MORBID VITALISM: SPINOZA, DECADENCE, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF DEATH IN DJUNA BARNES'S *NIGHTWOOD*

In 1936, after a ~~long,~~ difficult period of revising~~ion~~ and rewriting, Djuna Barnes published *Nightwood*, her second novel. Its experimental prose style, marked by the pseudo-philosophical digressions of ~~its central character,~~ the cross-dressing~~, former priest and~~ unlicensed~~illegal~~ obstetrician Dr. Matthew O'Connor, continues to divide readers. While some read O'Connor's exaggerated performance of despair as a parody of high modernist idioms, others see in his monologues a healing impulse~~benevolence and eagerness to heal his interlocutors~~ that constitutes the emotional core of the novel. To different readers, he is alternately earnest and facetious, melancholic and manic, fearful and hopeful. In this article, I will argue that these conflicting ways of understanding O'Connor's monologues can be ~~explained and~~ reconciled and their ethical-political implications uncovered if we understand him as a decadent figure whose performance of negative affects expresses Barnes's engagement with the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. Though the fact that Barnes read Spinoza while she was rewriting late drafts of *Nightwood* has received scant~~almost no~~ critical attention~~; however,~~ I contend that we will have misunderstood the specificity and complexity of Barnes's decadence until we account for Spinoza's influence on ~~Barnes's writing of~~ *Nightwood* in general and ~~of Dr.~~ on O'Connor in particular. Though *Nightwood* has long been recognized as a decadent novel for its deployment and ~~occasional~~ subversion of the themes of social, personal, racial, and religious decline, the meaning of this decadence has been contested, with some taking *Nightwood*'s decadence as an expression of existential uncertainty and intermediacy (Kannenstine; Blyn), and others seeing in it the stylistic counterpart of Barnes's anarchic resistance to institutional forces and mastery (Danzer; Caselli).~~ritics *Nightwood*'s decadence alternately as a~~For some critics,

~~decadence names *Nightwood*'s performance of an kind of modernist intermediate subjectivity unmoored from static constructions of personality and defined by a liberating sense of existential uncertainty (Kannenstine; Blyn); for others, it is the stylistic expression of Barnes's nihilism and her anarchic distaste for institutions, mastery, and authorities (Danzer; Caselli). Contrary to these readings,~~ My reading, though, focuses on ~~I argue that what appears to be~~ *Nightwood*'s ~~paradigmatically modernist sense of pessimism and fragmented subjectivity is in fact a~~ unique approach to impersonality and death; I argue that Barnes offers an~~, and an~~ affective revision of decadence that her reading of Spinoza makes possible~~.is made possible by herBarnes's reading of Spinoza's philosophy of life~~. This approach, which I term "morbid vitalism," encompasses several elements: a subjectivity that is not merely fragmented or disordered, but ~~which is in fact~~ an impersonal *milieu* of relations without a center, determined by the interactions of external forces; a conviction that death is immanent to life and that the~~is~~ impersonal subject~~ivity~~ is defined~~always engaged~~ by the process of its own dying; an implicit critique of binary oppositions between the affective structures of optimism and pessimism; and, finally, a conviction that these oppositions ~~hope-fear binary~~ can only be avoided by a subject that affirms and performs its ~~own~~ status as a decadent entity, something constituted by its own failure, its own gradual dying. *Nightwood* uses the rhetoric of pessimism to non-pessimistic ends, challenges us to think about life and death as non-contradictory, and suggests we are both too fearful of death and too hopeful of escaping it when we imagine life and death as separate domains.

If we understand *Nightwood*'s appropriation of Spinoza in the context of decadence, the novel becomes legible as an intervention in one of the cultural impasses that developed in the interwar period, particularly in the United States, between two competing sets of discourses about modern life and death, one literary and pessimistic, and one popular and optimistic. Kristin

Mahoney has recently attributed to decadence a "rebellious spirit of critique" that provided decadent writers with "a model of enthusiasm that remained at the same time skeptical and apart, which, in its immunity to unthinking loyalties or allegiances, retained the capacity for clear perception."[1] It is this critical spirit that allows *Nightwood* to draw upon, and yet distinguish itself from, two sets of discourses that seem rooted in opposite affects. The first of these are the high literary and artistic discourses exemplified by modernists such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, who inherited and adapted the pessimism of the decadent tradition. Indeed, Vincent Sherry~~typically literary culture whose exemplars were such arch-modernists as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. It was often self-consciously elitist, deeply pessimistic, informed by the traumas of the Great War. Barnes herself owed much to this high modernism, which Vincent Sherry~~ has recently argued that this modernism is~~constitutes~~ nothing less than a "reinvention" of decadent attitudes and aesthetics, marked by~~the primary markers of which are~~ a sense of the present as a time of decadent "aftermath" ~~perpetuation of the decadent temporality of "aftermath"~~ and a self-consciousness of the printed word as a dead remnant~~ or "shadow"~~ of language.[2] ~~While the affective tenor of this "aftermath"temporality of aftermath is often pessimistic,~~ Sherry has argued that Eliot, Pound, and others discovered in this aftermath~~it~~ an ironic sense of novelty that could be inhabited "not with despair necessarily but neither with hope" (*MRD*, 27). One of the effects of Barnes's exposure to Spinoza, I argue, is that she understands this middle position not merely as a source of novelty, but also of affective power, so that in *Nightwood*, decadence, death, and failure are genuine modes of life, ineluctable modes of self-constitution~~is that it led her to understand decadence, death, and failure as constitutive of, and immanent to, life itself~~see ~~decadence and death as generalized and immanent conditions of life itself, not merely of the present historical moment~~. Using Spinoza, Barnes develops a decadent approach to

impersonality that bears little resemblance to Eliot's familiar ideal of the impersonal writer who ~~thatn affective approach to decadence thatthinks the temporality of aftermath, that we are ever living through a time in which we have already begun to decline, in terms of an impersonality that bears little resemblance to the more familiar ElioticEliot's ideal of the impersonal writer who~~ rejects the narcissism of overt emotionality~~emotional self-expressionexpressions of "personal" emotion~~; rather, Barnes produces an impersonal subject, ~~'s impersonal subject is an affective economy,~~ a floating bundle of emotions~~,~~ defined by its struggle—and often, by its failure—~~—~~to inhabit the~~that~~ volatile affective ground between despair and hope~~ that Sherry identifies as part of the decadent inheritance of high modernism~~.[3] The second set of discourses that shaped~~contributes to~~ Barnes's decadence manifested itself in the broadly optimistic perspectives of occultism, spiritualism, and popular medical science after the *fin de siècle*~~planning between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the Great War, which were often championed by medical officials speaking to a mass audience under the auspices of organizations such as the American Public Health Association~~. *Nightwood* acknowledges and mocks aspects of these optimistic discourses through the parodic doctor figure ~~Matthew~~ O'Connor, whose dark worldview initially appears to be the opposite of the medical optimism of the period; however, while Ina Danzer has noted how Barnes uses the pose~~figures and attitudes~~ of decadence "to give expression to her radical nihilism and profound pessimism,"[4] I argue~~believe~~ that *Nightwood* suggests ~~that~~ the binary of optimism and pessimism is not only untenable, but ~~positively~~ harmful, and strives instead to reconceive of life and death as indissociable expressions of a single living power~~two different expressions of a single vital order~~. ~~*Nightwood* uses the rhetoric of pessimism to non-pessimistic ends, and. By figuring sickness and decay as strictly inseparable from the processes of life itself, *Nightwood* challenges~~

us to think about life and death as non-contradictory. By figuring sickness and decay as strictly inseparable from the processes of life itself, *Nightwood*Ultimately, it suggests that we are both too fearful of death and too hopeful of escaping italtogether too timid, too fearful of death on the one hand, and too hopeful of escaping it on the other, when we imagine life and death as separate domainsbeing essentially and absolutely separate.

O'Connor is theThe key figure to understanding *Nightwood*'s morbid vitalism. is O'Connor, whosemorbid vitalism of *Nightwood* is most legible if we read Dr. O'Connor's His frantic, pseudo-philosophical ramblings function asas an ironic revisions of aspects of Spinoza's rationalism, with which Barnes encounteredbecame acquainted in 1935 as she revised O'Connor's role in the novel. The connection between Barnes and Spinoza has to my knowledge, thise Spinoza connection has been noted only by Phillip Herring, Barnes's biographer, and then only in passing.[5] Despite the well-attested importancesignificance of Spinoza's thought to philosophers of the modernist perioda number of philosophers of the modernist period like, from Henri Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead, to Samuel Alexander, and George Santayana, the question of hisSpinoza's impact on modernist literature has only recently been seriously investigated seriously, thanks in large part to the influence of Gilles Deleuze, for whom Spinozahe was a philosophical guiding light. A small number of While Deleuze-inspired critics such as have forayed into examining Spinoza's significance amongst the modernists, including Anthony Uhlmann, Garin Dowd, and Derek Ryan have examined modernist literature through Spinoza, ; however, it is telling that almost all most of this critical attention—welcome though it is—has beenis paid to a small band of writers who were perennial favourites of Deleuze: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Virginia Woolf.[6] Though these critics are responsible for much valuable work, tThis coincidence inadvertently suggests that The

~~inadvertent suggestion that arises from this picture of the current scholarship is that~~ Spinoza is relevant to modernism only insofar as Deleuze is~~,~~. and~~And~~ yet, Spinoza's reach extended beyond those writers who most frequently earned Deleuze's ~~seal of~~ approval.[7] ~~Though Deleuze admittedly inflects my own interpretation of Spinoza as a philosopher of immanence,~~ Much Spinoza-inspired scholarship also tends to under-emphasize the role of "negative" affects, given the prominence of joy in Spinoza's system; however, attending to Spinoza's insights into fear, for example, allows us to understand more clearly how ~~bring him, and~~ *Nightwood* revels in affects of despair without becoming a truly despairing or nihilistic novel, as it is often thought to be~~, into dialogue with queer theory's recent debates about failure and negativity. I think it necessary to take Barnes's and others' give writers like Barnes their due, to take seriously their engagements with Spinoza seriously,and his philosophy, whether or not there is a precedent for this attention in Deleuze's workthey have been vouched for or given precedent in Deleuze's writings. Indeed, sSuch a reading allows us to see~~ O'Connor's monologues will thus appear as more than examples of melancholic struggling before~~the rambling speech of a melancholic struggling with an~~ incomprehensible loss[8] or attempts at composing an identity ~~the attempt to solidify an identity~~ in the face of contingency~~, knowing all the while that it can only ever be contingent and inadequate~~;[9] instead, they~~we can see, alternatively, that they~~ functionare attempts ~~to~~ collapse the distance between life and death (and, with it, success and failure) without subsuming one into the other—in short, O'Connor allows us to think of death in vitalistic terms. ~~to see both as elements of a single process of organization and disorganization—in short, to think of death in vitalistic terms.~~

Between Hope and Fear: The Contexts of *Nightwood*'s Decadence~~ of *Nightwood*~~

