannenstine writes that she “embodies a state of being both beyond but before good and evil” (116-17). This both attracts her lovers and ultimately hurts them. They seek in her the “odour of memory” (*N* 118) that is about her, attracted to this freedom of a time before language which she represents. Yet her nature defies all that they know as humanity. In other words, she cannot be tamed. Nora, on the other hand, is described as an early Christian who believes in the Word. Her dialogues with Dr. O'Connor are textual proof that Nora is a woman of the human world: the world of the Word, of the day. Robin,

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as a code song for the underground railway. Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who helped free many others from slavery, has often been referred to as the Moses of her people. The name of this chapter then appears to refer to O'Connor as Moses, sent to Nora's apartment to free her from the weight of the memory of Robin, which he ultimately fails to do.

as previously mentioned, is an almost completely silent figure.<sup>23</sup> Robin's lack of speech in comparison to Nora's is an important aspect of their identity and the nature of their relationship. Nora speaks, writes and believes in the Word. She has a relationship to language, the civilized mode of communication, whereas Robin, the beast and pre-nominal object, exists before language, hence has none. Furthermore, when Whitley writes that "animals are typically thought of in terms of biological sex and not gender, since they do not develop gendered identities through a process of socialization" (87), she is indicating Robin's identity as beast-turning-human as not only incorporating a struggle between the dual notion of beast/human, but also that she transcends gender and its dichotomy. Robin is a hybrid being. Her identity is non-fixed. She is a creature of the night, living in shadows where all things are blurred by darkness and are never as they appear. Making Robin a beast allows Barnes to address the pre-nominal, to personify it (as Love does in Hush). Both the beast and the pre-nominal refer to a place beyond memory. Both defy humanity. Both are the abject.

A similar opposition to the one between Nora and Robin is found in Hush between Roses and Loralie. Both Nora and Roses are depicted as smart women who can manipulate language (already at the age of twelve Roses plays making anagrams), though by the end of both novels language fails them. Loralie speaks much more than Robin does, but language seems incomprehensible to her. She understands it in small bits. Her vocabulary is usually limited to single words, short phrases, or sentences she has heard others say, like a child's formulaic speech. Both women are kept by a series of lovers, Robin as an animal, Loralie as a victim. They are also both nomadic. Robin roams the night and countryside and Loralie goes from one town to another carrying a globe in her suitcase. However, this opposition differs greatly with regards to the border between the human and the animal. Instead of portraying one character as beast/nature, Hush inscribes

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<sup>23</sup> She hisses at Nora when she is drunk (*N* 143); she speaks to a prostitute (*N* 144); and she guesses Jenny's actions (*N* 71). Barnes told James B. Scott, her first biographer, while discussing a reading and recording of Nightwood (which never occurred) that "she would not have let Robin say 'anything at all' if she had that to do over again" (Broe 343).

both main characters with animal attributes, which has them both confront the reader with abjection.

Loralie is written in relation to dogs. There is an innocence about her that likens her to man's best friend. She, like dogs, understands the world through non-verbal body language or the intonation of speech. Textual references to this relation include her tongue with the tip bit off as flat as a dog's; the reference to her sex looking like something a dog chewed up; and the curtains of hung dogs that line the walls of her interior space. The latter relation is especially important because it describes her mental shelter. These hanging dogs, though dead and though a morbid image, protect her mind from the external world when she is unable to cope with it. Roses vomits what she cannot swallow, Loralie shuts it out, dividing herself from it by closing herself into her soft fur-coated room. Loralie is also crazy about going to the zoo to watch caged animals. Watching animals in a zoo can have the effect of her appreciating her own freedom. Or, it can be a way of distracting herself from the bars of the cage that surround her. Either way, the zoo is a place where she can physically be alone and reflect, as best she can, on the words that torment her. It is a place where language is of little consequence, so where she can think through the words that have consequence for her.

