

AFFECTIVE BODIES: NONHUMAN UND HUMAN AGENCIES IN DJUNA  
BARNES'S FICTION

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KEYWORDS

affect, agency, embodied reading, Djuna Barnes, new materialism, nonhuman, the nonhuman, thing

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 2, November 30, 2016

HOW TO CITE

Laura Oulanne. "Affective Bodies: Nonhuman and Human Agencies in Djuna Barnes's Fiction." *On\_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 2 (2016).  
<<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12351/>>.

Permalink URL: <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12351/>>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hebis:26-opus-123515>



# Affective Bodies: Nonhuman and Human Agencies in Djuna Barnes's Fiction

## Abstract

Djuna Barnes's work is an intriguing example of the ways fiction makes its readers face the nonhuman as having potential for agency, and shows the entanglements between human and nonhuman. In the stories, objects tend to steal the attention from the main characters and become agents in their own right. At the same time, a lot of Barnes's human characters remain "unreadable," and thing-like or animal-like; as such, nonhuman themselves.

This article asks why readers become engaged with such texts and how we make sense of them. Drawing on new materialist and posthumanist conceptions of distributed agency and affect, I explore the entangled human and nonhuman agencies that contribute to the action of the narratives and, arguably, to their affective appeal, the two being closely intertwined. To discuss the reading processes the texts invite, I employ embodied cognitive approaches to the process of reading fiction. Based on the analysis of Barnes's novel *Nightwood* and her less researched short fiction, I propose that reading these texts is largely a process of affective, embodied sense-making that pertains equally to human and nonhuman fictional agents, revealing their mutual dependence and their equal capacity to affect.

## 1 Introduction

Reading fiction makes us face all kinds of situations, characters and phenomena that we might consider strange and uncanny, yet enchanting and immersive. This way, it also puts us face to face with the nonhuman in its various forms. Some fictional encounters with the nonhuman may become accentuated and even disturbing, especially ones in which the nonhuman presents itself as profoundly entangled with what we consider as human, which entails elements such as agency based on individual subjectivity, psychologically motivated actions, and capacity for interpretation and understanding. Such entanglements are in no way specific to thematically experiential, generic niches such as science fiction and fantasy, but can also be encountered in, say, modernist prose, as this essay will show. Why do we become engaged with characters who take a human form but whose inner life and motivations for actions remain unfathomable and inexplicable, such as Melville's famous Bartleby, or characters who are presented in the narration as bearing close resemblance to nonhuman things<sup>1</sup> or animals? On the other hand, how shall we read and interpret fiction where nonhuman, inanimate things seem to have a life of their own, and invite readerly immersion and affective engagement as much as human characters?

Djuna Barnes's (1892–1982) work combines these two sets of problems. Many of the thematic and formal aspects of her work are of a modernist making, in touch with European and American avant-gardes of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her work also carries a great amount of looking backward, what could be called “antiquarianism”:<sup>2</sup> some of her characters and milieux seem to come from the stock of both naturalism and decadent symbolism, some plotlines and characters' relations evoke Victorian sentimentalism, others classical tragedy, while her language and some experiments with genre hark all the way back to Renaissance literature. Barnes's characters are often typified to the extent that they resemble characterizations in a Renaissance framework of humoralist personality types, or the stock characters of *commedia dell'arte*.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, her work engages in modernist directions theorized as “the dehumanization of art” by José Ortega y Gasset, identifiable in a turn to abstraction especially in the pictorial arts, but also in the lines of development leading to the *Nouveau Roman*, for instance.<sup>4</sup>

Barnes's work is also modernist in that it usually does not offer omniscient, extradiegetic descriptions or analyses of the internal states of her characters in the manner of a typical realist novel, for instance. However, in many cases, the alleged inner emotions and motivations of her characters are not decipherable even through what we are told of their actions, or through mimetic presentation of their talk. One can try to read the characters by imaginatively assuming they have an interiority or a personhood composed of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions,<sup>5</sup> but this approach tends to fall short of being helpful. Barnes's characters often have what H. Porter Abbott has called “unreadable minds.”<sup>6</sup> Abbott suggests that such characters are “naturalized” or made more readable by classifying them as types, catalysts for understanding other characters, or as having a symbolic function. However, this too remains an insufficient analysis. First of all, there is usually no other character with more psychological profundity in sight, for the unreadable characters to mirror. All in all, it seems that we are engaged with Barnes's characters, however typified, *as characters* before and besides grasping for a symbolic or functional explanation for their existence.

Readers of Barnes might end up in trouble when applying reading methods that call for a ‘theory of mind’ or an assumption of certain cognitive processes as the basis of attributing consciousness to a character. Furthermore, the same fate of puzzlement threatens readers equipped with a symptomatically oriented framework of interpreta-

tion, looking for repressed motives behind actions and emotions. One might become inclined to judge Barnes's characters as literary failures not conveying what they should. Then again, this would be an oversight: her work does indeed convey a lot of things, also in the realm of feelings. There are deeply tragic tones, as well as pleasures and pleasantries, which affect the way the work can be read and engaged with. As Julie Taylor notes, "while Barnes might be highly skeptical about Freudian notions of depth, she was [...] still interested in describing the dynamics of emotion."<sup>7</sup>

Rather than through individual depth-psychology, the affective tones available for readers to grasp are produced jointly through characters and other elements. These include descriptions of spaces, objects, and landscapes that form fictional encounters: the ways bodies — in this case meaning both human, lived bodies and nonhuman, material entities — move one another. The material, nonhuman elements, in turn, stand out and seem to demand a part in the distribution of agency, not being explainable solely as background material used to produce an illusion of realism, or as symbolic references to something other than themselves. This is why the emphasis of my analyses will be on descriptive passages, to best illustrate the appeal of things and thingly characters *an sich*, not as proxies to action, which we might explain with a more naturalizing or humanizing touch — although it will also become apparent that the distinction between description and action is far from clear-cut.<sup>8</sup> Another reason for selecting just such passages for analysis is a rather simple one: the predominance of description especially in Barnes's later fiction. This is especially noteworthy in the case of short fiction, where most of the concise space afforded by the story form is devoted to building something like a still-life, with little or no action and no moment of epiphany typical of a modernist short story. As we will see, however, Barnes's arrangements of things are actually far from *still*.

