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**“What an autopsy I’ll make, with everything all which ways in my bowels!”:  
the intracorporeal landscapes of Djuna Barnes**

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In a pivotal scene in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936), Doctor Matthew O’Connor meanders off-topic into a fantasy of self-autopsy:

What an autopsy I’ll make, with everything all which ways in my bowels! A kidney and a show cast of the Roman races; a liver and a long-spent whisper, a gall and a wrack of scolds from Milano, and my heart that will be weeping still when they find my eyes cold, not to mention a thought of Cellini in my crib of bones, thinking how he must have suffered when he knew he could not tell it for ever – (beauty’s name spreads too thick). And the lining of my belly, flocked with the locks cut off love in odd places that I’ve come on, a bird’s nest to lay my lost eggs in, and my people as good as they come, as long as they have been coming, down the grim path of ‘We know not’ to ‘We can’t guess why.’ (*Nightwood* 90)

His envisaging of his internal topography presents a confusion of organs and body parts – the kidney, liver, gall bladder, heart, eyes, bones, and stomach lining – jostling for space alongside objects and metaphors, a cabaret chorus line representing ancient history, intangible memories, whispers, and thoughts. This imagined physiological exploration is the opposite of a sterile, careful, controlled autopsy. Literal and figurative meanings and functions of body parts never settle; they are in a constant state of destabilisation. The form, too, derails the reader; the second sentence of this passage is clearly a list of the objects “all which ways” in his bowels, while in the third sentence, subjects and verbs become muddled: are his people flocking his stomach lining or is he laying them in his nest with his lost eggs? The body is unmade and remade through words, its different parts personified and mythologised, as Barnes creates her own vocabulary of the internal. She coins a collective noun – “a wrack” – for a group of “scolds”, itself more recognisable as a verb than a noun. Amongst the confusion of body parts and influences, the neologisms and evasive grammar further set us off track from familiar linguistic pathways of understanding; the narrative and its clarity become likewise lost on the “grim path” of not knowing to not guessing why (*Nightwood* 90).

This quotation encapsulates what I am calling the “intracorporeal landscape”, a term I have borrowed from a medical study examining how patients visualise pain within their bodies (Moore et al 2). I enlist it here to refer to the manifestation of emotions and memory as physical

landmarks in and amongst the topography of concealed and invisible organs. This form of fictional description signals three striking things about Barnes and her writing. First, her interest in human biology which draws on, though is not faithful to, medicine and science. Second, her desire to perform literary experimentation via bodily exploration which produces an aesthetics of the inside. Third, her interest in the agency of bodily matter beyond human control. As the quotation above demonstrates, Barnes holds the organs at least partially responsible for the formation of identity; she rejects a definition of the self which is purely cerebral and insists on the role of the body in self-making. As such, the intracorporeal in her writing might be a conscious dramatization of the psyche-soma schism occurring in medicine in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Barnes's description certainly rejects medical realism as the function of organs and systems deviate from medical fact. The organs in *Nightwood* do not stay within their bounds; they have agency that extends beyond the bodies that house them. The non-human elements in O'Connor's autopsy seem almost prescient of posthuman theories of the body, or the Human Microbiome Project findings since 2012: that we contain more alien bacteria cells in the microbiome than human body cells, both of which decentre a conception of the human self as a contained and singular entity (Farré-Maduell 1).<sup>1</sup>

The significance of the body's internal biology has been a blind spot in Barnes's criticism. Analyses of the body in her work tend to focus on the surface and the social, often using the lens of the carnivalesque, for example to show how taboo and marginalised bodies reject stratified categories of normal and abnormal (Marcus 1991), grotesque bodies create feminist countermyths (Stevenson 1991), animal-human hybrids offer provocative political commentary (Goody 2007), or pregnant men evoke uncanny biofuturity (Davison 2010). Others consider how bodies interact with form; how her poetry reclaims the image of the female corpse as a fertile and flowering source of inspiration (Parker 2016), or how images of allegoric dismemberment in her prose perform a deliberate assault on traditional myth and symbol (Armond 2012). These perceptive readings can, I argue, be extended through examining Barnes's visualisations of what lies beneath the surface.

Barnes was irritated by her friend Peter Neagoe's comment that *Nightwood* held "not one note of cheer" (*qtd. in* Pender and Setz 1). She wrote to another friend, Emily Holmes Coleman: "who wants cheer of any kind except truth? [...] split the most beautiful woman in half and is it cheering in his sense? No. In mine yes, to see the guts and gall and heart embroiled in that pit out of which beauty boiled" (*qtd. in* Pender and Setz 1). While critics note the appropriateness of the guts and gall to Barnes's work, they continue to shy away from them. The essays in the wonderful 2018 collection *Shattered Objects: Djuna Barnes's Modernism* productively consider the exuberant nature of her bodily grotesque; you can see this in Winning's chapter "Djuna Barnes, Thelma Wood, and the Making of the Lesbian Modernist Grotesque" in particular. The editors open their introduction with the extract above from Barnes's letter to Coleman, and indeed named the collection after a marginal annotation Barnes made in the same letter: "there is always more surface to a shattered object than a whole object" (Pender and Setz 1). While they acknowledge that the pit containing the guts and gall is compelling, they focus instead on the shattered object, and by extension, fragments and surface, for their definition of Barnes's particular form of modernism: "As a description of beauty and of the art of storytelling, Barnes's 'shattered object' challenges readers to find their own understanding... her 'shattered objects' imply a celebration of mere surface, not of depth" (Pender and Setz 1). Yet Barnes's writing insistently pictures the body's interior, its passages, organs, and guts. The grotesque does not stop at the surface but delves inward, producing a carnivalesque of the inside. The body is turned inside out in a display of interiority that mocks psychoanalysis through an insistence on physiological mapping. I am interested in Barnes's joyful exploration of the depth beneath the surface: the guts and gall and heart embroiled in

that pit out of which beauty boiled, the innards which she aligns with "truth", and terms her own version of "cheering".

