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Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection

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Reading for Monsters

In Djuna Barnes' novel *Nightwood* (1936) the main character, Robin Vote, is pictured as a girl lost to the world, not subject to the common bonds of love and desire, almost godlike. Her alterity is emphasized in a variety of ways. She is characterized as an invert. She is described as childlike, placed in a realm that resembles the wilderness of plants and nature, and also embodies animalistic features. Like her eponym, the nightingale or robin, she is a nocturnal creature. As a nightwalker, her gender is obscured and made ambiguous by the shadows of the city; she roams the streets and, like her winged kinfolk, attracts female partners. Robin is finally portrayed as an angel-like statue, which seems ageless and, although withered, resistant to time and decay. She symbolizes a fantasy: an ephemeral but nonetheless solid presence that gives her the power to simultaneously fascinate and alarm those surrounding her.

In the early twentieth century, what was called the “invert” was conceptualized by sexology as a person of sexual deviance.¹¹ Inverts were said to exhibit confusion about their gender and were treated as outlaws or as cases for psychiatry. However, Robin is praised and admired by her friends and lovers. Though her gender and sexual inversion cause those around her to fear and be contemptuous of her, *Nightwood's* main character nonetheless gleams like a beautiful painting. The invert here becomes the exceptional love object, the deviant turns into a prince. Dr. Matthew O'Connor, yet another “inverted” character, identifies with Robin's fate and describes her lovingly as “the girl who should have been a boy and the boy who should have been a girl” (157).

Barnes's novel not only exposes the historical and cultural construction of deviance, but, more importantly, brings the “monstrosity” of social, racial, and gendered difference closer to the reader. Robin, said to be in danger of becoming “a monster with two heads” (65), avoids doing so only by constantly negotiating her otherness with her friends and lovers.¹² Moreover, she wavers between distance and closeness, detachment and intimacy, to those around her as well as the reader. In this

¹¹ See more on the history of the invert in D. Cohler.

¹² In this book, I use the term “monster” as a narrative and visual tool to disturb common distinctions and seeming borders between the self and the other, between the human and the animalistic, between the “-abled” and the disabled.

way, the book links the heroine's construction of otherness to the reader's sense of self in a way that is partly alienating, partly pleasurable. As Matthew reflects:

[What] is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read. The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting; it was inevitable that we should come upon them, for our miscalculated longing has created them. [They are] the living lie of our centuries. When a long lie comes up, sometimes it is a beauty; when it drops into dissolution, into drugs and drink, into disease and death, it has at once a singular and terrible attraction. (145-6)

In Matthew's words, one observes a fascinating synchrony between repulsion and attraction, desire and horror, romanticism and reality, truth and lie, love and hate, and masculinity and femininity. Those seeming contradictions are combined here, almost like the sensations one experiences when biting into a foul-smelling yet deliciously tasting fruit. I take them as a starting point to analyze the productivity of the simultaneously abhorrent and desirable characteristics of "gender deviance."

Matthew's monologue reflects on gender inversion and same-sex desire in the interwar years, a period when eccentric otherness, even as it flourished and became the object of scientific research, was feared and persecuted. It indicates the novel's struggle with the limits of modern perceptions of "sexual inversion" in contrast to an idealized, romantic version of gender ambiguity and homoerotic love. In this sense, the book bridges two historical phases, whose influence on contemporary normative gender and sexual identities I aim to analyze: the development of sexology in the nineteenth century and the era of the gay liberation movement in the 1960s.

The scientific study of human sexuality emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Sexology was represented by psychologists and physicians such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud, and Magnus Hirschfeld, who studied sexual behavior and function. The British sexologist Havelock Ellis coined the term "sexual inversion" to describe male homosexuality in opposition to the prevailing Victorian moralism toward sexuality (2007/1927). Ellis aimed to de-criminalize homosexuality by describing it as a congenital anomaly. Male homosexual behavior was thus not motivated by a criminal mind or psyche; rather, it was defined as a mere physical abnormality. Lesbian sexuality, however, was explained as "true inversion," which

ascribed to women who were attracted to other women the possession of masculine desire. Here, sexuality and gender identification became intertwined. Similarly, with the development of Freud's psychoanalytic studies and the synthesis of anatomical and psychological reasoning, the sexuality of fetishists, masochist, sadists, and other "perverts" was seen instead as forms of personal identity.¹³

The invert consequently embodied in one subject not only sexual diversion, but also gender variation. The seeming naturalness of true maleness or femaleness was challenged with the concept of inversion, which began to reveal sex and gender as comprising culturally institutionalized and practiced conventions.¹⁴ Representing neither one nor quite the other sex or gender, the invert finally became a figure for the fearsome disruption of the order of things. Up through the present, the invert at the same time symbolizes a poignant phenomenon of human corporeal existence: the undecidable and multiple nature of the conjunction between the self and the body. The link between bodily abnormality and non-normative behavior has been observed especially in relation to sexuality. However, other bodily markers—such as specific racial characteristics, and those signifying class, age, and non-normative physical attributes—have been stigmatized and added to a catalogue of monstrous corporeality.

In this sense, the invert and the monster share a history. While the invert was born mainly out of scientific research, the creation and celebration of monsters has taken place within everyday discourse throughout history.¹⁵ I want to focus on the coincidental, yet historically meaningful, overlap of monsters and inverts, of which *Nightwood* is a particular manifestation. In Barnes's novel, neither the invert nor the monster is explicitly brought to the reader's attention. Instead, what marks *Nightwood*'s characters as inverted and monstrous is weaved into the structure of the plot and unfolds only in the intimate encounter between the fictional figure and the reader. The creation of monstrosity thus exemplifies what Judith Halberstam has termed the "technology of monsters." In her analysis of Gothic literary fiction, she observes: "The monster's body is a machine that, in its Gothic mode, produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative" (21). The surrealist novel *Nightwood*, similar to its pre-modernist Victorian

¹³ See S.Freud, M.Hirschfeld, R.Krafft-Ebing. For an overview of the history of sexology see L.Bland & L.Doane.

¹⁴ See M. Foucault, 2003: 87. Foucault contends that, since antiquity, the monster as half-human/half-bestial creature signified a violation of the laws of nature as well as a fundamental confusion of societal laws.

¹⁵ See more on the promise of monsters in D. Haraway, 2004: 63-124.

predecessors, offers itself as an “open book” to be filled with the reader’s desire for horror and relish for repulsion. Yet, in contrast to the way most Gothic novels convey the experience of horror through abnormal embodiment, the novel also invites the reader to relate to the obscurity of identity, the transformability of personality, and the multitude of human embodiments.

