

Forms of Restraint: High Comic Renunciation in Three Plays by A. R. Gurney

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I

*In Douglas Sirk's films, love seems to be the best, most
sneaky and effective instrument of social repression.*
—Rainer Werner Fassbinder¹

When Fassbinder points out the manipulative and repressive uses of love in the glossy Hollywood melodramas of Douglas Sirk, it is immediately apparent that he might just as well have been writing about his own bitter and sardonic *oeuvre*. What is far less likely to spring to mind, however, is that his comment could easily apply to the comedies of A. R. Gurney. That critics have failed to recognize the bitterness underlying his plays should come as no surprise: critics have paid little attention to Gurney overall. Despite his decades of success on the American stage and abroad, critical commentary on his work has been scant and is largely contained in a single, recently published volume of essays.² Although it is always far easier to account for why an author has been written about than ignored, it seems that Gurney has been passed over as an author of straightforward, middlebrow amusements, lacking the interpretive enigmas that lure scholarly critics to the likes of Shepard, Albee, and Fornes. The truth, however, is that Gurney is a playwright whose plays, though never ostentatiously obscure or experimental, are far from simple or unambiguous.

Perhaps Gurney has contributed to the superficial response and neglect with which his plays have often been met by his own characterization of himself as the anthropologist of WASP life, a tactic that has encouraged critics and audiences to see him as the mere chronicler of a passing and provincial scene, rather than a playwright who deals with issues of wider import.³ He has also tended to be marginalized by the genre in which he has often worked, the largely vanished world of American high comedy. Gurney has acknowledged the influence of American high comic playwrights Philip Barry and S. N. Behrman on his work, and, as often happens

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with writers acknowledging influences, he has worked to differentiate himself from them as well.⁴ Reviewers have also noted the relationship, though they have rarely considered it as thoughtfully as Gurney himself has.⁵ It has not helped that the high comic genre in American drama is largely forgotten; most of its examples are out of print, rarely taught in the classroom, and usually return to the stage only in the form of ever-rarer amateur revivals of *The Philadelphia Story* and *Holiday*.

From the start, American high comedy has been anything but the aristocratic purebred that its name might suggest. It has been a thoroughly mongrel genre: an odd mixture made up of wildly varying proportions of European high comedy, American stage realism, Shavian comedy of ideas, and star vehicle.⁶ Odd as it may sound, *high* comedy in America has largely been a *middlebrow* entertainment. The onstage presence of an aristocratic circle with its presumptions to superior wit and style, so common an element of high comedy that it is often seen as its most distinctive feature, has never sorted comfortably with American populist sympathies.⁷ American high comedy repeatedly manifests an ambivalence towards the elitist presumptions that have been inherent in the European examples of the genre. Nor did the time of its origin in America—an unsettled period between two world wars, marked by a global depression, widespread political unrest, the fall of imperial houses, coups, and revolutions—do much to give that onstage aristocracy a sense of ease and self-assurance. Add to these factors a deep-seated American distrust of artifice reaching back to the Puritans, and high comedy emerged on the Broadway stage as a conflicted form: a playwright ruins his marriage by his insistence on the primacy of art (Philip Barry, *In a Garden*), a successful psychoanalyst sends his wife back to a reunion of pathetic Hapsburg court has-beens to disillusion her with her pre-War past (Robert Sherwood, *Reunion in Vienna*), and a Jewish intellectual finds such an outburst of anti-semitism in a British country house that it sends him back to Nazi Germany (S. N. Behrman, *Rain from Heaven*). So neatly and grimly encapsulated, these plays hardly sound like the stuff of any kind of comedy, high or low, and indeed, the paramount challenge in performing these plays is to keep the comic tone from being consumed in darkness, while not dismissing the pain and serious issues altogether.

The overriding question of American high comedy is a serious one: what is the relationship of individual desire to social acceptance, whether within one's own family or larger social units. What is the price paid to gain entry or remain within a privileged circle, and when is it too much? In American high comedy, entry into the social realm always exacts a price. In the three plays of Gurney's under examination here—*Mrs. Farnsworth*, *The Cocktail Hour*, and *The Golden Age*—social inclusion depends on the destruction of a manuscript that testifies to individual desire.

Gurney is not the first author of this genre to use this image; it turns up in two of the most celebrated high comedies of the playwright Gurney most resembles, S.

N. Behrman. Undoubtedly the author of the most tense and problematic American high comedies in the interwar years, Behrman takes the famous flaming manuscript of *Hedda Gabler* and turns it from a gesture of aggression to one of self-effacement. In Behrman's *Biography*, Marion Froude decides to abandon her projected memoirs of her life in love and art and, in so doing, makes the breakup with her lover, muckraking journalist Richard Kurt, inevitable. In his *No Time for Comedy*, playwright Gaylord Easterbrook decides to abandon his ambitious drama about the Spanish Civil War and go back to writing vehicles for his witty actress-wife. In both of these comedies, as well as the three Gurney comedies discussed here, the play chronicles the sacrifice of a prized text that had come to embody the author's serious convictions in favor of compromise we witness. The comic tone of both plays points to another renunciation beyond the renunciation of the personal text: the comic approach demands that the sacrifice not elicit either too much suffering or anger on the part of the sacrificer. These comedies not only demand that the sacrifice be made, but also that it cannot be mourned. Behrman's comedies, in which the cost of social acceptance is often impossibly high, already indicates the crisis of the genre decades before Gurney begins his writing career.⁸