An interest in the internal organs is particularly appropriate for modernist literature's obsession with surface and depth. Indeed, Barnes's interest in internal biology was not unique among her contemporaries. Gottfried Benn and W. Somerset Maugham for example, both of whom trained as physicians, channelled their medical knowledge into their literary productions; Benn's 1912-1913 medical autopsy reports are even considered by some scholars as part of his poetic oeuvre (Höcker 2013). Thomas Mann's fascination with X-ray technology is key to the plot of *The Magic Mountain* (1924), as Ulrika Maude notes, exemplifying modernist resistance to "the body's reduction to mere text or code, insisting instead on the body's fleshly, visceral nature" (Maude 2009, 119). Barnes's stance on the intracorporeal is distinctive. Not only does she resist realist depictions of medicine, modern surgery, and technology, but pokes fun at penetrative, masculine examinations of bodies – living or dead. She rejects the detached medical gaze to foreground instead experiential, subjective understandings of and encounters with the body and its innards. As I discuss later, she unites a celebratory taboo in the spirit of James Joyce – the eating of offal, the detailing of base bodily functions – with parodic medical discourse. Her creative descriptions of disruptive internal organs suggest the potential for reconceptualising identity through the inner workings of the human body.

Barnes's imaginative explorations of the internal body often take the form of a journey of discovery. This article maps these explorations in her most famous novel *Nightwood*, which follows the lives of Felix, Robin, Nora, and Jenny, locked in a destructive and painful love quartet, while Doctor Matthew O'Connor tries to help and heal to no avail. I will also look at her earlier novel *Ryder* (1928), an epic family chronicle set in the nineteenth century, which presents the legend of Wendell Ryder and his family: his mother Sophia, his wife Amelia, live-in mistress Kate-Careless, and numerous children. *Ryder* employs multiple antiquated narrative styles and literary forms, many parodying medieval and renaissance texts, and also includes a series of faux woodcut illustrations by Barnes. Several of the illustrations were censored by the New York Post Office on publication, as were certain passages of the text, for depictions of bodies deemed grotesque or distasteful, including women urinating. I draw in part on Thomas Heise's 2009 article, which argues that a defining feature of *Nightwood* and Barnes's early journalism is an active opposition to urban planning and sanitation. He demonstrates that both the unclean underworld of the city, and the bodies of Barnes's characters, appear as sites of resistance "to a modern madness for order and sexual normativity" (308). His perceptive analysis of Barnes's bodies mirroring the "debased urban geographies" of the city as they are "bifurcated into clean and unclean realms, practices, and desires" speaks to my reading of the landscapes and topographies of the internal (308; 312). Yet by expanding my analysis from the cityscapes of *Nightwood* to the lesser-studied *Ryder* which Heise circumvents, I aim to reveal a continuity in Barnes's interest in the internal body which goes beyond a critique of urban political economy; that she sees it as fundamental to both her literary aesthetics and her understanding of self and identity. Taking my cue from O'Connor, this article aims to explore the chaotic interior body as Barnes depicts it, and to argue that she uses the intracorporeal to experiment with both narrative and aesthetics. To prevent us getting lost in the bowels of the body, I will put two specific organs under scrutiny: the heart and the kidney. By examining the uncontrollable agency and shifting meanings of these two organs in *Ryder* and *Nightwood*, I hope to show how Barnes's writing aims to liberate the self from medical and patriarchal narratives of disorder and normalcy. Before inspecting these organs, it is pertinent to consider how Barnes subverts the typical positionality of the medical gaze.

### "Susceptible orbs": The Medical Gaze

Doctor O'Connor, who acts as our tour guide through the intracorporeal landscape, fittingly appears in both novels, reinforcing Barnes's ongoing exploration of the internal body. As a representative of medicine in Barnes's work, O'Connor unsettles the model of masculine medical authority in several ways. He is a subversive, flawed and damaged healer, by his own admission unlicensed, suffering from shattered nerves, a crossdresser – or early literary representation of a trans woman (Shin 2014 and Dolan Kautz 1995) – who longs for an organ his body does not possess: "a womb as big as the king's kettle" (*Nightwood* 81). While he dominates the narrative of *Nightwood* with his rambling and meandering speeches, he is more peripheral in *Ryder*, in which he is a general practitioner, a midwife to all the local women, and philosopher of history. He is, however, granted a stream-of-consciousness monologue, "Chapter 32: The Soliloquy of Dr. Matthew O'Connor":

What with a dilater on my hip and the diseases and distresses and distempers of man, and what they are prone to, coming into my mind, and before my eyes, and me restless, it's a devil a bit of peace I'll get, says I, banging my head against the scrofula and the tapeworm and the syphilis and the cancer and the pectoris and the mumps and the gleet and the pox of mankind, I says, and me with my susceptible orbs staring down into and up through the cavities and openings and fissures and entrances of my fellowmen, and following some, and continuing others, and increasing many, and them swelling and opening and contracting and pinching like the tides of the sea, and me a mortal like the sea with my ebb and flow, and my good heart, and my thundering parts and my appetites and my hungers. (*Ryder* 137)

O'Connor's delve inside the body is characterised by both helplessness and power. While banging his head against diseases implies a haphazard, even futile attempt at treatment, he has an authoritative insight into the body's secret interior. He can actively follow, continue, and increase internal passageways, but they also have a life of their own in their movements, and he is swept along as they become a seascape. As in *Nightwood*, the confusion of contents in the body results in a confusion of grammar; the lack of punctuation sweeps the reader along through lists and openings. O'Connor claims his own character mimics this tidal quality, an ebbing and flowing, unsettling the image of a hypermasculine explorer of uncharted lands through his strong association with traditionally feminine symbolism. However, as Lisa Cartwright's important study of medicine and cinema testifies, in the early 1900s "the sensory body of the medical observer and its perceptual apparatus" had to become liquid: "sight must become more like the blood: fluid, pervasive, and unfixed from a locale" (82). O'Connor's sensory apparatus, his "susceptible" rather than "perceptual" orbs, suggests difficulty in maintaining a detached doctorly role. In the final line, medical observation becomes enmeshed with his own uncontrollable biological urges, his thundering parts, appetites, and hungers. Immediately after this he acknowledges that his insight can be hampering and dislocating, as he becomes "lost in my bowels like a little child crying against the great darkness of myself" (*Ryder* 138), an anxious and vulnerable depiction of medical authority.

