

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE: NIN, BARNES, AND THE AESTHETICS OF
AMORALITY

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Barnes's *Vagaries Malicieux*, and Nin's *Delta of Venus*, are examples the developing vision of female sex, and both authors use their literary techniques to accomplish their aesthetic vision of amorality. Nin's visions are based on her and her friends' extreme experiences. Her primary concern was expressing her erotic and amorally aesthetic gaze, and the results of her efforts are found in her aesthetic vision of Paris and the amoral lifestyle. Barnes uses metaphor and linguistics to fashion her aesthetic vision. Her technique in "Run, Girls, Run!" both subverts any sense of morality, and offers an interesting and challenging read for its audience. In "Vagaries Malicieux" Barnes's Paris is dark while bright, and creates a sense of nothingness, indicated only by Barnes's aesthetic appreciation.

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INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century, artists of all disciplines flocked to Paris to experience the wave of freedom and experimentation crashing onto the Left Bank of the river Seine. Surrounded by war, desperate to escape the repressions and expectations of previous generations, they sought refuge in cafes, literary salons, bars, clubs, and brothels. They rebelled against everyday society with the help of absinthe, opium, and sexual escapades. Yet amongst this frenzy of moral degradation arose some of the most significant theories and works in artistic—particularly literary—history. The cultural environment of bohemian Paris contributed greatly to the development of a new Modern aesthetic, one free of the scrutiny of contemporary morality. Men and women alike participated in this revolution, and amongst them were Anaïs Nin and Djuna Barnes.

The term “aesthetics” encompasses far too many definitions to explore briefly. Yet in the Modern era, following Wilde’s development of “art for art’s sake,” it became increasingly popular to eschew morality as an aspect of literature. Preceded and inspired by the ever-decadent Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier and his *l’art pour l’art*, as well as the aesthetic philosophies of Walter Pater and Wilde (followers of the previously mentioned French originators), members of the Modern literary community were continuously spurred on to new aesthetic lengths by their multinational counterparts, including Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot. However, it would be erroneous not to recognize female Modernists, who, working under new freedom following Suffrage in both America and England, also found residence as significant additions to the artistic community. Barnes moved in circles alongside Gertrude Stein, as well as Joyce, while Nin enjoyed an intimate relationship with Henry Miller and many others. As their lives intertwined and they experienced a world of art, sex and war, it

became clear to many that art, whether it reflects life or transcends it, could not be judged by any moral compass. The new movement, in very broad terms, proved that anything was possible, and, most importantly, that art should not be censored. Morality would no longer be an issue. Writers were free to discuss, not to mention participate in, sex, drugs, and politics. Thus, amorality became the new moral standard, as well as the new aesthetic. Noel Carroll refers to the separation between morality and art as “radical autonomism”:

Thus, moral criticism is not germane in evaluating artworks as artworks. Or, in other words, morality is not truly relevant to art. Indeed, some even might say that it makes no sense, ontologically speaking, to criticize artworks morally, since only agents can be criticized in this way and artworks are not, strictly speaking, agents. (127)

When “radical autonomism” is applied to the idea of amoral aesthetics, an action in the former becomes one in the latter. In fact, some, like Barnes and Nin, go beyond merely adhering to the division between art and morality. Instead of simply performing “radical autonomism,” they each, in their own way, utilize the consequences of amorality to create a new amoral aesthetic vision.

Barnes and Nin, both of whom came to Paris from America, each explored this realm of aesthetics in a unique way. Barnes, inspired by Joyce and supported by Eliot and Stein, delved into the linguistic style adopted by so many modernists, particularly Joyce. This “modernist prose was always in one way or another heightened and stylized,” and Barnes’s acerbic wit, for which she was somewhat famous, lent itself well to the style (Symons 194). Her most famous work, *Nightwood*, is often considered the epitome of this linguistic genius, though her talent is present in her short stories such as those in *Vagaries Malicieux*. With the help of her complex style and Eliot’s editing, she managed to avoid complete censorship, despite the racy subjects:

It is natural that the double function of art to conceal and to reveal makes particular demands on the form. It is the function of the form to conceal, yet it must also reveal lest the work should lose its value as a symbol. It must, however, never be too obvious and too plain. ‘The one thing not worth looking at is the obvious,’ Wilde asserts, or: ‘Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing.’ We remember that in Wilde’s opinion Art began with abstract design and only afterwards became soaked in life. Even the literary forms seem to Wilde to have sprung from the same abstract origins. (Ojala 138)

With Wilde as a guide, it is clear that Barnes’s aesthetic style is more than abstract and modern; it encompasses a new type of beauty in both its form and function. In concealing authorial intent and moral value by way of linguistic mayhem and layers of metaphor, Barnes reveals everything by expressing nothing.

Nin, on the other hand, though a fan of Barnes, did not rely merely on language to subvert and demoralize. Instead, she relied on truth – or her version of it. Her claim to fame came in the form of her diaries, which were not published until later in her life. Though some of her short stories had been published in the 1930s, her diaries attracted great interest, as they provided accounts of the decadent activities of many artists in the Modern period. Nin’s style of writing, even in her diaries, was too poetic for some to accept them as truth. For them, “the Diary reveals a determined self-consciousness of design and content, a calculated artistry which is in direct opposition to Nin’s espoused ideal of naturalness and spontaneity” (Bobbitt 267).

Alongside trust issues, subject matter in the diaries caused a stir as well. Nin tells, in graphic detail, tales of many affairs and trysts, and of an incestuous relationship with her father. Yet this aesthetic technique which made the truthfulness of her diaries questionable served her

well in *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds*, her two erotic collections, as they became a standard in the realm of erotic literature:

Nin's erotica expresses possibility rather than nature. Yet, there is nothing within her stories that is not possible in nature. We know from her diaries and biographies that incest occurred within in her personal life as it occurs in her erotica. The difference is that those extremes of reality are glorified as romance rather than debauchery. There is no real shame or sense of evil as there would be in reality. (Killoh 31)

Blatant and graphic, Nin uses the truth about sex, inspired by her own experience and combined with poetic imagery, much in the same way Barnes uses language: to subvert any sense of morality and adhere to the Modern amoral aesthetic.

Barnes and Nin both examine the Modern aesthetic, and, as female authors, express through their art the development of female sexuality. Their works are examples of a reframing of female sex: no longer suppressed, no longer censured under the new amoral aesthetic. In *Vagaries Malicieux*, women may be adulteresses, wives, or unwed and pregnant –as critic Irene Martyniuk points out, “none of Barnes's women fits into conventional formats; they are never stable models or subjects that lend themselves to mimetic realism,” – yet they receive no more of Barnes's scrutiny than any other character in the story (63). Nin's sexual frankness about her female characters is stunning, but, when combined with her aesthetic vision of their feminine roles suddenly the whores are decorated and highly desirable, as are the brothels they reside in. Barnes and Nin both had the uncanny ability to make the profane sacred, or the ugly beautiful.

Paris, for the American expatriates, as well as many others, was the perfect place for these aesthetic ideals:

They went to Paris instead of London because many of them admired French rather than British literary models...They went because James Joyce lived in Paris, and the subterranean fame of the book he was writing spread...They went because Gertrude Stein was there...Paris was to them a dream of civilization. They went to absorb it, but also to turn that civilization to American literary uses. (Symons 129)

Paris provided the background. Historical, and renowned for its beauty, the city was an inspiration to each and every writer in a singular way. Together, both socially and culturally, the city and its inhabitants formed bohemian Paris; a place for art and love, all of which fueled authors like Barnes and Nin to pursue the literary and aesthetic possibilities of amorality.

BOHEMIAN PARIS: THE BIRTHPLACE OF MODERNIST AESTHETICS

The day is gray, humid, and a light mist hangs in the air which softly moistens the cobblestones. The sun's burning rays are dimmed ever so gently by clouds. A light breeze frames the sounds of footsteps and the occasional car on the street along La Seine. People stylishly dressed lounge just outside a café on the Left Bank, their glasses of wine before them. Most of them have a cigarette in hand, and with a flourish of the wrist they take a small puff between high brow philosophical comments—each sip, each puff is accompanied by a scratchy jazz record in the background, and each movement appears almost choreographed. They talk, laugh and argue on every subject, but their favorite is art. Later, as the evening presses on and night begins to fall, they will disperse, some alone, some in pairs. Some will merely move on to the next popular nightspot or salon, a small, seedy club, the Moulin Rouge, or the local brothel. Wherever they go, they are accompanied by the occasional stumbling drunk relieving himself on the wall or in the gutter, the whore on the corner, and the faint smell of opium leaking lightly from a nearby den. Choose any name from the list of Modern writers, from Joyce to Stein to Miller, and it has been spoken in such a conversation, within this scene which has long been embedded in the Western mind. Each one fits as well as the next, and each is equally essential to the complete portrait of Parisian Bohemia.

Bohemian Paris is far more than a place: it is the setting, background, and oftentimes an element of the plot in the story of Modernism:

The story of Bohemia is not a sex, dope, jazz, or rock story, or a romance of radical politics, or a chronicle of mad scientists, or even a case study of outpatients, although it includes all these elements...Bohemia is also the distinguished international community...It thrives today, expanded by recent beat and hip recruits...Bohemia has

climbed toward power, making art into a career and setting styles in clothes, journalism, advertising, recreation. (Gold 17)

The development of the arts flourished in Paris, its history and architecture an inspiration. In between two World Wars the Modernists found both refuge and freedom in their city and their art, and revolutionized the language of fiction along the way.

Most, if not all, of the essential elements of Modern literature are grounded in the idea of aesthetics. From Gautier, Pater, and Wilde, the founding fathers of “art for art’s sake,” aesthetics have become an essential element in literary study. Aesthetic theory abounds with complex applications and definitions for each and every area of literature, yet it can be said its importance reached a peak in Modernism. Pater and Wilde, Joyce, and Proust are just some to craft their own versions of theoretical aesthetics, but an element common amongst them is the basis for the term “aesthetics” itself: beauty. If the earlier scenes are any indication, the reason is clear. These Modern Parisian scenes are wrought with intense imagery, both definably beautiful and graphically perverse. Ideas on aesthetic theory began to vary from person to person over time. Yet just as the theories surrounding aesthetics shift, so do ideas about what is beautiful. Preceded by Victorianism and surrounded by war, Modernists came to the realization that real life was not composed of dances and long, witty, mannered conversations with Mr. Darcy. Fitzgerald and his flapper, though an extreme version built out of rebellion, figured it out and many more followed. Artists took hold of this newfound freedom and ran with it, proclaiming life to be beautiful, be it in the palace, the Moulin Rouge, or the gutter. The previous generation had proven to most that money and morality did not equal beauty. Instead, in many cases it seemed to equal merely unhappiness.

