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STANDING AT THE PRECIPICE: RESTRAINED MODERNISM IN THE FICTION OF E.M. FORSTER, NELLA LARSEN, AND ELIZABETH BOWEN

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Standing at the Precipice: Restrained Modernism in the Fiction of E.M. Forster, Nella Larsen, and Elizabeth Bowen

In the field of literary modernism, value has been assigned most often to texts that display a certain kind of innovation: aggressive, destructive, and difficult. Other, quieter texts have been relegated to the periphery of the modernist canon. This dissertation, contributing to the work of the New Modernist Studies, argues for an expansion of how critics define innovation and, by extension, modernism. Through close reading and thorough analysis of critical reception, I explore a "restrained" modernism in the stories and novels of E.M. Forster, Nella Larsen, and Elizabeth Bowen, demonstrating how their innovation proceeds from and depends on their performance of clarity and their deconstruction of traditional forms from within. These three authors strategically deploy familiar traditions like the female *bildungsroman*, social satire, and the tragic mulatta tale in order to explore the queer agency of restrained subjectivities trapped inside. Forster, Larsen, and Bowen defy critical accusations of timidity, conservativism, and failure, critiquing the totalizing identity categories of nation, race, sexuality, and gender and suggesting the quiet yet radical power of a literary—and modernist—restraint.

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And for Dan: this *is* the book I wrote, not *about* my time in Eugene perhaps, but during it, and of course, *of course*, I have to dedicate it to you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I. “ON THE THRESHOLD OF GREAT THINGS”: MODERNIST INNOVATION AS RESTRAINT 1

II. “AN AMBIGUITY AT THE HEART”: THE INNOVATIVE, “CLOSETED” RESTRAINT OF E.M. FORSTER’S EARLY FICTION 25

III. “A THING THAT COULDN’T BE REGISTERED”: THE MODERNIST RESTRAINT OF NELLA LARSEN’S *PASSING* 66

IV. “SHE WAS AWARE OF VIOLENCE, BE SURE”: RESTRAINT, VIOLENCE, AND AGENCY IN ELIZABETH BOWEN’S *THE LAST SEPTEMBER* 107

REFERENCES CITED........ 148

CHAPTER I

"ON THE THRESHOLD OF GREAT THINGS": MODERNIST INNOVATION AS RESTRAINT

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Charles Marlow confronts the "farthest point of navigation" in his encounter with Kurtz, the megalomaniacal agent who embodies the opposite of restraint:

> "'I was on the threshold of great things,' [Kurtz] pleaded in a voice of longing … He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the very earth to pieces … and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air. I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good. They were common everyday words—the familiar vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares … I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint" (66).

Marlow's encounter with Kurtz on the banks of the Congo threatens his foothold on stable existential and linguistic territory. For Kurtz has left solid ground behind, having "kicked himself loose." He has gone over the "threshold," lacking the "restraint" necessary to hold himself back. This is reflected in his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, which deploys soaring, unrestrained rhetoric in order to make its case, as Marlow recalls: "It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the *unbounded* power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words" (50; emphasis mine). The rousing effect of his words is matched, moreover, with the frightening excess

of his recommendations, "scrawled" at the bottom of the report in a final flourish: "It was very simple and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes'" (50). This is a performance of rhetorical pyrotechnics, writing that kicks loose of the foundations of political civility and embraces extermination.

Marlow, by comparison, is restrained. He does not follow Kurtz over the threshold of his ideas or the precipice of his eventual death. He makes it back up the Congo to tell his tale. His encounter with Kurtz does, however, affect both his life and the form of the story he tells, contained within the narration of one of his fellows on the deck of the *Nellie*. Kurtz destabilizes the certainty of groundedness. Marlow wonders, standing before him, whether he stands or floats. Marlow's unmoored body reflects, moreover, his unmoored conscience. He admires Kurtz, not despite but because of his lack of restraint, stating repeatedly that Kurtz is a "remarkable man" (70). More importantly, Marlow realizes, as he tells his tale of darkness, that he has lost faith in the power of "common everyday words" to communicate the "inconceivable mystery" of his time with Kurtz. At the time of their conversation, words could contain and convey the "terrific suggestiveness" of dreams and nightmares, a language made extraordinary because it is disconnected from the waking need for logic and order. When used to recall and describe Marlow's encounter with Kurtz, however, words fail to capture the experience. The signifier falls far short of the signified. Marlow can only use the phrase "inconceivable mystery" to describe Kurtz.

Marlow's awareness of Kurtz's "inconceivable mystery," thus, changes his conception of what is possible for men as well as what language and stories can do.

Marlow is different from his fellow seamen because of his journey down the Congo, and that difference registers in the way he tells stories. Conrad's frame narrator describes the difference between the "yarns" of a typical seaman and Marlow as the difference between "direct simplicity" and "inconclusive experiences" (5;7). A typical yarn can be neatly cracked open to reveal its "whole meaning," like the "shell of a cracked nut" (5). Marlow's stories, on the other hand, cannot be cracked. The narrator locates the meaning of Marlow's tale "not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (5). The meanings of Marlow's tales are not solid, compact, digestible nuggets contained within neat, accessible narratives. For him, there may well be no meaning at the center of a tale, but rather an eerily enveloping haze that the story only "brings out" but does not penetrate. Marlow repeatedly stops his tale, moreover, frustrated with his inability to convey the centrality of his experience: "…No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible" (27). Marlow's tales cannot proceed with "direct simplicity" because he doubts the ability of language to capture the significance of an event. It can only convey a misty penumbra of meaning, not the "life-sensation" of existence itself.

And yet, he continues to try. The frame narrator reveals Marlow's "propensity to spin yarns" despite his conviction that conveying the "truth" and "meaning" of existence is "impossible." Like the Ancient Mariner, Marlow is compelled to tell his tale about Kurtz, even after he has declared its impossibility. Language is all he has. He remains cognizant and at least partly committed, moreover, to the shaping of stories for certain audiences. When he meets Kurtz's Intended and she asks him to reveal Kurtz's final

words, he holds himself back from speaking the truth. He does not repeat Kurtz's whispered cry, " 'The horror! The horror!'" (69). He will not be that unrestrained: "I pulled myself together and spoke slowly. 'The last word he pronounced was—your name'" (76-77). Marlow reins himself in and supplies an appropriate ending to Kurtz's story that he knows will satisfy her. The Intended's response, moreover, confirms his success: "I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. 'I knew it—I was sure!' … She knew. She was sure" (77; ellipsis in text). Marlow's repetition of her confident proclamations partly registers his loss—he has lied to preserve her illusions about Kurtz, even though he has already claimed that he "hate[s]," "detest[s]," and "can't bear a lie" (27). Moreover, Marlow has betrayed Kurtz by refusing to share his final words, keeping them hidden. Marlow expects to be punished for his reticence: "It seemed to me that the house would collapse … that the heavens would fall upon my head" (77). At the same time, however, he acknowledges his inability to "render Kurtz that justice which was his due" by repeating his final disturbing cry: "But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether…" (77). Having returned from the Congo and stepped into the bourgeois confines of the Intended's "lofty drawing-room," with its "tall marble fireplace" and "grand piano," Marlow knows there is no space or language to accommodate and communicate the experience he has just had. The darkness must reside instead in what he does not say—in the ellipses, pauses, and gaps in conversation that he preserves for the sake of protecting the Intended's illusion and which critique that illusion through the immensity of their silence. As John McClure argues, Marlow's confrontation with the limits of experience

and language register the tensions between reticence and boldness, between acceptance and victory, between containment and release: “Marlow does not signal his own total victory over the temptations and limitations of language; he only alerts us to their existence, and to the necessity for struggle” (315).

My dissertation, “Standing at the Precipice: Restrained Modernism in the Fiction of E.M. Forster, Nella Larsen, and Elizabeth Bowen,” argues that a similar modernist aesthetic of restraint—made of silences, hesitations, and confrontations with the limits of language and narrative—runs through the work of Forster, Larsen, and Bowen, along with the fiction of Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Willa Cather, Rebecca West, and Christopher Isherwood, among others. Restrained modernist texts, like *Heart of Darkness*, confront the limits of coherent language and propriety without abandoning them. They depict hesitations and contain silences that both capitulate to and critique the norms of bourgeois and colonial cultures. They preserve and deploy familiar forms and genres like the tragic mulatta tale and the female *bildungsroman*, but not without destabilizing and drawing attention to them *as* constructions. This queer aesthetic deconstructs nineteenth-century forms and their attendant limitations from the inside.

Restraint is not a word typically associated with literary modernism. Modernists, denizens of the avant garde and proponents of the experimental, do not hold back, as their manifestos, letters, and essays reveal. F.T. Marinetti’s 1909 Futurist manifesto, for example, defines an artistic “masterpiece” as, at bottom, a “work with an aggressive character,” a “violent attack on unknown forces” (qtd. in Levenson 45). He urges artists to “glorify war,” “destroy museums, libraries, academies of every kind” and to “fight …

every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice" (45-6). In 1919, John Middleton Murray, editor of the literary magazine the *Athenaeum*, depicts the landscape of literary conversation as a battle: "There's no doubt it's a fight to the finish between us and them" (qtd. in Diepeveen 12). In Murray's argument, "they" are those who value and publish literary tradition, transparency, and escape while Murray and his colleagues fight for work that defies tradition, abandons transparency, and insists on confrontation. By 1923, Virginia Woolf describes the effect of the "new" fiction as simulating "the sound of axes … a vigorous and stimulating sound" ("Mr. Bennett" 22). She argues that aesthetic violence is necessary for a generation whose literary conventions have become so "artificial" that they can no longer provide a space of communication between writer and reader (21). In the face of that predicament, she insists, "the strong" are moved to "destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society" (22). The conversation surrounding modernism as it is being written—in manifestos, letters between the publishers of little magazines, reviews, and essays by those creating the "vigorous and stimulating sound" of a literary axe—hardly evokes the concept of restraint.

In fact, modernism is often associated with aesthetic excess, with texts that announce definitively and loudly their aim to experiment with and even destroy traditional forms without concern for how far they go in the process. One marker of this modernist excess is in the frustrated and overwhelmed responses of its readers.[1] In 1922, Lewis Bettany contends that the excesses of Woolf's *Jacob's Room* create barriers to the most basic acts of interpretation: "[the novel] is so full of parentheses and suppressions,

[1] For more on difficulty in literature being a relationship between reader and text, see The Idea of Difficulty in Literature, ed. Alan C. Purves, and Diepeveen's application of the theories developed in The Idea, particularly chapters 1-3.

so tedious in its rediscoveries of the obvious, and so marred by its occasional lapses into indelicacy, that I found great difficulty in discovering what it was all about" (98). This is a novel full of "too much": too many parenthetical asides, too many "suppressions" of clarity, too much tedium in its concern with the ordinary, and too much inclusion of the inappropriate. Woolf goes so far in her novel that her reader cannot sift through its excess to detect its meaning. In 1930, G. W. Stonier's review of what would become *Finnegan's Wake* expresses frustration with James Joyce's tendency to overwhelm the reader with technical pyrotechnics: "Most of the failures of Mr. Joyce's new prose come from too much distortion and the introduction of patterns and allusions which merely bewilder the reader with irrelevant deftness" (408-10). Joyce's excessive disruption of language with "too much distortion" and too many "patterns and allusions" takes his novel beyond the point of relevance. Even Wyndham Lewis (himself a proponent of "high" modernist experimentation) compares Gertrude Stein's "prose-song" in 1927 to a recipe gone horribly wrong: "We can represent [Stein's work] as a cold suet-roll of fabulously reptilian length. Cut it at any point, it is the same thing: the same heavy, sticky opaque mass all through, and all along … It is mournful and monstrous" (qtd. in Diepeveen 152). Stein allows her compositions, Lewis argues, to expand beyond normal lengths to the "fabulous" and "reptilian." Her fiction takes the manageable meal of a suet-roll and transforms it into an unaccountable, unbearable, inedible monstrosity. This is a meal that, with its excess, does not create greater satisfaction but rather leaves one reeling, horrified, and sick.

The definition of modernism as overwhelming excess, moreover, became not just omnipresent but also lionized by the mid-twentieth century. Critics like Bettany and

Stonier lost their arguments for moderation so thoroughly that, as Leonard Diepeveen argues in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, discussions about the value of high art, modernism, and reading after about 1950 proceed from a tacit assumption that good art displays the difficulty of excess and that good reading is a process of decoding and deconstructing that difficulty. This assumption shaped both the literary canon and the reading practices developed and taught at universities, valorizing and institutionalizing an aesthetic of difficult excess: "In the triumph of high modernism, difficulty … became the 'default' aesthetic, the principle of aesthetic value that most readers turned to automatically, a principle that … made possible and inevitable the shape of the high modern canon as it existed by, say, 1960" (Diepeveen 179). Works like *The Waste Land* or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* retained value in the academy because they present readers a high degree of interpretive difficulty that necessitates close, deconstructive reading practices. Thus, in 1976, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane characterize modernism as based on the "shock," "violation," and "crisis" its style produces in readers (24). By 1992, Richard Poirier explicitly defines modernism as a phenomenon of a certain kind of reading: "The phenomenon of grim reading—that is what I would like to offer as my initial definition of modernism. Modernism happened when reading got to be grim" (272). Modernist innovation as excess has become "default" by mid-century and continues to be so through the beginning of the twenty-first, relegating other forms of literary experimentation to the periphery (Diepeveen 179).

Within the first half of the twentieth century, however, as Murray's "battle" for modernistic excess is being waged, Forster, Larsen, and Bowen all write lectures, letters, and essays that valorize restraint, rather than excess, as a method for literary innovation.

In his 1926 *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster does not describe Stein's experimental fictions as horrifying, acknowledging her "noble" attempts to liberate narrative from normative constraints (67). He feels, however, that the costs are too dear. He argues that Stein "goes much further" than is safe because she cannot abolish linguistic norms "without abolishing the sequence between the sentences," "the order of the words in the sentences," and finally "the order of the letters or sounds in the words" (68). At that point, she is "over the precipice" (68). Such a novel, Forster insists regretfully, "only becomes unintelligible and therefore valueless" (68). Like Marlow, Forster will not go over the precipice; he too steps back. His formal experimentation, moreover, depends on this restraint. He uses the constraint of coherency to enact and destabilize the rigid limitations of traditional form.

Larsen also casts restraint as innovation in a 1925 letter to Carl Van Vechten, author and patron of many Harlem Renaissance artists. Her letter advances a theory of fiction that begins with a list of captivating subjects for literary representation. That list encompasses a wide range of people, objects, and emotions: "What things there are to write, if one can only write them. Boiler menders, society ladies, children, acrobats, governesses, business men, countesses, flappers. Nile green bath rooms, beautifully filed, gay moods and shivering hesitations" ("To Carl" 158). This list of potential topics ranges across class boundaries, taking in "boiler menders" and "countesses" alike. Larsen insists, however, on presenting her characters, objects, and moods in "an intensely restrained and civilized manner" that conceals the "ironic survival of a much more primitive mood" (158). Larsen's letter implies that presentation is as important as subject, and that her

"restrained and civilized manner" works as a strategy to smuggle in more subversive content. Reticence is a narrative strategy to demonstrate the "primitive mood."

Similarly, Bowen writes in a 1954 essay, "What Jane Austen Means to Me," of the lessons on restraint she has learned from Austen and tried to put into practice from the beginning of her own career: "At the outset, I spoke of [Austen] as formidable—this, to me, seems a thing that an artist should be. If this quality in her is overlooked, that may be because of the very quality I would most gladly learn from her—restraint. She was aware of violence, be sure" (229-30). Given its connection with the narrative practice of a nineteenth-century author of female *bildungsromane* and comedies of manners, Bowen's restraint would seem to be the least innovative of all. And yet, her theory connects formidability and restraint, suggesting that reticence to explore violence explicitly does not mean ignorance of its existence. Restraint, moreover, speaks to different audiences differently, performing pleasantly on the surface while acknowledging, obliquely, the violence attendant on the drawing room that sympathetic readers like Bowen can detect.

In each of these examples, authors usually placed at the margins of modernism argue that their literary aesthetic depends on holding back. Yet they also depict restraint as a formal strategy, connected to innovative presentation, oblique demonstration of violence, and the preservation of value and meaning. Like Conrad, Forster, Larsen, and Bowen are more interested in the moment just before the plunge, the disorientation and disruption of reaching the "farthest point of navigation." Their fiction contends with the limits of experience and language rather than gliding out into the chaos of the uncharted. This is modernism that gets its edge by not leaping over it.

The fiction of Forster, Larsen, and Bowen is more formally restrained than Conrad's and situated in less obviously estranging, unfamiliar spaces than a steamship traveling up the Congo. Forster's first stories, "The Story of a Panic" and "Ansell," depict, respectively, bourgeois British subjects staying at a proper Italian pension and an English academic visiting the country house of his cousin. Larsen stages her novel, *Passing*, in the carefully designed and decorated spaces of Harlem's middle-class. Bowen's novel *The Last September* unfolds within and around an Irish Big House, a symbol of colonial power and privilege. Nor are their characters burgeoning modernist artists like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus or D.H. Lawrence's Paul Morel, seeking ways to "forge" an "uncreated consciousness" or leaving death behind to enter the "gold phosphorescence" of the "faintly humming" city (188; 388). The characters of modernism's restrained aesthetic do not walk the streets of American, British, and Irish cities, or if they do, they carry plenty of money and sip tea on the rooftops of luxurious hotels. The prose of Forster, Larsen, and Bowen demonstrates a consistent commitment to narrative coherence, displaying few or none of the obvious pyrotechnics of "high" modernist authors. It is possible to read their restrained stories and novels as twentieth-century renderings of nineteenth-century forms like social satire and the *bildungsroman*. Neither authors nor texts have been easily located in the spectrum of modernist experimentation.

Their restraint, moreover, has regularly been interpreted as evidence of artistic failure. In 1932, Howard Doughtry, Jr., for example, sums up critical discussion of Forster's work as a series of attempts to "answer the question why he is, comparatively speaking, a failure as a novelist" (75). Doughtry argues that Forster's fiction does not

"come off," because of its lack of "integration": "on putting down one of his books one is not left with the feeling of a total experience … His books … are disrupted" (75). Doughtry also points to Forster's fourteen-year silence between *Howards End* and *Passage to India* as evidence of his artistic failure. Similarly, critics single out Larsen's silence after her final story, "Sanctuary," as reason to describe her legacy as a disappointment. Thadious Davis (1994) calls her a "failure" for abandoning her writing career, arguing that "silence replaced Larsen's voice" (460). Hildegard Hoeller confirms that Larsen herself has gone down in literary history, for many critics, as a "failure" (421). Like both Forster and Larsen, Bowen suffers continued criticism for her "failure" to construct convincing, clarifying conclusions to her novels and stories. In 1924, a critic for *The Outlook*, for example, argues that Bowen's fiction "fails to pose situation and resolve problem … convincingly" ("The New" 648). In 1929, L.P. Hartley echoes that argument in his reading of *The Last September*: "one should close a novel with the sense that something has been demonstrated, and I do not think one feels it here" (185).

My dissertation demonstrates that the subtle disruptions, silences, and anticlimactic conclusions of these stories and novels, not to mention their safe and culturally homogenous settings, comprise not artistic failures or neglect, but deliberate strategies to depict queer subjectivities struggling to live within the constraints of bourgeois, colonial spaces and forms and to deconstruct those forms from within.[2]

[2] In this effort I join a continuing conversation of critics intent on broadening limiting readings of Forster, Larsen, and Bowen's fiction. Wendy Moffatt's 2010 Forster biography, *A Great Unrecorded History*, opens up new avenues for reading his work and life. Jesse Matz, Paul Armstrong, and Ambreen Hai have all produced careful, innovative readings of Forster's lesser-read short stories and novels. Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* features an influential chapter on Larsen's *Passing* that thinks through its queer, gender, and class politics through the lens of psychoanalysis. Hildegard Hoeller makes a compelling case for reading Larsen's story "Sanctuary" as an example of modernist translation rather than plagiarism. Susan Osborn's edited volume *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives* as well as a recent issue of *Textual*

Forster, Larsen, and Bowen represent encounters with war, death, and desire through reticence, silence, and subtle disruption. Their comments on fiction, moreover, suggest that they write with restraint not out of capitulation or a lack of interest in experimentation—they all read and were impressed by Woolf, Joyce, and Stein—but as a method of quiet subversion. Reading Forster, Larsen, and Bowen for the subtle disruption and innovation of their restraint rather than their failure to achieve the radical pyrotechnics of some "high" modernists reveals a strain of reticent experimentation that deserves critical recognition. The narrative disorientation of the view from the edge has as much experimental value as the fatal velocity of the plunge.

"Standing at the Precipice" expands the category of modernist aesthetics to include writers whose restrained innovation deserves greater recognition. This project of expansion is of a piece with the investment of the New Modernist Studies, as Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz argue, in the work of "expansion" in "temporal, spatial, and vertical directions" (737). With the creation of the Modernist Studies Association conference and the founding of prominent field journals like *Modernism/modernity* at the end of the twentieth century, New Modernist scholars have been pushing at the aesthetic, political, and spatial boundaries of modernism, arguing for the importance of a whole list of "modernisms" that do always resemble the modernism of excess produced by Joyce, Woolf, and Stein, and which move beyond a Euro-centric vision of who was creating modernist texts. The New Modernist Studies have yielded books and articles on "deviant" modernism, "ordinary" modernism, "popular" modernism, "peripheral"

Practice devoted to Bowen both aim to move beyond discussions of Bowen's Anglo-Irish sympathies to consider the innovation of her work.

modernism, even “planetary” modernism.[3] Critical focus has turned so regularly to what Heather Love calls “unpromising topics”—writers, modes, and methods that until end of the twentieth century could not compete with the volume and intensity of the “excessive” modernists—that it often seems, as Love argues, that “marginal modernism begin[s] to look more and more like modernism itself” (744).

More specifically, my project contributes to a continuing discussion about the importance of acknowledging multiple modernist aesthetics. Diepeveen, for example, argues that reading the “simple” aesthetic of Frost or Cather through the lens of aesthetic difficulty or excess “miss[es] much of the texture of the experience of reading them. Difficulty is neither the first nor the obvious thing to be said about them; their difficulty is subtle, not obvious. The structures that give rise to difficulty, and the experience of the difficulty itself, differ radically from those of classic high modern texts” (207). Diepeveen insists that critics need to bring a greater degree of self-consciousness to the texts of such authors, a greater awareness of the critical investments in difficulty and excess that determine the canonical status of important, though not obviously experimental, modernists: “As long as we avoid a serious examination of difficulty as an aesthetic principle … writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Willa Cather, Robert Frost and Carl Sandberg, will never be *really* canonical” (214; emphasis original). Critics of modernist poetry are also working to expand awareness of modernist poetic aesthetics

[3] See, for example, Colleen Lamos, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust*, Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Juan Antonio Súarez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday*, Marc Caplan, *How Strange the Change: Language, Temporality, and Narrative Form in Peripheral Modernisms*, and Susan Stanford Friedman, “Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies.” For a discussion of the concept of tracing different “modernisms,” see Peter Nicholls’s *Modernisms*. For work on decentering modernism’s geographical, racial, and imperial spaces, see Chana Kronfeld’s *On the Margins of Modernism* and Laura Winkiel and Laura Doyle’s *Geomodernisms*.

beyond the fragmentation, collage, and allusions of Eliot's, Pound's, and H.D's later work. Kirsten Blythe Painter introduces the category of "tempered modernism" to describe an "alternative trajectory of restrained Modernism," whose poets were "circumspect in their attitude towards tradition, generally adapting it to modernity rather than rejecting it altogether" (2). Painter argues that there were multiple "rebellions" in the first few decades of the twentieth century, that there were "three options, not two," and that between the avant-garde radical and the nineteenth-century traditionalist, moderate, "tempered" innovators "staked out a middle ground" (9).

My dissertation participates in the New Modernist investment in "expansion" and contributes to the critical discussion of alternate, "simple," and "tempered" modernist aesthetics by tracing a line of modernist restraint whose practitioners are interested in subtle, irregular, wayward methods of formal and thematic innovation. This is expansion along the "vertical" direction of Mao and Walkowitz's argument: "in which canons have been critiqued and reconfigured … and in which scholarly inquiry has increasingly attended to matters of production, dissemination, and reception" (738). The canon of literary modernism, shaped, as Diepeveen argues, by a "default" aesthetic of excess, should be expanded to reflect multiple methods of literary experimentation. Innovation need not be indicated only by aggression, violence, and war. It does not have to go beyond the "farthest point of navigation," abandoning coherence and subtlety in favor of unrestrained experimental technique.

Much of my argument, moreover, grows out of my work with the reception history of these texts, which reveals the investments critics make in circumscribing specific cadres of modernist innovators. Often, the reviews and criticisms of readers

signal the existence of restrained innovation—descriptions of puzzlement, accusations of failure, or expressions of disappointment with anticlimax follow all of the texts considered in this dissertation, and suggest their success in producing a kind of doubleness. They can be read as belated nineteenth-century forms, but attention to their provocations of puzzlement and their "failures" to fulfill the genres and forms they evoke reveals their queer, quiet subversion.

Indeed, one unexpected conclusion that has emerged from this project is the value of queer theory's insights to illuminate the innovation of more peripheral modernist authors and texts. These insights work on multiple levels. Eve Sedgwick's *Tendencies* locates one meaning of "queer" in the interpretive scenario created by sexualities not subsumed under the dominant, heterosexual key: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (8). In other words, queer sexuality affects texts not just because of the sexual desires characters experience or the acts they commit, but because of the way queer sexuality provokes and disrupts interpretation, carrying with it the "gaps," "dissonance," and "lapses … of meaning" that also describe restrained modernist experimentation. On another level, however, "queer" signifies more universally as anything that actively works to subvert the norm, as Michael Warner argues in *Fear of a Queer Planet*: "For both academics and activists, 'queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual" (xxvi). This interpretation shifts critical focus from locating and interpreting sites of queer sexuality to considering how characters or texts constitute challenges to any dominant key, acknowledging "a wide

field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence" (xxvi). In pushing back against the normative forces of binary logic, bourgeois homophobia and snobbery, totalizing claims about identity, and the gendered repression and violence of the female *bildungsroman* and the reproductive expectations of the Anglo-Irish, these texts take on a "queer" and "critical" edge.

The productivity of reading modernist *excess* as queer has already been registered by New Modernist critics. Heather Love, for example, acknowledges the "good fit" between "queer" and "modernism" in "Modernism at Night," arguing that both the mode and the movement work against the certainty and containment of the norm: "the indeterminacy of *queer* seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production" (745). Liesl Olson, moreover, has written a book exploring the investment of "high" modernist texts in the quiet, the subtle, and the ordinary rather than the transcendent and the explosive. My explorations of Forster's, Larsen's, and Bowen's fictions demonstrate the potential of bringing the "queer," the "ordinary," and the "restrained" together. Each of my chapters engages with the insights of queer theory in order to explore how queer predicaments of identity make strange the landscape of restrained literary modernism. All of the novels and stories considered here are entangled with queer identity politics, subtly resisting and calling into question dominant categories in ways that also draw attention to and destabilize narrative forms and structures. Forster builds the queering of norms into the dialectic of his fiction, as "value" constantly works against the "tyranny" of time. The queer repression of Irene Redfield, Larsen's protagonist, threatens the safety and stability of both the pleasant bourgeois life she leads

and the possibility of identity being something that *can* be accurately interpreted. Bowen, moreover, radicalizes the queer desire and politics of her protagonist, Lois Farquar, in a way that challenges the female *bildungsroman* and destabilizes repression itself. These texts enact and reveal how their queer, restrained protagonists are difficult to interpellate into discrete, essential identities.