~~**The Best of Times and the Worst of Times: Modern Hopes and Fears**~~

~~Though it is a truism to say that modernism is informed by European and American experiences during the Great War, Barnes does not write in its shadow in the same sense as many of her contemporaries.~~ In order to see how Barnes deploys decadence to~~'s develops decadent sensibilities~~ problematize~~into a morbid vitalism that problematizes the~~ binaries like~~y of~~ hope and fear, life and death, we must~~it is necessary to~~ understand how the cultural memories of~~she combines the cultural memories of~~ the~~y of the~~ Great War and its aftermath inform her use of~~and the Spanish flu pandemic with the~~draws on the memories of the Great War, as well as the the decadent imagery of decay, sickness, degeneration, and madness~~ in her novel~~. Many writers who lived through the Great War ~~(~~and the pandemic of "Spanish" flu that followed~~)~~ expressed a sense that modern life had become increasingly pervaded by death~~pervasive and often deeply pessimistic sense that modern life had become increasingly deathly~~deathly~~, even hellish~~. Alan Warren Friedman and Pearl James have written on the haunting resonance of the Great War in the modernism of Woolf, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and others, and its part in shaping modernist pessimism. For example, Friedman contends in *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* that this modernism often conceals the presence of death behind circular, self-reflexive formal and narrative devices, while James observes in *The New Death: American Modernism and World War I* that even modernist works that have little to say explicitly about the Great War nevertheless express its influence as a traumatized silence or representational absence indicative of a "new death," whose qualitative intensity and quantitative scale were newly felt after the Great War.[10] The work from which James draws her title, a 1918 religious meditation by Winifred Kirkland, announces a sense of death's immanence in its opening pages, declaring that "[t]o-day no one can escape the constant presence […] of dissolution. The most casual concerns flash forth at unexpected moments in startling focus against the present holocaust of

ruin."[11] Many Anglo-American modernists felt compelled to register this new intensity of death; one of the speakers of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for instance, observes and remarks that~~For many Anglo-American modernists, this new death would have to be recognized, and reconciled with, anew, as in works like. One of the speakers in Eliot's *The Waste Land* , where a speaker remarks that~~~~that~~registers this feeling, remarking that "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many."[12] Others felt the urgency of imbuing death with new recuperative meanings, or of finding in it an indication of how to proceed into the future, as Pound attempts in his portrayal of Odysseus's journey into the underworld, his sacrifice of blood to the ghosts of the dead, and his conversation with the blind seer Tiresias in "Canto I."[13] While ~~both~~ *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*, like *Nightwood*, attempt to transform our affective responses to the thought of death, they nevertheless hold out a hope for redemption—however faint—that ~~I contend~~ is alien to Barnes, who seeks an affective power proper to the experience of hopelessness.~~out a~~does not attempt to convert fear into hope, but both into a fearless, hopeless source of affective power.

Though *Nightwood* was ~~not~~ published ~~until~~ some eighteen years after the Great War~~, and the Spanish flu,~~ its fixation on ~~images of~~ death~~, and sickness,~~ and negative affect preserves the trace~~s~~ of th~~ese~~ cultural trauma, particularly in the character of Felix Volkbein, who ~~s and their aftermath. Barnes~~ ~~was already considering the culture of wartime during her journalistic career in New York City, had already written about the Great War during her career as a freelance journalist in New York City, where she wrote about touring the city with servicemen during the war, but~~ ~~veral servicemen. In *Nightwood*, Barnes~~~~she looks back on the war's affective aftermath, particularly through~~cultural aftermath of the war. The ~~character of Felix Volkbein is defined by a life of aftermath, mired in a reality long since shattered by the war; he~~fixation on the war-time

past is central to Felix Volkbein, who proudly Tthe character of Felix Volkbein, who lives in this mode of aftermath, proudly defines himself by his ultimately spurious according to his family's supposed descent from the Austro-Hungarian aristocracy. The novel emphasizesreminds us of Felix's attachment to this lineagethese spurious dynastic ties for ironic effect, since it isthey are doubly meaningless in the aftermath of the Great War, which dissolved the aristocratic order from which he claims descentand the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy in Austria. In one of Dr. O'Connor's earliest appearances in the novel, he reminisces with Felix aboutreplies to Felix, who asks if he has ever been to Vienna, that he remembers scenes of Austrian schoolboys sitting in the sun, "facts of history glimmering in their minds like sunlight, soon to be lost, soon to be forgotten, degraded into proof,." invoking the [14] This sceneThough he is nominally commenting on the way that youth dissolves into old age, the doctor also invokes the post-war trope of youthful innocence soon to be corrupted by wartimeor destroyed by experience, is often applied to the youths of the pre-war period who would march off to their deaths after 1914. When Felix responds to the doctor that he "was not thinking of [Vienna's] young boys, but of its military superiority," we are to understand the irony that this "superiority" had been brokendecisively disproven in 1918, and that the lives of boys like these had been the cost of that defeat, and that Felix's sense of self depends on these pale remembrances of war-dashed prestige (*NW*, 21).

The other context informingsource of *Nightwood*'s morbid vitalism is also shaped by its engagement with the hallmark decadent themes of sickness and degeneration, bodily and mental decay, and degeneration, which Barnes uses to elaborate the different ways that her characters constitute themselves in time as decadent subjects. Early in the novel, O'Connor declares that "There's something missing and whole about the Baron Felix—damned from the waist up" (*NW*, 29). It is Felix's desperate self-identification with the pre-war aristocracy of Old Europe that

both damns him and makes him whole, for he has no sense of self without it, though it~~yet this~~ consigns him to a life of literal and figurative genuflection toward a patriarchal social order.~~and political order that is, for most intents and purposes, dead or defunct. Further,More than that, though,~~ O'Connor suggests that aristocracy is ultimately degenerate,~~becomes, in the last instance, a form of degeneracy,~~ warning~~and warns~~ Felix, who hopes for a son to carry on his lineage, that "The last muscle of aristocracy is madness" (*NW,* 44).~~ Though Felix is not yet at this extreme, t~~The aristocracy that Felix's~~she~~ veneration~~venerates~~ represents the least vital mode of decadence~~a modevariety of decadence that must be avoided~~: an attempt to deny death altogether by retreating from a present of decay and failure~~decayed present~~ into the glories and successes~~supposed glories~~ of an undying past. Lest we confuse Felix's decadence with the morbid vitalism that O'Connor exemplifies, the doctor~~, connoisseur of lies that he is,~~ deflates ~~and summarizes~~ Felix's patriarchal~~family~~ pretensions, declaring that nobles are only "the few that the many have lied about well and long enough to make them deathless. So you must have a son" (*NW,* 43). While Felix aims to transcend his own inevitable, individual death in order to perpetuate a false deathlessness through his son, O'Connor insists that it is the universal, immanent death that poses the greatest challenge to the subject, not the death of anyone in particular; thus, O'Connor advises Felix that "No man needs curing of his individual sickness; his universal malady is what he should look to" (*NW*, 35). Robin constitutes herself temporally in the opposite manner~~Sickness is also the theme through which Barnes develops Robin as a decadent character. We are told that her face is that "of an incurable yet to be stricken with its malady," that she is stamped with a doom that has thus far been deferred (*NW,* 45). This line echoes O'Connor's earlier advice to Felix that. We might read this latter passage as a comment on the distinction between Felix's and O'Connor's modes of decadence: where Felix aims to~~

~~cure his own individual death and to become deathless through his son, O'Connor insists that it is the universal, immanent death that poses the greatest challenge to the subject, not the death of anyone in particular; thus, O'Connor advises Felix that "No man needs curing of his individual sickness; his universal malady is what he should look to" (*NW*, 35).~~. While Felix's morbidity consists in dissolving the present into the past, Robin's denies all connection to past or future.~~But if Felix's decadence dissolves the present in the past, Robin's rejects any sense of past or future; She~~Robinshe~~ is "incurable" of the malady of death, but ~~which~~ shows no signs of being struck by it, as~~and~~ her.~~what O'Connor later calls "the eternal momentary" (*NW*, 135). Robin's~~ life is bound to a perpetual present that O'Connor later calls "the eternal momentary" (*NW*, 45, 135). This present, ~~Her present,~~ though, is~~but one that is also~~ like a perpetual death—she cannot sustain at any length a life amongst others, but is only the "infected carrier" of a past that exists for them, ~~but~~ though not for her (NW, 41). ~~This dynamic is literalized in~~ As I will argue shortly, Robin's pregnancy with Guido, her child by Felix, literalizes this dynamic. Whil~~e~~~~ere~~ Felix sees their son as the~~a source of~~ hope for extending his own aristocratic past into the future, Robin fears~~rejects Guido~~ and rejects this patriarchal, heterosexual vision of futurity altogether~~the futurity that he represents~~ (*NW*, 52-53). ~~But there is a radicalism in this act that invests Robin's relation to history with a disruptive potential that Felix's conservative reverence for the past lacks. What Robin denies is not just her child, but what Lee Edelman terms "reproductive futurity": the very ideological horizon of a heteronormative social order that names the Child, the future, as the source of absolute value, while rendering queerness unthinkable.[15] By rejecting her child, Robin also rejects her heterosexual union with Felix and the social compulsion to reproduce it; her denial represents an anarchic, de-compositional force that signifies the utmost morbidity and decadence to a social order that is definitively heteropatriarchal. Though Robin's~~

~~anti-social gesture is a necessary corrective to Felix's conservatism, it fails, as I will argue shortly, to produce what Edelman describes as something "better" that nevertheless promises nothing (NF 5). This is so not because she refuses to affirm an alternative future (a gesture that Edelman rightly argues only reinforces futurist imperatives), but because she progressively extinguishes the social relations that constitute her in the present, as present to others; thus, Robin's descent into a speechless, anonymous animality represents a shift of register from the anti-social to the asocial.~~ ~~braces what Sherry, channeling Lee Edelman, identifies as decadence's denial of reproductive futurity (*MRD*, 26).~~

Though high modernism's aestheticization of despair is perhaps the most familiar literary response to modern death~~the sense of death's omnipresence in modernity~~, there existed an array of loosely connected discourses ~~number of popular counter-discourses~~ that together offered accounts of death with starkly different affective valences.~~the hope that death could be transcended, ranging. These discourses rangedran the gamut~~ Of these, ~~discourses,~~ spiritualism and the discourse surrounding life expectancy are of particular relevance to *Nightwood*'s morbid vitalism. These discourses shared two important features, for all their other differences: they offered hope ~~and even promises~~ that death could be transcended by appealing~~, and they appealed~~ to ~~the authority of~~ the progress of modern scien~~tific knowledge to vouch for these promises~~ at a time when scientific and technological innovation seemed capable of overthrowing long-established assumptions about the limits of human power in the natural world. ~~Many p~~Proponents of spiritualism such as Henry Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney, and William Barrett regarded psychic phenomena like telepathy as being worthy of sustained scientific examination; other spiritualist inquiries looked to photography and radio waves to corroborate accounts of ghostly apparitions, mediumship, and communion with the dead~~, at the same time that other~~

~~spiritualists, for example, claimed that photographs could capture the ghostly images of the dead, or that radio waves could would one day provide a scientific explanations for accounts of telepathy, mediumship, and communion with the dead~~.[16] The common thread in these investigations was a certain hope that human inquiry could penetrate the mysteries of death, understand its workings, and even transcend the dividing line between the living and the dead. Perhaps the best example ~~fullest expression~~ of the ~~this~~ alliance of spiritualism, science, and hope ~~against death~~ was Frederic W. H. Myers, one-time president of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), who ~~famously~~ argued at the turn of the nineteenth century that ~~'s *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, published posthumously in 1903, which opens with a declaration that~~ the immortality of the soul could be proven by serious, open-minded scientific examination.[17] Spiritualism had particular appeal for thinkers who were unsatisfied with strictly empirical and positivist accounts of the natural world, such as ~~also appealed to the likes of~~ Bergson and William James, who both served terms as SPR president.[18] Another noteworthy devotee of spiritualism was ~~, and, notably,~~ Zadel Turner Barnes, Djuna's grandmother, who conducted séances to conjure the spirits of Franz Liszt, Chopin, and Beethoven, among others (*DFW*, 43). The younger Barnes recalls her grandmother's performance of the voices of the dead at these séances in letters to Emily Coleman; notably, these memories literalize the overlapping of life and death that Barnes would explore, albeit in complicated, often ironic terms, in *Nightwood* (*DFW*, 43).