As a way to discuss agency and the entanglements between fictional humans and nonhumans, I draw on new materialist conceptions of agency as distributed and affective, happening in constellations of more than one agent. These views broaden the scope of thinking about agency, which enables me to discuss the distinctions and similarities of human and nonhuman agency in Barnes's fiction, thereby also offer some insight into how a modified understanding of the roles of the human and nonhuman elements in fiction can help us make sense of Barnes's work and its appeal. In addition, I am referring to embodied, enactive approaches to the cognitive study of fiction,

which are especially helpful for discussing the readerly experiences as well as the narrative techniques of immersion and ways of inviting engagement with both human and nonhuman fictional agents.

In the following, I will first briefly discuss the theoretical and conceptual starting points of the analyses, then provide examples from Barnes's best known novel, *Nightwood*, as well as from some of her lesser known short fiction, to develop these ideas. To illustrate the mutual entanglement of human and nonhuman, I will first touch upon the topic of Barnes's characters as animal-like. This, however, is an area already largely covered in research. My emphasis is on the discussion of the "unreadable" characters in the context of materiality and thingliness. The focus of the latter part, on the other hand, will be on the immersive qualities and agency of material things, and their co-operation with the character-descriptions. While providing insights into the challenging oeuvre of Barnes, the readings can also enlighten various traits common to modernist literature and beyond, and open up new paths for the exploration of agency in literary fiction in general. The essay also raises the following, broader issue: in what ways does our distinction between human and nonhuman as agents help or hinder our making sense of fiction — or the world we live in?

## **2\_Entangled Agencies**

Before discussing the actual theoretical background of this essay, some conceptual clarifications are in order. As has become apparent, I am using the conceptual pair of 'nonhuman' and 'human', while realizing that there is a variety of ideological burdens and difficulties hidden in such dualisms. This is an example of a dichotomy in which the two halves constitute one another. There would be no need for 'nonhuman,' had we not 'human' as a point of departure, and the way we conceive of 'human' is largely dependent on what is left outside its scope — the definition of which is also a political and ethical decision in a historical context.

Yet there are a multitude of nonhuman elements in what first looks human, and what we call nonhuman might have a variety of characteristics verging on human, considered culturally or biologically. The task of drawing a line between human and nonhuman becomes especially difficult when dealing with an imaginary sphere such as literature, although it does not seem so to begin with. The study of literature is usually seen falling within the scope of humanities, researching a field of life which

considers, predominantly, human beings, and pondering what it is to be human. It is from this perspective that researchers also come up with critical concepts like the nonhuman, or whole new ways of thinking about our place in the world and our relationship to the other, such as different traits of posthumanism. The production, consumption, discussion, and making sense of literature all involve human agents communicating stories and meanings with a little help from things in the material world, such as ink, paper, and electronic devices. Writers and readers probably conceive of themselves and their experience as human. However, literature is also a sphere where imaginative solutions and devices such as personification of nonhuman entities are available, and in frequent and efficient use. In the phenomenon of reading, the division of agency between the human and the nonhuman is actually far from clear-cut. I am writing about *human* experience, and making assumptions about *human* readers and characters, but I hope the following will show how this very humanness is profoundly entangled with the nonhuman.

Firstly, I draw on Karen Barad's seminal account of *agential realism*. In this view, which encompasses both epistemological and ontological, even ethical issues, there is no individual agency as we have learned to conceive of it in most of the history of philosophy and humanist thinking. Agency is what emerges in constellations, what she calls "phenomena," involving more than one agent, out of which any number can also be nonhuman and even ones we might consider as inanimate — Barad herself emphasizes the importance of nonhumans in these constellations.<sup>9</sup> Agents not only *interact* in phenomena, but are constituted in and through them. On these grounds, Barad comes up with the term 'intra-action':

[D]istinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements*.<sup>10</sup>

The entangled phenomena of agential realism are mixtures of what we habitually call material and cultural — actually, in them, the distinction often ceases to matter, as we notice how players from both spheres alike emerge as agents in phenomena.

In the context of literature, for example, we might use the idea of intra-action to shed light on how the agents involved in the phenomenon of reading literary fiction mutually constitute one another. The reader is human agents, but they are made such only in connection with the nonhuman agency of the text, while the writer emerges as

an *imaginary* agent. All three are culturally constructed entities, but they all also have a material dimension, even the imagined writerly agency.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, besides the triangular arrangement, there are a multitude of other agencies involved. There are paper, pens, screens, keyboards and printing machines, there are chairs and tables; there are printed words and vocal sounds; there are intertextual references, prior human experiences and biological processes. Similarly, within the storyworld, we can observe fictional phenomena, consisting of a multitude of agencies, to be imagined and enacted by the readers entangled in the event of reading.

