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Sympathetic Constellations: Toward a Modernist Sympathy

by

Monica Jean Miller

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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Committee in charge:

Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair

Professor Ann Banfield

Professor Debarati Sanyal

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## Abstract

## Sympathetic Constellations: Toward a Modernist Sympathy

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

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This dissertation examines five modernist writers' revisions of sympathy in response to modernity's changing theories of subjectivity, knowledge, and ethics. I argue that the dominant narrative of modernism as an aesthetic movement that values impersonality over interpersonal interaction overlooks the modernists' interest in developing new theories of emotion and its transmission, an interest inseparable from their aesthetic and philosophical goals. The guiding principle of their explorations of emotion is not empathy, a relatively recent concept whose popularity reflects our contemporary valorization of embodiedness, affect, and fluidity, but rather sympathy, which is currently dismissed as an antique from the Scottish Enlightenment further encumbered by its importance to the Victorians, with their sentimentality and imperialism. In using sympathy as the starting material for their experiments with fellow feeling, however, the modernists not only situate themselves in an ongoing literary and intellectual tradition, but also emphasize sympathy's structure, distance, and social relationships over the inward-directedness of pity or the immediacy of compassion. The preservation of space is fundamental to sympathy: by maintaining rather than collapsing the distance between the sources and recipients of emotions, sympathy creates an opportunity for experimentation much like that opened by the indeterminacy of language. Taking advantage of this parallel, modernist writers revise sympathy through formal experimentation. The development of new conceptions of emotion and theories of aesthetics were not, as has been assumed, independent processes, but rather two intertwining threads of a complex story about the nature of subjectivity, representation, and experience.

I begin with two Bloomsbury writers, E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, because their revisions of sympathy are motivated largely by ethical differences with the Victorians. In "How to Connect," I trace Forster's development from a grudging Victorian liberalism to a quietist liberal irony that leads him to favor negative over positive liberty. To this end, he settles on a passive sympathy that demands tolerance of the other's point of view rather than attempts to improve her station. The next chapter's title, "Putting Ourselves In Mr. Ramsay's Boots," refers to a formal method by which Woolf allows us to experience the "pathos, surliness, ill-temper, charm" of the boots' owner detached from "his concentrated woe; his age; his frailty; his desolation." Faced with sympathy's tendency to

balk at the gulfs between the classes or genders, Woolf borrows a technique from Cubism, spreading the traditional content of subjectivity across arrays of common objects in order to form landscapes of emotion detached from individual owners and thus accessible to anyone.

In “Unfastening Feeling,” the relationship between subject and object, button and button hole, comes undone: Gertrude Stein lifts the Bloomsbury writers’ concern with the nature of the subject and the relative position of the object out of an ethical framework and considers them in terms of aesthetics, countering the limitations subjectivity and objectivity impose on the representation of emotion by breaking down the distinctions between subjects and objects until she is left instead with interchangeable subject-objects. Emotion in Stein’s work is no longer a coherent cognitive response to be transmitted between subjects, but a perpetually shifting transmission that arises out of the differences between representations and requires multiple points of origin.

For James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, the barriers to sympathy are epistemological. In “An Uncertain Sublime,” Joyce reformulates sympathy so that it no longer depends on certainty but rather on a Kantian concept of negative presentation. However, even as Kant’s sublime models a means by which Joyce can avoid reformulating the unknown other in terms of the self, it reduces the other to the Other – to the idea of an enigma. Thus Joyce buffers a totalizing unknowability with the humbler space of error, locating the other’s emotion at an indeterminate point within the larger space of the unrepresentable. For Beckett, the minimalist structures of mathematics replace the messiness of human relationships, so that sympathy is an emanation not of individual subjects, but of symmetry. However, because perfect symmetry is no better an antidote to solipsism than a glance in the mirror, we must learn to feel “Sympathy for Surds”: for irrational numbers rather than ones or zeroes, rough approximations rather than fully realized subjects or Gayatri Spivak’s “originary nothingness.” In fact, what creates company and thus the possibility of emotional transmission is the tension between a conception of the real and an imperfect approximation; sympathy is impossible without a feeling of friction or opposition, even if the other who provides it turns out to be a fragment of the self.

One narrative of modernism took T. S. Eliot at his word and banished ethical criticism and the study of emotion from the academy; it seems useful, then, as those outcast fields regain critical attention, to excavate another narrative of modernism, one that is messy, ambivalent, and often tacit, but that reveals the fissures and internal contradictions in our understanding of emotion and its transmission and, in turn, lays the groundwork for a revision of our own conception of sympathy.

For Dylan, scientist-sympathizer

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## Introduction: Sympathy in the Age of Empathy

### A History of Modernist Sympathy

It is almost a truism to say that sympathy is not modern. I do not mean merely that sympathy, the descendant of a cluster of classical concepts that includes the medical term for the interdependence of bodily systems, the cosmic *sympatheia* of the Stoics, and the more familiar fellow-feeling, is older than modernity.<sup>1</sup> Nor do I mean that as the central concern of Scottish moral philosophy, Victorian popular culture, and even, as Catherine Gallagher argues in *Nobody's Story*, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, sympathy is older than modernism. I mean, instead, that sympathy as traditionally formulated appears to be opposed to the very idea of modernity, with its fractured subjects, distrust of transparency, and suspicion of knowledge as such. Sympathy justifies its demands with a prescriptive ethics: it calls the sympathizer into action on the behalf of a possibly unwitting other, requiring, as Amit Rai observes, the obliteration of the conditions of its own existence (57). As Audrey Jaffe argues, it draws upon and reinforces existing social hierarchies, setting out terms for a humanity from which some humans are necessarily excluded. It flattens the other into an object that can be possessed as knowledge, a closed, complete individual whose interiority is legible on the surface of her body.

The modernist sympathy to which my title refers may therefore seem an impossibility or at best a curiosity, a rare resurgence of Victorian sentimentality in an otherwise un sentimental period. In arguing not only that sympathy persists in modernist texts but also that the revision of earlier conceptions of sympathy and, in turn, emotion was a necessary component of the modernists' experiments with subjectivity and form, I am writing against a view of the movement that the modernists themselves encouraged. For modernity's intellectual custodians, who quite deliberately framed their era in opposition to Victorian hierarchy, paternalism, and univocity, also rejected the process that embeds the past's superannuated ethics and politics in the transmission of emotion. Among the modernists, perhaps the most self-conscious of these stewards of modernity, the rejection of sympathy gave rise to a new suspicion of emotion itself. According to the dominant narrative of the movement, promoted perhaps most influentially (and most self-consciously) by Hugh Kenner,<sup>2</sup> the modernists developed an objective, distant, ironic

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<sup>1</sup> The definition and cultural significance of *sympatheia* are subjects of ongoing debate among classical and religious scholars. For a discussion of the relationship among classical concepts of *sympatheia*, magic, and science, see Ierodiakonou, Katerina, "The Greek Concept of *Sympatheia* and its Byzantine Appropriation in Michael Psellos," *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium* ed. Paul Magdalino and Maria Mavroudi, Geneva, Switzerland: La Pomme d'or, 2006, 97-118. For a study of the evolution of cosmic *sympatheia* from a classical to a Christian context, see Torchia, N. Joseph, "Sympatheia in Basil of Caesarea's Hexameron: A Plotinian Hypothesis," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4.3 (Fall 1996).

<sup>2</sup> As Kenner explains, "The Modernist canon has been made in part by readers like me; in part in Borges' way by later writers choosing and inventing ancestors; chiefly though, I

voice as a refusal, in part, of the Victorian valorization of tender feelings. T. S. Eliot's impersonality and T. E. Hulme's irony can be read as protests against George Eliot's famous pronouncement that "If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally" (*Letters* 88). "In George Eliot," Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth explains, "sympathy is the first step of a double imperative: first, to accept unruly circumstances, especially those embodied in neighbors and friends; and second, to act on the basis of this acceptance for some particular end" (26). At least on the surface, modernism appears to refute both halves of this imperative. For Hulme and T. S. Eliot, neither sympathy nor the moral action it signifies and inspires are valid artistic goals. A sort of literary scientism justifies this shift: in Hulme and Eliot's view, the problem with sympathy's tendency to reduce the other to an object of knowledge is not the violence this reduction does to the other, but rather the inaccuracy of the resulting representation. In "Romanticism and Classicism" (1911), Hulme objects to the boundless receptivity that George Eliot seems to encourage; he contends that excellence has nothing to do "with infinity, with mystery or with emotions," but rather with a poet's ability to calculate "the exact curve of the thing":

It isn't the scale or kind of emotion produced that decides [whether or not a description succeeds], but this one fact: Is there any real zest in it? Did the poet have an actually realised visual object before him in which he delighted? It doesn't matter if it were a lady's shoe or the starry heavens.

The ideal classical poem not only refuses to enlarge its reader's sympathies but forecloses the very possibility. In Hulme's mathematical equation, emotion is the term that drops out; the only numbers that matter measure the precision with which the poet observes a visual object and the accuracy with which the poem conveys that act of observation. "Zest" is Hulme's shorthand for "a properly aesthetic emotion," drawn from but not identical to Kant's concept of the same name.<sup>3</sup> In Hulme's theory, an aesthetic emotion more closely resembles detached interest than the standard definition of emotion as the cognitive response to an affect, which is understood in turn as an embodied response to a stimulus. A properly aesthetic emotion is in Hulme's view a highly individualistic experience; it cannot be shared with another, only funneled into artistic production.

The production of aesthetic emotions, which according to Clive Bell arise from a particular combination of formal attributes that he terms "significant form" (loc.178), was also a central aim of members of the Bloomsbury Group, who are remembered more for their formal innovations and contributions to aesthetic theory than for their political commitments, such as feminism and pacifism. Nevertheless, the formal experiments of the Bloomsbury writers were often political in both inspiration and implication, whether this influence was acknowledged or implicit. For E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, the

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think, by the canonized themselves, who were apt to be aware of a collective enterprise, and repeatedly acknowledged one another. For our age has been canon-minded" (60).

<sup>3</sup> Though Kant's *Critique of Judgment* has been used frequently in the defense of theories that detach art from feeling, in the philosopher's view, which I will address in more detail in Chapter Four, the relationship between aesthetics and emotion is complex and not always antithetical (I.1.3).

rejection of sympathy was motivated less by aesthetics than by ethics: the First World War and the unraveling of colonialism rendered the past's universal moral code suspect. Sympathy, the guiding force of that code — the key to our moral sentiments, according to Adam Smith — was instrumental to imperial expansion. In Edward Said's influential theory, the construction of the foreigner as the "other" is necessary for the formation of a national identity. As Audrey Jaffe persuasively argues, sympathy builds national cohesion through a similar manipulation of the relationship between self and other. Sufferers receive our sympathy in proportion to their similarity with us, and because similarity is relative rather than absolute, we can render a particular person more sympathetic by thinking of a second person as *less* similar to us. Thus as we will see in the work of Forster, the othering of colonial subjects in India and Africa facilitates sympathy among different strata of English society, fostering the sort of national cohesion necessary for imperial expansion. When the task of enlarging men's sympathies is able to coexist with or even to reinforce the task of enlarging an empire, both sympathy and the moral values it supposedly shepherds require reconsideration.