Gurney himself has styled his life story in terms of the tension between personal desire and group acceptance. Although he has maintained a definite restraint in discussing his personal life with interviewers, some of the stories that he has shared echo the themes of self-effacement found in his plays. Arvid F. Sponberg tells how, while serving in the Navy, young Gurney was on the verge of marrying a Japanese woman, but was pressured by his family to break off the engagement. This incident has inspired an episode in Gurney's *Love Letters* and provided the basis for *Far East*.⁹ Later, after the success of a musical comedy for which Gurney had written book and lyrics while a student at the Yale School of Drama, he received a call from Mary Martin's husband, Richard Halliday, inviting him to New York to discuss a possible project. The meeting never happened, however, because Gurney's parents had arranged to visit him that weekend, and he declined the invitation from Halliday rather than run the risk of offending his parents.¹⁰ When he finally enjoyed success with a full-length play on the New York stage with *Scenes from American Life* in 1970, the pleasure was marred by the anger of his father, who objected to what he considered some indiscreet and disloyal references to friends and family in it. This familial unpleasantness found its way into *The Cocktail Hour* years after the death of Gurney's father.¹¹

These biographical snippets are not being presented here as the prologue to a biographical reading of the plays, but rather as evidence that the personal narrative that Gurney has constructed shares a common theme with many of his plays: the conflict between individual desire and familial pressures, especially as they relate to his career as a playwright. The question of authorship in Gurney's plays often brings about a conflict with society, which forces the author into acts

of renunciation. The results are often ruthless, but executed with a light touch that is by turns beguiling and disconcerting.

II

ORSINO. And what's her history?

VIOLA. A blank, my lord.

—William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (II.iv.105-106)¹²

Mrs. Farnsworth: A Woman without a Story?

Gurney's *Mrs. Farnsworth* was billed as "a political comedy" for its April 2004 premiere production at the Flea Theatre in the Soho section of Manhattan.¹³ Publicity displaying the smiling faces of stars Sigourney Weaver and John Lithgow against a field of red, white, and blue, seemed to promise an amusing foray into the world of topical election-year wit and good spirits, a latter-day *State of the Union*, perhaps. But *Mrs. Farnsworth* is far more troubled and ambivalent than its sunny promotion promised, and a reading of the published script shows it to be darker still.

Mrs. Farnsworth opens with a familiar tactic for a star vehicle—the "build" to the entrance of the "leading lady." In a college classroom, the creative writing teacher, Gordon Bell, writes the protagonist's name on the blackboard and asks if she is there. He had received a message from the yet unseen Mrs. Farnsworth, he explains, asking if she might present her work first in class. She, of course, is not there, which only whets the audience's appetite for her entrance. Just as another writing student begins to present her work, Mrs. Farnsworth breathlessly appears, to the audience's applause. After some vigorous explanation and comic exposition, she gets round to reading her piece, a single paragraph evoking 1960s skiing vacations undertaken by students at Vassar in idealized and nostalgic terms. She explains that she has come to the writing class because she cannot get beyond this first paragraph to write the book she has in mind, which turns out to be a thinly disguised *roman à clef* about a disastrous liaison between her ("Emily" in the novel) and the clearly alluded to but never named George W. Bush (or "Miles"). It is a tale of a young woman in love with a charming but feckless and criminally irresponsible young man who abandons her, followed by a trip to British Honduras for an abortion paid for by his family, and ending with her struggles to continue her life alone. Gordon, who is strongly opposed to the Bush presidency, immediately realizes the immense political potential of this writing project and all other class projects are swiftly shelved in favor of it.

The more Mrs. Farnsworth tells about her project, the more sinister, convoluted, and melodramatic the play becomes. The class learns that she had actually written far more than the first paragraph, but her wealthy Republican husband, Forrest, burned it—though not before photocopying it and giving it to a well-connected Republican

lawyer, who later told her that his secretary had accidentally shredded the copy. When Gordon expresses his indignation at Forrest's ruthless and authoritarian behavior, Mrs. Farnsworth defends her husband, explaining that he was motivated, as always, by his affection for her: "It's because he loves me . . . He tells me how much he loves me all the time"¹⁴

Quickly the play shifts from being a play about a scandal concerning "Miles," to one about a triangular situation in which Mrs. Farnsworth is caught between her desire to write her story (a desire increasingly embodied by Gordon, who is eager to help her) and her belief that her domineering husband, who does not want her to write the book, is motivated by love. Out from under the jokes about WASPS, Republicans, and George W. Bush, and under the comic, breathless innocence of Mrs. Farnsworth, emerges a melodrama about a woman with a secret who has escaped from confinement and must find her way to safety before she is recaptured by the villain. In this respect, *Mrs. Farnsworth* looks back, not to the witty heroines of William Congreve and Oscar Wilde, but to the beleaguered heroines of Gothic melodramas. The protagonist's closest kin in American drama is not to be found in high comedy, but in Tennessee Williams's Southern Gothic *Suddenly Last Summer*, in which Catherine Holly insists on repeating the scandalous and horrific events of Sebastian Venable's last summer despite forced incarceration in a mental institution and the threat of lobotomy.

Soon Gurney's version of Violet Venable arrives onstage in the smooth, urbane figure of Forrest Farnsworth, and the melodrama takes a slightly Pirandellian turn. In a tactic reminiscent of *Right You Are (If You Think Yourself So)*, Gurney has Forrest tell his conflicting version of his wife's story while she waits for him in the car. According to Forrest, there was no affair with "Miles": the entire narrative is nothing more than the fabrication of a dear but troubled woman with a history of mental illness and substance abuse. Rather than being a lengthy manuscript that was destroyed (twice), the novel never existed in any form beyond a few random jottings and scattered pages. Just as Gurney had earlier encouraged us to believe Mrs. Farnsworth's story by showing the degree of emotion she manifested as she told of "Emily's" suffering, he now gives Forrest a countervailing claim on our sympathies by showing him deeply affected by his wife's mental illness.

As our sympathies are divided between the spouses' differing accounts, our interpretation of what we have seen grows more conflicted. Mr. Farnsworth is either a Machiavelli with ties to Washington, D.C., or a devoted caretaker; Mrs. Farnsworth is either a wronged woman turned valiant whistle-blower or a pathetic hysteric. The question of the play becomes the irresolvable enigma of Mrs. Farnsworth.