Barad's account is influenced, for instance, by the Actor Network Theory initiated by Bruno Latour, but the radically performative elements in her theory distinguish it from earlier formulations of distributed or material agency.<sup>12</sup> Besides this context and the influential queer performativity as discussed by Judith Butler, this view of agency arises from the empirical findings at the core of quantum physics, which may have a share in making her thinking seem like quite a leap in the context of the humanities, in its attempt to erase the special position of the human not only as an agent, but also as the subject of observation, understanding and interpretation.<sup>13</sup> Some of her conclusions might be only partially applicable to a sphere such as literature, and more so for scientific practices and phenomena such as interaction between nano-sized particles only accessible to human observers with the help of specific instruments. However, agential realism also shares the profoundly *humanist* concern of what constitutes the human, and therefore is not separate from the long lineage of humanistic thinking — in fact, it is inescapably linked to it even by the term 'posthumanism.'<sup>14</sup> Barad specifies that her use of this label "marks a refusal to take the distinction between 'human' and 'nonhuman' for granted," and a will to investigate the very practices in which these poles are constituted.<sup>15</sup> Such a shift in attention away from the predominance of the human subject is part of a larger, ethical concern, connected to the anthropocentrism of Western thinking and its implications for the abuse of nonhuman nature, for instance. In the context of Barnes's fiction, these questions form a philosophical background, against which more practical questions of reading and literary sense-making are set.

The dynamics of Barad's account bear resemblance to several theories of *affect*, although the concept is not overtly present in her work. 'Affect' is a multifaceted term, its definitions partly but not completely overlapping with those of 'emotion.'

Here I refer to the Spinozist-Deleuzean account, in which affect has come to mean the capacity of bodies to move and be moved — this being no unique property of human bodies.<sup>16</sup> Another feature that distinguishes affect in this sense is its *relationality*, as opposed to the individuality more often associated with emotions: affects occur in-between bodies, emotions can be shared but are usually seen as arising from reactions and appraisals that occur within the human subject, which is why using the term ‘affect’ enables inclusion also of nonhuman and thingly agents in the discussion.<sup>17</sup> Thirdly, ‘affect’ is fit to be used to denote a rather vague, non-conceptualized coloring or mood, the phenomenon of moving and being moved in general. ‘Affect’ is the concept from the realm of ‘feeling’ that best suits the following discussion, because embodiedness and materiality, relationality and blurred lines seem to characterize the phenomena I wish to discuss in relation to Barnes’s writing.<sup>18</sup>

Jane Bennett’s discussion of distributed agency is linked to this account of affect, while it also draws on Epicurean, Nietzschean, and vitalist traditions, as well as Actor Network Theory. Her notion of ‘vital materiality’ suggests, a bit more cautiously than Barad, that material things can “act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, forces or tendencies of their own.”<sup>19</sup> These agents do not act alone, either. She conceives of agency, following Deleuze and Guattari, in *assemblages*, “confederation[s] of human and nonhuman elements,” in which the force of the confederation is more than the sum of its parts (although the parts are not actually constituted by one another).<sup>20</sup>

Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen [...] is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone.<sup>21</sup>

These “effects” and the “ability to make something happen” make the assemblages affective. Bennett’s thinking has overt political implications ranging from consumption to public health and energy policy,<sup>22</sup> but it also applies to the present discussion of reading fiction. As Bennett suggests:

Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy: plants, animals, blades of grass, household objects, trash. [...] poetry can help us feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs.<sup>23</sup>



We know that stories, as well as the “poetry” in the quotation, have the capacity to move us, but what is it actually that does the moving — especially in cases such as Barnes’s work, where we rarely get “round” human characters to identify with, or exciting lines of plot to follow?<sup>24</sup> The following will suggest that the notion of the assemblage is key to understanding the affective appeal of Barnes’s *tableaux vivants*.

Bennett’s deconstruction of the boundary between matter and life enables us to look at humans as well as nonhumans and things as simultaneously material and potentially “vital.” To address the agential and affective potential in thingly players in a text, we thus need not limit our discussion of nonhuman agency in fiction to instances of anthropomorphism in the form of personification,<sup>25</sup> or to the more complex phenomenon of fetishism, which still has the human lacks, desires, and disavowals at its heart. This is extremely helpful, since many texts, such as the ones by Djuna Barnes analyzed here, display forms of nonhuman agency that extend beyond such devices and interpretations. Secondly, the notion of the affective body as a party in the emergence of agency is a fruitful one for the reading of fictional texts, taking into account the embodied aspects of reading that also frame the discussion in this paper.

### **3\_Material Enactments of Experience**

As the main interest here is the agency of nonhuman affective bodies, it is important to discuss the reader, too, *as a body*, and to note the phenomenological elements of *livedness* that pertain to the human body. Our experience of fictional events, characters, and objects involves certain psychological processes, even though all of these need not be ‘human’ by definition. Embodied and enactive cognitive approaches to reading and fiction provide empirically-grounded conceptual aids to discussing reading as an embodied event, and the reader as an embodied agent.