So, the expatriates, American and otherwise, participated in what might be termed “extreme rebellion,” and Paris gave them the perfect opportunity:

From the literary exiles’ point of view, Paris in the 1920s was a veritable palace of modernism. The centre of all this activity, in painting, literature, drinking and sex, was Montparnasse. No one could quite explain why the avant-garde groups had abandoned Montmartre – whose indigenous life was as lively as ever...The most important fact was that Montparnasse seemed physically right for the high point of twentieth-century modernism...It was then, and is now, a place of sharp angles and an uncompromising and determinedly metropolitan culture. (Hussey 337)

The first World War had pushed people of all nationalities in and out of their homes and countries. Paris, over the first part of the twentieth century, witnessed a remarkable flow of immigrants, including Americans, chief of whom were soldiers. As time passed, Paris earned a reputation as the center of Modern development in almost every conceivable area. The French seemed fearless in their artistic endeavors, as “the greatest changes taking place in Paris were therefore neither in politics nor engineering but in the arts and particularly in literature” (Hussey 316). Artists were emboldened as they surrounded themselves with progress in Paris’s shadier districts. Life revolved around art, literature, and sex.

Few led this life better than Anaïs Nin. Her diaries constituted the most in-depth look at the Modern generation of writers, and remain so, but also function as a window into her own gritty life. It’s no secret now that she was married and had a stream of lovers, of whom one was infamous for his participation in the Modern lifestyle, Henry Miller. Her affair with him became a claim to fame, and an artistic inspiration for both of them. Her history includes adultery, bigamy, incest—the list goes on and on. Her writing style has been both hailed and condemned

by critics, and feminists both love and hate her. Her diaries revealed in great detail the secret lives of herself and others, but her style appears to many to be too poetic, too edited to be the truth, and so the question of trust between the author and reader has been a subject of debate. Yet in the midst of the Modern era and its quest for beauty in amorality, Nin certainly contributed something unique: her erotica. Erotica had yet to become what it is now, a genre of writing common enough but often condemned by authors as “smut” or “fluff.” At the time, erotica was being written, but was not readily available to all and was often simply classified as pornography. Nin, however, in an effort to make money, created an opportunity to write literature perfectly suited to amoral aesthetics. She wrote erotica with the intention of creating beautiful sex in all its most improper, vulgar forms—and she succeeded, as her effort is recognized today.

Nin’s part in history is far more prevalent in popular culture than some of the authors she knew and adored. Djuna Barnes was supposedly one of Nin’s literary idols: “*Nightwood* was everything Anaïs was struggling to write...When Anaïs learned that Barnes lived in Paris, she wrote several letters offering to send...some of her work in progress, and asked for a meeting to discuss their work. Barnes never replied...” (Bair 240). A friendship between the two never blossomed. Instead, each contributed to the ongoing visions of aesthetics individually and in her own way. Barnes’s vision was a bit different from Nin’s. While Nin’s style is overtly frank, Barnes is highly subversive. Nin relies on graphic detail by way of ornate language to influence aestheticist vision. Barnes, in contrast, manipulates language, using metaphor and mystification to inspire and subtly reveal. Being a fan (and perhaps a female rival) of yet another founder of Modernism, James Joyce, Barnes’s style “examined not only the failures of representational reality but also...the asymmetries of age and power and the contradictions inherent in gender

definitions that undercut family intimacies, encoding complex modes of eroticism for which we as yet have no literary typology” (Broe 21). *Nightwood* is an excellent example of this. Too candid in its own way, much of the original version was cut, with the help of friend and fan T.S. Eliot, leaving what is still an important piece of Modern literature. Unfortunately, though Barnes composed much more than this, the rest of her work is to some degree critically ignored—this is another thing she has in common with Nin. In the 1970s two of Barnes’s short stories were published in a single edition entitled *Vagaries Malicieux*. The stories were written early in Barnes’s career, and were selected solely because they were the publisher’s favorites. However, the two selections together encompass most, if not all, the very elements which make Barnes’s aesthetic style. Both witty and acerbic, one smothers all sense of morality with its metaphors and humor, while the other presents a dark, yet beautifully sad portrait of Paris and its inhabitants. Both reveal the possibilities of beauty amidst squalor and depravity.

Both Barnes and Nin are an excellent example of the Modern amoral aesthetic, and each contributes to the realm in her own unique way. Nin’s poetic “honesty” in both her diaries and her erotica seemed so experimental that it took many years subsequent to the Modern movement in Paris for the works to be published. This was due in part to monetary problems, but primarily for her writings’ graphic material. Barnes managed to maintain others’ respect for her art amongst not only the female authors of the day, but the male as well, including the established Joyce. To be sure, Barnes’s use of metaphor and her strangely elaborate style saved her from censorship to a certain extent, though she still suffered some editing. As different as their styles may be, when approached together under the same concept, they yield a comparable product of study. Both authors delved bravely into amorality not only with their distinctive style, but their tenacity to sustain themselves as female authors in a realm long controlled by men. The fact that

they, as women, dared to pursue amoral aestheticism places them amongst a rare collection of female writers whom assisted in cultivating not only feminist literature, but Modern amoral aestheticism as well. Barnes's clever linguistic wordplay and metaphors express certain circumstances with humor and sarcasm, thereby clouding the element of profanity or immorality within these situations. Nin, on the other hand, explores the possibility for beauty within debauched circumstances through elaborate and bold description. But both authors, in their own way, utilize their literary techniques and achieve a similar outcome: aesthetics of amorality.

THE PROFANE MADE SACRED IN ANAÏS NIN'S *DELTA OF VENUS*

Nin and the Beauty in Depravity

Anaïs Nin's adventure in writing erotica is a curious one, one which was never really meant to be published. In her diary she tells that "a book collector offered Henry Miller a hundred dollars a month to write erotic stories" (Nin x). She continues to explain how she accidentally became involved in this escapade, writing for an anonymous collector who paid one hundred dollars a month for her stories, and who requested over and over again: "leave out the poetry...concentrate on sex" (xi). Her friends became her muses. They offered up freely their own sexual encounters and Nin "invented, overheard, and researched from Krafft-Ebing and medical books" (xii). Over time, however, Nin faced the reality that she could not go on trying to please this "collector." His demands for sex with no emotion and no beauty became taxing. In the midst of this revelation Nin discovered that other erotica being written at the time had none of the value she assumed it possessed. She found it "shoddy, written by second-rate writers" (xiii). So, she devised to make it her goal to write truly beautiful erotica, despite her "collector's" ambitions. In her diary, Nin makes a statement that is a basis for this entire essay: "I gathered poets around me and we all wrote beautiful erotica. As we were condemned to focus only on sensuality, we had violent explosions of poetry. Writing erotica became a road to sainthood rather than to debauchery" (xiv).

Nin's actions assisted in altering the face of erotica. When she finally agreed to publish her stories in 1977, in collections entitled *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds*, she unwittingly helped erotica become a legitimate form of sexual expression, and to some, an art form. Yet despite the artistic nature of these stories, they remain somewhat overlooked. Nin is renowned primarily for her diaries and her sexual escapades, and secondly for her novels such as *Ladders to Fire* and her

short stories. She is called “a mobilizer of fantasies, a kind of symbolic place-holder” (Tookey 310). All these express elements of the sexual, but none can compare in audacity or debauchery to the stories within *Delta of Venus* or *Little Birds*. In fact, *Delta of Venus* became her first bestseller, albeit posthumously. As Helen Tookey writes:

Just as she created for herself an identity (or non-identity) in the realm of legend and fantasy, so many women respond to her in the same register: Nin becomes a mirror reflecting various faces of femininity and feminine sexuality, including ‘liberated’ woman, seductive *femme fatale*, garish old hag and predatory monster. (310)

Tookey is referring to Nin’s novels and diaries, but given the extent to which *Delta of Venus* sold, her comment applies to Nin’s erotica as well. With her tales Nin explores many aspects of sexuality so vividly that women around the world, as Tookey claims, find aspects of themselves mirrored within the stories. However, when it comes to *Delta of Venus*’s descriptions of the most heinous and outrageous sexual circumstances such as incest and necrophilia, how could a reader possibly find anything recognizable, or even remotely beautiful? Nin herself stated her own reasoning—poetry. Poetry was her, and her fellow writers’, “own aphrodisiac” (x). “I had a feeling that Pandora’s box contained the mysteries of woman’s sensuality,” she writes, “so different from man’s and for which man’s language was inadequate. The language of sex had yet to be invented. The language of the senses was yet to be explored” (xi). Nin, with her florid and erotically charged language, is successful in expressing beauty in sexual depravity, thereby promoting her idea that all sex—particularly female sex—is sacred. To validate this claim one need look no further than the erotica itself.

Though the criticism on Nin’s erotica is lacking, the criticism that does exist is not entirely supportive of Nin’s claims regarding her aesthetic view. One critic begins by claiming

that Nin's assessment of erotica at the time is unwarranted considering that in "France...erotica and pornography have a long and serious tradition, claiming, among others, George Bataille whose novels...and his studies...deserve an important place in the history of sexuality" (Kamboureli 147). However, the opinions of others were never really Nin's concern. Her only concern was successfully expressing her own erotic and aesthetic gaze. The critic continues to claim that "in spite of her reservations, Nin is not writing pornography 'tongue-in-cheek'; she 'caricatur[es] sexuality,' but she does so only to the extent that she makes it the single theme of *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds* (DV, ix)" (147). The term "caricature," however, is misleading here. While Nin's portraits are extreme, they are based on those "most extreme adventures" she used as inspiration. As will be shown, these "caricatures," these excessive sexual portraits, lent to the aesthetic quality that made Nin's erotica so bold and unique in its presentation, and allowed it to represent her investigation into amoral aestheticism.