Looking back over the protagonist's behavior in the light of her husband's account, we realize that it could support a diagnosis of her as a hysteric. From her written plea that she appear first in class, to her descriptions of Forrest at the piano serenading her with a Cole Porter ballad, to the annihilation that she suffered at

a recent Republican fund raiser at which “Miles” appeared and clearly showed no sign of remembering her, Mrs. Farnsworth’s actions are marked by an intense anxiety about her identity that demands constant verification from others. In this respect, she fits Colette Soler’s description of the hysterical subject as one who “is searching for a sense or feeling of being—desperately, in general” and relies on the sense of being loved or desired to confirm that imperiled lack of being.¹⁵ In her relationship to Forrest, “Miles,” and the classroom/audience, Mrs. Farnsworth demonstrates an extreme dependence on the Other’s gaze for verification: a performer desperate and uncertain of her role. Claiming that she is unable to write, her public attempt at a *roman à clef* is transformed into a theatrical performance for an audience, echoing Charcot’s famous fin-de-siècle classroom exhibitions of hysterical women at the Salpêtrière. Even Mrs. Farnsworth’s name becomes open to interpretation as a hysterical symptom. Although she tells us that she uses her formal, married name on the advice of her patrician grandmother, who disapproved of the way modern American society was slipping into a slovenly casualness, Mrs. Farnsworth’s choice of how she wishes to be addressed—completely cloaked in her husband’s name—can be read as further evidence of her unstable identity and radical insecurity. Hysteria, for Gurney, is simply the extremity of the performing self’s need for social verification.

When Mrs. Farnsworth returns to the classroom, Forrest sets out to undermine her writing project in front of the class. Taking the steam out of the play’s political debate by claiming to have been a stealth Democrat all along, he recasts his attack in terms of his wife’s class identity. He does not attack the veracity of her project, but warns her that her kiss-and-tell novel will leave her feeling “cheap and vulgar and embarrassing”¹⁶ as a “traitor to your class.”¹⁷ Invoking values of dignity, restraint, and trust within a privileged elite, he makes his wife doubt whether she can act against the values with which she was raised. And Forrest triumphs. Calling herself “a woman without a story,”¹⁸ a defeated Mrs. Farnsworth wonders whether she should drop out of the creative writing course. It might be, she thinks, that we should not label each other, but see the unique value in each other, yet the next moment she dismisses this thought as “sappy,”¹⁹ and not even worth the effort of writing down. Stripped of her story, she cannot produce an individual narrative, but only a slack, liberal humanist platitude that is belied by the fact that the action of the play has robbed her of her narrative and value. Suffering under a social identity that demands her erasure as an individual, she becomes wraithlike, an echo of the protagonists of Gurney’s early one-acts, *The Rape of Bunny Stuntz* and *Richard Cory* who find themselves drawn to suicide in their affluent but unsustaining worlds.

Forrest’s attempt to contain his wife has succeeded. Gurney’s Torvald has launched a commando raid to recapture his Nora and return her to his suburban Guantanamo. His success, however, does not resolve the question of the truth of Margery’s story. As the play unfolds, the ambiguities proliferate. In the closing

moments of *Mrs. Farnsworth*, Gurney does not pose the Pirandellian question of “what is the truth?” about his enigmatic couple from Connecticut—his concerns are more social than metaphysical—but rather, asks us to wonder whether his protagonist’s capitulation is total or not. Gurney carefully mixes his signals. The protagonist’s final exit with Forrest suggests total capitulation, but her decision shortly before this to discard the restraining and self-effacing name of “Mrs. Farnsworth” for the more personal “Margery,” does not suggest submission. Then she even rejects “Margery” for another identity altogether. “Call me Marge,” she suggests, “Like I’m working in a diner.”²⁰ She admits that this experiment of re-defining herself outside of her patrician constraints flies in the face of the draconian code of her grandmother, but also recognizes that the code is outmoded: “My grandmother’s dead, Gordon,” she reminds him.²¹

As Mrs. Farnsworth/Marge exits, Gordon writes two words on the blackboard: “Marge,” with a circle drawn around it, and “Save!!!”²² What are we to make of this final, enigmatic utterance? *Can* Marge be saved? *Who is* Marge? Does the name mark the beginning of a new identity for the woman we have just seen exit, or is it a marker for a woman who has no story of her own and cannot achieve an identity? Can Marge return to the class, or is she so completely contained within the insidious marital dynamics of her Machiavellian husband and her own insecurity that resistance is in vain?

“Keep an eye on her please,” Forrest tells the audience, in a reprise of the play’s double-edged language of the gaze, “She’s my most precious possession”²³—a description at which even Mrs. Farnsworth flinches. Is this love flawed by a degree of possessiveness and objectification, possessiveness and objectification masquerading as love, or love as the “best, most sneaky and effective means of social repression”²⁴ Whether Margery, Marge, or Mrs. Farnsworth, the woman onstage remains an enigma. With the resilience of a comic eccentric, she seems to painlessly rebound on her final exit, chatting about her college weekend with presidential hopeful John Kerry, but the message we see on the blackboard—MARGE —Save!!!—keeps us in mind of another, more desperate point of view.

Mrs. Farnsworth is a political comedy that initially suggests an attack on the Bush presidency but is twice displaced. First, its political critique is displaced by a personal narrative of rejected love, and second, that narrative is sacrificed in favor of the protagonist’s allegiance to her class and belief that her husband loves her. What appeared to be a spirited attack on the Bush presidency becomes a play in which any resistance, whether political or domestic, appears increasingly ambiguous and difficult to maintain. By the end, Margery/Marge/Mrs. Farnsworth emerges as an increasingly enigmatic figure, by turns comic eccentric, melodramatic victim, silenced prophet and hysteric, who briefly solicits the gaze of the Other to play out an obscure drama of renunciation, then disappears.