In the nineteenth century, Gothic fiction produced literary monsters like Dracula, Mr. Hyde, Frankenstein’s monster, and Dorian Gray.¹⁶ Despite the age-old history and cultural legacy of monsters in Western societies, these characters arguably mark, for the first time, human difference in a specific way: the body was seen as enveloping a soul, which, as Foucault wrote in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) “[was] the prison of the body” (29-30). The monstrous therefore showed itself on the surface of the repressed body, a body that was enthralled by a monstrous soul. The figure of the monster was found simultaneously within and upon the site of the body.¹⁷

Authors of Gothic fiction combined a variety of human differences to create a versatile version of the deviant body: as Halberstam states, their monsters were made of “lumpen bodies, bodies pieced together out of the fabric of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (3). The figure of Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde is perhaps exemplary here. Dr. Jekyll produces within his own person, inside his own body, a perverse version of his respectable bourgeois body. The animalistic Mr. Hyde unites race with deviant sexuality: his small, dwarfish, ape-like appearance hides within Jekyll’s normal shape and manifests itself as a doubled body born from one being. Bodies in bits and pieces, doubled or multiplied bodies, and bodies that combine seemingly conflicting human features constitute the foreign body as abject body. At the same time, the abject body retains a certain familiarity so that it confuses the boundaries between self and other.¹⁸

In the beginning of the twentieth century sexology and psychoanalytic practices connected the figure of the monster to so-called abnormal sexualities and gender identification, like those we can see in *Nightwood*. Much later, in the mid to

¹⁶ See B. Stoker, *Dracula* (1897, reprint 1981); R. L. Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886, reprint 1981); M. Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1831, reprint 1998); O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891, reprint 1981).

¹⁷ Halberstam defines Gothic fiction in her analysis as “the rhetorical style and narrative structure designed to produce fear and desire within the reader. [...] Gothic infiltrates the Victorian novel as a symptomatic moment in which boundaries between good and evil, health and perversity, crime and punishment, truth and deception, inside and outside dissolve and threaten the integrity of the narrative itself” (2). I will use Halberstam’s definition of the Gothic in this chapter.

¹⁸ I am basing my argument on Kristeva’s interpretation of the abject: “[The abject] is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.” Kristeva, 1982: 4.

late twentieth century, social, political, and theoretical discourses developed “queerness” to account for persons who deviate from gender and sexual norms in a non-derogatory way. What were once “inverts” are today’s *queers*. What were once monsters are today’s ugly, obese, disabled, black, old, or simply *unacceptable* bodies. Hence, the normative discourses about the body are still influenced by the notion of the monster, but they have become more difficult to grasp. Their borders have become more fluid, their shades more colorful. What we see in *Nightwood*, I argue, is an intersection of these different periods.

As I will try to demonstrate, many of the descriptions of Robin refer to Gothic monster narratives as well as depict (almost contemporary) queer lives. This convergence allows me to engage in an analysis of ambiguous corporeality in a nearly a-historical way. Robin’s monstrosity is vague, ephemeral, intriguing, and seems to have paved the way for a queer embodiment that productively plays with or appropriates the figure of the monster. As such, the character Robin stands for a form of deviance or queerness that marks the flesh of Western cultural discourse and runs like veins through the construction of the human body—today as much as a hundred years ago. On the basis of this telling history of corporeal ambiguity, I elaborate the notion of queer monstrosity, which reveals that binary gender and sex classifications are too narrow to satisfactorily account for human bodies and the diversity of corporeal experiences. I focus on the “inappropriate” sexual behaviour and disturbing identities of *Nightwood*’s characters.¹⁹

In the first part of the present chapter, I will employ Judith Halberstam’s analysis of the Gothic fictional monster (1995), in which she develops a theory of the technology of monstrosity. I will draw links between Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1831) and *Nightwood* to show, on the one hand, Robin’s “monstrous” traits and, on the other, to differentiate her from her historical predecessors.

Subsequently, with the help of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity (1990; 1997) and Garrett Stewart’s account of phonemic reading (1990), I analyze the productive, yet complicit relationship between *Nightwood*’s characters and the reader. Both of those concepts theorize language as an active agent in the construction of meaning and a person’s subjectivity. Phonemic reading reflects on what is written

¹⁹ See Judith Halberstam on the notion of monstrosity as “queer category that defines the [normal] subject as at least partially monstrous.” J. Halberstam, 1995: 27. Donna Haraway discusses the monster as inappropriate/d other, which means not to fit into categorization, but primarily “not to be originally fixed by difference,” in D. Haraway, 2004: 69.

between the lines, or on signification beyond the lexical meaning of words. The theory of performativity assumes that the social use of language, or the acting out of speech, has an effect not only on the meaning of words, but also on the subjectivity of the speaker, listener, or reader. *Nightwood's* ambiguous plot urges the reader to get involved in making sense of the characters. I even contend that just to make sense of the novel its reader must actively participate in the book's production of meaning.

Third, I will reflect on *Nightwood's* affective consequence for the reader's self and his or her complicity in the construction of monstrosity. I am interested in the role of affect in the construction of monstrosity. Despite her defiance of normative identity, Robin is able to obtain desirable human characteristics. She is simultaneously dependent on and manipulative of her reader and involves her or him affectively in her own creation. Through the reader's complicity, the figure of monster is here clearly human-made and cannot be diametrically opposed to the reader's or the theorist's subjectivity. I finally claim that monstrosity can serve as a queer category that characterizes the non-normative subject as a human being who eludes taxonomy, transgresses the boundaries between self and other, and challenges fixed categorizations of identity.²⁰

Gothic Monsters

In her book on *Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monstrosity* (1995), Judith Halberstam recounts the characteristics of nineteenth-century literary monsters, comparing them to their successors in postmodern horror films. The former strongly inform the latter, yet their differences are revealing. They show the transformed role of bodies in the construction of monstrosity. Halberstam posits the Gothic monster as a metaphor for the uncertain borders around the physical body. The critical stability of binary oppositions such as outside and inside, female and male, body and mind, self and other dominated older the conception of monstrosity. Gothic novels are characterized by their simultaneous mistrust of and fascination with the hidden, the unspoken, the silent.