Roses is spoken of in relation to rabbits. This rapport begins when she is a girl and can skin a rabbit in a minute flat. At that time, the rabbit hutch is a place where she goes to hide, her place of shelter. Following the incident at Potter's field, Roses not only forgets how to skin rabbits, her mind goes blank, overwhelmed by an empty feeling, whenever August is out gutting rabbits for the stew. The act of skinning rabbits becomes a hole in her memory and comes to represent the trauma she lived through, hence a place in her mind and memory where her conscious self cannot go. This analogy explains the importance which the image of rabbits, whether skinned or not, has for Roses. It explains why she sees herself as a half-skinned rabbit, and not some other animal, when she exposes herself to Junior and Billy. When she dreams of Potter she dreams him in the hutch, having killed all the rabbits and having moved in, "offering his bones

up for the stew" (*H* 101), which is an image of his sacrificing himself for her. The analogy also explains her sympathy for them. When they are let loose in the yard, she does not have the heart to pick them up and put them back in the hutch. Instead, she watches them as they eventually find their way back, not seeking to escape because they are accustomed to their servility. "Roses knows there is something wrong in the way they line up for the slaughter, returning to the nest in the cage, its straw belly hollow as a scarecrow's" (*H* 52). Yet Roses is like them, staying at the hotel instead of leaving town, lining herself up for a lifetime of torture. Roses, like the rabbits, through denial finds the unavoidable tolerable.

The most disturbing analogy of Roses and rabbits is the terrible sensuality she sees in their skinning, her skinning, as if it were a game of seduction. This is made manifest when August recounts, after she asks him to, how he would skin her. As he describes the steps he would take, Roses, disheveled with drink and desire, holds herself to avoid falling into "some empty space just under the sky" (*H* 31). She enjoys this "fairy tale telling" (*H* 31). Meanwhile, it strikes the reader as an incestuous ritual of his consumption of her. This scene is disturbing for two reasons, the first being its incestuous overtone. J. Hillis Miller writes that, "Since the taboo against incest is absolutely universal, in the sense that there are no human cultures without it, it is natural to the human species, not cultural. On the other hand, it is a distinguishing feature of human, as against animal, societies, so it must be defined as cultural" (73). This means that though the taboo of incest is disturbing, it is essentially indefinable. Also, August is a father-figure, but not her father, therefore on what grounds do we call it incest? At the same time, Roses is the one who expresses desire, and not so much August. In Hush, the definition of incest and its performers exist as unfocused conceptions, which causes the reader unsettling ambiguity. Second, their game of seduction is expressed through the retelling of a violent and gruesome act, to skin alive, that only the most sadistic could possibly enjoy. It joins the morbidity of death (and killing) to the sensuality of the body (and pleasure): the corpse to desire. Theirs is a repugnant rapport where the body becomes a wound, and where the very act of being lacerated becomes an expression of desire. Their rapport affronts the reader not only

because it conveys many levels of ambiguity, but also because desire is expressed as suffering, as a crying-out from deep under the skin; it is desire soused in abjection.

For Roses, the image of the spray of blood always expresses sensuality, whether it be from the wound of Loralie's tongue as she licks the tip of August's penis (*H* 58), or a rabbit's bloody spoor across the snow:

Then August laid hold of the mallet, and she'd cut her eyes long and slow, until the mallet was laid on the bench, matted with fine white hairs, and it was still. So terribly still. But not before it'd laid a bloody spoor across the thin layer of snow. Roses retraces this spoor, reads in it a desire so strong it clutches her by the throat. Desire for what? (*H* 16)

If this desire is unknown to Roses it is because it exists in a part of her memory that is forbidden to her, the part associated with her trauma that her mind needs to forget for her to survive, for her to keep "holding it in her somehow" (*H* 78). This trauma originates in Potter's field when Roses turned the wrong end of the gun, when she kneeled before Potter in preparation for her shooting. She takes in with disappointment the bullet passing over her head to lodge itself into a rabbit, creating a hole in its flesh. She then runs to it and skins it. Roses' last skinning and the images of holes in flesh like extra mouths to the body occur during her coveted yet failed execution. Roses' unquenched desire portrayed in the spray of blood is her desire for death. As Nora holds on to death by making a fossil of Robin, Roses holds onto it by burying it deep in her memory where it can be sensed but not divined. Both Roses and Nora, caught in the night of their abjection, hold a love of death dearer than all else. This love is symptomatic of their psychic workings, Nora by her compulsive repeating and replaying of her relationship with Robin, and Roses by her rejection of such a desire; not being able to voice it, it manifests itself in acts of violence, in the spilling of blood. Yet this love is also sublimated, allowing Nora to live on with her idea of the highest form of love and Roses, once Love has disappeared inside of her, the ability to abstract herself from the exterior violence that surrounds her.