III

STUDENT: *This house has many secrets . . .*

YOUNG LADY: *So have other houses. . . We like to keep ours to ourselves!*

—August Strindberg, *The Ghost Sonata*²⁵

The Cocktail Hour: Becoming Lynn Fontanne

Although *Mrs. Farnsworth* can be called a “political comedy,” it ultimately has more to do with the politics of the family than that of the nation, with its protagonist’s abortive attempt to oppose patriarchal power crumbling beneath a ruthlessly loving assault. In *The Cocktail Hour*, the playwright’s vision further contracts into the inner sanctum of the nuclear family (the drawing room), into its private ritual (cocktails before dinner), and into its exclusively familial cast list (wife, husband, son, and daughter). The family is not an enigma presented to a perplexed audience in the public space of a classroom, but one enjoying its privacy and, for the most part, determined to hold on to it. Distinguishing the play’s title from that of T. S. Eliot’s high comedy *The Cocktail Party*, the mother explains, “a cocktail *party* is a public thing. You *invite* people to a cocktail party. A cocktail *hour* is family. It’s private. It’s personal. It’s very different.”²⁶

The plot is easily summarized: John, a struggling playwright, goes to visit his parents, announcing that he has written a new play about his father, Bradley, and needs his father’s approval before he puts the play into production. Bradley, without ever even glancing at the play, rejects it as an invasion of privacy, offering his son a check for twenty-thousand dollars to suppress it. John quickly acquiesces, albeit gracelessly and only accepts the check on his mother, Ann’s, insistence. When one of John’s siblings, the favored son, needs money, Bradley asks for the check back, assuring John that he will get an extra twenty-thousand dollars in his inheritance and will be able to write and produce any plays he wishes once his father is dead.

The plot is a very simple one for a full-length play and, as I have quickly related it here, seems to be very similar to the plot of *Mrs. Farnsworth*: a transgressive manuscript that is seen as a breach of trust is suppressed in favor of patriarchal power. Once again the requirement of abandoning one’s desire is configured as abandoning a manuscript as the condition for “loving” acceptance. John gives up his playwriting project quickly—almost so quickly that we cannot help but wonder if he wrote it only so he could suppress it. Like Mrs. Farnsworth, his drama of revolt may merely be a ruse for another, more deeply felt, drama of self-effacement. The lack of focused conflict and the ease with which both John and Mrs. Farnsworth both submit suggests a similar dynamic at work.

Like Mrs. Farnsworth, John exhibits the hysteric’s desire to be the object of a verifying gaze. Remembering the plays he performed as a child for his parents, he excitedly theorizes that he was “playing my own penis,”²⁷ performing

exhibitionistically to affront his parents' gaze and affirm his masculinity, rather than woo the gaze. But even decades later, when the sexual frankness of his psychoanalytic interpretation offends his mother, he collapses back into silence. Once again, the hysteric's resistance seems merely a prologue to submission. Like Mrs. Farnsworth, John is reincorporated into the domestic order at the price of his desire. Like Forrest, Bradley insists most on his loving nature when he is most successfully oppressive. Having reduced his son to powerlessness, he suggests, in *The Cocktail Hour's* curtain line, that John retitle his play *The Good Father*.

Although *The Cocktail Hour's* plot can be easily summarized, it is far more complicated than its summary might suggest. Gurney has written a metadrama in which John's play not only seems to mirror Gurney's play in its content, but shares the same title. References to John's "The Cocktail Hour" lead us to sense that the play we are seeing is the play that John's father is suppressing. "The Cocktail Hour," the unread script that remains onstage throughout the performance of *The Cocktail Hour*, takes on a double status, being at once a testament to filial defeat and to filial triumph. In a paradoxical maneuver rife with ambivalence, the son triumphs by scripting his own defeat at the father's hands. The result is ironic. From one point of view, it seems that the privacy of the cocktail hour has prevailed over "The Cocktail Hour"; from another, it has been defeated and publicly exhibited in *The Cocktail Hour*. This resultant ambiguity suggests a possibility of triumph though artifice absent from *Mrs. Farnsworth*.

From the beginning of *The Cocktail Hour*, Gurney foregrounds theatrical artifice, explaining that the set should not merely be a realistic representation of a conservatively furnished, upper-middle class living room in the 1970s, but that it "should also be vaguely theatrical, reminding us subliminally of those photographs of sets of American drawing-room comedies in the thirties or forties, designed by Donald Oenslager or Oliver Smith."²⁸ John's playwriting aspirations quickly turn the dialogue to a discussion of the contemporary theatre, which is primarily distinguished by the fact that no one seems to attend it. The theatre is the art form of the past. Ann and Bradley have fond memories of the bygone theatre of Katharine Hepburn and Ina Claire and not only refer admiringly to Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne's celebrated technique of crystal-clear, overlapping dialogue, but imitate it as well.²⁹ Fondness for the theatre is characterized at best as nothing but nostalgia, and John's theatrical ambitions strike even him as out-moded and ludicrous. "It's artificial, it's archaic, it's restrictive beyond belief. I feel like some medieval stone cutter, hacking away in the dark corner of an abandoned monastery, while everyone is outside, having fun in the Renaissance" he complains.³⁰ To be caught up in the theatre is to be involved with an anachronistic project, one that reflects one's parents' world more vitally than one's own. With his references to Oliver Smith, the Lunts, and other theatrical luminaries of an earlier generation,

Gurney sets up a play that is not only about his parents, but a play that consciously evokes the theatre of their generation as well.