While spiritualism became less respectable and lost much of its pseudo-scientific veneer after the Great War,[19] there was no decline in the popular appetite for hopeful narratives promising this deliverance from death, especially if the ~~yose narratives~~ could be packaged with the pedigree of modern science ~~, as Steven Cassedy has recently shown~~.[20] Indeed, the spiritualist

enthusiasm for phenomena that promised the transcendence of death by life found a distinct echo in scientific discourses on human life expectancy that became popular in the United States during the 1920s. Public figures and medical authorities like Dr. Stephen Smith, (co-founder of the American Public Health Association) (APHA), and Dr. Charles V. Chapin, (the Rhode Island superintendent of health), wrote and lectured widely in this period about the possibility of extending the human life-span so radically ason the possibility of radically extending human life expectancy, to produce a what Smith described in 1921 as aperhaps even to the point of arriving, as Smith declared in 1921, at a "Life that suggests immortality."[21] (quoted in Cassedy 2014, 5). It is indicative of fear'shope and fear's susceptibility to oscillation and reversal with hope that this utopian discourse could emerge with such confidence from a medical culture that had so recently endured the tremendous challenge of the pandemic of 1918-19, which killed as many as 675,000 Americans and infected up to a quarter of the entire population.[22] Like the spiritualists, Smith, Chapin, and others saw death primarily as something to be transcended, an inconvenient limitation of the human body that the rapid advances of modern science would overcome.dualism in which death was only life's antagonist, and thus something to be denied or overthrown. Paul Fairfield paraphrases the underlying logic of this denial: "If the thought of death, many now reason, does not promote happiness, it can only be counterproductive to life's singular purpose."[23] This logic, which animated a great deal of American medical thinking in the early twentieth century, is one that O'Connor challenges in *Nightwood*'s O'Connor challenges.

Although Barnes did not live in the United States for most of the 1920s, having been sent to Paris as a correspondent for *McCall's* magazine in 1921, she Barnes had first-hand experience in her journalistic career of the lengths to which modern science would go in order to deny the power of death. In 1914, she volunteered to be force-fed in order to write an article for *New York*

World Magazine about the ordeal of hunger-striking suffragettes who were then being subjected to the procedure in the United Kingdom. In her article, Barnes recounts the irresistible panic of being forced to decide between swallowing or choking, observing that "Science had at last, then, deprived us of the right to die."[24] Knowing that many suffragettes had ~~in fact~~ died of asphyxiation during similar force-feeding procedures that were nominally meant to save their lives, Barnes asks us to consider the paradox that "those white robes assumed for the work of prolonging life would then be no better than shrouds; the linen envelope encasing the defiant victim a winding sheet."[25] The paradoxical imperative animating this encounter with medico-scientific discourse was cognate with that which animated both the spiritualists and Smith and Chapin, albeit exaggerated to the point of absurdity~~She~~~~Barnes need not have known of Smith or Chapin, or the movements they represented, in order to identify the paradoxical imperative animating~~that animated ~~this encounter with much of the medical discourse of her day~~: deny the power of death at every opportunity, even at the cost of life.~~where life itself is the cost of that denial. There are thus two dominant attitudes toward death that~~

Nightwood echoes Spinoza's claim that hope and fear—and thus optimism and pessimism—share a single affective structure. Just as fear involves the hope that a frightening outcome will never occur, hope preserves the fear that what it hopes for will never be achieved.[26] This position precludes any belief that hope could be a solution to fear, particularly the fear of death. The only alternative to this vicious circle is to devise ways of practicing a mode of life that is without hope, but not without joy—failure without defeat, hopelessness without despondency. The novel~~*Nightwood*~~ scrutinizes ~~two attitudes toward death~~come under scrutiny in ~~*Nightwood*: that of a~~both the popular culture that saw~~ees~~ the alliance of spiritualism, medicine and modern science as a means of erasing death from life, and the~~that of a~~ high literary culture

that saw life as increasingly compromised by death. Though Sherry has recently shown how the modernism of Eliot, Pound, and others ~~is, in fact,~~ constituted ~~as~~ a transformation of such~~this~~ death-claimed life into a source of literary potency, ~~what~~ we also encounter in Barnes ~~is not only a radicalization of this attitude (it is not the present historical moment that is decadent, but life itself), but also~~ a conviction that decadence, ~~and~~ death, and failure must be understood as phenomena that belong to an economy of affects that exceeds any individual subject, and, moreover, that these experiences are intimately related to ~~as essentially affective states and processes that are, in the end, inseparable from~~ the circular affectivity of hope and fear ~~that~~ that Spinoza examines in his *Ethics*. *Nightwood* seeks neither to transcend death nor to surrender nihilistically to it~~the sense that modern life may be irredeemably deathly~~. Canonical high modernists like~~as~~ Pound and Eliot were not hopeless in the same manner, as the fear implicit in their works bears the sting ~~and disappointment~~ of a hope that one feels unjustified in maintaining. Barnes, having~~It is through her engagement with Spinoza that Barnes makes her singular contribution to modernism. Having~~ absorbed the rhetoric of despairing hopelessness, ~~which is really~~ both ~~a fear of dashed hopes and a~~the hope to dash fear, she transforms it~~, via O'Connor,~~ into a vitally hopeless performance of subjectivity that finds its only life in the~~its~~ gradual passage toward the inscrutable end of death~~slow passage toward the inscrutable end with which our hopes and fears are most fascinated~~.

Spinoza, Morbid Vitalism, and the Affective Problem of Death

~~In the section that follows, I will show that~~ *Nightwood* produces, via a critical deployment of Spinoza's philosophy, a meditation on the intertwining of life and death that is distinct from and opposed to both the pessimistic sense of life as a death-in-waiting~~living death~~ and the optimistic sense that death could~~may~~ be ~~definitively~~ eliminated from life. Perhaps

Spinoza's best-known comment on death is the~~his~~ maxim that "A free man [sic] thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death" (*E*, 355-56, IV.P69). ~~There are three observations to be made about this claim. Firstly,~~ Spinoza appears at~~on~~ first ~~read~~ to suggest~~be suggesting~~ that freedom can be gained only by denying the power of death—a position which would align him ~~definitively~~ with the optimistic, death-denying discourses which I have argued Barnes undermines. ~~Secondly, we must understand t~~The "free man" that he~~Spinoza~~ invokes, though, is not ~~as~~ an individual or autonomous agent,~~within the context of a philosophical system that sees the individual~~ but ~~as~~ a multitude of externally determined relations; thus~~, not as an autonomous center of agency~~, ~~and furthermore that~~ Spinoza's freedom is not a simple given that is there for the choosing, but must be produced within the hard limitations of the existence to which we are consigned. This approach to freedom must condition our understanding of Spinoza's seeming optimism. So, too, must his~~His~~~~Thirdly, Spinoza's seeming optimism—and his conception of freedom as a product, not a raw given—must be reframed in the context of his claim~~argument attitude that hope is never a true alternative to fear, but is always bound to it, and bound also to reproduce it. Thus, if I maintain that *Nightwood* is a Spinozist novel, I do not mean that it follows the overt letter of Spinoza's thinking, but rather that it ~~finds a way to~~ considers the affective problem of death in a way that could be arrived at from an attentive application of Spinoza's premises.~~from a perspective analogous to Spinoza's through the lens of these three observations.~~ While a simple reading of Spinoza might insist that we should refuse to think of death, *Nightwood* proclaims~~suggests~~ that we can think of nothing but, and moreover that to think joyfully of anything at all is first to wrestle with the problem that death is immanent to our lives, that all of our thinking is, in a sense, deathly. Spinoza and *Nightwood* alike understand the relation between life and death not as an opposition, but as what

Judith Butler calls a dynamic, constitutive "bind."[27] So, while *Nightwood*'s may initially seem to jar withinsistence on the immanence of death to life seems opposed to Spinoza's dictum that a free person thinks of death least of all things, it attempts to think the immanence of life and death in terms of this relational bind that cannot be undone or transcended, regardless of our hopes and fears to the contrary.actually arrives at this position through Spinoza's own senseargument that both the fear of death and the hope of transcending it stand in our way of living well and joyfully.

The analysis of hope and fear that Spinoza mounts in the *Ethics*, and the attitude toward death that it enables, depends on his understanding ofthe way that he understands the interaction between affects and the body, which in turn provides. This understanding provides Barnes with the resources for rethinking the literary subject as an impersonality—an embodied nexus of pre-personal affective relations— that is distinct from that advancedpromoted by Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." and elsewhere. For Spinoza, and, I argue, for Barnes, bodies are neither stable nor self-enclosed; they are not individuals, in the final analysis, but a practically infinite sets of relations between different vital powers of acting, thinking, feeling (*E*, 251-55, II.P13-14). Omri Moses has recently proposed a similarly vitalistic approach to affect as part of an effort to "repsychologize character and thus avoid approaching it in formalist terms—for example, as a matrix of symbolic functions, thematic significance, or narrative sequencing."[28] Moses undertakes a dissociation of flexible "character" from static "identity" that resonates with my invocation of Spinozan impersonality.[29] Nevertheless, Moses's psychology of affect, part of his broader concern to debunk the supposed anti-psychologism of modernist literature, does not quite capture the specificity of Barnes's Spinoza-inspired morbid vitalism. Where Moses's investigations offer a fluid or transitional psychology that sees affect as a tool for "navigating

circumstance," Spinoza's affect theory poses an ontology of relation, in which affect or feeling actually constitutes beings, bodies, capacities to act.[30] ~~Further still, the mind is nothing other than the idea of the body, and, by reversal, the body is only the material of the mind (*E*, 251-55, II.P13-14).~~ For Spinoza, freedom, knowledge, and affect are inseparable and depend on the interactions between ourselves (the singular relation of ~~the~~ qualities that constitute us) and others. There are two primary categories of affect: joys, which increase our powers to act, and sadnesses, which contract those powers.[31] The aim of a good life, per Spinoza, is to maximize experiences of joy and to minimize those of sadness (which we should be careful not to confuse for a simplistic imperative to consider only happy circumstances). ~~We should be careful, though, not to confuse this for a~~ When we experience joy, we are not simply acquiring abstract knowledge about another entity, ~~n~~or transcendent freedom from ~~any~~ constraint; we are discovering how our lives are constituted, perpetuated, ~~and~~ nourished, and bound together, in the sense of Butler's "bind," by entanglements with others. We discover, ~~we discover,~~ in effect, ~~if we follow Spinoza,~~ that our personalities are impersonal to us. The consequence of this scheme is that there is an element of the unforeseeable in Spinozist freedom. We can only stumble upon what is good; there is no means of deducing it *a priori*. ~~is no means of deducing *a priori* what is good; we can only stumble upon it.~~ Our freedom arises not from choosing which experiences to have and which to avoid, but rather from understanding what causes us joy. We are unfree in terms of what we experience and what we are, but ~~are~~ free in the sense that "[b]y understanding the causes of what we undergo, we […] appropriate to ourselves the status of determining cause."[32] ~~All rests, f~~For Spinoza, the distinction between bondage and freedom rests on a qualitative difference between passivity (being affected by causes that we are unable to understand~~identify clearly~~) and activity (understanding and embodying determinant

causesaffirming and understanding the causes that determine us). Freedom comes from understanding what types of encounters expand our powers of acting and which do not, provided that we read "understanding" as an activity that is not merely mental, but also bodily.