This soliloquy anticipates the narrative move from surface to depth which will become central to *Nightwood*. The nineteenth-century O'Connor of *Ryder*, occupied with the scrofula of mankind, is carried along the passages or fissures that expand and contract in a seemingly random and uncontrollable fashion, and becomes "lost" in the intracorporeal landscape. In *Nightwood*, now middle-aged and having relocated to Paris, he is an unlicensed gynaecologist, First World War veteran, and endless storyteller – in his terms, "the greatest liar this side of the moon". Barnes again relates medical procedures using scopic and spiritual imagery. O'Connor notes that "the great doctor", in his exploration of the body, "closes one eye, the eye that he studied with, and putting his finger on the arteries of the body says: 'God, whose

roadway this is, has given me permission to travel on it also,' which, heaven help the patient, is true; in this manner he comes on great cures" (*Nightwood* 28-9). From the susceptible orbs of *Ryder*, the doctor's eye is now granted godly insight, and his finger placed reverently on the arteries. Once again designating the body's passages as a roadway, he further frames the interior as a landscape which the medical profession has been granted permission to explore, but that results in cures being stumbled upon more than studied for.

O'Connor's figurative closing of one eye invokes the act of looking through a microscope. Indeed, Barnes's linguistic journeying around the body's insides can be contextualised alongside medical developments and technologies that enabled real intracorporeal exploration. The early twentieth century witnessed the rapid development of theories of bodily process, and technologies which enabled a deeper understanding of the body. Cartwright reveals how, in this era, "the observed body comes to be viewed as a vehicle, a site of living processes" and identifies a medical quest "to chart the body's imperceptible nonsites (blood flow, minute tissue growth, nerve action)" (Cartwright 82). Increasingly powerful microscopes allowed doctors to see small and intimate bodily interactions, and cell theory finally became predominant after decades of doubtfulness. An increasingly bacterial or germ-based understanding of disease was accompanied by research into vitamins and micronutrients, and a burgeoning understanding of the importance of healthy gut flora. In 1902, secretin was identified by Bayliss and Starling, which heralded the discovery of hormones and neurotransmitters, giving rise to debates about how nerves and organs communicate. In 1909 the Kroghs conducted experiments demonstrating that oxygen transmitted through the body via diffusion rather than respiration, instigating a view of the organs as porous, pervious, and more passive than was previously thought (Cartwright 92). Medicine was benefitting from the increasing use of X-rays: a revolutionary alternative to post-mortem autopsy – not to mention live animal vivisection – that allowed for the first time a view of the internal human body while it was alive, that is, while the organs were going about their business. Barnes's linguistic explorations are certainly conscious of these advances, but also transcend them: because her writing is not restricted by realism, she can perform an imaginative, fantastical, celebratory rummage through the bowels of the body.

Some of Barnes's key influences are, by contrast, consciously retrograde. Max Nordau's infamous diatribe *Degeneration* (1895) is a source text which haunts these two Barnes novels. It surfaces in moments of direct parody, such as the increasing animality or devolution of the characters, but also in echoes of his phrasing in her prose. While Nordau's influence on Barnes's writing is widely acknowledged (Shin 2015; Seitler 2001; Heise 2009), the link has not yet been made to the attention she gives to the internal organs. Nordau's chapter on "the psychology of ego-mania" offers a pseudo-medical explanation for what he perceives as widespread degeneration: that it is symptomatic of "a profound organic disorder" which produces "the great emotionalism of the degenerate" (Nordau 242-3). He argues that a degenerate has an unhealthily insight which he terms "coenaesthesia", a hyper-perceptiveness of "the activity of his organs" which overshadows the external world, leaving the individual unable to focus on anything except "the painful or tumultuous processes taking place in the depths of the organs" (Nordau 249; 253; 257).<sup>2</sup> Nordau denounces most writers and artists as degenerates and egomaniacs on these grounds: as quite literally naval gazing.

Coenaesthesia is markedly similar to a disorder discussed by another of Barnes's influences, Havelock Ellis, who in the *Journal of Mental Science* in 1903 reported on "internal autoscopia"; "the abnormal power of observing and representing the anatomical and functional state of the subject's own internal organs" (547). Ellis recounts a hysterical patient of Paul Sollier who, despite complete ignorance of the structure of the body, could "under certain conditions represent, or, rather, *see*, her vessels, heart, blood, lungs with bronchi and pulmonary vesicles, intestines, ovaries (described as like almonds), tubes, uterus, vagina,

muscles, tendons, skeleton, and brain" (548). Sufferers of autoscopia could not help but envisage the body from within, and communicate in hysterical detail the shape and structure of their internal organs. Ellis continues: "Although the subjects frequently use the word 'see' there is of course no actual vision; autoscopia would appear to be a representation founded on coenaesthetic sensations originating in the organs. Sollier admits, however, that the subjects often rightly describe the colours of organs, and cannot explain this" (549). This delightful mystery suggests an almost supernatural insight into the body's inner workings: a patient-centred vision which overturns the authority of the medical gaze. Barnes's own envisaging of the viscera, and her journeys through the intracorporeal landscape, are autoscopic yet imaginative, celebratory, and rebellious. She invents new and strange biological connections and elevates comparatively overlooked organs through new mythological meaning. As I will now discuss, she also deposes a traditionally venerated and symbolically loaded organ, the heart, from both its biological role and its cultural primacy.

