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Robin Blyn



From Stage to Page: Franz Kafka, Djuna Barnes, and Modernism's Freak Fictions

It used to pay very well to stage such performances, but today that is quite impossible. We live in a different world now.

—Franz Kafka, “A Hunger Artist” (243)

The old Coney is closing down, not stopping, mind you, but changing. We are tremendously interested to see what the evolution is going to be; we are interested to know how shocking society is going to become when it's proper.

—Djuna Barnes, *New York* (49)

As witnesses to the decline of the display of “human curiosities” for profit, modernist writers reveal to us the powerful literary legacy of a form of entertainment more widely known as the “freak show.”¹ For even as the freak show lost its edifying aura and its respectability, it retained its earlier allure, now enhanced with the power of nostalgia.² Just as Rabelais converted the disappearing practices of the carnival into the novel, modernist writers appropriated the aesthetics of the freak shows of their youths, manipulating the visual and verbal aesthetics of the original *show* business into a “new species” of fiction.³ Through a study of these appropriations, a much overlooked and rich literary history becomes available to us, one which reconceives the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, as well as between narrative and spectacle. As the work of writers like Franz Kafka and Djuna Barnes tell us, writers of the modernist era were as acutely aware of the instantiation of spectacle culture as the postmodernists who would later claim to be uniquely constrained by the same phenomenon. More radically than the postmodernists who fol-

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lowed them, these "minor" moderns insist that spectacle has changed the conditions for narrative and relocated the transgressive potentials of the novel.⁴

In 1968, Guy Debord published his influential *Society of the Spectacle*, articulating for a generation of scholars the links between capitalism, aesthetic production, and the technologies of reproduction as "spectacle."⁵ Moreover, Debord's dense treatise modeled the kind of complicitous critique of late capitalism that we have come to associate with the postmodern project.⁶ Yet, half a century before Debord defined the modern spectacle as "a world vision which has become objectified" (1), modernist writers like Franz Kafka and Djuna Barnes had begun experimenting with the possibilities for fiction within the confines of this "objectified world." Indeed, the fascination with pop-culture spectacles we see in the early works of both writers significantly shaped the novelistic experiments that both undertook in the latter stages of their careers. Specifically, we can find direct links between Kafka's and Barnes's notoriously opaque fictions and the premier low culture form of their era, the freak show or display of human curiosities. It is their engagement with such spectacles that differentiates Kafka's and Barnes's work so significantly from the *avant garde* circles each traveled within. While their contemporaries focused on subjectivism and the invisible, psychological depth of characters, Kafka and Barnes produced fictions that focus on the surfaces of bodies as they are manufactured for display by the dynamics of spectacle.⁷ Rather than using fiction as the antithesis of spectacle, as the art form that dramatizes the internal world and vision of the subject, both Kafka and Barnes begin from a point in which the spectacular has become a social and aesthetic condition that neither narrative nor its subject can evade. Unlike their postmodern successors, however, neither Kafka nor Barnes read the preeminence of the spectacle in Debord's tragic terms. Rather, for Kafka and Barnes, spectacle delineated the realm of possibility for narrative fiction, providing the context for the radical experiments each consequently undertook.

Veiling the significance of the freak show to modernist aesthetics is the prescriptive zeal of the most influential of modernist criticism. T. S. Eliot, self-appointed arbiter of modernist art, attempts to ignore the crucial distinction between a modernism extolling subjective imagination and a modernism self-defined by the objectifications of spectacle, and he does so specifically by dismissing the freak from the realm of art. "To regard this group of people as a horrid side show of freaks," he moralizes in his preface to *Nightwood*, "is not only to miss the point, but to confirm our wills and harden our hearts in an inveterate sin of pride" (xvi). Just as the novel is only worthy insofar as it appeals to "sensibilities trained on poetry" (xvi), so too the word "freak" is the pejorative other of Eliot's high modernist artist; the low form legitimates the high. In recent years, Leslie Fiedler has attempted to answer Eliot by redeeming the freak's role in the arts of the twentieth century. In his 1978 *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, Fiedler writes, "As [the freak show] has retreated, therefore, from the center of our culture to its periphery, from the metropolis to the small town, from Broadway to Skid Row, artists have attempted to assimilate its meanings to other media: words on the page, images on the screen. Beginning, that is to say, as a form of naive or pop art, the sideshow has become the subject of

more self-conscious high art or more up-to-date mass art" (284). While Fiedler thus opens the door to studies of the freak in modernist fiction, he specifically divests the freak of his show. Using Barnes's *Nightwood* as the decisive example, Fiedler argues that the modernist novel "deals not with Freaks on show but in society—or rather freaks more like their authors than Barnum's performers" (284). For Fiedler, the "side show" can only be meant metaphorically in the world of narrative fiction. In the novel, the freak is metaphor, not performer.

Other contemporary analyses confirm this view, arguing implicitly that the freak show has no place in narrative fiction. When writers unravel the role of the freak in fiction, they inevitably limit their studies to the level of figure or to visual media—the live freak show or its filmic incarnations.⁸ By default, the scholarship thus argues that spectacle is *not* spectacle when it enters the novel; we can narrate a freak show or we can portray a freak in the narrative, but there is no fictional equivalent of the spectacle's power to *display*. Rather, after Bakhtin, it has become generally assumed that once the spectacle enters the written, heteroglossic world of the novel, it subjects itself to the dialogism of the genre and "evolves" into the carnivalesque.⁹ In her popularization of Bakhtin, for example, Kristeva places Kafka among the greatest practitioners of the "polyphonic novel" (71), her term for the genre of the novel that most fully achieves the carnivalesque. Likewise, Jane Marcus identifies *Nightwood* as a "Rabelaisian comic epic novel" where "the world of carnival and circus . . . is redemptive" (247). In both cases, the freak spectacle is presumably contained—if not redeemed—by narrative. The narrative-spectacle opposition has thus become a staple of contemporary theory.

Yet, as writers like Susan Stewart and Mary Russo have demonstrated, the freak show is antithetical to the carnival in precisely the same way that spectacle is to Bakhtin's novel: the freak show relies on the distance and distinction between actors and spectators that the carnival so aggressively denies. Stewart draws this distinction succinctly: "While the grotesque body of carnival engages in this structure of democratic reciprocity, the spectacle of the grotesque involves a distancing of the object and a corresponding 'aestheticization' of it. . . . On display, the freak represents the naming of the frontier and the assurance that the wilderness, the outside, is now territory" (107–10). Unlike the carnival, it is not laughter that overcomes terror in the freak show, but the distance imposed by spectacle, negotiated in the interaction of the barker's spiel with the freak's tableau. Raised up on stages or lowered in pits, the freak show confirms all that Bakhtin's carnival challenges: separations, hierarchies, and the closure of the individual body. As the original *show* business and the preeminent capitalist invention of its day, the freak show's success has always depended on the effective exploitation of the stereotypes of its audience, including, eventually, the audience's assumption that the freak was being exploited by his owner.¹⁰ Without his show, the freak is no freak at all, for it is the dynamic of spectacle that allows for the objectification and aestheticization that define the freak as physical and cultural construct. As Mary Russo concludes, "Freaks are, by definition, apart, as beings to be viewed" (79).

Thus, to insist on the narrative-spectacle opposition is to divorce the freak from his show, and, therefore, to miss insights into the specific narrative experiments con-

ducted by such writers as Kafka and Barnes. Yet, since it is inherently spectacular, when the freak show has appeared in narrative fiction, it has been misread as carnival precisely because of a critical prejudice that reads carnival as transgressive and spectacle, presumably its opposite, as the tool of the hegemonic order. To be transgressive, spectacle must be abandoned, since it stands, according to various schools of contemporary criticism, for objectification, oppression, and the semiotic thrall of late capitalism.¹¹

Two schools of thought have been especially instrumental in the vilification of spectacle: psychoanalytic and Marxist critiques, both of which ultimately equate the spectacle with the fetish. In her breakthrough essay on feminist film theory, for example, Laura Mulvey psychoanalyzes the spectacle as the site in which the "determining male gaze is constructed" and the women's "to-be-looked-at-ness" reaches its apotheosis (366). In short, the subjection of men and the objectification of women, along with the "sexual imbalance" it brings with it, are for Mulvey what defines the spectacle. Moreover, the spectacle is identifiable as that which arrests narrative, as that which "freezes the flow of action" (366). Incorporated into narrative film, spectacle is the stuff of "fetishistic scopophilia," taking the male viewer momentarily outside the linear time of narrative. As the woman is the other of the man, for Mulvey, the spectacle is the negative other of narrative.