The complex relationship betweenis conception of mind, body, and affect informs Spinoza's conception of deathanalysis of the affective problem of death. Nothing more dramatically separates us from our powers of acting, nothing is sadder, heSpinoza suggests, than the thought of our own death, which forces us to imagine ourselves at the nadir of our powers of acting. It is . fFor this reason, that death is a source of fear, which Spinoza defines as "inconstant pain arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in some doubt" (*E*, 313, III.Def.Em13). We are generallyIn most cases, we are unable to know with certainty when we will die, and as long as we live, we cannot imagine what it would feel like not to feel, not to live. As Maurice Blanchot observesdeclares in *The Space of Literature*, "No one is sure of dying. No one doubts death, but no one can think of certain death except doubtfully."[33] When we are affected with fear, the object of uncertainty strikes us as something to be reviled, a cause of pain or sadness. Perhaps it is better to hold out hope, to imagine that after death will free uswe will be free from pain, or that we will be or restored unto ourselves in a hereafter? Not so for Spinoza. The affective structure of hope, he argues, is identical to that of fear. Both involve the anticipation of an outcome that is uncertain, but where fear involves a painful prospect, hope involves a pleasurable one.[34] If the uncertainty of pleasure may seem to us more tolerable than that of pain, Spinoza intends to disappoint us:

> [T]here is no hope without fear and no fear without hope. For he [sic] who is in hopeful suspense and has doubts as to the outcome of a thing is assumed to be imagining something that excludes the existence of the hoped-for thing, and so to that extent he

> feels pain. Consequently, as long as he is in hopeful suspense, he fears as to the outcome. (*E*, 313, III.Def.Em13.Exp.)

~~To hope for a better outcome is to doubt that it could come at all and to fear that the outcome may be different.~~ If we fear an outcome, we also hope that it~~the outcome~~ will not be what we fear. As a~~The~~ consequence~~, of this reasoning is that~~ hope and fear form two poles of a single affective mechanism~~trap~~ that, even when it involves a joyful prospect, can involve it only in a constant oscillation between joy and sadness. More troublingly, Spinoza implies that hope, in its inseparability from fear, limits our capacities to act or to feel. Briefly put~~In short~~, hope makes nothing better; it is not only vain, but~~. Spinoza suggests that hope is not only vain, but~~ pernicious: whatever one founds upon it is less than unhelpful—it is paralyzing.[35] This crux is the essence of the~~is the crux that I will refer to this crux as the~~ affective problem of death. How do we live in such a way that our joy ~~happiness~~ is not contingent on a miraculous abolition of death, yet without thinking of death as that which waits behind every shadow to rob us of our life? This is a stubborn problem, to which there can be no~~since there can be no~~ dialectical resolution, since ~~of the affective problem if~~ there is no true opposition between hope and fear in the first place. Optimism and pessimism, grounded in hope and fear, do nothing but mire us deeper into this problem. ~~It is here, as I take it, that Barnes mounts her intervention.~~ Through Barnes, we can see a special role for the artist:~~It is a task of the artist, Barnes suggests,~~ to struggle—and perhaps to fail—against the~~among others, to devise ways of slipping the~~ vicious circularity of hope and fear, to demonstrate~~realize~~ on the one hand that death haunts us as the very condition for thinking about life, and on the other that to approach it well and joyfully,~~well, happily, joyfully,~~ we must discover how truly to be hopeless.

Morbid Vitalities: Impersonality and Failure in *Nightwood*

From 1933 to 1936, Barnes struggled to revise the manuscript of what would eventually become *Nightwood*. ~~Though a number of publishers had indicated some interest in the novel, most were sceptical that it would be accessible to a reading public.~~ These years were formative ~~ones~~ for Barnes's novel, which eventually found a strong advocate and a constructive critic in Eliot, who offered editorial advice to Barnes as she revised the manuscript for publication with Faber and Faber.[36] Herring writes that Eliot was especially fond of ~~Dr.~~the character of O'Connor, who he saw as "a central consciousness" of the novel, and encouraged Barnes to foreground his~~O'Connor's~~ role in the novel (*DLW*, 226, 230). At the same time, Eliot suppressed~~insisted on suppressing and cutting parts~~ elements of O'Connor's~~the doctor's~~ monologues that he felt violated his own literary principles, particularly that the writer ought to avoid explicitly~~excessively~~ personal or ~~explicitly~~ emotional content.[37]~~.~~ As Barnes reworked~~set about reworking~~ *Nightwood*, she also read widely in philosophy and theology, including works by William James, Montaigne, Martin Luther, and Pascal (*DLW*, 219). It was ~~also~~ during this period that Barnes first read ~~the philosophy of~~ Spinoza. She records her unusual impression of this encounter in a letter of June 26th, 1935, to ~~Emily~~ Coleman: "Theres [sic] a man who got into his own mind and ran around in it trying to find cover and a way out" (*DLW*, 219).[38] Readers familiar with the~~Spinoza's philosophy may well find him unrecognizable in this description. Where many have remarked on the coolness and~~ detachment of Spinoza's Latin prose may well find him unrecognizable in this description; nevertheless,~~ Barnes portrays him as comically frantic.~~ Barnes's reference to his~~Spinoza's~~ efforts to escape his own mind suggests that the work in question is the *Ethics*, which employs the infamously complicated~~convoluted~~ "geometric method" to organize its claims. By framing his arguments as Euclidean proofs, ~~complete with definitions, axioms, postulates, propositions, and demonstrations,~~ Spinoza sought, in a sense, to

accomplish ~~show that his conclusions followed necessarily and incontrovertibly from the principles upon which they were based. The geometric method was in this sense an effort to accomplish~~ what Descartes attempted via~~sought to do through his use of~~ systematic doubt: to escape the perils of mere subjectivism, to "find cover and a way out," as Barnes has it, in order to bridge our phenomenological experience of the world and its ontological constitution ~~separate the way the world appears to us as situated individuals from its actual causes~~the way it actually ~~operates~~. I~~f Barnes is indeed referring to the *Ethics*, then it~~ is plausible that Barnes~~she~~ would ~~have also~~ have encountered~~read~~ Spinoza's definition of the body as an infinite composite~~, his rejection of Cartesian dualism, and, most significantly,~~ and his critique of hope. ~~In any case, she had encountered Spinoza's thinking first-hand.~~ And yet, her version of Spinoza, the manic thinker clamoring desperately to escape the stifling confines of his own mind, is perhaps~~might strike a reader of *Nightwood* as being~~ a more fitting~~apt~~ description of ~~Dr.~~ O'Connor than of Spinoza the arch-rationalist. We might, in fact, consider the doctor~~O'Connor~~ ~~I take this resemblance seriously and consider O'Connor himself~~ as a revisionary Spinoza figure.[39] While Spinoza has for some time been understood (by Nietzsche and, more recently, by Deleuze) as a philosopher of immanence and life, O'Connor is a kind of philosopher of death, and while Spinoza deduces his metaphysics from first principles, O'Connor (and Barnes by extension) arrives at them by rumination, digression, and imagination. Though the~~yse figures~~ are an odd pair, Spinoza and the doctor~~O'Connor~~a ~~rigorous exploration of what Spinoza has in common with O'Connor will show that they~~ share a hostility to the dualism of life and death, and to the power of hope as an antidote to the fear of death. For them ~~both Spinoza and O'Connor~~, death cannot be hoped away; unlike Spinoza, though, O'Connor conceives of death as something that becomes a source of power by being performed, shown, that is~~that which must be performed,~~

~~well and truly~~, as one of the guises in which life is lived. While ~~If~~ Spinoza sees~~would say that we can derive~~ joy as something we derive from understanding the causes that determine us, but not from the direct contemplation of death, since it reduces~~is a reduction of~~ our powers to act, I argue that O'Connor understands~~could rejoin~~ that death is also an effect of external causes ~~on our lives~~ and that there is~~may well be~~ a certain joy in understanding life as the enactment of death. His~~O'Connor's~~ performance of death is unavoidably~~thus as much~~ a performance of life, insofar as he recognizes that ~~life is also a process of dying and that this~~ dying is integral to whatever meaning we derive—or fail to derive—from life~~can be made meaningful~~. Performance is his~~O'Connor's~~ means of neutralizing death—not to be rid of it, but precisely to keep it, to preserve the thought of death as constitutive of life ~~and not hostile to it~~.

Through O'Connor, Barnes treads~~seeks out~~ the narrow path between hope and fear, refusing ~~that refuses~~ either pessimism or optimism. In doing so, she sees death and decadence as primarily affective phenomena. ~~problems, where other modernists expressed these themes in terms of what Sherry calls the sensibility of "afterward,"~~conceptualized these ideas in terms of ~~the unique temporal consciousness of what Sherry calls "afterward," a sensibility of living after the end times, in a dying age.~~ Though~~While~~ Barnes ~~certainly~~ integrates the decadent temporal sense of aftermath, of living in the end times,~~this consciousness~~ into *Nightwood* ~~(she was, after all, a protégée of Eliot's)~~, she does so in a way that uniquely foregrounds the embodied affectivity~~affective dynamics~~ that Spinoza articulates in the *Ethics* ~~through the medium of performance, performance is an. An essential part of these affective dynamics is performance~~. Throughout the novel, but most explicitly through ~~the figure of~~ O'Connor, Barnes adopts ~~a~~ high modernist melancholy~~rhetoric of melancholy~~ as an ironic pose, a vitalizing and self-aware performance, even a parody, of pessimism. There is no longer any tenable distinction in