I begin my exploration of modernism's restrained aesthetic at the beginning of the twentieth century and the beginning of Forster's career. In Chapter 2, "'An Ambiguity at the Heart": The Innovative, "Closeted" Restraint of E.M. Forster's Early Fiction," I argue that the familiar critical story about Forster's work, which depicts him as unwilling to commit to an outright modernist assault on established literary form, draws on the binary, gendered logic of the closet. His readers, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, often portray him as a victim of constraint, conflating sexuality with aesthetic experimentation, or claim that his work only becomes fully innovative when he liberates it from the limitations of nineteenth-century satire and Edwardian fantasy in *A Passage to India*. My account of his fiction, in contrast, works backwards from his 1927 Clark Lectures, in which he articulates the "closeted" aesthetic of restraint that shapes his fiction, an aesthetic dialectic that moves between the restrictions of the "life in time" and the rebellion of the "life by value." Forster argues that *both* are necessary in order to create meaning, and that artists like Stein who try to liberate their fiction from time's tyranny fail, their "noble" yet doomed efforts taking their stories "over the precipice" where they cannot achieve any value (28). For Forster,

the cost of remaining on solid ground is worth the value of potent, if limited, literary subversion.

That theory is born out in his first two short stories, "The Story of a Panic," written in 1903 and published in 1911 in *The Celestial Omnibus*, and "Ansell," written in 1903 and published posthumously in 1972 in *The Life to Come*. These stories reveal the rewards and costs of Forster's restrained aesthetic. Both deploy fantasy to allow their queer male characters brief, metamorphic flights from the bourgeois restrictions that keep them bound, but both reveal the price that must be paid for those flights to take place. Forster installs liberating figures of metamorphosis and escape in his stories to reflect the rewards of value, but still insists, with unexpected eruptions of violence and death, as well as deeply melancholic, ambiguous endings, that the closet has a price. His early stories represent a modernist queering of the closet, registering its liberatory potential as well as its repression in ways that deconstruct nineteenth-century forms and constraints from within.

Chapter 3, "'A Thing That Couldn't Be Registered': The Modernist Restraint of Nella Larsen's *Passing*," explores how a restrained modernist aesthetic affects readers. As opposed to modernist excess, which produces protestations like Poirier's that modernism can be located in the experience of "grim reading," restrained modernism often registers in accusations of puzzlement, as in I.A. Richards's description of Forster as "the most puzzling figure in contemporary American letters" (914), or, in the case of Larsen's novel *Passing*, misinterpretation. My chapter traces *Passing*'s history of critical misreadings, elisions, and interpretive anxiety, from its publication in 1929 to the twenty-first century. Early critics ignore subtle, disturbing aspects of the novel's plot to focus on

Clare Kendry's more legible acts of racial passing, which evoke the familiar conventions of the tragic mulatta tale. Mid-century critics read *Passing* as an embrace of the materialism and class performance of Harlem's black bourgeoisie, arguing that Larsen's conservative class politics disqualify her as a member of the literary revolution. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, critics attend more closely to the novel's deceptive qualities, noting Irene Redfield's strange relationship to her race, class, and desire, but use that focus to engage in an ongoing search to locate the novel's "real" topic, whether marriage, race, class, or queer sexuality.

My chapter argues that Larsen's restrained, reticent aesthetic provokes these readings in order to critique interpretive certainty. Like the acts of passing it depicts, the text provokes confidence in the plausibility of finding the "real" story beneath the novel's captivating surfaces. My chapter demonstrates that there is no getting beneath the skin, that the novel critiques the very concept of locating the essential identity of a person or a text. The text's formal structure—a series of shifting surfaces—and its provocation of totalizing readings enact the racial passing the novel depicts. *Passing* makes the modernist argument that the only qualities essential to identity are uncertainty and fluidity.

I consider the effect of modernist restraint on the nineteenth-century form of the female *bildungsroman* in Chapter 4, "'She was aware of violence, be sure': Restraint, Violence, and Agency in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*." Bowen's admiration of Jane Austen's restraint and its relation to Austen's awareness of violence, proves illuminating for a reading of Bowen's 1929 novel *The Last September*. Bowen's argument in "What Jane Austen Means to Me" alludes to the gendered violence of the

female *bildungsroman*. Susan Rosowski explicates this violence, arguing that the female *bildungsroman* or novel of awakening depicts its heroine's eventual acceptance of limitations: the nineteenth century female bildungsroman may successfully end with a marriage, but that ending requires its heroine to temper her genius to serve her husband. Modernists like Virginia Woolf and Olive Schreiner respond to the constraints of the genre with violence—Woolf's Rachel Vinrace and Schreiner's Lyndall do not complete their *bildungsromane* but die, doing violence to the genre in the process.

I argue that Bowen's innovation within the modernist female *bildungsroman* is restraint. Lois Farquar, *The Last September*'s protagonist, is aware at the onset of both what is expected of her as a young woman and of her queer desire to avoid being inscribed into that tradition. Moreover, Lois does not die but keeps dropping out of the text in a series of disappearances that critics have largely ignored. These narrative departures are keyed to the political, cultural, and gendered particulars of her complicated historical predicament as a young Anglo-Irish woman at the height of the Irish War for Independence. They formalize both her growing awareness of her impending political dispossession as well as her limited agency, within the shrinking space afforded her, to explore her desires and try out a subtle resistance. My chapter argues that her brief disappearances, as well as her unexpected absence from the novel's final pages, call into question the futurity of the female *bildungsroman* and demonstrate a radical, modernist skepticism of the ability of language and restrictive literary and cultural forms to represent queer modern subjectivities.

Ultimately, the stories and novels under discussion in this dissertation display the potent possibility inherent in experimenting from within rather than without, on the edge rather than over it. Marlow cannot stop considering the difference between these two positions once Kurtz has died, comparing his own hesitancy to Kurtz's unbounded leap:

> "True, [Kurtz] had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. Perhaps" (70).

This is the tension of a restrained aesthetic. Marlow supposes that Kurtz gains "all" imaginable "wisdom" and insight in the moment he takes the "last stride" over the "threshold of the invisible" and into death. He thinks that the final commitment to stepping over the edge is what imbues a human being—or a text—with the most radically illuminating insights. He feels his reticence as a loss. However, his final word on the matter—"Perhaps"—implies the possibility that there may be some wisdom and, if not "truth," insight in stepping back from the precipice. Marlow's view from Kurtz's threshold, and the way that view alters not only the way he tells stories but how he thinks about language and humanity, implies that a great deal of value is bound up with "draw[ing] back" a "hesitating foot." The "threshold of the invisible" implies, moreover, permanent silence. Kurtz cannot return to report on his discoveries. There is no crossing that line and returning, no getting outside of life, but the closer to the edge of the precipice that Marlow and the novel get, the more vertiginous things become. Similarly, the novels and stories of Forster, Larsen, and Bowen do not create the jangling narrative

dissonance caused by a violent assault on the foundations of literary conventions from the outside. Indeed, they demonstrate that getting outside narrative or culture is not possible.

In this they engage in a debate that Malcolm Bradbury argues is quintessentially modernist: "The problem of whether art can redeem life by transcending it is crucial to modernism" (129). Critics have contended that for "high" modernists like Joyce and Proust, narrative form is a tool for "transcending" time itself. Joseph Frank famously argues in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," for example, that Joyce, Proust, and Djuna Barnes create narrative spaces that attempt to vault literature and its readers outside the trauma of modern life, spaces in which "history becomes ahistorical" and time "is no longer felt" (63). Restrained modernists, on the other hand, show that there is no getting outside of time, history, or trauma. Forster, Larsen, and Bowen root their stories in the constraints of the closet, the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and the disorientation of encroaching dispossession, evoking and clarifying these experiences both in the traditional forms they use to structure their fiction and in their commitment to coherency. Restrained innovation begins with acknowledging the limitations queer subjectivities face. As Bowen argues about the value of Austen's restraint, "Strength … comes from the acceptance of place, of time, and also of the certain rules of Society" ("What Jane Austen Means" 229). This is not the strength Woolf describes as the quality modern writers need in order to destroy the very foundations of literary conventions from the outside, hacking at the house of fiction with the axes of formal deconstruction. The strength of the restrained modernists comes not from violent upheaval, but from a stoic, unflinching exploration of limits. These stories and novels may not overwhelm readers with a frightening plunge over the edge of narrative coherency, but instead present a view

from the edge vertiginous enough to turn "tranquil" views into "sombre" and troubled vistas of darkness. Restrained modernism declines to explode a bourgeois drawing room with the force of pyrotechnic "horror," but it does provoke, as Marlow sees from within the Intended's drawing room itself, radical uncertainty in the wisdom of anyone to "know" or be "sure" of anything.

CHAPTER II

"AN AMBIGUITY AT THE HEART": THE INNOVATIVE, "CLOSETED" RESTRAINT OF E.M. FORSTER'S EARLY FICTION

In December of 1927, I.A. Richards would have had available to him an array of obscure, difficult works of fiction to puzzle over and read closely—Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr* (1918), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), among others. And yet, in his 1927 essay "A Passage to Forster," Richards dubs not Lewis, not Joyce, not Woolf (or, for that matter, Pound, Eliot, H.D., or any of a number of experimental poets), but E.M. Forster, the unassuming English author, as "the most puzzling figure in contemporary American letters" (914).[4] This is a claim that requires some defense, as Richards knows: "Mr. E.M. Forster is not a writer whom we should naturally suspect of obscurity … not in … the ordinary page by page texture of his writing. His prose seems, on the contrary, the clearest and simplest possible" (914). Richards expands his discussion, moreover, to underline Forster's quiet, restrained version of modernity as compared to giants like Nietzsche: "[Forster] is no 'holy howl-storm upon the mountains'. He has no thunders, no hoots, no grimaces, nor any of the airs of the denunciating prophet" (916). Unlike Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, quoted in this passage, which famously hurls at readers the claim that "God is dead," Forster's work does not make prophetic pronouncements or deploy thunderous technique. His fiction depicts the lives of the British bourgeoisie in clear prose. Both the content and form of his stories appear restrained and mannerly. It seems odd, then, that Richards

[4] Richards does not provide an explanation for why he would describe Forster, a life-long British citizen, as a figure of American letters. It is possible he means that Forster is the most puzzling figure *available* to American readers, or it could be an error of word choice.

spends seven pages meditating on how to interpret Forster's work. It seems strange that readers would need, as Richards's title suggests, to cross some kind of "passage" in order to understand him.

Richards would not be the last reader to puzzle over Forster's ambiguous fiction. In the same year as Richards' essay, Forster notes in his *Commonplace Book* that both an "ill-bred-and-natured journalist" named Priestley and "friendly and sensitive" Leonard Woolf charge him with "elusiveness" (31). In 1966, David Shusterman argues that "despite the apparent ease on the surface of [Forster's] writings, there is an underlying complexity which has baffled more than one critic. Only a few writers of our times have been met with greater puzzlement" (3). Elizabeth Langland, in 1990, confirms that even approaching Forster is difficult, despite his lack of "stylistic resistance and technical virtuosity" and his excess of "nineteenth-century liberal humanism," which should "set at naught the complexities of literary modernism" (252). More recently, in the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster* (2008), David Bradshaw notes the "ambivalence" and "uncertainty" of Forster's fiction. These readers struggle with a similar decision—where to place Forster in the conversation regarding modernist difficulty and formal innovation and how to contend with or diagnose the strange bewilderment his fiction provokes. Forster's "clear," "simple," and "easy" prose should place him on the traditional end of the spectrum as a Victorian holdover (or, as Forster himself put it, at the "fag end of Victorian liberalism"). On the other hand, something about his fiction refuses to comply with that easy categorization, challenging binaries like new/old, innovative/traditional, and puzzling/clear.

It seems true, thus, that there is something rather queer about Forster and his literary reputation, and Richards is right to suggest that comprehension of Forster and his work lies in understanding his negotiation of the passage around, up to, and across boundaries—boundaries that define the limits and expectations of sexuality, language, and innovation. This chapter argues that Forster's modernism resides in the very ambiguity his restrained, "closeted" aesthetic sustains. His fiction may avoid the "hoots and hollers" and "technical virtuosity" of modernism's prophets and pyrotechnical practitioners, but his stories and novels still contain "stylistic resistance" that formally enacts and subverts the constraints of England's stifling, homophobic bourgeoisie. Forster's restraint recasts, moreover, the closet in which he spends his life, articulating *both* its heavy costs *and* its subversive potential. His earliest stories—"Ansell" and "The Story of a Panic," written in 1903—register the balance of Forster's dialectic between liberation and constraint, rendering his aesthetic and sexual closets not only instruments of subjugation and silence but also, in life as well as fiction, spaces of active agency, experimental expression, and art. The result of this tension is a modernist practice that deconstructs nineteenth-century form and bourgeois constraints from within.

Forster's restraint has not historically been the subject of critical praise. Prominent modernist critics have argued that Forster's moderate approach limits him, holding him back from modernist innovation. In 1924, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf edges Forster closer to modernist territory by sorting him as a "Georgian" instead of an "Edwardian." She also, however, contends that Forster's tendency, in his early fiction, to use the Edwardian "tools of house-building" instead of simply throwing

them away “spoilt [Forster’s] early work” (20). In 1927, Woolf reframes Forster’s hesitancy to abandon traditional forms and techniques as failure: “Hence it is that there is so often an ambiguity at the heart of Mr. Forster’s novels. We feel that something has failed us at the critical moment; and instead of seeing … one single whole we see two separate parts” (“The Novels” 645). She calls these two parts “the prose and poetry of life,” and suggests that Forster suffers a perennial problem of connecting them. He cannot, she says, complete that passage; his “queer and in some ways contradictory assortment of gifts” will not allow him to do so (“The Novels” 646).

In 1991, Michael Levenson echoes Woolf’s sense that Forster somehow falls short: “Forster belongs neither with the stout Edwardians, Wells, Bennet and Galsworthy, nor with the lean modernists, Joyce, Woolf, Ford and Lewis” (78). In this metaphor, Forster seems to have been unable to make the decision to shape up. He has not let himself go entirely in the direction of writing weighty Edwardian books, but neither has he put in the work and the sweat required to strip those books of unnecessary sentences and limiting conventions. Indeed, Levenson describes Forster’s literary legacy in terms of indecision, inability, and perhaps even a strain of weakness: “He shared with [the modernists] the sense of an irrevocable historical transformation that necessarily alters the methods of art, but he could never muster the conviction for a programmatic assault on traditional forms” (78-9). Forster understood, in other words, that big things were happening. He heard, in Virginia Woolf’s words, “the sound of their axes … a vigorous and stimulating sound” (“Mr. Bennett” 22-3). However, Levenson argues, he could not gather the determination necessary to join the fray, or, as Woolf argues, the confidence needed to chuck more traditional novel-making tools in favor of picking up those more

destructive implements of the modernists. Traditional form was, for Forster, too imposing and perhaps sacred an edifice to allow the use of an axe. He might have understood the spirit of literary modernism, but he would not participate in it. Thus, Levenson reinscribes Woolf's hesitant pronouncement of Forster's modernist legacy (and repeats her word choice), by suggesting that Forster "continues to occupy an ambiguous position in the history of modern fiction" (79).

That ambiguity, however, seems in Woolf and Levenson's accounts to stem from more than the puzzlement Richards describes as his response to reading Forster's prose or the apparent differences of form between Forster and "high" modernists like Joyce, Woolf, and Lewis. Woolf, writing at the beginning of modernist studies, and Levenson, writing at the beginning of the *new* modernist studies, both deploy a suggestive lexicon to explain Forster's place as a not-quite modernist. This lexicon conjures figures that nod towards Forster's ambiguous sexual identity to explain his ambiguous literary identity, as becomes more blatant in this section from Woolf's essay "The Novels of E.M. Forster":

> [W]e have the sense that there is some perversity in Mr. Forster's endowment so that his gifts in their variety and number tend to trip each other up. If he were less scrupulous, less just, less sensitively aware of the different aspects of every case, he could, we feel, come down with greater force on one precise point. As it is, the strength of his blow is dissipated. He is like a light sleeper who is always being woken by something in the room. (646)

Woolf implies in this passage that modernism can be identified through evidence of a forceful, precise blow as opposed to the expression of sensitivity, awareness, or perversity. Her analysis calls to mind her description, in "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown,"

of modernism as "the strong" responding to the artificiality of conventions by "destroy[ing] the very foundations and rules of literary society" (21). Forster's blows, in her estimation, lack this kind of strength, having been "dissipated" by his great sensitivity to the multiple perspectives of each instant. He is unable or unwilling to conform to the literary necessity of "coming down" with "force" on the "precise point" of revolutionizing traditional literary forms. Woolf's word choice queers Forster, literally and figuratively. Levenson's lexicon, moreover, implies that Forster's temperament as an author and person prevents him from answering the rallying call of the high modernists. You cannot be part of the avant-garde, these arguments claim, with a dissipated blow.

Woolf's lexicon also implies a connection between Forster's aesthetic and that of the decadents in the late nineteenth century, particularly Oscar Wilde. Though late Victorian reviewers consistently praised Wilde for his genius, they also often marked him for his particular literary bent, although more often than not, their criticisms tended to avoid his writing and focus on his questionable morality and sexuality. Critical contentions of Wilde's queer aesthetic emerged, moreover, well before his ruinous 1895 libel case exposed him to charges of indecency, which resulted in a conviction for sodomy and two years of hard labor in London's Reading Gaol. In 1882, for example, T.W. Higginson challenges Wilde for writing poetry unfit for female readers: "women of high social position receive him at their houses and invite guests to meet him; in spite of the fact that if they were to read aloud to the company his poem of 'Charmides,' not a woman would remain in the room until the end" (51). Higginson's concern for the "public purity" of women is connected, in his account, to his insistence on poetry as a masculine endeavor. In order to make this point, Higginson suggests that Wilde shares

important characteristics with another poet who threatens morality, Walt Whitman: "And their poetry is called 'manly' poetry! … But there is another test of manhood: it lies in action. 'It makes a great difference to a sentence,' said the clear-sighted Emerson, 'whether there be a man behind it or no' Each of these so-called 'manly' poets has had his opportunity of action and waived it'" (51). Higginson assigns a rare consciousness to the written sentence, suggesting that its syntax squirms when it knows the figure standing behind it is no man. Moreover, he insists that the definition of manhood lies in "action," in taking up arms and fighting, and also implies that if readers look carefully in the poetry of Wilde and Whitman, they will see evidence of passivity.

These gendered, queered critiques of Wilde's work continue in 1890 with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in serial form in *Lippincott's*. One unsigned review in the *Daily Chronicle* makes the connection between Wilde's aesthetic and his increasingly decadent reputation clear:

> It is a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*—a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction—a gloating study … which might be horrible and fascinating but for its effeminate frivolity … its flippant philosophisings, and the contaminating trail of garish vulgarity which is over all Mr. Wilde's elaborate Wardour Street aestheticism and obtrusively cheap scholarship" (Beckson 72).

Wilde's literary blow, here, is not only dissipated; it is decaying. His book emits the awful odors of "moral and spiritual putrefaction," a rotting byproduct of the garbage heap that is Wilde's "elaborate" version of aestheticism, located on the very Wardour Street where his characters, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, buy their richly woven brocade

(35). This is not a book, moreover, that can be traced to the upright, uncontaminated literature of England, but to the tainted, "leprous" work of the French. The critic argues that Wilde's decadent aesthetic is a disease of moral decay, detectable in the symptoms of "effeminate frivolity" and the "elaborate" nature of his "aestheticism," as decorated as the rooms of Wilde's houses were reported to be. Indeed, the review transforms the book into the perfumed den of an underworld madam that threatens to overwhelm the reader's moral uprightness.[5]

Forster's fiction, as Woolf and Levenson imply, displays some similar symptoms of infection—a certain "perversity of endowment," gifted, perhaps, from his literary forebears, that spreads in his work a sickly, effeminate "dissipation." His "queer gifts" do not leave a contaminating trail or threaten to infect the work of others who read it, as critics felt Wilde's would, but they do, Woolf and Levenson contend, prevent Forster from choosing to be great; instead, he lounges in his fiction, declining to state his point forcefully, failing to summon the energy and verve to choose "action," in the words of Higginson. This is not to argue that Woolf and Levenson specifically denounce Forster's homosexuality for preventing his genius from fully expressing itself.[6] But their apparent frustration with Forster's ambiguity, his refusal to set down any matter wholly, his deep sensitivity, does suggest that the queerness of Forster's fiction—its puzzling ambiguity

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[5] This anonymous critic attempts to definitively diagnose for readers the disease of Wilde's decadence, ensuring its quarantine from the parlors and bedside tables of gentlefolk. Interestingly, however, the review's sensual, excessive language merely underscores the critic's fascination with the "leprous" novel, piling adjectives, bad smells, and vigorous protestations into a paragraph that adds up not to a puritan's disdain, but an unwilling convert's denial. Moreover, this is the kind of review that can only make any reasonable reader go out and find this leprous book at the first possible chance.

[6] Woolf did, however, record in her diary a distinct discomfort with Forster's sexuality and that of his friends, men she called "Lilies of the Valley" (qtd. in Moffat): "At Duncan [Grant's] show, we met the Bugger boys, Joe [Ackerley], Morgan [Forster], William [Plomer]; & savoured the usual queer scent" (Woolf, *Diaries* 120).

and its sense that “something has failed us at the critical moment”—is connected to a gendered understanding of his queer sexuality, as well as the gendered construction of modernism by writers like Pound as the “vigorous” and “volcanic” work of Joyce, Eliot, and Lewis, as opposed to the “frowsy” work of the “feminine and feminized” (qtd. in Piggford 92).[7] Consciously or not, Woolf and Levenson collapse the categories of sexuality, gender, and aesthetics, until it becomes unclear whether Woolf is talking about Forster’s “queer gifts” as an author, gifts that produce a certain aesthetic, or his life as a closeted gay man. In this formulation, Forster’s queerness, signaled by his frustrating hesitance to act decisively, stymies his efforts at innovation. Woolf and Levenson cast Forster’s restraint as a silencing, limiting force that prevents him from joining in the work of the strong, masculine, active modernists. Their readings imply a gendered understanding of modernism as well as strict binaries—active/passive, forceful/weak, militant/sensitive—that they argue Forster can never find the tools or the determination to cross. They read his ambiguity as evidence of silence, limitation, and constraint.

The figure of the closet is also constructed of boundaries and binaries. The earliest of these in Western imagination is public/private—we put things in closets that we want to keep to ourselves. As the *OED* reports, closets have held private studies, theoretical as opposed to practical knowledge, the private apartments of rulers, curiosities, provisions, private or scandalous troubles that should not see the light of day, secret retreats, and toilet facilities (qtd. in Sedgwick 65). A closet is a place where all kinds of

[7] Piggford extends the argument Sandra Gubar and Susan Gilbert make in “Tradition and the Female Talent” that modernism was shaped, in part, by male anxiety about the growth and quality of female authorship. Piggford argues that artists like Pound and Lewis were similarly anxious about queer influences.

"unpublishable" things belong: private thoughts, untested theories, oddities, dark secrets, and excrement. Hence, when public figures like politicians find themselves embroiled in scandal, their unfortunate situation is figured by talking about skeletons in closets. Politicians, in that figure, stash salacious secrets in private closets—containing affairs, illegitimate children, and financial crimes for instance—that can be locked and ignored until a determined searcher comes upon them and all is brought to light. The truth, usually, will out.

When the closet is used as a figure for homosexual identities and acts, however, the stakes of the binaries change. The concept of the difference between "public" and "private" or "in" and "out" cohere around the concealment or revelation of what becomes the ultimate secret of homosexual sexuality, as Eve Sedgwick argues in *The Epistemology of the Closet*. A heterosexist culture might imagine a closet as a safe and "impermeable space where *it* belongs," a "durable" figure that keeps undesirable desire at bay (Sedgwick 71). Conversely, a homophilic culture might imagine the closet as what Sedgwick calls a "salvational epistemologic certainty" (71). That is, going into a closet naturally entails the possibility of coming out again. This image of "coming out" understandably offers a vision of homosexual empowerment, an act in which homosexual love would dare to speak its name.

The closet has generally been imagined as either a space of silence and lost potential or the precursor to the liberation of coming out. These binaristic constructions of the closet, moreover, parallel the way critics have discussed Forster's literary and political reputation and his connection to literary modernism—readers critique him, like Woolf and Levenson did, for his silence about the oppression of literary and cultural

closetedness, or they cite as innovation only those texts that obviously work to dismantle literary conventions and practice a liberating innovation. These readings create a binary whereby Forster is either silent, passive, and conservative, or vocal, aggressive, and innovative.

In the 70s and 80s, for example, critics argue that Forster's fiction should have explicitly challenged the homosexual closet by depicting gay desire, sex, and relationships instead of resorting to the depiction of heterosexual romance and the completion of genres like the *bildungsroman* with marriage. Though Forster did arrange for the posthumous publication of *Maurice*, his homosexually-themed novel, along with sharing a series of homosexually-themed stories that would eventually be published under the title *The Life to Come*, some critics frown on the length of time it took him to agree to publish the book. Julian Mitchell, reviewing *Maurice* in *The Guardian* in 1971, argues that Forster failed his gay readers by refusing to publish the book while alive: "He was … wrong, I think, not to have published *Maurice* in however doubtful a foreign edition during his lifetime. It could conceivably have helped to get the law changed sooner" (Gardner 439). Andrew Hodges and David Hutter take their critique of Forster's hesitancy much further, calling Forster a hypocrite and a traitor: "Even through the ten years that successive governments failed to implement the meager recommendations of the Wolfenden Report, when public opinion was waiting to be led, he remained silent, preferring to watch the drama dispassionately from the stalls rather than take his proper place on the stage" (22). Hodges and Hutter predict Levenson's argument that Forster failed to muster his conviction to act as a leader, although they argue that Forster's loss of nerve had significant consequences for more than just his literary reputation. They insist

that Forster's literary star could have led the charge for gay rights and paved the way for the recommendations of the Wolfenden Report, which urged, among other things, the decriminalization of "consensual homosexual behavior between adults (i.e. of men over twenty-one)," to be made into law (Weeks 166). Hodges and Hutter argue, as Woolf suggested decades earlier, that Forster was unable to come down forcefully enough on the point. Thus, even after the publication of *Maurice* and *The Life to Come*, which should have comprised Forster's true coming out, Hodges and Hutter claim that Forster "deserves the title of Closet Queen of the Century. The next twenty-five years are unlikely to produce a better candidate" (22). These critics interpret Forster's aesthetic and political restraint through the binaries of the closet, arguing that his silence and failure to represent homosexual relationships in his published fiction signal his complicity in the repressive violence of life in the closet in twentieth-century England.

Hodges and Hutter also, however, elide the stakes for closeted gay men living in England between 1885 (when Forster was six) and 1967 (three years before he died), during the implementation of the Labouchère Amendment. In that period of time, life *was* the closet: "By section 11 … of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, *all* male homosexual acts short of buggery, whether committed in public or private, were made illegal" and subject to penalties of jail terms up to two years with the potential of hard labor (Weeks 14). Had Forster published fiction that explicitly represented and favored homosexual desire, had he been exposed as gay or caught engaging in *any* sexual activity with another man, he would have faced the kind of ruin that destroyed Oscar Wilde in 1895 (when Forster was sixteen). The specter of Oscar Wilde, as Jeffrey Weeks argues, haunted homosexual British subjects: "The Wilde trials … created a public image for the

homosexual, and a terrifying moral tale of the dangers that trailed closely behind deviant behavior" (21). To come out of the closet in the days of the Labouchère Amendment was not to embrace liberation, but to risk blackmail, incarceration, and violence.