As in Mulvey's psychoanalytic discourse, in the Marxism of the Frankfurt School, too, we find the seeds of spectacle's vilification, its incriminating association with fascism. It is no coincidence, for example, that Walter Benjamin introduces his definition of fascism in the conclusion of his extensive article on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." "The logical result of fascism," he writes, in his now famous formulation, "is the introduction of aesthetics into politics" (241). The aim, Benjamin tells us, is the violation and control of the masses. Thus, aesthetics are the means of controlling the populace in the fascist state. For Benjamin, it is a "sense perception that has been changed by technology" (242) which makes the fascist control possible. Technologies of reproduction have wrought these changes in aesthetic reception, changes that allow for the success of fascism's multimedia program of aesthetic control.

Although the word *spectacle* never appears in Benjamin's essay, the control of the masses through the aestheticization of politics is precisely the danger Guy Debord later locates in spectacle. As he writes, "By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence" (19). Not coincidentally, then, the word *spectacle* becomes the predominant word for the aesthetic productions of fascism. In his impressive analysis of the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, for example, Jeffrey T. Schnapp goes as far as declaring that "fascism puts forth the first modernist politics of spectacle" (3). In this way, spectacle and fascism have been sutured together in such a way that they seem to define one another; if fascism is inherently spectacular, then the spectacle is inherently fascist. Though in Benjamin's essay the social transformation potentiated by the "age of mechanical reproduction" both precedes and exceeds the life of fascism, contemporary theory sees spectacle as the premier aes-

thetic invention of fascism, the means by which the fascist regimes of this century have consolidated their power. Hence, to combat spectacle is to combat the fascism residual to late twentieth-century politics.

In the context of Mikhail Bakhtin's Marxist theory of the novel, we see specifically the need to counter spectacle with narrative. According to Julia Kristeva, Bakhtin "extended his theory into literary history as a principle of all upheavals and defiant productivity" (71). Carnival and transgression become synonymous in Kristeva's discourse as acts of "defiant productivity." Spectacle, on the other hand, emerges as their antithesis. As in the case of Mulvey, spectacle becomes the other, here the monologic other of the dialogic novel. The polyphonic novel is the hero of both Kristeva's and Bakhtin's narrative of the life of the carnival, the literary space where the utopian, precapitalist democracy of carnival persists along with its transgressive powers. It is here that the embrace of the carnival dovetails with Marxist critiques of the spectacle. In the era of transglobal capitalism, critics like Kristeva, Bakhtin, and the numerous carnival enthusiasts who have followed them embrace narrative fiction as the place where subject relations escape the spectacular protocol Guy Debord attributes to capitalism's instantiation. As "the opposite of dialogue," Debord argues in his jeremiad, the spectacle's dominance reflects a "downgrading of *being* into *having*" (16). He writes, "The spectacle subjects living human beings to its will to the extent that the economy has brought them under its sway. For the spectacle is simply the economic realm developing for itself—at once a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers" (16). Here, Debord very nearly defines the spectacle as a freak show, the realm of "distorting objectification" that proponents of the carnivalesque seek to evade. At once, then, the carnivalization of spectacle in the novel would presumably transform the monologic into the dialogic and contest the objectifying power of the economic realm that produced it.

To suggest, on the contrary, that the freak show enters into the novel *as* spectacle is, apparently, to compromise the transgressive power of the genre. Hence, as the object of criticism, fiction's freaks have been unstaged, as spectacle has been upstaged by carnival. And yet we need to question an aesthetics of transgression that so vigorously seeks to evade the historical and economic transformations that render Bakhtin's utopian carnival necessarily obsolete. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White tell us, "there is no *a priori* revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression" (16). To insist the novel serve as the extant realm of a precapitalist utopia is surely more nostalgic than revolutionary. Neither Kafka nor Barnes engages in this particular nostalgia. If they refuse to let the freak show die, they retain it as a "world which has become objectified," that is, as spectacle. For, in its decline, these moderns appropriate the freak show as a trope and also as a formal strategy, thus challenging any theoretical paradigm that opposes narrative to spectacle.

Within the freak show, the narrative-spectacle opposition necessarily collapses. Yet, even within the frame of spectacle, verbal and visual representations retain their primacy and distinctions in the representational strategies of *spiel* and *tableau*. Derived from the barker's "pitch" or "ballyhoo," *spiel* refers to the verbal elements of

the freak show and serves in the following analyses as the term marking the transformation of narrative within spectacle's domain. Within his *spiel*, the barker may narrate the story of a freak's genesis, capture, and development, but that narrative will never exist independently of the *spiel* performance. Thus, as *spiel*, narrative is itself spectacular, language inseparable from performance. As *spiel* enters the short story and the novel, it retains its original freak show characteristics: exaggeration, exorbitant detail, rampant assertions, fraudulence, and claims to knowledge legitimated at different turns by science, theology, and mythology. As Robert Bogdan reveals, the "true life" pamphlets sold at the end of the freak show, as well as the press releases and advertisement materials preceding the show, underscore the "exaggeration, fabrication, and out-and-out lies" that define freak show *spiel* (19).

Supplementing and often contradicting the verbiage of the freak show *spiel* is the visual display of the freak, the *tableau*. In historical terms, the *tableau* presentation of the freak is a testament to the freak show's merging of a theatrical aesthetic with a photographic one. By the time the freak show achieved its popularity, *tableau* was a dominant feature of nineteenth century drama and photography already a popular culture craze. The freak's live display was a *tableau* commodified in the photographs sold at the close of the show. More than even the "true life" pamphlets showmen sold, *cartes de visite* were the collector's items of the freak show.¹² As it moves from stage to page, freak *tableau* brings its silence and its stasis. Moreover, it brings the backdrops, props, and costuming designed to enhance—or even create—the anomaly of the freak on display, providing the visible "proof" of the freak's freakishness. Unlike the inherently verbal *spiel*, then, *tableau*'s movement from stage to page necessitates its translation from a visual to a verbal discourse. Thus, on the page, freak *tableau* will share a complex relationship with freak show *spiel*. Of necessity, *tableau* will be available to the reader only through the language of *spiel*. Yet, as we shall see in the works of Kafka and Barnes, the *tableau* is also manipulated into the silent castigation of *spiel*'s claims to knowledge. Just as *spiel* is narrative within a spectacular frame, so, too, *tableau* is spectacle in a verbal register, another indication of the fallacy of the narrative-spectacle opposition.

With striking consistency, it is through the aesthetic of the freak show that Kafka and Barnes critique the conventions of realism and remark on the limits of the knowable, countering the certainties upon which the emergent fascism relied. As a trope, the freak show appears in their fictions as *tableau*, signaling the limits of discourse, the duplicity of the visual, and the crisis and rearticulation of transgressed boundaries. As narrative, the freak show enters these fictions as *spiel*, refuting the conditions of realism and challenging the accepted truths of their respective audiences. Together, freak *tableau* and *spiel* create a textual performance at odds with the "dialogic" and the "carnavalesque" which, in our postmodern nostalgia, we have come to see as the transgressive potential of the novel. In a world of spectacle, such as the one Kafka and Barnes perceived, the utopia of the carnival is eschewed for a "new species" of narrative that neither vilifies the spectacle nor tries to escape it. Rather, it engages spectacle as the social and aesthetic frame which narrative enters into as part of the show.

BECOMING RHETORIC: KAFKA'S FREAK PERFORMERS

From Kafka's earliest stories until his last, we find circus figures such as the trapeze artist in "First Sorrow" and the circus horseback rider in "Up in the Gallery," standard modernist figures for the artist.¹³ It is in the later works, however, that we find a growing number of characters whose bodies serve as the surface for art: the grotesque body of the transformed Gregor in "The Metamorphosis" and the bodies fed into the apparatus in "In the Penal Colony." Variety star Red Peter in "A Report to the Academy" and the displayed body of "A Hunger Artist" are two additional examples of the body artists in Kafka's fiction. They are the exemplars of freak show artists who lack the "high art" connotations of the *aerialiste* and the acrobat which Kafka's works increasingly treat ironically.

Despite Kafka's reputation for asceticism, he was both an enthusiast of the circus and burlesque entertainment. In *Kafka's Clothes*, Mark Anderson links Kafka's interest in the stages of Prague with his early enthusiasms for *fin de siècle* aesthetic movements that privileged the body as an aesthetic surface. Further, Anderson connects Kafka's engagement with popular culture and fashion with the fiction he later produces. What remains after Kafka's rejection of dandyism and its related practices, according to Anderson, is the idea of the body as the primary object of artistic expression (70). Anderson writes: "The gymnast, the acrobat, trapeze artist, circus horse-rider, singing mouse, or hunger artist—these figures have all externalized their art into visible corporeal display. What interests Kafka in these figures is the impersonality of the body that has been subjected to constant training and exercise, a body that is 'flawless' because it has been absorbed by the artistic process itself. In dance and other visual spectacles of the body, the literal identification between artist and artwork works to efface the performer's individual 'personality'" (70). The attraction of the body in performance, as Anderson notes here, is its complete identification with its art.