In both the aesthetic and the ethical threads of the dominant story of modernism, writers turn away from the idea that art must or should perform moral work, and that sympathy is the tool that best enables it to do so. But this is only one part of a larger, more complex, and less coherent story. Over the past few decades, critics have grown increasingly skeptical of the conventional narrative of modernism, with its ponderous dichotomies: high culture rather than mass culture, art for its own sake rather than propaganda, and, finally, impersonality rather than emotion.<sup>4</sup> Modernism's origin story is Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence writ large: the need to emphasize discontinuities between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to define the new aesthetic movement led both the modernists and their early observers to disavow moments at which their work draws upon, revises, or even perpetuates the past. Evidence of sympathy's continuing influence on modernism is not as rare as critical framing of the movement has led us to assume. In the epigraph to *Howards End*, E. M. Forster seems to encourage sympathy when he begs his readers to "only connect." Virginia Woolf's novels temper their rejection of sympathy with regret, as when Lily Briscoe mourns the embodiment of fellow feeling, Mrs. Ramsay, even while refusing, at least for a moment, to carry on her legacy. Gertrude Stein, whose work may seem inhospitable to sympathy given the absence of traditional characters, evokes a surprising array of emotions through the interactions among surfaces. James Joyce celebrates Bloom's receptivity to others' emotions even while suggesting that he may misread them, and even Samuel Beckett, the bard of solipsism, revisits sympathy when he ponders the lower limits of company. Why these moments of sympathy have been rarely noticed and even more rarely discussed is a complicated question, one that we cannot answer without considering the aspects of modernity that led to the modernists' suspicion of sympathy, its subsequent excision from their self-presentation, and the influence of that presentation on the modernists' heirs — that is, on the contemporary world.

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<sup>4</sup> While the deconstruction of modernism's dualisms has become a common critical endeavor, two early skeptical accounts were Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide* (1986) and Marshall Berman's *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (1988).

## From Smith to Chimps: Science and the Rise of Empathy

However one-sided the dominant narrative of modernism has begun to appear, it has exerted a substantial influence on the way we latter-day modernists conceive of emotion and even the terms we employ to speak of it. Though Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism," as a definitional text, emphasizes postmodernism's breaks with modernism over its inheritances, the "waning of affect" he documents in late twentieth-century culture is a natural conclusion to the often-told story of modernism's turn away from sentimentality and, hence, sentiment. Nevertheless, nearly thirty years later, the dominant narrative of modernism has dissociated into a collection of competing interpretations, and the subsequent association between modernity, aesthetics, and impersonality has begun to unravel. Emotion and ethics have become subjects of increasing interest in both intellectual and popular culture. But the term *sympathy*, if not the process to which it once referred, remains out of favor.

The choice of which term to valorize is more than mere semantics; debates about emotion often hinge upon words, even if no one can agree how to define them. To choose *sympathy* over *pity* or *compassion*, for instance, is to emphasize structure, distance, and social relationships over fluidity, immediacy, and Woolf's "dark places of psychology" ("Modern Fiction"). Though all terms for emotion undergo perpetual evolution, as does the definition of *emotion* itself, certain features remain more or less intact. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, pity is "a certain pain at an apparently destructive or painful event happening to one who does not deserve it and which a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer" (139). The ideal objects of pity are "acquaintances," for the suffering of those closest to us inspires dread, while the suffering of those distant from us leaves us indifferent (140). For Hannah Arendt, writing in the 1960s, pity becomes the process by which internal emotions evolve in response to "feelings in the air" rather than the expression of an individual acquaintance. The unhappy content and inward orientation of pity remain consistent: in both cases, the witnessed suffering is merely a catalyst, and pity begins and ends with the pitier. Arendt's compassion, by contrast, involves being "stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious" (80), and thus foregrounds immediacy, proximity, and viscerality over the distance of sympathy or the self-containment of pity.

Today we know Arendt's compassion by another name, one that has conquered sympathy in both critical and, to a slightly lesser extent, popular discourse. Psychologist and science writer Frans de Waal follows a widespread trend when he offers *empathy* as the catchword of our age.<sup>5</sup> Empathy is "the grand theme of our time," he argues, citing the speeches of Barack Obama, whose frequent references to and performances of empathy are well known. Yet the longer de Waal dwells on this theme, the more

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<sup>5</sup> A headline search for "empathy" in the New York Times archives returns only thirty-three articles between January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1988 and January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000, but seventy-three articles from 2000-2012. Although a search of the Times of London archive was less precise, it suggested a similar increase in interest in empathy, which was mentioned 1559 times between 1988 and 2000 and 2697 times between 2000 and 2012.

internally contradictory it grows, for empathy, like sympathy and pity, is a concept whose turbulent history has left it riddled with cracks and internal folds. De Waal spends the majority of *The Age of Empathy* deploying primate studies to defend his claim that empathy does not, in fact, belong to an age, but is rather a biological function reinforced by evolution. Empathy, for de Waal, is both natural and historical, genetically encoded yet influenced by a particular sociopolitical climate. This temporal doubleness is not unique to de Waal's argument or even to empathy, but is instead the legacy of an older incarnation of fellow feeling, a trace of the term's erased history: for the Victorians, sympathy was a process both innate and cultivated, humanity's birthright and an aim for which we must strive. Even Charles Darwin, who aims to establish emotional transmission as an innate process, displays a measure of ambivalence. Describing his infant son's emotional development, he suggests that sympathy is inborn:

When a few days over six months old, his nurse pretended to cry, and I saw that his face instantly assumed a melancholy expression, with the corners of the mouth strongly depressed; now this child could rarely have seen any other child crying, and never a grown-up person crying, and I should doubt whether at so early an age he could have reasoned on the subject. Therefore it seems to me that an innate feeling must have told him that the pretended crying of his nurse expressed grief; and this through the instinct of sympathy excited grief in him. (358)

Yet he defends the scientific study of emotion and its transmission with an argument that would appeal to George Eliot:

We have also seen that expression in itself, or the language of the emotions, as it has sometimes been called, is certainly of importance for the welfare of mankind. To understand, as far as possible, the source or origin of the various expressions which may be hourly seen on the faces of the men around us, not to mention our domesticated animals, ought to possess much interest for us. From these several causes, we may conclude that the philosophy of our subject has well deserved the attention which it has already received from several excellent observers, and that it deserves still further attention, especially from any able physiologist. (366)

Citing the "welfare" rather than, for instance, the edification of mankind thrusts the conversation into the territory of morality: welfare, for the Victorians, was associated with Christian charity, the physical and spiritual well-being of a society, and the upbringing of children.<sup>6</sup> To pursue this line of argument is to abandon the previous one, for if an understanding of emotion were entirely innate, its contribution to the welfare of mankind would be more or less guaranteed. Instead, the communication of emotion is both instinctive and something that requires study, a natural ability that must be cultivated.

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<sup>6</sup> These associations were deliberately fortified by members of the Anglican church. See Thomas Hill Lowe, "National Religion the Only Sure Ground of National Welfare," Exeter: C.J.G. and F. Rivington, 1833 and Richard Yates, "The Basis of National Welfare," London: Nichols, Son, and Bentley: 1817.

This is not the only point at which de Waal's empathy collides with its predecessor: the first philosopher he rallies to his cause is Adam Smith, whose *Theory of Moral Sentiments* contains what is perhaps the most influential model of sympathy. When "our brother is upon the rack," Smith contends, we are able to imagine his emotional state only through "the impressions of our own senses" (11):

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (12)

For Smith, the sense that leaves the most lasting impression is vision. "When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm," and, more brutally, "The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation" (12). De Waal's primate subjects do the same, even if they do not always share Smith's hierarchy of senses: "When young apes put on their playface, their friends join in with the same expression as rapidly and easily as humans do with laughter" (48), and "mother apes often whimper as soon as they hear their offspring do so" (51). When de Waal argues that "Bodily connections come first — understanding follows" (48), he is not, after all, disagreeing with Smith, for whom understanding is impossible without an initial sensory impression.

Even as he allows his conception of empathy to overlap with Smith's sympathy, de Waal takes care to cultivate the appearance of a partition between the terms. He bases his distinction between empathy and sympathy on modern psychology's definitions of the two processes: "Empathy is the process by which we gather information about someone else. Sympathy, in contrast, reflects concern about the other and a desire to improve the other's situation" (88). Nevertheless, these definitions are subject to confusion and debate even within the discipline of psychology. So troubled is the term that in a recent article in the *Emotion Review*, Eva-Maria Engelen and Birgitt Röttger-Rössler collate competing definitions of the concept to "establish a few landmarks that will help to ensure that the phenomenon with which various researchers are dealing is the same, or has at least important features in common" (3). Furthermore, psychology's most widely used definitions of *sympathy* and *empathy* are lifted out of the sociopolitical contexts in which the terms originated and stripped of their winding histories. Science, in practice if not always in theory, is positivist and progressive; once new scientific knowledge gains widespread acceptance, it overwrites rather than converses with past beliefs. But empathy was not a scientific discovery, even if it has come to be treated as such. Instead, empathy originated in the field of aesthetics and was propelled by a series of political and philosophical choices — possibly even mistakes — to its current position of dominance.

In the most frequently told story of empathy, Theodor Lipps, a philosopher who influenced Freud, borrowed the concept of *Einfühlung*, or "feeling into," from Robert Vischer, who had coined the term in 1873 as a means of describing a Romantic concept by which an observer projects emotions into objects. When psychologist Edward

Titchener translated Lipps's work into English in 1909, he invented the term *empathy* to mirror *Einfühlung*'s etymological relationship with *Mitgefühl*, the German word for "sympathy." Nevertheless, as Gustav Jahoda points out, *Einfühlung* did not arise *sui generis*, but was rather an intervention in a conversation that applied Adam Smith's theory of sympathy to art appreciation. By the time Vischer joined this conversation, Johann Gottfried Herder had already described a similar phenomenon in terms of sympathy, and Vischer himself uses *Mitgefühl* to describe a different level of *Einfühlung* (Jahoda 156, 153). Empathy, in other words, was originally a particular variant of sympathy rather than an independent concept.