While Forster's restraint of his sanctioned sexual identity led some critics to describe him as a failed writer and public figure, his literary successes are attributed to his abandonment of the claustrophobic and limiting constraints of sanctioned literary forms. Randall Stevenson praises Forster's evolution away from his beginnings in the confinement of late Victorian and Edwardian realism and assigns value to Forster's work based on its movement towards obvious modernist experimentation: "A novelist initially so rooted in the manners of English society and its comic fiction … might perhaps be admired for managing to travel as far as he did. That journey, and its conclusion in *A Passage to India*, offer at any rate an exemplary evolution" (221). Stevenson contends that the restrained protocols of English society and its comic fiction could not serve as the setting of modernism. He casts *A Passage to India* as Forster's uprooting of his fiction from the boundedness of English manners—the novel comprises his artistic freedom from constraint.

Nor is Stevenson the only critic to describe Forster's final novel as a long-awaited liberation. Sylvia Lynd (1924) titles her review of *A Passage to India* as "A Great Novel at Last," arguing that it represents a long hoped for "enlargement" of Forster's capabilities as an author (218). J.B. Priestley (1924) figures the novel as having "opened … a window to the outside air," countering the constraint of his previous novels (230). Leonard Woolf contends that the novel represents the pinnacle of Forster's achievement: "The difference between *A Passage to India* and the former novels is that now Mr.

Forster knows exactly how to use the elements of his genius … None of these former books 'came off'" (Gardner 205). This novel, Woolf says, does come off, and he figures that success, like Priestley, as a liberating release that reveals the "power of opening windows upon what is both queer and beautiful" (Gardner 205). By exposing his previously hidden interest in "what is both queer and beautiful," Woolf argues, Forster establishes his abilities as a serious literary artist. These critics deploy the logic and figure of the closet in describing Forster's more obviously experimental novel *A Passage to India* as "enlarged" or "opened" compared to the manners, social satire, and realism of his earlier, more restrained stories and novels. By writing a modernist book, they argue, Forster emerges from his acceptance of formal constraints. That is his evolutionary narrative, a constant progression away from the "silliness" of his early novels, as Leonard Woolf deems them, towards the moment when Forster takes up the real tools of his trade and writes what others are willing to call, unreservedly, a modernist book. This is liberation, opening the space of the novel, and the idea of liberating what is "both queer and beautiful" suggests a connection to the liberating concept of coming out itself.

The logic of the closet, thus, has significantly influenced readings of Forster's literary reputation and his place in the canon of literary modernism, propagating the assumption that Forster's closet was *only* a restrictive, unproductive space and that his innovation as an artist only began when he abandoned some of the formal and thematic conventions that limited his contribution to the literary revolution going on around him. These readings construct binaries—closeted/out, traditional/modernist, and careful/radical—that collapse sexual and aesthetic categories and suggest that most of Forster's story as an artist and a person is one of caution, silence, and failure.

But as Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, silence does not mean absence: “There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say … There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (27). Foucault works in this passage to unearth the constant preoccupation of eighteenth-century educational institutions with sex, despite their prohibition of discussing it. But Foucault’s interest in multiple silences can be extended, I contend, to illuminate how those *not* in power, those *forbidden* to speak by institutionalized discrimination, can deploy silence and restraint as “strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.” Forster’s restrained aesthetic quietly but strategically complicates the binaries of the closet and of modernist definition. He uses the spaces of his earliest stories, and the podium of his 1927 Clark Lectures, to register the constraint *and* liberation of life as a closeted writer in twentieth-century England. His innovation registers in the ways that he deploys restrained form to intimate the struggle and liberating potential of queer desire.

Innovation and restraint are both evident in the public lectures Forster gives on the novel in 1927, three years after the publication of *A Passage to India*. Forster’s alma mater, Cambridge, confirmed his importance as an author by inviting him to deliver a series of Clark Lectures at Trinity College. The annual series began in 1888 with Sir Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf’s father, and asked that the lecturer consider any “aspects of English literature” (“Clark Lectures”). Previous series had been led by men like Walter Raleigh and John Middleton Murray, on topics like Shakespeare and Milton, Chaucer and Spenser, on genres like letters, humor, and poetry, including T.S. Eliot’s 1926 series on “The metaphysical poetry of the 17th century” (“Past Clark Lecturers”). Forster followed

Eliot's rumination on the past with his own witty, earnest musings on the more contemporary topic of the novel, the first Clark Lecture to consider the genre. Here, already, is evidence of Forster's innovation, as he dared to deviate from the "graver and grander streams of criticism" by declaring the importance of this newer, "colloquial" form (*Aspects* "Note"). The lectures (published as *Aspects of the Novel*) suggest passion for the genre tempered with some regret. More importantly, however, they articulate the innovative, "closeted" aesthetic of restraint that shaped Forster's fiction from the beginning.

Forster's lecture entitled "Story" figures a work of fiction as a closet, a space of enclosed desire that takes its form in the tension between two opposing forces: the "life in time" and the "life by values" (49). Humans experience the "life in time" every day, when they notice the ticking of the clock, plan their lives around presumed chronologies, or when they tell or read stories, because "what the story does is to narrate the life in time" (49). A story places the complexities and changes of human life *inside* time's constraints, narrating it not from the perspective of imagination's limitless possibilities, but from the reality of seconds ticking by, of certain years left to live.

This more limited perspective of time and language enacts—and in Forster, is connected to—the limited perspective of what English culture will allow, and it reveals the way language itself acts as a limiting, binding agent. Elizabeth Langland argues, for example, how Forster's fiction recognizes "the way ideologies are encoded in language" and acknowledges the multiple kinds of cultural "privilege" implied by speech (262). Thus Leonard Bast's desire, in *Howards End*, to take up the linguistic style of Ruskin cannot contend with the economic fact of his poverty and socioeconomic fact. Thus Marget

Schlegel, observing Bast's struggles, can observe how all the thoughts of the moneyed classes "are the thoughts of six-hundred-pounders, and all our speeches" (63). Because the architecture of a story and its language arise out of the limits of time and the ideological hierarchies of culture, Forster argues, the world of fiction is always already shaped by constraint. Despite his affection for the genre, he cannot proclaim the freedom of the novel or the novelist; by using language and telling a story, the writer of fiction takes up the tools of, among other things, subjugation, imperialism, and discrimination. Moreover, when we experience this "life in time," we are "in" something—Forster's language creates a sense of spatial enclosure, of being walled in by the places that time, language, and culture will not go, the identities that they will not allow, and the limitations they must enforce. The "life in time" props up and protects the norms that necessitate the figure of the closet and usher queer subjectivities inside it.

As powerful as this constricting force may be, however, its agency is not unlimited. While the "life in time" sets up the four walls of the story and solidifies its enclosure, the "life by values" works against the normative restrictions of time's requirements. It is measured not by chronology but "intensity" and it strains against the scaffolding of time's constraint: "We shall . . . observe already how that other life—the life by value—presses against the novel from all sides, how it is ready to fill and indeed distort it" (66). The progression of narrative and the containment of culture require that a story fit a certain way within a certain space, but it cannot police and suppress all evidence of subversive expression. Once the scaffolding of time is set up, the life by value "presses . . . from all sides," like a hand trying to force open a door. This life is prepared completely—and perhaps inappropriately—to "fill" the entire space of the

novel. This is not life contained "in" something constrictive like time and language, but life expressed "by" an insistence on and expression of the "intensity" of "all dreamers, artists, and lovers" (49). Forster argues that the novel pays a "double allegiance" to time and value, shaped by the relationship between them.

Forster's "double allegiance" creates the conditions for his modernist consideration of language, bourgeois constraint, and desire. As the "life by values" presses into Forster's works it snaps impending marriages by crushing the bodies of unsuspecting characters; it pushes off course the neat conclusions of narratives, causing confusion and even disappointment in final pages; it does not uproot grounding syntax, thus bringing whole stories crashing to the ground in a pool of time and a tossed word salad, but it does, as Forster suggests, "distort" what stories mean to do. It queers, as we might say, the norms that narratives mean to keep straight. It is a rebellious thing, this "life by values," chafing at the "life in time" even as the clock of the story keeps ticking: "[A]ll … artists … are partially delivered from [Father Time's] tyranny; he can kill them, but he cannot secure their attention, and at the very moment of doom … they may be looking the other way" (49). If novelists inevitably build limitations into their fiction by taking up language as their primary tool, then the "life by values" offers a way to playfully and mischievously push back.

Forster's articulation of the dialectic between "time" and "value," moreover, serves as a veil for other parallel dialectics. The "life in time" aligns with the rigid structures of the "manners" and "comic fiction" of nineteenth-century literary form that Stevenson claims Forster struggles to leave behind. It also evokes the claustrophobia and costs of the closet itself. The "life in time" is, for homosexual men living in England in

1927, “life in the closet.” But Forster also insists on the presence and power of the “life by value,” which implies that modernist formal experimentation has a place in his stories. “Value” also intimates the experience of an uncloseted life, ready not only to “press against” the closet door “from all sides,” but also to open it and emerge entirely. These other dialectics, aesthetic and sexual, are silences that “underlie and permeate” Forster’s discourse on the practice of writing fiction. The “tyranny” of time, limiting form, and the closet have some dominion over Forster’s fiction, but the liberating potential of value’s formal innovation as well as the subversion of an uncloseted life also leave their mark.

Forster’s comments on Gertrude Stein offer some acknowledgment of the attraction of a completely unrestrained aesthetic. He describes Stein as the quintessential example of a writer trying to abandon the confining structure of the life in time: “Going much further than Emily Brontë, Stern or Proust, Stein has smashed up and pulverized her clock and scattered its fragments over the world like the limbs of Osiris” (*Aspects* 67). Stein rules, in Forster’s formulation, over the structure of her life and her texts, consciously challenging time in her pursuit of a “continuous present” and scattering fragments of language in an order *she* chooses (“Composition”). This is going far, indeed: Forster figures the “life in time” as a body that Stein dismembers, flinging its bloody limbs to the far corners of her fiction like Osiris’s murderous brother, Seth. Furthermore, Forster’s figure of Stein as Seth does not make her a monster. He admires her precisely because she pulverizes her clock and with it the “life in time” of her aesthetic closet. Forster figures Stein as a kind of freedom fighter, calling her creative destruction “noble”: “she has hoped to emancipate fiction from the tyranny of time and to express it in the life by values only” (28).

But there is also a cost to Stein's destructive, overt liberation. Forster declines to complete Osiris's story, but its conclusion does not leave much hope for Stein: Seth famously cannot keep the limbs of Osiris at bay. They reassemble, allowing Osiris to have a child, and after his death, his supplicants still meet to worship representations of those limbs. The body has frustrating limits; for Forster, denying them does not allow for infinite expansion of ability, but rather disembodied fragments. Forster's admiration for the nobility of Stein's project cannot overcome what he sees as its inevitable failure: "She fails, because as soon as fiction is completely delivered from time it cannot express anything at all" (28). The body of the text must stay connected for the blood to flow and the muscles to flex. For value to exist, it must be restrained by time. Absent the limits of time and language, the limbs that allow a body greater agency, fiction loses its power to connect: "She cannot [abolish time] without abolishing the sequence between the sentences. But this is not effective unless the order of the words in the sentences is also abolished, which in its turn entails the abolition of the order of the letters or sounds in the words. And now she is over the precipice" (28). This is a leap Forster is not willing to make, though as he says, his "heart goes out to her" (29). He chooses the whole body. He chooses the connection that can come through the ordered construction and limitations of language. He chooses the limits and restraint of the story because abandoning that kind of sequence, as restricting as it may be, could actually halt expression altogether. Stopping the pulse of the life in time means, for Forster, that the story simply dies. His admiration of Stein's courage cannot alter his melancholic resignation to one of the requirements of fiction: "Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story" (45).

That resigned tone intimates the toll paid by the queer writer working within the closet at the beginning of the twentieth century. One could read Forster's resignation as an example of what Levenson calls Forster's failure to summon the will to revolt, or what Woolf refers to as his inability to come down forcefully enough on the point. But did his life in the closet, writing with his restrained aesthetic, really prevent him from innovation? Did his compromised life by value yield no provoking, eloquent, and radical statements? Did his belief that there is no going outside the system of life and death—that art does not have the power to conquer mortality or save the world from the horrible calamities that humans seem bent on creating—make him, as Woolf, Levenson, and others have argued, a perverse artist, who failed to come up to muster?

Only if readers approach Forster according to the binary logic of the closet. Forster's essays and fiction articulate his aesthetic and personal closets as sites more complicated than the expression of either silence or liberation. There is a space between that he argues has value and power to disrupt cultural and narrative constraints. He does not follow Stein over the precipice, but the view he commands from the edge still celebrates the potential of queer desire and queer modernism, even as it registers the cost of its own restraint. Forster's thematic and formal concerns differ from those of Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Lewis, and Hemingway. He did not set out to explode the printed page with incendiary prose pyrotechnics. He did not attempt to fully liberate his stories from the tyranny of time. He knows, from his position at modernism's edge, that such liberation is not possible. There is no way outside of time, but stories can still, through the power of queer value, cause mischief from within. By focusing on the dialectic of

Forster's first stories, readers can follow his own "closeted" version of modernism—restrained and innovative, traditional and new, in time and of value.

Closets thematic and formal loom large in both "The Story of a Panic" and "Ansell," his first two stories written around 1903. In "The Story of a Panic," a strange force interrupts a group of British travelers picnicking in the Italian valley of Ravello and transforms a young man named Eustace from a sullen teen into a devotee of nature and touch. Of course, the proper, bourgeois British travelers do not rejoice at Eustace's newfound energy and especially not at his newfound interest in Gennaro, the Italian servant boy. Instead, they lock him in his room—the only room in the pension with bars on the windows. In "Ansell," a young, Forsterian Cambridge undergraduate named Edward, like his creator, lugs a "cruel box" of books to his cousin's estate, his "stooping shoulders" (and spirit) bowing under the weight of a dissertation he must write, and a place in society he must win. This is a box "bound with iron at the corners" (5). All action in the story circles this "cruel box," which contains a potential future that disfigures the body that would inhabit it. Both stories require that their characters distort their desires and bodies in order to fit the requirements of bourgeois culture: English travelers do not cavort with Italian servants; English undergraduates finish the dissertations that will put them safely in jobs, regardless of the physical vitality those jobs may sap from them. However, both stories are also disfigured by the consequences of their restraint—a kind of internal violence of "value" acting on its own behalf, a rebellious and modernist effort to queer the story's frame.

Forster grants “The Story of a Panic” a stalwart representative of the life in time in the person of its narrator, Mr. Tytlar, who begins his tale by announcing to the reader his commitment to sequence and order: “I confess at once that I am a plain, simple man, with no pretensions to literary style. Still, I do flatter myself that I can tell a story without exaggerating, and I have therefore decided to give an unbiassed [sic] account of the extraordinary events of eight years ago” (1). Mr. Tytlar’s account of himself suggests the value he places in relating the lockstep of events. Stories are meant to be told without exaggeration, in the order they occur, without bias. Of course, Mr. Tytlar brings to his tale his own bias, hence his horror at the unknown interrupting the proper English picnic, and his belief that telling a story without exaggeration is a flattering characteristic. Mr. Tytlar’s insistence also creates the expectation in readers that what follows will be anything but experimental.

Having set up the constraints of his story with the limited viewpoint of his narrator, Forster surveys the characters that Mr. Tytlar’s narration does not want to allow: “Mr. Leyland, a would-be artist,” and Eustace, who first earns Mr. Tytlar’s distaste by refusing to take a walk, and then his disgust for admitting to being afraid of swimming (2-3). Moreover, Tytlar’s narrative works concertedly to contain the voices and bodies of any racial outsiders, as he makes clear when speaking to Gennaro: “‘And remember that, though Signor Eustace is sometimes silly and foolish … yet you must always behave respectfully to him; for he is a young English gentleman, and you are a poor Italian fisher-boy’” (25). Here Tytlar polices the borders between the young bodies of English boys and Italian sons of fishermen, enforcing rigid racial, class, and national boundaries. Though Eustace’s odd behavior does not qualify him for Tytlar’s respect, the fact of his

Englishness demands that Tytler protect his place in the "natural" order of things. Tytler's story contains rules and hierarchies that he expects to be followed, and he uses language to uphold those rules: "'it is no good speaking delicately to persons of that class. Unless you put things plainly, they take a vicious pleasure in misunderstanding you'" (25). Or rather, Tytlar takes a vicious pleasure in using "indelicate" language to put people like Gennaro firmly in their place. Characters like these do not press against the sides of Mr. Tytlar's narrative; they certainly do not distort them, or at least, that is what Tytlar wants to believe.

Forster could have given control of the narrative to Eustace, or even more radically, to Gennaro. Gennaro could have spoken back to Mr. Tytlar's imperially sanctioned power, in multiple languages. Instead, readers hear Mr. Tytlar's smug satisfaction at his own respectability, his horrified incomprehension at what happens to Eustace, and his determination to contain it. Instead, Forster shows the value of restraint, a more radical version than the kind Tytlar values. Mr. Tytlar's domination of Forster's tale not only interrogates the queer position of Forster's characters—and by extension, his own; it also illuminates the folly of the pedantic, prejudiced narrator in assuming that desire and chaos can be controlled by the character and language of Englishness. Mr. Tytlar efficiently creates his own unintended critique of the bourgeoisie, articulating its narrowness and its commitment to the rules of the life in time. Tytlar must tell the story, so that readers will recognize the walls, so they will appreciate just how strong are the bars of nation, class, and gender that hold Eustace in place.

Mr. Tytlar's narration also allows the potency and threat of Eustace's desire to register fully in the text. In the story's final act, Forster literally busts Eustace and

Gennaro out of Eustace's iron-barred room. Thematically, the closet door is opened. Formally, Forster's "life by value" starts pushing at the edges of the narrative of the pedantic, prejudiced Mr. Tytlar, queering it to allow moments of confusion, transformation, and fantasy:

> I reached the terrace just in time to see Eustace jumping over the parapet of the garden wall. This time I knew for certain he would be killed. But he alighted in an olive tree, looking like a great white moth, and from the tree he slid on to the earth. And as soon as his bare feet touched the clods of earth he uttered a strange loud cry, such as I should not have thought the human voice could have produced, and disappeared among the trees below. (41)

Eustace's escape from his small room—out of his particular box, and into the possibilities of an Italian night—allows him, it seems to even Mr. Tytlar, fantastic, superhuman abilities. It pushes at what Mr. Tytlar's narrative wants to allow. Eustace survives a jump that would kill others. He "alights" in an olive tree like some kind of insect. He metamorphizes to resemble a giant moth. He howls with an inhuman voice. Eustace ceases to be bound, at least for the moment, by the rules for people in English society. The life by value pushes back against the narrator, against narrative. The text frees Eustace from the constraints of civility, the normative text, even the human body. Gennaro celebrates his and the text's liberation: "Now, instead of dying he will live!" (41).

One could imagine Gennaro shouting the same thing at the climax of "Ansell." The titular character, a rugged gameskeeper and former boyhood playmate of the rickety

Edward, the narrator, ferries Edward and his "cruel" box to the estate.[8] As with "The Story of a Panic," Forster grants narration to a representative of cultural restraint—this time, in the form of Edward's anxious capitulation to the requirement that he make his life within the space of the box that weighs him down. Edward tries to explain the rewards of his life to Ansell, but they ring hollow and emphasize the narrowness of his vision:

> I then explained … how I was engaged in writing about the grammar that was spoken by the Greeks in ancient times, and how, if what I had written was considered better than … rival dissertations … I should receive eighty pounds a year and rooms in college and a free meal every evening, and be allowed to impart my knowledge to others …
>
> [T]here was another long pause. At last he raised his head and said: "Well, of course I hope you'll succeed."
>
> "Thanks very much." (4-5).

The silence that follows Edward's description of the rewards awaiting him suggests their meager recompense for the toll of having to cart a "cruel box" everywhere he goes. Edward makes a small pension, room, free meal, and the opportunity to recite the contents of his box sound like a life fit for the confines of such a small, "cruel" space, a space that requires sloped shoulders, curved back, and contracted chest. Nor can Edward ignore the cost to his body when sitting next to Ansell, whose "chest measurement" Edward cannot help but note. Ansell's body expands with health and desire. Edward's must contract to fit the confines of the life he has chosen.

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[8] And namesake of the garden boy Forster played with as a young child, who arguably reappears later in *Maurice* as George and later as Alec.

Again, Forster's choice of a repressed, limited narrator emphasizes the initial threat of the life by value when it strikes. At a critical moment on a precipice high above a river, a horse "dances," a fence gives way, and the box of books goes over the precipice—interestingly, just where Forster will later claim in his Clark lectures he is not willing to go. Meanwhile, Edward stands on hand to witness what happens when the narrative of upper class culture falls away. As it falls, the box transforms into a series of liberating and liberated figures: "About halfway down it hit a projecting rock, opened like a water-lily, and rained its sweetness upon the deep. Most of the books … plunged like meteors through the trees into the river. One or two … roosted coyly for a minute on the branches before they too … disappeared" (6). Instead of rigidly outlining Edward's joyless future, the books, once the box is destroyed, become blossoming water-lilies, blazing meteors, and flirtatious, suggestive hens. The pension's barred windows and doors no longer hold back the bodies they were meant to contain. The "cruel box" is smashed. The closet door is open.

Within the spaces opened by the life by value, Forster can challenge the power of the spoken and written language that men like Tytlar employ to police their national, racial, and class privilege. His characters, queered by their brush with value, communicate instead by touch and play. In "Ansell," for example, most of Edward's books transform into meteors that sketch an arc through the trees and into the river. "One or two," however, wait a minute before taking their plunge, "roosting coyly … on the branches." Part of the "sweetness" this box of books rains down on "the deep" and on readers is playfulness, as the one or two books seem to flirt with disobeying gravity itself.

The power the books have, in this moment, is not in the words written on the page, but in playful movement that communicates something to Edward. That movement is physical—readers can imagine the book's roost, as the pages rustle slightly in their tree, wiggling a binding suggestively at Edward, the onlooker. These books that had contained everything he dreaded and slogged through now insert a light flirtation in the tale, but only when their contents are neglected in favor of their physical, material form. We might call this a bodily language.

These moments of bodily language allow Forster's characters and their stories a chance to move away from societal and literary constraints. In *Aspects of the Novel,* Forster details his literary plan for challenging the life by time, a plan centered around proximity and touch: "[W]e cannot consider fiction by periods, we must not contemplate the stream of time" (28). Forster will not separate authors into the neatly constructed boxes of periodization. Instead, he gathers them all into one room, allowing them to lounge together in the British Museum, nameless and timeless at first, their works mingling as anonymous pieces of fiction. Imagining various authors together at once, outside of restricting chronological classifications, Forster allows readers to shrug off the "demon of chronology," forcing the authors also "from the limitations of date and place" (42). Significantly, Forster's literary salon also attempts to free writers and readers from other limitations, like gender, age, and class: "[The authors] come from different ages and ranks, they have different temperaments and aims, but they all hold pens in their hands, and are in the process of creation" (29). Forster theorizes a sanctuary, a retreat for authors from questions of money, status, and seniority. These writers gain influence not through birthrights or fortunes, but through the spark of connection thrown off as their

work anonymously touches that of another: Forster delights at the possibilities that could come from pairing Virginia Woolf with Laurence Sterne, H.G. Wells with Charles Dickens, and Samuel Richardson with Henry James (29-37). Touching on Forster's page from across time and space, these authors illustrate his ardent belief in the importance of reading and writing as activities that avoid the judgments of "[p]rinciples and systems," but instead rely on the "final test" of "affection" (42). For Forster, readers and authors have to meet each other somewhere outside of time as people, where what matters are the very physical sensations of writing: "it is the feel of the pen between their fingers that matters most" (38).

Forster also uses a bodily language within the constraints of his own fiction—however briefly—in order to create spaces outside the judgments of "[p]rinciples and systems," modernist spaces beyond the language of time and control. The bodily language Forster's stories explore makes written and spoken language strange, and, by extension, casts doubt on the reliability of men like Tytlar, whose power stems at least partly from their mastery of the imperial language of the British. Eustace's transformation in "The Story of a Panic," for example, negates Tytlar's language as a viable method of connection. Before the "cat's paw of wind" chases all but Eustace off the ridge where the British travelers picnic, a deep silence descends (10). Moreover, as the wind races towards them, something unenclosable by a box of any kind, even Mr. Tytlar's proper English language breaks down: "It is not possible to describe coherently what happened next" (10). Confronted by an unknowable, inexplicable force, Tyler struggles with language much like Conrad's famously bewildered narrator, Marlow, trying to describe his journey towards Kurtz: "It seems to me I am trying to tell you a

dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation … can convey … that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment … that notion of being captured by the incredible" (Conrad 27). This is what Tytlar fears most, and as the "bewilderment" of the "incredible" approaches, his language deserts him. The British picnicking party feels a deep, instinctual fear; they run without knowing where or why. They cast off the illusion of propriety: "I had been afraid, not as a man, but as a beast" (11). The borders between humans and animals, policed by that stream of regulatory language that flows from our mouths, collapse. After Mr. Tytlar reveals his animalistic fear, even the text falls silent, pausing before he can gather words to begin the next section of the story, before he can find a way to describe what happens next. This negation of language creates in the unprepared English travelers, and especially in Mr. Tytlar, a true, wild, Pan-ic—turning civilized English folk into terrified beasts.

The scene of Panic displays Forster's modernist skepticism in the ability of language to describe inexplicable encounters with queer, destabilizing forces like that which descends on the bourgeois travelers. When Mr. Tytlar's language does return, moreover, he finds it just as difficult to continue his story: "I cannot describe our finish any better than our start" (12). These events fall outside of what his language can comprehend or describe. Nor is the British party helped, as they limp back to the scene, by Eustace, for he feels no need to use words to describe what he has experienced. Instead, his body tells the story, his hand "convulsively entwined in the long grass" (16). When the party discovers the tracks of a goat, Eustace responds not with a cry but with a physical act: "when he saw the footmarks he lay down and rolled on them, as a dog rolls

in dirt" (16).[9] Much of his jubilation stems from his freedom to express himself physically: "He stepped out manfully, for the first time in his life, holding his head up and taking deep draughts of air into his chest" (18). He doesn't share in any conversation, but races about, "like a real boy" (19). When the party reaches their hotel, Eustace leaps into Gennaro's arms, and though the text provides no dialogue between them, something has been conveyed: "'Ho capito,' I heard [Gennaro] say as he passed me. 'Ho capito' is the Italian for 'I have understood'; but, as Eustace had not spoken to him, I could not see the force of the remark" (23). Mr. Tytlar, a product of English constraints, both social and linguistic, cannot comprehend the possibility of a thought communicated without being constrained by the limits of language. Finally, when Mr. Tytlar scolds Gennaro for referring to Eustace (his social "better") with the informal Italian "Tu," Gennaro reveals the extent to which the significance of language as a convention has been eroded by the events of the day: "Gennaro only sighed, and said: 'It is true.' 'Quite so,' I said, and turned to go. To my indignation I heard him add: 'But sometimes it is not important'" (25-6). Outside of the constraints of language, connection no longer depends on selecting the appropriate words, or, in Forster's world, placing authors in their appropriate periodized boxes. Genuine connection happens between bodies, through the subversive power of touch.