Nightwood between death and life, but only a death that is itself alive. While *Nightwood* contains much pessimistic language,~~there is much pessimistic language in *Nightwood*,~~ and Barnes herself was frequently read by contemporaries as pessimistic, I depart from Danzer's judgment that *Nightwood*~~Barnes~~ expresses a "radical nihilism and profound pessimism."[40] Herring is somewhat closer to my position~~mark on this question~~ when he claims that only O'Connor~~"only Matthew O'Connor […]~~ "can sufficiently transcend suffering to construct a metaphysics of pessimism, which, for all its rambling, does make a coherent statement about life" (*DLW*, 207~~, my italics~~). ~~Nowhere does *Nightwood* make more of a self-conscious pose of its pessimism than in O'Connor's monologues. And yet, his~~However, I disagree that O'Connor's "metaphysics of pessimism" functions to~~cannot be said to~~ "transcend" suffering. To my mind, it is precisely this transcendence that *Nightwood* refuses, preferring instead to affirm a position that could be summarized thusly:~~.~~ Death well performed is death well lived~~—this could be *Nightwood*'s motto~~. In fact, performance is central to O'Connor's understanding of what it means to be anything at all. His very identity as a medical practitioner is an acted one, an unlicensed performance, so to speak, of obstetrics~~since he performs obstetrics without a license~~ (*NW*, 38). The meanings of these performances are often ambiguous. ~~Though in one sense O'Connor's frequent talk of death satirizes the optimistic, death-defying medical discourse of his time, his~~ O'Connor's dual role as an abortionist and a deliverer of children ("I helped to bring you into the world," he exclaims to Nora Flood~~, Robin's jilted lover~~) associates him in the same moment with women's childbearing (symbolizing life, regeneration, perpetuity) and death, making him~~O'Connor~~ a kind of *chiasmus* where life and death~~they~~ are inseparable from one another~~become inseparable from one another, as they become in Spinoza's thinking~~ (*NW*, 21).[41]

The inseparability of life from death in *Nightwood* goes hand-in-hand with the inseparability of being from appearing. Louis Kannenstine aptly describes O'Connor as a "paradox on all levels, an embodiment of the mystery of intermediate being," a character who the reader is "never allowed to take […] at face value," despite beingthough his is the lens through which much of the novel must be interpreted.[42] Similarly, Daniela Caselli writes of how Barnes "uses depth superficially, treats frivolity seriously, fashion politically, despair mockingly, and the self and its destruction ironically."[43] *Nightwood*'s pretenders, fromand there is a wide cast of them, from O'Connor to the circus of pretend aristocrats that Felix associates with in the first chapter, do not live in a false world. On the contrary, their pretending is a mode of ontological constitution. Though we cannot quite take O'Connorthe doctor seriously, it is equally true that we cannot bring ourselves to dismiss him. His pretending, his hyperbolic speeches, and his pronouncements on the nature of death all stake their own claims to structuring the novel's reality. At one point, Felix declares that "the doctor was a great liar, but a valuable liar. His fabrications seemed to be the framework of a forgotten but imposing plan; some condition of life of which he was the sole surviving retainer" (*NW*, 33). In this novel of characters who seethe melancholy and nurse innumerable psychological wounds, it is only the doctor, the supreme articulator of those wounds and of that melancholy, who retains "some condition of life." Through his valuable and vital lying, O'Connor enlivens death into a potentialsource of affective power or joy. At one point, he declares that "Day and night are related by their division" (*NW*, 87). Day and night, which here figure not only the conscious and unconscious worlds, but life and death, are relatively, but not absolutely, distinct, but joined in a single living movement; similarly,vital system, as sub-processes in a single vital system, just as O'Connor'sthe doctor's "lies" are not straightforwardly untrue, but participate in a kind of ontological constitution, in the

register of the false-but-real. One way to frame this phenomenon in *Nightwood* is as an example of what Susan Sontag calls "stylization": the self-conscious and purposeful performance of a distinction between "matter and manner, theme and form."[44] O'Connor writes about death in the manner of something vital, and by performing the content of pessimism in the style of optimism, he challenges the act of making that very distinction by making a spectacle of itmakes a spectacle of, and poses a challenge to, the act of making that very distinctione distinction at all. Properly speaking, O'Connor is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but – he challenges the basis of theis distinction. Monica Kaup identifies a similar performance of suffering in Barnes's works more generally, noting that "the lamentation in *Nightwood* […] is an extroverted rather than an introverted grief, a public display that shifts the emphasis from the tragic suffering itself (objectivism) to its expression and articulation (subjectivism and emotional appeal) […] In *Nightwood*, […] suffering is a spectacle."[45] Though one mightI would hasten to qualify the somewhat tidy distinction between the objective and subjective registers in this portrayal of Barnes, I follow Kaup unreservedly in asserting the primacy of performance in *Nightwood*'s treatment of pain and, ultimately, of death. Even the novel's title suggests a stylized exploration of death, alluding to the dark wood of Dante's *Inferno* and its portrayal of the underworld.[46] O'Connor admits as much when he styles himself, rather ostentatiously, "Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor," as if to emphasize not only that he is at once serious and unserious (to be taken with a "grain-of-salt"), but that he identifies himself with Dante as an imaginative explorer of death (*NW,* 87). David Weir has suggested that Barnes invokes Dante in her title in order to "[elevate] the darkness and degradation conventionally associated with sin and error through a positive valorization of various negatives. Stated more simply, *Nightwood* affirms negation."[47] While this characterization is helpful as far as it goes, it holds only as long

as we avoid readingare careful not to understand the affirmation of negation in a Hegelian light, as a moment of dialectical sublation. To do so would risk slipping again into the vicious circle of hope and fear; the. The novel would be little more than a mediation between these two poles, a representation of one to the other. Perhaps more gravely, this perspective would also implicitly reduce *Nightwood* to an exemplar of a type, one more decadent novel that revels in the aesthetic experience of decline. We would be unable to distinguish, for instance, what makes the decadence of *Nightwood* different from that of Huysmans's *À Rebours*, orfrom the poetry of Baudelaire, or from Wilde's plays. We would thus miss how *Nightwood*'s treatment of the circularity of hope and fear challenges the binary oppositiondivision of negation and affirmation. Thus, I prefer to say that *Nightwood* uses decadence as a means of affirming the hopeless, or the morbid, rather than the negative, and in light of Spinoza's comments in the *Ethics*, in which death is a radical change of relation, but not an absolute negation, on the circularity of hope and fearin the *Ethics*, I regard this as an operative distinction.

It remains to be shown exactly how *Nightwood*'s stylizationI have thus far been discussing how the Spinozan resonances of O'Connor's stylized performance of death allow him to escape the dialectical trap of hope and fear. I will now develop these observations to show how this stylization entails a rethinking of the subject of death. Rather than aAgainst the closed, interior model of the subject, what we find in Barnes isposits an impersonal subjectivity, articulated in O'Connor's monologues, that is distinct in important ways from the impersonality advocated by fellow modernists like Eliot and Pound. Interestingly, Eliot reads his own theory of impersonality into *Nightwood* in his preface to the novel, where he writes that "The miseries that people suffer through their particular abnormalities of temperament are visible on the surface [of *Nightwood*]: the deeper design is that of the human misery and bondage which is universal."[48] In

other words, the essence of the work is not its treatment of singular qualities embodied in individual persons, but its representation of qualities that transcend their iteration in individuals. Art—art, for Eliot, addresses questions of the human type, not the individual person. The personal and the impersonal are only different categories of human experience, one insular, the other universal, and only. Only the latter is fully worthy of being rendered in art. In contrast, Barnes'sthe impersonality, as figuredrepresented by O'Connor,that I see Barnes articulating via O'Connor isunderstandssees the subject as a cloud of affects, of powers-to-act determined by external relations. Herein lies another difference between Barnes's and Eliot's versions of impersonality., Barnes articulates a difference between herself an Eliot. As Monika Faltejskova writes of Barnes's embrace of emotions that Eliot rejects as "neurotic carnality."[49] O'Connor'sBarnes's impersonality, on the contrary,, as expressed by O'Connor, is, in fact, inseparable, in fact, is inseparable from carnality of all kinds—it is the embodiment, the living-in-the-flesh, of the volatility of affect. It does not repudiate personal affectivity, but suggests that we can no longer conceive of failure or death as pertaining solely to individuals, but must understand them in terms of a sociality that O'Connor's "queer" relation to others makes him uniquely qualified to perform. These carnal, embodied relations are de- and re-composing themselves at every moment; the. In a phraseword, this impersonal subject is perpetually dying. It follows that if this subjectBarnes's decentralized, impersonal subject (O'Connor being the clearest example) is produced at every moment by the constant variation of its constitutive relations, it can have no truly universal qualities, let alone any universal sense of "misery and bondage," as Eliot putshas it.[50] O'Connor expresses no universalized despair (though he is certainly susceptible to particular despairs); rather, he rejects hope as a viable alternative and

~~strives – with mixed success – for a~~what I term, ~~in a technical, Spinozan sense, an hopeless affirmation of morbid joy.~~

~~But what is this affective, variable subject, and how does it inform Barnes's Spinozan engagement with the problem of death? Through O'Connor,~~ Barnes~~'s sketches a version of the~~ impersonal subject ~~that~~ cannot be defined in the traditional manner as a self-contained unity, let alone as a *locus* of agency.[51] From a Spinozan perspective, death reveals ~~the impersonality of the subject,~~ that what dies is nothing in itself, only ~~who or what dies is not a discrete entity, but~~ the relation of a complex multiplicity or *milieu* of properties onto which we project the name of the subject. ~~The inmost qualities of this subject are determined only from without, by the *milieu* of relations in which it is embedded.~~ O'Connor articulates this subjectivity in Spinozan fashion in his cryptic musings to Nora:~~remarks about the impossibility of "pure sorrow." Soon after we meet O'Connor, he muses to Nora:~~ "A man's sorrow runs uphill; true it is difficult for him to bear, but it is also difficult for him to keep […] There is no pure sorrow. Why? It is bedfellow to lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall! There are only confusions; about that you are quite right, Nora my child, confusions and defeated anxieties" (*NW*, 25~~, my italics~~). The difficulty of interpreting these proclamations eases if we read them alongside a similar passage of Spinoza's *Ethics*: "Affect, which is called *animi pathema* [passivity of the soul], *is a confused idea* by which the mind affirms of its body, or any part of it, a greater or less [sic] power of existence than before~~; and this increase of power being given, the mind itself is determined to one particular thought rather than to another~~" (*E*, 174-75, III.Gen.Def.Em, emphasis in the original).[52] For Spinoza, an affect is confused if we do not know, firstly, which relations comprise our powers of acting, and, secondly, how that power is modified by a given encounter~~the compositionwhat the composite of our own body comprises and, secondly, what composite of external bodies affects us~~. Though the

affects determine us to act and feel in specific ways, we know these powers of acting, feeling, only by their fluctuation when we pass into different relations with others—we know them only confusedly. Since the Spinozan subject's powers are not strictly its own, but derive from external relations, itsthe subject's interiority is always already an exteriority that is in a sense impersonal to itstrictly secondary to those external relations. Tyrus Miller has argued that Barnes's "careful composition of character and narrational personae [allows her] to ward off the dual danger of excessive interiority and exteriority."[53] I argue, though, that rReading a Spinozan impersonality into *Nightwood*, though, forces us to amend that formulation. By my reading, interiority is derivative of exteriority, secondary to it—every inside is conditioned and constituted by what is outside it. It is this primacy of the exterior that allows Spinoza to think of life and death impersonally, as a single dynamic process.This exteriority or impersonality of the subject bears on how Spinoza considers death; In the *Ethics*, Spinoza recountsrecounting. In the *Ethics*, he recounts the story of a Spanish poet who was afflicted with amnesia and argues,. Spinoza argues that the poet as he once was has essentially died; the pre- and post-amnesiac poet are, for all intents and purposes, different individuals—the dissolution of the former's characteristic array of relations amounts to death (*E*, 342, IV.P39Schol). Dying is thusin this sense a constant process, a kind of ontological forgetting, a disruption of whatever characteristic relation we reify as the individual, even a kind of ontological forgetting, and death itself is only the disruption of whatever characteristic relation we reify as the individual subject. For the subject *qua* interiority,Under the interiority model of the subject, death is a source of fear thatbecause it entails the end of the subject, whereas Spinoza allows us to understand it asfor Spinoza it is only the immanent, and ongoing decomposition that attends and makes possible every re-composition, every assertion of life.