Barad writes that agency is “*an enactment, not something that someone or something has.*”<sup>26</sup> This is compatible with the view of experience and consciousness as properties enacted in the embodied organism’s interaction with the world, which is taken in enactivist phenomenology.<sup>27</sup> When brought within the sphere of literature, this means a focus on the embodied experiences evoked by a narrative. As Marco Caracciolo puts it, citing the prevailing neurological views in relation to the imaginary processes involved in reading: “If perception is embodied, then mental imagery must be embodied, too. [It is] deeply rooted in our real body and in memories of our

past sensorimotor interaction with the environment.”<sup>28</sup> Our ways of imagining while reading resemble our active sensory exploration involved in experiencing reality.<sup>29</sup> Caracciolo sketches a process of “fictionalization of the reader’s virtual body” to tackle the embodied dimensions of fictional immersion, in which it is the reader’s *body*, not her consciousness, that can be transported virtually into the story.<sup>30</sup> This transportation means an imaginary enactment of movements in the fictional world, based on the reader’s embodied experience of moving and living in the actual world.

These formulations have mainly been used to discuss the enacted experiences of fictional characters or focalizing structures.<sup>31</sup> However, it is plausible that the fictionalization of a virtual body would spill over the edges of characters in a human form, precisely thanks to the holistic conception of experience involved. As formulated by Alva Noë, because of the component of the virtual in our perception, we experience and make sense of the world and its objects by actively engaging with them — thinking with objects, so to speak.<sup>32</sup> This kind of experience, then, becomes enacted also in reading fiction, as it is the only kind of experience we have access to. Therefore, in fiction, it is not only the human bodies that carry significance, but the constellations of human and environment, and the ways the humans act in the environment. Following Bennett, this could be taken even further: the material being-in-the-world that is shared by human and nonhuman can enable projection of embodied experience beyond the form of the human body, to the animal or thingly.<sup>33</sup> In the case of things, they are not only the *object* of our experience — we experience with things, and taking into account our own materiality, to some extent *as* things.

Thus an enactivist conception of readerly experience also creates ways of bridging the human-thing gap when discussing the event of reading. It also serves to highlight the role of embodied experience and processes such as affective engagement in reading, which ties in with the new materialist and posthumanist discussions of agency. The focus on embodiment and affectivity is also the reason why, in this essay, I refrain mostly from referring to ‘interpretation’ or ‘understanding’ of literature, and instead write about ‘making sense.’ This delicious polysemy reflects an epistemological choice to foreground the processes of embodied, sensory imagining and grasping, which seem to be present in our dealings with literature, but which sometimes tend to be overlooked for the benefit of more conscious ‘interpretation’ and ‘understanding.’ For the type of sense-making that I wish to discuss in this essay, these terms carry too

strong a focus on cognitive appraisals of a “higher” order than affectivity, which, in recent enactivist accounts, is usually seen very broadly, as part of the mind and life of even simple organisms.<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that higher-order skills and interpretation would not play a part in reading Barnes, as they most definitely do. My suggestion, however, is that the entangled human-nonhuman agencies we encounter in Barnes’s fiction are made sense of largely through less conscious or analytical, more primordial, affective, and even tactile forms of embodied sense-making, and that focusing on such sense-making might also increase our *understanding* of our being-in-the-world shared with and permeated by nonhuman elements.

#### **4\_The Nonhuman in Characters**

Even though this essay focuses on discussing Barnes’s characters as thingly, their well-researched resemblance to animals is so closely linked to this discussion that it requires some attention here. The great number of animals in Barnes’s texts, and her characters’ animal-like traits have been discussed, for instance, by Alex Goody in the context of Deleuzian ‘becoming-animal’ and Bakhtinian grotesque.<sup>35</sup> Carrie Rohman, on the other hand, notes how Robin Vote, the elusive, deceptive lover of Nightwood, “figures nonidentity as a form of subjectivity, where the nonlinguistic, the undecidable, and the animal serve to revise what counts as human.”<sup>36</sup>

Robin is the character who in Barnes’s work perhaps most strikingly combines psychological unfathomability with animal traits — as befits her avian name. As Rohman suggests, Robin is associated with silence and the absence of language, which contributes to her unreadability but does not exhaustively explain it. When she is first seen in the novel by her future husband Felix Volkbein and the eloquent pseudo-doctor Matthew O’Connor, she is lying on the bed in a hotel room, not only silent but unconscious. She is said to exude an odor with a “quality of that earth-flesh, fungi [...] texture of plant life.”<sup>37</sup> Rohman points out, rightly so, that this foregrounding of the sense of smell locates Robin in the “realm of animality;”<sup>38</sup> yet the passage has other elements from the realm of things, which have consequences for how readers are invited to imagine Robin.

The first things the intruders in the room are described seeing are a carpet and two windows. Then the focal point moves to the bed, but it takes its time before reaching Robin:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly oversung by the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten — left without the usual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives — half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and disheveled. (N 30–31.)

The narrating voice seems to get lost in detail of plants, fabrics, and birds in cages, producing a kind of *tableau vivant* of *The Sleeping Beauty*. The picture features the figure of a female human being, but the sheer amount of other nonhuman elements that override (and “oversing”) the human form.<sup>39</sup>

Such patterns are typical of Barnes’s descriptions of characters. Consider, for comparison, the following excerpt from the short story *A Boy Asks a Question* (first version published 1923), of Carmen la Tosca. She is an actress come to spend her holiday in a village. A boy from a neighboring house interrupts her breakfast with a vague question about the nature of love, because he has heard her to be a woman of the world. The answer, too, remains vague, but Carmen delivers some lessons in life and some general encouragement; the following day, she leaves the village with her *entourage*, and there are no further mentions of the boy. Thus the story ends with the exit of another quite enigmatic and evasive character in Barnes’s repertoire. She is also another woman pictured in her bed:

Carmen la Tosca breakfasted in bed, and late. Having caught herself out of sleep in a net of bobbin-lace, she broke fast with both food and scent, lazily dusting her neck and arms with perfumed talc, lolling on the bed (which stood between two ovals of pear-wood, framing versions of Leda and the swan), ripping through the wrappers of Puerto Rican journals and French gazettes with the blade of a murderous paper-cutter, and finally, in the total vacancy of complete indulgence, her hand sprawling across a screaming headline, would stare out into the harsh economy of russet boughs, pranked out in fruit.<sup>40</sup>

This character, too, is surrounded by a multitude of fabrics, furniture, art, small objects, and plants. The borders of her agency are unclear: she has “caught herself out of sleep,” being simultaneously subject and object of waking up and hanging in the imaginary “net of bobbin-lace.” There are cues for the sense of smell in this description, and also sounds emerge to make the materiality of the words ring in the readers’ ears:

“ripping through the wrappers;” “screaming headline” — the latter pointing towards written language but also remaining mere noise, without conceptualizable content.

In both of the quoted passages, the description of the surrounding space creates a sense of distance in relation to the character. The material detail certainly has potential for leaving a more vivid recollection than the human character engulfed by it. On the other hand, the character and the surroundings form an assemblage from which it might be useless to separate one or the other. The readers are given cues for embodied enactments through the focalizer, and the richness of materials produces an array of imaginable sensations, among which the human body is but one inanimate surface of an object that can be sensed virtually: a “heavy, disheveled,” and perfumed thing available to the senses, or a sprawling hand evoking tactile sensations. Considered in the Baradian framework, we could say that the characters emerge in the phenomenon of focalization. And borrowing from Bennett, none of the entities that emerge as thingly, in these assemblages of human, bird, plant, and furniture, is a carrier of agency in itself. It is the whole that has the potential to affect the reader. The descriptions of the human characters would not have the same effect, were they stripped from the material detail; the assemblage of detail, however, might have an almost equal effect, were the human element removed. In this case, the human element would still exist, though, in the reader’s enacted experience of the materialities described, based on the experiences of the reader’s body.

Eventually, Robin wakes up. When she begins to act in the fictional world, readers are invited to engage in sense-making processes regarding these actions in some new ways, but Robin never sheds the sense of being a mixture of human, animal, and thing. She wanders into a marriage with Felix, gives birth to a child but remains alienated from him, and subsequently drifts out of the marriage and into a passionate relationship with Nora Flood. She keeps drifting in the new relationship too, drinking and roaming from one café, one casual sexual relation to another, and finally out of reach for Nora. The reader is invited to side with Nora, as she tries but fails to understand Robin, who remains “unable or unwilling to give an account of herself” (N 44). Nora explains her pain to Matthew O’Connor: “‘I’ll never understand her — I’ll always be miserable — just like this’;” “‘I can’t stand it, I don’t know — I am frightened. [...] What is it in her that is doing this?’” (N 76–77). This discussion, like many others in Barnes’s work, remains without closure, the interlocutors talking

slightly past one another. This heightens the sense of certain affective interchanges that exist beyond language. At the end of the novel, Robin is found in an abandoned, decaying chapel by Nora and her dog, and she performs an inexplicable, wordless gesture of falling down, crawling, and crying in front of the scared animal. This gesture keeps repeating in Barnes's fiction, often in a form that underlines it *as a gesture*, a literary motif, rather than the psychologically justifiable action of a human-like character.

Both Carmen and Robin evade the touch of language, interpretation, and explanation. It is entirely justifiable to read them as having symbolic or catalytic functions, as Abbott would suggest — thus Robin could be read as symbol of the animal, nonlinguistic, and unconscious sides in the human, or as a catalyst for other characters' desire and pain — or as a type, of perhaps a decadent modern 1920's bisexual; whereas Carmen la Tosca, as her name suggests, would be a typified *grande dame*, a phallic woman, a symbol of feminine knowledge and power. Carmen, like Matthew, also acts as catalyst, a voice for the authorial agent to pronounce philosophical, although cryptic, ideas with the authority of the woman of the world:

Do you know what makes the difference between the wise man and the fool?  
Never do evil do good people, they always forgive, and that's too much for anybody. [...] when it's all over, you'll listen to nothing at all; only the simple story, told by everything. (CS 349)

Barnes's writing definitely uses and even toys with such character functions. Yet these do not suffice to explain the potential for readerly engagement with what happens in her stories. Even Carmen's "answer" to the boy's question seems more like a gesture, playing with the archetype of the wise old man, inviting close interpretation but thwarting it by opaque references to "everything."<sup>41</sup>

The virtual embodiedness and materiality of the characters has a crucial role also in the way they come to act as symbols or catalysts, or how their reading as types contributes to making sense of the whole narrative. The portrayal of characters as thingly might be read as part of Barnes's "dehumanizing" views and decadent sensibilities, a sign of a pessimism as regards the human in general. However, in light of new materialist and enactivist thinking, it can equally be seen as an empowering gesture, which shows the proximity of human and nonhuman as *affective potential* that emerges in different, singular assemblages. The action of the story unfolds in such fictional constellations, which make the characters affectively available for readers to

make sense of, constructing a basis for other types of interpretation, and permeating them, too. Robin and Carmen are characters we experience and enact virtually as feeling bodies, regardless of how much we know of their psychological movements or otherwise construct them as human. The imaginary experientiality of the characters emerges together with readerly reactions to them *as bodies*, but also to the nonhuman bodies surrounding them. This brings us back to the question, are there any differences in how human and nonhuman bodies invite readers to react? How to conceive of agency and readerly experience in descriptions where there is no human body included in the assemblages — or are such descriptions even possible?