That subversion also inverts the gendered language Woolf uses to characterize Forster's "queer gifts." Having encountered Pan's strange, non-normative force and by all accounts been given "queer gifts" of his own as a result, Eustace should, by Woolf's contention, display signs of dissipation or weakness. Instead, he finds, for the first time,

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[9] See Hai for more discussion about touch in "The Story of a Panic."

an ownership of his body, stepping "manfully" and holding himself erect, "like a real boy." Even Mr. Tytlar acknowledges these changes. Eustace does not hesitate, moreover, to jump into Gennaro's arms, and the physical communication between them comes to a precise point—Gennaro understands without Eustace having to say a word. Mr. Tytlar cannot see the "force of the remark," but it is there nonetheless. The scene critiques gendered constructions of modernist experimentation and implies that strength and innovation comes not only from the "high" modernist concerns with alienated, fragmented language, but with the potential of abandoning written language altogether in favor of an experimental expression of the body.

Similarly, in "Ansell," the titular character introduces the loudest, clearest speech into the story with his body. Weedy Edward encounters Ansell after long separation, but rather than lengthy speeches, Ansell says a complicated hello with a simple physical act: "I . . . held out my hand, which he grasped in a vice and swung from side to side like a scythe. That long handshake is a wonderful thing; it may merely mean shyness, but it can also denote reproach, forgiveness or intense affection. In this case I took it as punishment for snobbishness" (1). In this handshake, Ansell can communicate something more genuine than any hesitant hello or awkward conversation meant tentatively to reestablish a friendship long dormant. He can communicate punishment, yes, but a punishment tempered by playful affection and even desire. Moreover, the text implies that Ansell may have broken the "cruel box" of Edward's books deliberately, perhaps to destroy Edward's cerebral future in order to preserve and even enjoy the future of his body: "[Ansell] too was thinking, as the sequel proved" (3). In this "sequel," Edward's life as an intellectual spills into the river, the potent and sacrosanct language blurred and

finally spilling outside the confines of the page. Ansell's physical act—a condemnation of "Them books!" as well as an attempt to save his friend from an anorexic life of the mind—proves far louder and more truly expressive than any of Edward's lengthy, pedantic ruminations on the "Greek optative" (4).

The liberatory potential of Eustace's metamorphic flight and the smashing of Edward's "cruel box" represent the equally liberatory potential of Forster's early aesthetic experiments within the closet. His characters experience a taste of freedom, strange and frightening though it may be for them and the narrators who attempt to describe it. The stories imply, moreover, that these rewards come from acknowledging and embracing queerness. Eustace can only take flight once he is allowed to explore freely the queer consciousness he has been given. Edward's freedom is connected to the communication of his handshake with Ansell and its shattering "sequel." In that vein, these first stories are far more "out" than the novels Forster would go on to write in the next decade, which center more resolutely around the journey young people take towards marriage. Forster's early stories explore queer fantasies of liberation and fulfillment that threaten the polite, mannered narration of the British bourgeoisie and delay the language of patriarchy and subjugation in favor of the body.

And yet, despite the celebration of queer potential evident in "The Story of a Panic" and "Ansell," these early stories—like his Clark Lectures over two decades later—still register the costs of queer liberation in a culture and narrative that are closeted. It is this element of Forster's restrained aesthetic that critics have overlooked in

their reading of "The Story of a Panic" in particular.[10] Critics argue that Forster's early stories provide "escape hatches" for their characters to flee the harmful constraints that bind them. Some argue that these narrative loopholes are evidence of Forster's literary experimentation. Robert K. Martin and George Piggford (1997), for example, contend that "Eustace disappears from [the bourgeois] world forever," but argue that his liberation confirms Forster's interest in "fictions that repeatedly seek to run amok," enacting his desire to challenge boundaries and borders (4-5). Like Martin and Piggford, Ambreen Hai (2008) claims that Forster emancipates Eustace from "the constraints of Englishness" in order to enact "the unspeakable body disrupting an oppressive and dominant social system": "Eustace escapes into the unknown outdoors for good" (234).

Other critics insist that by allowing his characters avenues to escape in his early stories, Forster limits his own innovative potential. In *The Cave and the Mountain* (1966), Wilfred Stone reads "The Story of a Panic," like Forster's other early stories, as an "awkward, self-conscious, and amateurish" fantasy that offers its characters a false "antidote" to containment: "The story ends with Eustace, shouting and laughing, running from his prison into the far distance of an endless landscape … He confronts nothing and escapes from everything" (136). Though he declines to describe Forster's early stories as "amateurish," David Medalie (2002) agrees with Stone that Forster's embrace of "escape hatches" in his early fiction comprises less an innovative confrontation with modernity than a deployment of "romantic realism," a "fictional mode which … communicates a 'reversal of the lines of causality, the presence of an escape hatch through which the

[10] I focus on critical discussion of "The Story of a Panic" because although "Ansell" was written at about the same time, it did not appear in print until 1972, when King's College, Cambridge arranged to posthumously publish *The Life to Come*. In fact, there are very few accounts of "Ansell" in Forster's critical reception.

fictional being may in some way evade the apparently ineluctable limitations of his existence'" (66). Medalie contrasts the writers of "romantic realism" with those of modernism by highlighting the former's tendency to create "loopholes": "[Romantic realists] confer possibility: they are liberating rather than restrictive … [T]he modernist writer must contend with restriction as well as possibility" (67). Medalie argues that Forster's affinity with liberal humanism and realism in his early fiction allows him to write witty but conservative stories and novels that "propose possibilities of transformation or escape from unenviable circumstances" (67). It is only when Forster abandons the positivity of liberal humanism with *Howards End* in 1910 and *A Passage to India* fourteen years later, Medalie insists, that he explores the awareness of "restriction" inherent to a modernist perspective.

But these readings elide Forster's insistence that there is a price to be paid for even the small amount of liberation allowed within his restrained aesthetic. Forster intimates this price in his Clark Lectures when he argues that readers who confirm the necessity of time in a story should do so not "vaguely and good-temperedly like a busman," for they "have not the right" (68). Nor, he insists, should they discuss time's limitations "briskly and aggressively like a golfer," for they "know better" (68). Instead, Forster argues, readers should acknowledge the constraints of a story in time and the closet "a little sadly," for committing to these constraints, despite the power of value working to distort and critique them, means that liberation cannot last forever (68). There is no "escape hatch" from the closet in Forster's day or from the power and reach of time in any day. The fantasy of Eustace's metamorphosis and flight as well as the blossoming figures of Edward's busted box exact a toll on the stories and, Forster's lecture implies,

their creator. Even in his early stories, Forster is well aware of and contends with restrictions. That he challenges them with joyous, transformative fantasy cannot elide the disruptive melancholy that interrupts and recasts "escape" as temporary and costly. The question of Forster's modernism, then, particularly in his early stories, comes down to recognizing the way those stories represent the price of fantasy. Though his early fictions may engage with liberatory possibility, they never ignore the inevitability of restriction's return. The language of the body may open new lines of communication, but the language of the Mr. Tytlars will be reintroduced, bringing with it a representation of the closet taking hold again.

Forster formalizes the closet's resumption of control through sudden, inexplicable violence and death, ambiguous or anti-climactic conclusions that detract from the power of value's fantasy, and a melancholic tone that belies any reading of permanent escape. Eustace does not flee forever into the woods in "The Story of a Panic," but eventually rejoins society to take up his "career" as (what else?) a writer of stories, a builder of boxes (1). Moreover, Eustace's "shouts and laughter" are not the only noises that disturb the story's final pages. Gennaro dies a sudden, unexplained death that disrupts and overtakes Mr. Tytlar's narration of Eustace's temporary liberation. The story itself mourns the fallen boy:

> The morning was still far off, but the morning breeze had begun, and more rose leaves fell on us as we carried him in. Signore Scafetti burst into screams at the sight of the dead body, and, far down the valley towards the sea, there still resounded the shouts and the laughter of the escaping boy. (42)

Upon close reading, this scene resembles a funeral. Moreover, this is a funeral given by nature, for Gennaro has no sympathizers among the British men carrying his body and scoffing at his death: "But those miserable Italians have no stamina. Something had gone wrong inside him, and he was dead" (42). Nature mourns Gennaro, even on the level of the word, for immediately after his death, the word "morning" occurs twice, though the night is still young: "The morning was still far off, but the morning breeze had begun." Nature insists on inaugurating its own *mourning*, going so far as to break through the cycle of day and night. Trees add their own mourning in the form of falling leaves. It is only through the screams (in horror or grief) of Signora Scafetti that the shouts of Eustace are heard, their joyfulness and exuberance tempered by loss. Something had gone wrong inside Gennaro and inside the story, which registers the cost that must be paid for Eustace's temporary flight: Gennaro's death. The Italian boy, his queerness evident in his physicality with Eustace and his disobedience to the rules of race, class, and nation in refusing to address the English boy as his superior, must die in order to allow Eustace to experience momentary freedom. The story enacts the steep cost of challenging boundaries with the mournful strangeness of Gennaro's funeral. Eustace does not escape forever and when he returns to the group, he returns to mourn his loss. But the story also insists on the disruptive power of desiring to get outside of conventions and the value of the attempt.

"Ansell" reaches similar conclusions, although with greater ambiguity. Edward stands at the edge of the "precipice," watching as the cruel, iron-bound life he meant to lead explodes into fiery figures. He does not leap wholeheartedly after it, however. He does not describe his life with Ansell as a joyful celebration of freedom, but instead as a

new kind of restraint that, in defying the progress of the academic future he has lost, keeps him in a strange, threatened state of arrest: "Ansell has appropriated me, and I have no time to think of the future. I cannot fend him off" (8). Edward hunts, rides, and laughs with Ansell, but without any real joy: "And we talk—goodness knows what of: I cannot remember afterwards, but I know that an allusion to the box of books is a recognized witticism" (8). Forster has destroyed the "cruel box," but in the process has also disrupted the story's progress and with it, his main character's grasp on time and language. Nor does the text portray this disruption as entirely pleasant—Edward would like to write about what he experiences, but he finds he is "forgetting the words" to do so (9). Ultimately, the text implies that even his tacit compliance with Ansell's life will not last: "Whenever we pass the place Ansell looks over and says 'Them books!' and laughs, and I laugh too as heartily as he, for I have not yet realized what has happened" (9). Eventually, Edward will realize that his academic life is over. He will understand the cost of the violent wreckage of his box. He might also realize that Ansell has initiated him into an "unrespectable," "unspeakable" life, making him into, as Maurice laments in Forster's homosexual novel of the same name, "an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort" (159). Edward—unlike Maurice, who chooses to escape with his own rugged gameskeeper lover, Scudder—stands at the edge of the precipice, taking in the consequences of liberation, and eventually steps back again.

The puzzling violence of Gennaro's death and the implicit mourning and ambiguity that fill the rest of "The Story of a Panic" and "Ansell" can easily lead to the kind of reader response that prompts Richards to speculate on Forster's difficulty and the passages readers tread in reading his work: "Turning over the leaves of a Public Library

copy of *Where Angels Fear to* Tread I find, neatly scribbled on the margin of the seventeenth page, '*What is it all about?*'" (914). Forster could have chosen to destroy rather than critique the principles and systems that contained him. He could have attempted, as Levenson argues, an all-out assault on literary conventions. He could have left his mother's house and lived as an openly gay man in Berlin, allowing value to fully flower in his stories without granting any space to time. If he had to choose between that and a closet, why not take the leap and to hell with worrying about a precipice? What is this restraint all about?

This chapter has argued that tracking the dialectic in Forster's fiction between restraint and liberation, the very dialectic of the closet, reveals Forster's commitment to challenging the stifling constraints of the period in content *and* form. Forster's modernism demonstrates his awareness of the creative potential of restraint, his commitment to that potential, and his acknowledgment that it does not come without its costs. There is an honesty to his innovation, an acknowledgement of the reality of constraints that does not contradict or prevent the queer, fantastical subversion he allows to erupt from within. Forster's stories make readers puzzle over sudden, inexplicable deaths. They confront readers with figures of enclosed desire and enact the transformative possibility of those enclosures being threatened or smashed. Forster's fiction, from the beginning, insists that there is artistic merit to the dialectic between the "life in time" and the "life by value," innovation to be found in embodying the struggle of the closet by exploring the relationship between its constraints and its potential to liberate. Forster's motto was not "make it new," but "only connect," a motto confirmed in

the bodily language his stories speak as they move and struggle within limitations. His restrained aesthetic insists on depicting the impossibility of getting outside the "life in time," aesthetically or personally. Forster's dialectic between constraint and freedom, moreover, aligns him with a similar dialect that Malcolm Bradbury identifies as quintessentially modernist: "Forster's view is, like that of most modernism, dualistic: art may reach beyond the world of men and things—the world of 'story'—but it can never leave that world behind, and must seek meanings and connections in it" (Bradbury 129). Or, in Forster's slightly more playful phrasing, 'Escape from life' – what slip slop! Who first used the phrase?" (*Commonplace* 103). For Forster, there is no getting outside of story or time. The lives we lead accrue meaning precisely because there are things we cannot do. Forster's version of modernism means having the courage to face and record the strangeness, loss, and possibility of moving right up to the closet door, and then stepping back again.

The questions and frustrations many readers experience in the spaces of Forster's stories make sense. It can be hard to see the value of remaining fettered. However, bringing *only* those questions to a reading of Forster's texts suggests, erroneously, that his stories—and his life—fell victim to the heterosexist cultural and literary standards of his time. On the contrary: his stories depict serious desires, alive and erupting through the placid surfaces of his texts. They do not leap over the precipice and fully embrace the pyrotechnics of "high" modernist experimentation, nor do they give full representation to same-sex desire. But their restraint on the edge of that plunge demonstrates Forster's significant, modernist skepticism in the ability of language to represent the potency of queer desire and his conviction that time may inevitably limit value's mischief but cannot

erase its effects—both metamorphic and melancholy. Forster uses restraint to construct a scathing critique of the cruelty and stunted imagination of the bourgeoisie *from within*.

If readers approach Forster's work only by tallying up everything they *don't* find there, everything the texts *don't* do, then they risk mistakenly characterizing his long, rich career as one of disavowal, fear, and silence. Forster was not silent. He kept writing, kept exploring the interiors of his closeted aesthetic, his closeted culture. Rather than applying a binary logic to Forster's texts and career—dismissing him for not throwing off the limitations of traditional forms and methods or singling out for praise and interest only those texts that embrace modernism as the purview of liberation and excess—readers can start again and observe the powerful forces at work in Forster's restrained, aesthetic. Forster's fiction reveals that modernism's commitment to formal experimentation is alive and well at the edge of the precipice. The "life in time" may continue its forward march, aiming to place the story of a character and an author into orderly boxes, but the "life by value" keeps interrupting that story, revealing how life and literature cannot be made to fit into convenient boxes without signs—confusing, tender, or violent—that there's more to the story than we think.

CHAPTER III

"A THING THAT COULDN'T BE REGISTERED": THE MODERNIST RESTRAINT OF NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*

In 1925, Nella Larsen wrote a letter to Carl Van Vechten praising his novel, *Firecrackers*. In that letter, she articulates a theory of fiction based on restraint:

> What things there are to write, if one can only write them. Boiler menders, society ladies, children, acrobats, governesses, business men, countesses, flappers. Nile green bath rooms, beautifully filed, gay moods and shivering hesitations, all presented in an intensely restrained and civilized manner, and underneath the ironic survival of a much more primitive mood. Delicious. ("To Carl" 158).

Larsen describes a narrative practice that ranges the whole of the class spectrum, from "boiler menders" to "countesses," including beautiful, racialized objects that stand in for class privilege ("Nile" green bath rooms), and the expansiveness of psychological moods. More importantly, however, Larsen's "intensely restrained" aesthetic takes legible objects, characters, and emotions and presents them all in a "civilized manner," allowing something "more primitive" and less clearly identified to flourish underneath. Larsen implies the effort and strategy that goes into the creation of restrained and mannerly surfaces, but even more apparent from the density of this passage is the difficulty of reading these surfaces well. Larsen's letter outlines a restrained aesthetic that resists the efforts of readers to pierce its carefully arranged presentation and grasp or even identify the "primitive mood" lurking underneath. Surely the eye would be more naturally and easily drawn to the allure of the surface. Her description suggests, moreover, the tensions her aesthetic provokes between "civilized" and "primitive," bourgeois and debauched,

surface and depth, as well as the innovative nature of her insistence on preserving, rather than resolving, those tensions.

Larsen's aesthetic emerges in the context of one of the most prominent Harlem Renaissance debates of the period, a debate which itself concerns issues of presentation. Writers like W.E.B. DuBois, George S. Schuyler, and Langston Hughes hold forth in little magazines on the question of the need for a distinctly racial aesthetic, what Hughes calls the literary representation of "strange un-whiteness" ("The Negro Artist" 476) as opposed to the "genteel" work that would represent, in DuBois's words, the "talented tenth" of the educated black class (Peplow 71). Larsen's aesthetic formulation of "intense restraint" seemingly aligns her with the preference of DuBois for literary representations of an educated, refined black middle class rather than the "debauched tenth" of the speakeasies and cabarets in novels like Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, which DuBois reported made him feel "distinctly like taking a bath" (qtd. in Hutchinson 284). However, Larsen's letter also professes an interest in the "ironic survival of a much more primitive mood," conjuring the practice of European and American modernists fetishizing blackness and primitivism and deploying them as markers of literary innovation. Michael North argues indeed that the translation and imitation of black stories and identities comprises part of the foundation of literary modernism: "linguistic imitation and racial masquerade are so important to transatlantic modernism because they allow the writer to play at self-fashioning," using the "fast" and "rhythmically unrestrained" aspects of jazz or the blues, for example, to assert experimental artistry (11).

As an avid reader and accomplished librarian, Larsen was aware of experimental modernist techniques and even wrote to Gertrude Stein in 1929 praising her for

"Melanchtha," Stein's modernist novella on the life of a young black woman: "I have often talked with our friend Carl Van Vechten about you. Particularly about you and Melanchtha, which I have read many times … I never cease to wonder … just why you and not some one of us should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine" (qtd. in Hutchinson 313). Larsen implies that Stein has created a realistic portrait of a young black woman. She echoes Richard Wright, moreover, who claims that Stein's work allows him to "hear the speech of [his] grandmother, who spoke a deep, pure Negro dialect" (qtd. in Wallace 115). The implication is that Stein's estranging, repetitive performance of black speech captures what Larsen calls the "spirit of this race of mine." Larsen did not choose Stein's experimental techniques, however, to create Irene Redfield, the central protagonist of *Passing*. Her novel is neatly arranged in three parts and, unlike Stein's "Melanchtha," conveyed in the "civilized manner" of a proper, legible narrator. As Robert Bone describes it, the novel's prose, setting, and characterization evokes the "Victorian" world more than the modern, concerned, at least on the surface, with little but portraying the "intact" and the "bourgeoisie" (99).

And yet, Larsen's novel has actually proven quite difficult for its readers, provoking critical reception that either consistently overlooks aspects of the narrative's plot and form or betrays the anxiety the narrative provokes through a continued debate concerning what the text is "really" about. *Passing* creates unreliable readers. George Hutchinson, Larsen's most recent biographer, also notes strange patterns of elision and misreading in Larsen's reception and argues that they are keyed to the effects of the color line and Larsen's own bi-racial heritage: "The problems … are not the results of poor scholarship or bad faith but rather symptoms of how we normally think about race,

identity, and literary tradition … The study of Larsen's life and of her fiction exposes a diverse, transatlantic ideological investment in the color line that formally depends upon the invisibility and silence of persons like Larsen" (10). Hutchinson contends that our reading of texts by African American modernists like Larsen is inherently bound with the ways that we read and think about what race is, including an ingrained sense of the need for less legible people and ideas to remain invisible and silent. Thus, the readings Larsen's critics have created betray their investments in more legible representations of race and identity and their desire for these categories to remain discrete. That alone makes Larsen's fiction important to the study of interpretation and its connections to identity.

This chapter, however, argues that Larsen's novel actually provokes such misreadings and that the "intensely restrained" aesthetic she describes in her letter to Van Vechten is, ironically, what makes her work modernist. My reading draws on two more recent critical accounts of *Passing*'s restrained formal experimentation. Deborah McDowell (1986) contends that passing, Larsen's "central metaphor," also comprises the narrative "strategy" she uses to construct her novel: "It takes the form of the act it describes" (377). McDowell reads the "'safe' themes, plots, and conventions" of racial passing as "protective cover" for the "dangerous subplot" of Irene's unacknowledged desire for Clare (377). Pamela Caughie (2013) argues that the form of the novel is one of "reticence"—that Irene's desire to avoid knowledge "inheres in the narrative itself" (530). Caughie suggests that *Passing*'s reticent form frustrates the reading processes used to detect passing as well as to interpret *Passing*: "this narrative of racial passing works against reading for distinctions, as we try to grasp 'a thing that couldn't be registered,'

which is Irene's definition of race" (530). Both McDowell and Caughie contend that the novel enacts the tensions, masks, and troubled interpretation of racial passing, the fear engendered by the idea of race as "a thing that couldn't be registered."

As McDowell suggests, the novel does take on the "form of the act it describes," but this performance does more than provide cover for one "dangerous subplot." Instead, the novel's passing creates the challenging, fraught interpretive scenario that the passing novel would describe: it presents a series of convincing, captivating surfaces that conform to the norms of the tragic mulatta tale and Victorian realism, while at the same time subverting them. But more than that, it formally enacts, solicits, and critiques the reading that the dominant key brings to the passing performance. Again and again in the novel, Irene and other readers believe in their ability to detect the truth of a surface, and again and again, the text proves them wrong. Moreover, the history of *Passing*'s critical reception proves the text's point that readers cannot approach texts and expect them to cooperate in either the representation of truth or the full confession of a lie. The text formalizes a radical and modernist skepticism about interpretive certainty, threatening notions not just of race but also of marriage, class, and even self. This chapter argues that the novel's passing form not only allows Larsen to deconstruct race or smuggle a dangerous representation of lesbian sexuality underneath the "safe" conventions of racial passing (although those are convincing and important readings), but also enacts a formal performance of passing that simultaneously encourages and critiques the certainty of any totalizing interpretation. Moreover, like Forster's innovative artistry of the closet, the power of Larsen's restrained, reticent aesthetic to direct and affect interpretation suggests that the power of modernism does not lie only within in its formal and thematic excesses.

Larsen teaches readers about the difficulty of interpreting captivating surfaces from the novel's opening. After looking through a pile of "ordinary and clearly directed letters," Irene Redfield turns to a "long envelope of thin Italian paper" with Irene's address written in a nearly "illegible scrawl" (5). This is a conspicuous letter, with its "[p]urple ink" and "[f]oreign paper of extraordinary size" (5). Somehow, however, the envelope manages at the same time to be "furtive" and "mysterious" (5). It keeps secrets: a "thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender" (5). The letter stands out and seems to ask for attention, but at the same time fails to "clearly direct" itself, to provide any sense of its "return address." The narrator sums up the letter's appearance by underlining this odd contradiction: "Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting" (5).

On one level, this letter introduces readers to Clare Kendry, the letter's author, before it even mentions her name. Much like this envelope, Clare is conspicuous. For one thing, she is beautiful; Irene's first lingering glance at Clare, taken before she recognizes her as an old friend, reveals an arresting woman "with … dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin" (9). Later in the novel, even in the midst of a strong desire to avoid Clare, Irene can't help but burst out, at the very sight of her, "Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare!" Moreover, Clare's loveliness does not sit idly by like a beautiful work of art. She possesses a "caressing smile" (66). She does not flinch from showing her loveliness, from being visible, much like the envelope: "exquisite, golden, fragrant, *flaunting*" (53; emphasis mine). Like the strangely contradictory envelope, however, Clare's appearance begs further interpretation. She

stands out at a Negro Welfare League Dance for her beauty, but also for her furtive qualities: Hugh Wentworth, Irene's white friend (based on Van Vechten), works unsuccessfully to figure out her "name, status, and race" (54). She becomes, for Wentworth, a "case in point" of the difficulty in identifying racial passers: "I'll be as sure as anything that I've learned the trick. And then in the next minute I'll find I couldn't pick some of 'em if my life depended on it" (55). Much like her letter, Clare fails in both white and black company to direct their gaze clearly or bear a return address. Clare becomes, in the text of the novel, a difficult text herself: conspicuous and "flaunting" but yet also oddly "furtive" and "sly."

Clare's letter also works as a figure for the acts of passing that the novel depicts. As with the negotiations of the closet discussed in Chapter 2, passing is the performance of restraint, the reining in and covering over of any parts of the self that do not create a presentation equal to whatever the "civilized" norm demands. If a passer is to succeed, she must be sure to leave "no return address" to betray her. At the same time, passing allows the subject to cross over the boundaries that aim to preserve the purity of white, bourgeois spaces, which requires a knowledge about the performance of being "flaunting." Mingling with the white middle and upper classes requires fashionable clothing, noticeable beauty, and confidence. There is power and even pleasure in a performance that provokes a response. Thus Larsen's novel presents Clare Kendry, who passes as white in order to escape the poverty of her South Chicago upbringing, marrying a rich white businessman and enjoying the travel and luxury of an upper-class bourgeois life. As one early reviewer sums it up, "What could be more commonplace than the story of a fair girl, a waif almost, who finds that life is easily switched from one key to another,

and takes the dominant key?" (Labaree 90). And indeed, if Clare's was the only performance Larsen's novel depicted, it might be reasonable to discuss *Passing*'s representation of the act of passing as "commonplace." However, Larsen is interested not just in the thrill, power, or even potential danger of successfully passing, but also in the acts of interpretation—and misinterpretation—that passing provokes.

In this way, more than introducing a complicated character or the trope of racial passing, the letter Irene opens also introduces the novel—in one sense, quite literally, as the letter and its opening open the novel. In another sense, the letter works as a figure for the novel's restrained, reticent aesthetic. Like the letter, *Passing* presents the conspicuous: it evokes the pathos of the tragic mulatta tale and describes the appealing, flaunting lifestyle and spaces of Harlem's black bourgeoisie. However, the novel also complicates its presentation of that tradition and those spaces by filtering them through the perspective of Irene's "intensely restrained" subjectivity, deploying a narrative form that casts significant suspicion on any scene depicted as "clearly directed." For despite Irene's insistence that she is "sure" what the contents of Clare's letter will reveal, despite her claims that the letter is "what she had expected," the events that follow suggest otherwise (7). The novel does not actually grant readers unmediated access to the letter's interior, nor does it suggest that Irene's reading deserves a stamp of certainty: "She ran through the letter, puzzling out, as best she could, the carelessly formed words, or making instinctive guesses at them" (7). The text of this letter is, apparently, almost unreadable at times, and even those phrases Irene "puzzles out," linked in the text via ellipses, are filtered through Irene's perspective, her certainty at what she will find. The events of the novel, moreover, reveal that Irene does not read the letter well, just as she fails fully and

reliably to interpret not only Clare but also her own husband, Brian. The novel repeatedly challenges Irene's contention that there is such a thing as a "clearly directed" surface. From its opening, the novel thematizes the complications and disorientations that result from supposedly simple or "commonplace" acts of interpretation. It advises readers to expect to be wrong.

The novel's early critics, however, are more taken with Clare's spectacle than with Irene's struggles as an interpreter. They choose to believe Irene when she says she knows how to read a text. Early critical accounts reveal this investment in "clearly directed" narratives. Multiple critical summaries of the text—published as part of reviews in little magazines and newspapers in 1929—elide Irene's radically destabilizing subjectivity to focus on Clare as tragic mulatta and on recognizable, "safe" conceptualizations of passing:

> Claire Kendry, an exotic, restless girl of provocative charm, leaves Harlem and has no difficulty in passing for white. After several years of marriage, Claire, longing for the warmth and color of life among her own race, revives her childhood friendship with Irene Redfield, and makes contacts in Harlem that endanger her own secret and the happiness of Irene's marriage. (99)[11]

This summary from *The Open Shelf* gets at some of the novel's general themes, but makes several key changes to Larsen's text.[12] First, in recentering the novel around Clare,

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[11] The reviewer misspells Clare's name, perhaps another example of a misreading, but also perhaps an example of an innocent misprint.