Barnes and Stone both use complex imagery that accumulates on a vertical scale, creating skyscrapers of meaning in their layering. Yet these images do not always add up or specify each other, and do not necessarily inform the reader. On the contrary, they most often confound the reader. Their writing is formed with “discontinuous images which seem to digress from rather than clarify a point” (Whitley 89). These splits, contradictions and discontinuities serve the writing by expressing yet veiling the abjection that lies within. Their rhizomes of signifieds propel the reader into a dark universe of black holes, loopholes and blindingly dazzling stars. These novels seize their readers by the beauty of the poetry of their writing as well as their expression of a horror and a suffering that is all too human, and all too easy to locate somewhere inside oneself. All these pull the reader into their abjection, which in turn seduces the reader, and repulses her.



## Conclusion

Abject literature is more than perverse or disturbing. It articulates the being's search of origin, the primal repression, wherein the subject (the author and, by extension, the reader) finds herself in a relationship with the lost object (the abject-object, or the non-narrative) that continually pulls them apart, crashes them into the other and has them contaminate each other. The affect of the abject is the result of this constant movement of rejection, attraction and disease. Like a type of seasickness, the subject finds herself in an endless state of ambiguity and unease, the symptom of the abject that is bearable only through the sublime, the *jouissance*, that always co-exists with the abject. Abjection is expressed in texts on various levels. Most importantly, the abject text has a rhetoric and a stylistic intensity akin to poetry. Language is made strange by the corruption of syntax and by a particular use of lexis, be it the excess of Barnes's text, or the restraint and repetition that characterize Stone's style. Moreover, abjection is expressed by the corruption of the laws of narrative. It disturbs reader expectations by twisting the plot, sometimes in such a way that one wonders if there even is one, and by altering narrative causality in a disturbing way. The theme of the abject text is that of suffering and horror, the crying out of the being in search of the lost object, which can be expressed by a number of topics.

Throughout Nightwood, Barnes makes freaks into humans and humans into beasts; she makes her reader dizzy with O'Connor's excessive and sometimes senseless speech; she exposes her narrative in a mixture of descriptive narrations, dialogues, monologues, retellings and lies. She pays no respect to linearity, to rhythmic regularity or chapter length. She hides her topic behind layers and layers of words. Nightwood's language seems to exist for the sole purpose of existing. It can be likened to an elaborate armour that sports on the outside the flourish of beautiful patterns only to better conceal its purpose, to protect what hides in its shell. The novel protects its interiority, never allowing the reader to fully enter.

In Hush, Stone punctures her narrative at almost every level. Her sentences are fragmented and constructed in such a way that the reader is always stumbling over them while trying to divine their meaning. Her narrative is also scattered and splintered. Linearity is corrupted to such an extent that the reader

often feels lost in the narrative, wondering where the plot is while making out only bits of stories. And her characters are linked together in the most taboo and tender of ways, which creates complex and ambiguous rapports that are difficult to conceive. The novel's greatest writing device is to articulate itself in absence, an absence of words, cohesion and causality. This extreme economy serves to sketch all that is silenced for fear of insulting some sense of propriety. Yet it is the very silence and ever process of silencing that bears witness to the violence in which this narrative is implicated, and that cries-out from it. As O'Connor would say, "We wash away our sense of sin, and what does that bath secure us? Sin, shinning bright and hard" (*N* 89).