Contemporary representations of monsters, in contrast, are notorious for their obsession with visuality or what Halberstam terms the "obscenity of immediate

²⁰ Margrit Shildrick pointedly describes the monster in relation to the conceptions of self versus other in her discussion of Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway: "[...] the monster is not simply a signifier of otherness, but an altogether more complex figure that calls to mind not so much the other *per se*, as the trace of the other in the self." In Shildrick: 129.

visibility” (1). The Victorian fascination with human bodies’ un-knowable borders and edges becomes, a century later, an appeal for the excess of visibility. The corporeal norms that a human being approximates have changed with the development of new technologies, the emergence of photography, film, and the internet. Through the extension of networks across social classes and national borders, the battle over the boundaries between innards and the skin turned into a human struggle with the “non-human.” Through increasing virtuality and the individual’s greater physical distance from the manifestation of monstrous bodies (because of the emphasis on the visual), as well as through the influence of psychoanalysis, the horror of monstrous bodies became psychological and physical. The twentieth-century monster became “a conspiracy of bodies” (Halberstam: 27). The human body has begun to serve as a new monster machine.

Nonetheless, as Halberstam argues, the Gothic and contemporary forms of monstrosity share the disruption of categories, the destabilization of borders, and the contamination of purity. What is monstrous about all of them is often, as Margrit Shildrick (2002) observes, their embodiment: “They are [...] what Donna Haraway calls ‘inappropriate/d others’ (2004: 70) in that they challenge and resist normative human being [...] by their aberrant corporeality.” (9) Monsters are deformed, ugly, animalistic, overly sexual, big and powerful bodies. They are defined by their physicality, not their subjectivity.

Halberstam’s reading of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1831 [1998]) reveals possible analogies with *Nightwood*. One characteristic that Halberstam brings to the fore in *Frankenstein* is an essential feature of Barnes’s novel: the reader’s investment in the construction of the fictional characters. Halberstam argues that the very nature of the monster transforms the reader of monster stories into a writer: “The monster, in its otherworldly form, its supernatural shape, wears the traces of its own construction” (1993: 349). Monstrosity unsettles boundaries between linguistic categorizations (such as between human and beast, woman and man, or reader and author), questions differentiations between self and other, and consequently affects a reader’s interpretation of a text. The notion of mutual contamination between reader and character is a dominant theme in recent analyses of the Western monster discourse.²¹ When reading *Frankenstein*, Halberstam asks: “Do I read or am I written? Am I

²¹ See Halberstam, 1995: 53-85 and Shildrick: 68-86.

monster or monster maker? Am I monster hunter or the hunted? Am I human or other?” (1995: 36).

Frankenstein’s monster is human as well as monstrous. He can change from one to the other or feature both identities at the same time. By reading Gothic monster narratives as *technologies of monstrosity*, Halberstam claims a productivity that does not merely position the novel in a distanced discourse of othering the sexually deviant, the racially undesirable, or the gender-erratic person, but that allows for numerous interpretations, precisely because the monster transforms the fragments of otherness into one body.²² That body is not female, not Jewish, not homosexual, but it bears the marks of constructions of femininity, race, and sexuality.²³ Halberstam writes:

[Monsters] can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body. And even within these divisions of identity, the monster can still be broken down. Dracula, for example, can be read as aristocrat, a symbol of the masses; he is predator and yet feminine, he is consumer and producer, he is parasite and host, he is homosexual and heterosexual, he is even a lesbian. Monsters and the Gothic fiction that create them are therefore technologies, narrative technologies that produce the perfect figure for negative identity. Monsters have to be everything the human is not ... (1995: 21-22)

Consequently, the monstrous body calls attention to the plasticity or the constructed nature of its creation, calling into question the social practices that classify deviance. Those practices are exposed as inventions of normative cultural powers.

Victor Frankenstein’s scientific experiment, which leads to the creation of a horrendous monster, is an example of the failure of the opposition of truth versus fantasy or imagination. The outcome of the experiment, which has been minutely planned and rests on supposedly infallible scientific knowledge about humanness, shares more with the fearful imaginations of human wickedness than with the “normality” of the morally good person who should have been the model:

Beautiful! - Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriences only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost

²² Halberstam, 1995: 88-91.

²³ Halberstam, 1993: 337.

of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley: 57)

Frankenstein's monster blends characteristics of the beautiful human being he should have been and the visual coding of the monstrous. He is more than simply human, animal, or "other." In his mixture of classifications, Frankenstein's monster not only undoes the singular category of the monster as "other," but he also, as Halberstam writes, "throws into relief humanness, because he emphasizes the constructedness of all identity" (1995: 38).

Bearing in mind this blending of human and monstrous features, I want to refer back to Halberstam's observation that the reader of Gothic fiction actively creates the monster with her or his desire to validate the "human." The reader remakes the monster as other and alien. In Gothic monster narratives, the monster never becomes fully visible. In the case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the monster hides within the figure/body of the book's respected, "normal" character. Similarly, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the monstrous version of Dorian is both hidden in the painting, which has been banished to the attic, and in his young and beautiful body, which embodies his evil soul but that outwardly appears as a normal human self. As a consequence, these novels merely allow the reader to imagine the horrific spectacle of the monster, so that monstrosity is limited to the reader's imagination. It is this necessary element of imaginative action on the reader's part that finally makes the reader the author of the monstrosity she or he encounters.

In a similar way, Robin, I suggest, draws her reader into a world of imagination. Her rejection of unambiguous social categorizations—as well as her blurred appearance as a result of her shadowy existence—demands an active reading. Yet, in addition to giving the reader the role of author in making up Robin's personage, the novel presents the book's other characters as responsible for her shape and behavior. Robin is portrayed as a vessel, filled with the desires of her friends and lovers. They fabricate Robin as a figure, which, by way of its overdetermined form, comes to exhibit traits that turn monstrous in the reader's imagination.

Like her Gothic predecessors, Robin is staged as distant to the characters who seek her out, but dangerously close to what they desire. She is human, yet also beyond humanity. However, compared to other monsters, Robin is much less invasive. Her presence is barely perceptible: she seems more of a plain screen than the Gothic

monsters' demonstrative presence. Robin's ephemeral presence creates space for others' self-identification. In this sense, she is a clean slate on whose surface others can reinvent their own selves. But, comparable to her literary siblings, she is constructed by the fictional settings and by the reader. Through the layers of other characters' identification with Robin, she gradually grows into a body that evades clear signification. Her body becomes a patchwork of natural images, sounds, and smells; meanwhile, she stops functioning as a social agent. She becomes part of nature, silent and invisible:

Sometimes she slept in the woods; 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. (151)

Robin's "natural" anonymity makes her a being without a name, history, or place. It is this blending of a monstrous, yet almost indiscernible, "nature" that motivates my reading of *Nightwood*. The monster serves here as a trope for a figure of near-absence and anonymity. Consequently, the monster must be brought to existence, produced, by the reader.