[12] *The Open Shelf* was published quarterly from 1895-1914, and again beginning in 1973, as a record of books added to the public library in Cleveland, Ohio.

the summary gives her all the agency along with all the active verbs: Clare "leaves," "revives," and "makes contacts," while Irene passively receives Clare's friendship and the threat to her marriage. One will likely conclude from reading the summary that Clare's story shapes the book, giving it structure and form.[13] Moreover, the language of the synopsis confidently reports Clare's innermost thoughts and feelings: she is "restless"; she "longs" for her own race; she renews her friendship with Irene *because of* that longing; she feels she has a secret to protect. The synopsis implies a narrative clarity regarding cause and effect that the novel does not provide, a comforting sense of reason and certainty that the novel actively questions. It takes Irene at her word when she claims to be a good reader of Clare and of "sly" texts in general. Moreover, the summary casts the novel as the latest in a series of Harlem tales, when in fact, Clare and Irene grow up in Chicago. Clare visits Irene in Harlem because of her husband's business trip and "revives" her friendship with Irene, furthermore, only by chance—the two happen to run into each other while both are "passing" on the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel, again in Chicago. The synopsis, by placing Clare and Irene in Harlem from the beginning, passes over the entire Chicago section of the novel, eliding some queer, troubling episodes to focus on Clare's reencounter with Irene in Harlem, two years later. It is as though the reviewer, much like Irene, feels uneasy at the notion of dwelling on what the story of Clare and Irene's reunion in Chicago might reveal.

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[13] This was not the only initial critical account that marginalizes or ignores Irene's role in the novel. The *New York Sun* critic who put the "beautiful white 'negress'" at the center of the novel depicts Irene as a "girlhood friend" (89). W.B. Seabrook, writing for *The Saturday Review of Literature*, also places Clare at the center of the novel: " 'Passing' tells the story of the life and death of Clare Kendry" (Norton 91). Again, Irene functions in this synopsis as "an old schoolmate" who serves as "Clare's link between the white and Negro worlds" (Norton 91). Aubrey Bowser, writing for *The New York Amsterdam News* does not name Irene, referring to her only as the "colored woman from whose viewpoint the story is told" (Norton 95). Significantly, these ellisions of Irene's more complicated racial politics themselves cross racial lines, appearing in newspapers and magazines geared towards both white and black audiences.

Nor is *The Open Shelf*'s review the only one to isolate Clare's passing story and push the strange Chicago scenes, and especially Irene's part in them, to the margins. Other early reviewers also summarize the novel's plot as though Irene and Clare had never been to Chicago. As with the *Open Shelf* synopsis, an anonymous reviewer from *The New York Sun* begins with Clare and sticks solely to the streets of Harlem: "A beautiful white 'negress' succeeds in 'passing' with a white husband … Clare has everything a woman wants in the way of comforts and luxuries, and is accepted in white society. But something is at work in her … In the end she is betrayed by her uncontrollable longing for Harlem" (89). This summary, like that of *The Open Shelf*, omits most of the book's plot, excising all but those sections that unambiguously relate the narrative of Clare's passing, marriage, and desire to return to the black community of Harlem. Likewise, Mary Griffin of *The Detroit Free Press* focuses her review almost entirely on the lure of Harlem, stripping even the characters' names from her summary: "[Larsen] portrays the dissatisfaction and furtiveness of those 'light' colored, who 'pass' for white … but soon or late Miss Larsen sees them lured back to Harlem" (97). Griffin not only focuses exclusively on Clare, but strips her of her individuating characteristics; she has gone from a "provocative" and "exotic" young woman to a representative of all light-skinned black men and women who pass but then are lured back to Harlem.

Granted, the generic pressures of a synopsis, particularly for the purposes of generating the interest of library patrons, as in the case of *The Open Shelf*, or limited to a small amount of column space, as in the *New York Sun* and *Detroit Free Press*, may not allow for a comprehensive description of plot. However, the publications' sense of what will draw readers and the way that sense remakes the book provide a fascinating insight

into how Larsen's novel works on reviewers invested in certain stories about race and confident in the text as a cooperative, familiar example of a passing novel. The *Open Shelf*, *New York Sun*, and *Detroit Free Press* reviewers decline to stray from clearly directed and delineated racial spaces like Harlem, acceptable settings for the exploration and staging of racial passing, as evidenced by passing novels like Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Walter White's *Flight*. Frequent newspaper articles and autobiographical works of the period, moreover, report on the proliferation of cases like the "charming colored chorus girl," as Langston Hughes reports in *The Big Sea*, "amber enough to pass" and as a result, "living in a penthouse" in New York (228).[14] Chicago, on the other hand, is a more ambiguous space—less coded as explicitly black, less clearly legible, less easily interpreted. Like Irene, these reviewers, consciously or no, avoid textual details in their attempt to situate the novel in "safe" spaces and paint it as an example of a recognizable, legible discussion of race.

These early critics also emphasize the legibility of Clare's racial passing, which evokes familiar, clearly directed conventions of the tragic mulatto/a tale and its conspicuous, legible exploration of the "poor mulatto." Sterling Brown describes the tradition surrounding the character of the tragic mulatto/a as misery inflicted by both black and white authors, albeit for different reasons: "Negro novelists urge his

[14] Two of New York's oldest and most respectable families, the Rhinelanders and the Kips, found their own histories embroiled with the phenomenon of passing after Leonard Kip Rhinelander married Alice Beatrice Jones, a mixed-race woman, in 1924, only to have the secret of their marriage and of Alice's race made into a public scandal. Rhinelander eventually sued his wife for annulment under the grounds that she had kept her true "return address" from him; a closed court session during which Jones was asked to remove all clothing above the waist revealed that she could not have "passed" with her husband, invalidating Rhinelander's claim. Jones won the case and a lifelong stipend. See Norton 129-48 for newspaper articles and editorials on the subject, and Rottenberg and Thaggart for a discussion of how the novel's evocation of the case (Irene refers to it briefly) can change the ways readers approach the depiction of race and the body in *Passing*.

unhappiness, until he is summoned back to his people by the spirituals, or their full-throated laughter, or their simple sweet ways … White novelists insist on the mulatto's unhappiness [because] he is the anguished victim of a divided inheritance" (144-45). Brown describes the progression of the tragic mulatta's tale as one of escape, unhappiness, and homecoming, complicated in white-authored tales by marriage with or desire of a white lover which, Brown argues, "must therefore go down to a tragic end" (145). Larsen provides readers a tragic mulatta heroine in Clare, as early critical descriptions of her as an "exotic," "restless," "beautiful white 'negress'" would suggest. Interestingly, even Brown includes *Passing* in the category of "The Tragic Mulatto Passes for White," echoing these early critics in focusing his analysis on Clare: "Clare, who 'passes,' is unhappy, and frequently visits Harlem … Her friend, Irene, who would not 'pass,' lives in contrast a happy, respectable life" (143).

Clare does, in her reunion with Irene on the roof of the Drayton, present a sympathetic account of a woman who, having "passed over" and married a wealthy white man, longs for the company and community of the black people with whom she was raised in Chicago.[15] Having shocked Irene into a surprised recognition of her old friend, Clare reveals that part of her intent during her visit to Chicago was to gain access to her former social and racial circle: "'I'm not surprised to see you, 'Rene … In fact, ever since I've been here, I've more or less hoped that I should … Still, I imagine that's because I've thought of you often and often'" (14). Clare performs the tragic mulatta's preoccupation with aspects of the self that have been left behind, dreaming of a

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[15] This is different from arguing that Clare is a good representative of the tragic mulatta. As Cheryl Wall argues, "Although her death is typical of the tragic mulatto's fate, the Clare Kendry character breaks the mold in every other respect … In drawing such an unsympathetic character, Larsen seems initially merely to flout the tragic-mulatto convention" (359).

homecoming. Clare's thoughts of her former friends are revealed in her emotional response when Irene tells the story of the twelve years since Clare's absence: "She told of the marriages, births, and deaths in other families that Clare had known, opening up, for her, new vistas on the lives of old friends and acquaintances. Clare drank it all in … She sat motionless, her bright lips slightly parted, her whole face lit by the radiance of her happy eyes" (15). Though Clare's beauty is undeniable from the moment Irene sees her, this contact with stories of "home" only enhances her appeal by adding a touch of pathos. Little wonder Clare takes a central role in the accounts of early critics. Her beauty as well as her evident pleasure at seeing Irene and accessing news of the community she left behind when she passed over activates readers to expect the tragic mulatta tale to unfold.

Clare's appealing passing story also makes it easier to overlook Irene's rather odd racial position in this scene. Indeed, a startling number of early critics, black and white, fail to recognize that Irene, like her friend Clare, is passing for white on the rooftop of the Drayton. Brown argues that Irene "would not 'pass'" and lives, as a result, a "happy, respectable life." An anonymous critic from *The New York Times Book Review* describes Irene as "a negro woman who, although she has skin light enough to 'pass' for Caucasian, prefers to maintain her racial integrity" (86). Another anonymous critic from the *New York News* describes her similarly: "Irene Redfield might also 'pass'; but she chooses not to, and makes an interesting comparison with Clare" (101). In fact, Clare and Irene's reunion takes place under the shadow of Irene's passing panic when an unrecognized Clare's insistent gaze causes Irene to wonder whether "that woman" could "somehow know that here before her eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro" (10). Given this moment of textual exposure, and given that Clare tells her story while she and

Irene sip tea on the rooftop of a whites-only hotel, these reviews are confusing—but also revealing.

For *Passing*'s reticent form invites these contrasts. The novel actively leads readers to believe that Irene is white, declining to "racialize" her upon introduction. The initial framing device of Irene examining Clare's letter barely registers Irene's appearance, focusing instead on her memories of Clare's childhood poverty and "catlike" ways (6). Consider, in contrast, Fauset's introduction of *Plum Bun*'s (1928) protagonist, Angela Murray: "Gratitude was no strong ingredient in this girl's nature, yet very often early she began thanking Fate for the chance which in that household of four had bestowed on her the heritage of her mother's fair skin. She might so easily have been, like her father, black" (3). Fauset's text immediately identifies Angela as a mixed-race woman able to pass due to her "fair skin," and describes her "gratitude" at the "chance" this offers her to pursue her desires in life. Larsen deliberately avoids this convention. The text's description of Irene's journey from the boiling streets of Chicago to the top of the Drayton, moreover, insists that Irene *must* be white:

> Suddenly she was aware that the whole street had a wobbly look, and realized that she was about to faint. With a quick perception of the need for immediate safety, she lifted a wavering hand in the direction of a cab parked directly in front of her. The perspiring driver jumped out and guided her to his car. He helped, almost lifted her in. She sank down on the hot leather seat.
>
> For a minute her thoughts were nebulous. They cleared.
>
> "I guess," she told her Samaritan, "it's tea I need. On a roof somewhere."

"The Drayton, ma'am?" he suggested. "They do say as how it's always a breeze up there."

"Thank you. I think the Drayton'll do nicely," she told him. (8).

In the 1920s, a black woman would not have associated the back of a taxi near downtown Chicago with "immediate safety." On June 27, 1919, a little over five miles from Chicago's Drake Hotel, which inspired Larsen's Drayton Hotel, a fight broke out in the waters of Lake Michigan between black and white swimmers that left one black man, Eugene Williams, dead. His drowning, as well as the failure of white police officers to arrest the alleged culprit, sparked a race riot that lasted for fourteen days and left thirty-eight dead and 537 injured (Tuttle 64). The threat of violence continued on into the next decade: "As late as August 1921 three members of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations sent an urgent telegram to Governor Lowden, warning him that 'Chicago still faces possibility of another race riot'" (Tuttle 257). Racial lines continued to be clearly drawn and policed through the twenties and beyond: "Chicago would remain one of the country's most segregated cities for decades to come" (Krist 266). Given the clear racial segregation enforced in Chicago at this time, no Chicago cabbie would have suggested the Drayton Hotel as a destination for a black woman needing "tea … on a roof somewhere" (8). Nor would Irene be guided out of the cab and onto the roof of the Drayton and given access to a view of the buildings and the lake and the "specks of cars and people creeping about in the streets" (9). Larsen's narration offers no glimpse of Irene's thoughts as she rests in the back of the cab and considers the cabbie's suggestion of the Drayton, the wording of which implies that he has never been into the hotel, that it is not a space for working class men and women, white or not. That Irene immediately

agrees to his idea indicates her sense of belonging in an upper-class, segregated hotel. Nothing on the level of the word, moreover, betrays any fear, trepidation, or anxiety as the hotel attendant takes Irene to the roof.[16] In fact, on reaching her rooftop table, she declares her tea and her place by the window "so much … what she had desired and expected" that after a moment she is "able to forget it" (9). She sits there, on the precipice of racial and class privilege, and betrays nothing but relief at being away from all the "sweating bodies" of the streets below. The text all but declares, through its reticence, that Irene is white, and suggests, further, that surrounded by the opulence and luxury of the Drayton's white, elevated space, Irene thinks of herself not as a racial intruder, but as a member of the white upper-class, able to "forget" about her privilege because it is assumed.

The text's narration also holds back from commenting when Irene, about to leave Clare and the Drayton, confesses to herself that she is "curious … about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment" (17). Though Irene has only just "passed" temporarily in order to gain access to the table where she sits, she draws a clear contrast between Clare's choice to live as a white woman and the passing she does "for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that," as she later explains to her dark-skinned friend Felise Freelander (70). Irene wants to believe that privileges like her unchallenged ascension to the roof of the Drayton, aided by her performance of

[16] My reading extends that of Jennifer DeVere Brody, who argues that the failure of both the text's "omniscient narrator" and Irene to comment on the "transgression" of Irene's passing suggests that "it is so natural for Irene to pass that she is not even conscious that she is doing so" (399). Brody's reading accounts for the strange ease with which Irene passes, but I think acknowledging how the text formally aids Irene in her passing only strengthens Body's important observation.

whiteness, are fundamentally different from the far more "hazardous business of 'passing'" that Clare has chosen. Indeed, Irene disowns the word "passing," declaring it foreign, "marked" territory in her thoughts, which Larsen denotes by encasing the word in scare quotes. What Irene does is gain access to the things and spaces she wants. She imagines that she is still "safe," still set far back from the "hazardous" risk of "passing over" the color line. This formulation confirms Irene's investment in creating a categorical difference between herself and Clare, evidence that, as she insists to Clare, she has "everything" she wants and, as she insists to herself, she displays a consistent "adherence to her own class and kind … in the whole pattern of her life" (24-25). The vehemence with which Irene insists on her race and class loyalty suggests that she protests too much, but the text's reticence, up to this point, to drawing attention to Irene's odd position in the text allows critics to ventriloquize her assertion that she is a savvy reader, that she chooses not to pass, and that she makes this choice in order to lead a "respectable" life.

Accepting this reading of Irene creates a more "clearly-directed" text. If Irene is reliable and does not pass, she can comfortably serve as foil for and objective observer of Clare. Mary Fleming Labaree goes so far as to suggest in *Opportunity* that if only Larsen had decided to focus more directly on the "real" story, on "The Girl Who Passed," the novel might have "marched more vividly," might have avoided the derailment of focusing on Irene's story (99). Had Larsen stuck to Clare, Labaree argues, she would have had the "advantage" of creating a "straight impact" (99). The text's strange and complicated presentation of Irene's racial passing is too queer—it does too much to challenge the norms not only of what race is but what racial passers and racial passing

look like. The effect of Larsen's restraint is to create a space for readers to fill with their own interpretations, and as Hutchinson argues, readers tend to fill out such a space by supplying and seeing legible representations of race and class. Her novel passes as a story about "The Girl Who Passed," but it actually explores the far more queer impact of a story about Irene, "The Girl Who Never Stops Passing."

Irene's restrained subjectivity depends on the concealment of surfaces. Having nearly fainted in Chicago's heat early in the novel, she immediately works in the back of the cab that has rescued her to prevent the appearance of any "damage": "Reviving under the warm breeze stirred up by the moving cab, Irene made some small attempts to repair the damage that the heat and crowds had done to her *appearance*" (8; emphasis mine). Her repairs work, in part, to preserve the veneer of the white bourgeoisie that allows her to pass for white and gain access to the cab in the first place, but her concern about appearances is not based entirely on fear of being exposed as a black woman. Her passing is more complicated. Irene's sense of self depends on neatness, the right frock, and above all else, not registering any damage done by contact with other bodies or even with the unnerving threat of emotions. Irene holds back tears because "she knew weeping did not become her" (48). She insists, again and again, on the value of "safety" above all else: "she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life … She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband" (76). Irene is a thoroughly restrained subjectivity, constructed by the materiality and pleasantness of her life as a member of Harlem's black bourgeoisie, but also possessed by an obsessive desire to make the world

around her just as pleasant. The result is a restraint that takes the form of repression—of tears, of the body, of the desires of her family members that she wishes to "direct for their own best good." The "tranquility" she desires comes from tamping down any contradictory thought, feeling, or appearance.

Mid-century critics of the novel focus on Irene's insistence on "safety" and the material wealth that helps her to attain it, arguing that Larsen's representation of stability and wealth makes her work more "safe" than innovative. In his 1958 critical study, *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert Bone, looking to "measure the contribution of the Negro novelist to American letters" in terms of literary form and merit, argues that Larsen's investment in and representation of the "dominant key" of the black bourgeoisie prevents her from participating in the literary revolution going on around her (99). He dubs her a member of the "Rear Guard," whose "shallow" work fails to criticize the decorative, genteel world of Harlem's middle class: "the Rear Guard continued to write as if the Victorian world were still intact" (99). For Bone, the "mark of the modern artist" is "alienation from bourgeois society," and he categorizes Larsen's novels, and their protagonists, as unequivocal endorsements of middle and upper-class living (97). In that, Bone argues, Larsen does not push the "negro novel" into more modern (or modernist) territory, but relaxes into her privileged place in the racial hierarchy and in so doing, "perpetuate[s] the traditions of the early Negro novel" (97).[17]

[17] Recent critical work has begun to challenge the notion that the "early Negro novel" features the kinds of conservative literary traditions to which Harlem Renaissance writers could retreat. M Giulia Fabi, for example, works to combat readings of nineteenth-century African-American fiction as examples of "literary incompetence," arguing instead for the artistry, centrality, and strategy of novels like William Wells Brown's 1853 *Clotel*.

Bone's reading of Larsen's supposed literary embrace of bourgeois life over innovation echoes an earlier Harlem Renaissance debate over what "Negro art" should be, which gets at questions of literary experimentation. In 1926, the black journalist and author George S. Schuyler argues that the very idea of a separate "Negro art" aesthetic is "hokum," contending that national and class identities should do more to determine an artist's aesthetic than race: "In the homes of the black and white Americans of the same cultural and economic level one finds similar furniture, literature, and conversation. How, then, can the black American be expected to produce art and literature dissimilar to that of the white American?" (469). Schuyler criticizes the notion that literature written by African-Americans should be "peculiar," and suggests that "intelligent people" should respond to such an idea with a "loud guffaw" (470). Schuyler's essay disputes the need for an experimental, "peculiar" black aesthetic, calling into question what he calls the "popularity of the Negro-art hokum" (470). Langston Hughes famously responds to Schuyler in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" with his own contention that wanting to be "a poet—not a Negro poet" equates to wanting to "be a white poet" and by extension, desiring to "be white" (471). Hughes attributes this desire for whiteness to the members of the "negro middle class," for whom the "word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all the virtues" (471). Hughes urges, instead, that the "Nordicized Negro intelligentsia … turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty," advocating the aesthetic representation of "strange un-whiteness" that depicts the "beautiful" and the "ugly too" (474-76).

Setting Larsen's *Passing* into the midst of this debate, it would seem to be obvious which side of the argument her novel supports. The "racial mountain" Hughes describes, at the top of which the "negro artists" will stand, "free within ourselves," is quite different from the seat Irene takes at the top of a whites-only hotel in Chicago (476). Irene's desire to "forget" her precarious position in the hotel, as well as her repugnance at the "unpleasantness and possible danger" of Clare's longing to visit her in Harlem, would seem to contradict Hughes's plea for "racial" work that is unrespectable, extraordinary, and, given its interest in the beautiful and the ugly, likely unpleasant and possibly even dangerous. Moreover, Larsen's association with the "civilized" aesthetic of what Michael W. Peplow and Arthur P. Davis, editors of *The New Negro Renaissance* anthology (1975), call the "Genteel School," positions her as an artist more interested in the civilized spaces of Du Bois's "talented tenth" (Peplow 71). In this reading, Larsen's *Passing*, much like its protagonist, elevates itself above the speakeasy or the cabaret. Larsen writes, after all, not about starving artists or flappers or the queer spaces of Harlem, but tea parties, shopping excursions, and Negro Welfare dances attended by men and women in shining gowns. The spaces and subjectivities of her novel do not obviously appear to be those of "high" modernism or the "strange un-whiteness" of Hughes's "racial" fiction.

Again, Larsen's text allows and even solicits such a reading. When Irene and her husband Brian sit down at their breakfast table, they create a scene that fulfills all of Hughes's concerns about the "Nordicized" Negro:

> They went into the dining-room. He drew back her chair and she sat down behind the fat-bellied German coffee-pot, which sent out its morning fragrance,

> mingled with the smell of crisp toast and savoury bacon, in the distance. With his long, nervous fingers he picked up the morning paper from his own chair and sat down.
>
> Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured creature, brought in the grapefruit. They took up their spoons. (38)

This passage might be read as epitomizing what Hughes terms the "apeing of things white": "The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, landowner, or politician. The mother may be a social worker … or she may do nothing and have a maid … Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art" ("The Negro Artist" 472). Irene and Brian dine at a table featuring a "German" coffee pot, with Brian courteously (and somewhat conspicuously) drawing back Irene's chair. They do indeed employ a maid, pointedly referred to as "mahogany-coloured creature," suggesting a hierarchy of color in the Redfield household and the association of darker color with a more animalistic nature. Their mannered life extends to a synchronized performance of eating breakfast: they take up their spoons at the same moment. That the text makes no commentary on this scene could suggest an implicit endorsement, as Peplow and Davis describe it, of the "Genteel School" argument to white readers that "We are like you, the best of you, except for the superficial matter of color" (70). According to Bone, Larsen fails to do the important work of contradicting that argument. Her evident interest in the non-experimental, non-revolutionary spaces of black middle-class wealth make her a "Rear-Guard" artist concerned with holding together the pieces of the Victorian world.

However, despite its pleasant presentation of a "respectable" black bourgeois family, *Passing* does not rest on its depiction of Harlem's middle-class or endorse the

lives its characters lead. Rather, Larsen's depiction of a subject trapped within the constraints of the bourgeoisie presents a subtle but withering critique of wealth and the pleasant surfaces on which it depends. *Passing* suggests that the spaces and subjectivities of the black bourgeoisie present their own kind of "strange un-whiteness." The breakfast scene provides a good example if recast as a scene of family relationships and class staged as theater. Caughie argues that the scene presents a satirical send-up of the black bourgeoisie as performers: "The narratorial 'they took up their spoons' creates the effect of stage notes so that when the scene freezes the Redfields in a tableau of class stasis, it is meant to strike one as performance … the Redfields have learned their lines … Irene's domestic milieu is clearly a stage set for her performance of class" (527). Caughie's analysis illuminates the theatricality of Irene's domestic world, its emphasis on creating the right impression of "the best people," as Hughes describes the black bourgeoisie. Irene and Brian's synchronized breakfasting demonstrates the discipline and rigidity required to live a middle-class life while also abrading their "shallow" surfaces—this is a stage set, not a home.

Larsen's depiction of class as performance also reveals the snobbery of the black middle-class through a consideration and presentation of its materialistic surfaces. When Clare invites Irene for tea in her Chicago apartment, Irene discovers that Clare has also invited Gertrude, a mutual childhood friend (and similarly light-skinned black woman) who has married a white butcher. Irene, surveying Gertrude's clothing and demeanor, finds her poor enactment of middle-class wealth revolting:

> Gertrude, Irene thought, looked as if her husband might be a butcher … Her black hair was clipt, and by some unfortunate means all the live curliness had gone from

> it. Her over-trimmed Georgetti *crêpe* dress was too short and showed an appalling amount of leg, stout legs in sleazy stockings of a vivid rose-beige shade. Her plump hands were newly and not too competently manicured—for the occasion, probably. And she wasn't smoking. (25)

Given the intensity and disdain of Irene's gaze, it is no wonder that Gertrude is "a little ill at ease" (24). Irene's contemptuous reading of Gertrude's attempt to pass for bourgeois demonstrates how the black middle class is also keen on policing its borders. Gertrude, unlike Irene and Clare, does not "know her lines," though she knows enough about crossing class lines to be "ill at ease" and to be aware that she does not belong. Irene's criticism of Gertrude focuses on the ways she does not know how to cover up—her dress is too trimmed and shows too much leg displayed in too vivid a shade of red. Her nails advertise the fact that she cannot afford regular, "competent" manicures. She does not read social cues well, or she would know that she should smoke. Most strangely, Irene notes how all the "live curliness" had gone from Gertrude's hair "by some unfortunate means." One might argue that Irene, the good race woman, is disappointed that Gertrude has resorted to straightening her black hair to make it appear smooth like a white woman's. However, the disdain of Irene's tone and its association not only with Gertrude's hair but her dress and nails reveals the depth of Irene's commitment to playing the part of the wealthy woman, to the point that she can feel palpable, powerful disgust at one of her oldest friends because she does not know the right place to get a proper manicure. Though Larsen's narration neither comments on Irene's snobbery nor alters its mannered tone, the text does not render Irene—or the black bourgeoisie generally—as happy or respectable. Indeed, Gertrude, appalling amount of leg and all, appears far more

aware of the subtle politics of the scene than Irene gives her credit for. When Irene offers Gertrude a miserly greeting, speaking to her in an "unsympathetic, almost harsh voice," Gertrude responds in savvy, subtle acknowledgement of Irene's classism: "The woman nodded and forced a smile to her pouting lips … "[Y]ou're just the same, Irene. Not changed a bit'" (24).

Even more than its withering class critique, Larsen's presentation of the black bourgeoisie, carefully prepared though it may be, does not pretend that the "Victorian world is still intact." Larsen presents the material possessions and proper behavior of Irene's bourgeois race woman as a series of shifting surfaces. The breakfast scene makes Brian and Irene's marriage appear to be one of synchronicity, harmony, and the observance of daily communal rituals. But Larsen's text exposes this harmonious façade as another form of passing Irene performs with her husband, the formalization of her insistence that the repetition of a "safe" and "smooth routine" equals a marriage (41). Alarmed when Brian expresses deep unhappiness with his job as a doctor and reminded of his desire to leave the U.S. for a life in Brazil, Irene uses her role as the mother of his children to distract him:

> "I'm terribly afraid [Junior's] picked up some queer ideas about things—some things—from the older boys, you know."
>
> Her manner was consciously light. Apparently she was intent on the maze of traffic, but she was still watching Brian's face closely …
>
> "Queer ideas?" he repeated. D'you mean ideas about sex, Irene?"
>
> "Ye-es. Not quite nice ones. Dreadful jokes, and things like that."

