Unbending the Tree of Knowledge: Reading for Affect in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*

Modernist texts are famously difficult, preventing a reader from reading the text straightforwardly and thereby creating confusion and uncertainty. I argue that this confusion is an imperative critical tool that forces readers outside of their familiar paradigms and can therefore be used to invigorate literary study. Building on Eve Sedgwick's practice of reparative reading and Rita Felski's practice of reflective reading, I argue that that confused reading provides another method for exploring both how and why texts mean. Confused reading modulates between cognition and affect, working within a hazy space that has elements of both extremes. Our best work as both critics and common readers, I argue, must take place within this paradigm. I use Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* as a text that calls for this type of reading, arguing that it advocates a reading practice that rejects traditional coherence and understanding in favor of bodily affect and aesthetic pleasure. Barnes uses the character of Robin Vote to destabilize categorization by offering confusing and contradictory depictions of Robin that refuse to reify her, as those around her constantly attempt to do. As readers, we are put into the position of other characters that attempt to control Robin by understanding her, but our initial confusion and frustration at not being able to place her in a category is dissipated by the lyrical qualities of Barnes' prose and the subsequent affect these qualities evoke in the readerly body. When we learn to read not for understanding alone but also for feeling, when we deny the easy satisfaction that comes with categorization for a reading experience that can accept not knowing, we can begin to appreciate Robin's own journey through *Nightwood* to a similar place of knowledge rejection.

Bio: Sarah Garrigan is a Ph.D. candidate at Tufts University currently working on a dissertation on the aesthetics of confusion in American and British modernist novels. She has previously delivered papers on E.M. Forster, Henry James, Virginia Woolf at the Northeastern Modern Language Association Conference, the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association Conference, and the Nomadikon Conference.