References to amnesiac or immemorial states recur throughout the novel in relation to Robin and O'Connor, and give us insights into the complex relationship between life, death, and impersonality in *Nightwood*. ~~I noted above that~~ Robin's life of the "eternal momentary" ~~also~~ reduces her life to a kind of death in which external relations are, if not impossible, at least untenable; her perpetual present~~. Robin's life of the momentary~~ is essentially immemorial, a perpetual death of the past. We must distinguish ~~here~~ between this death-like life in which life and death are frozen states, isolated from the flow of time, from O'Connor's~~the~~ morbid vitalism ~~of O'Connor, in which death is a fluid process, and the death-like life of Robin, for whom~~ life ~~and death and life alike are frozen states, isolated from the flow of time~~. Robin clings to her eternal present as a protection against change, affect, and the past—a protection that she mistakes~~she mistakes it, in this sense,~~ for absolute freedom. As I argue above, she abandons Guido in part~~She abandons Guido, for instance, in part~~ because his birth threatens to burden her with personal and affective demands, and, moreover, with history~~Her abandonment of Guido, her son, allows her to escape the personal and affective demands that parenthood would place upon her freedom~~. ~~Similarly,~~ Robin also refuses to commit to any form of personal history with others~~any relation to the past~~~~extending her present life into the future as much as she refuses to be committed to the past or to any personal history~~, either with Felix or with Nora. And yet, she~~Robin~~ cannot help but retain some amnesic trace of a time that is irreconcilable with the perpetual present she lives in: she listens "to the echo of some foray in the blood that [has] no known setting," and becomes "strangely aware of some lost land in herself" ~~earlier in the novel,~~ during her pregnancy~~when she becomes pregnant~~ (*NW*, 48-49). What she hears, though, is not the~~a~~ past in the ordinary sense, but ~~a state of~~ prehistory, a hazy apriority: less a time of the lived past than that of ~~an impersonal, even inhuman life,~~ a "past" before time, ~~that is~~ accessible to her

only in the form of its inaccessibility, ~~as~~ a forgetting ~~that remains~~ perpetually beyond recall, an obscure blurring of life and death. This apriority is the temporal form taken by the impersonal, Spinozan movement of life and death that ~~I have read into O'Connor's speeches by way of Spinoza~~O'Connor expresses in his speeches, yet~~.~~ Robin's stance toward it~~this apriority~~death is quite different from~~than~~ the doctor's~~, though~~. While O'Connor ultimately suffers, I ~~will~~ argue, for failing to sustain his sense of impersonality,~~because he becomes insufficiently impersonal,~~ Robin suffers at the end of *Nightwood* because she is insufficiently personal. She performs no such decadent stylization of apriority, of the immanence that constitutes her, as that which sustains O'Connor through his life-in-death~~,~~ for much of the novel~~, through his life-in-death~~; on the contrary,~~but,~~ in escaping from the influence of others (other people, other times), she becomes affectively isolated. This is the content of the final chapter, where Robin is animated by "a desperate anonymity" that drives her as she returns to New York (*NW,* 177). ~~This anonymity recurs in the next paragraph, where Robin visits the decayed chapel on Nora's estate, in a scene that recalls Robin's prayer in mid-pregnancy at the convent of *L'Adoration Perpétuelle*, though here ruin of the American chapel foreshadows the ruin that Robin will experience inside it.~~ As Robin~~she~~ approaches the ruined chapel on Nora's estate, "the silence that she had caused by her coming was broken again by insect and bird flowing back over her intrusion, which was forgotten in her fixed stillness, obliterating her *as a drop of water is made anonymous by the pond into which it has fallen*" (*NW*, 177-78, my italics). Since only the present is really real for Robin, she becomes subsumed into her surroundings, disappearing~~seems to disappear~~ into her own unchanging, immobile stillness~~, which subsumes her into her surroundings~~. This radical anonymity—in a word, this impersonality—culminates in the infamous final scene of the novel, where Robin descends into a bestial state and engages in a (possibly sexual) act of communion

with Nora's dog, which leaves her "lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping" (*NW*, 180). Though she continues to live, it is according to a drastically different mode of life; like Spinoza's amnesiac poet, her nature is wholly changed.

Nevertheless, Robin's failure is instructive, as it gives us insights into the significance of failure in *Nightwood*, its relation to death, and how best to square O'Connor's final scene with the morbid vitalism I have ascribed to him. Though Robin's anonymity fails to generate a morbid vitalism, it nevertheless helps us to see how *Nightwood* thinks through an association between failure and death that recent discussions of queer negativity by scholars like Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz can help to illuminate. There is a disruptive potential and a queerness in Robin's flight from her Felix and Guido. What she denies, ultimately, is not ~~merely~~ just a child and a husband, but ~~all of the accoutrements of~~ what Edelman calls "reproductive futurity": the entire ideological orientation of a heteronormative social order that names the Child, the future, as the source of absolute value, while rendering homosexual modes of relation unthinkable (*NF*, 2-3). By rejecting her child, Robin also rejects her heterosexual union with Felix and the social compulsion to reproduce it. Such denials represent an anarchic, de-compositional force that Edelman identifies with the death drive (and queerness broadly writ), and which signifies morbidity and decadence to the heteropatriarchal social order to which Felix is so obsequious (*NF*, 3). However, while Robin's escape from the world of domesticity in a sense marks a powerful refusal to be co-opted into modes of (heterosexual, patriarchal) life that would erase her as a queer subject, her progressive negation of all social relations—queer or otherwise—proves self-destructive. This is so not because she refuses to posit an alternative future, but because she extinguishes the relations that constitute her in the present, as present to others. Robin's descent into animality represents a fatal shift of register from the anti-social to

the asocial where, having shed all social links and contracted her life into ~~an~~ eternal immediacy, she can no longer place her negativity in opposition to anything.[54] If there is absolutely no immanence, no intrusion of the past upon the present, or of others upon ourselves, there ceases to be anything to defy. The defiance of relation, in short, presumes relation and starves without it, leaving us only with "romances of the negative," in Muñoz's phrase (*CU*, 11). We can say of Robin's negativity what Halberstam says of Edelman's: it "strands queerness between two equally unbearable options (futurity and positivity in opposition to nihilism and negation)."[55] Edelman poses a binary choice between pessimism and optimism that, according to Halberstam, lacks "generative models of failure" to "remind us that there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing" (*QAF*, 120). Muñoz finds in these queer failures "a kernel of potentiality […] a certain mode of virtuosity that helps the spectator exit from the stale and static lifeworld" (*CU*, 173). However, if we are looking for a character whose virtuosity delivers failure from impotence, we must turn from the enigmatic Robin, whose withdrawing nature and distance from the narrative center of the novel precludes her performing any such mode of virtuosity, to the loquacious O'Connor.

O'Connor's performances of impersonality amount to generative failures of the kind that Muñoz and Halberstam describe; they are momentary flashes that suggest a different relation to life, death, and others. By transposing the terminology of success and failure into that of life and death, we can see morbid vitalism as a conceptual slant rhyme with generative failure: both concepts seek out a power that is proper to weakness, but which abstains equally from optimistic idealization and pessimistic foreclosure. O'Connor's morbid vitalism is a kind of queer failure inasmuch it refuses to valorize life over death as much as it refuses to romanticize death; it recuperates death and failure for the purposes of living otherwise, of following the impersonal

movements of vital death, of deathly vitality, beyond received notions of what it is to live and to succeed. O'Connor's virtuosic performances of impersonality constitute an essential element of his queerness, his refusal of the system of ready-made oppositions (hope and fear, vitality and morbidity, success and failure, the masculine and the feminine) that permit the expression of only certain modalities of life. And yet, while O'Connor's resistance is not Edelman's queer anti-futurism, neither is it quite like Muñoz's queer utopianism, since it resists the anticipatory affect of hope. O'Connor weaves the apriority of the impersonal, in which life and death are not sharply distinct, into a relation with determinate pasts and presents. He does not reject futurity, but his logomania grounds him in this (increasingly troubled) weaving of his particular life and death into the impersonal, generalized movement of a life and death that are not sharply distinguished. At one point, O'Connor declares to Nora that life is ~~simply~~ "the permission to know death [and ~~that~~] [w]e were created that the earth might be made sensible of her inhuman taste" (*NW*, 90). Life conditions us to its other side~~is a means, then, of conditioning ourselves to its other side~~, allows us to live~~of living~~ what is ~~inhuman,~~ impersonal, deathly, in human and personal terms. We break down, but constructively; we fail, but successfully; we die, but vitally. With this dynamic in mind, we can understand *Nightwood*'s examination of the very failure of O'Connor's morbid vitalism as a means of conditioning us to what is generative in his approach to death.

Still, *Nightwood* does not suggest that we could simply opt out of personality or interiority in favor of~~that interiority cannot simply opt for~~ a hopeless enjoyment of life, and O'Connor is not immune to failure, to regression into hope and fear, since the phenomenological orientation of the subject toward its own personal death cannot be thought away or transcended. Caselli has rightly warned that "a complete denial of coherent identity [in *Nightwood*] would

amount to an easy way out of suffering" and that such an out would be too easy, too complacent, for Barnes; in any case, —such easy choosing would ~~, as the process of death. Though O'Connor is Barnes's vehicle for expressing the impersonal, Spinozan alternative to this interior-subjective death, he is not immune to regressing into hope or fear. In fact, he exemplifies two key difficulties of~~about the subject's relation to death. ~~Firstly,~~The first is that the impersonal is not an attitude to be adopted or chosen—this, after all, ~~presumes the very subject model of absolutely self-contained, free-willing subjectivity~~interiority that impersonality challenges.[56] The impersonal~~—but~~ must be made practicable ~~to us~~ through affective experiences that allow us to discover the causes of our own subjectivity in the effects that others have on us—but~~.~~ ~~Nevertheless, Secondly,The second difficulty is that~~ an excess of personality always remains a tempting position for the subject. ~~Even a morbid vitalist like O'Connor is not immune to regression into hope and fear, as the phenomenological orientation of the subject toward its own personal death, rather than toward the absolutely immanent death that Spinoza envisions, cannot be thought away or transcendedmust be grappled with rather than transcended. This is because t~~The subjective illusion that "I" is a living thing whose death shall come, rather than a thing whose life is always a vital dying ~~vitality~~, is the source of a deceptive consolation, a ~~certain~~ fearful hope that though I must one day die, I am at least free whilst I live to make of my~~that~~ death whatever I want. To be sure, this illusion is also a kind of stylization, but one polluted by ~~its own~~ hopefulness, a~~its~~ sense of life as pure freedom, separate in time from the future moment that bears the necessity of death ~~within a single hard limit (death)~~. It is because this passive position offers its own illusory powers that O'Connor~~, though he is *Nightwood*'s mouthpiece of the impersonal stance toward death, nonetheless~~ slips back into the pernicious circle of hope and fear, optimism and pessimism. Late in the novel, he wonders,~~discussing Robin with Nora, he~~

~~asks,~~ "Is there no bread that does not come proffered with bitter butter? I, as good a Catholic as they make, have embraced every confection of hope, and yet I know well, for all our outcry and struggle, we shall be for the next generation not the massive dung fallen from the dinosaur, but the little speck left of a hummingbird" (*NW,* 163~~, my emphasis~~). O'Connor's fearful desperation is the obverse of the theological hope supplied by the Catholicism of his youth; what once offered him the hope of a final transcendence of death now fails to convince O'Connor that he, or anyone, will be remembered as anything more than waste. He underscores this oscillation into fear and pessimism by observing that while the remarkable waste of dinosaurs might at least attract the interest of archaeologists, most of us are bound for obscurity~~those now living will not even amount to the remarkable waste of a dinosaur that might provoke the interest even of archaeologists, but waste that will go unnoticed by generations to come~~. Despite his earlier performance of impersonality, even O'Connor finds it difficult to escape~~slip~~ the circle of hope (for theological transcendence) and fear (that perhaps this transcendence will not be delivered).