Jahoda notes that for Lipps, the distinction was even fuzzier and often nonexistent. Lipps uses "*Einfühlung*" and "sympathy" interchangeably and inconsistently, though in general, he equates sympathy with "positive" *Einfühlung*, in which an emotion is transferred from the other to the self, but not "negative" *Einfühlung*, in which another's unpleasant behavior induces "inner rejection" (159, 158). About Titchener's contribution, Jahoda is less forgiving: the English word *empathy* is not only dependant on Smithean sympathy, but its accidental child, originating in the British-American psychologist's fundamental misreading of Lipps (162). The fact that the English word re-entered German not as *Einfühlung* but as *Empathie* corroborates Jahoda's claim (Zepf and Hartmann 741). The result of Titchener's translation, particularly in psychology but also in the many disciplines it influences, has been a general assumption that empathy and sympathy are distinct processes.

If empathy's birth was an accident, it was a convenient one, coinciding with the modernist turn away from Romanticism, the First World War's shattering of Victorian ideals, and the splintering and codification of academic disciplines. I do not share Jahoda's certainty that Titchener's coinage was a mistake rather than an intervention, for *empathy* joined the English language just as multiple fields of inquiry began to turn away from its predecessor. Susan Lanzoni traces sympathy's various incarnations in *Mind*, the influential journal of psychology and philosophy, which began publication in 1876, shortly before the two disciplines parted ways. In the nineteenth-century issues of *Mind*, sympathy crosses modern disciplinary boundaries with ease, featuring in discussions of ethics, evolution, psychology, political philosophy, art, and epistemology "as a form of psychological imitation, an instinct, an aesthetic or epistemological capacity, or a cornerstone for ethics" (268). By the turn of the century, however, "the threat of degeneration, the presence of malevolent impulses, and the circuitous and unstable path from a feeling of sympathy to ethical action, had all begun to chip away at [sympathy's] moral power" (286-287). Since the early twentieth century, the very concept of "moral power" has become suspect: as D. Rae Greiner sums up the shift, "Empathy has come to mean, roughly, 'sympathy minus the attitude,' bumped off its moral high ground into something more pleasingly democratic, feeling with rather than for others" (419).

De Waal's chimps, so frequently summoned as evidence in discussions of evolutionary history, are also unwitting participants in a mostly tacit modern debate. Though our understanding of chimpanzees' intelligence and emotional capacity is incomplete and, as de Waal suggests, insufficiently generous, evolutionary psychology frequently uses chimp behavior as a stand-in for basic human instinct. Thus the very choice to turn to apes for evidence of human nature appears to be a rejection of sympathy, at least in Adam Smith's formulation, in which, as Greiner argues, it is not an

automatic, instinctive transmission, but rather a cognitive process that maintains a degree of distance between self and other that empathy would close (418). For Smith, sympathy in its ideal form is the imaginative reconstruction of an emotional state through the correct interpretation of sense-data. Greiner associates empathy with metaphor and sympathy with metonymy, contending that whereas empathy merges subject and object like a metaphor's vehicle and tenor, "[m]etonymy's proliferating 'surface' associations are tailor-made to meet the needs of sympathy," at least when it is understood as a form of consciousness that requires "the imaginative approximation, not actual identity, of participants' states of mind" (422). As a result, sympathy, unlike empathy, crosses physical space and is thus subject to the influence of the world outside the immediate subject-object relationship. In Smith's theory, the social world enters the sympathetic exchange in the form of moral judgment:

The propriety of every passion excited by objects peculiarly related to ourselves, the pitch which the spectator can go along with, must lie, it is evident, in a certain mediocrity. If the passion is too high, or if it is too low, he cannot enter into it. [...] This mediocrity, however, in which the point of propriety consists, is different in different passions. [...] And if we consider all the different passions of human nature, we shall find that they are regarded as decent, or indecent, just in proportion as mankind are more or less disposed to sympathize with them. (32-33)

Sympathy and moral judgment are so closely interwoven that sympathy itself becomes a measure of propriety. Yet here the association of empathy with natural instincts and sympathy with cultural influences becomes less clear. Smith's argument traces a rough circle: we sympathize to the degree that we believe a passion justified, and we determine whether or not a passion is justified by measuring the sympathy that it elicits. What saves the argument from descending into fallacy is the distinction between the particular and the general, the primary judgment of the sympathizer and the secondary judgment of the philosopher. Nevertheless, the confusion reflects an ambivalence about the instinctive or socially constructed nature of judgment that continues throughout the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* — Smith dodges the question by contending that customs out of line with Nature cannot possibly survive (V.II.) — and has haunted sympathy ever since.

Despite empathy's stronger association with nature, it does not escape this confusion. De Waal defends his claim that empathy is grounded in instinct by arguing that the "sight of another person's state awakens within us hidden memories of similar states that we've experienced," a process that he differentiates from Smithian sympathy by specifying that he means not "conscious memories, but an automatic reactivation of neural circuits" (80). Yet to keep this formulation from slipping into an argument that all emotions are affects — automatic reactions linked to physical stimuli rather than the cognitive processing of those reactions — he cautions that the instinctive nature of this triggering does not suggest a lack of conscious control: "Though we identify easily with others, we don't do so automatically. For example, we have a hard time identifying with people whom we see as different or belonging to another group" (80). But socially constructed barriers to the exchange of emotion are no more subject to conscious intervention than natural ones, and as theorists of sympathy acknowledge, they are a problem from which sympathy has always suffered.



In short, the problems of empathy are to a large extent the problems of sympathy, because empathy is modeled on sympathy and remains separate from it only through careful maintenance of the distinction. “We want to make sure that we do not take empathy to mean the same as sympathy or pity,” write Engelen and Röttger-Rössler. “Whereas pity is the mode of feeling sorry for the other, sympathy is the mode of being in favor of the other” (4). Because empathy can exist only to the extent that it is *not* sympathy, their exploration of multiple definitions of empathy requires them to artificially hold competing terms constant, even if the definition of sympathy that they present differs from those of the theorists whom they discuss in their article, including de Waal.

De Waal’s partial erasure of sympathy is thus neither a deliberate occlusion nor an accident, but rather one instance of a more widespread trend in modern studies of emotion. To the two readings of his title that de Waal offers — one of which references a generational timescale, the other a geological one — I would add a third: ours is the Age of Empathy because empathy is the concept that we have chosen to valorize. In collapsing sympathy into empathy, de Waal is not actively rejecting the former term, but instead embracing the terminology of our current age.

In perversely choosing sympathy rather than empathy as the central theme of my project, by contrast, I am emphasizing historical continuity over the present cultural and political climate that has led to empathy’s dominance. Though the construction of a modern intellectual history of fellow feeling is one aim of my dissertation, I do not favor sympathy merely to highlight this history, but also to reveal the unintended consequences of eliding it. Even as the distinctions between sympathy and empathy blur and fluctuate, certain differences of emphasis remain constant. The shift from sympathy to empathy is a shift from a highly structured system of emotional transmission bounded by social, political, and ethical constrictions to a protean, innate, and biologically instigated process. The trade of one term for the other is not an unqualified improvement, but a choice of certain values over others. For even as it flattens the hierarchies sympathy imposes, empathy as currently understood imposes new divisions: while empathy is more democratic and less constraining on a social level, it assumes a homogenous aptitude for emotional transmission that the human population does not possess. A mode of fellow feeling tied to instinct and imagined as instantaneous collapses both the spatial distance between individuals and the temporal distance between initial and reproduced feelings, replacing sympathy’s structure with empathy’s fluidity. Those for whom fellow feeling does not flow automatically, but rather through conscious effort, are thus excluded from exchanges of emotion.

Autism, for instance, is commonly believed to involve a deficit of empathy, with the attendant implications of biological and ethical deficiencies. According to Simon Baron-Cohen’s “empathizing-systematizing” theory of autism, which he intends in part as a counter to more stigmatizing theories, those on the autism spectrum struggle with empathy but tend to excel at developing systems for understanding the world. Sympathy, however, is itself a system, a structured process through which we achieve emotional connection. It is unsurprising, then, that an “autism-friendly format” for teaching emotion would more or less transform empathy back into sympathy:

The DVD *Mind Reading* . . . presents actors posing facial expressions such that

people with autism can teach themselves emotion recognition via computer. This involves taking the quite artificial approach of presenting mental states (such as emotional expressions) as if they are lawful and systemizable, even if they are not (Golan et al. 2006). The children's animation *The Transporters* . . . grafts human actors' facial expressions of emotion onto mechanical systems such as trains and trams that move in a highly predictable fashion, along tracks, so that even young children with autism are attracted to look at faces while they are drawn to watch the kinds of material that is intrinsically rewarding for them (Golan et al. in press). Such approaches, which have been evaluated and shown to lead to improvements in emotion recognition, tailor the information to the learning style of the learner so that they can begin to process it. (72)

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of sympathy, facial expressions *are* law-abiding and systemizable, and the image of emotions proceeding along a set of train tracks is a credible if perhaps excessively schematic way of representing the transmission of emotional information in Smith's and Hume's models. Our belief that such emotional training is abnormal is a relatively modern one, contingent on a contemporary understanding of feeling that emphasizes the body, biology, affect, and empathy over the mind, convention, emotion, and sympathy. While traditional models of sympathy attach as much value to the ability to sympathize as we do to the ability to empathize, for the eighteenth-century theorists, sympathy is a skill for which people have varying degrees of natural aptitude and thus one that should be honed and developed through dedicated moral instruction. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, after all, the teaching of sympathy was not odd, but necessary — the guiding purpose of the novel.

#### Hume and the Humanists: Ethical Criticism's Hidden Sympathies

“[R]eaders had to be taught how to read fiction,” Catherine Gallagher contends in *Nobody's Story*, “and as they learned this skill (it did not come naturally), new emotional dispositions were created” (xvii). To develop these new emotional dispositions, eighteenth-century readers drew on the process of sympathy, which was receiving considerable attention in both philosophical circles and popular culture. Today we may take the relationship between sympathy and readerly identification for granted, but in Gallagher's view, this association was not automatic, but rather the result of particular choices eighteenth-century novelists made, sometimes deliberately and sometimes incidentally, in response to contemporary theories of emotion and its transmission. The abilities and limitations of sympathy, which Adam Smith and David Hume were examining and to some extent codifying, allowed novelists to adjust the degree to which their readers identified with their characters. Sympathy thus exercised a double influence on the rise of the novel, serving not only as one of the novel's chief aims, as the familiar argument goes, but also as a means to an end, a tool the new art form could use to perform political, moral, or philosophical work. Though the literary application and depiction of sympathy is by no means limited to the novel — sympathy's classical predecessor, Aristotelian pity, is arguably the purpose of tragedy, and only the strictest follower of Hulme would argue that poetry elicits only aesthetic emotion — sympathy was integral to the development of several technical aspects of novelistic writing, from

characterization to narration to plot, and is thus of particular interest to novelists engaged in rethinking their genre: because sympathy is embedded in the form of the novel, experiments with novelistic form, such as those performed by the modernists, are inevitably, if sometimes only incidentally, experiments with sympathy.