The undertones of Barnes's and Stone's poetic language imply that language is itself a flawed system of referents that cannot adequately and never completely portray an individual or a story. This quality of their language is in line with the abject text that cries out the original unknown. It expresses the fundamental lack that is language and that is meaning, which derives from language. To express this lack, this abjection, these authors revert to a different mode of writing, a stylistics and mode of story-telling that corrupts the laws of narrative with the use of fragments, layers, repetitions, silences, and impressions. Both authors offer a night world of "possibilities not limited by linear logic of day, world(s) which require(s) a matching prose of flexibility and dreamlike openness that can convey ideas and sensations usually censored by rationality" (Whitley 85). A rational and linear narrative, stable characters and a language that does not indulge in the lavishness of poetry would not have properly translated their stories. Involved with more than plots and stories, theirs is a performative writing that enables the abject to be expressed.

It is in the effort to understand the strong reactions certain experimental works of fiction cause in their readers that I have delved into the psychoanalytical theories of abjection. I am aware that to elaborate a theory of abject literature, the seeds of which have been sowed by Kristeva and in whose tradition I work, poses as many (if not more) questions than it answers. For example, if Barnes's and Stone's novels are both considered experimental and abject due to how they

manipulate language and narrative, does that mean all experimental works are abject? Second, if one of the primary ways of expressing abjection in writing is by means of the poetry of language, should all poetry then be considered abject? In other words, is the expression of abjection always irrevocably linked to the making strange of language? And, are there levels of abjection? Can one abject text be more abject than another, making abjectness a quantifiable quality? Furthermore, if innovative texts of the past went a step ahead using poetic and confounding language, can these be considered abject? Surely texts have always encompassed horror and the sublime.

Though my impulsive answer to the first question would be to say no, that experimental and abject texts are not all one and the same, I have as yet not sufficiently explored other experimental works to be able to firmly voice my “no.” Much more study would need to be done on the topic. Indeed, to properly answer any of these questions would involve not only the study of many innovative and experimental texts, but also the type of effect these texts have had on their readers from the time of publication to today. To properly answer these questions would involve a far greater amount of work that exceeds, I am afraid, the requirements of this thesis.

That being said, I do wish to propose an answer to the last question regarding the historicity of abject literature. I do not believe that abjection is new to human nature; but I do believe that the modes of understanding its effect and of expressing it with the written word are. Following Kristeva’s theories, our way of perceiving abjection is irrevocably linked to the way we define it as an unstable psychic state based on a precipitated, therefore faulty, primal repression. In other words, our understanding of abjection is defined in psychoanalytical terms. Kristeva writes that the deject is on a journey during the night, “the end of which keeps receding” (*PH* 8), this night being everything we do not know, the darkness of the unconscious or preconscious, the origin of the human being that is within. I would argue that human beings have always been suspicious of the existence of such a night. What differs are the words we use to understand it. The religious texts of Western Literature also serve to explain the unexplainable, the darkness

that exists before and after human life. Yet where religious texts speak of the night of the soul, we now speak of the night of the psyche. Psychoanalysis was invented at the turn of the twentieth century. It entered our world at the same time as the Modernists, who started experimenting with language, making it other and making it new. Is it not normal that our texts, the way we construct narratives, should be a reflection of the ideas that influence the construction of our personal narratives? Therefore, where religious texts engender allegory, modern texts engender experimental writing. As defined by and according to Kristeva, abject literature is a twentieth century phenomenon. I tend to second this statement not only because the twentieth century has offered us psychoanalysis, a more precise language by which to understand abjection, but also, and more importantly, because it is during the latter century that writing changed in such a way that one could write the expression of the subject, and not just her portrait.

One last question begs to be asked: “Why read abject texts if they are so difficult and repulsive?” To this I answer that if scholars and readers enjoy trying to make sense of the abject novel, it is precisely because it permits them to remain in a land of *jouissance* and to explore their personal holes. As Victoria L. Smith eloquently put it, “What Barnes discovers suggests that finding a speech for loss converts loss into gain” (203). Hence reading abjection would be an effort to identify and then reclaim one’s own loss, and by doing so to transform it into gain, into a personal reward.

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