~~In a certain sense,~~ O'Connor's final scene forces us to consider the meaning of failure alongside the affective problem of death. ~~is a cautionary character, a warning to the reader of the difficulty of practicing impersonality, hopelessness. The most dramatic example of O'Connor's slippage back into the affective problem of death, the trap of hope and fear, comes at the end of~~ In "Go Down, Matthew," he~~the final chapter involving the doctor, in which he has fallen~~ falls into a drunken, pessimistic rage; his impersonal condition deforms into a personal failure. As O'Connor~~he~~ struggles to leave a bar, he weeps of life's futility: "I've not only lived my life for nothing, but I've told it for nothing—abominable among filthy people—I know, it's all over, everything's over, and nobody knows it but me" (*NW,* 175). We swing in the space of a chapter from the equivocation of theological hope, which obscures the finitude of individual lives behind

a screen of perpetuity (the belief in~~that an~~ eternal life after~~will overthrow~~ death), to O'Connor's~~the~~ affective paralysis with~~of~~ the fear of death, his~~an~~ intoxication by despair as much as by alcohol. ~~His performance was once one of hopeless death, one that, affirmed in performance, becomes a source of self-caused joy, as Spinoza might call it. In his speculative investigation of how death acts as a cause of effects on Nora, Felix, or himself, O'Connor functioned as one of the affective centers of the novel, perhaps the only one capable of neutralizing, through the performances of his monologues, the affective contagion of fear without resorting to facetious or ineffectual hopes. Earlier in the novel,~~ While O'Connor's earlier stylized conversations with Nora and Felix produce~~function as means of producing~~ a morbid joy that often involves musing on the nature of death, this performance breaks down in~~. In~~ "Go Down, Matthew~~,~~" and~~though, his performance breaks down; it~~ mingles with a genuine, limiting fear. ~~Once, O'Connor's The doctor's earlier performances~~ invented peculiar, expanded ways of ~~feeling, imagining, and acting,~~produce an expanded capacity to feel, to imagine, to act, yet~~; now,~~ This declaration that everything~~all~~ ends with despair coincides with~~amounts to~~ a remarkable contraction of powers, to the point that~~so much so that~~ the drunken doctor~~O'Connor~~ can no longer stand on his own two feet: "He tried to get to his feet, gave it up. 'Now,' he said, 'the end—mark my words—now nothing, but wrath and weeping!'" (*NW*, 175~~, emphasis in the original~~). While~~Where once~~ O'Connor once spoke fancifully ~~spoke~~ of "creative misery," he now finds himself confronted with a failure that he cannot recuperate, which makes him incapable of transforming misery into anything else (*NW*, 34). Obsessed with the idea of his own personal death, the doctor, already corpse-like~~like a corpse~~, cannot walk, and as~~. As~~ sad affects wash over him~~O'Connor~~, what had been ~~a~~ morbid vitality curdles almost into solipsism as he declares~~,~~ ~~O'Connor's declaration~~ that he alone possesses privileged knowledge of the emptiness of life.

Though O'Connor has a nominal audience in this scene (an ex-priest, whose presence makes the scene a figurative mockery of Catholic confession), ~~nominally addresses~~is nominally addressing ~~an ex-priest in this scene (making it a figurative~~kind of ~~mockery of Catholic confession),~~ he is practically oblivious to the presence of others. And yet, the source of O'Connor's failure turns out to be, in a sense, the~~his~~ presence of others~~problem turns out to be one, in a sense, of presence; unlike Spinoza's amnesiac poet, though, he does not forget. In fact, O'Connor~~ cannot ~~forget anybody~~reveals that he cannot forget anybody~~: "The reason I'm so remarkable is that I remember everyone even when they are not about" (*NW*, 173). If Felix denies the reality of~~has been guilty of denying~~ death by dragging the past into the present, and Robin by contracting her life into an amnesic momentariness,~~of making her life an amnesic deathlike amnesia, a present without past or future, we discover that~~ O'Connor is guilty of letting nothing die, of preserving too much—for all the performative power of his impersonality, it dashes on the rock of memory. It is when he fails the strange~~particular~~ discipline of being hopeless~~his impersonality~~ and truly fears that his memories must dissolve into the amnesic apriority of death that O'Connor can no longer sustain his morbid vitalism. As his drunkenness de-composes the relations that constitute him, he falls into nihilism, so that, obsessed by the idea of nothing, he becomes capable only of nothing—and disappears from the novel.

While this figurative death is O'Connor's last scene in *Nightwood*, I do not read it as dismissing morbid vitalism to failure, but as cautioning that such vitality is always volatile, difficult, threatening. Morbid vitalism does not promise the success of life over death, the conversion of the latter into the former; rather, it provides an orientation for living always on the margins where life and death impinge on one another. It names the power of failure, so to speak, and pertains wherever the power to be encounters something that is incompatible and

unassimilable to it under current conditions, a resistance that is nevertheless the index of all enjoyment, all success, all living. ~~Barnes's suggestion that a hopeless relation toward death is untenable, naïve, or impossible. Instead, I understand~~ O'Connor's terminal ranting is the novel's caution to the reader, and thus also ~~as~~ a necessary component to be accounted for in studying O'Connor as a character and as a Spinoza figure. Like Spinoza, O'Connor understands that sorrow,~~Sorrow,~~ like any other affect, is always a confusion,~~—it always involves~~ a particular combination of different corporeal elements, or what O'Connor earlier calls "lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall~~.~~" (*NW*, 25). Furthermore, sorrow~~It~~~~Sorrow, furthermore,~~ is a sad or limiting affect; it "runs uphill~~"~~; in other words, when we are affected with sorrow, we encounter resistance everywhere, like the runner uphill whose movement is resisted by gravity and the hill's incline; it ~~(*NW*, 25) "). In other words, when we are affected with sorrow, we are impeded; we encounter resistance everywhere, like the runner uphill whose movement is resisted by gravity and by the hill's inclineit is difficult to act when one is affected by it, just as a person running uphill encounters the resistance of gravity and the hill's incline. In addition to being disempowering, sorrow If sorrow is limiting and disempowering, it~~ It is also unstable and fleeting, or~~;~~ ~~which is to say that it is~~ "difficult to keep," as the doctor~~O'Connor~~ puts it (*NW*, 25). O'Connor ~~also~~ accounts here for joyful affects, though only by clothing them in the language of death and negation. He names them~~joyful affects~~ by circumlocution as~~: they are~~ "defeated anxieties~~.~~" (*NW*, 25) The subject that O'Connor presumes is always, like Spinoza's, more-than-one, always suspended between an array of relations; however, the ephemerality and volatility of affect means that the subject has little control over its own~~the~~ content ~~of its own subjectivity~~. Performative impersonality is one way that~~If the performance of the impersonal is one way in which~~ O'Connor affects himself with a kind of joy or power, but the ephemeral nature of the affects,

which are as unstable as our own mingled bodies, ensures that this impersonality is always exposed to failure~~not without risk of failure~~~~difficulty or risk—there is always the possibility~~ and the risk of backsliding into the circular affectivity of hope and fear, as O'Connor does in his final scene. And yet, it is because the subject depends for its vitality on these experiences of volatile affect, because our power always depends on the relations that we are drawn into without necessarily knowing or choosing, that acts of performance like O'Connor's are necessary—they are experiments in what ways of dying are best for living. It is in a similar sense that Caselli argues that "*Nightwood* reflects on what may or may not be good for us, knowing that this ranting search 'feels' good."[57] *Nightwood*'s unabashed depiction of raw, messy feelings~~sentimentality~~ (a quality that Caselli associates with the novel's queerness) is correlative with its~~an epiphenomenon of its fundamental~~ understanding of affect as the measure~~index~~ of vitality, power, and, if not the good, then the "good for us."

~~Seen this way, t~~In this sense, O'Connor's~~The doctor's~~ last scene~~words~~ in the novel ~~in *Nightwood*~~ complements—albeit darkly—the famous parting thought of Spinoza's *Ethics*: "For if salvation were ready to hand and could be discovered without great toil, how could it be that it is almost universally neglected? All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare" (*E*, 382, V.P42.Schol). The priest's salvation is ready to hand, available without toil, but O'Connor, the lapsed Catholic, knows already that it cannot help him~~ knows it well already, having grown up a Catholic, and knows too that it cannot help him, nor can he help himself~~. His nihilism does not invalidate his earlier pursuit of a rigorous hopelessness toward death so much as it confirms Spinoza's position~~assertion~~ that one must produce one's own salvation—not from death into eternal life, but within the finite limits of an existence that is nothing other than the interplay of life and death; however, since O'Connor isolates himself, his affirmation of the hopeless, —his

stylization and performance of it, collapses into a fear that not only contracts what he can feel, but also what he can put into practice. ~~In short, h~~He becomes incapable of the affective toil, the vigilance against hope and fear, that sustained him in earlier chapters. His failure, though, is generative. It offers us no excuse for thinking that anything—religion, literature, or morbid vitalism itself—could finally transcend a problem posed to us in immanent terms: life and death suffuse one another, and we are never speaking of one without implying the other.~~literature example shows us that the effort to escape the affective problem of death is perilous and, that we should not think that literature offers us the hope of a final transcendence of the affective problem of death. dilemma, of an escape from. If we have hoped that O'Connor will solve thisfor us this problem for usthat can be grappled with but not solved, his final scene reminds us that the fruits of our hope, like those of fear, are mere "wrath and weeping,." but it indicate to us that this failure is not one of succumbing to hopelessness, It is not because he is hopeless that the doctor ends up so broken and enraged—it is rather because he cannot continue to be sothe means of continuing to be hopeless were no longer available to him. In short, O'Connor succumbs not to hopelessness, but to thea fear that is as intimately related to hope as a photograph to its negative.~~ *Nightwood* instead encourages us to conceive of our relations to death and suffering, to what our bodies can do and feel, to our hopes and our fears, as too unwieldy to consider in isolation from others who compose those relations with us. Halberstam cautions that "Negativity might well constitute an antipolitics, but it should not register as apolitical" (*QAF*, 108). This is also true of morbid vitalism, and doubly true of its failure, so that we must be willing to discover in this final chapter something more useful than hope: the fact that our dying implicates us in the lives of others and binds us to them.