### "The defunctive murmur in the cardiac nerve"

In *Ryder*, the heart retains some of its traditional cultural figuration as the organ of love, yet its depiction is not so typical. Barnes destabilises romantic cliché, firstly by insisting on the heart's physiological role as merely one among many organs and body parts, and secondly through its association with vomiting. "Chapter 31: No Greater Love Hath Any Man" takes the form of an exchange of sweet nothings between Wendell's son Timothy and a woman he calls his "Light-o'-Love". Timothy tells her, "I love thy heart, its beating, its tottering, its striking, its ticking, its going and coming" (*Ryder* 133). The heart is no abstract metaphor; its functional action, its role as an organ, is what he loves. Its erratic behaviour implies the feel of its beats against his body, suggesting that the whispering of these endearments takes place during sex. She responds by imagining his internal body, expanding the focus from the heart alone in a penetrating and exploratory intimacy: "thy small gut and great gut, thy liver and lights, thy tendons and muscles, thy tongue and its roots, thy belly and backsides, thy hands and thy feet, thy faults and thy fairness, are as pity and pride, as love and as hate" (*Ryder* 133). Her colloquialism "liver and lights" – the latter meaning lungs – changes the meaning of Timothy's endearment for her, his "Light-o'-Love", from an abstract play on "light of my life", to the lung of love, that which gives breath by drawing in life-giving oxygen. However, the term "liver and lights" is more commonly applied to animal innards and entrails, especially for eating in the form of offal, inviting the association of desire as an almost cannibalistic hunger, and evoking the human body's meatiness.

The imagery of consuming is key to this encounter. Timothy declares, "the wax in thy ear is as honey, as spice, an unguent, as barley, as truffles and cake, as mead and as sleep, as slumber and death" (*Ryder* 133). His description of her bodily qualities falls into couplets mixing recognisable binary oppositions with more incongruous pairings, suggesting a logic which is then withdrawn, a linguistic playfulness reflected in numerous scattered half rhymes, "thy thickness and thinness, thy roundness and flatness, thy wet and thy dry. Thy hair and thy skin, thy fat and thy lean, thy gristle and gravy, thy blood and thy bone... thy fainting and feigning, thy sweet and thy stinking, thy functions and laving, clean and unclean" (*Ryder* 134). Barnes writes of guts and of functions, of the body's interior and its products, as worthy of attention, devotion, arousal, love. To readers today, this might recall Joyce's scatological love letters to Nora Barnacle, though Barnes could not have read these while she was writing *Ryder*. It is possible that Barnes is conjuring Nordau in this erotic encounter, to subvert his discussion of degenerate perversions of normalcy. Nordau asserts that in perversion of taste, a degenerate:

seeks greedily to swallow all that ordinarily provokes the deepest repugnance, i.e., is instinctively recognised as noxious, and rejected for that reason—decaying organic

matter, ordure, pus, spittle, etc. In perversion of smell he prefers the odours of putrefaction to the perfume of flowers. In perversion of the sexual appetite he has desires which are directly contrary to the purpose of the instinct, i.e., the preservation of the species. (260)

Timothy's praising of her ear wax as manna but also death suggests just such perverted consumption of something noxious; his joy at her sweet, her stinking, her "functions", suggests perversion of smell. If indeed Barnes has this passage in mind, we can read this heterosexual encounter as a parody of perversion which mocks Nordau's critique of non-procreative desire (and, by implication, homosexuality). Timothy tells his Light-O'-Love, "I spew and upgorge thee, I drink and devour thee, I hold thee and keep thee, I renounce thee and cast thee away from my heart" (*Ryder* 134). The spewing is a violent image of bodily rejection; Barnes's neologism "upgorge" reverses the action of gluttonous consuming, suggesting the coming back up of what has been devoured. In another odd reversal, this expulsion formally precedes rather than follows the drinking and devouring. The chapter is exemplary of how Barnes's writing repeatedly thwarts logical structures, both of language and of the body.

Timothy's back-and-forth holding then renouncing of the lover from the heart, while again suggesting the physical movements of copulation, also implies contradictory passions that at once want to consume the lover, absorbing them into one's system, and the simultaneous self-protective impulse to distance or expel them. Upgorging, spewing, or vomiting is an image which is repeated in the novel in relation to the heart, and in the context of familial love as well as romantic. A grandmother-granddaughter relationship is described thus, "Sophia offering her heart for food, Julie spewed it out on a time, and said, 'I taste a lie!'" (*Ryder* 16). Wendell's mistress Kate Careless, furious at the prospect of bearing him yet another child, berates him: "I'll spew out my own heart in my own way, but you shall be father to it!" (*Ryder* 171). The sensations of love and heartbreak are intensely corporeal; provoking what contemporary scholars might call abjection (Shin 2015). The vomiting up of the heart is not only self-protective, but inherently self-destructive: an expelling of the organ typically perceived as the centre of the self and the determinate of life. This is reiterated in *Nightwood* in the doctor's final speech, which cautions, "everyman dies finally of that poison known as the-heart-in-the-mouth. Yours is in your hand. Put it back. The eater of it will get a taste for you; in the end his muzzle will be heard barking among your ribs" (*Nightwood* 126).

*Nightwood's* plot is fundamentally shaped by heartbreak, and yet the heart is repurposed from its traditionally romantic symbolism and instead related to nineteenth-century socio-medical discourses of inheritance, evolution, and degeneration. From the opening lines of the novel, the heart directs the reader to the influence of biology in the construction of selfhood. Guido prepares a heart for his coming child, fashioned on his idealisation of nobility, the "genuflexion the hunted body makes from muscular contraction" (*Nightwood* 2). Social status is framed as a food chain, the nobility versus the hunted, the fitting of oneself into a Darwinian framework of survival and competition. Guido's own barony is later revealed to be a fabrication, itself "fashioned" rather than inherited; his guilty awareness of his counterfeit nobility is likewise passed on to his son Felix, "it had made Guido, as it was to make his son, heavy with impermissible blood" (*Nightwood* 2-3). Later, the doctor frames heart and nerve problems as a universal malady affecting muscles and movement, "the defunctive murmur in the cardiac nerve has given us all our gait" (*Nightwood* 115). The heart and its vagaries are responsible for the gait or walk, characterised by widespread convulsion, involuntary muscular contraction, and the recurrent imagery of bowing down and going down throughout the novel.