Reading for Monsters

When *Nightwood* was published in 1936, the book was criticized as tangled and obscure. The setting changes constantly in time and space. Moreover, the plot takes place in the different characters' pasts and memories. Barnes seems to have created the book's protagonists from clay and spirited them with a life independent of their author: they are formed to produce their own muddled story.

The narrative is mainly set in Paris during the interwar period,²⁴ and unfolds through a series of monologues and dialogues between the characters. Robin Vote, a young American expatriate in France, is the primary yet most invisible character of the novel. She is the spirit, the motor, and the cause for the story. All the narratives recounted in *Nightwood* seem to exist merely to conjure up her personality. Her relationships to the other characters form the skeleton of the story. Robin marries Felix

²⁴ *Nightwood* is essentially plotless, but, as I argue in this chapter, a kind of plot is created by the reader on the basis of the novel's few signposts, such as the different characters, the cities of Paris and Vienna, and a forest in North America.

Volkbein, gets pregnant, and gives birth to their child. She then leaves him and their son and starts an intimate relationship with Nora Wood. She continues to be promiscuous. During one of Robin's sexual side-steps, she meets Jenny Petherbridge and leaves Nora for her. At the end, Robin, alone, seems to find self-fulfillment only in nature. Nora and Felix are devastated by Robin's behavior and seek advice from Dr. Mathew O'Connor, who appears to understand more about Robin than anyone else. O'Connor dominates the novel with long, drunken tirades of self-ascribed wisdom. The Irish former gynecologist is a cross-dresser and functions as spiritual advisor for Nora, Felix, and Jenny. Their lives are woven together almost out of chance. What brings them together is their various complicated and shifting relationships to Robin.

Robin is a paradoxical character. She stands in the center of everyone's attention, but does not perform her part according to societal rules. She hardly ever speaks, nor is she regularly spoken to. Rather, the other characters speak of her. Moreover, the reader does not get a clear picture of Robin, although she is represented through the eyes and speech of her lovers and the doctor. Robin seeps out of the narratives built around her. The more the other characters in the novel talk about her, the more she vanishes from the scene.

Barnes's novel exposes its readers to a seduction that is common for the reading of monster narratives. Stories such as *Frankenstein* and *Nightwood* are seductive in that they refuse to offer a clear image. Reading the monster is always linked to an act of imagination, an act of visualization. Robin seduces her reader by offering entry into an imaginary, fantastic world. Yet she simultaneously eludes visualization because she can transform herself from one thing into another. Our first impression of her is that she is a married woman who will live a mother's life. Next, the reader confronts an image of a woman who denies ever having given birth to her son and who is involved in a lesbian relationship. Here, she becomes a masculine woman, as well as being unpredictable in her desire's meanderings through the nightlife of Paris. Later, she blends with nature's landscapes and becomes almost indistinguishable from animals and plants.

Robin's tendency of slipping from one particular body, gender, and, sexual identity into their opposites – as in woman/boy or human/beast – liken her again to the monstrous figures of Gothic narratives. As Halberstam remarks:

The tendency within Gothic fiction of one thing to slip into its opposite ... makes mincemeat of any notion of binaries. This is one of the reasons that it becomes so difficult to pinpoint the political impetus of any given Gothic text but it also is what produces the multiple web of interpretations that mark Gothic as both highly readable and unreadable. (1995:179)

Nightwood's unreadability similarly expresses itself through Robin's fleeting and transforming nature. Paradoxically, the book's readability is enabled by the author's excessive recourse to visuality. The many references to paintings, landscapes, and other visual markers give the reader the illusion and thus also the motivation of seeing through and looking into Robin's world.

In the following passage, Robin is depicted as a spectacular shape-shifter, taking on the forms of a painting, a wild animal, and an actor, moving between the realms of the cultural and the natural:

Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room ... thrown in among carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of unseen *dompteur*, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-wind render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness. (31)

The *dompteur* is invisible: he tames flowers and animals from an unseen position. Visibility is the result of his work: the domesticated wilderness, rendered visible by standardization and unification. Robin belongs to this nature and becomes visible in the form of a painting that holds her within the frame of civilization and categorization.

But who acts as the *dompteur*? The reader and, to a lesser extent, the characters around Robin. The reader has the power to play with the untamed and the uncultivated. He or she is not only entitled to get involved in the story, but effectively forced to do so to make sense of the unstructured content of the book. The reader's imagination acts both as tamer and as monster-maker. In a similar fashion, Felix, Nora, Jenny, and Matthew all struggle to read Robin to form a coherent picture of her. Their desire for her ambiguity paradoxically coerces her into readable structures. She is forced into the identity of either heterosexual or lesbian womanhood or motherhood. Yet, as her ambiguity is seemingly conquered by the amorous claims of others, Robin persistently reclaims her unfixd form by fleeing from those who love her.

As if he were Robin's comrade-in-arms, Matthew reveals identity to be a fiction, an illusion developed by repressing otherness. He describes himself as a monstrous being, an ugly man, while he would have liked to have been a flaming and proud maid:

Misericordia, am I not the girl to know of what I speak? We go to our Houses by our nature - and our nature, no matter how it is, we all have to stand - as for me, so God has made me, my house is the pissing port... In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps it's that memory that haunts me. The wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future, and am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king's kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner? And what do I get but a face on me like an old child's bottom. (81)

In exposing social norms as limited to the construction of fixed identities, Matthew also addresses the reader and his or her reenactment of gender categorization. In engaging with the figure of Robin, we must be aware that the uncertainty she provokes is built into binarism. Her ambiguity refers back to the oppositions between man and woman, human and animal, homo- and heterosexual, citing each of them simultaneously. There is no third term. The reference to the "normal," which here shows its mocking side, might be experienced as the biggest threat of the monster: its disruption of meaning through its excess. Monsters cannot be contained, yet they produce ever new meanings, unsettling the ground of knowledge.

Within this aspect of the monster's role, however, I want to differentiate Robin Vote from Gothic monsters. Monsters in Gothic narratives are produced as perfect figures for negative identities, as Halberstam points out: "[They] have to be everything the human is not and, in producing the negative of human, [Gothic] novels make way for the invention of human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual" (1995: 22). Gothic monsters produce meaning through categorization, serving as normality's antithesis. Robin, conversely, is not so much a figure of negative identity as she is the creator of *non-identities*.