~~In the chapter "Watchman, What of the Night?," the doctor distinguishes between the impersonality that the subject actually is, which has its own mode of death, and the~~ subjective ~~interiority model of the subject, which conceives of its own death in personal terms. "To our friends," the doctor says, "we die every day, but to ourselves we die only at the end. We do not know death, or how often it has essayed our most vital spirit" (*NW*, 103). For our friends, who have no purview into the interior continuity that we experience of ourselves, we "die" constantly—we are always changing, altered by the decomposition of some relations and the composition of others~~one set of relations, or perhaps by the new composition of others. ~~Barnes and O'Connor, like Spinoza, see an interior subject as secondary to the impersonal, affective, external processes that determine that subject as an interiority. It is the imperceptible death, that which the doctor tells us we do not know personally, that marks out where "our most vital spirit" lies. In a similar sense, Blanchot writes that "Death exists not only, then, at the moment of death; at all times we are its contemporaries."[58] In a phrase~~word, death is ~~immanent, indwelling everywhere~~ that we live, ~~regardless of our habit of thinking of it as a single event, a trap lying in wait. In *Nightwood*, Nora credits the doctor with a similar observation: "You know what none of us know until we have died. You were dead in the beginning" (*NW*, 161).~~ Through the prism of morbid vitalism, life and death are refractions of the same light, movements of the same impersonal force. If death could ever represent for us a ~~we have at any moment the paradoxical~~ "power," a source of joy, ~~to die (to let our power lapse into impotence),~~ it is only because we have always been suspended in this movement of composition and decomposition, because the animate power of being is paradox: ascendancy shadowed by its own decadence, thriving that knows itself in failing to thrive.~~; we have always been both alive and dead.~~ Denying~~To deny~~ death with the optimists turns out to be little different than denying~~to deny~~ life with the

pessimists; the hope for release dissolves into the fear of nullity.~~, and it is~~ *Nightwood*'s ~~Barnes's~~ sensitive examination of O'Connor's middle position between hope and fear,~~,, and O'Connor's struggle to maintain, this middle position, neither hoping for an escape from death nor fearing that such an escape is impossible, that marks *Nightwood* as such an exceptional contribution to modernist~~ its performance of the mutual intimacy of life and death, and its practice of what Halberstam calls "the queer art of failure" mark it as an exceptional and singular contribution to modernist literature. ~~efforts to conceptualize death. And yet, t~~This ~~is a~~ contribution ~~that I argue~~ is only legible, though, ~~only~~ if we read *Nightwood* alongside Spinoza and his analysis of hope and fear. ~~To do so cuts against the grain of modernism's reputed pessimism.~~ While~~Though~~ *Nightwood* in one sense challenges Spinoza's claim that the free think least of all of death, it also absorbs key elements of Spinoza's philosophy of life, from its analysis of the affective dimension of hope and fear to its insistence on ~~rigorously~~ thinking through life and death in immanent, non-reductive terms~~immanent terms~~, which distinguishes it from much other modernist and latter-day decadent writing~~writing in the decadent vein~~. It is with these conceptual resources that *Nightwood* clears a path between ~~the~~ optimism and pessimism, success and failure, being and appearing, decadence and ascendance~~ that pervaded the various levels of American culture in the interwar years~~. By passing between these categories and undermining their binary opposition, *Nightwood* breaks~~oke~~ ground toward an avowedly morbid vitalism.

Notes

1. Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3. See also Daniela Caselli's *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 10, which argues that Barnes's *oeuvre* constitutes a relentless questioning of "critical mastery."

2. Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 26, 193-95. Henceforth abbreviated *MRD*.

3. The distinction I draw between Barnesian versus Eliotic impersonality echoes, but diverges from, Justus Nieland's examination of the distinction in *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 221-25.

4. Ina Danzer, "Between Decadence and Surrealism: The Other Modernism of Djuna Barnes," *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 23, no. 2 (1998), 239.

5. Phillip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995), 219. Hereafter abbreviated *DLW*.

6. See Anthony Uhlmann~~, Garin Dowd, and Derek Ryan: Uhlmann~~, *Thinking in Literature: Joyce, Woolf, Nabokov* (New York: Continuum, 2011),~~:~~ Garin Dowd, *Abstract Machines: Samuel Beckett and Philosophy after Deleuze and Guattari* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), and~~;~~ Derek Ryan, "Entangled in Nature: Deleuze's Modernism, Woolf's Philosophy, and Spinoza's Ethology," in *Understanding Deleuze, Understanding Modernism*, eds. Paul Ardoin, S. E. Gontarski, and Laci Mattison (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

7. Spinoza is a significant reference point in May Sinclair's autobiographical novel *Mary Olivier: A Life*, while Benjamin De Casseres took Spinoza as a precursor to Nietzsche in his 1932 book *Spinoza: Liberator of God and Man*. Waldo Frank wrote appreciatively of Spinoza in "With Marx, Spinoza," from the essay collection *The Jew in Our Day* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1944), and Edgar Lee Masters read Spinoza at Knox College and incorporated his thought into the *Spoon River Anthology*. See Herbert K. Russell: *Edgar Lee Masters: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 103-04.

8. Victoria L. Smith, "A Story Beside(s) Itself: The Language of Loss in Djuna Barnes's Nightwood," *PMLA* 114, no. 2 (1999), 201.

9. Lheisa Dustin, "Ghost Words: Nightwood's Cryptic Imperatives," *Criticism* 57, no. 1 (2015), 117.

10. Pearl James, *The New Death: American Modernism and World War I* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 1-2.

11. Winifred Margaretta Kirkland, *The New Death* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 1.

12. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 54-55.

13. Ezra Pound, "Canto I," in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 3-4.

14. Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 2006), 20. Henceforth abbreviated *NW*.

15. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2-3. Hereafter abbreviated *NF*.

16. Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 123-27

17. Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (New York: Longman's, Green, and Co., 1903), 1.

18. Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History*, 122-23.

19. Ibid.~~Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History*~~, 129.

20. See Steven Cassedy, *Connected: How Trains, Genes, Pineapples, Piano Keys, and A Few Disasters Transformed Americans at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 5.

21. Ibid.

22. Nancy K. Bristow, "'It's as Bad as Anything Can Be': Patients, Identity, and the Influenza Pandemic," *Public Health Reports (1974—)* 125, supplement 3: The 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic in the United States (2010), 27.

~~23. Paul Fairfield, *Death: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2015), 19.~~

24. Djuna Barnes, "How It Feels to Be Forcibly Fed," in *Vivid and Repulsive as the Truth: The Early Works of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Katharine Maller (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2016), 38.

25. Ibid., 39.

26. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 313 (III.Def.Em13). Henceforth abbreviated *E*. I use the following shorthand in addition to page numbers when citing from the *Ethics*: Roman numerals signify parts; "P." signifies a proposition; "Exp." signifies an explication; "Schol." signifies a scholium; "Def.Em" signifies one of the

Definitions of the Emotions from part III; and "Gen.Def.Em" signifies the General Definition of Emotions that Spinoza gives at the end of part III.

27. Judith Butler, "The Desire to Live: Spinoza's *Ethics* Under Pressure," in *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 80.

28. Omri Moses, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 20.

29. Ibid., 1-3.

30. On Spinoza's ontology of relation, see the second chapter of Vittorio Morfino's *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser*, trans. Jason E. Smith (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 46-71.

31. See Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988) 50; Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999), 53.

32. Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 85-87.

33. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 95.

34. This account of hope could be usefully contrasted with that of José Esteban Muñoz, who recognizes its "anticipatory" affective structure, but takes a Blochian approach that sees hope as the basis of a renewed model of queer utopianism. See *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1-4. Hereafter abbreviated *CU.*

35. Deleuze remarks of affective encounters in a 1978 lecture that~~underscores this point in an incisive remark on affective encounters from a 1978 lecture:~~ "Spinoza means something very simple, that sadness makes no one intelligent." See Deleuze, "Spinoza: 24/01/1978," *Les Cours de Gilles Deleuze*. Accessed November 17, 2016, http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=14&groupe=Spinoza&langue=2.

36. In the wake of pioneering feminist readings by Jane Marcus and others that prompted the Barnes revival of the 1990s, ~~the status of T. S.~~ Eliot's relationship to Barnes has been hotly debated. See~~Marcus, "Laughing at Leviticus:~~

~~*Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic," in *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 221-50. Miriam Fuchs, Georgette Fleischer, and Monika Faltejskova give important accounts of that relationship. See~~ Miriam Fuchs, "Djuna Barnes and T. S. Eliot: Authority, Resistance, and Acquiescence," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 12, no. 2 (1993), 288-313, Georgette Fleischer, "Djuna Barnes and T. S. Eliot: The Politics and Poetics of 'Nightwood'," *Studies in the Novel* 30, no. 3 (1998), 405-37, and Monika Faltejskova, *Djuna Barnes, T. S. Eliot and the Gender Dynamics of Modernism: Tracing Nightwood* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

37. Faltejskova, *Djuna Barnes, T. S. Eliot and the Gender Dynamics of Modernism*, 101-02.

38. ~~If~~ Barnes likely read~~is indeed referring to the *Ethics*, and is reading it in translation, she is likely reading~~ one of the widely-reprinted translations of R. H. M. Elwes or Hale White, both from the 1880s. See Wayne Boucher, *Spinoza in English: A Bibliography from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), 1-6.

39. Nieland anticipates this direction by framing O'Connor's humor as "a faculty of survival, a conative faculty in the Spinozan sense," though he does not elaborate upon the comparison. See *Feeling Modern*, 229.

40. Danzer, "Between Decadence and Surrealism," 239.

41. See Bonnie Roos, *Djuna Barnes's Nightwood: The World and the Politics of Peace* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), especially 128-132, for an allegorical reading of O'Connor that connects his double association with life and death to the political and cultural contexts of the interwar period.

42. Louis F. Kannenstine, *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 110-11.

43. Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 19.

44. Susan Sontag, "On Style," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), 18.

45. Monica Kaup, "The Neobaroque in Djuna Barnes," *Modernism/modernity* 12, no. 1 (2005), 106.

46. Smith, "The Language of Loss," 197.

47. David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 185.

48. T. S. Eliot, introduction to *Nightwood*, by Djuna Barnes (New York: New Directions, 2006), xxi.

49. Faltejskova, *Djuna Barnes, T. S. Eliot, and the Gender Dynamics of Modernism*, 103.

50. It is in a similar sense that Lee Edelman has rejected the ethical category of "the good," which depends, for him, on an essentially heteronormative conception of the self as stable and knowable, and a concomitant idealization of futurity as the reproduction of a heteronormative present. See Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 5. Hereafter abbreviated *NF*.

~~51. Though my conception of impersonality is inflected primarily by Spinoza and Deleuze, I would be remiss not to mention Sharon Cameron's rich work on the concept in the context of American literature. See Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).~~

52. These page numbers and text refer to Hale White's translation, *Ethic: Demonstrated in Geometrical Order and Divided into Five Parts* (London: Trübner & Co., 1883). I refer to White's translation ~~here~~ because his language ~~more closely~~ resembles O'Connor's~~that of O'Connor~~ and would have been available to Barnes at the time she was writing *Nightwood*.

53. Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: Los Angeles, 1999), 123-24.

54. For a more recuperative reading of this scene, see Nieland, *Feeling Modern*, 247-49.

55. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 120. Hereafter abbreviated *QAF*.

56. Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 176.

57. Ibid., 174.

~~58. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 133.~~