Coupled with Naomi Ritter's analyses of Kafka and the circus in her *Art as Spectacle: Images of the Entertainer Since Romanticism*, Anderson's work provides an invaluable historic backdrop for Kafka's fiction. Yet, despite their sustained attention to the popular entertainment venues of the circus and variety stages, both of these critics exclude the freak from their studies. The spectacle of anomalous bodies is omitted from their accounts, and with them, the narrative spiels that accompanied their presentation. By conflating the display of the freak with that of the acrobat and *aerialiste*, Anderson and Ritter miss crucial differences in the significance of the figure of the freak and the tenor of the fiction within which he appears. Further, like Fiedler, Anderson and Ritter focus on the variety performer as figure only, ignoring the narrative appropriation of the dynamics of display. When the freak appears in Kafka's short fiction, as he does in the cases of Red Peter and the hunger artist, he brings with him both the tropological associations and the formal aesthetics of the freak show, *spiel* and *tableau*.

Without an appreciation for its freak show heritage, "A Report to the Academy" has been taken at the dour word of its narrator, Red Peter, tragically civilized ape. From this point of view, the story is either a paean to uncorrupted nature, a mourning

for lost innocence, a critique of Darwin's *Origin of Species* through Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, or the reverse, *Totem and Taboo* submitted to Darwinian logic. Naomi Ritter, for example, concludes that the story is about "the loss of animal innocence in a creature that imitates men" (82), and Mary Russo, following Deleuze and Guattari, maintains that it reveals "the ludicrousness of the humanistic ideal of freedom. . . . The much sought after differentiation of the species—freedom as that which makes 'us' human—turns out to be another version of imprisonment" (51). However productive these readings of the story have been, they have each in turn fallen for the freak show bait, forgetting that "A Report to the Academy" is staged as a performance in which Red Peter addresses an audience, here the academy, and delivers a rhetorical act that plays with the clichéd sentiments of his audience. By attending to the dynamics of Red Peter's spiel, we may re-read the story as a mocking not only of science and the rhetoric of evolution, but also as a biting critique of the melancholy longing for lost origins and the notion of the natural so dear to the hearts of the listeners of his report. To accomplish this task, "A Report" reverses the narrative-spectacle relationship implicit in both Bakhtin's carnival and Mulvey's fetishistic scopophilia.

From beginning to end, the speaker of "A Report to the Academy" reminds us that he is a consummate performer who has achieved his fame through his ability to "keep the image" (173). Indeed, we learn that the speaker only speaks because of his assured position on the variety stage. "I could not risk putting into words such insignificant information as I am going to give you," Red Peter confides, "if I were not quite sure of myself and if my position on all the great variety stages of the civilized world had not become quite unassailable" (174). With all the hyperbole and excess gesture of the ballyhoo, Red Peter makes a show of his "frankness," and it is in the very excessiveness of his assurances that we recognize the hoax. "Everything is open and aboveboard; there is nothing to conceal," Red Peter reminds us yet again—reminds us, that is, that everything is actually underhanded and concealed (174). In short, there is simply no reason for us to take Red Peter as an ape who has learned to imitate man when we could just as easily take him as his freak show incarnation, the man who has learned to imitate an ape imitating a man.¹⁴ If Red Peter's elaborate "honesty" and allusions to his status as star performer are not enough to create suspicions in his listener, he includes a self-reflexive moment in his address that similarly invites our skepticism of his stage persona. In his self-constructed rite of passage, we are reminded that as the civilized ape, Red Peter is a completely rhetorical being.

The first performance Red Peter ever gives, he tells us, is a rhetorical one. Indeed, he reveals his acquisition of language as his very entrance simultaneously into the realm of the Lacanian symbolic and onto spectacle's stage. He turns into a successful performer at the moment in which he first speaks. "Before a large circle of spectators" on board his captor's ship, Red Peter tells us, he overcomes his repulsion for schnapps, drains the bottle, and calls "a brief and unmistakable 'Hallo!,' breaking into human speech" (182). Language makes Red Peter a spectacle, the anomaly of the civilized ape. As he reports, "the line I was to follow had in any case been decided, once for all" (182); once he speaks, he can leave neither civilization nor the

stage. Red Peter is thus not merely a discursively constructed freak, but also a freak whose performance is discursive. As a freak, he makes a spectacle of rhetoric. For Red Peter, speech is *spiel*: a narrative that takes place within the already established context of spectacle.

Once we identify the report as *spiel*, we begin to see how much the story plays with the narrative conventions of the freak show. As in the case of the traditional show, here the performance is legitimated as the passing on of knowledge, as an opportunity for the education of its audience. As the title of the story itself suggests, we are reading a “report” to the learned members of the academy. The story of the ape’s capture and his progress in humanizing himself are similarly the stuff of the exaggerated biographies sold at freak shows, filled with trials, tribulations, and eventual triumphs. Now likening ape to men, now differentiating the two, Red Peter advertises himself as a scientific object of study, inviting the audience to define him. Just as the sailor on board the slave ship *Hagenbeck* “tried to solve the enigma of my being” so, too, we are seduced into similar speculation.¹⁵ As in the case of the traditional freak show, “A Report to the Academy” plays on, or *spiels*, contemporary scientific debates and, in the process, renders scientific explanations indistinguishable from the mysticism they sought to suppress. The myth of progress implicit in evolutionary discourse and the tragic myth of regress embedded in Freud’s account of primal loss both enter the story as social myths. Playing myth against myth, the story engages the reader in its need to account for origins by giving that nostalgia the face of scientific inquiry. At times, Red Peter encourages his audience to identify with him, suggesting that we share an ape past with him and “insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, [it] cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me” (174). Yet, Red Peter’s *spiel* is also careful to keep him at a strategic distance from his audience, allowing the readers and the members of the academy to differentiate themselves comfortably from him. The crucial differentiation comes as a result of his account of his body and its display. As freak, Red Peter’s body is scarred and wounded, marked with the visual stigmata of difference.

Through the words of Red Peter, we are provided with a description of the freak body. On the one hand, Red Peter is a freak by virtue of the transgression of the boundaries between animal and human he represents. This transgression is signified by his speech and by his clothes. Speech and clothes are thus rendered as equivalent veils, fetishes for the freak body. The transgression is made visible by that which covers it. Additionally, however, Red Peter’s capture produces bullet wounds that have left him with a facial scar, a limp, and with “nothing to conceal” with his trousers; he has been castrated in the civilizing process. His “predilection for taking down his trousers to show [his audience] where the shot went through” is hence a strip tease in the strict sense of the term, as it remains tease even after the strip (175). Red Peter insists, “As for me, I can take my trousers down before anyone if I like; you would find nothing but a well-groomed fur and the scar made—let me be particular in the choice of a word for this particular purpose, to avoid misunderstanding—the scar made by a wanton shot” (175). Simultaneously, Red Peter is arguing that the body and “the truth” should be exposed. While the trousers serve to mark Red Peter as a freak, as a civilized ape who wears clothes, the removal of the trousers does not

reveal an unmarked nature. Even without clothes, he is dressed for display by the marks of civilization. Further, as clothes have already been equated with language, we can also conclude that without language there is quite simply nothing to "see" in this performance. As Red Peter indicates in several places in the text, the limits of language are the limits of the knowable. He reports, for example, "what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it" (176). In this way, Red Peter succinctly articulates the self-imposed limits of narrative *spiel*, which offers superfluous, excessive detail, only to underline the radical unknowability we confront in freak tableau, the impenetrable surface of the body.

Without that narrative to clothe the naked spectacle, Red Peter is a burlesque object rather than the enlightenment subject he constructs through his report. Red Peter clothes and strips himself with narrative. In a reversal of pervasive formulations on the subject, "A Report to the Academy" makes narrative the fetish, the veil to the spectacle. The spectacle does not arrest narrative, as the popular theory of the fetish suggests, but in Red Peter's story, the narrative is the spectacle, the clothing that makes the body visible. In "A Hunger Artist" the freak's first-person narrative will be transformed. Rhetorical show will no longer belong to the spectacle himself, who, instead, comes to us only in the form of his silent freak tableaux.