In John's second act confrontation with Ann, Gurney's high comic metadrama becomes increasingly complex and enigmatic. John pressures his mother into revealing what events in his early childhood rendered his role in the family forever marginal, an offense that finally leads him to physically block her exit from the drawing room. Held captive, Ann explains that she was preoccupied during John's infancy, writing a six-hundred page romantic novel, which she later destroyed. The novel told of a young woman employed as a governess by a wealthy man, but who has a brief and passionate affair with a stablegroom. When she ends the affair, the enraged groom sets fire to the stable, and the heroine, in an attempt to save the horses, is seriously burned. When the bandages are removed, however, not only is she unscarred, but transformed into a beauty. She marries her employer, who, she realizes, has loved her all along.

On the simplest level, Ann's novel seems a clear parallel to John's play. While John fantasizes the transgression of illegitimate birth, Ann fantasizes about transgression in the form of fornication with a class inferior. Both works resist, at least for a time, the power of the patriarch. But when John sees his mother's novel as the factual confirmation of his fantasized illegitimacy and pressures her to reveal the model for the groom who might well be his father, Ann evades her inquisitor. "Oh, John I don't know . . . maybe I'm getting old . . . or maybe I've had too many cocktails . . . but I'm beginning to think I based him on your father," she says, deftly skirting both the issue and her son's blockade, as she starts to exit.³¹

Ann's revelation reveals nothing. In the absence of further evidence, Ann may or may not have written a novel, may or may not have had an extramarital affair with a groom, and may or may not have conceived John during that affair. The novel may be a real object that stood in for a fantasized adultery, it may be a real object that stood in for a real adultery, or it may be an imaginary novel that stands in for a real adultery. It is as ambiguous as Mrs. Farnsworth's lost manuscript and her affair with "Miles."

Despite the uncertainty of Ann's references to the past, its function in the present seems clear. Her destroyed novel, an artistic protest against the limitations of her world, echoes John's unperformed play. Both turn out to be unsuccessful gestures of revolt. Both are, as their authors admit, inadequate in the passion their narratives demand, and both are meant to be resolved by substituting Bradley's love for the transgressive document. In the joint sacrifice of Anna and John's dreams at the altar of the patriarch, we again see love as the most sneaky and effective instrument of social repression. As Mark William Rocha observes in his insightful essay "Indeterminacy as Tragic Fate: Issues of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in Gurney," "There is always a "missing text" in a Gurney play, which

invariably belongs to a woman and has been rendered visible by what I have termed the text of the father."³²

And yet the tone in *The Cocktail Hour* is less melodramatic and more comically ironic than *Mrs. Farnsworth's*. After all, why is there such an excess of ambiguity in the play's climactic scene? Why does it superimpose two extreme and equally unverifiable actions—the writing and destruction of a six-hundred page novel and an adulterous affair? An explanation can be found back in the play's earlier identification of John's parents with the Lunts. Ann's climactic scene, rife with did she?/did she not? ambiguity is an *hommage* to Lynn Fontanne's stage persona, in which she repeatedly became a figure of feminine ambiguity. *Did* she recognize her husband when he made love to her, disguised, in Ferenc Molnar's *The Guardsman*? *What* were we to make of her reunion with her deposed Hapsburg ex-lover in Robert Sherwood's *Reunion in Vienna*? *Was* she the phony blonde adventuress who had a one night stand with vaudevillian Harry Van in Sherwood's *Idiot's Delight*? *Was* it *really* infidelity when Zeus wooed her in the form of her own husband in S. N. Behrman's adaptation of Jean Giraudoux's *Amphytrion 38*? And was she really under hypnosis when she declared her love for the adventurer in Behrman's adaptation of Ludwig Fulda's *The Pirate*, or was she shamming? And what were we to make of the fact that all of these fornications, if they were consummated at all, were consummated with her off-stage husband, Alfred Lunt? And what are we to make of that passion if, as current research argues, they were both queers who artfully "made heterosexuality into a performance"³³ With Fontanne, the high comic Mona Lisa of the Broadway stage, you could never quite be sure of anything.

Mrs. Farnsworth presented woman as an enigma tinged with an aura of hysteria, following a long tradition of fascination with the hysterical woman. As Ann Wilson has observed "What remains constant throughout the history of hysteria is the sense of the enigma of woman"³⁴ In *The Cocktail Hour*, the hysteric becomes male, and the mother presents a femininity that is deliberately crafted as artful enigma. For *Mrs. Farnsworth*, the enigma of woman is imposed from the outside and painful, as she is forced to relinquish her identity and submit to a control that is masked by protestations of love. For Ann, the enigma appears as a deliberate act of self-fashioning. Without any gestures of victimization, her climactic scene transforms her into Lynn Fontanne, moving from putative romance novelist *manqué* to high comic star. Instead of being a woman without a story, Ann masters the ambiguity she embodies, playing the Fontannean conundrum that conflates husband (law, duty) with lover (pleasure, transgression), as she claims to have modeled the lover of her fiction on her husband in life. As such, she can play the role of loving prop to her self-absorbed and posturing husband, splendidly capping off this climactic scene with the exit line, "My life, my darling, I've based my life on you,"³⁵—a remark of undoubted theatrical effectiveness, though not unshakeable truth. Ann's

triumph as Lynn Fontanne prefigures the possibility of the triumph of John's "The Cocktail Hour."

Reviewing the Off-Broadway production of *The Cocktail Hour*, critic Frank Rich complained that the protagonist was opaque and the reconciliations in the last act were unconvincing.³⁶ Certainly, if approached as simple realism, the play's second act seems unduly contrived. When approached as a stylized and ironic metadrama, however, the protagonist achieves the theatrical opacity of mask, and the domestic reconciliations become highly conscious gestures of artifice that operate to imaginatively triumph over loss.