As a "caricaturist," Nin is interested in surfaces, and sometimes makes it clear that appearance means everything, or at least a great deal, in comprehending the possibilities in profanity and sexuality. For example, she might create attraction by making the wanton sexuality manifest itself in an object or an act associated with beauty. In more than one story a woman touches, caresses, and decorates genitals with "bejeweled" hands. These hands, with rings and diamonds, adorn the genitals, putting them on display for the reader. In "The Hungarian Adventurer" Anita is an exotic Brazilian dancer. The Baron, as he is called, discovers this woman "rouging her sex with her lipstick" while men sat around watching. With "one foot on a little table, her elaborate Brazilian dress was lifted, and with her jeweled hands she took up rouging her sex again, laughing at the excitement of the men around her" (2). Within one moment are two prime examples of the previously mentioned aesthetic technique. Applying

lipstick for a woman is commonplace enough, yet it continues to arouse excitement due to the association between the color red and sensuality, as well as to oral fixation. The female mouth, its shape and color, is a highly sexualized body part because of its resemblance to vaginal lips, and thus the idea it provokes of oral sex. Add the image of a woman applying glossy red to these lips, and the implications are unavoidable, even irresistible. Such a graphic display of genitals could be profane, but thanks to Nin's aesthetic technique of adornment, suddenly Anita is not merely masturbating, she is aesthetically decorating a delectable body part, making a superficial kind of art by embellishing her vaginal lips as carefully as she would the lips on her face. Interestingly, what she accomplishes is similar to what Nin accomplishes in her writing. As Anita adorns her genitals and thus aestheticizes them, so Nin does with her style, adorning graphic sex to make it sacred and aesthetically pleasing. Thus, perhaps unwittingly, Anita's actions serve as a sort of metaphor for Nin's.

The aesthetic visuals accompanying the genitals in this story are not confined to them. They extend to the hands caressing them. With her "jeweled hands" she touched herself, and the men, thereby spreading the elaborate decorations to encompass male genitalia as well. In the first instance Anita's ruby vagina is surrounded by the jewels on her hands, allowing the reader to imagine the glittering lips worth their weight in sex and diamonds. Then "she knelt before a man, unbuttoned his pants, took his penis in her jeweled hands, and with a neatness of touch, and expertness, a subtlety few women have ever developed, sucked at it until he was satisfied" (3). With the very same visual elements Nin enhances the penis, bestowing on them not only jewels, but those rouged lips as well. It seems that if the female mouth represents the female genitalia, both belong as ornaments for the penis, along with the jewels which once only decorated the vagina. Thus the two aestheticized images are perfectly merged in what could be an otherwise

crude image of fellatio; the beautiful, sensual red lips enclose on the penis, and both are surrounded by the ever-present bejeweled hands, creating a somewhat surreally aesthetic portrait. The image thus becomes reminiscent of Surrealist portraits, certainly a possible inspiration as the Surreal movement was prevalent in early twentieth century France. Rather than merging, the mouth and genitalia become an extension of one another, a strange growth surrounded by jewels, a distorted vision of female sexual performance.

In these lavishly adorned scenarios, what is it the female reader recognizes? Lynette Felber claims “the female gaze seizing upon female image provides an experience of identity and difference, discovery of self and other. It differs from the male gaze/female spectacle in both the identity (sameness) and the (slighter) extent of difference perceived” (311-12). In other words, a woman may see an element of herself or her femininity within Nin’s written representations. She may also discover an alternate identity; a new feminine image she never acknowledged as a part of herself. The primary identity found in Anita of “The Hungarian Adventurer” is the seductress, the *femme fatale*. Far more deplorable is the castrator. Anita rouges her lips, her vaginal lips, as she would her mouth. Thus, these lips become as kissable as the latter. Her genitalia is decorated with both florid action and imagery, and all the while she smiles and performs for the surrounding men in a seductive dance. One item, or items, when missing from this scene, prevents it from taking a macabre turn: teeth. When teeth do appear and add interesting complexity to Anita’s image. As Anita diligently engages in fellatio the male member goes “into her magnificent mouth between her flashing teeth” (3). There, alongside the *femme fatale*, is the emasculating woman. She devours the men around her, almost literally. She also consumes their lust and excitement. She laughs at them as she does it, further promoting the image of the carefree seductress who is unaware of the baseness of her debauchery. Yet certain

components prevent her actions from being vile. As she does this she gives the “men a pleasure for which they paid generously” (3). There is no fear. The language is as ornately descriptive, with her teeth “flashing” much like the diamonds on her hands do. It is almost as if they serve a purely decorative purpose. But the link between Anita’s red lips, both sets of them, is too clear to be mistaken. In Nin’s erotic realm, seductresses and *femme fatales* are as much a part of the bountiful pleasure as anything else. They are not to be feared, they are not grotesque, aestheticized and therefore made socially acceptable.

In her Postscript Nin writes: “In numerous passages I was intuitively using a woman’s language, seeing sexual experience from a woman’s point of view. I finally decided to release the erotica for publication because it shows the beginning efforts of a woman in a world that had been the domain of men” (xv). If *Delta of Venus* is an indicator, Nin believes a woman’s point of view is rarely, if ever, profane. The character Maman of “The Basque and Bijou” is an ideal example. Maman is the Madam of a Parisian brothel. Simply stated, she loves penises. She adores them in all their shapes and sizes, delights in stealing glances or gazing upon them, and measuring a man by the look of his penis. These descriptions of Maman’s love of the male genitalia are picturesque, making male genitalia a source of delight, rather than disgust. In these moments:

Maman indulged herself continuously in her habit of looking at men’s possessions.

When men came out of the *urinoirs*, finishing their buttoning, she had the luck to catch the last flash of some golden member, or some dark-brown one, or some fine-pointed one, which she preferred...Better still if she caught a tramp unburdening himself against a tenement wall, holding his member pensively in his hand, as though it were his very last silver piece. (151)

Similar to techniques used to describe Anita's actions, Nin relies on color and exquisite materials to express Maman's enamored vision of the penis. She creates a highly aesthetic gaze, focused on an instrument commonly considered utilitarian, as well as repugnant when exposed. The varying colors suggest the aesthetic possibilities for beauty in different penises, or at least the possibility Maman sees in each. The golden penis, and the one being held like a "very last silver piece," convey the value in each. The two penises, gold and silver, transform into Maman's monetary equivalent. With each and every sighting, and sexual encounter, she "hits the jackpot."

This is Nin's equivalent of the "money shot," a term later coined in contemporary pornography. The current term, also called the "cum shot," refers to the final pornographic act of a man ejaculating on a woman's face or other parts of her body. Linda Williams states that the money shot, "in combining money and sexual pleasure—those simultaneously valuable and dirty things—the money shot most perfectly embodies the profound alienation of contemporary consumer society" (107). When applied to Nin's evocative images the term takes on a far more aesthetic version of this definition. Her money shot involves a description, which provokes an image in the reader's mind like a photograph; a shot of the genitalia surrounded by diamonds, rings, or made of gold or silver; literally, money. Again Maman finds decadent beauty in the most base:

"The stains, oh, the stains of love! Strange stains, which she could detect as if she carried a magnifying glass. There, where the trousers had not been pulled down sufficiently, or where, in its gesticulations a penis had returned to its natural place at the wrong moment, there lay a jeweled stain, for it had tiny glittering specks in it, like some mineral that had melted..." (152)

Here she revels in the sight of semen which has dried on a man's trousers. To the average individual something like this is a crusty mess, an embarrassment which must be hidden and washed immediately. But to Maman and her girls, these stains are a precious commodity, projecting a new aesthetic vision of the "money shot." Their living is made by producing them, and so they hold far greater value. By comparing it to minerals and jewels, the sperm becomes more like a treasure than a stain, and thus is a representation of the very money they work for.

Yet as the stories progress, Nin continues to prove that the relationships between the most base of sexual acts and its possibilities for beauty and pleasure are not limited to monetary value. The stains have "sugary quality which stiffened the clothes. A beautiful stain, the stain of desire, either sprayed there like a perfume by the fountain of a man, or glued there by too fervent and clinging a woman" (152). It is not crusty; it is "like some mineral" with "a sugary quality," suggesting it is not disgusting, but instead inspires pleasant sensory images, such as something sweet in taste. The imagery for the semen's production is evocative of a spray of perfume, calling upon the reader's sense of smell as well as sight in order to associate ejaculation with a pleasant feminine mist and scent. The word "fountain" is also pleasantly suggestive. It maintains a peaceful image, accompanied by the sights and sounds of an object that is usually the centerpiece of an aesthetically pleasing and peaceful place.

This intoxicating sensory overload in relationship to the male genitalia stood highly unusual for the time. While parts of the world (Paris, Greenwich Village, etc.) experienced a cornucopia of artistic and erotic experimentation, a great percentage of the rest were struggling with the beginnings of social and sexual liberty. Sexuality was still a strange and terrifying thing for many women at the time, particularly with regards to male genitalia. Girls were not schooled in the most common sexual practices, and the subject was still very taboo, even with feminism

on the rise: “mothers waited until the wedding, then whispered confusing and frightening things to the new bride....Such accounts suggest that mothers had unhappy memories of their own wedding nights or low expectations of sexual initiation” (Stewart 382). The infamous sexual surveyor Alfred C. Kinsey published the first part of his controversial *Kinsey Reports* in 1948, approximately eight years after Nin began writing for her dispassionate collector. Kinsey made great headway into explaining the primary and natural courses of male and female sexuality, but not enough to still Victorian fears of open sexuality. The penis remained, for many, reminiscent of a weapon, ready to painfully pierce a woman and mark her as a wife.

Nin’s exploration into the female sexual psyche, representative of the time, place, and lifestyle in which she thrived, combats the terrifying penile images with those of fascination, curiosity, and pleasure. Maman is an excellent example of this. Her voyeuristic appetite satiates the hunger of the sex-starved woman. The penis is not a weapon, or any sort of thing to be feared. It is a “golden member” and a “royal *pendentif*” (151). It is to be cared for, savored and kissed, “just on the tip, merely to draw that first tear of pleasure!” (153). The penis is suddenly no longer an image of male possession and aggression. It is now an object for female possession, capable of being seen and explored with every sense. It is not to be feared, it is to be sought after like precious metal, or devoured like delectable sweets.

However, the images and moments covered so far are not necessarily among the most compelling evidence of Nin’s transformative aesthetics. They are beautiful and fascinating, to be sure, but it is relatively simple to make genitalia visually pleasing given the right stimulus (which Nin attempts to provide). There exists a conceptual hierarchy of taboos, particularly in the realm of sexual aesthetics. Certain acts are more commonplace than others, and thus are more easily incorporated into the aesthetic gaze. By contrast, it is far more difficult to transform the most vile

and immoral acts, such as necrophilia and incest, into aesthetic moments of beautiful, amoral intimacy. Yet Nin attempts this as well.