Despite our acknowledgement of the central role sympathy played in the history of the novel, contemporary literary criticism, like psychology, tends to overlook the extent to which our own theories of emotion — and, hence, our understanding of the way literature depicts, implements, and produces emotion — still depend on the problematic process. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, literary studies has taken a renewed interest in both ethics and emotion,<sup>7</sup> though sympathy, which was for the Victorians the chief link between the two fields, generally remains relegated to historicist criticism that locks it in context. Nevertheless, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of emotion and its transmission exert a heavy though often unacknowledged influence on the “new” ethical and emotional criticism. I take as my case study Gayatri Spivak’s “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching,” an influential text at the nexus of critical discussions of ethics and emotion, which calls for and performs their revival as both subjects and modes of criticism. Spivak’s essay circles an absent term, never named, that functions in a manner almost identical to sympathy; her article’s gaps and omissions are rhetorical and ethical choices that illustrate contemporary criticism’s rejection of and simultaneous dependence on eighteenth-century theories of emotion.

Spivak’s advocacy of literature as a means of understanding the other as human bears a striking resemblance to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century promotion of fiction as a means of provoking fellow feeling. “The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings,” George Eliot famously confided in her friend Charles Bray, “is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures” (*Letters* 88, emphasis original). Spivak concurs with Eliot that literature’s ethical purpose is to facilitate imagination and feeling, though she stops short of giving this process its old name. Drawing on a speech by Martin Luther King, she underscores the importance of understanding how one’s enemy feels or, as she puts it, imagining “the other who does not resemble the self” (23).

Here we encounter a complication, one that is central to both the modern rejection of sympathy and, I will argue, the subsequent modernist *revision* of sympathy: while for Eliot, our common status as “struggling, erring, human creatures” is ground enough for sympathy, for Spivak, writing in the aftermath of colonialism, our tendency to relate to one another on epistemological terms leads us to “construct the other as object of

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<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Hale traces the origins and motivations of the resurgence of ethical criticism in “Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel” and “Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century.” Among the past decade’s many new studies of emotion, a few of the more influential are Eve Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings*, and Rei Terada’s *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject.”* That all three titles foreground “feeling,” a nebulous term that each critic defines slightly differently, reflects a continued suspicion of the past’s more unified theories of emotion.

knowledge” (17) — as a component of T. S. Eliot’s universal Tradition, an entity to be pinpointed somewhere on the totalizing map of humanity provided by “psychology, ethnology, and The Golden Bough” (“Ulysses”). For Spivak, knowledge is inextricable from the cultural context that produces it. We can avoid our tendency to represent the other in terms of ourselves only if “the ethical interrupts and postpones the epistemological” and in so doing enables the other to remain unknown (17). The medium of this ethical interruption is fiction, which she describes as “an indeterminate ‘sharing’ between writer and reader, where the effort of reading is to *taste* the impossible status of being figured as object in the web of the other” (18, emphasis added). To “taste” the other’s experience is an odd formulation, one that suggests intimacy — no other sense requires such closeness or has such potential to invoke disgust — but is still a means of receiving sense-data.

Spivak’s choice to use a sense as a metaphor for the experience of reading becomes easier to understand when we remember that the process of sympathy, as Gallagher explains, also begins with sense-data. Where de Waal drew mainly on Smith, Gallagher draws on Hume, who provides an alternate model of sympathy less familiar to his contemporaries, but more influential, Gallagher notes, among literary critics. In Hume’s model, sense-data transmits an “idea of someone else’s emotional state,” which, through the power of “relational principles linking sufferer and perceiver,” transforms into an impression so “enlivened” that it reproduces that emotion in the sympathizer (169). For eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers, fiction facilitated this sort of understanding. As Gallagher summarizes a common argument:

Sympathy and the imagination . . . were linked in some ethical systems, and certain historians of the novel argue that the new cultural prestige of fiction depended on this link. Fiction, the argument assumes, makes it easy to appropriate another’s point of view, to sympathize. (167)

Spivak’s contemporary view is strikingly similar:

The literary text gives rhetorical signals to the reader, which lead to activating the readerly imagination. Literature advocates in this special way. These are not the ways of expository prose. (22)

Although she does not mention sympathy, the process by which “rhetorical signals” activate the “imagination” resembles the process by which sense-data inspire the experience of an emotional state, a resemblance made still more remarkable by the fact that her definition predicates ethical imagination on experience. Furthermore, her model narrows the gap Hume leaves between sympathy and the imagination: rather than a means of inciting sympathy, imagining is itself an experience of sympathy. Finally, as it is for Gallagher’s novel reader, spurred to benevolent action by his or her sympathy for fictional characters, for Spivak, imagining is not an end in itself, but rather a “grounding condition” for political action (29).

Nor does the postcolonial concern with cross-cultural emotional transmission lack precedent. For all George Eliot’s appeals to a universal humanity, her eighteenth-century forerunners recognized the obstacles social divisions pose to our attempts to reproduce

the other's emotions. In fact, one of Gallagher's central claims is that the novel had to tell Nobody's story — the story of a fictional character — to evade the barrier property presents to the flow of sympathy. We sympathize with others, in Hume's theory, to the degree that they belong to us, whether in a familial or national sense; by belonging to no one, Gallagher contends, the fictional character becomes potentially accessible to everyone. Though it would take two centuries for writers and critics to acknowledge that even as fiction evades of the bonds of property, it often fails to surpass the additional obstacles social divisions pose to sympathy, eighteenth-century writers' struggles with the limitations imposed by property serve as a model for later writers' attempts to circumvent the boundaries imposed by class, gender, and ethnicity. Property also complicates the sympathetic process in a second sense: at least in the Humean model, sympathy turns the other's emotion into our own. We receive the other's emotion through sense-data, and hence as knowledge translated to conform with our own epistemological systems. The emotion subsequently produced is therefore not the other's actual emotion, but our own interpretation of that emotion. In Gallagher's reading, Humean sympathy requires a double appropriation in the most literal sense of the word, for it proceeds only when we take both the object of our sympathy and the emotion we reproduce as our own.

Spivak's process of "tasting" the other's experience is an attempt to avoid these acts of appropriation by replacing the sense through which we access the other's emotion. Since the publication of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," vision's tendency to objectify has become a critical commonplace. Even when it is not producing scopophilic pleasure, vision figures the other as an object of the subject's knowledge, as a possession.<sup>8</sup> Taste, on the other hand, requires an intimacy between both figures, albeit one that avoids exact symmetry: one cannot taste the other without being touched in return. Unlike vision, taste does not organize, totalize, or enclose. The relationship between the taste of a person and the person tasted is metonymic, not metaphorical; what we receive is not complete knowledge of the other, but, as in the common idiom, "just a taste." As Spivak explains in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Colonialism," the other cannot be represented, at least in terms we would recognize. In her later essay, she illustrates this principle by recounting her experience with a young *adivasi*, whose expression she describes as an "inexorably closed look, jaws firmly set, that reminds one of [J. M. Coetzee's character] Friday, withholding" (27). The other's expression is inaccessible to vision, lacking any referent except the withholding of one. Its content, in other words, is negative.

In drawing our attention to negative rather than positive modes of relating to the other, Spivak builds on a central theme of modernism, one that is particularly evident in the fiction of Joyce and Beckett. Negative content does not begin with modernism, of course; its direct ancestor is Kant's concept of negative presentation, which is in turn predated by Christian negative theology. Yet as many theorists of modernism have contended, a negative approach to knowledge is particularly well-suited to an era in which positive approaches to knowledge have failed.<sup>9</sup> Negativity provides another way of

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<sup>8</sup> For a more extensive analysis of sympathy in terms of Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure, see Laura Hinton's *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy*.

<sup>9</sup> Among the best known of these arguments are those of Jean-François Lyotard (in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* and *The Postmodern Condition*).

approaching modernism's absent center; the modern world's loss of totalizing structures of meaning becomes, instead, the revelation of an absence that has always been there. In practice, the difference between the two means of framing this absence or lack appears to be slight: both offer narratives of the path from the chaos of modernity to the formal experiments we have come to know as modernism, and in some theories, such as Lyotard's concept of modernist nostalgia, absence and lack may as well be identical. Nevertheless, the absence of Joyce, Beckett, or Spivak is different from a constitutive lack in that it does not necessarily imply a missing presence, whether real or imagined. Negative content confounds a positivist epistemology by representing not merely the not-yet-known, but the unknowable, and in so doing revealing both the limits of knowledge and potential routes around those limits. As I will argue, negativity's potential to reroute the seemingly inevitable procession from knowledge to understanding to fellow feeling enables forms of sympathy that would be impossible in an epistemology based on positive knowledge. Joyce and Beckett embrace negativity in an attempt to break the bond between the unknown and the lost and thus forestall the formation of a desire to know — a desire that prevents us from seeking means of relating to one another that do not depend on knowledge.

Although Spivak draws from the positivist language of sensation, the process she describes operates negatively. Tasting rather than seeing the other's experience replaces knowledge with interpretation:

Literary reading teaches us to learn from the singular and the unverifiable. It is not that literary reading does not generalize. It is just that those generalizations are not on evidentiary ground. (23)

Reading allows an expression that the eyes would see as lacking evidentiary value, and hence as nothing, to become an originary nothingness, a “scary beginning” (21). Negative content becomes not a lack, but a space of possibility.

As absences become spaces of possibility, presences become spaces of uncertainty. Even if a text offers visual cues, language's mediation of the objects it describes transforms the eighteenth century's imaginative reconstruction into an act of imaginative construction. Far from a source of empirical data, the expressing body in a novel literally and figuratively becomes a text that, whether successfully mimetic or not, does not function identically to an object in the world. The “imagining” that occurs during the act of reading takes the form of experience, even if that experience is mediated by text:

The only way a reading establishes itself—without guarantees—is by showing the steps of the reading. That is the experience of the impossible; ethical discontinuity shaken up in a simulacrum. (23)

“Ethical discontinuity” is Spivak's term for the gap between ethics and epistemology: understanding how the other feels in the experiential sense and understanding the other's feelings as objects of knowledge in the epistemological sense are mutually exclusive pursuits, for knowledge requires the objectification of the very emotions that the sympathizer wishes to experience. Literature resolves this conflict by bypassing Humean

sympathy's epistemological requirement. The type of understanding that Spivak advocates does not require learning and then reproducing an emotional state. Instead, she proposes a technique she calls counterfocalization, which involves reading against the grain of a text not as a means of uncovering hidden knowledge, but rather as a means of inducing "textural change." To counterfocalize is to exchange knowledge based on sense-data for negative presentation and in so doing to experience what cannot be known only through its opposition to the known. Instead of replacing the epistemological structures it refuses with new forms of knowledge, counterfocalization allows us to feel resistance to those dominant structures and hence to experience some form of sympathy with the other whom those structures have objectified.