> "Oh, I see," he threw at her … After a moment he demanded bluntly, "Well, what of it? If sex isn't a joke, what is it? And what is a joke? … The sooner and the more he learns about sex, the better for him. And most certainly if he learns that it's a grand joke, the grandest in the world. It'll keep him from lots of disappointments later on."
>
> Irene didn't answer. (42)

This is a performance, indicated by Larsen's description of Irene's "consciously light" manner and the difference between her "apparent" attitude of concentrating on traffic and her actual concern with "closely" watching Brian's reaction. Irene means for her husband to be calmed by her concern for their son, to be directed away from his wandering desires and to the business of protecting his children. Far from establishing her conviction that Brian "was fond of her, loved her, in his slightly undemonstrative way," however, the scene suggests that their marriage consists primarily of "civilized," "mannered" scenes at breakfast tables (43). The apparently "intact" world of breakfasts and teapots conceals a deeply fragmented, divided, and unhappy marriage. Though they have children, the Redfields do not share a bed. Brian's insistence that sex is "a grand joke, the grandest in the world" confirms that theirs is a sexless relationship. Irene means for Junior's "queer" ideas about sex to raise Brian's concern for his son. Instead, the comment reveals not their connectedness as parents, but the gulf that separates Irene's notions of "smooth routine" and Brian's experience of "lots of disappointments." Irene's desire to keep order, to preserve her life of "easy monotony" and routine does not, this conversation suggests, admit anything "queer," which in her case means anything related to the body. Thus, her husband opens his paper with "long, nervous fingers," uncomfortable with the role he is

tasked with playing. Thus, he bitterly reacts to her concern for their son's sexual education with his biting rejoinder that sex is "the grandest joke in the world."

Larsen repeatedly implies that Irene avoids and covers up anything related to the body, just as she desires to suppress Junior's access to "dreadful jokes" about sex. Everything associated with the body is "dreadful" to Irene. Thus, the few times her body threatens to expose her, the rupture registers formally in the text. One example also relates to the enjoyment of a joke. While reuniting with Clare and Gertrude in Clare's Chicago hotel room, Irene meets Clare's white, racist husband, John Bellew. The situation requires that all three women pass, but maintaining that façade soon proves difficult as Bellew jokes about his wife's darkening skin: "'I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned in to a nigger'" (29). Bellew, Clare, and Gertrude all join in a good laugh, but here Irene's intense bodily restraint fails:

> Irene, who had been sitting with lips tightly compressed, cried out: "That's good!" and gave way to gales of laughter. She laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided. Until, catching sight of Clare's face, the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke, and for caution, struck her. At once she stopped. (29)

This is the kind of "illegible" moment that the novel hints at in its first paragraph with the letter—a "scrawl" of a laugh, a laugh that seems "out of place and alien," mirth of "extraordinary size." The laugh is indeed so large and consuming that it seems hard for Irene to contain it in her body. It wants to get out: "Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt." Like the opening of the letter, the laugh is also multi-valent. On

one level, Irene's laugh allows her to keep up her façade of racial passing. To a room of white people, Bellew's racism is a funny joke. To a room full of black people, it is no joke at all. But to a room of black women passing as white, humor ceases to matter. The laughter is a layer of protection. If Irene fails to laugh, if she continues to stare at the "queer" gleam in Clare's eye, she risks detection. She risks betraying not only her own return address, but also that of Clare and Gertrude. Participating in the joke allows her to pass, to add her laughter to Bellew's roar, Clare's "bell-like laugh," and Gertrude's "shrill" shriek (in this fraught space, even laughter is a performance of class).

At this far limit of threatened exposure, however, Irene's unrestrained laugh also gives her power and suggests the authority, albeit limited, of the one who passes. This is part of what makes the joke so "priceless." Bellew has just stated with the utmost certainty that he knows who his wife is: "'You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be'" (29). In his certitude, he draws a line, but in spite of his insistent claim that he *knows* who his wife is and that his entire family is secure from the influence of "black scrimy devils," he stands in the company of three black women, one of whom is "giving way to gales of laughter" directed at him. Irene's "tightly compressed" façade releases in this moment to an enjoyment that the joke is finally on the rich white man and his certainty that he *knows* about race and women, that he has the power to draw lines when really he is far beyond them. This is "priceless."

But on a third level, Larsen implies that the joke is also on Irene—on her and her husband. Her body becomes a danger to her because she keeps it repressed, constantly fearful that it will betray what is "crouched, always, deep down within her," threatening

to create visible, undeniable rupture (40). *Passing* reveals, with Irene's outsized enjoyment of Bellew's joke, the latent potential energy of the repressed body, which returns in this moment and overtakes Irene's restraint. Her body continues, moreover, to threaten the tidy presentation of Irene's "shallow" surfaces. While hosting a tea party late in the novel, and under the assumption that Brian and Clare are having an affair, Irene sees Clare charming another woman's husband, with her "trick of sliding down ivory lids over astonishing black eyes" (66). Irene takes this sight as persuasive evidence of Clare's shameless flirtation and convinces herself that she has become "nothing" to her husband but an "obstacle" (66). Her mind remains frozen with this helpless realization, but her body acts:

> Rage boiled up in her.
>
> There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup. Dark stains dotted the bright rug. Spread. (66)

In Clare's hotel room, Irene's laugh threatens to break through her carefully constructed performance, but she regains control of her body. In this instance, her body breaks through and destroys something, threatening to reveal the strain of her performance. To recover herself, she uses her affected dislike for the cup, actually a Confederate artifact brought to Harlem on the Underground Railroad, as a screen to conceal the actual emotion, much stronger than dislike, roiling within her: "I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it for ever. So simple! And I'd never thought of it before" (67). Her words, however, unwittingly betray a piece of her inner thoughts, foreshadowing the ease with which she is eventually rid of Clare forever. Despite her apparent ease at passing over and beyond her social gaffe, Irene's moments of sudden

violence suggest that her control over her own body, so vital to the project of passing on which her safety could depend, can suddenly slip, if provoked, and the gap in those moments of slippage shows the uncontrollability of identity. She cannot or will not speak her truth, but her body threatens to reveal it for her by breaking things: the apparent pleasantness of a laugh or a conversation, the veneer of "shallow" contentment that cloaks her marriage, the racially significant cup broken in her rage, the transparent appearance of the text pierced by her body's rebellion, even the beautiful body and face of her friend, Clare.

Moreover, the interchange between Brian and Irene and Irene's response to breaking the cup both expose Irene's tendency to use any appealing surface available to her to maintain her intensely restrained but preferred simulacrum of a life. She resorts to using her children as a screen to get her husband to do what she wants, deploying a potential threat to Junior in order to get her husband to give up his desires for hers. When a conversation about racial passing and biology threatens to turn into a debate, Irene uses the pleasant surface of her work organizing the Negro Welfare League's dance to distract Brian: "many arguments in the past had taught her the futility of attempting to combat Brian … Ignoring [him], she slid away from the subject entirely. 'I wonder … if you'll have time to run me down to the printing-office. I've got see about … some more tickets for the dance'" (39). Irene retreats from the unpleasantness of actual conflict, diverting her husband with the more "clearly directed" version of herself as a good race woman working to "uplift" her fellow black men and women. She works constantly to maintain a series of shifting surfaces that will allow her to pass for whatever she has to be in order to

preserve her restrained vision: “Above everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life” (72).

On the surface, Larsen’s representation of the black bourgeoisie performs everything that Hughes disdains about “Nordicized” art, and, as Bone contends, the novel is profoundly interested in “shallow” surfaces. Not only does Larsen’s text defy the notion that black middle class life is “happy and respectable,” however. It also describes Irene as a woman who lives a “strange un-whiteness”—refusing to face up to or own the reality of any black body, especially her own. She invests instead in the ways that performance can secure for her the safety and stability that she craves. She may not appear alienated from the black bourgeoisie, but the novel implies that being a full member of the black middle class in this period requires a significant level of alienation from the body and the self.

Irene’s unreliability and alienation becomes the subject for much *Passing* criticism from the 1970s to the present. McDowell cites Beatrice Royster’s 1975 dissertation and its argument that “Irene is an ideal choice as narrator of a tale with double meanings” (McDowell 372). Claudia Tate (1980) contends that interpreting the novel responsibly depends on “determining the extent to which [Irene] is reliable as the sole reporter and interpreter of events” and argues that Irene fails to be an objective observer (344). Jennifer DeVere Brody (1992) calls Irene a “myopic and unreliable narrator” (401). Anne duCille (1993) notes just how pervasive this new perspective on Larsen’s text becomes by the late twentieth century: “Critics have generally read the repeated reference to Irene’s ‘unseeing eyes’ as an indication of the distorted vision that

makes her an untrustworthy narrator" (441). This critical contention, moreover, has opened the text to readings about the complexities of Irene's identity. Readers begin to focus on what Cheryl Wall calls the "effective mask" of the text, calling attention to how the novel itself might be passing.

This emphasis on reading for signs of falsity, ironically, provokes interpretation bent on stabilizing, fixing, and solving the text. Nor is this an entirely new trend in *Passing* criticism. In 1929, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, ex-wife of the poet Paul Dunbar, argues that readers could skip the novel's "passing" scenes to get to its "true" subject matter: "The *real* situation is not that Clare 'passed.' It is that she came back into the life of Irene and that she loved Brian. She did not have to be a near-white woman to do this, nor did the others have to be colored" (90; emphasis mine). Efforts to locate the "real" subject of Larsen's novel escalate, moreover, in the late twentieth century. Charles Larson echoes Dunbar-Nelson over six decades later in his autobiography of Larsen, *Invisible Darkness* (1993). He claims to see through "writers playing narrative tricks," and suggests that race merely gives Larsen an architecture for a more central issue: "the racial question is the framework for Larsen's second novel, the context she used to develop her major theme of marital stability" (82). Larson underlines this argument again late in the book: "Readers today … still fail to understand … that the primary subject of the story is not passing but jealousy" (211). As noted earlier, McDowell contends that readers can look past race as the novel's "true" subject matter, although she argues that the novel is actually about repressed lesbian desire. Tate contends that the "*real* impetus" for the story is not race, which is "at best peripheral to the story," but "Irene's emotional turbulence" (344). duCille, meanwhile, identifies the "crux" of the novel as the

"dialectic" between Irene and Clare, through which Larsen represents and critiques two prominent representations of black femininity during the Harlem Renaissance.

These readings all open up the text in vital ways, making important claims for the novel's destabilization of primary categories like race and class and for Larsen's status as a strategic and innovative artist. When read, however, as part of the full history of *Passing*'s critical reception, recent scholarship still manifests a preoccupation with the possibility of being able to uncover the essential identity of Larsen's novel, insisting that if readers just keep digging they will find a core reading that is "real," that represents the essence of the novel. Brian Carr describes this tendency of *Passing*'s critics as the deployment of a "depth-and-surface model," a mode of criticism that plumbs the depths of a text, convinced that those dark places conceal the key that, if brought to light, will "out" the "true" or "real" reading. For such critics, Brian argues, the text's ambiguity impedes the truth, a problem that can only be solved by an illuminating corrective. Carr wonders whether these attempts at critical disclosure, specifically those that seek to "out" the text's closeted lesbianism, actually reveal more about the pervasiveness of "paranoid" critical interpretation than they do anything about what the text might conceal.

Extending Carr's reading, I contend that *Passing*'s history of misreadings is symptomatic of the novel's form—and of the novel's deep skepticism about the possibility of sifting through ambiguity to find truth. Larsen's portrayal of identity is so uncomfortable and so disturbing that it renders readers reticent—leading them to look for what they can pin down, the elements of Irene's identity and the text's multiplicity that can be named for certain. For the text implies not just that race could be a blind for the

exploration of something more dangerous, or vice versa. It also casts significant doubt on readers' abilities to successfully interpret any text or any self—including their own.

Irene implies as much at the Negro Welfare Dance when Hugh Wentworth asks her to identify whether Clare is a "case in point" of racial passing:

> Her smile changed to a laugh. "Oh, Hugh! You're so clever. You usually know everything. Even how to tell the sheep from the goats. What do you think? Is she?"
>
> He blew a long contemplative wreath of smoke. "Damned if I know! I'll be as sure as anything that I've learned the trick. And then in the next minute I'll find I couldn't pick some of 'em if my life depended on it."
>
> "Well, don't let that worry you. Nobody can. Not by looking."
>
> "Not by looking, eh? Meaning?"
>
> "I'm afraid I can't explain. Not clearly. There are ways. But they're not definite or tangible … Just—just something. A thing that couldn't be registered." (55-6)

The implications of Irene and Hugh's conversation are disturbing for readers concerned about the possibility of light-skinned black men and women passing. If white skin does not connote whiteness, and if race is a thing that "can't" be registered, a thing without a "definite" or "tangible" marker, then the policing of spaces like the Drayton is pointless, as the novel demonstrates. Moreover, the novel's ability to convincingly present Irene as a white woman and to deploy her racial privilege and claimed competence as a reader to distract the readers from her alarming paranoia reveals the allure of whiteness, wealth,

and patronage. It is often preferable and easier to see what we want to see, particularly if, as Irene confirms, we "couldn't pick some of 'em" if our lives depended on it.

However, at this point in the novel Irene's concerns about deceptive surfaces, in particular Clare's, range beyond the topic of race and allow an alternate interpretation of her conversation with Hugh. Irene has begun to resent Clare's infiltration of Harlem and to question Clare's relationship with Brian. Indeed, the thought that constantly eats at Irene by this point in the novel is the question Irene asks Hugh about Clare's race, reformulated as a larger question about whether Clare is who she claims: "'Is she?'" Is Clare having an affair with Irene's husband, Brian? Is she intending to leave her own husband, Bellew, to live in Harlem with Brian or in an otherwise unrestrained fashion? Is Clare, on the other hand, actually Irene's friend? Is Clare telling the truth? These are questions Irene is asking herself, whose answers she desperately wants. In this context, Irene's response to Hugh proves deeply unsettling: "Nobody can [pick 'em]. Not by looking." And indeed, the text provides no ocular proof of Clare's intentions, actions, or desires. *Passing* itself confirms Irene's argument that surfaces cannot tell us what lies beneath, or what lies the surface conceals.

And yet, Irene does proceed as if she knows, and the resulting "finale" of the novel confirms that lives can depend on an acknowledgment of uncertainty. Wed to notions of safety and stability, believing in herself as a reliable interpreter of surfaces, Irene behaves as if by looking she can tell. When Clare reveals to Irene that she wants Bellew to find out about her racial background so she can live as she likes, Irene looks at her and decides that "everything had happened" between Clare and Brian: "Ah! The first time that she had allowed herself to admit to herself that everything had happened, had

not forced herself to believe, to hope, that nothing irrevocable had been consummated! Well, it had happened. She knew it, and knew that she knew it" (76). Irene claims not only knowledge of their affair, but also a comforting multiplicity of knowledge: she not only knows, but *knows* that she knows. This is despite the fact that she has no evidence beyond her awareness of Brian's defiant unhappiness, her deep, unacknowledged cognizance of their unsexed performance of a marriage, and Clare's report that she intends to pursue her desires no matter what.

Irene uses her doubled certainty to interpret and react to the events of the novel's final scene. Irene, Brian, and Clare attend a party together at Felise Freelander's sixth-floor apartment, Irene sensing the connection between Brian and Clare "like a live thing pressing against her" (78). This precipice, however, proves to be more precarious. Clare's husband bursts into the apartment and accuses her of being "a damned dirty nigger" (79). Irene sees Clare, backed up against an open window, smile in response to Bellew's bellowing attack and interprets that smile as the sign of Clare's plan to steal Irene's husband. This sparks a sudden, bodily response: "It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (79). But Irene has no access to Clare's actual thoughts, and neither do readers. Clare's smile may be an attempt to pacify Bellew. It may be an unconscious response to the sudden violence of Bellew's entrance. It may be that she welcomes the exposure as she has recently stated to Irene, but Irene cannot know. The text does not reveal it. Clare's motivations remain a mystery, as do the circumstances of her death.

Neither does the novel solve any of its remaining mysteries. Though Irene believes Brian and Clare are having an affair, Larsen provides no final word on the matter. Though many readers believe Irene pushes Clare out the window and to her death, the text refuses to offer any conclusive evidence. The narrator tells readers that Irene does not want to know: "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly … One moment Clare had been there … The next she was gone" (79). That is the tidied version of events, the one that takes a complicated instant with multiple volatile components (Clare, Irene, Bellew) and puts them all into a narrative gap. Irene knows something is missing from her account, just as Clare's body itself fails to appear in the novel's final pages. Even when Irene makes her way down six flights of stairs and out onto the snowy courtyard where Clare has fallen to her death, Irene finds only the group of shocked party goers. Clare's body must be there, somewhere, revealed now in its racial masquerade, but the text effaces it completely. The novel refuses to provide ocular proof of anything, the narrator reporting instead Irene's intense repression of what she thinks happened but refuses to acknowledge: "What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not— But she musn't, she warned herself, think of that … 'It was an accident, a terrible accident,' she muttered fiercely. 'It *was*'" (80). The text holds back from finishing Irene's thought, but the silence created by the hyphen points nonetheless to Irene's desperate and disavowed fear that *she* pushed Clare. Larsen, however, does not confirm her fear. *Passing* provides no proof to establish what *really* happened to Clare, just as there is no proof of Clare's intentions towards Irene, Brian, Bellew, or anyone she encounters during the course of the novel. The final scene implies

that "what really happened" to Clare is less the matter than Irene's tortured attempts to reconstruct for herself a pleasant, respectable story that can conceal the possibility that she has murdered her childhood friend.

Irene is still certain of what the final interpretation will be, and she reads that correctly enough—a "strange" and "authoritative" man rules Clare's death the result of "misadventure" (82). But more importantly, the text suggests that when it matters most, even when it is a matter of life and death, getting at the central truth of a person or an act may well be impossible. Irene's protests that Clare's death "*was*" an accident illuminate little but her desire for that to be true. Larsen has already shown that race is situational, dependent on need and circumstance, as are marriage, class, and the intimacy of friendship. The novel's final tangle of Irene's intense repressions reveals the rarity of identifiable and certain interpretations of any event. Identity is situational, but so is truth. The text formalizes not only the radical uncertainty or even impossibility of determining truth from surface, but also the comforting certainty we allow ourselves to bring to our attempts to read those surfaces. If Forster's restrained aesthetic allows for the eruption of powerful desires within acknowledged (and grieved) cultural constraints, Larsen's restraint tries to teach readers the folly of approaching any text as though it could possibly be clearly directed. The "delicious" effect of Larsen's "intensely restrained" text is how it makes *readers* unreliable.

Which raises an important potential counterargument for this chapter. I have argued that *Passing* has provoked readers, since its publication, to create totalizing readings that the novel itself critiques. Its earliest readers claim Clare, the "vogue" of

Harlem, and the tale of the tragic mulatta as the novel's "real" concerns. Mid-century readers dismiss the novel's innovation, arguing that it is "really" an embrace of the conservative politics and material possessions of the black bourgeoisie. More recent readers, alert to Irene's paranoia and repression, have engaged an extended debate on what the text is "really" about—race, marital strife, class, sexuality, and, most convincingly, all of them at the same time. My chapter has shown how all of these readings depend to some degree on the desire for legibility and the principle that texts contain truths that can be unearthed, an idea on which *Passing* casts significant doubt. A reasonable reader, however, might well ask whether this chapter isn't doing something similar—isn't this also an argument about what the text is "really" about? Couldn't I be making the same mistake of insisting that I have uncovered the truth beneath *Passing*'s beguiling surfaces?

The short answer is yes. I am arguing that my reading does more to account for what I'm calling the novel's restrained aesthetic than those that have come before. This, after all, is central to the act of literary interpretation. Readers seek to find the best possible answers to the questions a text provokes, building on previous work (occasionally correcting "misreadings") in order to unearth the truth. However, in this instance, I am not suggesting that I have hit bedrock, to extend Carr's surface/depth metaphor. I am arguing that there *is* no bedrock. What lies under the surfaces of Larsen's novel is not the truth about race, marriage, desire, or class. Rather, Larsen's novel is concerned with the fundamental inability of human beings to correctly identify the authentic meaning of any text, including the self. The novel shows Irene, again and again, that she cannot trust what she sees. Irene states repeatedly, moreover, that interpretation

is not a matter of looking, that even a careful, expert reader cannot divine definite markers of race, desire, or intent hiding beneath the skin or behind the eyes. These are all things that cannot be registered. *Passing* demonstrates the degree to which Irene can pass even with herself, urging her mind away from the sight of her hand on Clare's arm. What lies beneath the surface is yet another surface.

Larsen does more than explore the yearning and fate of a captivating tragic mulatta. She goes beyond critiquing what she sees as the performative, rigid snobbery and repression of Harlem's middle class. Her novel contains more than destabilizing explorations of race or class or marriage or sexuality. *Passing* is "really" about the radical uncertainty that underpins every act of interpretation human beings attempt. Larsen explores the deeply unsettling idea that reality is always contingent, always unknowable. Her novel argues that we all pass, all the time, that there is no "real" fundamental truth waiting to be discovered. In that way, *Passing* is "really" modernist.

CHAPTER IV

"SHE WAS AWARE OF VIOLENCE, BE SURE": RESTRAINT, VIOLENCE, AND AGENCY IN ELIZABETH BOWEN'S *THE LAST SEPTEMBER*

A reading of Elizabeth Bowen's restrained modernism begins, oddly enough, with aggression. In "What Jane Austen Means to Me," Bowen makes what she calls her "aggressive" argument for the "formidability" of her nineteenth-century literary forebear. She expresses frustration with those who praise Austen for the way that *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* offer readers "an escape from the violences of today … soothingly remote from … harsh realities" (225). Bowen is less interested in the "delicious, dainty, *miniature* little world" these readers praise than in the "formidable artist" working "beneath her smiling guise" (225). That formidability proceeds, Bowen argues, from engagement, however controlled, with the very "violences" and "harsh realities" Austen's readers claim her novels escape:

> Strength—and what a strength had Jane!—comes from the acceptance of place, of time, and also of the certain rules of Society … At the outset, I spoke of her as formidable—this, to me, seems a thing that an artist should be. If this quality in her is overlooked, that may be because of the very quality I would most gladly learn from her—restraint. She was aware of violence, be sure. (229-30)

Bowen makes an explicit connection between authorial strength and the acceptance of cultural, temporal, and spatial limitations. She argues that an author does not have to explode form or defy cultural expectations in order to produce worthy, challenging work. This suggests that while she admires High Modernist writers like James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, she also esteems and even intentionally emulates

authors like the "calm, lucid, mannerly, and detached" Austen (225).[18] Moreover, her respect for Austen stems from an oblique awareness of the violence at work in her novels beneath what Bowen describes as their "smiling guise" of "lavender and lace" (225). Bowen's essay hints at the subtle violence with which woman novelists must perhaps always contend, violence attendant to the forms they inherit from men as well as the "place," "time," and "certain rules of Society" of which they are always aware.

Bowen's argument for Austen's formidable restraint counters those who would regard Jane Austen as a creature of lavender and lace, but it also provides a way to think through how restraint, violence, and strength shape her 1929 novel *The Last September* and its critical reception. Violence certainly threatens the characters and spaces of Bowen's novel, which is set in Cork County, Ireland, in 1920, during the height of the Irish War for Independence. "Sinister" British lorries driven by the Black and Tans and members of the British Army circle the Anglo-Irish Big House where Lois Farquar, the novel's protagonist, dances down avenues with British soldiers, and the Naylors, Danielstown's owners, scrupulously avoid admitting to themselves the isolation and vulnerability of their predicament or the fact of their imminent dispossession. Marda Norton, their Anglo-Irish guest, underscores the willed blindness of the Anglo-Irish: "'How far do you think this war is going to go? Will there ever be anything we can all do except not notice?'" (117). The countryside is alive with rumors of guns in the plantations and members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) planning ambushes.[19]

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[18] In "James Joyce," Bowen defends the excesses of *Finnegan's Wake* and its attempt to create readers who are "affected, profoundly, instead of being informed" (244). In "A Matter of Inspiration," she cites the post-war work of Hemingway and Faulkner as evidence of the "re-animation" of the English language (267).

[19] The Irish Republican Army is descended from the Irish Volunteers, a voluntary army developed during the debate on Irish Home Rule that participated in plans to stage the Easter Rising in 1916 and saw their in

Bowen sets her novel, its characters, and the colonial symbol of the Big House in which they live on the edge of historical oblivion—during the struggle for independence, "nearly two hundred Irish country houses were destroyed as the symbols of a colonizing force, sometimes without consideration for the politics of their owners" (Krielkamp 6). The Anglo-Irish way of life is about to come to an end, but Bowen is less interested in charting the chaos that follows that end than anatomizing and exploring the crisis of indecision, anxiety, and identity that unfolds in the moments before the end falls and the houses burn. Bowen holds her novel restrained at the precipice of the modernizing forces of revolution and imperial disintegration, charting its surreal, menacing, and queer landscape.

Like Forster and Larsen, Bowen also chooses to explore a restrained subjectivity. Though Lois is on the cusp of maturity at the age of nineteen, she displays a troubling self-consciousness and reticence to accept the consequences of that maturity and fulfill the conventions of the female *bildungsroman* Bowen erects around her. Lois knows from her experience reading novels (possibly those of Austen herself) that she should want to marry Gerald Lesworth, the British soldier with whom she dances down Danielstown's avenues: "She would have loved to love him" (71). She knows that she should look forward with excitement to learning who and what she is, but she continuously steps back

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Irish politics as the "guarding of Irish national rights" (McKenna 12). See also McKenna 4-6, 42-43. Moreover, the countryside is also alive with the lorries and brutish behavior of the Black and Tans, recruited from Britain in 1919 (many of them World I veterans): "The popular memory of the war in 1920 and 1921 is one of burning villages and rampant Black and Tans" (Hopkinson 79). Bowen depicts their rampancy in a scene when Lois and Livvy are nearly driven off the road by a Black and Tan lorry. In 1920 the British government recruits more soldiers from Britain to serve in the Auxiliary Division to be sent to active IRA Areas. Like the Black and Tans, the Auxiliaries are associated with damage to civilian property, loss of civilian life, and poor discipline: "Fifty-nine Auxiliaries were declared unsuitable in the first three months of 1921 and there were nearly forty cases of destruction associated with them" (Hopkinson 50). Both the Black and Tans and the Auxiliary Division are recruited to swell the ranks of the Royal Irish Constabulary, the national Irish police force answerable to Britain (see note below).

from this knowledge, fearing fixation and finality: “She didn’t want to know what she was, she couldn’t bear it” (83). Moreover, her status as an Anglo-Irish woman living on the “shrinking islands” of the Irish Big House gives her reason to fear or be frustrated by conclusions, as the spaces and stories available to her grow continuously smaller: “‘How is it that in this country that ought to be full of such violent realness there seems nothing for me but clothes and what people say? I might as well be in some kind of cocoon’” (66). Barred from the violence and “realness” she senses all around her and unfulfilled by the paths she sees towards maturity, she remains suspended in the novel, held and holding back from any definite conclusion. Lois simply does not “develop” according to the narrative of the *bildungsroman*.