O'Connor, making a misogynistic comment about how women will always find a reason to weep, states, "if one gave birth to a heart on a plate, it would say 'Love' and twitch like the lopped leg of a frog" (*Nightwood* 24). This image recalls the experiment involving

stimulating frogs' hearts and the vagus nerve which won Otto Loewi the Nobel Prize in 1921. Loewi's findings were key to the emerging science of endocrinology, as well as debates over how nerves and organs communicate: either through electrical impulses or chemical hormones. Rather than the two convulsing frog hearts involved in Loewi's experiment, Barnes evokes an *in vitro* talking heart of unspecified species, and a twitching frog's leg, seeming to foreshadow the defunctive murmur in the cardiac nerve that affects the gait. We could consider O'Connor's flippant comment a deliberate disordering of Loewi's experiment, Barnes perceiving imaginative potential for exploring what else is nestled in amongst the organs and bones: her own *in vitro* experiments in the literary sphere.

However, experimental frogs have a much longer history. Since the seventeenth century, frogs have been fundamental to the scientific understanding of how the inside of the body works, moves, and convulses, their active post-mortem tissue making them particularly suited to physiological experimentation; in the 1850s the physician Hermann Helmholtz called frogs "the old martyrs of science" (*qtd. in* Holmes 311). It is possible to kill a frog but leave its heart still functioning, hence their usefulness for Loewi. Frogs' legs had long been essential to studies of muscular contraction and the nervous system. O'Connor's statement thus recalls, perhaps more so than Loewi's experiment, a history of experiments on frogs' legs, and particularly the theories of galvanism; that animal bodies are animated by electrical power. Frog hearts, in Loewi's experiment, became new proof of the opposite; that synapses communicated not by electrical impulses but via hormones. The resulting debates became known as "the war of the soups and the sparks" (Valenstein 2005). O'Connor's throwaway comment about women and emotionality seems to encompass the transition from a nervous to a hormonal understanding of the body. Barnes enacts a return to nineteenth century understandings of the nervous system disordering the organs while simultaneously alluding to contemporary theories of hormones that would come to define emotionality, particularly in women's bodies.

So how does this map onto the central plot of heartbreak? O'Connor comments, "I, as a medical man, know in what pocket a man keeps his heart and soul, and in what jostle of the liver, kidneys and genitalia these pockets are pilfered. There is no pure sorrow. Why? It is bedfellow to lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall!" (*Nightwood* 20). The heart is displaced from the centre of the body into a pocket, rendered vulnerable to theft due to the disorderly movements of other organs. O'Connor indicates that sorrow and suffering can form a physical presence in amongst the body's organs and skeleton. His self-proclaimed wisdom as a medical man here is destabilised when he later admits he is "not a licensed practitioner", a move from the great doctor with godly insight, to the uncertain authority of an insightful charlatan (*Nightwood* 32). Charlatan or not, his diagnosis plays out in Nora's body, though whether figuratively or physically is unclear. The narrator tells us:

Love becomes the deposit of the heart, analogous in all degrees to the 'findings' in a tomb. As in one will be charted the taken place of the body, the raiment, the utensils necessary to its other life, so in the heart of the lover will be traced, as an indelible shadow, that which he loves. In Nora's heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora's blood. (*Nightwood* 50-51)

Within Nora's body, love produces a residue: emotions and traumatic experiences are impurities that the body struggles to process or dispose of. These remains develop into a fossil which begins feeding off its host, parasitically sustained by Nora's blood. Love – or rather, heartbreak – is demarcated as a material presence, potentially poisonous. The imagery of tomb discoveries further evokes the concept of bodily exploration, while recalling Freud's archaeological metaphor for uncovering buried memories. It also recalls his description of



hysteria as a deposit of trauma, still present long after the event, "we view hysterical symptoms as the effects and remains of excitations that had influenced the nervous system as traumas" (*Nightwood* 81). Yet reiterating O'Connor's insistence that sorrow is bedfellow to lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall, Nora's emotions manifest as a foreign body, sentiment made sediment. This might seem a purely figurative description of the physical pain of emotion. Yet it is suggestive of calcification, the build-up of a hard fossilised deposit in the body, most familiarly as kidney stones. In fact, while the heart does appear many times, it is another organ, the kidney, designed to process impurities in a way that the text implies the heart cannot, which holds court in the novel.

### **"No greater truth than the kidney will allow"**

In *Ryder*, Julie spews out her grandmother's heart because she tastes a lie. Conversely, in *Nightwood*, O'Connor asserts that "no man can find a greater truth than his kidney will allow" (*Nightwood* 75). While the heart is deceitful, the kidney is the source of great truth; the primacy of the heart as the central organ of the body is overthrown. The kidney is accorded authority and agency; the finding of the greater truth is implied to be contingent on the kidney allowing access to it. What further significance does this organ possess? Unlike the heart or the liver, it has no established mythological connotation. To look to biology for Barnes's meaning, the kidney's function is to purify the entire blood volume continuously, to filter it, retaining positive substances and concentrating waste into urine. This process offers a biological counterpart to the cathartic process of psychoanalysis, expunging negative matter from the body, as the talking cure aimed to rid the mind of buried traumas. If the heart is "heavy with impermissible blood" (*Nightwood* 3), the kidney processes that blood, perhaps makes it lighter, rids the blood of poison, toxins and waste residue. Barnes offers this filtration as an alternative to both psychoanalysis and to the body's reliance on the lying heart and its "defunctive murmur" (*Nightwood* 115). Rather than invoking a psychoanalytic model of narrative or speaking catharsis, Barnes points out that our bodies already perform a process of filtering and voiding. She creates her own mythology around this overlooked but fundamental piece of biological machinery.