However radical Spivak's intervention, the process she describes borrows the skeleton of traditional sympathy: taste, while more democratic than vision, is still a means of obtaining sense-data, and while the negative presentation Spivak figures as "tasting" may bypass sympathy's dependence on the senses and knowledge per se, it preserves a structure based on knowledge. What Spivak offers, in other words, is not a rejection but a revision. In fact, the process of sympathy already contains a mechanism for its own revision: the much-maligned imperative to act on fellow feeling makes sympathy self-correcting. Adopting the experience of objectification as our own — sympathizing with the other in the only way we can, under our current circumstances — motivates us to change those circumstances so that we can read the other's unknowability not as an absence, but as an opportunity. In short, sympathy inspires us to seek out means of overcoming its own limitations.

Spivak's revision of sympathy draws together multiple threads of a long tradition of tacit and half-acknowledged interventions. The revision of sympathy, I argue, began at the same moment as the rejection of sympathy, when the modernists began to explore the thorny intersection between emotion and ethics. Long before postcolonialism emerged as an interpretive frame, E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf were troubled enough by sympathy's reinforcement of hierarchies of self and other that they sought out routes to fellow feeling that bypassed traditional subjectivity. Gertrude Stein, motivated by aesthetics rather than ethics, dismantled subjectivity even further, breaking down the distinctions between subjects and objects. The entanglement of affection and epistemology that Spivak attempts to unwind was also a problem for James Joyce, whose characters, from Gabriel Conroy to Leopold Bloom, struggle against isolation imposed by their inability to possess the other as knowledge. The gap between signifier and signified in language that becomes such a useful nexus of modernist experimentation inspires a similar skepticism toward sympathy's dependence on the body as signifier: the intense specificity of experience that appears in the Joycean stream of consciousness drives a wedge between an emotion and its bodily expression, not to mention its aural communication between characters who, after all, cannot speak to one another in streams of consciousness. Finally, Beckett, for whom no knowledge is certain, must make still more radical changes to the sympathy of Smith and Hume, ultimately proposing a system of fellow feeling remarkably similar to Spivak's, in which the irritating texture produced by the friction between the other's experience and our own transforms the space of uncertainty into a space of possibility.

## The Modernist Revision of Sympathy

My purpose in this dissertation is to reveal the buried network that links Smith and Spivak, a network that runs through the very modernist writers who, at least according to the traditional narrative, were responsible for the initial rejection of sympathy. In excavating the modernist discussion of sympathy, I have three goals. First, I aim to show that the modernists developed their own theories of emotion and its transmission *out of*, not merely *against* the eighteenth-century conceptions of sympathy that dominated Victorian thought — in other words, that their approach to the shortcomings of sympathy constitutes a revision, not a rejection. Because current theories of the transmission of emotion result directly from the early twentieth century's apparent break with sympathy, a better understanding of how the modernists reacted to the flaws of traditional sympathy and, in turn, the alternatives they suggest in their own work will help us uncover the assumptions that inform our own conceptions of emotion and revisit our under-historicized theories of its transmission.

To this end, my second goal is to trace the way writers' revisions of sympathy develop along with modernism itself, from the early experiments of Stein and the proto-modernism of Forster to the high modernism of Woolf and Joyce to the postmodernism of Beckett. The modernists do not experiment with sympathy in a vacuum, but rather adjust their theories of emotion in response to a changing political, ethical, and philosophical landscape. Nor was this influence unidirectional, for as I will argue, the dismantling of the liberal subject for which the modernists are well known was in part a reaction to the limitations subjectivity imposes on the transmission of emotion. Furthermore, the twinned revisions of sympathy and subjectivity are inseparable from these writers' formal experiments, for it is in large part through form that they attempt to rectify the shortcomings of earlier iterations of sympathy. The modernists take advantage of stylistic innovations that open gaps where the Victorians saw none, or at most cracks: to give one well-known example, the modernist predilection for the free indirect style allows them to sever self from speaker, as Ann Banfield has shown, and thus permits the experiments with subjectivity, consciousness, and narration that we see in the "Wandering Rocks" episode of *Ulysses* or the London scenes of *Mrs Dalloway*. In a similar manner, form can become a means of breaking apart and rearranging entities involved in the transmission of emotion. As I will argue, Woolf borrows a technique from Cubism in order to release emotion from the net of subjectivity, and Gertrude Stein dismantles grammar itself in her quest to destabilize the relationship between subjects and objects and, hence, the standard paths along which emotion is transmitted.

My final goal is methodological: in studying modernist reconstellations of sympathy, I aim to rethink our continued attachment to the already deconstructed myth of modernism's sudden origin. I hope that an examination of the shifts — rather than the breakages — that result from changes in aesthetics and ideology will underscore the continuities that temper those changes and, furthermore, demonstrate the value of tracing the connections in addition to the ruptures between movements. I do not mean to argue that the formal and philosophical differences between the Victorians and the modernists (or the Edwardians and the Georgians, to use Woolf's more localized frame) are subtle or unimportant, but rather to ensure that my method acknowledges the deceptively obvious



point, often obscured by our valorization of originality, that even the most radical among the modernists' formal and philosophical experiments are informed by historical precedents. Particularly in the first section of my dissertation, I aim to show how modernist innovations draw on ideas already inchoate in Victorian literature and are shaped by or at times even strive to preserve the underlying structures of Victorian culture — one of which grounds ethics and sociality in sympathy. I concentrate on some of the most canonical modernists in part because it is in discussions of high modernism, as opposed to modernity in general, that we most heavily emphasize sudden bursts of originality over subtle, gradual changes and pure aesthetics over a more complex story of intertwining formal and ethical goals. Nevertheless, I focus on the brightest stars of the constellation only as the most efficient means of tracing a general shape. As Hugh Kenner writes, “The life of the mind in any age coheres thanks to shared assumptions both explicit and tacit, between which lines of causality may not be profitably traceable” (55). Though the historical form of sympathy with which I begin originated in Scotland and was most influential in England, and although I follow this form of sympathy down a particularly Anglo-American evolutionary path, many of the events that drove the changes I examine were global, from World War I and the collapse of multiple empires, as I've mentioned, to the rise of science and the growth of technology, which changed the nature of interpersonal relationships and even of selfhood. Sympathy and subjectivity evolved together in response to the cluster of widespread changes that produced what we now call modernity — changes that affected not just the canonical modernists, but modernism in general.

I begin with two of the best-known writers from the Bloomsbury Group, Forster and Woolf, because their revisions of sympathy are motivated largely by ethical and political differences with the Victorians. As such, they depart from Victorian moral philosophy without rejecting ethics and morality as valid concerns of literature, probing weaknesses in the popular Victorian conception of sympathy through a modern lens, but one still colored by the ideological environment in which they were reared. Thus Forster can claim that “tolerance, good temper, and sympathy” are what really matter in the world while admitting that “[t]hey want stiffening, even if the process coarsens them” (“What I Believe”), and Woolf can simultaneously mock George Eliot's early novels as “all this tolerance and sympathy” and argue that to “dismiss the heroines without sympathy, confine George Eliot to the agricultural world of her 'remotest past'” is to not only “diminish her greatness but lose her true flavour” (“George Eliot”). Sympathy, like morally instructive literature, is for the Bloomsbury writers both passé and indispensable, regrettable and admirable, the cracked foundation of a liberal ideology that they aren't quite ready to leave behind.

Forster initially attempts without success to divorce the eighteenth-century models of sympathy from the social hierarchies they reinforce, turning first to a radical individualism that would render social categories meaningless, then to a radical oneness of being that he associates with religion. When neither alternative succeeds in preserving the possibility of sympathy, he instead settles for an ironic liberalism that, as Brian May notes, anticipates that of Richard Rorty. The sympathy of liberal irony is predicated on negative rather than positive liberty; it demands tolerance of the other's point of view rather than an attempt to improve her station. Forster's passive sympathy is less a

revision of the traditional models than a wistful gesture that closes his extended critique of liberal subjectivity and the limitations it imposes on fellow feeling.

Woolf builds on Forster's critique of sympathy and subjectivity without sharing his attachment to a liberal view of the subject. Instead, she widens the fissures in liberal subjectivity that Forster reveals, using the problem of sympathy as a guide to rethinking the subject. Traditional sympathy's failure to overcome our tendency to objectify the others we see across the gulfs of class and gender leads Woolf to search for a means of transmitting emotion not from subject to subject, but across the object world. Following the Cubist method of shattering a unified subject and rearranging its parts, Woolf spreads the traditional content of subjectivity across arrays of common objects, forming landscapes of emotion detached from any individual owners and thus accessible to anyone. Nevertheless, a liberal ideology still frames Woolf's project, which is designed, after all, to foster understanding among members of different social groups. This conflict leads Woolf's revised version of sympathy to rely on a flickering subject, sometimes coherent, sometimes dispersed, that is at once capable of producing emotion and setting it free.

Gertrude Stein, older than either Forster or Woolf yet in many aspects more stylistically similar to Beckett, has an odd position in this project. Her work shares neither the liberalism of the Bloomsbury writers nor the negativity of the Irish writers; what political and philosophical attachments she does display, though no longer widely considered nonexistent, are contradictory. An American who spent most of her career in France, she straddles both Anglo-American and Continental intellectual traditions and serves as a pivot between the Victorian liberalism with which Forster and Woolf struggled and the French avant-garde tradition that would influence Beckett and the poststructuralists. Stein also introduces the question of genre to my project: although *Tender Buttons* is nominally a poem and *A Long Gay Book* a novel or short story,<sup>10</sup> both texts, like most of Stein's work, straddle multiple genres and thus fold together the concerns of poetry, the novel, and even the catalogue or treatise. While sympathy rose to cultural prominence alongside the novel and is thus most powerfully associated with the genre — it is not a coincidence that the modernists most concerned with the revision of sympathy are the novelists, not the poets — it is by no means dependent on such novelistic trappings as characters or narrative. Stein's generic flexibility lends her revision of sympathy a similar complexity. She shares many of the central concerns of the Bloomsbury novelists, from the nature of the subject to the relative position of the object to the flattening of the hierarchies formed by traditional sympathy, but she lifts them out of an ethical framework and considers them more directly in terms of aesthetics. At stake for Stein is not reality, but representation. In *A Long Gay Book* and *Tender Buttons*, she counters the limitations subjectivity and objectivity impose on the representation of emotion by breaking down the distinctions between subjects and objects both conceptually and grammatically until she is left instead with interchangeable subject-objects. Emotion in Stein's work is thus no longer a coherent cognitive response

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<sup>10</sup> The title suggests that Stein originally conceived of *A Long Gay Book* as a novel, but she eventually published it in a collection entitled *Matisse, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein, with Two Shorter Stories*. Needless to say, *A Long Gay Book*, despite being deemed a "shorter story," is significantly longer than *Matisse, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein*.

to be transmitted between subjects, but a perpetually shifting transmission that arises out of the differences between representations and requires multiple points of origin. Emotion, in other words, is always already sympathy.