Until relatively recently, Kafka criticism has been unfriendly to the idea that historical context influenced the author's fiction except in the most indirect manner.¹⁶ It was not until 1987 that Breon Mitchell introduced the historical reality of the phenomenon of hunger artists to Kafka criticism. Mitchell writes, "Amazingly enough, almost every detail of 'A Hunger Artist' is historically accurate with regard to the actual profession of fasting for pay, from the beginnings of this strange occupation in 1880, down to 1922, when Kafka wrote his story. The correspondence with reality is so close that Kafka could not possibly have written the tale without some direct or indirect knowledge of the best-known hunger artists of his time" (238). Mitchell goes on to make an extremely convincing case supporting this last statement. He provides provocative parallels for us to consider; the hunger artist becomes a composite of Claude Seurat, "The Human Skeleton," and Giovanni Succi, professional faster. Dressed and displayed like Seurat, the hunger artist more closely mirrors Giovanni Succi, the preeminent hunger artist of his time. Like Kafka's character, Succi insisted on professional observers twenty-four hours a day to prove the veracity of his feat, pleaded to be allowed to fast for greater and greater lengths of time, and finally was discovered to be mentally unstable.¹⁷ Mitchell convincingly demonstrates that Kafka would have had access to these events through both the newspapers and medical journals.

Mitchell's dilemma is not his historical research, but rather, his uncertainty about the significance of his findings. As he asks in his introduction, "What difference would it make if we knew that hunger artists were familiar figures in European popular culture of the late nineteenth century, and that Kafka had a detailed knowledge of their performances? Would we not still prefer to dismiss such knowledge of their performances as incidental to the true understanding of the text?" (236).¹⁸ "True understanding" aside, we can place the story in the context of the freak show and its aesthetics where its historical references to the display of human curiosities fit in

with a larger thematic and narrative structure.¹⁹ Through its appropriation of freak show aesthetics, "A Hunger Artist" provides a biting critique of its audience's desire to replace its secular saints with the figure of the suffering artist.

Nowhere, perhaps, is the freak show's independence from the carnivalesque better exemplified than in "A Hunger Artist." Almost everything in this short story is a contradiction to Bakhtin's theory. As quite literally a display of a human curiosity, the story describes a body that is anything but grotesque in Bakhtin's sense of the word.²⁰ As the narrator introduces him to the reader, the hunger artist settles into his freak tableau:

[He] sat there pallid in black tights, with his ribs sticking out so prominently, not even on a seat but down among straw on the ground, sometimes giving a courteous smile, or perhaps stretching an arm through the bars so that one might feel how thin it was, and then again withdrawing deep into himself, paying no attention to anyone or anything, not even to the only piece of furniture in his cage, but merely staring into vacancy with half-shut eyes, now and then taking a sip from a tiny glass of water to moisten his lips. (244)

Here we have an emaciated body closed over with tights, a body that is twice removed from the public. He is caged and he is almost completely without the orifices and extensions that allow for Bakhtin's carnivalesque body to merge with others and thus undermine the subject-object opposition. The sip of water and the extension of the arm through the cage only underscore the separation of the body and its closure. Further, the eating, drinking, and defecating that are standard features of the carnivalesque are countered here by a body that takes in and emits almost nothing. If the carnivalesque is about consumption, a hunger artist and the ascetic he represents constitute its opposite. Footlights are not absent in this spectacle where watchers "focused him in the full glare of the electric pocket torch given them by the impresario" (244). The hunger artist exhibit is both art and spectacle, contrary to Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and conforms to the freak show's body and its aesthetics.

As Roy Pascal tells us, the narrative voice of the story is the voice of the barker. Through this narrative voice, the freak show aesthetic is translated into print. The limited identification with the freak, the instability of the line between reality and illusion, and the exploitation of the stereotypes of the reading audience, are all conveyed through the narrator's voice. The story, in short, is a barker's spiel, a sales pitch to the reader who, finally, is the privileged victim of a typical freak show hoax.

As in the traditional freak show, the narrator as barker provides the audience with a limited identification with the artist on display. Pretending objectivity, the narrator shapes his tale. Only occasionally do we get the point of view of the artist and always through the mediated point of view of the narrator. We are invited to sympathize with the hunger artist but are not forced to dwell on his suffering or death for any length of time. Instead, we leave the "show" with the lively panther, moved by the hunger artist's tragedy, but cheered enough to move on to the next exhibit. Further, the extent of the knowledge flaunted by the narrator also flaunts its limitations. We are utterly unable to resolve the contradictions of the motivations of the artist and

the dissatisfactions that stalk him. In the same paragraph the artist is “the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast” and the only one who is not satisfied (246). In the course of the story the source of this dissatisfaction changes. The artist first complains that fasting is too easy, then that limits are placed on the length of his fast, and, not long after, that his art is unrecognized by his audience. Finally, he locates his dissatisfaction in his inability to find food he would like to eat. These contradictions, so obvious in a written story, are the leftovers of an oral discourse designed to win attention and money, the sensational discourse of the barker's spiel. Such inconsistencies litter the story, then, not as Kafkaesque paradoxes, but as discursive markers of the identity of the narrator.

The narrator of “A Hunger Artist” reveals himself as the vestige of the freak show barker in the language of his narration, his blatant contradictions and inconsistencies, and in his description of the tactics of the impresario. Everywhere in the story are clichés, awkward constructions, and the superlatives of freak show discourse. The children, for example, “who stood open-mouthed, holding each other's hands for greater security, marveling at [the hunger artist]” serve as an exaggerated cliché of the callousness of society and its fickle change in tastes that “seemed to happen almost overnight” (250). Exaggerated cliché reaches its apex when the hunger artist is forced to end his fast:

There happened yet again what always happened. The impresario came forward, without a word—for the band made speech impossible—lifted his arms in the air above the artist, as if inviting Heaven to look down upon its creature here in the straw, the suffering martyr, which indeed he was, although in quite another sense; grasped him round the emaciated waist, with exaggerated caution, so that the frail condition he was in might be appreciated; and committed him to the care of the blenching ladies, not without secretly giving him a shaking so that his legs and body tottered and swayed. (248)

As the narrator brings our attention to the “exaggerated caution” of the impresario, we become initiated into the fraud of the freak show, which the narrator participates in so thoroughly himself. The impresario fools the audience into thinking the artist suffers from his fasting; the narrator fools us into thinking he suffers, by contrast, from being forced to end his fast. In the context of the freak show, the one ruse is ultimately no more credible than the other.

If the impresario's ruse depends on the stereotype of an artist dedicated to his public, religiously suffering on their behalf, the narrator's ruse depends on the reverse, an artist suffering because of the public. Throughout the story, the narrator plays on the contemporary sentiment that the proprietors of such exhibits exploited their employees. From the narrator we learn how the impresario reinterprets the hunger artist's behavior to please the crowds. His fury at not being allowed to continue fasting, for example, the impresario explains as “irritability caused by fasting” and the artist's protests are transformed by the impresario into a toast to the public. Dispensing with the stereotype of the exploited artist, however, reveals the three—the artist, the impresario, and the narrator—as collaborators in the same hoax. Thus,

the story plays on its readers' expectations as surely and adeptly as the impresario plays on the expectations of the audience in the story. Once the narrator is fully recognized as a barker, the reading audience may appreciate the art of his spiel: the skillful placement of the religious references and images, the artful construction of the hunger artist as a suffering martyr. It becomes all too obvious that the hunger artist's resistance to the impresario's forty-day limit is merely part of the show. When the impresario reportedly praises "the high ambition, the good will, the great self-denial" of the hunger artist, the reading audience sees how well the narrator mimics the impresario's deception in the course of the story. Like the impresario, the narrator constructs the freak, and central to that construction is the artist's enslavement to the greed of his employer.

As a freak show, the spectacle of "A Hunger Artist" thus feeds the desires of an audience who wants to see its artists as suffering martyrs, as misunderstood, fanatically and single-mindedly dedicated to their art, fighting for autonomy from the greed and material gain of the greater society. If, as Leslie Fiedler suggests, modernist writers remove freaks from their stages and place them on show in society (284), they do so without eschewing the freak show aesthetic and the dynamics of its spectacle. As we can see in *Nightwood*, even in the context of the society at large, the metaphorical footlights do not disappear long enough to allow the carnivalesque to enter the scene. Rather, if *Nightwood* is anomalous to the tradition of the novel, it is precisely because it does not enclose its spectacles within a conventional narrative frame. Instead, Barnes's text is a radical experiment in the novel precisely because it is a text which insists that narrative, human relations, and political protest, are all possible *only* within spectacle's frame.