The kidney is thus connected to truth; O'Connor also relates it to singing, self-expression, and narrative. He claims in *Nightwood* that both his song and singing voice were "better until I gave my kidney on the left side to France in the war – and I've drunk myself half around the world cursing her for jerking it out" (*Nightwood* 81). This loss of a kidney might be the reason the organ is mentioned so many times by O'Connor, as if the absence of one of his own is often on his mind, a preoccupation that emerges symptomatically in his rambling speeches. Much of what O'Connor says is, by his own admission, not necessarily true; he refers to himself as "Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor" (*Nightwood* 72). He explains to Nora his reason for telling endless stories:

Do you know what has made me the greatest liar this side of the moon, telling my stories to people like you, to take the mortal agony out of their guts, and to stop them from rolling about, and drawing up their feet, and screaming, with their eyes staring over their knuckles with misery which they are trying to keep off, saying, "Say something, doctor, for the love of God!" And me talking away like mad. Well that, and nothing else, has made me the liar I am. (*Nightwood* 122)

Lying and storytelling are here framed as medical attempts to ease pain, to distract the sufferer. Yet this parody of the talking cure suggests that a stream of meaningless words is inadequate to pacify the body out of control due to intense pain. Indeed, O'Connor stages more than one parodic subversion of the psychoanalytic encounter in *Nightwood*. Yet he also acts as a

directive to look into the body's internal passages and perform an imaginative biological exploration that reveals the influence of the intracorporeal landscape. The paths, roads, and passages he perceives within the body point to the dislocating effects of biology on identity. The implication is that this perspective is more revealing of truth than the falsity of narrative and story, a rejection of the concept of healing or recreating the self through narrative. Barnes is forging her own truth, found not in a sanitised, falsely structured version of events, but in the messy chaos and disorder of the body; in the guts and gall and heart embroiled in the pit, rather than the ordered narratives of realism.

As with the "liver and lights", the kidney also appears in animal form in *Ryder*, in "a treatise on carnivora" (*Ryder* 205). Wendell celebrates the ravishing sight of women eating meat and offal, and places women in a food chain hierarchy of flesh-eating mammals, informing us: "of all carnivora man holds woman most dear" (*Ryder* 205). Detailing a woman's consumption of a whole catalogue of meat, fish, and animal parts, Wendell views it as both erotic and spiritual, that "through her office slaughter may be transfigured" (*Ryder* 205). The woman in his imagination is nourished and strengthened, but also takes on the qualities or attributes of the meat and fish she consumes; coming to bed with a "gaming foot", slipping and swimming into slumber with "aqueous felicity": she is what she eats (*Ryder* 205). Wendell marvels, "What kidney ever laid a nation's dust, as lightly as she will lightly lay that nation's dust, when that same kidney is relieved of its vain days of miring, by her reprieve?" (*Ryder* 205). This again directly evokes Nordau in a deliberate misquote: the first chapter of *Degeneration* is entitled "The Dusk of the Nations", in which Nordau sets out his fears about the decline of civilisation and mankind "perishing in the midst of a dying world" (Nordau 1). Wendell describes the kidney's function as "miring", a verb which has several meanings: to involve in difficulties or sinfulness, hampering, entrapping; to sink into a mire and become stuck fast; to look into a mirror; to wonder. The organ's function to hamper, entrap, and stick fast recalls Wendell's boastful statement that his children will struggle their whole lives "to unravel the tangle of [their] upbringing" (*Ryder* 131). The more conceptual acts of self-reflection in the last two definitions anticipate a man being unable to find "a greater truth than his kidney will allow" (*Nightwood* 75). Miring has another meaning unique to Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is to defecate. While this function is misplaced in the kidney, it does align with Barnes's general celebration of the voiding of waste. Barnes spent a deal of time with Joyce in Paris in the early 1920s, and famously lamented "who has the nerve" to write another line after reading *Ulysses* (Barnes "James Joyce" 288); they shared this impulse to elevate taboo bodily functions. Indeed, Wendell's speech echoes modernist literature's most famous offal scoffing, Leopold Bloom's eating "with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls", and especially grilled kidneys which "gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine" (Joyce 48).

Yet, Barnes takes a distinctly feminised stance on this Joycean imagery; her deployment of the body's waste products emphasises gendered notions of vulgarity. The taboo in *Ryder* is most explicit in the persistent presence of bodily processes and fluids. We are told the story of Kate-Careless's mother, the "buxom contralto from Cork", a street opera singer whose monstrous voice reverberates against her kidneys, causing uncontrollable urination:

For a great voice was in her, beating against her heart and her lungs, a windy brute terror, tearing and strumming the nerves and the arteries of her body like some monster plucking a prison of harp strings and singing, divinely and terribly, against her kidneys, so that she could not take her rightful place on the operatic stage, but must stand athwart the gutters, singing and \*\*\*\*\* like a stupendous hound dog, and her child sitting beside playing tra la la, la la! (*Ryder* 81)

Her great voice is framed as a violent presence crashing around her heart, lungs, nerves, arteries, and kidneys. It results in an uncontrollable public performance of bodily functions, which seems to play into age-old narratives of the leaky and unruly female body. Kate's mother's predicament suggests that women are held back by their bodies from taking their rightful place. Yet, nevertheless, she must sing; the great voice which is both divine and terrible signifies a power as well as a curse. Urination is thus rendered a symbol of female self-expression. Pervasive cultural metaphors of the leaky female body are, in *Ryder*, playfully satirised and transformed into floods of urine. Performative cathartic voiding, expelling of waste, is perhaps a necessary side-effect of women having a voice, telling their stories, and being true to their talents.

