Introduction: Screening desire in the Sapphic modernist roman à clef

In late July or early August, 1935, as Djuna Barnes was revising her elegiac novel *Nightwood*, she wrote to her friend, Emily Holmes Coleman, about her former lover, Thelma Wood:

Had a letter from Thelma, possibly the last in my life if the book *does* get printed. She will hate me so – it’s awful – God almighty what a price one pays for 200 pages.¹

On the 20th of September, she wrote again:

I am apprehensive that perhaps I’ve written my best, my life and my love. What shall I write now that will be as good? Nothing I should think …

In private at least, Barnes was not at all reluctant to admit that she had structured *Nightwood* around her ‘life’ and her female ‘love’. And while she was anxious about Wood’s potential reaction to the novel, she was not at all reticent about claiming a representation of personal experience as her ‘best’ work. On the other hand, in presenting the novel to the public, *Nightwood*’s editor, T.S. Eliot, argued strenuously against reading the novel as anything other than a study of ‘the human misery and bondage which is universal’. With his pre-emptive and revealing warning against reading *Nightwood* as ‘a horrid sideshow of freaks’, Eliot implies that ‘good’ literature is impersonal, and defies the reader to question Barnes’ objectivity.² Eliot’s aesthetic ideals informed his introduction to *Nightwood*, but he was almost certainly equally concerned with circumventing criticism and even censorship,³ revealing an anxiety over public reception that Barnes appears not to have experienced, at least

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¹ S. Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic Modernism* © Sashi Nair 2012
not to the same extent. Instead, she was preoccupied with the personal implications of a textualization of the private – she feared that the ‘price’ of publishing *Nightwood* would be a final loss of contact with Wood, and she doubted her ability to write once she had exhausted the material provided by her ‘life’ and ‘love’.

*Nightwood* is a celebration of same-sex love, in the form of an elegy for its passing. Barnes was reflecting upon the suffering that characterized a failed lesbian relationship, yet her intention was to insist upon the significance of this relationship. Writing again to Coleman, she explained her decision to marry Robin, her fictionalization of Wood, to Felix Volkbein, with the claim that it was a necessary plot device that attests to the authenticity of same-sex love:

> people *always* say, ‘well of course those two women would never have been in love with each other if they had been normal, if any man had slept with them, if they had been well f----- and born a child’. Which is ignorance and utterly false, I married robin [sic] to prove this point ...

The kind of dispassionate objectivity that might be expected to underpin a study of universal human misery is notably absent here. The very narrative of *Nightwood* is structured by an intention to challenge common perceptions about ‘two women … in love with each other’ – to insist upon the intensity and reality of same-sex love and desire – and in spite of Eliot’s protests to the contrary, this is what the novel does. Eliot’s strategic misrepresentation of the novel, informed by a concern that an elegy for same-sex love was more likely to be censored than an objective study of human nature, works against Barnes’ stated intentions. That Eliot perceived a necessity for a depersonalizing and depoliticizing introduction raises the question of whether Barnes was ignorant of, or unconcerned about, the potential consequences of writing same-sex desire. Yet she was not unfamiliar with the pitfalls of pushing literary boundaries: the US postal service had refused to ship her bawdy, heterosexual family saga, *Ryder* (1928), while her lesbian satire, *Ladies Almanack* (1928), privately printed in Paris, had been banned by US customs. In spite of these incidents, and the fact that she was desperate for any income, she published a meditation on same-sex love that is explicit in its sexualization of that love.

So why wasn’t *Nightwood* banned, like Radclyffe Hall’s lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, which was declared obscene in Britain in 1928? Is it due to the fact that it was too obscure for the general reader to understand?