One of the primary, possibly the most, shocking scenes in Nin's collection occurs in "Pierre." Pierre comes to the aid of a man pulling a nude woman's deceased form from the river. Once the man has left to contact the police, Pierre finds the moment to notice her form:

The sun was just beginning to rise, and it touched the naked body with a roseate glow.

Pierre saw it was not only a woman, but a very beautiful woman. Her long hair clung to her shoulders and full, round breasts. Her smooth golden skin glistened. He had never seen a more beautiful body, washed clear by the water, with lovely soft contours exposed (202).

Already the reader's comfort level is breached right alongside his or her growing interest. The woman is dead. This is clearly stated. But through the eyes of Nin's character, the reader does not see the wet, possibly bloated, corpse which she knows would occur in nature. Instead she, or he, views the body through the eyes of a soon-to-be necrophile. It is obvious his vision is altered by his attraction. Her skin is not pale with death as the reader knows it should be. It is "golden" and "glistens" with the water. In fact, "he had never seen a more beautiful body."

Pierre's fascination grows. With this increasing desire, the body, to him, seems to be yearning for him, too, as "he felt for her heart...Her breast seemed to cling to his hand" (203). One moment of description, one moment of touch, creates a fleck of possibility in an illusion, for Pierre and the reader, that this corpse might want him. Pierre is undone. From this moment on this is not a body. It is an increasingly live female entity whom he possesses with all the passion of a man madly in love:

He continued to kiss the woman. He parted her lips. As he did so, a little water came out from between them, which seemed to him like her very own saliva. He had the feeling that if he kissed her long enough she would come to life. The heat of his lips was passing into hers...It was like kissing her under water...Finally he fell on her, and as he began to penetrate her, water flowed from between her legs, as if he were making love to a naiad.

(203)

Each and every gesture is an element of Pierre's spiral into the final conclusive necrophilic act. The pressure of his kiss causes hers to part. But, to him, simple, natural physical responses are metaphysical. He is reviving her. Suddenly, the parting of her lips releases the water contained in her mouth as a result of the drowning. To him, she kisses back, and her saliva enters his own mouth. Even the water between her legs feels supernatural. So much so, he imagines she is alive, and a mythical being of the water. With the rising sexual tension Pierre feels for his lover, the reader's level of confusion rises to match it. The black and white, socially and psychologically established areas of right and wrong, moral and immoral, are suddenly blurred. With one moment, Nin manipulates the language to express a love which appears to transcend morality. Where once the reader felt disgust, now he or she experiences surprise, confusion, curiosity, and perhaps even arousal. Nin's ability to make the profane appear sacred suddenly reaches an almost unfathomable level.

Now that the lengths Nin will go to in her writing are clear, perhaps her other descriptive ventures may appear less surprising. However, just as the previous moment takes the reader to new places of discovery, so those sacred elements of sexual intimacy are even more prevalent in moments which, when read from a certain perspective, begin at a similar level of profanity. Necrophilia carries cringe-worthy connotations. So does incest. The latter is a subject Nin was

very familiar with. Her diaries contain candid confessions of, at first, a sincere devotion to an absent father. Later came attraction, and eventually an affair. Nin's openness about the sordid events in her life are what made her diaries the sensations they continue to be, and these personal experiences are prevalent in her art as well.

Pierre's story continues in the way it began. The only changes are the erotically charged circumstances which persist in their beauty and debauchery. Pierre eventually falls in love and marries. Over time his wife becomes an invalid, and is, for reasons unknown, unable to bear children. They adopt a boy and a girl from a local orphanage. The two are described as being "inseparable...as close as brother and sister" (211). Pierre observes their friendship at first. He sees a mutual attraction in both of them. Yet, the only way in which this disturbs him is jealousy. With a physically absent wife, Pierre's sex life is nonexistent. He delights in watching his two children grow with each other. They develop their own personalities, and Martha, his daughter, begins to discover her sexuality.

Pierre, being experienced with women, sees the change in Martha. He sees her feelings for her brother John, and can't help but feel jealous at her longing for this boy who treats her so roughly. Martha begins to suffer, however, as she realizes her desire for her brother to consider her a thing of beauty. To Pierre, this evolution is entirely natural. He sees no problem in Martha loving her brother this way. As she comes to trust her father more:

She confessed that John had said she was ugly and awkward and too animal. "What a stupid boy," said Pierre, "that is absolutely untrue. He says that because he is too much of a girl and can't appreciate your type of healthy and vigorous beauty. He is a sissy, really, and you are wonderfully strong and beautiful in a way he cannot understand." (213)

Thus, her relationship with Pierre grows into something far more than father and daughter:

Pierre drew her body towards him and stretched her on the bed. She kept her eyes closed. This seemed merely like the continuation of a dream. Lying alone for many summer nights, she had been expecting this hand, and it was doing all that she had expected. It was stealing softly through her clothes, stripping her of them as if they were a light skin to be peeled, setting free the real, warm skin. (215)

Now, not only is Pierre not disturbed by his son and daughter, he is engaging in the very relationship Martha originally wished to have with John. The context of this scene creates an atmosphere of complexity. This love scene occurs between a father and his adopted daughter, yet the two never really battle their affections. They succumb to them with hardly a second thought. Neither of them had any qualms with Martha loving her adopted brother, therefore, this feels just as instinctive to them. Without the surrounding story one would likely never guess as to the nature of it, their love appears tender and natural. It is romantic, a picture of physical and emotional love. And yet, the progression, as corrupt as it seems it should be, isn't. Each and every step taken for all characters is depicted as healthy, beautiful, and natural. The two children still refer to Pierre as their "Father," and Pierre continues to think of them as brother and sister. So why is the evolution to physical intimacy so natural? It would seem that, according to Nin's perspective, the instantaneous passion which occurs between them is beautiful and sacred enough to support an aestheticized vision of their actions. The affections between them are so natural as to provoke amorous feelings within the reader, thus, aesthetically, the passion between father and daughter is natural and lovely, as opposed to the negative light society would shed upon it.

There are two technicalities which greatly assist in establishing the characters' strange comfort levels. Pierre is their father by adoption, and Martha and John are not truly brother and sister. The question of paternity is not literal. Nin invokes the familial feeling through adoption into a familial relationship, while still maintaining that technicality which allows for the incestuous circumstance. Nin toys with the reader's knowledge, playing with the boundaries of what is incest and what is not, and creating a tender sexual scene whose sensuality and love is as undeniable as their relationship. This also allows her to explore the natural, or what is generally accepted as "natural." Socially, a purely platonic love between a father and daughter, one which does not include romance or sex, is perfectly acceptable. But when the stability of that familial relationship is shaken, what then? If they are not bound by blood, and only by law, do the same rules apply? The same question can be posed about the bond between a brother and sister. What really makes a brother and sister? Is it blood? Is it closeness? Nin creates sexual tension and confusion for the reader, once more blurring the lines between right and wrong, beautiful and profane.

Two years after Nin's erotica was published, VC Andrews and Ian McEwan explored extenuating circumstances surrounding brothers and sisters in their novels, *Flowers in the Attic*, and *The Cement Garden*. Their examples are far more literal, as the siblings were related by blood. Yet the differences and similarities between the two relationships are of interest. In Nin's story, lack of blood relation essentially absolves the characters of real guilt. In Andrews and McEwan's tales, circumstances surrounding the children that force them to go through essential stages of sexual development together absolve them. Is one situation more immoral or unnatural than the other? Given Nin's personal history, and her ability to see the beauty in a sexual act like necrophilia, it is likely she would declare that neither is truly profane.

Though Martha's affection for her father grows, and it develops into a passionate sexual affair, her feelings for John do not cease to exist, and he struggles internally as well. Observant, he sees the intimate change between his father and Martha, and is jealous. Upon seeing them in the act, he discovers his own desires are more powerful than he first realized. He decides to escape by joining the army. Hearing this, Martha decides it is time to try a new method in pursuing her brother. She proves her love by discontinuing her relationship with Pierre and staying with John every night, sleeping "like children, together" (222). Doing as she promised drives him mad until he is forced by his desire to have sex with her. The strange, pseudo-incestuous relationships both end favorably. John "did not go into the army. And Martha kept her two lovers satisfied, Pierre during the day and John at night" (226). Each love affair progressed, in Nin's terms, naturally and happily. Each character got exactly what he or she needed: a family of lovers. With this happy ending the nature of things, again, becomes clear. Martha's affections for the men in her family are beautiful and natural, as is her pursuit of each of them. Her design, in any other light, would appear devious and make her incestuous and promiscuous. In Nin's aesthetic illumination, however, Martha's actions are a genuine part of her evolution as a woman, so that not only are her somewhat incestuous relationships pleasing, her ability to maintain them both is as well.

Over the course of *Delta of Venus* Nin appears to have little to no fear. Her diaries proved she had little in life, so why would she in her art? Nin became rather infamous for her general attitude and appearance. She walked in public, face layered with make-up and often in a cape. Her outrageous appearance, and the sexual extravagance of her life caused some to label her as a performer:

Nin was, in fact, a consummate performer. Writing in the *Guardian*, Maureen Freely lists Nin along with Sarah Bernhardt, Isadora Duncan and Zelda Fitzgerald as the women who, she says, ‘reinvented the modern erotic female’, and did so through *performance*...It is precisely Nin’s ‘performance’—both textually and extra-textually—of the role of the erotic, rebellious, unfettered woman that so many women have responded to and...continue to respond to. (Tookey 319)

It worked. She gained notoriety for her diaries, and later her books and erotica. She has become a representation for the ever-changing woman. While early feminists fought for equality and asked, or demanded, that women shirk the expected feminine roles and take on new ones, Nin expressed a far more complicated view. As expressed in the varying degrees of femininity in her erotica, women naturally and internally possess different elements of the feminine, and each must be acknowledged and explored. Aesthetically speaking, the feminine gaze is far too important to go unacknowledged and/or censored. In the previous examples alone Nin exposes the *femme fatale* and seductress, the child and daughter, the sister and lover. According to Sharon Spencer, “every woman wants to be secure in her ‘femininity.’ Seemingly, this is so crucial that many women will deny and even penalize the larger component of being, the self, in order to satisfy the ego’s need for approval” (249). Yet Nin shows that women have the ability to take on, or perform, multiple roles and manage to maintain the “larger component of being.” In order to find security in one’s femininity, a woman must accept every part of herself.