The noticeable restraint of Bowen’s second novel and its protagonist has long been of interest to critics, but it has not until recently been interpreted as anything approaching “formidable.” The novel’s early critics often focused their analyses on a negative critique of *The Last September*’s lack of development. A *New York Times* reviewer writes in 1929 that the novel fails to “reach an intensity that would bring [it] into the category of deeply felt emotions” (“Elizabeth” 63). It does not go far enough and as a result, “the reader is not stirred emotionally” (63). In a review for *The Saturday Review* (1929), L.P. Hartley argues that Bowen frustrates a reader’s need to comprehend the entirety of a character’s identity: “[Bowen’s characters] lack purpose, or the majority do: one cannot see their drift, one cannot tell what they want. They have gestures and self-manifestations, tricks and traits of character, but in the absence of a continuous, dominating, recognizable intention, these intimations of identity are like the moss that will not stay on the rolling stone” (184). Without “intention” to shape and confirm

"intimations of identity," Hartley argues, the novel does not do enough to fulfill the reader's demands for revelation and closure: "the intense interest and significance of the individual pages is not enough … one should close a novel with the sense that something has been demonstrated, and I do not think one feels it here" (185). These early reviewers cast Bowen's formal and thematic restraint as a lack. They read the novel's failure to "demonstrate" as evidence of Bowen's youth and relative inexperience rather than her intentional aesthetic exploration of a cultural moment bound up with anxiety and even paralysis over what happens when "intimations of identity" can no longer be confirmed and history takes its next inevitable step.

More recent critics, however, have worked to recast Bowen's restraint as emblematic of her formal innovation and participation in the modernist project. Andrew Bennett reads Bowen's resistance to change as her response to the "fundamental crisis" of WWI's trauma and a reflection of her conviction that in the post-war era romantic love is no longer a viable solution for women, whose only recourse is to embrace a modernist "changelessness" of plot and romantic status (36). Jed Esty places *The Last September* in a group of modernist novels set on the colonial periphery—including Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and Woolf's *The Voyage Out*—whose *bildungshelden* cannot grow up. Esty argues that *The Last September* formalizes the "historical contradiction" between antiprogressive time of Anglo-Irish history and the progressive conventions of the coming-of-age novel" (184), hitching Lois's *bildungsroman* to the belated fate of the Anglo-Irish and the Big House. The result, Esty argues, is a modernist "metabildungsroman" that draws attention to the faulty progressivist logic of empire and its literary representations (164). Both of these

compelling readings recast Bowen's restraint as her contribution to the modernist project of radically destabilizing notions of narrative and epistemological certainty.

This chapter extends these arguments, focusing on Bowen's innovation within the genre of the female *bildungsroman* more specifically. It situates Lois's queer, restrained subjectivity within the history of the nineteenth-century female *bildungsroman*'s inherent gender violence and repression as well as the modernist response to it, arguing that Bowen's innovation *depends* on her restraint of the violence that modernists like Woolf deploy to deal with the genre's failures. This does not mean, however, that Lois's unconventional *bildungsheld* has no destabilizing effects on the novel's form. Instead, the complex subject position Bowen has chosen to examine—restrained by genre, political forces, and gender politics—leads to dislocating formal ruptures, moments when Lois goes missing from the text to an undisclosed and unrepresented "nowhere." Bowen's own restraint in representing that space creates a meta-textual and modernist awareness of the limits of language and knowledge and the untenability of certain literary forms to account for or correct the errancy of queered subjectivities. As in the fiction of Forster and Larsen, Bowen's approach demonstrates that restraint can confer power, agency, and innovation. The novel gets at the complexity of negotiating desire and identity through the very forces of escape, violence, restraint, and agency that Bowen admires in Austen's work. Exploring the edge of the polite, the mannerly, and the disintegrated, *The Last September* is interested, as Bowen writes of Austen's work, in depicting "life with the lid on and what happens when the lid comes off" ("English Novelists" 45).

The *bildungsroman*, from its eighteenth-century beginnings, has been invested in systems of cultural restraint. It is a disciplinary genre that allows its subjects the freedom to explore and even make mistakes before they bend to the will and requirements of bourgeois expectations. In doing so, *bildungshelden* help to establish what Franco Moretti calls "the comfort of civilization" (16). A democratic and capitalist bourgeois society can tolerate a certain amount of conflict and errancy before requiring that all subjects submit to the norm. Moreover, the assimilating process the *bildungsroman* presents can only be considered truly successful when subjects accept discipline and constraint as necessary to their happiness and even their identity: "Thus it is not sufficient for modern bourgeois society simply to subdue the drives that oppose the standards of normality. It is also necessary that … one perceives the social norms as *one's own*. One must *internalize* them and fuse external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity" (Moretti 16). This is the ideological work the classic *bildungsroman* performs: disciplining its subjects (and its readers) to look with satisfaction on the projected journey of a *bildungsheld* from youthful errancy that is restrained and molded to "symbolic legitimation" of the bourgeois social order (16).

The female *bildungshelden* of nineteenth-century writers like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë must contend with a deeper and more aggressive cultural restraint. Built into the structure of the female *bildungsroman*, because it is built into the structure of the cultural systems of which the novels are a part, is a gendered violence that changes the notions of what it means to progress and mature. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, editors of *The Voyage In*, allow that both the male and female *bildungsromane* are "marked by clashes of unique human possibility with the restraints of

social convention," but point out that while men struggle with *how* to create their ideal selves, women must try to establish the mere possibility that they might have significant selves in the first place: "In fact, while male protagonists struggle to find a hospitable context in which to realize their aspirations, female protagonists must frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever" (6-7). Susan Fraiman argues, for example, that though Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* does settle Elizabeth Bennet in a happy marriage by the novel's end, it also inevitably leads to the diminishing of her own intellectual gifts as she turns to the business of being a wife: "Enabled by her father, this unique Bennet daughter sets out with a surplus of intellectual confidence and authority which, in the course of the novel, she must largely relinquish … the narrative that passes Elizabeth from one father to another … takes her from shaping judgments to being shaped by them" (63). This is the violence Bowen sees under the "smiling guise" of a new engagement. And yet, Elizabeth, like the male *bildungsheld*, must come to accept her place, and again like the male protagonist, the novel suggests that despite her bright intelligence and potential beyond marriage, she has internalized the sense of her value as being inherent to her success at finding a husband. She feels joy at the marriage rather than loss at the possibilities she must relinquish.

Not all female *bildungshelden*, however, can internalize their place in the world, and their awareness of the restraints placed on them alters the genre, particularly beginning in the late nineteenth century. Susan Rosowski argues that such novels should not be termed novels of "apprenticeship" or "education" but what she calls "novels of awakening":

> The direction of awakening follows what is becoming a pattern in literature by and about women: movement is inward, toward greater self-knowledge that leads in turn to a revelation of the disparity between that self-knowledge and the nature of the world. The protagonist's growth results typically not with "an art of living," as for her male counterpart, but instead with a realization that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible: it is an awakening to limitations" (49).

Female protagonists in these novels do not have access to the cultural expansiveness or journeys abroad that figure in so many male *bildungsromane* like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.[20] Instead, female protagonists of the "novel of awakening" turn within and discover deep reservoirs of strength, knowledge, and desire only to find no place outside of themselves to develop those attributes or put them to use. There is nowhere for them to expand. They "awaken" to knowledge of restraint, and often their experience of that restraint leads them to violent ends. In the five novels Rosowski considers—*Madam Bovary, The Awakening, My Mortal Enemy, Daughter of Earth,* and *Middlemarch*—Emma Bovary, Edna Pontellier, and Myra Henshawe die, Marie Rogers has her marriage and life's work destroyed by novel's end, and Dorothea Brooke finds her ability to extend into the world only through a marriage that diminishes her. Awareness of restraint does violence to their lives: "Each [novel] presents a resolution only at great cost to the protagonist" (Rosowski 68).

One modernist response to the predicament of the female *bildungsheld* is to abandon resolution as a requirement and even embrace failure. Moretti argues that

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[20] Suzanne Howe, for example, in one of the first critical accounts of what she termed the "apprenticeship novel," argues that "Going somewhere is the thing. And there—in all sorts of tempting variety—is your story" (1).

literary failures occur “when a form deals with problems it is unable to solve” (243). By the twentieth century, Gregory Castle argues, it has become apparent to modernist writers that the *bildungsroman* solution to the problem of female destiny is no longer adequate: “That modernist *Bildungsromane* so frequently deal with failure suggests a critique of the cultural conditions … which deprive individuals of the freedom to think critically about their identities and how they relate to structures of power” (26). A modernist critique of that failure occasionally takes the form of violence done to the genre itself. For instance, for the first two thirds of Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*, Rachel Vinrace follows the script laid out for young female bourgeois subjects—indeed, much of the novel focuses on a series of figures who work to shape her unschooled, uninitiated mind and body. On a trip to South America, she becomes engaged to Terence Hewet, and though this should be the climax of her story, Woolf provides her character an additional hundred pages to “think critically” about what she has agreed to do with her life.

Almost immediately, Rachel senses the personal sacrifices marriage will require of her: “It seemed to her now that … she wanted many more things than the love of one human being—the sea, the sky. She turned again and looked at the distant blue, which was so smooth and serene where the sky met the sea; she could not possibly want only one human being” (286-87). She has not internalized the dictum to marry. Instead, the engagement itself is a moment of awakening to both the limitations of her impending marriage and the potential liberations of her desires. Rachel even goes so far as to declare the engagement over: “‘Let’s break it off, then’” (287). However, language cannot accomplish her freedom. Language is what bound them together initiallly, and rather than separate them, Rachel’s declaration forms a kind of glue: “The words did more to unite

them than any amount of argument. As if they stood on the edge of a precipice they clung together. They knew that they could not separate; painful and terrible it might be, but they were joined forever" (287). That could be the end of Rachel's story. She could be like Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, a "substantive and rare … creature … absorbed into the life of another" (611). Rather than accept those constraints, however, Woolf ushers Rachel into an alternate world of fever dreams keyed to her anxieties about gender and marriage. When Terence visits Rachel's sick room and kisses her in an attempt to rouse her, she opens her eyes but sees only "an old woman slicing a man's head off with a knife" (321). Rachel's fever transforms the tender kiss of her doting fiancée to a disturbing vision of murderous female violence, imbuing an "old woman" with the strength and power to cut off a man's head. Her strange vision also raises questions about her true feelings for Terence, suggesting the depth of her frustration with the constraints of their engagement and her desire to cut off the patriarchal logic of the bourgeoisie. She dies shortly after responding with "fatigue" and "perplexity" when Terence tells her that life is "wretched" without her (334). Her death allows her, as Castle argues, to "opt out of the dialectic of romance and marriage, of conventional bourgeois existence generally" (231), and many critics agree that Woolf does violence here to the genre, to systems of Western knowledge and thought, and to the patriarchy that causes women such "fatigue" and "perplexity."[21] Woolf declares, by embracing failure and halting Rachel's young life on the threshold of its climax, that the *bildungsroman* itself is no longer adequate to

[21] See Friedman and DuPlessis. It should be noted, however, that despite allowing that Woolf's novel works to "combat the ideologies of the subject and subjectivity that had been … consolidated within educational systems and political institutions" (193), Castle sees Woolf's novel and its interest in the classic notion of Bildung as "dialectical harmony" as a modernist revival and continuation of the genre (192).

account for female desire and experience. She would rather her protagonist die than subject her desires to the will of a husband. This is an indictment of the form itself.

Rather than have Lois Farquar awaken to the violence of an impending marriage and then die to avoid it, Bowen creates a character who is already aware, from the outset, of the constraints binding her, and whose response is not death but rather a subtle restraint of her own from committing to any finished identity. Standing on Danielstown's steps to welcome Hugo and Francie Montmorency as the novel opens, Lois knows she represents youth and a particular brand of young womanhood more than she represents a unique human personality: "In those days, girls wore crisp white skirts and transparent blouses clotted with white flowers; ribbons threaded through with a view to appearance, appeared at the shoulders. So that Lois stood at the top of the steps cool and fresh; she knew how fresh she must look, like other young girls, and clasping her elbows tightly behind her back tried hard to conceal her embarrassment" (3). Lois is a savvy reader, aware of what it means for her to stand "crisp" and "fresh" on the front steps of Danielstown. She has seen the effect of her former classmate, Viola, committing fully to that role: "her hair was in place already, woven into her personality … Viola must have played at being a schoolgirl just as Lois would have to play at being a woman" (68). Lois knows that she is like a young woman in a *bildungsroman*, announced and presented as ready for marriage.

Indeed, Lois filters a large part of her experience through her reading of novels. When Gerald kisses her, she compares the kiss to those she has read of and finds her experience wanting: "She could not remember, though she had read so many books, who spoke first after a kiss had been, not exchanged, but—administered. The two reactions,

outrage, capitulation, had not been her own" (223). Lois's response suggests the depth of her savvy reading of bourgeois courtship—she knows a kiss is not meant to be a matter of "exchange" in which the female body has equal agency but rather the opportunity of a man to "administer" the symbol of his claim on that body. She also knows that novels of marriage offer her two appropriate responses to a kiss: "outrage" or "capitulation." She feels neither, which only emphasizes her awareness of youthful femininity as a performance that she cannot easily emulate. Nor does she feel she has an easy or obvious option to behave differently, as her position at Danielstown dictates what she means and how she acts: "She could not hope to explain that her youth seemed to her also rather theatrical and that she was only young in that way because grown-up people expected it. She had never refused a role … For to explain that … would, she felt, be disloyal to herself, to Gerald, to an illusion both were called upon to maintain" (40). This is a rather sophisticated understanding of bourgeois femininity as performance, but it goes deeper, to suggest that the significance of Anglo-Irish bourgeois culture itself, represented by the roles each of its subjects must play, is no more than an "illusion" that all work to maintain. Lois may be "loyal" to this illusion to the point that she wants to accept her part in it, but her awareness is still a destabilizing force in the novel.

If Lois had "never refused a role" and accepted the "completion" that her friend Viola seems to enjoy without question, the course of Bowen's novel would be quite different. However, beginning early in the novel, Lois's destabilizing self-consciousness about the roles she knows she should play leads to formal narrative disruptions when she encounters evidence of the political and cultural foreclosures those roles entail. With each disturbing encounter, Lois disappears briefly from Danielstown and goes beyond the

reach of Bowen's narrative representation, removed to an unseen, undocumented "nowhere." These conspicuous absences formalize Lois's awareness of her political, cultural, and personal predicament, drawing attention to the stability of the novel itself as an agent of the bourgeois "illusion." Whereas Esty's "metabildungsroman" casts doubt on the progressive logic of empire and enacts its slow grind to a halt, Lois's departures from the novel enact the encroaching dispossession of the Anglo-Irish while also exploring the queer agency of one subject trapped inside. *The Last September* explores Lois's complicated, restrained, self-aware subjectivity as it challenges the stability and futurity of genres like the female *bildungsroman*, displaying a modernist skepticism in the futurity of traditional forms.

Lois's first disappearance follows a dislocating, silencing encounter with the potential violence of the war being waged around her and its spatial consequences for the Anglo-Irish. Her confrontation shakes her out of the willed avoidance of knowledge displayed by Lady Naylor early in the novel as she tries to reassure her dinner guests and herself that a looming disintegration has nothing to do with them:

> "From all the talk, you might think almost anything was going to happen, but we never listen. I have made it a rule not to talk, either … Oh yes, Hugo, it's all very well to talk of disintegration … But one does wonder sometimes whether there's really much there to disintegrate … I daresay there may have been … And if you talk to the people they'll tell you the whole thing's nonsense: and after all what is a country if it isn't the people?" (31; ellipses in text)

As Lady Naylor works here to defuse the discomfort of her guests early in the novel and assure them that Danielstown and its occupants remain secure in their positions, she reveals the complexity of England's imperial occupation and her own perilous place in it. As Esty notes, the colonial project requires "twin and contradictory goals," that cultural, national, and racial "difference" be both "annihilated and integrated" (269). The logic of empire argues that all Irish people are actually British, thus eradicating difference and establishing a common identity. At the same time, however, it incorporates that difference into the very fabric of colonized Ireland, creating a hierarchy with the Anglo-Irish Ascendency at the top. This hierarchy is built into the construction of the "Anglo-Irish" identity—"Anglo" comes first. Lady Naylor, along with Sir Richard, the Trents, and other members of the Ascendency, cannot or will not see this second, more divisive fact of colonization.[22] She thinks of herself as Irish (when discussing an interesting Irish friend of hers, she remarks, "But then our people *do* think"; 31), accepting the annihilation of difference between herself and those who do not live in the Big House as fact. Thus, she cannot see that there is indeed very much "there to disintegrate"—that her body, her friends, and her house would actually comprise the matter that decolonization would disintegrate, the connective tissue imposed by outsiders and never fully integrated. Her refusal to comprehend her perilous position is reflected in her confidence that "the people" believe that colonial disintegration is "nonsense," that the rebellion is merely the "'way the young ones do be a bit wild'" rather than a war of liberation and decolonization designed to make sure there's nothing left of the British to disintegrate (31). Moreover, Bowen formally inserts doubt into Lady Naylor's dismissal of disintegration. Two sets of

[22] For more on the inability, willed or not, of the Anglo-Irish to see and know their predicament, see Crowell.

ellipsis open up gaps in her logic, hinting at the doubt that underlies her argument that a discussion of disintegration is moot.[23] This discussion of disintegration hints at the certainty with which Lady Naylor and those like her believe themselves to be integrated into the history and culture of Ireland, the way they hold back from accepting the truth that things are indeed, as Laurence argues, "closing in" (28). At the same moment, the text casts doubt on that certainty, highlighting the complexity and contradiction of the Anglo-Irish position.

Lois's initial engagement with the war being waged around her is excitement over the possibility of guns being buried in Danielstown's plantation. She chastises Michael Keelan, one of the plantation's workers, for failing to confront the men he saw digging in the plantation late at night. His answer, which suggests the risk in challenging men with shovels late at night in the middle of a war, earns him derision. She criticizes him for the fact that he "'fled back the way he had come'" (29). Both her excitement about the possibility of finding guns on the plantation and her sense that she would have the authority to question men on the plantation late at night suggest that she still believes, at least initially, in her ability to play a role in the events unfolding around Danielstown. She can still intrude her own narrative of youth and courtship into the contested space of the Irish Big House, dancing down the demesne's avenue with a British soldier in the evening. She can still approach the plantation through the imaginative stories of gothic romances, not the nervous stories of ambushes at crossroads. Indeed, on her evening walk through Danielstown's plantation early in the novel, she does not fear the possibility of

[23] Neil Corcoran's "Discovery of a Lack: *The Last September* (1928)" makes a thorough and convincing argument about the significance of narrative gaps in the novel, although he does not focus on Lois's brief absences. I work in the chapter to extend his interest in Bowen's "lacunae" to focus on the implications of Lois's repeated departures from the narrative.

encountering the members of the IRA. She casts the dark paths she walks as the plot lines of ghost stories. On a walk down the very avenue where she and Gerald had danced, she turns down a "shrubbery path … solid with darkness" and tries to embody the role of the brave heroine:

> Laurels breathed coldly and close: on her bare arms the tips of the leaves were timid and dank, like tongues of dead animals. Her fear of the shrubberies tugged at its chain, fear behind reason … She went forward eagerly, daring a snap of the chain, singing, with a hand to the thump of her heart: dramatic with terror. She thought of herself as forcing a pass. In her life—deprived as she saw it—there was no occasion for courage, which like an unused muscle slackened and slept. (41) [24]

Approaching her fear as a form of entertainment, Lois imagines herself as the heroine of a gothic story. She walks down a dark path, seeing "tongues of dead animals" instead of the tips of laurel leaves. Bowen's chain metaphor makes Lois a playful, brave dog "tugged" backward by her fear but moving forward nonetheless, dauntless and "eager" to investigate. She enjoys the pleasurable thrill of going far enough towards the edge of the ordered world to be allowed to experience fear. She relishes the opportunity to be "dramatic with terror" and imagines herself as a heroine "forcing a pass" beyond the forbidding darkness. Moreover, she welcomes the opportunity to exercise the "muscle" of her courage against terror, having had little exposure to it.

Lois's conceptualization of the danger she faces on her walk emphasizes the surprising separation Danielstown's owners, occupants, and guests have from the

[24] Corcoran draws fascinating connections between the "laurels" brushing Lois's arms and Laura, Lois's deceased mother, who also haunts the text and in particular, Laurence.

ongoing and increasing IRA attacks in County Cork during the first six months of 1920: Coleman reports that in that time the IRA "destroyed 30 courthouses, 343 vacated Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) barracks, 12 occupied RIC barracks and caused damage to a further 104 vacated and 24 occupied police barracks" (69).[25] Moreover, by September of 1920, the month during which the novel takes place, the IRA's strategy was to employ smaller units of "flying columns" to ambush Black and Tan soldiers patrolling the countryside in their "sinister" lorries (Townshend 335-6). The tongues of dead animals and the metaphoric fear they engender in Lois are not all that threaten her on her walk. Moreover, she would not be the heroine in the story of the War for Independence, as Bowen herself acknowledges of the Anglo-Irish, whose contributions to Irish history in their desire to both "conquer" and "love" did violence to the country in which they settled: "[Anglo-Irish] exploitation of land and labour, repetitive, crippling blows to trade and industries … make the dire background of these hundred and fifty years" ("The Anglo-Irish" 176). Lois anticipates heroic contact with a terrifying specter, but she herself represents a group of people whose occupation of Ireland provokes the struggle for independence being waged around her. Given the decaying quality of both the Big Houses and the Anglo-Irish, Lois might more aptly be considered as a kind of demonic possession the IRA and its supporters are trying to exorcise.

To these two versions of the gothic—Lois's sensational expectation of ghosts and England's haunting possession of Ireland through the Anglo-Irish—Bowen adds a third.

[25] The RIC were the Royal Irish Constabulary, an armed force of Irishmen loyal to the British government who kept order throughout Ireland (except Dublin), which made them targets during the War for Independence: "The Irish War for Independence … was a struggle to remove any meaningful British presence from the daily lives of Irish citizens. The R.I.C. was the manifestation of British authority that Irish people encountered most regularly" (Lowe 79). See also McKenna 9.

The passage also evokes the gothic mode of the Big House novel, recalling in particular the threatened, victimized niece of Sheridan La Fanu's 1864 *Uncle Silas*. Orphaned when her father dies of a sudden illness, Maud Ruthyn, protagonist and narrator, moves to the decaying Big House Bartam-Haugh to live with her uncle, the villainous Silas. Imprisoned within the house and her room, she faces several occasions for courage, spending her nights awake waiting for an intruder to find his way to her bedroom through the woods surrounding the house. Unlike Lois, Maude is so familiar with fear and its demands on her courage that she can catalogue its various manifestations: "But the valley of the shadow of death has its varieties of dread … There are periods of incapacity and collapse, followed by paroxysms of active terror … I sometimes wonder how I carried my reason safely through the ordeal" (461). Her uncle's machinations threaten to dispossess Maud of her inheritance in addition to her life. Moreover, as Vera Krielkamp argues, the villainy of *Uncle Silas* is carried out not by faceless outsiders, but by the Anglo-Irish themselves: "threatening family presences, tormented villains living in the private hell of personal damnation … the traditional gothic specters become emblematic of ascendancy crimes" (106). Lois faces the same consequences in *The Last September*: dispossession of her status as a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the loss of her home, and even the loss of her life. Moreover, though the physical violence waged against the Anglo-Irish at the periphery of Bowen's novel is not carried out *by* the Anglo-Irish, Bowen's evocation of La Fanu's novel underscores the Anglo-Irish culpability in the creation of their own "private hell" and their folly in ignoring the consequences of that creation.

Lois's attempt to cast her walk as the story of her heroic confrontation with gothic terror is troubled by the intrusion of another character to challenge her for the role of protagonist: "Then steps smooth on the smooth earth; branches slipping against a trench-coat. The trench-coat rustled across the path ahead to the swing of a steady walker. She stood by the holly immovable, blotted out in the black, and there passed within reach of her hand, with the rise and fall of a stride, some resolute profile powerful as a thought" (42). Bowen's earlier passage dives into the playful metaphors of Lois's imagination, projecting her into a deliciously ghostly scenario in the part of the brave heroine. Once this mysterious figure arrives, however, somehow even less comprehensible than a ghostly apparition, Lois's place in the scene becomes less certain. No longer the protagonist forcing a pass, she becomes a quiet, disconcerted observer unable to recognize anymore what story she is in. Moreover, because the narrative is still focalized through her voice, it registers the interruption of her cogent story on the level of the word. Playful metaphors and imaginative scenarios give way to the bare registering of sense perceptions unadorned by figurative or imaginative language except for her final description of the figure itself as "some resolute profile powerful as a thought." Even that more powerful language paints a muddied picture—what does it mean to be powerful as a thought? The prose creates less a description of a human being than an impression of intent. Lois must turn from easy narration to uncertain observation.

Though Bowen does not explicitly identify the trench-coated figure as a member of the IRA, Lois immediately assumes the figure is there "because of Ireland … down from the mountains, making a short cut through their demesne" (42). Rather than be drawn in by this thought, she feels left out: "Here was something else that she could not

share" (42). She is as aware of not having a place in the war as she is of being expected to play a role as a young woman. In describing her as being "blotted out," the passage also symbolizes the desires of organizations like the Gaelic League at the time of the novel to rid the country of any outside influences on its language, culture, or politics. This included, as Julia McElhattan Williams argues, the Anglo-Irish, "regardless of Anglo-Irish individuals' claims to a share in the Irish national identity" (225). Williams cites as an example the work of Denis Patrick Moran, author of *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland*, who argued that the Ascendancy culture should and would be "'absorbed' into the Gaelic, Catholic culture of the Irish nation'" (qtd. in Williams 225). Thus, the trenchcoated figure striding across Danielstown's plantation "blots out" Lois, absorbing her attention but also making her indistinguishable from the darkness in which she stands while the figure takes up the full scope of the novel's attention. There is no place for her in the story of the Irish struggle for independence or in the story of a post-colonial Ireland.

Lois tries various methods to recover a voice and a central position in the narrative the figure has usurped. First, she tries speaking to the figure to confirm her existence and combat her sense of having been expunged: "she felt prompted to make some contact: not to be known of seemed like a doom of extinction" (42). She does not, however, find a voice to address the powerful figure. She cannot, she realizes, "conceive of her country emotionally," and thus she has nothing to say. After the figure passes her in "contemptuous unawareness," burning on the dark "an almost visible trail" of "intentness," she tries again to find for herself some kind of role to play by wresting control of the story from the powerful figure and telling it to the group of relatives and guests waiting for her inside the house: "She ran back to tell, in excitement" (43). Quite

quickly, however, she realizes she cannot tell her story: “But it was impossible to speak of this” (43). Walking “in a waver of shadow among the furniture” of the house, she feels blotted out here, too, and she knows that her audience will not allow her the authority of narrative control: “At a touch from Aunt Myra adventure became literary, to Uncle Richard it suggested an inconvenience; a glance from Mr. Montmorency or Laurence would make her encounter sterile. But what seemed most probable was that they would not listen” (43). Again, Lois is aware of the limitations placed on the voice of a young woman. She knows her story will be wrested from her, shaped and polished, its potential and fruitfulness ignored—or worse, she will be dismissed entirely.

This encounter initiates for Lois a series of dislocations. She tries to have an adventure in Danielstown’s plantation, but the trench-coated figure puts her into an entirely different story, one where she has no safe role to play. She turns to familiar gothic tropes but finds them inadequate to account for the “profile powerful as a thought” that stalks Danielstown’s plantation. She turns to the possibility of connecting with that figure but finds herself detached from Ireland’s political reality, “blotted out.” She turns to the possibility of taking possession of the narrative of her strange encounter, becoming the “I” in charge of her own somewhat sensational story of maturation (as in La Fanu’s *Uncle Silas*), but realizes that she has no agency to do so. There is no place within the space of Danielstown for her to assume control of her story, and the predicament of her historical position, astride the sinking island of the Irish Big House, prevents her from finding that agency outside of the house. Moreover, the simpler story of sensational gothic tension with which she began the scene, the child-like narration that is available to her, no longer seems adequate. She cannot rationalize what she has just experienced with

the story of Danielstown or the likely reception of its occupants to what she will tell. Her mute sense of her own complicated historical position prevents her from telling her story. It necessitates restraint. It holds her back. She keeps the events of her walk to herself and goes up to her room without saying goodnight.