For Joyce and Beckett, Bloomsbury's social other becomes the philosophical other, and the barriers to sympathy are epistemological ones. The question, for Joyce, is not how we can understand the emotions of someone unlike us, but rather how we can access another person's emotions at all. The knowledge that the Enlightenment found in sense-data is for Joyce only provisional; in his work, the other's expression is a text subject to interpretation rather than the sign of a verifiable fact. While for the poststructuralists and arguably for Beckett, this interpretive flexibility becomes a space of opportunity, for Joyce, it introduces the threat of solipsism: if we can never know with any certainty what is on another's mind, how can we be sure that other minds exist at all? Joyce's somewhat surprising solution is not to seek an alternate proof of the other's existence, but rather to reformulate sympathy so that it no longer depends on certainty. To do so, he turns to Kant's concept of negative presentation, in which a failure of representation gestures toward the unrepresentable — in this case, the other's unknowable emotion. Negative presentation is particularly useful for modernist sympathy because it allows its traditional structure to persist in the absence of the knowledge it once contained. Sympathy can thus remain sympathy even while adapting to meet the challenges modernity poses to positivism and liberal subjectivity. Yet negative presentation risks misrepresenting the other in the opposite way, not by translating her emotion into the language of the self but by reducing it to the idea of the enigma. Thus the epiphanic sympathy that Joyce develops in "The Dead" leaves room for error within negative presentation, locating the other's emotion at an indeterminate point within the larger space of the unrepresentable.

In *Ulysses*, Joyce expands the range of epiphanic sympathy by embracing the errors it incorporates. Leopold Bloom's sympathy proceeds through a deliberately sloppy science untroubled by the concern with accuracy that limits Gabriel Conroy to the rare insights provided by epiphanies. For Bloom, any similarity, no matter how tenuous, becomes a potential source of connection to the other. This method risks reinstating the tendency to reinterpret the other in terms of the self, a habit from which Gabriel suffers at the beginning of "The Dead." What distinguishes Bloom's sympathy from pre-Bloomsbury sympathy is a persistent awareness that all connections are provisional. Bloom's aim is not to understand the other but to experience his or her presence; not to look at the other, but to see what the other is looking at.

It is Beckett who ultimately tames Bloom's sloppy sympathy by delineating the logical limits of his geometry. For Beckett, the type of symmetry that produces sympathy must be measurable: his definition would exclude the rough similarity Bloom detects (or imagines) between Milly and his cat but include two bodies positioned face to face. In the spare universes of Beckett's prose, the modernist critique of subjectivity has already occurred; the personal connections for which Forster once hoped have been reduced to structural connections, such as those of mathematics. In Beckett's work, symmetry not only facilitates emotional connection but takes its place, such that in *Company*, a romantic liaison consists solely in the alignment of two bodies. As in "The Dead," however, sympathy relies on error. Perfect symmetry is no better an antidote to solipsism than a glance in the mirror. Instead, sympathy requires a difference, even one as slight as

the gap between approximate and perfect symmetry. What creates company and thus the possibility of sympathy is a feeling of friction or opposition, even if the other who provides it turns out to be a fragment of the self.

The sympathy we are left with after this series of modernist revisions is one that has evolved in concert with modernity, adapting to an intellectual landscape in which all structures are provisional and whose dominant species, the subject, has splintered into temporary, ever-shifting subspecies. The landscape in which we find ourselves, in other words, is a postmodern one. Nevertheless, sympathy itself is not postmodern, and the hints of its history that its skeleton still bears are not entirely vestigial. What is striking about sympathy's evolution is not the postmodern end-state it reaches but its persistence, even under assumed names, despite the modern and postmodern dismantling of the subject and of the Christian ethics of the Victorians. Sympathy survives inhospitable or even hostile climates not only because it is adaptable, but also because during its long and often internally contradictory history, it has grown entwined with subjectivity or its lack, with ethics, and, finally, with company.

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1.  
How to Connect:  
Forster's Subjects of Sympathy

The epigraph to *Howards End* summarizes the impulse behind Forster's entire body of work with two deceptively simple words: "Only connect." As several critics have pointed out, the simple message evokes a cloud of questions. Connect to whom? What does connection entail, and how does one go about it? Deepening the muddle, to borrow one of Forster's central terms, is Mohammad Shaheen's crucial question: "Can this quest achieve any success with the dominance of imperialism?" (2) Shaheen's answer — and, by the end of *A Passage to India*, Forster's — is a categorical, if still complicated, no. As Shaheen notes, in Forster's final novel, imperialism destroys personal relations, transforming individuals into types and eventually "developing into a misrepresentation of the contact between the cultures of different races" (16). Colonizers, Shaheen contends, are incapable of connecting not only with the colonized, but also with each other: in his most straightforward example, Ronny Heaslop, who freely admits to his incapacity to comprehend Indians, also fails to understand his own mother and fiancée.

In *Howards End*, however, the quest to connect is in some sense a success: the Schlegels, Wilcoxes, and Basts ultimately forge a tentative relationship across the cultural and economic gulfs that divide them, even if their connection occurs only after a death, an imprisonment, and a generational shift. Yet the characters of *Howards End* are still imperialists, even if in the Schlegels' case, they relegate their imperialism to the fringes of their awareness. Why do the Schlegels and Wilcoxes succeed where the arguably better matched Fielding and Aziz fail? One likely answer is the distance, both physical and metaphysical, at which the English who remain in England can hold the rest of the empire. Margaret's resigned, ambivalent imperialism is as much an "imperialism of the air" as her father's, considered in relation to abstract ideals rather than actual people (28). Though it may seem the inevitable result of geography, this distance from the colonies is something that must be created and actively maintained in order to enable connection in England. As I will argue, the sort of connection Forster's characters seek is not a natural state that empire disrupts, but rather a phenomenon empire both enables and inhibits. In other words, connection succeeds in *Howards End* not in spite of its failure in *A Passage to India*, but rather because of it.

### The Paradox of Sympathy and the Category Shift

The inherent contradictions in Forster's concept of "connection" are among its many structural similarities with the process of sympathy in both its theoretical and popular manifestations. Although connection is nebulous in meaning, denoting as little as an encounter or as much as a sort of spiritual merging, it most frequently entails a sharing of emotion that functions almost identically to sympathy. The two processes draw on a shared set of conditions: the other with whom we hope to sympathize or connect must be human; comprehensible, at least in a limited sense; and close enough, whether in location

or sensibility, to spark a feeling of identification. The final condition creates one of the “aporias” Amit Rai sees in the “paradoxical” process of sympathy: the need to both produce and efface difference. “The one calls for sympathy,” he explains, while “the other, if he is properly humanized, gives it” (57). Though sympathy rests on this original difference, if it succeeds, it will not only

diminish (if not obliterate) the difference between agent and object, but also... mark this very difference as a target of some sort of action of justice (betterment, amelioration, understanding, but even approval, fellow-feeling, affinity, pity, etc.). Properly performed and executed, sympathy should obliterate its own conditions of existence. (57)

In Audrey Jaffe’s terms, sympathy aims to dissolve individuals into a common humanity, “defin[ing] as human what is least subject to the contingencies of politics” (15). However, even as sympathy works against the gap in happiness that produces it, as an arbiter of the category “human,” it widens perceived gaps between group identities. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century moral philosophy, sympathy is a natural — as in innate, but also as in appropriate — human response to another’s emotion. According to this logic, if we do not feel sympathy for another person, either she or we are lacking in humanity. In theory, sympathy obliterates the markers that distinguish one group from another, but in practice, the ideology of sympathy leads to the constriction of humanity’s borders: in the classic example, colonizers define those they colonize as less than human in order to preserve their own humanity in the face of what would otherwise seem an inhuman lack of sympathy for the oppressed.

The paradox of identity and difference also complicates the flow of power within the sympathetic process. The argument that sympathy strips its object of agency is a well-known one, but sympathy also provides those who have been dehumanized by the prevailing ideology with a means of regaining that agency. Rai documents American slaves’ deliberate attempts to strike sympathetic chords as a means of setting off reverberations in the network of social and philosophical systems entangled with the concept. By wrapping themselves and fellow slaves in the language of Christian humanitarianism, slaves-turned-writers such as Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano thrust people otherwise denied the status of human into the position of undeniably human objects of sympathy. As Rai writes,

Her supposed childlike nature, her horrid suffering, her scarred and ravished body renders the sentimental hero of antislavery discourse an apt object for *universal* sympathy. But if a black person can be sympathetic, doesn’t the universalist but decidedly European norm of humanity itself have to be supplemented, extended, revised? (69)

The very link between sympathy and nature that dehumanizes the colonized or enslaved thus becomes the tool by which they stretch the Western definition of humanity to include them.

Rai’s choice of the feminine pronoun is no accident; women are not only the traditional dispensers of sympathy in the post-Enlightenment Western popular



imagination, but also its objects *par excellence*.<sup>11</sup> Although the gulf between the genders, to use Virginia Woolf's term, is conceivably as deep as those produced by other categories of identity, in both popular and theoretical conceptions of sympathy, the family provides emotion with a well-marked route across the divide. Not only does the family supply both of Hume's conditions for sympathy — contiguity and resemblance — but it also creates an imperative to sympathize. As Sarah Stickney Ellis and other authorities on Victorian domestic conduct insist, sympathizing with her husband is foremost among a wife's duties. Even women outside the legitimating bounds of the family are deeply associated with sympathy, albeit as its recipients. The fallen woman, for instance, was among the most popular recipients of Victorian charity, which, to schematize Jaffe's more nuanced argument, can be seen as sympathy in its monetary form (16). Though she never becomes a universally sympathetic object, she is so deeply imbricated in what could be called a culture of sympathy that she becomes a facilitator, albeit a threatening one, of feeling in her own right. As Jaffe argues, she embodies a fear of "sympathetic identification as a loss of identity," a fear tied to tropes of femininity as permeability (18).