FREAKS AT LARGE: NIGHTWOOD'S URBAN SPECTACLE

Barnes's writing about the freak show dates back to her years as a New York reporter.²¹ Between her early journalism and *Nightwood*, however, Barnes's depiction of the freak transforms, relocating the freak's power specifically in his spectacle. In her reports on the Coney Island freak show written between 1913 and 1917, we can find a figure who encapsulates Barnes's fascination with the freak and the self-consciousness of his spectacle: the freak with a mirror about his neck "who looks at himself as he lies there, moving his mouth, because this is all he can do" (279). In the two decades between this portrait and the publication of *Nightwood*, however, the pitiful freak evolves into a social renegade, his show into an exhibition of the will to nonconformity. In *Nightwood*, this same freak is a spectacular subject, not a pathetic object, who uses his mirror in order to "enjoy his own 'difference'" (146). The Coney Island freak knows himself as spectacle and, like all the characters in *Nightwood*, he comes to the reader in a novel that allows nothing to escape the dynamics of display. Each body described in *Nightwood* is a freak body, a spectacle made all the more mysterious by the narrative spiel that accompanies its display.²²

As in the case of Kafka, Barnes's interest in the freak show has been, on the one hand, rigorously denied and, on the other, confused with the circus and the carniva-

lesque. From Eliot's introduction to the novel onward, an impressive amount of critical energy has been expended in denying that *Nightwood* is a "horrid side show of freaks." Where Eliot focused on the empathetic capacity of its central male figure, the "doctor" Matthew O'Connor, more recent critics have located the novel's subversive qualities by identifying it as carnivalesque. Jane Marcus has perhaps been the most successful in this effort, using the carnivalesque in order to argue that *Nightwood* is a "kind of feminist-anarchist call for freedom from fascism" (231). Political and liberatory, the carnivalesque reversals and transgressions Marcus sees allow her to celebrate *Nightwood* as a collective rebellion of "outsiders" against the rise of fascism. She writes: "*Nightwood* is the representative modernist text, a prose poem of abjection, tracing the political unconscious of the rise of fascism, as lesbians, blacks, circus people, Jews, and transvestites—outsiders all—bow down before Hitler's truly perverted Levitical prescriptions for racial purity" (231). In Marcus's hands, *Nightwood* thus prophesizes the Holocaust and rebels against it, and it does so specifically through its carnivalesque transgressions of "Levitical prescriptions." Marcus's carnival, equated with the circus, becomes "redemptive."

Illuminating and energetic, Marcus's argument also carries with it the utopian zeal so often attached to the carnivalesque; it equates carnivalesque aesthetics with the effective protest of a "sister- and brotherhood of difference" against the hegemonic order (250). Moreover, while identifying the freak, Marcus's interpretation denies the freak his show; it denies the spectacular dimensions of *Nightwood* which transform the grotesque into the freak, the carnival into the freak show.²³ For *Nightwood* is a freak show; it is perhaps the most complete appropriation of freak show aesthetics of any modernist novel. Thus, the violence and essentialisms of the fascism Marcus detects in *Nightwood*'s "political unconscious" cannot be subsumed or redeemed by carnival. Given the obsolescence of the carnival and the transgressive potentials that go with it, *Nightwood* implies, we can only combat the spectacle of fascism within the terms of the spectacular society that produced it.

In Barnes's novel, the only bulwark against the absolute certainties of fascism is a mystification that denies mastery of the human in the form of knowledge. Contrasting the assertions of freak show spiel to the mute mystifications of freak tableau, *Nightwood* confirms the unknowability of a highly aestheticized object of analysis, the human being. Moreover, *Nightwood* is no political allegory. Despite Marcus's powerful argument, *Nightwood* refrains from locating a tangible and discreet enemy. Rather, as a novel deeply concerned with personal relationships, *Nightwood*'s most political revelation of all is that the spectacular aesthetics of both the freak show and fascism have come to define even the most intimate of relations.

As in Kafka's stories, the freak show of *Nightwood* confuses the distinctions between narrative and spectacle as it offers its coordinated, if incommensurable, spiels and tableaux. In *Nightwood*, as in Kafka's shows, language is a fetish that seeks to cover and make visible the closed, impenetrable surface of the freak show body. The bodies of the freak performers in the text underscore both the spectacularization of language and the impenetrability of freak tableau. Introducing the trapeze artist Frau Mann, Barnes's narrator tells us, "She seemed to have a skin that was the pattern of her costume. . . . The stuff of the tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the

span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll" (13). As in the case of the castrated Red Peter, language here is equivalent to the clothing that covers Frau Mann's "unsexed" body and that which makes it visible. Language, like clothing, is fetish-wear, or, as O'Connor later puts it, that which has "dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known" (136). Similarly, Nikka, covered head to foot with tattoos represents an impenetrable, spectacular body covered with language. Here, too, language is fetish; over Nikka's penis is "Desdemona" and across his knees the "I can" that covers for his impotence (16–17).

In the descriptions of these two freak performers we find figures for the novel's own denial of interiority. Like the circus freaks that people its text, *Nightwood's* surface is a display of language that denies entrance to its readers. As so many critics have noted, the body of *Nightwood* is, like the bodies of Nikka and Frau Mann, impenetrable, a surface composition exorbitant with detail that refuses to explain, a closed body which poses every penetration of its surface as violation.²⁴ Just as "there was no place for intrusion" in Jenny, the scapegoated "squatter," *Nightwood* is densely clothed in the stylized language of its spiel. Similarly, the very hallmarks of the carnivalesque—grotesque realism and abject imagery—appear in O'Connor's discourse enclosed in quotation marks, thus creating textual bodies as whole and incomplete as any of the freak bodies that fill *Nightwood*. Faced with the spectacle of *Nightwood's* freak show, the reader is consequently left to share the predicament of the young Guido, whose eyes are framed by thick-lensed spectacles, the plight of "those in whom concentration must take the place of participation" (120).

Structurally, the novel only tells its stories as the spiels of its barkers: the narrator and Dr. O'Connor. One after another, *Nightwood's* characters are pictured in freak tableaux and accompanied by the excessively detailed, notoriously assertive discourse of the freak show. As in the freak show, *Nightwood's* spiel moves between mythologically-based biography and scientifically-based theories of the descent of man. Even more explicitly than in the traditional freak show, *Nightwood's* spiels offer demystifications that only further mystify the freaks they ostensibly explain. From the first pages to the last, *Nightwood* contrasts its tableaux to its spiels, underlining the unknowability and elusiveness of the objects of desire. Guido and Hedvig Volkbein, Robin Vote, and Dr. O'Connor are all cases in point, characters who each enter the novel as a new exhibition on the freak show stage. Moreover, the novel displays them in the two most common modes of the traditional freak show, what Robert Bogdan has called "the aggrandized" and "the exotic" modes of freak construction (94–116).

The omniscient narrator begins the novel with the "aggrandized mode" of freak display. As Bogden explains, "With the aggrandized mode the presentation emphasized how, with the exception of the particular physical, mental, or behavioral condition, the freak was an upstanding, high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature. . . . One, some, or all of the following attributes were fabricated, elevated or exaggerated, and then flaunted: social position, achievements, talents, family, and physiology" (108). *Nightwood* takes the aggrandized mode even further. As the characters aggrandize themselves, they create the theatrical sets of their freak tableaux and their aggrandizement becomes, itself, a sign of their freakishness. In their tableaux and in the narrative spiels that accompany their textual dis-

play, Hedvig and Guido are exemplars of the aggrandized mode of freak display. Fabricated and flaunted, their royal lineage is the definitive detail of their lives, the hoax at once advertised to the audience and hidden from the complicit "Baroness." Like "General" Tom Thumb, Barnum's most successfully aggrandized freak, Hedvig and Guido display their physiological freakishness within the parameters of the aggrandized mode.²⁵ Their display mirrors the portraits they display in their home, the false Volkbein ancestors frozen in tableaux: the lady is posed "expecting a bird" and the gentleman is seated on a charger and captured in "the execution of a falling arc" (6). Similarly, the "fantastic museum" in which Hedvig and Guido live is a wild collection of styles, historical curiosities, and animal figures which all accentuate the staged quality of the descriptions that follow and define the aggrandized sets on which the Volkbeins make their appearance.

At the very beginning of the novel, Hedvig Volkbein comes to us first in the tableau of childbirth, as a description as stylized and ornate as that which it describes. Indeed, both the language of the tableau and that which it describes may correctly be named "aggrandized":

Early in 1880, in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people, Hedvig Volkbein—a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty, lying upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valance stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin on which, in massive and tarnished gold threads, stood the Volkbein arms—gave birth, at the age of forty-five, to an only child, a son, seven days after her physician predicted that she would be taken. (1)

Here the richness of the description reflects the richness of the "spectacular crimson," and adds, along with the "Volkbein arms," to the aggrandizement of the social position and lineage of the freak, Hedvig. Moreover, Hedvig's description is clearly an exaggeration of a decadent and disappearing royalty, characterized by its "massive and tarnished gold threads." In the last gasp of royal privilege, Hedvig offers her illegitimate offspring to the disapproving people. Underlining the tableau quality of the description, the narrator freezes Hedvig in the act of thrusting her child from her "with the gross splendour of a general saluting the flag" (1). Hedvig's freakishness is constructed around her false title and aggrandized stature, but her physiology is the center of the display. As the possessor of "great strength and military beauty," as well as a "massive chic" (4), Hedvig transgresses traditional gender boundaries. Thus, Hedvig's freakishness is twofold; she is the aggrandized "Baroness" in an age that has delegitimated its royalty, and she is a masculine figure giving birth.