Or do they? The irony is never clearly resolved, for the comedy's fantasy of rescripting the father through the patriarch's own system is ultimately an imaginary triumph. It may also be a pyrrhic one, since what John may learn is that he can only configure his father on his father's terms. After all, John not only relinquishes the opportunity to have his play staged, but he also winds up forfeiting the twenty-thousand dollars that his father had offered him to forego the play's production. While his father lives, John cannot enjoy either theatrical success or financial remuneration. Only in the fantasy of outliving his father can he hope to achieve theatrical visibility and monetary gain. *The Cocktail Hour* suggests two possible happy endings for its self-sacrificing protagonist; either transcendence into the artful ambiguity of a Lynn Fontanne existence or outliving his father. The former depends on art: the latter, on nature.

Yet in this highly theatricalized world, it is impossible to know about the workings of nature with any certainty. Bradley is deeply concerned about his health; he has recently undergone a hospitalization for pneumonia. His wife, however, refuses to take it seriously. Is his concern justified or narcissistic? Is it completely genuine or crassly manipulative, or both? Even if it is true, it is certainly played for dramatic effect; even if it is false, it marks the waning of patriarchal robustness into pathos. The more one analyzes the characters in this play, the less one can determine truth, and the more one is aware of the way everything is staged within a family drama.

Upon further examination, still another, yet more troubling possibility presents itself: that the creation of this sophisticated enigma called *The Cocktail Hour* may be nothing more than a comic mask imposed on renunciation. Fashioning themselves as props around the wounded and self-dramatizing patriarch, Ann and John can be understood to have renounced their desires in Lacanian gestures of castration, or submission to patriarchal law, in which "the effects on a person who becomes the subject of law are, basically, that he is deprived of what is most important to him, and in exchange, is handed over to the texture which is woven between generations."³⁷ Mother has schooled son in renunciation; having given up her own desire in order to be a prop to the patriarch, and she urges her offspring to do the same. When Ann urges John to abandon his desire as she abandoned hers,

is she urging him to a mastery that is real or feigned? Is there necessarily a hidden, unmourned cost to being Lynn Fontanne, the price of being delivered to the texture that is woven between generations? Is family life, then, nothing but a school for castration? And is the theatre, which is always performed for verification in the eyes of an Other, forever fated to be the gestures of a desperate and hysterical solicitation? Underneath the high comic veneer of *The Cocktail Hour* lies another play in which the triumphs of comedy remain dubious.

IV

*When monster meets monster, one monster has to
give way, AND IT WILL NEVER BE ME.*

—Tennessee Williams, *Sweet Bird of Youth* ³⁸

The Golden Age: The Real Decoy

In *The Cocktail Hour*, the anticipated death of the patriarch held out hope for the playwright. In *The Golden Age*, the patriarch never appears onstage and has been dead for decades but still has the power to fascinate and seduce his offspring.

Admittedly a take-off on Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*,³⁹ Gurney moves the time to the 1980s and the setting to a brownstone on Manhattan's Upper East Side. It is inhabited by Isabel Hoyt, an actress and socialite of the early decades of the century who once knew the play's Jeffrey Aspern (and spectral patriarch), F. Scott Fitzgerald. While most readings of James's novella accept on face value the narrator's assertion that the "Aspern papers" of the title do indeed exist until Miss Tina finally incinerated them, Gurney's comedy plays with the heterodox critical reading laid out by Jacob Korg in the 1960s that there are in fact no such papers and that they are an invention of the elderly Miss Bordereau to help assure an inheritance for Tina.⁴⁰ Like Korg, Gurney recasts what is usually seen as a narrative of perception into a play of intrigue, with its enigmatic, histrionic *grande dame* playing off the desires of Tom, an ambitious but credulous young scholar who comes to her apartment besotted with dreams of past literary glamour and romance.

Like John, Tom is enthralled with the past. Just as John is caught up in his anachronistic love of the theatre, Tom is fascinated with what he calls a "Golden Age" of American letters. At the center of that Golden Age, for Tom, is F. Scott Fitzgerald. At the center of his fantasy of Fitzgerald is *The Great Gatsby*, and at the center of *that*, Tom believes, are some missing chapters—an absence he is intent on restoring. His quest brings him to the brownstone of Isabel, now a recluse, listed as deceased in the Social Register, who retired from life decades earlier after the deaths of her children. A spectral figure, sequestered from the world, she describes herself as a "dark star." "When the universe collapses, all these *things* collect around a dark star," her grand-daughter Virginia explains to Tom. "You can't even see

the star, but you know it's there, because all these things keep gravitating to it."⁴¹ Surrounded by an array of objects that Tom believes are fine pieces but are actually all copies, Isabel comes to embody for him all the allure of the past.

Describing herself as an actress "once and always,"⁴² Isabel not only tantalizes her gentleman caller with memories of her friendships and love affairs with past celebrities, but also feeds his obsession with hints of the existence of his fantasized lost chapter from *The Great Gatsby* that describes sexual intercourse between Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan. Just as John is fascinated by the prospect of a manuscript that might prove he is the product of an extramarital affair, the result of his mother's passion for a groom, Tom rambunctiously conflates the idea of a sex scene between Jay and Daisy to his imaginary primal scene, with Fitzgerald as Jay and Isabel as Daisy. "Sex is at the heart of the Golden Age!" he enthuses.⁴³ He believes he has discovered "The absolute center of the Golden Age."⁴⁴ The possibility of a piece of Fitzgerald erotica describing Gatsby and Daisy having sex becomes an object that would retrospectively confer completeness and plenitude on the lost Golden Age. Like Ann's lost romantic novel in *The Cocktail Hour*, Isabel's text holds out the promise of revealing to Tom both the evidence of the older woman's desire and the confirmation of a fantasy scenario of his own origins. In both plays, the matriarch both holds out the prospect of access to the primal scene, but also blocks it. "Let me look at it!" Tom begs Isabel. "Let me just see!"⁴⁵

The Golden Age differs from *Mrs. Farnsworth* and *The Cocktail Hour* in that its impossible manuscript is not written by the author/protagonist but is nevertheless brought into being by that character's desire. In this case, the manuscript does not challenge the patriarch, but endows him with a posthumous, pornographic glamour.