Ironically, it is the very threat of feminine permeability that makes feminine language an effective means of bypassing the boundaries of social categories. By describing themselves in feminine language, the former slaves take advantage of the ease with which women elicit and supply sympathy, drawing forth the emotions suffering women conjure in the white male imagination, while summoning white female feelings of solidarity. Translating differences that seem insurmountable into the language of more familiar differences, such category shifts domesticate the detested or unknown, facilitating sympathy through Hume's criterion of contiguity and Smith's appeal to personal experience. If the former slaves also threaten the categories they adopt by revealing the contingency of an identity grounded in a particular social position, this works to their benefit: the more they destabilize a restrictive definition of humanity, the wider its borders can grow.

The category shift is a common tactic of works that aim for the production of sympathy — a class of which Elizabeth Gaskell's *Condition of England* novels are perhaps the quintessential examples. Jaffe reads *Ruth*'s titular character as a transposition of the bourgeois "fear of falling," arguing that the Bensons identify with Ruth's disgrace as a means of acknowledging, in displaced form, their resentment at the precariousness of their socioeconomic position. In other words, the Bensons' sympathy with a gendered form of suffering eases their sympathy with — and marks their underlying similarity to — the lower classes. In *Mary Barton*, whose goal, as stated in its preface, is to "give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy" (37-38), the shift takes a more concrete form. Gaskell attempts to surmount the sense of antagonism between the classes by clothing her working-class male characters in the tropes, terms, and even the costumes of femininity. The novel abounds with male nurses and motherly fathers, from Job Leigh

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<sup>11</sup> Theorists of sympathy are less likely to associate it with femininity, as the male sympathizers of their hypothetical examples reveal. Nevertheless, Smith credits women with more "humanity," which consists in "exquisite fellow-feeling" that does not necessarily move the sympathizer to action (274).

in his “women’s cap” to Jem Wilson sitting vigil over an ill and infantilized Mary. A fully feminine man, however, would evoke a fear of sexual “inversion,” and thus raise a different sort of barrier to sympathy. Gaskell treads a fine line between emphasizing and erasing sexual difference, attempting to salvage her nurturing males’ masculinity by tempering feminine images with masculine adjectives — even if they care for the ill, they do so as “rough, tender nurses” (99). Nevertheless, in a binary model of gender any degree of feminization is a degree of emasculation that, given the Victorian essentialization of gender roles, increases the sense of a natural difference between men of the middle and working classes. The category shift is thus a paradoxical means of expanding the range of sympathy, one that potentially increases a sense of difference between group identities even as it closes the sympathetic gaps between them. Furthermore, to include a particular group in the boundaries of humanity through a sort of bait and switch leaves that group’s inclusion secondary and contingent.

Nor is the definition of humanity infinitely expandable even in this contingent sense. As Forster’s English missionaries respond when their Indian students prod at the limits of heaven, “We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing” (38). Sympathy, like salvation, draws meaning from its boundaries. Thus a category shift that pushes those boundaries to embrace a previously dehumanized group frequently — in Forster’s work, I will argue, necessarily — does so at the expense of a different class of others. As Jaffe argues, the Victorian novel’s focus on class “shifts to a cultivation of like-mindedness that presumes to transcend all social boundaries, but in fact only transcends some (such as those of class) in order to enable the establishment of others (such as those of nationality)” (23). The traditional liberal conception of subjectivity lends itself to a spatial metaphor of difference, with a central self ringed first by the family, then by shifting circles composed of various group affiliations. The more familiar — that is, the closer to the familial circle — another person becomes, the more easily he or she evokes sympathy. In what can be seen as a scapegoating of difference, category shifts draw nearer those whose identities distance them from the ideal reader by pushing other groups further away.

In Jaffe’s reading of *Daniel Deronda*, for instance, Daniel must reject sympathy with Gwendolen Harleth and his own mother in order to solidify his Jewish identity. Gwendolen exemplifies the upper-class Englishness that reared him, and that he must leave behind, while his mother, who represents a degraded form of Jewishness (149), threatens the “fantasy of shared sensibilities that constitutes ‘national feeling,’ a feeling [with the] capacity to turn shared ideas into a conviction of shared genealogy” (153). The result of Daniel’s emphasis on the national identity he owes to his rejected mother is a paradoxical devaluation of the nuclear family in favor of a primary identification with an idealized nationality; gender loses its traditional place of privilege in narratives of sympathy, such that Daniel sympathizes even with his wife, Mirah, through their shared national sensibility rather than the bourgeois English bonds of family.

When Forster commands us to “only connect,” then, he does so in light of a tradition of liberal humanist attempts at universalism that frequently fail, and at most partially succeed. Yet his belatedness allows the “latter-day Victorian liberal” to take his political tradition’s past failures into account (May 185). As Brian May contends, Forster is a liberal ironist rather than a traditional liberal, and thus acknowledges the contingency of his ideals even as he professes them. Forster’s famous dictum does not solely represent

an attachment to a problematic tradition or an insistence upon idealism, though for all his political demurrals, his work frequently evinces both. Instead, despite its imperative mood, the epigraph can be read as an evocation of the very questions it raises about the terms, nature, and costs of connection.

*Howards End*: Shifting Others

First note. I had better let the cat out of the bag at once and record my opinion that the character of the English is essentially middle-class. [...] Solidity, caution, integrity, efficiency. Lack of imagination, hypocrisy. These qualities characterize the middle classes in every country, but in England they are national characteristics also, because only in England have the middle classes been in power for one hundred and fifty years. (“Notes on the English Character” 3)

Forster’s somewhat facetious codification of national and class differences in “Notes on the English Character” takes on a serious cast in *Howards End*, whose project, in one sense, is to explore the conjunctions between the group identities it establishes or, to take the “note-taker” at his word, identifies. The novel, after acknowledging and then dismissing a broader reality it leaves to “the statistician or the poet” (44), subdivides the middle class into a set of binary camps that form a microcosm of British society: male/female, rich/poor, practical/Romantic, and native/foreign, with the first set of each pair marking the valorized position. Though Forster reveals his map of social identity as a simplistic means of categorizing individuals — socioeconomic class, of course, takes the form of a gradient rather than binary opposition, as does foreignness in a novel whose heroines are second-generation immigrants — it nevertheless dictates with surprising strictness which relationships characters can successfully forge.

As Rai notes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, the schematization of identity, however artificial, determines the directions in which sympathy can flow. Forster departs from his Victorian predecessors by distinguishing between shared categories of identity and the shared values and personalities they represent. *Howards End* not only questions, but shatters the traditional association between sympathy and sensibility. Margaret and Helen, like latter-day Dashwood sisters, diverge enough in character that we may suspect them of serving opposing allegorical masters. After once insisting on their similarity, the narrator proceeds to emphasize their differences: “the younger was rather apt to entice people, and in enticing them, to be herself enticed; the elder went straight ahead, and accepted an occasional failure as part of the game” (30). Although their familial relationship can partially explain their deep connection, the almost mystical understanding they share — a bond which allows them to speak through the “slight indications” of the “voiceless language of sympathy,” and, tellingly, from which their brother Tibby is excluded (10, 25) — suggests that the sort of resemblance sympathy requires refers more to a social similarity than a personal likeness. Margaret and Helen, after all, share an identical social position. Paradoxically, the novel’s social categories draw their power from the essential natures they were once thought to mark, yet transcend the requirement that their constituents display those essential characteristics. Still, Forster does not permit us to dismiss the categories as ossified structures of the past, for the novel perpetually refines and redefines them. The Schlegels

and Wilcoxes whom Forster initially defines according to their social types eventually become “Schlegels” and “Wilcoxes,” social types to be deconstructed in their own right. Social categories enclose or shed particular sensibilities as the novel or its characters require. “All our thoughts are the thoughts of six-hundred pounders,” Margaret can note, even as her own insight proves her the exception to her claim (59).

For all their internal flexibility, social categories strictly regulate the possibility of emotional connection. Across the gulf of class or gender, however shallow, sympathy devolves into pity or, worse, philanthropy. What the Schlegels interpret as their sympathy with Leonard Bast emerges as pity during the dinner party for which he serves as centerpiece, first in the form of a topic of conversation, then as a “bright” or “dark spot in civilization,” a dehumanized or at least depersonalized accessory to an argument (118). When the other guests propose educating or employing him, Margaret chides them for infantilizing him, insisting on money as the only form of charity that acknowledges its recipients as independent agents. Like the Victorian humanists, Margaret understands charity in utilitarian terms: rather than an inward-directed act that nourishes the soul of the giver, it is a practical means of converting sympathy into action, one’s own goodwill into another’s wellbeing.

Yet what the novel’s philanthropists actually exchange is not sympathy, but its absence — the gap between feeling and duty. Characters send each other money to excuse failures of sympathy or absolve themselves of the responsibility to feel with those to whom they consider themselves socially or morally bound. Helen plies Leonard with money in order to “feel finished” (291) — to buy the right to reduce him from a living being with persistent demands on her attention to a “husk that [has] enclosed her emotion” (290). His family members, likewise, pay him in inverse proportion to the sympathy they feel with him: his sister Blanche, who reads his letter “with some emotion,” sends a “little money,” whereas his brother-in-law attaches “more money” to a “cruel, insolent reply” (296). As the narrator sardonically sums up the exchange:

Society is based on the family, and the clever wastrel can exploit this indefinitely. Without a generous thought on either side, pounds and pounds passed. The donors disliked Leonard, and he grew to hate them intensely. (296)

The ease with which the familial call to sympathize can be paid off suggests the primacy of class in Forster’s social theory. Begging solidifies an economic disparity into a class difference by establishing hierarchy and insinuating degeneracy; by dousing himself with the old essence of poverty, however superannuated the rest of the novel makes it seem, Leonard signals his shift in position from the struggling middle class to the actually poor. Ironically, it is the very unmooring of class from a set of stable, essential traits that allows Leonard to use those traits to switch classes. The destitute family member no longer resembles his financially solvent kin, and if he threatens to remain contiguous to them, they resolve, like Leonard’s brother-in-law, to drive him away with charity. The class difference causes, excuses, and perpetuates the failure of familial sympathy, even if that failure defies the rules of capitalism by instituting a debt that represents nothing, and thus can never be repaid.