When Margrit Shildrick connects the history of the monstrous with postmodern feminist deployments of embodiment, she observes a certain productivity of social criticism precisely in emphasizing the body's fluidity:

As long as we resist the impulse to recapture, as it were, those undecidable and fluid forms of embodiment that mark out the monstrous, then the encounter with the strange(r) will be the grounds for a radical rethinking of the concept of the selfsame. (132)

Comparably, Robin's renunciation of identity opens up space for desires outside of binary oppositions. Not only does she challenge the "normal," but she also makes her reader invent new identities out of her or his body and desires. In Robin's case, the image of the deviant "other" turns into a pleasurable acting-out of the perverse indeterminacy of queer or transgender identities. Her gender-monstrous body serves as the stage for spectacular events of love, desire, sadness, madness, bestiality, and sexuality.

Robin's desire for nightly excursions into the gloomy underworld, her sexual attraction to men, women, nature, and animals, as well as her boyish physiognomy (even after having given birth), make her a queer and gender-crossing person. Her loneliness, her wandering and not belonging, her evasion of visual categorization identify her as neither quite man nor quite woman, neither hetero- nor homosexual, neither human nor beast. The characters surrounding Robin are precisely drawn to this lack. They use her ambiguity to fulfill their own desires; they expect her to take on the identities they create for her. Felix wants her to be his wife and a mother to his son. Nora pictures Robin as the stable partner she needs for coping with her anxieties. Jenny projects her existence as social outcast onto Robin. To all of them she figures as an empty sign, filled by whatever they like to see in her. Even Robin's body shifts from what they identify as a boy's anatomy to a pregnant woman's, and finally Nora compares Robin to her dog.

Robin almost plays a Freudian *fort-da* game: by disappearing and reappearing, Robin stands in for the little child's object and, as Freud theorized, allows the child – in this case, her lovers – to manage the anxiety of the mother's absence. (Freud, 1961: 9) The characters in *Nightwood* use Robin as their *fort-da* object to represent and control their need for an affective relationship. Interestingly, Robin does not in the least represent a motherly role; yet, much like the child's object, abstracted from human form, she symbolizes a presence or realness that is missing from Nora's and her friend's lives. So, does Robin also stimulate in the reader a longing to fill the relational void of childhood and of possibly unsatisfactory identification? If so, the

reader not only produces her monstrosity, but also makes her an object; Robin is thus monster, human, beast, and object in one body.

In “Atavistic Perversions and the Science of Desire” (2001), Dana Seitler observes how the connection between ambiguous genders and bestiality becomes productive in texts like *Nightwood*:

These texts, positioning their main characters down on all fours, and thus producing equivalencies between animality and sexuality, point to a shared project of making social problems identifiable and resolvable in the body that extends beyond the limits of generic convention. (544)

This *sharing*, I would like to stress, implicates the reader who, with her or his own bodily experience, brings to life the monster as a living creature in everyday culture. Constructing Robin as a monster in the reader’s eyes, *Nightwood* recalls the meaning-production of Gothic monsters through the narrative devices of disrupting linearity in plot and structure, confusing the roles of author, reader and character, and inverting the position of monster and monster-maker.²⁵

Robin has no narrative voice, and she tends to be silent and evasive. The only actions that she engages in are fleeing, wandering, and straying. She suffers from loneliness and remains enigmatic to the people surrounding her. At the end of the novel, she almost loses her human existence, turning into a creature that resembles a dog. For the reader, and for Nora, she becomes a *beast*:

And down she went, until her head swung against [the dog’s]; on all fours now, dragging her knees. The veins stood out in her neck, under her ears, swelled in her arms, and wide and throbbing rose up on her fingers as she moved forward. (152)

Even before her radical transformation into dauntless nature, her husband Felix, trying to imagine what kind of creature she might be, describes her as

gracious and yet fading, like an old statue in a garden, that symbolizes the weather through which it has endured, and is not so much the work of man as the work of wind and rain and the herd of seasons, and though formed in man’s image is a figure of doom ... Thinking of her, visualizing her, was an extreme act of the will. (37)

²⁵ Halberstam, 1995: 19-20

The extreme act of the will it takes to grasp Robin is also carried out by the reader. Here again, Robin's merging of objecthood (statue), element of nature (rain, wind) and animality (dog) demands an act of sense-making that lies beyond common terms. It reminds us again of the various roles assumed by a reader of Gothic fiction to meet the challenges of the monster narrative. When Halberstam writes that "[the] reading subject (but also the characters and seemingly the writer) of the Gothic is constructed out of a kind of paranoia about boundaries," (36) she ascribes to the reader an active, albeit involuntary, position. The reader, akin to the novel's characters, is confronted with her or his own paranoia about unstable meaning. Robin becomes the mirror image of this fear and does little to relieve it.

When Dr. O'Connor finds himself confronted with Nora's desperate wish to know more about Robin, he tells her that "Robin was outside the 'human type' - a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain" (131). Even though the doctor situates Robin in a woman's body, the reader is confronted with the difficulty of pinning her down to a fixed identity. Being caught in her own skin makes Robin a wild thing, or a woman who does not naturally have or own a woman's body. One can picture her as a naked creature squirming in an outer skin that fits neither her body nor her mind and soul: a grotesque, unpleasant, yet touching image.

It is Robin's defiance of self-identified subjecthood, which reciprocates others' desires, that makes her monstrous. Like monsters, Robin is marked by being apart, by being viewed as a spectacular object and by having a body that does not conform to corporeal norms.²⁶ At the end of the novel, Robin seems to find a home in the guise of a creature that is half-human, half-beast, and that figures as the sexualized Other:

Robin began going down. Sliding down she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out ... on all fours now, dragging her knees. [Then] she began to bark also, crawling after [the dog] - barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her; soft and slow his feet went. He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees. (152-3)

²⁶ M. Shildrick describes the bodies of monsters as "radically [disrupting] morphological expectations" and as "[failing] to approximate to corporeal norms" (2).

Robin and the dog become alike; they seem to melt into each other so that they can barely be distinguished. Although, in their rawness and vulnerability, they are like children, Barnes's description of the two bodies is sexually tinged. She thus positions the reader morally vis-à-vis her or his fears of having animalistic and pedophile desires. This danger is commonly triggered by the monstrous, since, as Halberstam observes, the monster is experienced as a poisonous infection, contaminating the good citizen's moral and spiritual purity with abnormal longings.²⁷

Given this background, the reader is not only *Nightwood's* monster-maker, but also drawn into complicity with her or his fictional creation. As much as Robin comes into existence through the reader's and the other characters' acts of portraying her, she is, after all, the cause for their role as actors. Consequently, reader and character share their conditions of becoming. This mutually dependant relationship is the basis for what, alluding to Judith Butler's theory, I call *performative reading*.