The Fitzgerald manuscript, whether it exists or not, is rendered chimerical by its hybridization with another mysterious manuscript. Isabel's recollections of Fitzgerald are inevitably confounded with those of Walter Babcock McCoy, a highly successful purveyor of melodramatic theatrical entertainments. Known as "The Real McCoy" for his theatrical mastery, his plays are "full of exciting scenes that never meant anything."⁴⁶ When Tom contemplates the painting of a male nude hanging in Isabel's drawing room, Virginia tells him that it was her grandmother's study of Fitzgerald. When Tom doubts that, she admits that it might just as easily be of Walter Babcock McCoy. When Isabel recollects a play that was written for her, Tom infers from the context that its author was Fitzgerald, but it turns out to have been McCoy. When Isabel talks about her bedside reading, is it *The Great Gatsby* or a melodrama by McCoy? The fictional author McCoy's writing is wittily coded as "real," compared to whom the historical Fitzgerald is momentarily reduced to a tantalizing phantom. To the end, we are never completely certain what Isabel's mysterious, black loose-leaf notebook contains: the primal scene, or the Real McCoy filled with scenes that mean nothing but are the stuff of pure theatre.

This mysterious double text is constructed and put into play by another of Gurney's enigmatic actresses. As a reclusive and glamorous representative of an earlier era, living a spectral and highly theatrical existence, the figure of Isabel suggests Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* and Sissy Goforth in Tennessee Williams's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*—and displays some of the same ruthlessness. She defines Virginia in the same terms of objectification and ownership as those Forrest Farnsworth uses to describe his wife, calling her "By far the best thing I possess,"⁴⁷ and manipulates Tom in an attempt to gain financial security and heterosexual romance for her granddaughter. Isabel's desire to prostitute Tom matches his single-minded pursuit of the Fitzgerald manuscript, giving the comedy a hard-edged quality that reviewer Brendan Gill believed tarnished the play and made it incapable of maintaining a consistent high comic charm: "the essential unpleasantness behind the comedy emerges as a taint, which the performers, skillful as they are, labor in vain to expunge."⁴⁸ Nostalgia in *The Golden Age* is not a warm, fuzzy feeling, but a dangerous and obsessive one that elicits ruthless manipulation and betrayal. It becomes the bait that lures the protagonist to be delivered to the texture woven between the generations. Virginia speculates that her grandmother is manipulating her and Tom in a private drama, one in which they are Jay and Daisy. The conflict in the play stems from competing desires for authorial control.

Tom is no match for the expert, bravura performances of Isabel, who is given to theatrical entrances, expert bait-and-switch techniques, and a total lack of nostalgia. Repeatedly emerging from a curtained alcove that suggests a proscenium stage, she is even more the embodiment of an old-style Broadway theatricality than *The Cocktail Hour's* Ann, staging her entrances, scenes, and even a physical collapse with an assured sense of what a star vehicle requires. When John Simon, in a dismissive review of the play's Broadway production, noted that actress Irene Worth, "Given a specious, campy role that begs to be hammed up, Miss Worth does that, even without creating a real character (who could here?), she disruptively steals the show from everyone—except the cat,"⁴⁹ his observation about the performance was accurate, though oblivious to the fact that the high artificiality of both Gurney and Worth's construction might be absolutely to the point, rather than a shortcoming: the glamour of the Golden Age might be, after all, a sleight-of-hand.

Isabel's theatricality turns out to be a weapon far more powerful than Tom's youth. Not only does she succeed in exposing him as a traitor and gigolo, she almost succeeds in exposing him physically as well, forcing him to strip naked at gunpoint. Isabel's portrait of a male nude suddenly takes on anxious overtones of subordination and castration. At this point, the fantasy of sexual exposure to the Other's gaze, enjoyed by *The Cocktail Hour's* John in his memories of phallic performance before his parents, displays a nightmarish aspect. Only an unexpected, McCoyan stroke of apoplexy fells Isabel in time to intervene between Tom and

absolute exposure. As in *The Cocktail Hour*, only death releases the stranglehold of the older generation on the younger.

In the last scene of the play, after Isabel's death, Tom returns to the apartment. He resists the temptation to look at the notebook, which granddaughter Virginia burns, telling him that it was nothing but an old play by Walter Babcock McCoy called "The Golden Age." She then plays out what she says was the drama's last scene, in which the heroine chooses independence over the entreaties of a suitor. As in *The Cocktail Hour*, this metadramatic gesture makes us wonder if we may have been watching a play by the Real McCoy all along, even though we know that realistically that would be impossible. It signals, however, a shift that we have seen elsewhere in Gurney's work. In *Mrs. Farnsworth*, a novel disappears and in its place an enigmatic performance unfolds before our eyes. In *The Cocktail Hour*, two manuscripts are renounced and displays of theatricality take their place. In *The Golden Age*, the fantasy of a manuscript of absolute restorative value is replaced by one of chimerical nature; a mongrel mixture of star turn, romantic comedy, American stage realism and melodrama, played out in a witty, ruthless high comic mode. By suggesting that his play derives from a tale by Henry James, Gurney is perhaps as duplicitous as Isabel, slyly invoking a piece of canonical literature as a red herring while actually delivering up the Real McCoy.

Once again for Gurney, the female lead comes to represent a site of radical ambiguity. When Virginia burns the McCoy/Fitzgerald text, she replaces her grandmother as the enigmatic female actress and succeeds her grandmother as the Lynn Fontanne of *The Golden Age*. In so doing, she creates a fantasy in which *The Great Gatsby* is replaced by McCoy's "The Golden Age," that is, in which literature is replaced by theatre. The seductive, domineering matriarchal enigma from the past is replaced by a potentially liberating enigma in the present, as Virginia achieves her independence from the competing figures who would script her future.