The narrator's presentation of Guido similarly underlines his physical freakishness within a tableau that flaunts his self-aggrandizement, his wealth, and his transgression of preestablished boundaries:

Guido Volkbein, a Jew of Italian descent, had been both a gourmet and a dandy, never appearing in public without the ribbon of some quite unknown distinction tinging his buttonhole with a faint thread. He had been small, rotund, and

haughtily timid, his stomach protruding slightly in an upward jutting slope that brought into prominence the buttons of his waistcoat and trousers, marking the exact center of his body with the obstetric line seen on fruits—the inevitable arc produced by heavy rounds of burgundy, schlagsahne, and beer. (1)

If Hedvig is freakish as a transgressor of the categorical imperatives of gender, Guido's freakishness comes ostensibly from his transgression of racial categories. In the scientific rhetoric of the day, "the Christian" and "the Jew" represent racial categories; their difference is biologically determined. Hence, Guido's illicit conflation of the two is made manifest in his physiological description. Just as Hedvig's embodies her transgression of boundaries, Guido's becomes visible as the comic bulging of the buttons on his waistcoat "marking the exact center of his body with the obstetric line seen on fruits." The obstetric line separates him into symmetrical halves, making visible their unnatural union and, simultaneously, feminizes the Jew in fairly stereotypical terms. While the military and mannish Hedvig gives birth in the first paragraph of the novel, in the second it is her husband Guido who carries the pregnant physique, the "obstetric line" revealing the false lineage of the Volkbeins he has conceived.

In these tableaux, the language is as much a performance as the object being described and, as in the case of Kafka's stories, the language that makes the freak visible as tableau will also obscure her as *spiel*. The narrative *spiels* that accompany these tableaux expand upon a cause-effect relation already implicit in the freak displays. As a typical freak show *spiel*, the narrator's "explanation" is rife with the essentialisms and the quasi-scientific language of the contemporary racial ideology. Further, it easily blurs its scientific discourse with personal biography and mythological allusion, and it confuses biological and cultural determinism in classic freak show fashion. Guido, we learn, "had lived as all Jews do, cut off from his people by accident or choice" (3). "When a Jew dies on a Christian bosom, he dies impaled" (3), the narrator continues with all the drunken confidence of O'Connor. Thus, everywhere in the discourse is the attachment of Jewish identity to blood. Guido's son Felix is heavy with "impermissible blood" (3), and the portraits Guido purchases as counterfeit ancestors are an "alibi for the blood" (7).

It is directly before the introduction of the spectacularized circus freaks for whom Felix feels a particular kinship that the narrator's *spiel* reaches its apotheosis. Here, the narrator's "blood" is both biological, literally the liquid that runs in the veins of the body, and tropological, a figure for history and cultural heritage:

It takes a Christian, standing eternally in the Jew's salvation, to blame himself and to bring up from that depth charming and fantastic superstitions through which the slowly and tirelessly milling Jew once more becomes "collector" of his own past. His undoing is never profitable until some *goy* has put it back into such shape that it can again be offered as a "sign." A Jew's undoing is never his own, it is God's; his rehabilitation is never his own, it is a Christian's. The Christian traffic in retribution has made the Jew's history a commodity; it is a medium through which he receives, at the necessary moment, the serum of his own past that he may offer it again as his blood. (10)

Both the Christian and the Jew in this passage are defined biologically—by their bloodlines. Yet, as the paragraph asserts the commodification of Jewish history, the Jewish subject becomes reliant on a recollected past, that is, on culture. The confusion between biological and cultural determinism is further evident in the final sentence of the passage. Jewish history is here likened to blood metaphorically as the “serum” of the past, but it is manipulated so that the Jew may present this culturally constructed and commodified past as “his blood,” the biological signifier. As a kind of reverse Darwinism, history is passed off as biology. Anti-Semitic and relentlessly essentializing, the narrator’s spiel is filled with assertions, with claims to knowledge and understanding of the aestheticized objects on display. And yet, as in the case of Red Peter, the excessiveness of the claims creates suspicions. Rather than granting the readers an appropriating gaze of the tableaux placed before them, *Nightwood*’s spiels exoticize and mystify their objects; Hedvig and Guido are spectacularized into utterly unassimilable objects.

Nowhere is the appropriation of the freak show aesthetic more explicit than in the introduction of the illusive Robin Vote; in *Nightwood*, the impenetrable surface of Robin’s tableaux and the inadequacies of all the elaborate explanations of her character produce the novel’s paradigmatic instance of freak display. If the Volkbeins are constructed in the aggrandized mode of freak display, Robin is clearly presented in the exotic mode. In this mode, Bogdan tells us, “showmen presented the exhibit so as to appeal to people’s interest in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic” (105). Like Hedvig, Robin is placed on a bed and in a highly detailed set. In keeping with the exotic mode, Robin’s head is “surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly oversung by the notes of unseen birds” (34). These exotic accoutrements of her display help convey Robin’s specific freakishness, her status as one who “lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado” (35), the “beast turning human” (35). As a tableau she is likened to a painting and to a theatrical presence even more explicitly than the Volkbeins. The narrator tells us,

Like a painting by the douanier Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of an unseen dompteur, the half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-winds render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness. (35)

In this tableau, the freak show legacy is clear. The wilderness is “colonized” and its exotic inhabitant is visually consumed. Her stage, her promoter, and the falsity of the “jungle trapped in a drawing room” remind us of the freak show sleight of hand, the constructedness of the freak display. Moreover, as an exhibit, Robin is the site of O’Connor’s double hoax. “Half dompteur” and “half promoter,” he awakens the “sleeping beauty” by throwing water on her face, passing himself off a doctor all the while (35). Second, he “prepares his audience for a miracle” that they entirely miss. While adorning his face with Robin’s make-up, he distracts the audience with a series of “honesties” and “reache[s] out and cover[s] a loose hundred franc note lying

on the table" (36). Robin's exhibit, then, is both an exotic tableau and a performance space for the freak show hoax.

In addition to her introduction into the novel, *Nightwood* continually associates Robin with tableau. With her "arrested step," she is the woman who "presents herself to the spectator as a 'picture' forever arranged" and "a danger" to the "contemplative mind" (37). However, the tableau, is only half of the freak show performance. Both the omniscient narrator and Dr. O'Connor deliver their spiels in turn. The narrator turns Robin into a standard freak show exhibit, a "missing link" between humans and animals. Like Red Peter, Robin is a "beast turning human" and "the infected carrier of the past," presumably the animal past of the human race. Like the "carnivorous flowers" that surround her, Robin is predatory, her beastliness as attractive as it is dangerous. The narrator concludes, "Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers" (37). With such sentences, the narrator's spiel only further mystifies the freak placed before the readers. The overdetermined evolutionary discourse, like the discourse of O'Connor on the definition of "the American" that follows it, leaves us with the same unrequited desire to penetrate and assume the spectacularized Robin Vote as the characters in the novel.

The remainder of the novel is filled with such contrasting spiels and tableaux. At times O'Connor will take over the role of barker. His notoriously rambling and opaque monologues will never, however, answer any of the questions put to him. Each is followed or preceded by a tableau, which O'Connor can only further mystify with his rampant assertions. His long monologue on "the night," for example, follows Nora's presentation of him in his own freak tableau. Yet, it fails to explain to her what she has just seen: "The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin . . . framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders, and falling back against the pillow" (79). Despite the pages of O'Connor's discourse, he fails to enlighten "the night" and Nora is left only with "the sensation of a thought" (79). Most importantly, however, we can look to the final sequences of the novel. For like any good freak show, *Nightwood* ends with its most elaborate spiel and its most mystifying tableau. "Go Down Matthew" is the exorbitant spiel which the tableau of "The Possessed" silently and finally negates.

"Go Down, Matthew" is a rambling exchange between Nora and Dr. O'Connor. As spiel, it is the *tour de force* of the novel, a philosophical discourse on human nature that will be utterly undermined by the final tableau it directly precedes. "Go Down, Matthew" is filled with aphoristic authority, seducing the reader along with its interlocutors into the illusion that the truth of love and human nature is being unveiled. "Make bird's nests with your teeth" (127), O'Connor tells Nora, "Love is the first lie, wisdom the last . . . To be utterly innocent would be to be utterly unknown . . ." (138). To explain Robin, the doctor will thus pile aphorisms atop one another, turning from one indecipherable parable to another, and ultimately, resorting to the same freak show aesthetics that accompanied Robin's first appearance in the novel.