Performative Reading

With the help of Butler's theory of the performativity of language (1997), I aim to analyze in this part of the current chapter how the reader creates Robin as monstrous and how, conversely, Robin makes the reader complicit in her own monstrous creation. In her account of the formation of subjectivity, Butler contends that, as linguistic beings, we are inevitably called into existence by socially sanctioned forms of address (1997). These forms of address put us in our place by naming us within the categories of gender, race, class, and culture. Those forms of address ("you are a girl," "you are black," "you are a stranger," etc.) designate us not only as persons but also as embodied beings. Butler stresses the somatic dimension of the linguistic process of becoming a subject. Indeed, on the site of the body our subjectivity is both sustained and threatened through modes of address. In this sense, the possibility or the foreclosure of social existence is enacted through our bodies. In this corporeal manifestation of language, the performative character of speech acts, as J. L. Austin has conceived of them, becomes evident.

In *How To Do Things With Words* (1955), Austin conceptualizes a theory of speech in which certain forms of speech do what they say rather than just say what they mean. Distinguishing between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, he assigns

²⁷ See Halberstam on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its reception after being published in 1891.

to the former the aspect of acting by saying something, and to the latter the achievement of an ensuing act by saying something. The act of saying something (locution) becomes, in these cases, often a physical performance motivated by language. Although Austin's theory distinguishes in greater detail which forms of speech can successfully function as acts, I here merely want to point to the general capacity of language to perform or trigger corporeal action. The performative link between language and the body, which Butler analyzes in relation to gender performativity (1990), hate speech (1997), and the vulnerability of bodies (2006), is my focus here as it allows me to account for the corporeal dimension of Robin's literary presence in *Nightwood*.

The "acting out" of speech results in physical effects. It hails our bodies into social existence, it prompts the cultural sense bodies hold, and it grants, or denies, these bodies social recognition. In Butler's analysis of excitable speech, in which she employs Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, she writes:²⁸

Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible [...] The address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, in abjection. (1997: 5)

Putting words into practice, the body enacts and repeats the social conventions of its time and place. It acts as reader or interpreter of everyday speech situations.

Against this background, Butler explores how gender is constructed through particular corporeal acts and how, through the use of such acts, transformations of gender norms can be effected. She ascribes to the body the ability to realize possibilities that exceed a binary gender system within the confines of cultural norms: "the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives" (1988: 526). As Butler observes, all bodies are culturally constructed and thus confined within certain norms; they cannot be read or even exist outside them, but they can performatively re-

²⁸ Butler uses and develops Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, which describes how an individual is transformed into a subject by responding physically to a shout from a stranger in the street. "Hey you!" triggers a physical response in a human being; language here acts as social agent and accounts for a subject's social recognition. See Althusser, 1971: 170-86. Butler theorizes furthermore the critical and potentially dangerous sides of social interpellation. See Butler, 1997. See also Silverman, 1992: Chapter 1.

enact and potentially transform the import of the directives. Notions of gender and other corporeal norms are thus constantly in the process of actualization through our bodies, which perform them, and without which they would be insubstantial.

If the body can be seen as an actor, staging and actualizing linguistic and cultural conventions, it can equally be seen as performatively enacting the “other” in language. The “other” body, the “other” gender, and the as yet un-conceptualized forms of existence can come alive by being enacted, with the help of the body, in language. This “other” is, before it is performed or lived, a mere potential, not yet realized and recognized by cultural conventions. And this potential lies in what I here call the “silent content of language”; that part of language that has not found an expression in and for bodily reality. It is, I contend, the recognition of this silent content that allows linguistic conventions to be transformed in favor of the unrecognized forms of corporeal expression.

In *Nightwood*, the silent text is dramatized or actualized by a reading body. Garrett Stewart (1990) inquires into the reading body as the place through which the soundless or silent reception of a text is evoked. Stewart develops the concept of “phonemic reading.”²⁹ Phonemic reading describes, in an abstract sense and in contrast to *phonetic* reading, the practice of identifying phonemes in written language as transforming the content, and not merely recognizing the meaning, of a text.³⁰ Phonemic reading pronounces the act of reading as being *performed upon an inscription*. Stewart suggests that the reading body, if analyzed as producing cultural meaning in and through its interactions with the text, serves as medium to perform acts of identification within a given culture. Phonemic reading gives voice to, or articulates, that part of a text that resonates with the embodied subjectivity of the reader. It places the reader’s body in interaction with the script and ascribes to the body the agency of seeing, hearing, and giving meaning to a text. The language in the script is also accounted for in its unexpected twists and turns, which come to the surface only

²⁹ Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines a phoneme as “the smallest unit of speech that distinguishes one utterance from another in all of the variations that it displays in the speech of a single person or particular dialect as the result of modifying influences.” See “Phoneme,” *Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* (July 21, 2010). If one changes an element of a word from one phoneme to another it results in a different word or loses its sense. Contrary, or in addition to this definition, Stewart identifies an excess of phonemes in written language (originally soundless). These phonemes are enacted in the process of phonemic reading; they generate a voice in the reader and new sense.

³⁰ A phoneme is the smallest sound in words that can change the word’s meaning, such as in s[k]ill versus s[p]ill.

through the cultural and social sphere given to them through the body's presence in time and space. Meaning, for Stewart, presents itself in remarkably physical ways:

In deed as in word, textual meaning is participial, progressive, transactive, the operation of signifying process in receipt by a reader. Language asserts as well as exerts itself in the interchange between a social sphere and any particular text. ... The body is the site of silent reading, subtending all conception. It is a place not separable from the space of 'understanding' (16-17)

Stewart's recognition of the body as the social and relational site of reading turns reading into a somatic event. The conception of reading as signifying and bodily process suggests that we look at *Nightwood* not as a ready-made product given to the reader, but rather as the corporeal co-production of reader and text.

While Stewart, like Butler, emphasizes the body's import in the reenactment of meaning, he, in contrast to Butler, conceptualizes the reading body as the "passive register" in the production of meaning. He nevertheless conceives a bodily dramatization of language through what he terms phonemic reading (2). Its practice has to do with *aural* reading: it listens to and interprets the silent text. It intervenes in the text's syntactic meaning and gives attention to the *phonotext* (28), the sounding text, which is articulated beyond the restrictions of the script. Stewart points here to that part of a text that can neither be analyzed nor understood through words' lexical meanings. He claims a productivity for what he calls *lexical fluctuation*, *transsegmental drifts*, and *phonemic uncertainties* (30-31). Taking place between the lines, phonemic reading accounts for signification seeping through the "cracks of wording," as Stewart writes: "[it] acknowledges an in(ter)dependence, and hence potential discrepancy, between two parallel textual sequences: the march of script and the flow of unsounded voicing" (31). Phonemic reading is thus a performative act; the act of reading here triggers, like uttering a performative speech act, an active response, if only in the reader him- or herself. The phonemic reader performs the text by bringing to life the concealed meaning of the written words, by making sense of the text only through his or her subjective interpretation of the text.