The usual expectation in romantic comedy is that, by renouncing his tainted desire for the manuscript, John would have proved himself worthy of heterosexual union with Virginia. *The Golden Age*, however, is not a romantic comedy, even though it trifles with the possibility of romance, and just as John loses both the opportunity of having his play performed and the compensatory check for twenty thousand dollars, so too Tom loses both the legendary manuscript that has come to act as a fetish for the entire, lost Golden Age, and the possibility of a deepening relationship with Virginia. In spite of this double loss, he perhaps receives an unexpected compensation for with the loss of the Fitzgerald manuscript comes the freeing of his own, hitherto blocked, creativity as a writer. Unlike *Mrs. Farnsworth* and *The Cocktail Hour*, *The Golden Age* destroys the weight of the patriarchal past, assuages the anxiety of influence, and perhaps even allows the next generation to tentatively come into its own. No longer is Tom the chronicler of a previous era and the desperate voyeur of an earlier eros, like John in *The Cocktail Hour*, but someone

who is beginning to be able to address his own questions in writing. Subjugated to the past by an erotic fascination, elicited in the female figure of the previous generation, the young can only hope for liberation through her death. While Mrs. Farnsworth, Anna, and John all pay the cost of self-sacrifice to remain a part of the social order, Virginia and Tom are liberated, but at the cost of the play's social world being dissolved. At the play's conclusion, Isabel is dead, Virginia and Tom are separated, and the elusive Golden Age is, for better or worse, gone forever. Unless, of course, it is all nothing but a *coup de théâtre*.

In all three plays, the truth claims of the fictive manuscripts remain in question as their effects are investigated, and the pretense to a security dreamt of in literature is displaced in favor of the vigor and uncertainty of live performance. This displacement echoes the dynamic of literary theatre, in which a written text is ultimately displaced in favor of embodied performance on stage. In each play, the performance that results is not the text the protagonist had in mind. The result is always another, a sacrifice of personal desire to the social world of the theatre. These plays mirror a truth of theatre as a collaborative art form: what you get on opening night, however wonderful, is never what you *wanted*—that had to be renounced somewhere along the way. The sacrifice of the text is necessary for the transformation into performance, a sacrifice that re-enacts the dynamics of the family. For the theatre, no less than the family, has its own sneaky and effective instruments of social repression, so powerful that one can be left with the suspicion that there is ultimately no meaning, only play.

In Gurney's theatrical world, characters cannot be known with any certainty. Their social masks are defenses; and the statements they make are not verifiable truths, but desperate maneuvers for attention. Refusing the spectator any assurance that his characters can be known in depth, Gurney presents them as increasingly theatricalized surfaces, behind which lurks the fear that performance may ultimately be meaningless. The love-lured movement into social acceptance may demand the effacement of self, and the theatrical charades of high comedy may be seductive but disconcerting displays of hysteria. Using Broadway's own particular form of stage realism, traditionally deployed to create the illusion of psychological depth, Gurney flattens it out in order to create ironic worlds of artifice. The unease that reviewers such as John Simon, Brendan Gill, and Frank Rich have expressed with Gurney's comedies reveals the shared assumption that these high comedies should be more seamless and comfortable than they are; that their unresolved tensions are the result of a failure of craft and not a view of social relationships.

In her overview of Gurney's "self-reflexive" plays, Brenda Murphy does not place Gurney among the postmodernists—and indeed, it seems awkward and not particularly helpful to place the author of *Mrs. Farnsworth*, *The Cocktail Hour*, and *The Golden Age* in the company of Richard Foreman, Maria Irene Fornes, and Mac Wellman, playwrights who have departed far more boldly from both American

realism and the conventions of the commercial theatre than Gurney has ever done.⁵⁰ Yet his plays nevertheless reveal a repudiation of depth in favor of a fascination with a purely theatricalized surface of irresolvable enigma that both hearkens back to the work of his American high comic predecessors and has more than a little in common with the aesthetics of the postmodern.

Perhaps the key difficulty that Gurney's plays have encountered in gaining critical acceptance is that they fall uncomfortably between two camps: they are too conservative in their form for the advocates of postmodernism to pay attention to them and too fractured, self-conscious and stressed for the traditionalists to praise them. To work in the theatre as he knows it, Gurney admits, is to work as an anachronism, neither at home in the present or the past. The only hope that he can envision is in a spectral existence exterior to his plays, one in which "Marge" might be able to escape her husband and dead aunt, Ann and John might feel free to publish and perform, and Tom and Virginia might have lives on the outside of the "dark star" that we could witness. But for Gurney, freedom and individual autonomy lie somewhere offstage, and all forms, whether dramatic or more broadly social, are forms of restraint.

Notes

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2. See Arvid F. Sponberg, ed., *A. R. Gurney: A Casebook* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

3. Karl Levett, "A. R. Gurney, American Original," *Drama* 149 (Autumn 1983): 6-7; Alex Witchel, "Laughter, Tears and the Perfect Martini," *The New York Times*, 12 November 1989, sec. 6: 42f.

4. See John L. DiGaetani, *A Search for a Postmodern Theatre: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights* (Westport: Greenwood, 1991) 117; Levett 7; and Sponberg, "Interview," ed. Sponberg 21.

5. See Frank Rich, "Light Banter and Dark Feelings in Gurney's *Cocktail Hour*," *New York Times*, October 21, 1988: C3, for a representative reference to Gurney as an author of high comedy; see Michael Feingold, "Heights of Despair," *Village Voice*, June 15, 1993, for a brief, but more insightful examination.

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37. Jacques Lacan, *Le Seminaire, livre VIII: Le Transfert* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991) 381. My translation.
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