He exoticizes Robin as "outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain; like the paralyzed man in Coney Island" (146). Once again, she is a beast-woman, a Darwinian anachronism, and "the meet of child and desperado." O'Connor continues his description of Robin in the exotic mode: "[She is] sort of a fluid blue under her skin, as if the hide of time had been stripped from her, and with it, all transactions with knowledge. A sort of first position in attention; a face that will age only under the blows of perpetual childhood. The temples like those of young beasts cutting horns, as if they were sleeping eyes. And the look on a face we follow like a witch-fire" (134). Hence, even in the final attempt at understanding her, Robin is only further mystified. O'Connor's construction of her as a freak is the only bulwark against the appropriating gaze of love Nora casts over the memory of her beloved. The only way to undo Nora's claims to knowledge and possession is to maintain Robin's status as a freak, to repair her to the realm of the unknowable. Nora confesses that she has "dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known" (136) and yet, the confession does not stop her from continuing the process. Each version of her love she develops is a love defined as incorporation, a love which destroys subject and object relations and hence allows Nora to "possess" Robin as part of herself. "Robin is incest," she tells O'Connor, "I can't live without my heart" (156). "On her mouth," she insists, "you kiss your own" (143), and her final fantasy of eternal love is for the two of them to have "moulted out parts, as figures in the waxworks are moulted down to their story" (158). O'Connor's insistent reassertion of the subject-object dichotomy explicit in the spectacle of the freak ultimately fails to counter Nora's equally insistent reassertion of a love immune to the protocol of spectacular relations.

Yet, after the stalemate between Nora and O'Connor, it is the mute tableau of "The Possessed" with which *Nightwood* leaves us. Like the photograph postcards of the nineteenth century purchased at the end of the freak show, "The Possessed" is pure commodity fetish, representing all we cannot possess, all to which we cannot claim knowledge. The notorious tableau is a meeting between Robin and one of Nora's dogs, with Nora as the helpless spectator:

Sliding down she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out, and the dog stood there, rearing back, his forelegs slanting; his paws trembling under the trembling of his rump, his hackle standing; his mouth open, his tongue slung sideways over his sharp bright teeth; whining and waiting. And down she went, until her head swung against his; 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 on her fingers as she moved forward. (169)

Here, in the final pages of *Nightwood*, Robin and the dog are poised for the very beast/woman embrace that defines Robin as a freak. In the end, the "beast turning human" comes to us as a picture of the "human turning beast," an evolutionary regression violently enacted. As such, it is the perfect tableau to end the freak show, the *carte de visite* that renders Robin as a "fixed dismay" (157), beyond knowledge, beyond possession.

CONCLUSION

Robin's freedom from appropriation is thus purchased at the price of her exotic objectification, her construction as a freak. From a post-WWII perspective, we are apt to confront such a victory with profound ambivalence. For under the fascist regimes that were soon to come into power, all those labeled as freaks—lesbians, homosexuals, Jews, the racially impure, and the physically disabled—cease to be merely “apart, as beings to be viewed” (Russo 79), but as beings to be eliminated. Recognizing the cultural context of the freak show apparently does little to alleviate the discomfort. Indeed, the freak show shares a great deal with fascism. Both fascism and the freak show rely on the dynamics of spectacle, on scientifically legitimized essentialisms, and on the distinction between the pure and the impure. Moreover, the disappearance of the commercial venues of the freak show and the rise of fascism occur at precisely the same historical moment, inviting us to hypothesize that the one replaced the other. The coincidence and complex relationship between these two is what makes *Nightwood*'s use of freak show conventions so difficult to decipher and so uncomfortable for the contemporary reader. For is there not a teleology that links the construction of freaks, their display, their disappearance, and the Nazi project?

Written before the Holocaust and the reign of the Third Reich, Barnes's *Nightwood* and Kafka's short stories implicitly answer *no*. Rather, these texts convey the aesthetics of the freak show as the very antithesis of what was to become the fascist aesthetic. Russell Berman cogently describes that aesthetic as follows: “If the fascist political movements intended to overcome the alleged chaos of liberal capitalism by returning to the ideological vision of a primitive stability and homogeneity, the fascist work of art appropriated this regenerative goal for itself. No longer an autonomous object of beauty to be contemplated by a passive recipient, it was designed to transform the status of the recipient in order to reunite him or her with the primal order of race and the permanence of unquestionable values” (Golsen xiv–xv). By contrast, as we have seen, the freak show dramatizes instability and mutation. Ideally, it leaves the viewers not with “the permanence of unquestionable values” but with just enough unresolved questions to encourage them to buy a second ticket and return the next day. As Stewart writes of the freak show, “The spectacle results only in speculation”(110). In Barnes's novel, it is the Baron Felix who tells us that “an image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties”(111). Yet, in *Nightwood*, even the image mystifies, as in the case of “The Possessed,” which leaves the reader in possession of nothing but the experience of “fixed dismay.”

While the temptation, then, may be to read the freak shows of Kafka and Barnes as naïve, given the history that follows them, another possibility exists. That possibility is that the history of fascism in the twentieth century has led us to misread cultural practices, such as the freak show, that seem to predict—if not directly contribute to—the mass exterminations enacted by the Nazis. In our zeal to embrace literatures that counter what we regard as the fascist aesthetic, we have, perhaps, confused cause-effect relations. The fictions of Kafka and Barnes echo Benjamin's assertions as they suggest that profound changes in the production and reception of art have occurred, changes that precede and exceed any single political movement.

In short, the society of the spectacle neither follows from fascism nor gives rise to it. While these fictions implicitly admit the potential for fascism's exploitation of these changes, then, they also point to the potential to counter fascist assumptions by exploiting the very same transformations in the artwork and its audience.

In Walter Benjamin's essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," as we have seen, he greets the rise of technologically mediated art forms with ambivalence, not with the censure of a text like Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Rather, in the years preceding the Holocaust, Benjamin attributes to the transformed work of art an equally transformed audience. It is an audience with the potential to fall prey to fascism, but also with the potential to counter it. It may "experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" or it may respond by "politicizing art" (242). The works of Kafka and Barnes regard the rise of spectacle culture with similar ambivalence. In the society of the spectacle they both construct and traverse, objectification is unavoidable. This position the modernist fictions share with more contemporary critics of spectacle culture. For neither Mulvey nor Debord could identify the spectacle as fetish in their respective registers without assuming the objectification implicit in the process. Where the freak fictions of Kafka and Barnes differ from and implicitly critique the most influential post-modernist view of spectacle is in their refusal to equate objectification with victimization. In Kafka's short stories and in Barnes's novel, objectification does not result in the appropriation of the spectacular object. Rather, the aesthetics of the freak show insist on the distinction between the two, a distinction that has no place in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. What possibilities exist, these modernist works implicitly ask us, once we cease to counter spectacle from an imaginary space outside of it? What possibilities will present themselves once we eschew the narrative-spectacle divide?

Kafka's and Barnes's embrace of a cultural practice and aesthetics completely at odds with the carnivalesque is thus provocative and chastening for the contemporary critic, both because of and in spite of its nostalgic longing. On the one hand, their nostalgia for the disappearing freak show illuminates for us the analogous nostalgia at the heart of the carnivalesque. On the other, it reminds us that the historical particularities that once rendered Rabelais's carnival transgressive have long since, and irreversibly changed. The association of the freak show with fascism, the vilification of spectacle and its opposition to narrative, as well as the celebration of the carnivalesque as *the* radical potential of the novel, comprise a matrix of cultural and critical assumptions. Written in an era that had yet to accept the carnival as inherently liberating and the spectacle as essentially oppressive, the freak fictions of Kafka and Barnes remind us that the transgressive potentials of the spectacle are as variable, tenuous, and historically-specific as those of the novel.

ENDNOTES

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sions of this essay and provided invaluable feedback. I am indebted to Gary Handwerk and Mary Esteve for their incisive commentaries on drafts of the essay and, especially, to David Baulch, whose careful readings and enthusiasm for the project continue to keep it moving.