### **5\_The Agency in Things**

If Barnes's characters are verging on nonhuman, the thingly elements in her fiction are often particularly lively. The most vivid readerly recollections of *Nightwood*, for instance, might well be of its interior detail: Nora and Robin's apartment with its fair-ground horses and dolls, or Matthew's room as described below by Nora:

A pile of medical books, and volumes of a miscellaneous order, reached almost to the ceiling, water-stained and covered with dust. [...] On a maple dresser, certainly not of European make, lay a rusty pair of forceps, a broken scalpel, half a dozen odd instruments that she could not place, a catheter, some twenty perfume bottles, almost empty, pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs. From the half-open drawers of this chiffonnier hung laces, ribands, stockings, ladies' underclothing and an abdominal brace, which gave the impression that the feminine finery had suffered venery (N 70–71.)

The description goes on so long that it is not possible here to provide a whole picture of the abundance of things in it. It forms a parallel with the introduction of Robin quoted earlier: after an array of scattered materialities, the focalizer's gaze reaches Matthew, the human object (once again *embedded* in the immediate environment of a bed).

We have seen how the human character emerges in a description of material things. But how do such descriptions affect us as readers, when the human has not (yet) emerged? Jane Bennett calls attention to an experience of being “struck” by random debris she encounters on the street:

In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of *that* rat, *that* configuration of pollen, *that* otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water bottle-cap.<sup>42</sup>

The encounter is beyond language and human fellow-feeling — yet Bennett argues that such experiences point at nonhuman, inanimate things having an agency of their own. The things do not move or show individual intentions. Still, the human capacity to be enchanted by things is proof of the *things' capacity to affect*:

[T]he figure of enchantment points in two directions: the first toward the humans who *feel* enchanted and whose agential capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that *produce* (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies.<sup>43</sup>

This needs to be seen as one more way to broaden the scope of agency outside the human sphere of intentionality and psychological motivation, toward the potential of affecting, which is not a unique human capacity.

This exploration is actually quite compatible with the problem of nonhuman agency in literature. To begin with, fictional assemblages of objects, such as the ones described in *Nightwood*, already set the stage for *enchantment*. Such passages offer singular, immanent objects to the reader's primordially affective interest: *that* maple dresser, *those* perfume bottles, puffs and powders, *that* abdominal brace. Thus they enable the study of fictional encounters phenomenologically resembling the one experienced by Bennett. The earlier quotation from Bennett recalls Viktor Shklovsky's statement: art "exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony."<sup>44</sup> These views capture the dialectic of "empathy and defamiliarization, the familiar and the strange," which Bernaerts et al. refer to in discussing anthropomorphized nonhuman narrators, and which also pertains to the more murky cases of nonhuman agency encountered in Barnes.<sup>45</sup> The open intentional state of reading, combined with the singularity of the fictional constellation, and the materialities of the language used, invites the reader to be affected, and engages her in a phenomenon of being-affected.

In the description of Matthew's room, even though everything described falls into the category of nonhuman (although they are also items made and used by humans), there is still a mode of humanness present in the form of focalization. Nora's "fictionally actual" body yields itself to us as a proxy, to align our "virtual body" with.<sup>46</sup> We do not require a human focalizer for the projection of embodied experience, though: in instances of what Monika Fludernik has called "figuralization," an "empty" deictic center is filled by readerly immersion which, as has been suggested here, arises from embodied experience.<sup>47</sup> This is an intriguing notion from the perspective of engaging with the nonhuman as well as for its relevance to the modernist devices that Barnes



can be seen to use, and needs to be explored further with the help of one more short story.

*Finale*, a short, two-page story (first published in 1918) is narrated extradiegetically from an empty deictic center, the focalization roaming around a room at the center of which lies a dead man in a coffin, surrounded by candles and mourners. In this story, the line between animate and inanimate, passive and active, does not fall neatly between human and nonhuman, as the narrating voice points out with regard to the corpse: “Everything else in the room seemed willing to go on changing — being. He alone remained cold and unwilling, like a stoppage in the atmosphere.” (CS 232). What keeps “changing” and “being” around him are his kneeling wife, mother and children, but also details of the material world, among them “the dead man’s dearest possession — a bright blue scarf embroidered with spots of gold.” (CS 233). The scarf could be called the leitmotif of the story. It was acquired during an apparent romantic encounter in Italy, and it has an experiential history: “It was a lovely thing, but much treasuring had lined it; and the marks of his thumbs as they passed over it in pleasant satisfaction had left their tarnish on the little spots of gold.” (CS 233) In the description of the scarf, a clear opening for the fictionalization of the reader’s virtual body comes in the reference to thumbs passing over it.

After this description, shadows are described growing and darkness falling on the room and the mourners. The ending of the story is a layered structure of a narrative event and descriptive stagnation on top of one another, as it were:

A large rat put his head out of a hole, long dusty, and peered into the room.

The children were going to rise and go to bed soon. The bodies of the mourners had that half-sorrowful, half-bored look of people who do something that hurts too long.

Presently the rat took hold of the scarf and trotted away with it into the darkness of the beyond.