With personal experience and a rather unique view of feminism and female sexuality for her time, Nin created a highly aesthetic collection of erotica by accident. Inspired first by destitution, then fueled by excitement and anger at a man’s lack of respect for the sacred beauty in female sex, she composed a collection of stories that are now decisive evidence as to the

aesthetic possibilities in amoral sexuality. In her diaries Nin poses the question: “And what of the integrity of doing erotica for money?” (xi). At the time the work may have seemed trivial. Now, Nin’s erotica has the opportunity to truly be appreciated; to make a difference in the way readers see sexuality. In a disturbingly ironic way, the very thing she lived for assisted in her death. Because of cervical cancer she never got to see her “Pandora’s box” opened.

Nin and the Glorification of the Gutter

As previously stated, the expatriate authors of the twentieth century had great reasons for choosing to live in Paris. It existed as far more than merely an artistic capital. Paris became a member of the community, housing her rebellious companions, providing continuous inspiration and plenty of opportunities for the decadence and frivolity involved in the bohemian lifestyle. She permitted the evolution of the new amoral aesthetic. In fact, the inspiration she provided was her landscape, which is, in and of itself, a grand vision of aesthetic quality. But to many of the artists, who adhered to the amoral lifestyle with great ease and enthusiasm, it was the grittier places in Paris, the depths of the city, where the most sexual and aesthetic pleasure was to be found:

First, the urban tenderloin was the location of cities' disreputable leisure, and as such it was the site of the new addiction. Second, the new addicts either came from the sporting class, which was comprised of prostitutes, pimps, thieves, gamblers, gangsters, entertainers, fairies, and johns; or, they were youths who admired the sporting men and women. In their efforts to join the ranks of the sporting class, the new addicts emulated the sporting class's manners and mores—including their drug use. (Keire 809)

It was in these places, surrounded by the "sporting men and women," that authors such as Nin found their aesthetic pleasure. No longer concerned with morality, prostitutes, pimps and johns were ample entertainment, as well as test tubes within a Parisian laboratory for sexual experimentation. Nin and her counterparts can be classified as the "new addicts" following the sporting class, and the results of their experiments are found in Modern literature, along with their aesthetic vision of an amoral lifestyle.

Nin was not alone in this quest. Her relationship with Henry Miller was heavy fuel for the fire of her passion for self discovery. Nin, Miller, Hemingway, and Stein, to name a few, all found a place to explore and establish themselves in these unique parts of Paris:

A striking sexual radicalism thus appears to underlie these various Paris scenes in which American expatriate writers of the 1920s and '30s explore the rise and nature of their creativity. Hemingway's fantasies of sex with an unknown girl while the faithful Hadley prepares lunch at home, Stein's lesbian establishment at the Rue de Fleurus, and Miller's whorehouse all seem to represent a sharp break with the conventionally acceptable in belief and behavior, a break that appears to be attributable principally to the Paris scenes in which they are set. (Pizer 177)

Nin's part in this "sexual radicalism" stands alongside Miller's, and her "emphasis on the relationship of sexuality to creativity in a Paris setting" is partially "because of her close association with Henry Miller and other American expatriates of the 1930s..." (Pizer 178) as they both participated in erotic writing for the anonymous benefactor. Miller's own escapades were amongst the tales told by friends, no doubt, which Nin used as subject for her collection. Each and every one of these tales occur in France, primarily in Paris, and often in famous places, many now frequented by tourists because of their link to the Modern literary movement. These places—they were, in fact, filthy places where venereal diseases were passed and excrement lined the alleys—replaced the clean comfort of the home, the spiritual essence of the chapel. Nin found passion, love, and spirituality in the gutter, and thus she, as well as other "American expatriate writers of the postwar period thus had no single attitude toward the sexuality that they viewed as inseparable from life in Paris" (Pizer 184).

Throughout Nin's collection of erotica, Paris's presence remains constant as an element of the erotica aesthetic. As seen in the previous section of this essay, Nin's story "The Basque and Bijou" provides a unique view of Parisian brothels. Rather than the reality that existed (filthy beds, painted faces, and disease), Nin glorifies her prostitutes with intricate details about their talents, beauty, and sexual adventurousness. Her creative tool expresses the idea that the condemnation of prostitution (particularly in Paris) was, to Nin, unwarranted. After all, if sex at its most socially repugnant state may be glorious and bountiful, why not the places in which it occurs and the people who act upon its instinct as well? Another element of these locations is the common presence of drugs and drink, most commonly absinthe and opium:

Lima at that time was strongly influenced by its large Chinese population. Opium-smoking was prevalent. Rich young men traveled in bands from bordello to bordello, or they spent their nights in the opium dens, where prostitutes were available, or they rented absolutely bare rooms in the prostitute quarters, where they could take drugs in groups, and the prostitutes visited them there. (12-13)

Needless to say, as prevalent and inspiring as the bordellos and opium dens were, the consumption of the drugs themselves was great stimulation. Accompanied by the aesthetic vision in an amoral mindset, the opium gave rise to distorted and surreal visions, appropriate as inspiration for the Modern author to create a memorable literary portrait. In Nin's tale, "Mathilde," one such instant invokes an aesthetic vision derived more from the visual arts rather than the literary. Mathilde experiences the underground world of the opium dens, and these experiences put not just her, but her male companions as well, in states of hallucination. These moments provoke elements of Surrealism, a movement prevalent in the Modern Age. To be specific, these moments are reminiscent of a Dali painting:

Then for hours they might lie still, dreaming. Erotic images would form again. Martinez saw the body of a woman, distended, headless, a woman with the breasts of a Balinese woman, the belly of an African woman, the high buttocks of a Negress; all this confounded itself into an image of a mobile flesh, a flesh that seemed to be made of elastic. The taut breasts would swell towards his mouth, and his hand would extend towards them, but then other parts of the body would stretch, become prominent, hang over his own body. The legs would part in an inhuman, impossible way, as if they were severed from the woman, to leave the sex exposed, open, as if one had taken a tulip in the hand and opened it completely by force. This sex was also mobile, moving like rubber, as if invisible hands stretched it, curious hands that wanted to dismember the body to get at the interior of it. Then the ass would be turned fully towards him and begin to lose its shape, as if drawn apart. (13-14)

In this aesthetic distortion, evidence of the surreal abounds, and the strangeness of the images becomes highly decadent and erotic. The reader is meant to slow his or her reading, and, like Mathilde, revel in the extremely slow, highly sensitized sensations aroused by the drug. As the reader does so, she begins to transcend to a new plane of erotic existence. The highly strange and somewhat disturbing images do not disgust the reader, but rather draw her into the brothel, down to the opium den, and make her a part of the amoral aesthetic through the drug and sex induced stupor. The images, compiled in the mind, resemble the written version of a Dalí painting. Body parts separate and come together to form seemingly meaningless erotic images. The peculiarity of the picture they produce embodies the surreal, the effects of the drugs, resembling the visions of Dalí. The entire circumstance, place, time and actions abound with Modern Parisian

decadence; the decadence of the time for artists and free-thinkers in the midst of a revolutionary movement of art and sex.

André Breton wrote that “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of associations hitherto neglected, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin, once and for all, all other psychic mechanisms...” (26). A notable part of the avant-garde evolution in Modern Paris, surrealists operated under terms such as “the marvelous (la merveille), convulsive beauty (la beauté convulsive), and mad love (l’amour fou),” and they “regarded themselves as revolutionary prophets of the modern epoch” (Walz 6). Salvador Dalí’s position amongst the surrealists is well established. It is his art, such as his 1929 piece *The Great Masturbator*, which appear in the viewer’s aesthetic vision much the same way Nin’s previous segment does. With its strange corporeal erotic contortions, evocative of Dalí’s art, Nin’s previous erotic segment becomes a surrealistic version of the Modern amoral aesthetic, operating, clearly, under each of the terms previously listed.

Of course, Nin doesn’t always require such extreme possible sources of inspiration. The bohemians in Paris congregated in several places, none so commonly envisioned in their literature as the cafes lining the streets of the Left Bank, or the literary salons, such as those hosted by Stein and Natalie Barney. Though congregants were often not as debauched in their activities within these places, they were still the leaders in the development of the amoral aesthetic. In “Elena,” the primary character, so named, finds herself and her feminine sexuality within these various places:

Led by an obscure intuition, she decided to go to an English tearoom above a book shop on the Rue de Rivoli, where homosexuals and Lesbians liked to congregate. They sat in separate groups. Solitary middle-aged men looked for young boys; mature Lesbians were

seeking young women. The light was dim, the tea fragrant, the cake properly decadent.

(135)

It is here, surrounded by the sporting class and their followers, that Elena begins her journey in discovering the wonders of homosexual relationships. While the English tearoom is not as openly fraudulent as a bordello and its opium den might be, it is still a chosen house for “fairies” and Lesbians, still considered by many concerned with morality to be highly depraved in their activities. Yet for Elena, this place houses a revelation: that sex between men can be highly arousing not only for the participants, but for the observers as well. She meets two men, who, from there, take her on such an adventure. It is also in a place like this that she meets the women who would later become her lovers. For Elena, and for Nin, this place houses precisely what she seeks: sexual experience, discovery, and release.

The brothel and the tearoom are merely two of the places in which Nin places her characters whom are so in need of sexual, and thus spiritual, deliverance. But, “Nin’s point is not the celebration of a female Don Juanism...but rather in the announcement of a sexuality which is so powerfully oriented toward self-discovery that it reaches, in its final joining of body and soul, a form of epiphany” (Pizer 181). Each of these places serves as a station along each character’s journey. Within each station, he or she discovers something new and relevant to his or her evolution as a sexual being. In order to become whole and complete, they must visit these places and discover something new about themselves and the amoral lifestyle:

In this kind of writing, the obstetrical function of Paris is of course portrayed in a positive light. The birth is successfully accomplished; indeed, the principal intent of each work is to depict the emergence and triumph of the creative imagination within a Paris context. But it should be clear as well that each of the scenes or moments I have discussed

contains a darker potential—the frustration of the girl longed for but not in fact had, the complex emotions locked within the walls of the unmentioned bedroom of the Rue de Fleurus, the degradation of the spirit inherent in the act of prostitution. It is in the fiction of the American expatriates of this period that this tragic potential in the effort to achieve a wholeness and intensity of creative expression in a Paris setting is explored and dramatized. (Pizer 181)

Paris thus becomes a geographical setting for a revolutionary journey into the sexual and amoral psyche. As Nin treats it, the stopping points along the way become places of discovery, epiphany, and spiritual awakening, no matter how debauched or generally unclean the places may be. Elena, once more, exemplifies this idea while “waiting for the train to Monteux.” She “looked at the people around her on the quays. Every trip aroused in her the same curiosity and hope one feels before the curtain is raised at the theatre, the same stirring anxiety and expectation” (88). As she sat and waited, “she singled out various men she might have liked to talk with, wondering if they were leaving on her train or merely saying good-bye to other passengers” (88). Here Elena begins her journey, already searching for something, which we’ve established as that connection between body and soul that may only occur through acceptance of the amoral existence. Elena does find it, but only through Nin’s aesthetic creation.