Ironically, Barnes's tongue-in-cheek statement about female voice and performance instigated her own silencing and censoring by the New York Post Office. Paul West notes that "Djuna Barnes and Charles Friede, an editor from Liveright, sat there in Paris removing passages having to do with body fluids" (West 243), Barnes furiously replacing them with asterisks to signpost the "havoc" of the "nicety" of censorship (*Ryder* vii). Alex Goody confirms that "references to urination were the most heavily censored in the first edition of *Ryder*" (167). Presumably, the asterisked word in the quote above was "pissing". The chapter's accompanying illustration of a huge woman singing and urinating a downpour onto the cobbled street was likewise censored from the first edition, as were many of *Ryder*'s faux woodcut illustrations representing copious urine, vomit, and blood.

Despite Barnes's satire of the way in which imagery of flowing and flooding is used to dismiss the female voice, critics cannot resist discussing Barnes's own writing in terms of its liquidity: as overflowing, flooding, spilling. Catherine Stimpson believes that Barnes is not in control of her characters, "the author can do little more than to let their voices flow without her intervention. They go on and on, until their rhetoric floods over and drowns linguistic normalcies" (Stimpson 372). West describes Barnes's "volcanic suasion of the prose" (West 246). Like biographical readings of Barnes's work which see it as processing or working through childhood trauma, this emphasis on uncontrollable fluidity undermines her creative decision-making, her deliberate rejection of normalcies, linguistic and otherwise. In the urine-soaked prose of *Ryder*, the kidney and its products are linked to truth, self-expression, creativity, especially representing female self-expression and subverting a traditional narrative of the liquid, overflowing female body, using a taboo that was bound to offend patriarchal authorities, as a means to critique misogynistic metanarratives.

### **Conclusion: "We are but skin about a wind" (*Nightwood* 75)**

Barnes's visualisations of the body's interior, though influenced by contemporary scientific developments, aim to discover her own version of truth through imaginative explorations of the intracorporeal, rather than through realism or scientific fact. The resulting visceral mythmaking simultaneously draws on and parodies old and new science, and pseudoscientific cultural metanarratives. Her prose repeatedly performs imagined autopsies which suggest that it is in the very disorder of the internal landscape that identity is forged, overturning the expected positionality of the detached medical gaze in favour of an experiential and implicitly subjective relationship with the body. This article has focussed attention on two specific organs to demonstrate how the viscera play a role, either functionally or metaphorically, in defining selfhood in Barnes's writing. Barnes destabilises the heart's primacy as the core of the self, displacing it from the centre of the body and rejecting its link to love and romance by connecting it to vomiting and poison. The heart, she suggests, is deceitful, endangering, noxious, with a fatal flaw – a defunctive murmur. The kidney, on the other hand, provides a corrective: it has the biological ability to void poison and cleanse the blood. In an inversion of hierarchy, the toppling of one cultural symbol and the creation of another, Barnes elevates the

kidney to the bearer of great personal truth. This discussion has crossed into the realms of other organs – the lungs, the stomach, the eyes, the womb – because in narrative, as well as in body, the organs are inextricably connected and interdependent. Indeed, much exploration could continue down the twisting visceral paths that Barnes lays out for us.

My interpretation of the way in which Barnes's intracorporeal bodies overturn fixed identities and celebrate an active and perpetual dis-ordering intersects with scholarship at the crossroads of medical humanities, surgery and literature, gothic and body horror, medicine and narrative. Gothic scholarship provides some of the most productive discussion of bodies – and particularly body *parts* – as creating alternative narratives which undermine or critique patriarchal, medical, and other hierarchical models. Laura Kremmel details how the Romantic gothic tradition used non-normative bodies to critique and exploit the instability of institutional medicine, as “gothic experiments expanded the possibilities of medical theories by showing what they might look like in a speculative space without limits” (Kremmel 1). For Kremmel, the gothic's prioritisation of fear is what allows it access to non-normative bodies, which shifts medical and narrative agency to those usually considered powerless: “by harnessing the power of fear, the tropes applied to these bodies allow them to reclaim agency over their own treatments at a time when medical authority was itself in flux” (Kremmel 2). Xavier Aldana Reyes defines the category of “Body Gothic” which “puts the body at the heart of the gothic experience: it becomes a catalyst of excessive, monstrous and liberating change, and a claustrophobic token of the impossibility to escape embodied consciousness” (Reyes 64-5). Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwick's *Gothic Dissections in Film and Literature* aims to track “the multitude of ways in which fiction has incorporated anatomical features into tales of terror” (11) through chapters which isolate and examine specific body parts. They note that “in Gothic fiction, as the body is threatened, assaulted or altered, the reader or viewer is reminded that this human body, in its detail, represents our body” (8). A sustained focus on bodies in fiction and film is thus effective because it reminds the reader or viewer of their own fragile corporeality. Kremmel's speculative space without limits, Reyes' catalyst of excessive, monstrous and liberating change, and Conrich and Sedgwick's satisfying methodological approach of scrutinising individual body parts in turn, are useful models for shining a light on Barnes's explorations of the intracorporeal and her carnivalesque celebration of the non-normative. However, Barnes's writing lacks something fundamental to the gothic: its prioritisation of fear. Instead of strategically deploying terror, horror, or the uncanny, the impression her bodies and body parts offer is rather one of irreverent absurdism. Rather than fear, as Barnes said herself about *Nightwood*, the guts and gall and heart embroiled in her fiction are meant to present us with her distinctive form of cheer.

Nonetheless, the championing of individual experience in opposition to restrictive categories of normalcy speaks to Barnes's privileging of the subjective. Sarah Wasson's definition of “Medical Gothic” builds on the idea that gothic fiction can be liberatory in its depiction of disorder, adding that illness narratives – fictional or autobiographical accounts of being ill – are *always* gothic, because of their sense of “confinement, constraint, bewilderment and despair” (Wasson 4). Medical categories, which can be generalising, erase personal experience as they seek to make treatment more uniform, and the experience of illness can thus involve depersonalisation, a loss of independence and control, and the eliding of individual emotional impact. Patient-centred narratives allow a recapturing of the lived experience of illness, wresting back control from the machine of institutional medicine, and offer an alternate, even rebellious perspective (Wasson 3-4). My analysis of Barnes's writing invites parallels; she is participating in this tradition of wresting back control of the body. Yet her characters tend not to suffer from specific illnesses or disabilities; instead, she depicts all bodies as engaged in a constant process of negotiation between biology, memory, and self. She also resists standardising medical narratives by transferring most of the sense of “confinement,

constraint, bewilderment and despair" (Wasson 4) from a patient figure to her representative medical professional Doctor O'Connor, lost in his own bowels, crying against the great darkness of himself.