1. The fullest social history of the freak show remains Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. See also Rosemarie Garland Thomson's introduction to the more recent collection of essays she has collected in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. For more theoretically-focused accounts see Susan Stewart's *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* and Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*.
2. In this way, the history of the freak show participates in a larger social pattern that Peter Stallybrass and Allon White identify for us. "These low domains," they write, "apparently expelled as 'Other,' return as the object of nostalgia, longing, and fascination. The forest, the fair, the theatre, the slum, the circus, the seaside-resort, the 'savage': all these, placed at the outer limit of civil life, become symbolic contents of bourgeois desire" (191). See *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* for a fuller analysis of this phenomenon.
3. See Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal work on the carnivalesque, *Rabelais and His World*.
4. By identifying Kafka and Barnes as "minor," I do not mean to suggest that they are not canonical writers. Rather, following Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I mean to indicate that Kafka and Barnes are minority voices within modernism, writers who identify the "revolutionary conditions within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (18).
5. Debord was not the first to identify these links between capitalism, art, and technology, of course. His book is highly indebted to Frankfurt School critiques. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno subtitle their chapter on the "culture industry" as "Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (120). Within that chapter, Horkheimer and Adorno elaborate the logical consequences of "the absolute power of capitalism" that Debord relies on for his argument (120). Yet, by identifying these links as "spectacle," Debord significantly influences the direction of future critiques.
6. See Linda Hutcheon's *Politics of Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and Hal Foster's *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* for typical accounts of postmodernism as the state of art in the context of artistic production and consumption Debord calls spectacle.
7. According to most accounts of the history of the grotesque, the Romantic Era is the turning point in which the grotesque exterior represents the alienated, inner subject. The classic studies here are Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, and, most recently, Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. In general, however, the preoccupations with individual psychology and epistemology are cited as hallmarks of the modernist project. Exteriorization and the focus on the surface, especially the surface of the body, is consequently labeled "postmodern." See Brian McHale's *Postmodern Fiction* and Andreas Huyssen's *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* for these kinds of formulations.
8. See Robert Bogdan's *Freak Shows*, Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks*, Susan Stewart's *On Longing*, and Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque* for some of the most provocative studies.
9. This kind of celebration of the carnivalesque as the domestication and democratization of the power dynamics of spectacle appears explicitly in Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror*. The most incisive critique to date of the carnivalesque and the challenge to power it supposedly accomplishes is *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White.
10. Robert Bogdan gives a range of examples of this kind of publicity stunt. Barnum, for example, enlisted his performers to challenge the term "freak" in court in order to get free advertisement for his show. While the performers exploited popular sentiments about the exploitation of the disabled, they

gave Barnum and themselves front page stories in all of the major newspapers in New York (270–71). See *Freak Show*.

11. See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, and Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque*. In this latter text, Russo attempts to recuperate spectacle, as do many other feminist scholars, as the site of transgression and liberation from social constraints. The need to recuperate spectacle, of course, points us to the established notion that it is a less than healthy mode of representation. Indeed, we can say that spectacle is the ever-present danger, the monster-in-the-box of representation. Hence, the goal of feminist artists to represent women without turning them into spectacle.
12. See "Step Right Up: The World of Popular Entertainment" in Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show* for the historical role of these postcard photographs in the freak show.
13. Russo writes: "In the late nineteenth and twentieth century, the figure of the acrobat becomes the privileged subject of representation by writers and artists, often, in fact, the figure of the male artist himself" (35). She contrasts these figures with the stunt performers of the era, the freak others of the professional artist. See also Naomi Ritter's *Art as Spectacle: Images of the Entertainer Since Romanticism*.
14. Such impostures were, of course, the heart and soul of Barnum's museum and the sideshow circuits. Barnum displayed microcephalic Henry Johnson as the "missing link" under the name "Zip, the What is it?" to great success. Similarly, Maximo and Bartola were studied by medical experts and sideshow audiences alike for half a century. Heralded as "ancient aztecs," the two were microcephalic siblings "acquired" in Central America. See Chapter 5 of Bogdan's *Freak Show*, "The Exhibition of People We Now Call Retarded."
15. In naming the ship Hagenback, Kafka here refers to the Hagenback family, who, like Barnum, gathered its exhibits for display from colonial frontiers.
16. Stanley Corngold summarizes the pervasive sentiment and its sources in Kafka's own comments as follows: "Kafka . . . figures as the angel destructive of history, a producer of things that cannot be drawn into the history of the world or the progress of its generations. In his works, says Kafka, the music of the world ceases to sound. Their music is not the music of the world, their world is not the world, is not its echo or copy" (41). Encouraged thus by Kafka's comments, critics like to read the hunger artist as a metaphor invented by Kafka to dramatize the suffering of the unappreciated artist.
17. Among the interesting insights Mitchell's research on Succi gives us is with regard to the introduction of the panther at the close of "A Hunger Artist." The scientist who studied Succi's great fasts conveys that, toward the end of his life, Succi believed himself to be "the successor of Jesus, the savior; he is a second incarnation of the son of God . . . but there is a great difference between Jesus and Giovanni; in this new incarnation the son of God wished to show his unlimited power in a new form" (243). Succi's desire to be the lion, as opposed to Jesus's Lamb, as Mitchell argues, can well be seen as the inspiration for the panther that replaces the dead hunger artist in Kafka's story.
18. In the end, Mitchell settles for what he calls a "more modest goal," to suggest that the discourses of the newspaper and contemporary scientific studies inform the voice of the story, that they produce "a combination which contributes to the sense of cool distance we characterize as typically Kafkaesque" (237). Such an argument seems not only unsatisfying but also unlikely, given that "A Hunger Artist" is atypical in the Kafka canon, told in a narrative voice which is distinctly different from the "typically Kafkaesque."
19. Mitchell's work reaches its limits because it cannot connect the professional fasters to the larger culture of the freak show and its aesthetics. On the other hand, Roy Pascal sees the connection to what he calls "variety entertainment," but fails to see the aesthetic it involves and, like the critics of his time, continues to see the term "hunger artist" and his occupation as Kafka's invention. My reading of the story, however, builds on Pascal's careful analysis of the narrative voice in the story.
20. Of the grotesque body, Bakhtin writes:

The grotesque body is in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world. . . . Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depth. (318)

21. Barbara Green has argued that Barnes's early journalism foregrounds "the problem of the woman who looks" (70). Green reads Barnes's "performative journalism" through Laura Mulvey (70). Assuming, therefore, the dangers of spectacle, Green redeems Barnes's "How to Be Forcibly Fed" by seeing it as an immanent critique of the female suffragette effort to recruit new activists, an effort which is "deeply flawed," she tells us, "because it insists that activists position themselves as exhibitions" (82). I will argue that Green's fear of the spectacle as the downfall of representation is her own, not Barnes's. On the contrary, for Barnes, there is no space outside of the spectacle.
22. My argument here converges and diverges with Laura Winkiel's recent exploration, "Circuses and Spectacles: Public Culture in *Nightwood*." Like Winkiel, I maintain that *Nightwood* registers a shift in the entertainment industry and in its audiences, a shift provoked by the instantiation of spectacle culture. When Winkiel argues that the freak show, as part of the circus, is a prespectacular entertainment venue and the means by which *Nightwood* critiques mass culture, however, I dissent. Rather, my argument is that the freak show is inherently spectacular and that *Nightwood*'s radical experiment is situate both the novel and its critique of social assumptions from within spectacle culture.
23. While ignoring or denying the omnipresence of the freak show in *Nightwood*, critics have attended to the freak figures and circus performers as evidence of the carnivalesque. Where the carnivalesque can be seen, so, too, these critics presume, the political force of the novel abides. These scholars have provided valuable new ways of reading the text and its role in the modernist project. Yet, by targeting *Nightwood* as a carnivalesque novel, they ultimately mimic T. S. Eliot's attempts to remove the novel from the realm of the freak show in order to make its politics palatable to contemporary thought. For to make *Nightwood* fit the carnivalesque, writers such as M. Keith Booker and Jane Marcus have had to alter the model so thoroughly that it no longer bears significant resemblance to Bakhtin's carnival, with the exception that it, too, is called a transgressive novelistic aesthetic. Moreover, these critics are left to reconcile the subversive politics they locate in *Nightwood* with the disturbing racist, anti-Semitic, and generally essentialist discourse that pervades the text. See Meryl Altman's exploration on the discomforts *Nightwood* presents to contemporary theory with its "insistent, almost pedagogical taxonomy" (162).
24. See Alan Singer's "The Horse That Knew Too Much" in *A Metaphorics of Fiction* and Carolyn Allen's "'Dressing the Unknowable in the Garments of the Known': The Style of Djuna Barnes" in *Women's Language and Style*.
25. From the moment Barnum acquired the four-year old Charles Sherwood Stratton, he shaped him into an aggrandized freak. As "General" and "Tom Thumb," the midget's name discursively conjoins military title with Arthurian legend. His popularity is perhaps best attested to by the thousands who crowded the streets on 10 February 1863—in the midst of the Civil War—to catch a glimpse of his marriage to fellow midget Lavinia Warren. See *Freak Show* 148–61 for a fuller description of the proceedings and the money they earned for Barnum and Stratton both.

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