Along her journey, Elena finds lovers in men and women alike, in these various places of inspiration. The significance of these settings is exemplified even further as Elena finds them inspiring as well. When she meets a handsome stranger, his particularly familiar looks is what catches her interest:

His head was youthful, alert, but covered with graying hair. His eyes were not quite human. They had the fixed, hypnotic gaze of an animal tamer, something authoritative,

violent. Elena had seen such an expression in the pimps who stood at the corners of the Montmartre district, with their caps and scarves of bright colors. (91)

The man may be handsome enough on his own to draw her attention, but the real significance in his looks lies in their familiarity to the pimps from Montmartre. To the common individual, the pimp is wicked and dangerous. He trades women for money and does so in deplorable conditions. To Nin, the aesthete, and her characters, however, the pimp is a powerful being, clothed in bright, becoming colors, and owed respect. His home, in Montmartre, is not an execrable location for homosexuals and whores. Instead, it is memorable for those who inhabit it. Thus, this stranger's resemblance to those pimps who live in Montmartre guarantees Nin's character will take an interest in him.

As inspiring as the places themselves and the people who inhabit them are their decorations. As Paris was a home to foreigners of all nationalities, many had their influence on bohemian life. As suggested by Nin before, bohemian lovers felt the presence of the Asian population through their activities in opium dens. They discovered the erotic qualities of Asian design. In Elena's case, her gentleman "surrounded her with erotic atmosphere. He made of their room a den, covered with rugs and tapestries, perfumed. He sought to reach her through her response to beauty, luxury, odors" (115). This atmosphere is a common, in some cases clichéd, part of the erotic experience. It is a way for the person to feel as if he or she is surrounded by luxury, when further outside the prostitutes and pimps stand in the gutter and on corners. It helps enhance the aesthetic experience, and comes together with sex, drink, and opium to create the atmosphere for a culmination between body and spirit.

French culture alone stands, to Nin, as valuable as Paris itself. Within Paris are the French, whom have come to be known for their supposed refinement of love and the erotic:

In France they know the erotic value of heavy black satin, giving the shimmering quality of a wet naked body. They know how to delineate the contours of the breast, how to make the folds of the dress follow the movements of the body. They know the mystery of veils, of lace over skin, of provocative underwear, of a dress daringly slit...Centuries of coquetry have produced a kind of perfection that is apparent not only in the rich women but in the little shop girls. (238)

If Paris is the ideal setting for aesthetics of amorality, then the Parisian people are the most likely to comprehend the importance of the lifestyle which accompanies it. Here, their fashions are so designed to draw attention to the body, which makes everyday vision occur within an erotic scope, and highly support arousal. The French have provided Paris, and so they continue to provide the necessities within their culture, art and fashion in order to best serve the amoral aesthete.

THE METAPHORICAL COVER-UP

Barnes and the Metaphorical Cover-up

Like Nin's erotica, Djuna Barnes's book *Vagaries Malicieux* also has a curious history. The two stories within the book were previously published in literary magazines. Later in life, Barnes was approached by a man, Frank Hallman, who wished to publish these two stories together in book format. After the small-time publisher's many attempts to meet with her, Barnes replied:

Any writings of mine, now out of copyright, can be taken and printed up by anyone at anyone's pleasure, or so I have been told by some such publishers. A deplorable condition. A copyright should, by law, be the right and possession of the author, until not 28 years, or double 28, but for life. But as I failed to protect myself earlier on, I can now do nothing but endure it...I should think them of no interest, and would myself not think of re-publishing. However, as you can, you can. (Letter by Barnes to Hallman, courtesy of the University of Maryland Library)

Barnes's regretful, and somewhat bitter, response did not stop Hallman. He published 500 copies of the two stories in 1974. In an "informal memoir" entitled *Life is painful, nasty and short...in my case it has only been painful and nasty* author Hank O'Neal claimed Barnes remained resentful of its publication. However, despite the nature of its publication *Vagaries Malicieux* is an intriguing example of Barnes' remarkable range and talent. One which, like Nin's *Delta of Venus*, has been overlooked intellectually, but for different reasons. Though Barnes was well published, "most of her texts were critically ignored, and her literary reputation was largely restricted to *Nightwood*" (Martyniuk 61). This situation has improved somewhat over time, as critics have branched their interests to include pieces such as *Ryder* and *The Book of Repulsive*

Women. One particular piece, however, which continues to remain unnoticed is *Vagaries Malicieux*. It appears, to this day, that no criticism has yet been attempted, and though some criticism of Barnes's style in other works is applicable to her style in the tiny collection, whatever analysis is attempted will be difficult to engage in critical debate.

The two stories within the book, "Vagaries Malicieux" and "Run, Girls Run!", demonstrate Barnes's stylistic abilities, each in their own way. As stated by Peter Gay:

Barnes adhered to the Modernist tradition with ease, and yet the acceptance of the new fiction was far from easy. For most readers consuming novels in the second half of Queen Victoria's reign, the games that modernist writers were beginning to play seemed like systematic betrayals of a well-tested, cordial relationship between author and audience. Avant-garde novelists asked the public to commit itself to a concentrated attention that more complaisant writers were sparing it. (Gay 181)

The latter is a story full of lustful and murderous intrigue, revealed through Barnes's playful use of metaphor and language. Her aesthetic style, indicated in the latter, is the pedestal for her "notoriously difficult work" (Kaup 85). She is well-credited by artists and critics alike for her "ornate, circular, obscure, rambling, hyperbolic style, a style which is non-communicative and transgressive" (85). Thus is the nature of Barnes's linguistic aesthetic, slathered in metaphor, concealing authorial and moral intent, as well as a full comprehension of meaning, from her reader. "Run, Girls, Run!" is a prime example of how she claimed her place among the avant-garde, and how she toyed with the relationship between author and audience, as Gay suggests. Barnes's style has also been compared to Joyce, and almost as often ridiculed as mere imitation. Yet Barnes and Joyce's relationship—their competitive respect for one another—proves that there is more to Barnes's style than "blubbery prose" and impersonation on closer examination.

In fact, if “we can say that Joyce, after discarding art that confines “the unutterable” and “defies speech,” presents the poet once more as an “interpreter,” and generally opens the perspective of mediation,” then the same may be said of Barnes’s talent and style, and her connection to Joyce is so strong she goes so far as to include him in *Vagaries Malicieux* (Aubert 13).

It can be inferred with some knowledge of the Modernist literary tradition and history that Barnes may have used metaphor as concealment in order to avoid censorship. Barnes faced the boundaries of censorship with *Nightwood*, and as a result was forced to cut much of the original draft. Though the stories in *Vagaries Malicieux* came much earlier in Barnes’ career than *Nightwood*, a close reading of stories like “Run, Girls, Run!” shows Barnes’ metaphors extend to such a degree they need a sort of translation to uncover the plot beneath, which is often fairly scandalous. Censorship aside, Barnes’s use of metaphor and linguistics serves as a distinctive fashioning of aesthetic vision. This technique both clouds any sense of morality in the piece, and presents an interesting and challenging read for its audience, thus serving its purpose in the realm of amoral aesthetics.

“Run, Girls, Run!” is an odd collection of seemingly unrelated stories—their only apparent link is that each revolves around a woman and her sexual proclivities. First, we come upon a man and his wife, “she who had borne him no sons but a thundering head brace of thorns, having diddled and horned him on every one of his fleecy temples” (31). The reference to the cuckhold is unmistakable, yet not so clear are the descriptions of her lovers:

...taking them as they came, a soldier off leave (no kill), a senator in mittens (where *did* he get them?), a conqueror come home from the wars, defeat in both hands up to the wrists; a galley-slave without an oar (women love the stoop in conquer), a Doge damned by Venice, a huntsman with his fallow deer but three sighs unspilled of her blood; and, of

course, a carpenter at joists who had been pegging the first house; a headsman stropping a whacking large meat ax (raised in rage and felled in justice) on a corn reaper's hone, who in turn dried the deed on the pot-boy's buckram. Then followed a bishop, a priest (nowhere to blame had his breviary been bigger) and for witchery, no doubt, a few stew boys, lean and sniffing, and last of all (for a woman will sidle up to a climax), the power behind the Throne. (31-32)

Each lover's title and occupation is obvious, but the strange, almost poetic, description following them leaves the reader a bit perplexed. One common aspect to note about each is the sentiment of their description. They are all unworthy of their position; they somehow make a mockery of it. Beginning with the soldier and the words "no kill." It would seem the soldier has no killing record—then what good is he in a war? The conqueror has been defeated, the galley-slave cannot row for he has no oar, the Doge is unwanted in his religion's native country, etc. One after the other, men of every status fall short. The husband would surely claim his wife is to blame, for obviously women are the downfall of men. They "love to stoop in conquer" and "will sidle up to a climax" (31-32). The reader, however, sees something else: man's hypocrisy.

There is not a trustworthy or redeemable man present. The husband "became no longer dear Don, but Richard the Lion-hearted, crying like a gosling into a woman's handkerchief" (32). He takes it upon himself to rid mankind of this wretched adulteress, and yet again his actions humorously suggest anything but honor and bravery. As he cries he yields to "the general trend to the effect that he would wring the neck of her head" (33). He tears at the bed and smothers her, all the while spouting angry insanity in Barnes' strange nursery-rhyme-like language. "Head-under-pillow" reads with the bounce of a nursery rhyme, as does "fin from another fish," and "cooled with a pillow." It is as if the husband sings a final lullaby to his wife. He tells her

unfortunate future, and the fear his daughter will have when she learns her father killed his previous wife. His lesson will be learned with what seems to be a bit of humor: a woman's sin leads to certain suffocation. And while the wife suffers the consequences of her actions, the husband proves dishonorable in his own way. Not only does he commit murder, but he exclaims: "So, when I marry again at ninety, my other daughter will be a fin from another fish, blind of an eye for the generation's sake. And will she fore-fear the blood! She will, when she learns that you were cooled with a pillow!" (34). Now future generations of women are at stake. While the story makes a corpse of a cheating woman, it also makes a mockery of the man's man. No matter how honorable they seem, they are capable of adultery, murder, and "robbing the cradle" at the old age of ninety. Just like the cheating woman, however, they will suffer their own consequences and, "though of course a man among MEN," be "shaken with a lad's grief" (34). It is a strange morality tale, in which morality seems to mean very little, since Barnes' style shrouds it in metaphor and humor.