I read Stewart's theory as an account of the performativity of the linguistic body, which provides an insight into *Nightwood's* Robin by accounting for her textual opacity. As the reader's sensorium, his or her body lends itself to the text as interpreter or voice of the text's silent substance, embodied by Robin's withdrawal from

categorization. What is important is not the presence of voice in the text, but the possibility of what Stewart terms "evocalizing" a multiplicity of as yet silenced meanings during reading. The text's silent voices are brought to the surface by embodied reading and, I argue, by textual figures like Robin. I suggest that Robin's existence beyond lexical meaning, her ungraspable character, motivates a form of reading that I liken to Stewart's phonemic reading. I think of such a reading as inner audition that allows the reader to hear the phonemes that are neither contained nor containable by the script.

I want to call this process *performative* reading, a practice in which the reader generates a dynamic of play between words that is then negotiated between text and reader. The iterability of such reading lies not in the textual script, as one would expect, but in the bodily response of the reader to the text. Performativity here does not iterate a textual, but a coporeal script – a cultural convention that is as coercive as the laws of language. An illustrative example is the specific bodily movements that are assumed and expressed in order to convey a gender, race, or class. They are mostly independent of physiological abilities, but are performed according to cultural conventions and aims. Stewart similarly emphasizes the performative character of our bodies' relationship to language when he writes: "The recognition of such a somatic quotient in the reading of writing [...] carries indirect but profound implications for the relation of subjectivity to text production, of consciousness to language" (3). Stewart's conception of the reading body thus also accounts for subjective meaning production.

Halberstam, similarly, observes a particular kind of performativity in Gothic monster narratives. How are these two accounts productive for analyzing *Nightwood*? Stewart grants the written texts a power of meaning that is instantiated by the reading body. Barnes's choice of words seems secondary, superceded by their enactment by the reader. This allows the reader of Robin to take on an inventive and almost boundlessly creative role. Halberstam ascribes to Gothic novels a capacity for meaning production that resides no less in the text or in the novel's form than in the reader's complicit reading. She contends that "[the] monstrosity of *Frankenstein* is literally built into the textuality of the novel to the point where textual production itself is responsible for generating monsters" (31). The novel's structure—the sum of its parts exceeding the whole, and skewing the relations between author and reader and author

and narrator, as well as among characters—makes *Frankenstein* a monster text. Its distorted textuality, in which portrays its characters exceed categorization, draws the reader into the hideous production of monstrosity.

In *Nightwood* I observe a form of textuality that corresponds to Halberstam's characterization of *Frankenstein* in that *Nightwood*'s structure contorts common role allocations among author, reader, narrator, and characters; yet, Barnes's novel so abstracts textual form that it becomes *informe*, "a procedure to strip away categories and to undo the very terms of meaning/being," in Rosalind Krauss's definition of the term (155).³¹ The formless textuality of *Nightwood* strips the human from her or his characteristics and makes her or him simultaneously *isotropic* (uniform in all directions) and variously identifiable. The defiance or negation of form in *Nightwood*, contrary to *Frankenstein*'s excess, might pose a problem to Stewart's and Halberstam's theories. As much as the novel's text engages the reader in a complicit and active role of sense-making, it also cancels out any clear form of identification with the book's main character. The textual denial of form seems to infect Robin, to dissolve her form so that it seeps out of the book and creates uncharacteristic meaning. As such the novel adds another model of readership to those of Stewart and Halberstam. The phonemic reader and the monster-making reader are here augmented by the indistinct reader—a reader who is drawn into the formless that Krauss, alluding to Bataille, describes as follows:

... the categorical blurring initiated by the continual alteration of identity. It is not just some kind of haze or vagueness in the field of definition, but the impossibility of definition itself due to a strategy of slippage within the very logic of categories, a logic that works according to self-identity - male, say, or female - stabilized by the opposition between self and other: male versus female, hard versus soft, inside versus outside, life versus death, vertical versus horizontal.
(Krauss, 2000: 7)

The indistinct nature of textuality, plot, character, and reader in *Nightwood* reflects the impossibility of defining Robin as male or female, human or beast, young or old. This observation, and the blurred relation between reader and character as self and other, lead me not only to identify the reader's complicity in the monster-making process,

³¹ Y.A. Bois & R. Krauss (1997): 155. See more on the *Formless* in Bois & Krauss, 1997, Krauss, 2000, and in chapter 5 of this book.

but further direct me to the question of how Robin can be pictured and related to—if, that is, such relations between Robin and the reader are even possible. With the help of Butler’s theory of discursive performativity, and by a focus on her concept of gender performativity, I will try to answer this question.

Subverting Performance

As we saw, Butler shows that interpellation is a performative speech-act, through which a subject is first hailed into existence by linguistic conventions (such as “hey you!” or “it’s a boy!”), and through which he or she can act as a social agent by citing or repeating the same linguistic practice (1997: 39). If, however, a subject is not recognized as human, and thus not hailed into a social community, she or he fails to participate in the discursive performativity (14) required to sustain a self. According to this analysis, Robin cannot be hailed into social existence.

When Butler describes gender performativity as the positing of an anticipation of a gendered “essence,” she adds that this seeming essence is no more than the constant repetition of certain acts and gestures. Butler further argues that these acts, gestures, and enactments of desire “are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (1990: 185). She thus concludes that gender is a “corporeal style” that suggests the construction of meaning.

In light of Robin’s formlessness, we should ask: how does she perform her gender? It seems as if Robin altogether lacks corporeal style, which makes her a special case in Butler’s theory. If human features, which manifest themselves also in attributes and acts, are missing or blurred how can a subject become intelligible? Butler’s analysis of drag performances as highly performative as well as subversive might be applied to Robin in one way, yet not in another: drag performances destabilize the distinctions that constitute the reigning discourse about gender: the distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inside and outside, self and other.³² While drag mostly expresses itself on a figurative or literal stage that is lit by beams of light, and makes itself heard, seen, and felt in an excessively expressive way, Robin’s (anti)performance contains no such eye-catching and forceful

³² See more on drag performance in Butler, 1990 & 1997.

accessories. She does not dramatize, imitate, or parody gender roles as they are commonly understood.