Bowen formalizes Lois's sense of being eradicated and dislocated in the very next scene when Lois goes missing from the narrative. Gerald walks across the lawn of Danielstown's tennis courts, searching the Naylors' garden party for any sign of Lois. The narrative ranges over where guests are sitting, the number of tennis players, the discussion of matches. That the blind leisure of the Anglo-Irish party circuit no longer seems to quite suit Bowen's dislocated protagonist rings clear in the text: "Lois was nowhere" (45). She has disappeared, stepping out of the novel and into some no-place that Bowen declines to represent. These textual disappearances punctuate Lois's displacing encounters with stories that provide no space for her (as with the profile above and the revolution in Ireland) or that she cannot access. They destabilize her female *bildungsroman* by drawing attention to her desire and need to find a place outside of its constraints.

Moreover, these departures, beginning with the first, emphasize and even intensify the queerness of Lois's position at Danielstown and in Ireland generally in 1920. As critics have long noted, Bowen's novel is filled with characters who could be considered queer in both the specific, non-heterosexual and the more general, non-normative context of the word.[26] Laurence, Lady Naylor's intellectual nephew, laments

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[26] In the latter use of the term, I am drawing on Eve Sedgwick's argument that "the most exciting recent work around 'queer' spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and

his canceled trips to Spain and Italy with two different men and argues that sex between men and women is "irrelevant" (56-8). Lois confesses to Marda that she thinks "honeymoons are a great waste of traveling" and believes herself to be a "woman's woman" (145). Hugo Montmorency is more his wife's caretaker than husband: Lois, accidentally opening the door to their room, discovers not a scene of sexual intimacy, but Hugo rather dispassionately brushing Francie's hair. Lois and Marda laugh at the thought later and Marda argues that Hugo "couldn't be anything's father" (186). Moreover, the Naylors, themselves childless, seem to lead a similarly sexless lifestyle, although their relationship is less that of a caretaker to an invalid than of two independent humans coexisting. The queerness of the novel's characters is even coded to their physicality, as in this passage describing Marda's body: "She was tall, her back as she stood looking over the fields was like a young man's in its vigorous slightness. She escaped the feminine pear shape, her shoulders were square, legs long from the knee down" (114). Rather than presenting appealing roundness, Marda's body is angular, long, and conducts a "lightning attack" on the "integrity" of those who look at her, challenging the binaries of gendered bodies (114). It also represents an attack on the "integrity" of the Anglo-Irish future. The text suggests that the "feminine pear shape," with its attendant implications of reproduction and futurity, is something to "escape," and Marda's boyish slightness, square shoulders, and long legs suggest to Lois a kind of "sophistication" that for her "opens further horizons" (114).

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sexuality at all … Thereby the gravity … of the term "queer" itself deepens and shifts" (*Tendencies* 8-9). David Halperin makes a similar claim in *Saint Foucault*: "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (62).

Those horizons include a future unconstrained by compulsory motherhood, as well as the possibility of Lois having desire for Marda herself, not just her unusual life. As queer readings of the text have revealed, the novel presents a considerable body of evidence that Lois and Marda desire each other. When Marda urges Lois to join her in investigating the ruins of an old mill, her touch excites Lois suggestively: "Marda put an arm round her waist, and in an ecstasy at this compulsion Lois entered the mill. Fear heightened her gratification … 'Hate it?' said Marda. 'You'd make me do anything,'" Lois replies (180). Renée Hoogland argues that the "suggestive verbal detail" and "evocative imagery" of Lois and Marda's interactions, particularly in the mill, work to represent "an active female same-sex, or lesbian, eroticism" (81) and create for Lois an "initiation into a nonnormative, subversive sexuality" (86). Patricia Coughlan argues that Lois's relationship with Marda comprises not only the literal center but also the heart of Bowen's novel, and contends that the novel's bland, under-sexed heterosexual relationships prove to be distractions for the "real silken cord of the book drawing tight between" two female characters (111). Both of these readings assert that lesbian desire comprises a coherent, rebellious counternarrative in Bowen's novel.

More recent readings work to situate Lois's potentially deviant sexuality within the context of the threat she presents to Anglo-Irish identity and futurity. Ellen Crowell argues that *The Last September*, like other novels by Anglo-Irish women, equates the sexual rebellion of lesbian love with the national rebellion of abandoning Ascendancy responsibilities, citing as a source the tale of the "Ladies of Llangollen," two Anglo-Irish women who eloped to Wales in the late eighteenth century to live in a domestic partnership: "By choosing to 'elope' together, they pointedly rejected the cultural role for

which they were bred: the ascendancy lady, whose primary duty was to reinforce the Irish colonial enterprise (via marriage and reproduction …) against threats of indigenous revolution and internal cultural combustion" (205). Crowell argues that Lois and Marda's failed romance represents Bowen's acknowledgement that "female intimacy" is always "imbricated" with "exile," an experience neither woman is willing to accept (207). Elizabeth Cullingford argues that the "active lesbian desire" initiated by Marda and representative of the literally unproductive Anglo-Irish culture, creates the potential for a rejection of the "heterosexual security that intact houses offer" and a recognition of the inevitable Anglo-Irish extinction (293). Queer sexuality, in these readings, represents both a disintegration of the aim of the female *bildungsroman* (the stable house and family) as well as an acknowledgement of the imminent political disintegration that threatens the Anglo-Irish.

The text suggests a connection between Lois's textual disappearances and her queer threat to the futurity of the Anglo-Irish way of life and the genre of the female *bildungsroman*. Not only do these disappearances give representation to the fact that she is outside the events happening around her. They also, more radically, suggest that Lois goes missing not only because she is forced to, but also because she chooses to. Her disappearances, in other words, depict Lois exercising a queer agency within the increasing constriction of space available to her. Her second disappearance, for example, follows her trying on Marda's luxurious fur coat, simultaneously trying on the cultural resistance women like Marda symbolize:

> Her arms slipped silkily through; her hands appeared, almost tiny, out of the huge cuffs. 'Oh, the escape!" she thought, pressing her chin down, fading, dying into

> the rich heaviness. "Oh, the *escape* in other people's clothes!" And she paced round the hall with new movements: a dark, rare, rather wistful woman, elusive with jasmine. "No?" she said on an upward note: the voice startled her, experience was behind it. She touched the fur lightly, touched the edge of a cabinet—her finger-tips drummed with a foreign sensitiveness. And the blurred panes, the steaming changing trees, the lonely cave of the hall no longer had her consciousness in a clamp. How she could live! she felt. She would not need anyone, she would be like an orchestra playing all to itself. (109)

This is more than just playing dress up with an older woman's fur coat. Lois tries on Marda's subjectivity and it changes her sense of her own possibilities. Edwina Keown argues that the change is purely sexual and evocative of female orgasm: "Using erotic language Bowen simulates a sexual climax as Lois 'fading, dying into the rich heaviness' repeats the thought '*escape*' as a wistful desire and then an italicized satisfied achievement" (7). The "foreign sensitiveness" she feels as she wears the coat, as well as the "experience" she now hears in her voice could suggest, as Keown argues, that "the coat has deflowered her or more tantalizingly its owner, Marda, has" (8).

The passage also emphasizes Lois trying on the kind of resistance that she believes the coat authorizes her to express. She tries on the word "no," though she uses the more tentative interrogative rather than the firm imperative, and that plus the new sensations she feels in her body free her "consciousness" from the "clamp" of the Big House's claim. Moreover, her use of the metaphor of an "orchestra playing all to itself" suggests more an interest in solitary pursuits than an exploration of sexual connection with another person. If this passage does evoke sexual release, it seems more

masturbatory, a celebration of the sexual and liberatory possibilities of being alone. Having already confronted the figure "powerful as a thought" that announces her impending cultural irrelevance, this pleasurable performance of the powerful, intentional solitude of an unmarried, "elusive" New Woman suggests that perhaps there are other spaces a queer, boxed out subjectivity could occupy that would be for no audience, not even a literary one. Having experienced this "foreign sensitiveness" drumming underneath her skin, Lois again steps outside the bounds of the novel.

Thus, the anxiety Gerald feels at Lois's first disappearance becomes a different sort of proclamation at this second, more subversive absence. Gerald comes to Danielstown a short while later and finds her, again, gone, gone entirely: "But she was nowhere; the place was cold with her absence and seemed forgotten … Gerald told himself it was all very queer, quite; that it was disappointing about Lois" (124). Lois is not where she is supposed to be, the warm presence confirming and rewarding Gerald's desire. This is "queer," as Gerald has arrived at Danielstown with the patriarchal and imperial intention to claim Lois like foreign territory: "He had thought this out—seen ahead to this climax … Now he meant to go past the hands, to kiss the curve of Lois's cheek as she strained away, then stamp her uncertain mouth with his own certainty" (121). But Bowen's novel is not a place for British, masculine certainty. Nor does it conform to the scenarios Gerald has thought out. Indeed, when he does catch Lois and "stamp" her mouth, she cuts short his declarations of love and fervently wishes for access to some place outside his reach: "She shut her eyes and tried … to be enclosed in nonentity, in some ideal no-place perfect and clear as a bubble" (127). Esty reads this passage as an explicit exploration of Lois's political position—on the eve of the

dispossession of the Anglo-Irish and specifically the owners of Danielstown, Lois is actually on the verge of entering a political "no-place," of being divested of her Anglo-Irish political identity and reclothed in "nonentity." Esty's careful reading illuminates the political stakes for Lois in the novel. However, he removes the context for Lois's desire of oblivion. Her feeling that there is no future comes only with Gerald's sudden, aggressive claiming of her mouth. He kisses her, and she feels nothing: "just an impact, with inside blankness" (127). The moment, thus, in addition to being a stirring representation of Lois's political "nonentity," also suggests the powerful draw Lois has to be outside the norms of romantic love. Having tried on Marda's coat and experienced the sensations attendant to the power of the word "no," Lois responds to Gerald's imagined romantic climax with her own quiet resistance in the form of absence and then a deferring rejection.

Lois's interest in what Crowell terms "Ascendancy flight," and the pleasures of "some ideal no-place" inspired by Marda, affect Bowen's novel beyond Lois's brief, queer absences. They also register on the level of the word. The single most lyrical and unrestrained passage of the novel unfolds when Lois is alone with Marda in the guest room at the top of the house, almost at the exact center of Bowen's novel. Marda asks Lois why she stays at Danielstown and Lois claims she likes to "'be in a pattern … to be related; to have to be what I am. Just to *be* is so intransitive, so lonely'" (142). Lois appears to claim for herself the requirements of not only the Anglo-Irish sequence of parties, dinners, and blindness, but on a meta-level, the confining series of literary genres that require her to be what she is, in a pattern of male domination (the *bildungsroman*) and female terror and dispossession (the gothic and the Big House novel). However,

when Marda asks her whether she has traveled, the novel's prose, far from displaying the "cold" that Gerald feels, warms and even ignites:

> Of course she had not, she said, because of the War, and of course she would like to … She had never seen anything larger than she could imagine. She wanted, she said, to see backgrounds without bits taken out of them by Holy Families; small black trees running up and down white hills. She thought the little things would be important … She wanted to go wherever the War hadn't. She wanted to go somewhere nonchalant where politics bored them, where bands played out of door in the hot nights and nobody wished to sleep. She wanted to go into cathedrals unadmonished and look up unprepared into the watery deep strangeness … She wanted to see something that only she would remember … She liked unmarried sorts of places. (142-43)

Throughout this long passage, the word "she" rings out with authority, emphasizing not what Lois must do in service to something else, but what she has not yet done, what she thinks, what she likes, what she wants. These desires do not speak of being part of a pattern—part of the mechanistic system of novelistic genres that either grind the life out of women or lead them to choose death rather than subservience.[27] They speak of being outside the pattern required by long political strife, the allegiances and expected behaviors allied with being a part of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the life of the Big House. They speak of expansion, of going beyond the restrictions of the war. They speak of travel, exploration, mind-expansion. They take as their purpose "the little things."

[27] Emma Bovary gives vent to this reality while praying to give birth to a daughter: "A man is free, at least—free to range the passions and the world, to surmount obstacles, to taste the rarest pleasures. Whereas a woman is continually thwarted. Inert, compliant, she has to struggle against her physical and legal subjection" (101).

They speak of being without trajectory, without concern about wasting time or taking a wrong turn. Lois's travels, in her mind, will ask nothing of her spatially or temporally except perhaps the accumulation over time of private, specific experiences that belong to her alone—and, pointedly, travel to and occupation of "unmarried" places, where Lois would not have to be anything to anyone, where she could look, "unadmonished," at whatever she likes without the need to be "prepared" for what she will find. Lois goes beyond imagining Ascendancy flight to blatantly wishing for Danielstown to burn "in a scarlet night to make one flaming call on Marda's memory" (141), an example of the "fiery interiors" Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe as one of the hallmarks of a "distinctively female literary tradition" (xi). Lois, who could easily be viewed by her fellow Danielstown residents and guests as a kind of "madwoman in the attic" of this scene, threatens the integrity of the female *bildungsroman* by giving voice to her desire for spaces identified by little save her sense that they are "unmarried."

The failure of Lois's *bildungsroman*, then, while certainly tied to the conflict between the novel's genres and temporalities and their attendant critique of the progressive logic of empire, as Esty argues, also stems from Lois's exploration of the limits of her queer subjectivity, held restrained on the brink of marriage and political oblivion. In her quiet, insistent holding back from settling for romantic love as her friend Livvy Thompson does, she gains a measure of agency within the shrinking space afforded her and even, perhaps, a kind of maturity not measurable by the conventions of the female *bildungsroman*. The novel, in turn, engages in a modernist exploration of the limitations of form. Thus, when Gerald finds Lois at the same crossroads where she had her disorientating, dislocating encounter with the figure she assumed was there "because

of Ireland" and asks her to run away with him, Lois can use her own quiet agency and her desire for unknown spaces to hold herself back: "She thought of going, hesitating with delight, to the edge of an unknown high-up terrace, of Marda, of getting into a train" (280). She does not think of taking the plunge of marriage. Instead, she imagines the "delight" of "hesitating" up to the edge of a precipice, an "unknown high-up" place that would give her a new vista. Parallel to this image, she thinks of Marda, another unknown territory who has provoked delight in dangerous places before, as when they entered a ghostly mill together and Marda's arm around Lois's waist produced in Lois "an ecstasy" (180). Lois thinks of "getting into a train," another kind of precipice into an unknown (as of yet) world, evoking her confession to Marda earlier in the novel, in the privacy of Marda's room, that she wanted to see something "larger than she could imagine" (143).

These are less story lines than small moments of experience that expand outside of time, the realm of literary experimenters like Woolf, Faulkner, or Stein. Most importantly, the desire to see something larger than her imagination does not include Gerald, who she can imagine quite readily and whose hand in marriage she only truly considers when she feels she has no other options in life. When Lois fears that Marda is not interested in her, when a man in a mill points a gun at her and warns her to stick to Danielstown while she still has it, that is when she thinks, "I must marry Gerald" (141; 181). He exists in her mind as a lifeline rather than a life. Her awareness of this fact allows her a form of resistance. She finds, in this moment when Gerald asks her to commit to the fulfillment of her *bildungsroman*, the agency to reassume the woman of "experience" she became while wearing Marda's coat. She finds the agency to again

exercise the word “no,” this time with the imperative: “‘*No*,’ she cried, terrified, ‘why should I?’” (280; emphasis original).

Lois’s rejection of Gerald does not mean that the structures of imperial power or the systems of patriarchal constraint are uprooted. Nor does it mean that there are no costs to her desire for an identity outside those the novel offers to her. Awareness of outsider status is not comfortable, as Lois discovers. After she and Gerald break off their engagement, Lois disappears again, absent from the house when a small group of women from the British garrison come to drag her back into the novel’s spaces in order to get a look at the young woman who would put a stop to her own love story. The women arrive at the house and find her gone: “This morning she seemed to be nowhere; shouting did not produce her” (285). When Lois does come back onto the page, seeming to their eyes “unbecomingly bright,” the women remind Lois of the status she has given up within the community of the British garrison and underscore how her actions have placed her outside the bounds of convention: “Lois saw, with interest, a ripple of light down their dresses; they nudged each other. There must be something odd about her, really, if they had noticed; she must clearly be outside life” (291). Straying from expected paths can make one into an outsider, and the perspective of the outsider reveals the powerful community of women whose united support of conventions threatens and displaces those who question. A more devastating narrative consequence, however, is “The Departure of Gerald,” killed in an IRA ambush immediately after Lois refuses his proposal. Gerald’s death continues to draw attention to the unraveling of Lois’s *bildungsroman*, for if she will not consent to marry him, the genre offers him little reason to continue. The novel

foreshadows his death when Marda suggests the danger he courts by occupying the role of Lois's suitor in a female *bildungsroman*: "'If [Lois] does not love him, poor little thing, he is useless'" (119). Renée Hoogland also describes Gerald as "irrelevant to the heroine's psychosexual development" once Lois has rejected his offer (86). This context adds another layer to the troubling sense the British wives have, on hearing the news of his death, that "'it seems so odd that he really shouldn't have meant anything'" (294). Beyond critiquing the false honor in dying to protect what Bowen calls the "inherent wrong" of the English occupation of Ireland, the text suggests a profound skepticism of the totalizing mechanism of the *bildungsroman* and its narrative insistence that following, accepting, and internalizing the logic of marital inevitability is what confers meaning on a human life.

Lois's final destabilizing confrontation compounds the novel's skepticism regarding the meaning to be found in the stories we tell about life. Daventry, the shell-shocked British soldier, comes to inform her of Gerald's death, and she immediately considers escape, "wondering where to go, how long to stay there, how to come back" (297). Instead, before her final disappearance from the novel, Lois experiences a modernist epiphany with which surprisingly few critics contend: "She went into the house and up to the top to find what was waiting. Life, seen whole for a moment, was one act of apprehension, the apprehension of death" (297). Rather than confirming the conventions and values of the *bildungsroman* or the political myopia of the Anglo-Irish, Lois's revelation looking down on Danielstown's landscape suggests the pointlessness of marital trajectories or concerns over the "preservation," as Jocelyn Brooke puts it, of the "protective crust of life" (9). Lois sees, instead, the "ominous fissure" that penetrates all

the way to the center of modern and human experience: she recasts her own story as one of waiting, not for the ideal marital match or for the moment when she, like her friend Viola, will have her "hair in place" and be, due to the effect, "completed" (68), but for the final disintegration of mortality.

At the same moment, Bowen deflates the radical power of this revelation by burying it in the middle of a paragraph and immediately switching narrative focalization from Lois to Daventry. Lois apprehends death at the top of the house and as if the sight proves too threatening for the novel to consider for long, the text transfers its focus to Daventry "staring after [Lois] in memory" because "she was, after all, a woman" (297). The text follows him into the house and narrates him telling the Naylors of Gerald's death, leaving readers to decide for themselves how Lois interprets her vision and comes back down from the top of the house. Daventry, a shell-shocked wreck who is himself "outside of life," has more of a place in the story at this point than Lois. The text leaves her standing in the demesne's plantation, at the same crossroads where she encountered the trench-coated figure and ended her future with Gerald. Readers last glimpse her as Laurence, embarrassed at her predicament and "exposed" to what he "dreaded," brushes "awkwardly" past her in unconscious imitation of the trench-coated figure (299-300). She sends him on his way with a pointed nod to her stalled, marginal position: "Well, don't stop, Laurence. You're going somewhere, aren't you?" (299). Lois is not going anywhere, or at least, not the "where" she knows she was meant to go. She has queered and destabilized her trajectory of maturation and the only space left to her now is the crossroads where she first confronted the reality of her dislocation, first began to fall "outside of life" and the *bildungsroman* genre that rewards those who accept the insider

track. Without warning, the text jumps ahead two weeks to a conversation between Lady Naylor and another Big House owner, Mrs. Trent, and reveals Lois's permanent disappearance from Danielstown and the novel:

> "And tell me; how's Lois?"
>
> "Oh, gone, you know."
>
> "*Gone*? Oh, the school of art!"
>
> "Oh, no," said Lady Naylor, surprised. "Tours. For her French, you know. And to such an interesting, cultivated family; she is really fortunate. I never have been happy about her French. As I said to her, there will be plenty of time for Italian." (300-01).

This is the queerest moment in a novel bent on exploring the experience of residing on the edge of chaos. The novel empties itself of its own protagonist, describing her final whereabouts through a casual conversation between Lady Naylor and a woman who has, up to this moment, hardly appeared in the narrative. The most important question, then, to considering the novel's modernist intervention in and commentary on the female *bildungsroman* and the Anglo-Irish at this moment in history is how we should interpret what happens to Lois at the novel's end. Where does she go?

Critical consensus interprets this final disappearance, with a surprising degree of certainty, as liberation. Citing the immolation of Danielstown by revolutionaries in the novel's final pages, critics argue that Lois is now free to write her own story. Declan Kiberd claims that "there can be no doubt" that Lois is "free now to enter a world of risk and growth rather than languish in one of fear and inexperience" (143). Patricia Coughlan contends that Lois will now go on to find "purpose," having been released from the

“confined” world of the Big House (124). Esty calls Lois’s final whereabouts a “gesture of throwaway realism” and assumes that Lois “ends up living (and presumably maturing) in France” (183). Even Derek Hand, who argues that Lois’s absence from the novel’s conclusion “must be considered significant,” believes that it represents “the possibility that Lois can indeed escape to life, away from the deadening and ghostly ceremonies of Anglo-Irish existence” (72).

But Bowen’s novel demonstrates, much as Bowen herself insists about Austen’s fiction, that “escape” from the “violences of today” is not so easy for a queer, restrained subjectivity like Lois’s. Her departure from the text is more complicated than simple liberation. On one hand, the text suggests that Lois’s fate has been designed by Lady Naylor with an eye to the “cultivation” of sanctioned languages carried out under the supervision of an appropriate family. This seems like a reinscription of the repressing violence of the Austenian female *bildungsroman*. Lois has been sent off to try again and perhaps she, like Marda, will eventually be able to “bring something off,” have her fluidity “fixed and localized” by the “straight … gaze” of her future spouse (187). On the other hand, Lois could become an expatriate New Woman, living on the Left Bank and exploring her sense that she is a “woman’s woman.” Regardless, as Esty argues, youth cannot remain frozen forever. The clock ticking in the background of any life means that Lois will, eventually, grow up (Esty 183-4).

However, critical speculations about Lois’s whereabouts and debates about the future she eventually fashions for herself avoid contending with the implications of Bowen’s refusal to allow Lois any mode of direct representation in the novel’s conclusion. Lois does not make it to the novel’s final page, does not see Danielstown

burning, does not speak about her departure from the Big House or her thoughts on what comes next. Bowen suddenly and awkwardly evacuates her from her own story, leaving behind a narrative hole that has radical implications for how we think about the novel's identity politics and its modernism.

As noted above, Bowen's novel is not the only modernist female *bildungsroman* to remove its protagonist before the novel concludes. The *bildungshelden* of Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* both fail to reach the ends of their respective novels, succumbing in both instances to illnesses that shockingly destabilize and criticize the foundations of the *bildungsroman*. Bowen's restraint in keeping her *bildungsheld* alive creates a no less troubling interpretive crisis in *The Last September*'s final pages. It also draws comparisons to a similar narrative decision E.M. Forster makes at the end of *Maurice*, what Paul Peppis calls Forster's "homosexual *bildungsroman*." Having chosen to depart England with his male lover, Alec Scudder, Maurice, like Lois, disappears from the novel, "leaving no trace of his presence except a little pile of the petals of the evening primrose" (246). He and Alex will retreat to the utopian space of England's "greenwood," where they will be safe. Peppis surveys critical responses to this conclusion that argue that Forster's provision of an "escape" for his two lovers places him more in the realm of "utopia" than "modernism" (140). Peppis, however, argues that the novel's failure to depict the utopian space of the greenwood suggests a more radical and radically modernist skepticism: "Forster's *Maurice* declines to represent any utopian state, only gesturing toward it—Maurice and Alec end up nowhere … That Forster refuses to render the greenwood is critical, perhaps the novel's most significant formal feature; *Maurice* thus rejects not just social accommodation and

the genre of the *bildungsroman* but representation itself" (140). In this refusal, Peppis argues, Forster engages not just in a critique of England's inhumane treatment of homosexuals but also a deep skepticism in the possibility of fixed, totalizing identities: "Forster's refusal to represent the culmination of Maurice's *Bildung* discloses intensifying resistance to fixing the self in *any* hypostatic category" (140).

Similarly, Lois's unexpected absence from *The Last September*'s conclusion does more than suggest the failure of the female *bildungsroman* or literalize the dispossession of the Anglo-Irish. It formalizes Lois's continuing resistance to being finished, repeating and incorporating into the narrative fabric her strangely violent response earlier in the novel, when Francie, discussing Lois's attachment to Gerald with a disapproving Lady Naylor, causes Lois panic at the notion that she might be reducible to a single, nameable identity:

> "Just one thing, Myra—I think you're so wise, you're so perfectly right, as you know … But … as this thing can't *have* a course, really mustn't: is it quite fair to the young man? Because Lois is so very—"
>
> Here she broke off, scared by a terrible clatter in Lois's room. A pail had been kicked and some furniture violently shifted …
>
> For Lois, this had all been exceedingly difficult. There she was, caught in her bedroom, she had not the face to come out … But when Mrs. Montmorency came to: "Lois is very—" she was afraid suddenly. She had a panic. She didn't want to know what she was, she couldn't bear it: knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one. Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round life-long inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler? (82-3)

As in this passage, rather than give specific representation to Lois's final whereabouts, completing Francie's utterance, Bowen causes a distracting and "terrible clatter," shifting the "furniture" of her novel in its final pages in a violent immolation of the Big House and an erasure of the Anglo-Irish identity, replacing the house with "a silence that was to be ultimate" (303). But much like Lois's outburst leaves a crack in her water basin, Bowen's decision leaves a crack in the novel. Lois, whenever she sees the crack in her basin, wonders "what Lois *was*" (83; emphasis original). The text tells us that "she would never know" and describes it as her "victory" (83). Readers, faced with the crack into which Lois has fallen and forced to contend with the "victory" of her unresolved nonidentity, make the modernist discovery that identity is either a performance, as in the representations of young women in the novels Lois reads, or completely unknowable. This radically destabilizing notion predicts the work of queer theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, which Claire Colebrook describes as the attempt to "liberate the self from any *proper* end that would govern its becoming," arguing that "the human animal has a peculiarly special end: that of having no end, of being oriented to nothing proper" (31). It also moves the novel firmly into modernist territory.

Bowen does not offer her protagonist the option of a clear escape—the conditions of her sojourn in France, as described by Lady Naylor, suggest the far reach of the mechanisms that ensure female inscription in social norms. Bowen does, however, refuse to finish Lois's story. She refuses the final inscription of Lois into a fate that would "stop, seal, finish one." She refuses the "proper" narrative closure written into totalizing forms like the *bildungsroman*, leaving open the matter of Lois's fate. The novel ends with the only historical and representational fact available to Bowen: the burning of the Big

House. This climactic immolation literalizes Lois's dispossession and desire for "nonidentity" but also serves as a distracting blind for the novel's radical resistance to representing the final whereabouts of its protagonist. By restraining the novel from completion and from either embracing traditional norms or exploding them, Bowen radicalizes her protagonist's queer subjectivity and inscribes modernism's uncompromising uncertainty into the novel's deceptively refined prose and form. Like Forster and Larsen, Bowen has created a formidable and modernist challenge to the concept of totalizing identity and closure, and she has done so through an aesthetic of restraint.

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