While Barnes avoids presenting her audience with any certainty of good or evil, she also avoids dealing with censors and finds herself free to express female sexuality within the confines of her style. This issue was common in the Modern period of literature with authors such as James Joyce and later D.H. Lawrence, writing far more frankly than Barnes ever did. This "frankness with which modernists—at least some modernists—treated sexual relations...now lay open. Subtext became text, though for some decades within limits" (Gay 185). These limits set the boundaries of Barnes' strange literary realm, which was littered with metaphor to avoid censorship as Modernism and its creators fought for the right to be frank.

If her style in “Run, Girls, Run!” is an indicator, Barnes enjoyed toying with these boundaries. Nancy is a young girl in an embarrassing situation by society’s standards. She is pregnant and unwed, and doesn’t appear to understand how she got that way:

Now how was it? And why was it? And *who* was it, by damn? I swear I never looked behind me that day a fear back, when a fist came out of the wind and felled me to my knees; a breeze flung back my kirtle and browsed at my thigh, and a gale drenched my withers! Ah me, a storm is a storm, yet it appears a tempest’s a father! (35-36)

Or, perhaps she does have some idea. Nancy’s “storm” serves as a metaphor for her having sex, or being raped. The fist coming out of the wind suggests violence, but again Barnes’ style causes confusion with this humorous vision of a girl confused about how she got pregnant, and who seems to think a storm is the father. She says, “not so much as a shower shall come between me and my sheaving, or a clap of thunder will get me with child...oh God, who could have guessed that the rain was a boy!” (36). Is the girl really that dimwitted? Is Barnes making humor out of rape? It would appear that both may be true as Barnes’ metaphors say more than one thing. This oddly humorous and complex metaphor disguises moral opinion and provides an aesthetically entertaining portrait. It is also reminiscent of another Modern piece, depicting debauched circumstances through the amoral aesthetic.

W.B. Yeats’s poem “Leda and the Swan” is a highly eroticized illustration of Zeus infamous actions against Leda, of which Helen of Troy was conceived. While Barnes’s images and metaphors are more humorous than erotic, they are still comprised of similar inspiration. Much like Barnes’s utilization of the storm as the girl’s aggressor, Yeats’s swan comes upon Leda with “a sudden blow,” and the violence against Leda during her rape, “the great wings beating still” as she is “laid in that white rush,” summons similar images of a violent storm

falling each woman down to her fate (214). Even more worthy of note is, though Leda's aggressor is a swan, he is also Zeus, the storm god. Yeats's portrayal is far more sexualized as "vague fingers push the feathered glory from her loosening thighs," and "a shudder in the loins" is felt (214). But both women experience a confusion of violence and wind, and each portrait, whether by humorous metaphor or erotic description, is evocative of the other as a unique vision of the amoral aesthetic.

No matter what Barnes is suggesting through the amoral aesthetic, we know for sure that "Nancy got her babe, landing in a sitting posture on that year's calendar!" (35). Humor covers the salacious activity in this moment. "Nancy became pregnant by having sex" is, of course, far too simplistic for Barnes, and far too revealing. Yet, while the satirical remark makes the act amusing, it also adds an extra hint of scandal. The phrase "landing in a sitting posture" projects a mental image of the act that a much more straightforward and simplistic explanation would not. Interestingly, the metaphor supplies both cover and revelation. It humorously hides the sin, and mentally reveals the action to the reader, making it both amusing and scandalous. The significance of this technique is that it allows Barnes to disclose sexual activity with a less likely risk of censorship. She uses no vulgar language, only a vulgar image shrouded in metaphor.

Barnes then takes us, skipping like children, from the pregnant Nancy to the Jewish Nell (who may or may not have drowned herself), to Hazel of Honfleur-woman into beast. Hazel's history is a confusing set of metaphors involving "hot-footing it down the paternal ivy facing Main Street at all hours of the night" (38). One may only guess as to what she has been up to, but combine it with her father's "vision of a late loitering lad," and his "bearding her night trick," it can be concluded that Hazel's proclivities included prostitution. But these activities are not the end of her sad, or, according to Barnes' style, amusing history:

Now this good Roman Gonzolas...was rewarded with Hazel from the Lord, to make up to him, in a small way, for having taken in marriage a Christ day resenter, a terrible creature who walked on her two feet as if they were four, whose one eye was dour for the sake of the other, and who, in Greek cloth, bound up her envious brows, for she never ceased lamenting the fact that she was the wrong blunder in the right house. (39)

Now Hazel has an affair with Roman, whose wife, clearly, is cause for concern. The question posed by these portraits is: who is worse? Hazel goes “hot-footing” and has an affair with a married man, but Roman’s wife is just so ugly with her “envious brows” and dour eye. Through the amorally aesthetic presentation, it would appear that perhaps Barnes is suggesting Hazel’s actions are not improper, and Roman’s wife is simply too unattractive for one to feel sympathy for the slighted wife. They’re both so amusing it is difficult, if not impossible, to decipher between right and wrong, and Barnes isn’t about to provide an easy answer. While Hazel and Roman have their love, Frampucca, Roman’s wife, takes an opportunity too great to miss. As families and workers gather round for the yearly roasting of a bull, “the bull split asunder from the great heat...and there in his belly, like a queen in her chamber, sat Hazel, her chin on her knees, as done as the ox heart that smouldered beside her” (41). Frampucca herself somehow stuffed the bull to cook Hazel, smiling all the while. In Barnes’ world, prostitutes fall in love, wives get their revenge, and it’s all very amusing, and amoral, in its aesthetically comical nursery-rhyme metaphors.

Barnes and the Dark-Bright Views of Paris

Barnes became infamous throughout her life for her biting sarcasm, and “the memoirs of the time show what a powerful impression was made on other expatriates by her tall elegance, her cutting tongue, her wildness” (Symons 191). Considered far from pleasant, Ezra Pound claimed “she weren’t too cuddly, I can tell you that” (Field 107). Though she engaged in a tempestuous relationship with sculptress Thelma Wood, and wrote *Ladies’ Almanack* (her book about the circle of lesbians in literary Paris), she refused to be called a lesbian. She did not find life in Paris as satisfactory as many of her counterparts. She came to Paris around 1920, and “she once said that she came to Europe to get culture, and if this was culture she might as well return to America” (Symons 191). Her short story, “Vagaries Malicieux,” after which Hallman entitled the tiny collection, apparently reflects Barnes’s vision of Paris. From the narrator’s, presumably Barnes, perspective, Paris is a mixture of elements, dark while bright, which add up to a certain nothingness, marked only by aesthetic appreciation Barnes managed to convey.

If “aestheticism represents a value consciousness where aesthetic values prevail over all others, from moral to material ones,” Barnes’s *Vagaries Malicieux* is an excellent example (Ojala 13). According to Barnes, most came to Paris for common, conventional reasons: to discover art, love, or something indescribable that only Paris could provide. Barnes, as the narrator, observes other women on the boat and describes them as “chiefly disappointed teachers from the Middle West, who sat on deck eating fruit sarcastically...A few of them thought they were being continental when they submitted to foreign embraces” (6). Already Barnes establishes the concept of foreign romance as a juvenile notion. She regards these American women with some contempt, and sums up their characters with one acerbic remark. Yet there is no pleasing her. Even a man she deems “a Frenchman, a gentleman, a professor,” all seemingly

admirable qualities, is predictable in that he had “possessed three hundred women” and “was still under the delusion that “love makes the world go ‘round” (6). As a keen observer, passion and love hold no interest for Barnes, and because of this she has no wish to engage in these activities. Her reason, it seems is purely aesthetic. She makes no mention of morality, and leaves no sense of the issue for the reader through subtext. Instead, she finds an aesthetic of dark amusement. She finds opportunity to make light of her gloomy vision, making it dark comedy.

As her journey continues, and she comes closer and closer to the city so many have placed on a pedestal, she finds plenty more reasons to quip with sarcasm. An “enormous but shabby sign” for “some inferior make of French soap” greets the travelers upon their arrival at Le Havre; the next mode of transportation, the train, “almost butts its nose into the nose of the sea;” and the windows of the train reveal “only a melancholy hill” as they pass Rouen, rather than the poppy fields apparently hoped for. And, with all the amusing disappointment Barnes experiences, her companion on the trip, the Frenchman, can only complain that “one realizes how much of France has lived and died; and then there are so many lovely young women who have grown old and have not known [him]” (8-9). As melancholy as Barnes’s images are, they continue to brighten through her, and thus the reader’s, amusement at how such a place could be highly overrated. This amusement is projected through both Barnes’s darkly aesthetic vision and style. Her cynicism, simple as it may appear, is worded specifically to expose her personality within the text, which allows the reader to connect with her aesthetically, and find the disappointment in France as entertaining as she does.

Continuing in her sarcastic journey, Barnes and her companions finally reach Paris. They arrive at Gare St. Lazare, and are greeted with “a strange tongue, but no florists’ booths, only one bootblackening parlor; and soda water and chewing gum noticeable for their absence” (10). Here,

however, Barnes covers another reaction to France, particularly Paris: “then the trembling sets in. The pit of the stomach turns cold. For the first time one realizes what one has done. ‘Great God what have I done!’ and then on its heels, ‘Great God how am I going to do it!’” (10). The arrival is a crucial moment for any voyager arriving in Paris. Excitement, fear and apprehension are the accompanying feelings. One is suddenly faced with a large, strange city, inhabited by strange people speaking a foreign language. In Barnes’s case, she begins to wonder why she came at all. She waits for the overwhelming sensations to cease, “for something a little more probable to happen” (10). Her feelings are so tremendous she asks a friend “if he did not experience a like sensation. He answered that he did, that he was always smiling to himself, as much as to say, ‘You can begin to be authentic as soon as you like’” (10-11). These feelings, as severe and frightening as they appear, are, again, projected in humor. Barnes provides a uniquely aesthetic vision of these feelings by expressing them at a heightened level, only to shed a sarcastically humorous light on them once more. She is not concerned with whether it was right or wrong to have traveled to Paris. She is merely projecting the sudden, almost irrational fear which each new arrival experiences. Then, with her familiar sense of humor, makes light of the fear by having her friend both validate the feelings and make it appear so easy to become Parisian. Aesthetically, the fear becomes funny.