In this sense, Robin does not seem to perform gender at all. As we saw, she can at most be seen as an imaginary or fantasmatic manifestation of the other characters' gestures, bodily acts, and desires. She does not perform an actor's role; instead, her audience takes over. Unlike the drag performer's audience, which despite being invited to watch and engage in the spectacle is always beyond the stage, Robin's audience—that is, the people surrounding her—*embody* the stage they put her on. Robin's refusal or incapacity to perform deprives her of social recognition, yet it liberates her from what we might call the "imperative to perform."³³ Instead, the other characters and the reader must perform *her*, and must perform for her.

As an anonymous and unspoken life-form, Robin loses the privilege of being interpellated as a social being. In this sense, she suffers from what Butler describes as the loss of context, which also implies a reduced chance of what Butler terms "linguistic survival" (1997: 4). Robin is exposed to the opinions and views of her companions. And although they do not mean to injure her, they cannot rescue her from drifting away from language, words, and social meaning altogether. Butler's observation on the effects of injurious speech seem to apply to Robin's loss of place:

The speech situation is not a simple sort of context, one that might be defined easily by spatial and temporal boundaries. To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are. ... To be addressed injuriously is not only to be open to an unknown future, but not to know the time and place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one's situation as the effect of such speech. Exposed at the moment of such a shattering is precisely the volatility of one's "place" within the community of speakers; one can be "put in one's place" by such speech, but such place may be no place. (4)

Although Robin seems not to know where she is or where she belongs, she also seems to be curiously beyond harm. Butler states that when subjects lose their context by being exposed to linguistic or physical violence, their corporeal place in the world is

³³ Jon McKenzie wrote an insightful book on the different meanings and consequences of performance and performativity in different cultural and academic fields. One of his claims is that twentieth-century developments in research, technology, and management created an imperative to perform, which is reflected in the "efficacy of cultural performance" as much as in the "efficiency of organizational performance" and in the "effectiveness of technological performance." Robin's non-performance, surveyed against this background, seems almost liberating: she leads a life beyond the aim or desire for effect, yet she has an effect on other people's lives.

threatened. Robin, however, is not in acute danger of physical injury. However, like the victims of injurious speech, she is in danger of never finding a place or role for her body to sustain a self. Robin lacks the conditions for a context as well as a self. Both absences are brought about by her failure to perform, which includes the failures to inhabit a singular body, to slip into a social role, and to articulate a fitting desire.

By robbing Robin of context, Barnes passes the ball to the reader, who is called on to perform the figure of Robin, providing her with what she is missing. When we consider the performativity of language as conceptualized by Butler, *Nightwood* calls for the reader's act of "authoring," in which she or he necessarily becomes part of the text and enacts a role on the story's stage. Robin's intangibility is not a natural characteristic, but a role invented for her by the reader. It is thus not Robin who performs gender in a deviant or monstrous way; it is the reader whose performance of Robin might be called monstrous.

The reader's collaboration in the text becomes visible here, negotiated in and upon the reader's own corporeal place in the world. And, if we want to push the term "collaboration" further we can even call it "complicity." Complicity, here, implies an identificatory process while the reader interacts with the text. The reading of the monster in *Nightwood* then comes to serve as instantiation of the complicity in everyday enactments of gender. To elucidate this point in more detail and to introduce the topic of the next chapter, I briefly want to return to the novel's relation to *Frankenstein's* monster-narrative, which shows that "humanness" is as constructed as the monstrous.³⁴

In an article on vision and inversion in *Nightwood*, Jean Gallagher (2001) describes the reader's complicity with the novel's plot through the metaphor of the peephole. She portrays the reader of *Nightwood* as a voyeur who is challenged as a disembodied spectator throughout the text. The viewer-reader's position is, as Gallagher observes, "inverted" and occupies a place oscillating between outside and inside.³⁵ The abundantly detailed descriptions devoted to various rooms and locations suggest that the reader is invited "in" not only to take part in a shared visual spectacle, but also to be assigned a particular position within the plot, almost as if he or she were

³⁴ Halberstam, 1995: 38.

³⁵ An "inverted" observer is turned *in* to the visual field and does not occupy a privileged, voyeuristic position outside of it. Similarly, Kaja Silverman suggests that, as in the case of Harun Farocki's *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (1988), the eye can be "shown to look not from a site exterior to the field of vision, but from one fully inside" (1996: 142). This means that vision is in specific forms linked to inversion.

one of the characters. The reader subsequently and involuntarily assumes the role of an accomplice in the course of events that are both viewed from outside and experienced from within.³⁶ The “look in” is alternately embodied by a particular character’s position in the story’s events and the reader’s corporeal identification with that character’s perspective. What makes this viewing spectacle special in *Nightwood* is what Gallagher refers to as the “inverted observer” (280) and what I would like to call the inverted reader. The manifestation of Robin’s body in the text is disquieting and disturbs the expectation of visual mastery. In this line of thought, Jacqueline Rose (2005) asserts that “uncertain sexual identity muddles the plane of the image so that the spectator does not know where she or he stands in relationship to the picture. A confusion at the level of sexuality brings with it a disturbance in the visual field” (226).

This reference to Robin’s “visual” disturbance relates to my next chapter. There, I will analyze the vulnerability of vision in view of disabled bodies. Again, the viewer of the “spectacle”, this time on a theatrical stage, is made complicit in the construction of humanness and monstrosity. In contrast to the characters in *Nightwood*, where the reader is asked to construct an identity, however monstrous, for Robin, the dancers in the film *Augenblicke N* ask their audience to recognize and possibly discard their visual construction of them as “monstrous” or other. Robin and the dancers all embody and exhibit forms of vulnerability. Yet, while Robin’s vulnerability ultimately leads to her transformation into a wild creature, away from human or cultural monstrosity towards a more nature-oriented being, *Augenblicke N*’s performers recognize their vulnerability as a cultural inevitability that must be acted-out and re-interpreted in order to defy the attribution of the “monstrous” to particular bodies.

³⁶ M. Bal uses the term “focalizer” to describe a character’s special position within a text or image through which the reader-viewer is directed to see the narrative content from a particular angle or in particular detail – focus. In *Nightwood*, different characters act or serve as focalizers in different contexts. Depending on their particular views, the reader develops changing interpretations of Robin’s character. Focalization is thus used almost excessively, but not without involving the reader’s own position. Bal, 1997: 94; Bal & Bryson, 2001: 54.