Should we be wary of such opulent, insistently figurative language as Barnes is fond of using in attempts to capture the experience of illness, disorder, or the human condition? This is an established concern of scholarship in the field of medicine and narrative, notably since Susan Sontag's foundational *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), which demonstrated that metaphor can have a powerfully negative impact on sufferers. More recent interventions have reassessed the value of metaphor. Discussing Victorian literature, Tabitha Sparks argues that in fictional novels, "illness is metaphor [...] it can be nothing else, and as such it invites a range of interpretive freedoms and judgements that would be wholly inappropriate to extend to real life subjects or sufferers" (Sparks 140). Patricia Waugh, looking to modernist literature as "an attempt to bring the body back into language, thought and expression" (Waugh 136), notes that "although fiction cannot "write the body", literary language is in some sense more embodied, closer to and arising out of the rhythms and pulsations of the body, and more able to produce bodily effects in its readers, than the so-called transparent language of science" (Waugh 140-141). Barnes's writing is a sustained experiment with embodied language, these rhythms and pulsations. It also reminds the reader insistently of the slipperiness of that very language, suggesting that a coherent or objective narrative representation of the body and its pain is near impossible. The doctor's attempt to explain the "Great Enigma" of life and love to Nora in *Nightwood* includes the phrase, "we are but skin about a wind, with muscles clenched against mortality" (75). At first glance this phrase implies the body beneath the skin is insubstantial or intangible, consisting of air, breath, or even intestinal gas. Metaphorically, wind can signify force, or change, or a hint of new knowledge. Barnes's fondness for archaic and obscure terminology may also indicate the evocation of 'wynd' – a narrow street or passage – which, like the related verb 'to wind' suggests twisting progress, moving along the meandering paths and passageways of the intracorporeal landscape, "coming furiously up the furlongs of the iris" (*Nightwood* 75). This is characteristic of this space, leading us at once to nothing and everything, like the doctor's speeches which somehow encompass mere hot air and profound insight. Language itself is untrustworthy, "we are full to the gorge with our own names for misery" and thus "should look well around, doubting everything seen, done, spoken, precisely because we have a word for it, and not its alchemy" (*Nightwood* 75). Words and names, Barnes suggests, should not be trusted because they cannot encompass the ongoing transformations of their referents.

This journey is also, according to Barnes herself, an aesthetic quest, a hunt for the origins of beauty: that pit out of which *beauty* boiled. Waugh points to Francis Bacon as an example of visual art which is full of "bodies hovering between meat and machine, softness and hardness, solidity and fluidity; bodies fragmented, tortured and suffering without means of redemption or sense of self-possession" (Waugh 144). Edward Juler looks to art contemporary to Barnes in a superb analysis of aesthetics and autoscopia, arguing that the visual externalisation of the viscera in Surrealist art created a deliberate, ironic autoscopic aesthetic, as an antidote to hygienist ideal of the vigorous, classical, muscular body which was "promoted as a remedy to modernism's ills" (Juler 360). He explains:

Conceived as a festering cauldron of unconscious desires, endocrine flows and sanguineous currents, the visceral system proffered a fulminous alternative to the hygienist image of the body. To the Surrealists especially, the lubricity of the body's subcutaneous provinces – in which hormones, appetites and digestive juices freely waxed and waned – volunteered a challenge to the hygienist claim that all bodies,

correctly managed, could acquire the polished, well-toned appearance of an antique cuirass. (362)

This autoscopic aesthetic is entirely fitting for Barnes's writing, in which the organs are likewise celebrated and made visible in a polemical resistance to any sense of the body as contained or controlled, or any standardised, sanitised ideal of beauty. Rather than the classical male body subverted by the Surrealists, female beauty in *Nightwood* is framed through what is underneath the skin, "Yes, oh God, Robin was beautiful. I don't like her, but I have to admit that much: sort of fluid blue under her skin, as if the hide of time had been stripped from her, and with it, all transactions with knowledge" (*Nightwood* 121). Robin's beauty suggests flaying, and the hint of an un-human and ancient physiology which disturbs both temporality and received fact.

At the heart – or should I say at the kidney – of my perspective, then, is that Barnes is experimenting with the autoscopic imagination, creating a literary aesthetics of the viscera, through narrative experimentation with the messy and unwieldy interior. Perhaps she too felt an instinctive rebellion against the ideal of the hygienist body; certainly, she eschewed what she saw as fascist disciplines of sanitation and cleanliness. In *Ryder* and *Nightwood*, Barnes's autoscopy also parodies entrenched medico-social metanarratives such as that of Max Nordau, and offers alternatives to a solely psychological or cerebral definition of selfhood. Her depiction of the body is in part a return to pre-psychoanalytic, nineteenth-century schools of thought regarding the central role of the internal organs and systems in mental health and illness. Yet, it is also ahead of her time in foreshadowing theories of the agency of bodily matter beyond human control, a holistic understanding of the body and mind as engaged in a random, chaotic, and inextricable interdependency. The body contains and is dependent on foreign bodies, monsters within, that might pluck our nerves and reverberate through our systems, but also help define the shifting and subjective vagaries of the self.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> While the discovery of gut microflora can be traced back to the 1840s, and their significance was beginning to be widely understood in the early twentieth century, it was not until 2012 that the Human Microbiome Project discovered that our own cells are outnumbered by colonies of bacteria living in the body (Farré-Maduell 1).

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the chapter of Nordau's psychology of ego-mania chapter of *Degeneration* in relation to Beckett, see Maude 2020.