Barnes’s curious journey, with its dark and amusing sarcasm, is only the beginning of her strange aesthetic vision of Paris. From the moment of her arrival, even with the oddities of travel and the sudden onset of apprehension, something about Paris and the feelings it procures makes her think “of some religion that had been waiting for [her] belief,” (10). It makes sense that, aesthetically, the most attractive places in Paris for Barnes would be the grand and somber churches. With no fanciful women looking for French lovers like the professor, she may find the

freedom to surround herself in the solemn nature of her thoughts. It appears much like Pater's "concept of 'imaginative reason,'" that "sense/spirit synthesis occurs in the mind during an epiphanic moment: 'art addresses not pure sense, still less pure intellect, but the 'imaginative reason' through the senses'" (Moliterno 60-61). While the rest of Paris exists in a "sad, falling twilight," Notre Dame is the first place to truly capture her senses:

But Notre Dame somehow leaves you comparatively untouched, you may not remember her for fear of intruding. She is a lonely creature by preference. She is not disturbed by those devotees who fall into two classes; those going toward, and those coming from, faith. She is in the centre condition, where there is no going and no coming. Perhaps this is why, for me, there was something more possible in the church of Saint Germain des Pres, the oldest church in Paris. It is a place for those who have "only a little while to stay"—It too is aloof, but it has the aloofness of a woman loved by one dog and many men. And here one takes one's tears, leaving them unshed, to count the thin candles that ruse about the feet of the Virgin like flowers on fire. (11)

With darkly aesthetic tones, Barnes paints an image of the world famous Parisian church. The Notre Dame Cathedral, popular and grand, gothic and looming, stands alone in the streets of Paris. In her "centre condition," she houses those who remain in one place, those who have found a way to remain housed in the Christian faith. But for Barnes, life has little room for remaining in one place. Like the church of Saint Germain des Pres, Barnes needs a place for those like her, who come and go seeking aesthetic experience, a place where she can pause for a moment, take in the light she finds in the dark, and move on.

But, as always, for Barnes the quality of these churches does not revolve around faith and Christian morals. Instead, these churches are aesthetic representations of people's lifestyles. In

this case, Barnes is more suited to Saint Germain des Pres, which stands nearest to the very place she called home in Paris for a decade. The Boulevard Saint-Germain runs on the Left Bank of the Seine, the very Left Bank many bohemian artists inhabited during the Modern era. Perhaps this church was the church for artists; the church for “a woman loved by one dog and many men.” It is a place where the narrator, aloof and bohemian, finds peace in the face of a religion which often condemns the amoral lifestyle of those living around it. It is a church for an artist whose life is too promiscuous for her to remain very long. She is aloof partially by choice, but also by misfortune. At times, she prefers to be alone, but occasionally she finds time for a man, but not enough to trust him long term. Thus, the only loyalty she finds lies in her dog. The church is a place for her to shed her tears and light a candle in prayer, just long enough to move on. The “flowers on fire” at “the feet of the Virgin” are the light and comfort for the sadness in her life. Barnes shows no concern, again, for confession, sins, or morals. This church is perfect for the new amoral aesthetic: it is about vision and emotion rather than morality.

Aesthetic vision, continuously dark, sarcastic and humorous, abounds throughout *Vagaries Malicieux*. Barnes proclaims beauty, particularly feminine beauty, as a chief concern amongst the people in Paris. The stereotypical notion of the French being great lovers is proliferated by most everyone she meets. Someone jokingly claims that “even little Madame Bovary would not have let you in at the gate, unless some good local clergyman had sent you, or unless you had the look of a great lover” (15). Having “perhaps a little of this look,” but “not willing to risk it on a sleeping country,” Barnes, as the narrator, has the opportunity to amuse herself by meeting a French family. She is met with a grand portrait:

How many years of my life had gone into picturing just such a room! Deep curtains, of an exquisite and terrible baby blue, shut out the sunlight, in just proportion to the sun...On

the satin covered walls hung hundreds of gilt frames, in which winsome women, of an earlier age, put up their back hair for someone, and still others half disclosed such busts as are dreamed of only by starved lithographers...Here were porcelains, too...little china women putting forth feet of such a ferocious tenuity that I was afraid to breathe my admiration...I think that this time Paris was for me, shall I say, my last affair with arrangements in music and silk. (16-17)

This image is overwhelming in its aesthetic, and clichéd, qualities. While most of Barnes's experience has been an amusing disappointment, she is suddenly faced with an extreme moment where her visual expectations are met, and her reaction is mixed. She expresses moments of wonder and awe, she is moved by the sight of an instrument "in such a way as to change [her] life," and her conclusion of this scene suggests some regret, very rare in her feelings about Paris, at never experiencing a moment like this again. This moment of pure materialism reflects the importance visual aesthetics to Barnes. She reacts far more to the sight of beautiful material objects, much as she did in the churches. When surrounded by people she finds less to be in awe of, and more to joke about. But with these settings, which are all about their aesthetic quality, where there are no human feelings or moral qualities to be concerned with, she finds a slight glimmer of genuine beauty.

Then, once more, people enter into the equation. Barnes, as always, finds the French family amusing and somewhat disappointing, with the Madame who "sat badly, not one foot before the other," and "all those 'differences' one craves in a 'same' life; the bad taste, the restraint where one least expected it, the abandon in every day matters" (18). Yet it is amongst this family, this particular amusement, where Barnes experiences the culmination of her entire journey. There are events following, this, of course, but here Barnes hears the phrase that

perfectly captures the essence of her experience:

A child with dark hair braided, drawn back, and fastened with discreet bows of black satin,—a very baby in short skirts, who nevertheless laughed heartily when her mother told a rather naughty war story, involving an attack on the family virtue, and who spoke of international matters with a very personal twinkle in her eyes, finally showing me to the door with the remark, in charming English:

‘I hope you will suffer prettily in Paris.’ Though I am sure she was much too young to know how astute the words were. (19)

The French family could not have comprehended how significant the comment was. They would not have understood Barnes’s cynicism and her constant sarcastic jabs at tourists and most of the French. Even here, in a moment essential to the experience of the story, Barnes projects the girl as a tiny coquette; a little Lolita in her “short skirts” and laughter at the “rather naughty war story,” suggesting, humorously, that French life leaves no room for innocence, even for a child. Yet, they find their way of life satisfying, and assume Barnes finds it simply wonderful as well. But here, the reader shares a secret with Barnes. The true wonder of Paris, for her, is found in suffering it. With every annoyance and disappointment comes a humorous comment, the churches provide a dark sanctuary for the amoral aesthete and cynic, with every moment of suffering, Barnes suffers very prettily, making her dark views of Paris very bright.

CONCLUSIONS

Barnes returned to America, like so many other American expatriates, in the early 30s. According to Julian Symons, “the flight from Paris was general,” but it seems “Djuna Barnes had gone to New York partly in an attempt to escape the sexual entanglements of her life” (233). She spent the last forty years or so alone in her New York apartment, struggling with her health. PhD students, whom she deemed “idiot children,” eagerly sought a moment of her time. A part of the mounting enthusiasm for American expatriate authors, of which she was one of the few remaining, “Barnes wondered just what these children would have done had they been there themselves” (Field 244).

For Nin, however, returning to America ended in the blossoming of her career. As American culture reached new heights in the 60s, it seemed the public was finally ready to fully experience the Modern amoral aesthetic, and were thus ready for Nin’s diaries and erotica. Nin’s diaries, edited for content to protect her relationships—Nin was a bigamist and continued to have the occasional affair—were published and well received by the young, blossoming generation. Nin traveled on the lecture circuit, gave interviews, met students, and answered fan mail. *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds*, her most successful pieces, were put in print after her death; the only piece of that particular success she got to see was the photo for the cover.

Yet, far more significant than the excitement within Barnes and Nin’s lives is the imprint they left in literary history. As women, they did what they felt was necessary to maintain their positions as artists and aesthetes in a literary world long dominated primarily by men:

Certain women writers...rejected the standards of the male literary establishment as insufficient for their subject matter. These writers therefore experimented with language and form out of necessity. Their inability to tell the truth...an inability created by societal

prejudice—in all likelihood fostered a disjunction between language and subject or, to use Eliot's terms, separated the 'word from the thing.' (Hubert 41)

Barnes, who primarily manipulated language, and Nin, who certainly toyed with subject matter, experimented in separating the "word from the thing." To a certain degree they were successful. Not only did they make a lasting mark on literary history and feminism accompanied by it, but, as is clear here, they successfully separated aesthetics and morality, and in so doing manipulated the modernist amoral aesthetic gaze to adequately express their own aesthetic vision.

Nin, with graphic detail and "honesty," maneuvers her language to express dazzling beauty within debauched circumstances. Presumably unable to peer beyond the curtain of ornate prose to see the deviance behind it, the reader is thus subject to Nin's own amoral aesthetic gaze, where genitalia is not disgusting, and necrophilia and incest appear natural. While Nin uses frankness, Barnes manipulates language by way of metaphor and sarcasm. Far less focused on conventional ideas of beauty, Barnes proves through her strange and complex poetics, as well as her sardonic presentation, that any circumstance has the possibility for humor, and the real light to be found is in darkness and suffering. Both authors explicate in their singular ways that there may be aesthetic pleasure in the depraved. Each author proves that the amoral aesthetic gaze allows for pleasure in all circumstances, no matter how profane.

Through their efforts, Barnes and Nin manage to establish themselves amongst the ranks of authors dedicated to the Modern revolution in literature. Each and every author contributed something unique in his or her own way. Nin supplied her aptitude for taking the profane and making it sacred. Rarely could a whorehouse and opium den become a spiritual refuge, or genitalia become as valuable as jewels. Nin's productions were so bold it appears she was ahead of her time. The world would not be ready for her amorally aesthetic visions until many years

after she composed them. Barnes's work gained respect earlier in her career than Nin, but more significantly, she earned the admiration of the authors she revered. One cannot discuss Modernism without mentioning Joyce, and certainly cannot discuss Barnes without mentioning her fascination with him. Barnes was unique in being one of the few female authors to earn the respect of men like Joyce and Eliot. Her style was unique and impressive enough to place her in the realm of male authors, in a period when female authors were still working to be a significant part of the literary domain. Both Barnes and Nin made a significant mark on literary history merely by being women audacious enough to use amoral aesthetics, and brave enough to suffer prettily in Paris.

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