One thing only had the undertaker forgotten to do; he had failed to remove the cotton from the ears of the dead man, who had suffered from earache. (CS 233)

The human element is still present, if not in the narrator, then in what is narrated. The characters become reified as bodies in a posture in-between actions, while the expressive quality of the posture invites readers to resonate experientially with what it is like to “do something that hurts too long.” Traces of human agency and experience become entangled with nonhuman elements: the rat is the most potent agent in the story,

whereas the scarf might be what is described in the liveliest manner. The rat's "present" actions follow their own pattern and do not cross with the other things going on in the room, except by removing the scarf from the scene. The last sentence is descriptive, returning to the slow rhythm of changing/being and finally to the unchanging/unbeing of the corpse. Yet the corpse is actually also changing, due to the non-human agencies, namely the processes of decomposition at play in it — excepting, perhaps, only the cotton buds, a nonhuman element within it, profoundly entangled.

There is no conscious human recognition of these crossings of human and nonhuman in the story. The scarf has been held dear and caressed, but is now forgotten; the once helpful, now out-of-place cotton is ignored. The bodies of the mourners seem almost as blind and deaf as the dead man, even though their postures evoke emotional and sensory experience. Yet there are encounters and entanglements that the story reveals, and it is these, I claim, that have the potential to strike and enchant the reader. The rat, unlike the one in Bennett's description, is a very lively one, but also the scarf has some potency of its own, having attracted the dead man as well as the rat — and being described so vividly as to leave a mark on the reader as well. The cotton exhibits a resisting, negative power also associated with things.<sup>48</sup>

In the fictional world of *Finale*, then, affective agency is distributed between human and nonhuman. Expressive suggestions of sense experience circle in the room. They are not reducible to human bodies, but arise between them and the nonhuman ones. Furthermore, were there no descriptions of or hints towards experience, I claim that a reader would be able to project something like it to the description of the scarf, for instance, like in the case of Matthew's room. There we have Nora as a narrator-focalizer, but the description does not differ markedly from one produced by an extradiegetic narrator, as regards the structure of readerly engagement.

The position of the human as the only active player in encounters such as the one described by Bennett, as well as in Barnes's *tableaux vivants*, becomes questioned, but this does not need to mean another grim view of the human possibilities of affecting the world. Rather, it enables a more detailed analysis of agency in cases where the human body is more the one being affected than the one affecting, and thereby a better understanding of the nonhuman forces that move us, and of how we also use our affective capacities to make sense of the world, and, in the case of fictional worlds, to *make* them.

I would argue that our readerly capacity of enacting experience reaches beyond structures of narration and ‘representations’ of human bodies and experience: we respond to fictional things, because we have our own experience of sensing and otherwise dealing with actual things, being in the world as three-dimensional bodies ourselves, and because of our capacity for finding even nonhuman, inanimate things *expressive* and affectively appealing. Like in the case of human characters, being expressive does not require being ‘readable’, something we could attribute consciousness and intention to; neither does it require being deciphered as a symbol or a type. These levels are present in *Nightwood* and “Finale” as well, but the fictional agencies and affective potential do not rest on them. Rather, most of what defines our reading happens on an embodied level that does not require, although participates in, symbolic interpretation. Matthew’s stuff and the nonhuman movements in the funeral home strike and enchant us, first and foremost, in the material, embodied being we share with them.

## **6\_Conclusion**

With the discussions above, I have shown the profound entanglements of human and nonhuman fictional agencies in Barnes’s fiction, and demonstrated how they can exemplify such fictional entanglements also more broadly. We have encountered a number of things or bodies as part of affective assemblages that are formed in the stories, and new ones formed in the context of this essay: fruit, birds, Robin Vote, bobbin-lace, Carmen la Tosca, a murderous paper-cutter, a catheter, a plastic bottle cap, Matthew O’Connor, two rats, and so on. I do not wish to lay these agents completely on the same plane in the manner of a “Latour litany.”<sup>49</sup> We have different responses for Robin and a catheter — although we also have different responses for laces, a paper-cutter, and rats.

I hope to have given at least two reasons for questioning the boundary between human and nonhuman in reading fiction. Firstly, the dichotomy is not a question of either-or but of both-and: in our experience of fiction, as in our everyday experience, we cannot conceive of one without the other, and the experience itself is dependent on nonhuman elements of the world. Secondly, from the point of view of embodied reading, a lot is shared between human and nonhuman agents, which is revealed by our capacity to make sense of and be affected by *material expressivity*, common to all

these things, which often is combined with their use as literary gestures, although remains a distinct phenomenon. As Bennett puts it: “One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world.”<sup>50</sup> We need not go through the processes of attributing or enacting consciousness or to naturalize characters or narrators to project our experience into a narrative. All we need are bodies and our own experience — and some language. More broadly considered, this also has ethical and political implications, such as a wider scope for empathy. Both within and outside the phenomenon of reading, we have the capacity to engage affectively with a number of different things.

In new materialist terms, the experience of fiction emerges in the affective assemblage of fictional elements, be it human or nonhuman, in their materiality, grasped in the materialities of language by a material reader in a lived body. This reminds us, writing and reading as humans, of the close and affective relationships we have with *things*, and the affective potential we share with them. Being entangled in a material world and thus, perhaps, “dehumanized,” need not mean only a pessimistic or fatalistic account of the loss of human agency: it merely shows the makings of this agency to be *shared* with the nonhuman world, with which we *intra-act*. Such interdependency (or *intradependency*?) may seem threatening, but it has enormous potential to be empowering by being inclusive of a wider array of agencies, and thereby avoiding some of the problems of exclusion inherent in the dichotomy of human/nonhuman.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> By ‘thing’ I refer to a material entity that is assumed to be inanimate. I use the term ‘thing’ instead of ‘object’ to avoid the inherent division into active subject and passive object. Cf. for instance Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” in *Thing Theory*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1–24.
- <sup>2</sup> Daniela Caselli, *Repulsive Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 87.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Cheryl J. Plumb, *Fancy’s Craft: Art and Identity in the Early Works of Djuna Barnes* (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1986), 13.
- <sup>4</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968 [1925]).
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).
- <sup>6</sup> H. Porter Abbott, “Unreadable Minds and the Captive Reader,” in *Style* 4 (2008), 450–452.
- <sup>7</sup> Julie Taylor, *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012)

- <sup>8</sup> Of course such devices are by no means unique to Barnes — we need only to think of the sublime landscapes in Gothic novels or Dickensian interiors that skillfully mirror characters — or go as far back as Aristotle to find a focus on action (the movement of bodies) rather than character: “you could not have a tragedy without action, but you can have one without character-study” (see Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*. Vol. 23, *The Poetics*, trans. W. H. Fyfe (London: Heinemann, 1932). Yet Barnes’s texts provide us with a unique mixture of “lively” things paired with characters verging on thingly.
- <sup>9</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 33; emphasis in the original.
- <sup>10</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe* (cf. note 9), 32.
- <sup>11</sup> Laura Oulanne, “Writing Wounded: Reading Djuna Barnes’s Writership as Affective Agency,” in *Writing Emotions: Literature as Practice*, eds. Ingeborg Jandl et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017); forthcoming.
- <sup>12</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); see also Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris, eds., *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (New York: Springer, 2008).
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Chris Calvert-Minor, “Epistemological Misgivings of Karen Barad’s ‘posthumanism’” in *Human Studies* 1 (2014), 123–137.
- <sup>14</sup> Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28.3 (2003), 801–831.
- <sup>15</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity” (cf. note 14), 801–831.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2, 21–23. For more discussion of the Spinozist-Deleuzean account of affect, see for instance Brian Massumi, “Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, eds. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xv–xviii.
- <sup>17</sup> Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press), 12; Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press), 1–25.
- <sup>18</sup> I will also use the word ‘feeling’, as I have done here, as a parallel concept to affect, however more colloquial, with less theoretical implications, but with capacity to evoke the embodied, sensory dimensions of the phenomena.
- <sup>19</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), viii.
- <sup>20</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), 23, 21.
- <sup>21</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), 24.
- <sup>22</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), viii.
- <sup>23</sup> Jane Bennett, “Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy,” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 223–239, here: 235.
- <sup>24</sup> An exception is formed by Barnes’s early short stories, which feature parody forms of dramatic twists, surprises and slapstick comedy, while the characters resemble the “types” encountered in the later fiction.

- 25 Bennett, though, suggests that there is no harm in “a bit of anthropomorphizing,” as it might actually work against anthropocentrism and provoke a grasping of different ways of nonhuman being: “a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman environment” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), 120). For research on anthropomorphized non-human narrators, cf. Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck, “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” in *Narrative 1* (2014), 68–93.
- 26 Barad, *Meeting the Universe* (cf. note 9), 178.
- 27 Cf. Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). Cf. also Karin Kukkonen and Marco Caracciolo, “Introduction: What is the ‘Second Generation’?,” in *Style 3* (2014), 261–274.
- 28 Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 160.
- 29 Marco Caracciolo, “Interpretation for the Bodies: Bridging the Gap,” in *Style 3* (2014), 385–403, here 389; Alva Noë: *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).
- 30 Caracciolo, *Experientiality* (cf. note 28), 159–160.
- 31 Cf. Caracciolo, *Experientiality* (cf. note 28), 163.
- 32 See for instance Noë, *Action* (cf. note 29), 72–73. Noë’s conception of the virtual component in perception is influenced by the “extended mind hypothesis” put forth by Clark and Chalmers, cf. Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” in *Analysis 1* (1998), 7–19.
- 33 There is a crucial difference here, of course, as the animal body is also lived, and we have some capacities to grasp “what it’s like to be a bat,” contrary to Thomas Nagel’s famous formulation (Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” in *The Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974), 435–450; cf. Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1991); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
- 34 Cf. Giovanna Colombetti, *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).
- 35 Alex Goody, *Modernist Articulations: A Cultural Study of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 36 Carrie Rohman, “Revising the Human: Silence, Being, and the Question of the Animal in *Nightwood*,” in *American Literature 1* (2007), 57–84.
- 37 Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* = N (London: Faber and Faber, 2007 [1936]), 31.
- 38 Rohman, “Revising the Human” (cf. note 36), 66.
- 39 Later in the text, the view is actually compared to a jungle painting by Henri Rousseau. See Barnes, *Nightwood* (cf. note 37), 31.
- 40 Djuna Barnes, *Collected Stories* = CS (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1997), 346–347.
- 41 Cf. Oulanne, “Writing Wounded” (cf. note 11).
- 42 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), 4.
- 43 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), xii.
- 44 Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004 [1917]), 15–21.
- 45 Bernaerts et al., “The Storied Lives” (cf. note 25), 75.

- <sup>46</sup> Caracciolo, *Experientiality* (cf. note 28), 160.
- <sup>47</sup> Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 192–207. See also Caracciolo, *Experientiality* (cf. note 28), 168–172.
- <sup>48</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), 1.
- <sup>49</sup> A playful term used for a habitual way of listing different agencies or “actants” participating in an event, a phenomenon or a network that attempts to avoid classifications, hierarchies, and anthropocentrism, used in the context of “Object Oriented Ontology”; Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* (cf. note 33).
- <sup>50</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (cf. note 16), 4.