Though gender difference seems less intractable than class difference, it also tends to transform sympathy into pity. Between the novel’s men and women flows more

pity than love or attraction: Margaret pities Henry, while Helen pities Leonard who, incapable of loving his wife, aspires instead to pity her more nobly. But “the barrier of sex, though decreasing among the civilized, is still high, and higher on the side of women,” in part because the traditional association between feeling and femininity has not disappeared with the turn of the century (62). As Forster’s ambiguously gendered narrator theorizes,

Pity, if one may generalize, is at the bottom of woman. When men like us, it is for our better qualities, and however tender their liking, we dare not be unworthy of it, or they will quietly let us go. But unworthiness stimulates woman. It brings out her deeper nature, for good or for evil. (227)

Before Margaret learns to love Henry as an individual, she interacts with him according to a gendered script. When he suffers as a man, she pities him as a woman. The narrator — a self-ironizing voice that should not necessarily be read as coincident with Forster’s — depicts even the failure to sympathize as gendered: while women respond to stymied understanding with pity, men respond without any emotion at all. In defiance of Smith, emotion detaches from judgment; a similarly gendered divide separates scientific explanation from understanding. Margaret groups masculine and feminine modes of interaction into the “outer life” of “telegrams and anger” and the inner world of “personal relations”:

The truth is that there is a great outer life that you and I have never touched — a life in which telegrams and anger count. Personal relations, that we think supreme, are not supreme there. There love means marriage settlements, death, death duties. So far I’m clear. But here my difficulty. This outer life, though obviously horrid, often seems the real one — there’s grit in it. It does breed character. Do personal relations lead to sloppiness in the end?” (27)

The gendering of emotion, and hence of sympathy, here appears an impediment to connection. Absent the pressures of the outer life that “breed character,” personal relations become sloppy, excessively fluid interactions between purely receptive beings. The “grit” of the public world that makes connection difficult also allows it to produce meaningful friction. Emotion, Margaret contends, must emanate from a subject: sympathy that flows too easily cannot be sympathy at all, because only individuals can emote, and individuals must have differences.

The “sloppiness” of personal relations figures as a sort of fuzzy receptivity in the case of Mrs. Wilcox, the novel’s sympathetic hub. Maternal and self-effacing, Mrs. Wilcox takes part in a tradition of modernist mothers, from Mrs. Ramsay to Mrs. Moore, who blur into their sympathetic roles. The mother who understands “everything,” even if not told a word (27), seems to permeate the family: “I feel that you and I and Henry are only fragments of that woman’s mind,” says Helen. “She knows everything. She is everything. She is the house, and the tree that leans over it” (292). Yet in spreading herself so thin, she becomes so transparent as to lack an identity of her own: though everything may be a fragment of her mind, her mind is merely a collection of those fragments. Surrounded by “a strange atmosphere of dissolution” in life, she loses even

her name after death (65). Throughout Forster's novels, this is a danger to which women are particularly susceptible. Even as he perpetuates the Victorian association of women and feeling, he identifies the sexism that underlies that association: one reason women are more apt to sympathize, he suggests, is that they have been trained to lose themselves in the needs of others.

We witness an attempt at this training in the relationship between Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret, her chosen heir, although Margaret, as we have come to expect, learns to turn feminine self-effacement to her advantage. Mrs. Wilcox sees in Margaret a kindred spirit, one who, despite defying the prescribed characteristics of her gender — “odd” is perhaps the word with which other characters most frequently describe her — willingly plays its roles; she somewhat self-consciously serves as her family's maternal, sympathetic hub, an “elderly and benign” spirit who watches over her siblings (100). Like her link with Helen, Margaret's bond with Mrs. Wilcox is formed of a material both stronger and weaker than the traits their gender bids them share: on the one hand, the category itself, stripped of the similarities it is meant to signify, and on the other, a particular set of values centered on domesticity. The narrator speculates that Mrs. Wilcox prefers the “less charming” sister on account of her “deeper sympathy” and “sounder judgment,” although Mrs. Wilcox, indistinct even to her narrator, “has left few clear indications behind her” (62). In the service of the code of domesticity, Margaret can cast off the feminine trappings that Mrs. Wilcox disappears into, as when she leaps out of a car to help what she thinks is a wounded dog. Margaret, in other words, preserves domesticity by modulating her femininity. While capable of extraordinary sympathy, she can also choose when to withhold it. When Henry, who has denied Helen mercy in the name of propriety and property, tells Margaret that his son is going to prison, “No sudden warmth [arises] in her,” and “[s]he [does] not enfold the sufferer in her arms” (311). By maintaining her distance from her husband, she asserts her identity in a way his first wife never could. Within days, his “fortress [gives] way”:

He could bear no one but his wife, he shambled up to Margaret afterwards and asked her to do what she could with him. She did what seemed easiest—she took him down to recruit at Howards End. (311)

Lacking a generic feminine dispenser of pity, Henry comes to need his wife as an individual: he can bear “no one but” her. Yet Margaret uses her newfound personal agency as a means of exerting moral influence, the chief source of Victorian female agency. She withholds only to ultimately teach sympathy; when given complete power over her husband, she uses it to bring him home — that is, to domesticate him.

For the domestic values that Margaret and Mrs. Wilcox share find their physical manifestation in Howards End, which, despite the family strife and inheritance battles that take place within it, eventually becomes a privileged space of sympathy. The house, though Margaret initially imagines it as a masculine counterpart to the “irrevocably feminine” Wickham Place, is animated by a succession of living female ghosts, from the Howard women to the oddly classless caretaker, Miss Avery, whose identities it absorbs (42). Ruth Wilcox sees in Margaret a “spiritual heir,” which in one sense merely suggests that she recognizes the house's deeper value, but in another, that she is capable of serving as its new angel (94).

But the sort of domesticity *Howards End* facilitates shifts with the nature of its governing spirit. Margaret's domesticity is not that of the Victorian wife, but a sort of domesticity of the air: a vague intimacy that connects members of a family in spite of or even in service of difference. As she explains:

A place as well as a person may catch the glow. Don't you see that all this leads to comfort in the end? It is part of the battle against sameness. Differences – eternal differences, planted by God in a single family, so that there may always be colour; sorrow, perhaps, but colour in the daily grey. (314)

Margaret figures humanity as a “glow” — indistinct yet spatially bound. Intimacy occurs within the space of that glow, or in the case of *Howards End*, within a glowing space. The glow functions in some sense like Hume's contiguity, resulting at times from physical proximity alone, but also arising from a spiritual closeness such as that generated by the family. According to this model, the family, like broader categories of identity, forges intimacy not because of the shared social positions, characteristics, or sensibilities it indicates, but simply because it groups people together. The differences that it surmounts, then, are differences of character: varying hues visible within the glow. Like the wychelm outside the house that grows to engulf the pig's teeth, transforming them into a cure for toothache, the family swallows up the source of irritation and turns it into its own cure. The family, in other words, overcomes the difficulties differences pose to identification, thus enabling the flow of sympathy, but those differences are also what give the family — and sympathy — purpose. Once bathed in the glow of *Howards End*, Henry and Helen, whose conflict fuels the latter half of the novel, grow not only to like one another, but to do so because of their differences.

That domesticity forges connections among disparate individuals is hardly a new insight, but whether or not the domestic glow can overcome the divisions of the wider social world is a more difficult question, one that the novel's conclusion neatly sidesteps by welcoming the lower classes into *Howards End* in the form of Helen and Leonard's child rather than Leonard himself. As Mary Pinkerton argues, Forster has purposely kept Leonard at a distance not only from the other characters, but also from the reader, who perceives even his interior monologues through the filter of an unusual number of narratorial intrusions. The character who symbolizes the barrier of class does not easily transform into a symbol of overcoming that barrier; Pinkerton, for one, takes a skeptical attitude toward Margaret's vision, upon Leonard's death, of “truer relationships beyond the limits that fetter us now” (307).

Nevertheless, Margaret herself posthumously, if only symbolically, envelops Leonard in the glow of *Howards End* by emphasizing the continuity between the isolated father, who yearns for “beauty and adventure,” and the accepted son, who will be born to “take the great chances of beauty and adventure that the world offers” (307). In bringing the child to *Howards End* — in “pick[ing] up the pieces” and making “a home,” as Helen says (315) — Margaret connects characters fragmented by class by ushering them into the sacred space of domesticity. Even if Leonard himself must be forgotten, the trajectory toward cross-class connection that begins with the stolen umbrella is fulfilled in his son's idyllic childhood, during which the child can play with the caretaker's son, Tom, while Schlegels and Wilcoxes look on. The children's friendship, Helen suggests, will be “a

great thing for Tom”; Margaret, through whom Forster more often than not ventriloquizes, avers that it “may be a greater thing for baby” (312). The child transcends class by basking in the domestic: he is a product of the house and of England, rather than of any particular social stratum. Thus freed from the barriers class imposes, he will grow up capable of forging personal connections across all levels of society. A utopian haze hangs over the epilogue; the economic relationship between Tom’s father and the Wilcoxes, for instance, must be blurred in order to emphasize the connective rather than exploitative side of the household. Still, in depicting the scene at all, Forster grants it a sense of possibility that he deliberately denies *A Passage to India*, with its final “not yet.”

Even as Margaret and Helen celebrate the fall of class barriers, however, they mourn the loss of country estates built on a foundation of class difference: “Howards End, Oniton, the Purbeck Downs, the Oderberge, were all survivals,” Margaret thinks, “and the melting-pot was being prepared for them” (316). She hopes, in spite of the “creeping” mass of London, that their “house is the future as well as the past” (316). Her hope does not necessarily arise out of a conscious loyalty to her class identity, but rather out of a commitment to its domestic ideology. For domesticity relies on the very differences it appears to mitigate. Even if we, like the novel, disregard the complications the household’s economy introduces — for a story about houses, *Howards End* is surprisingly lacking in servants — we must recognize that domesticity creates its own divisions: if proximity fosters intimacy, distance, of course, impedes it. The family, in drawing people spiritually closer through their shared group identity, inevitably creates a spiritual distance between those who do and do not belong to the group. Some people, as Margaret admits, must “move outside humanity altogether” (314). Domesticity, after all, establishes an interior only in opposition to an exterior; the home would not exist without a public world to provide a refuge from. For the sort of intimacy domesticity creates to remain significant, the glow that encompasses members of a particular social group must leave others in shadow.

Postcolonial critics have pointed out that a sense of the nation as domestic space forms through a similar dialectic with an imagined other. The nation as home arises out of a conception of national identity, which, given the actual permeability of borders between territories of an empire, often takes the form of a racialized conception of nationality. As Edward Said explains, “Imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (55). The Occident, in short, formed its identity in large part against its own imaginative creation of the Orient. In early twentieth-century England, however, the drawing of a strict binary between domestic and foreign was complicated by its colonies, which split the nation’s self-conception into England and Great Britain, island and empire. The English posited as their counterparts Great Britain’s colonial subjects, defending their right to rule on the basis of cultural differences that increasingly crystallized into racial characters as ethnology gained increasing acceptance in the late nineteenth century. Even if, as Susan Bayly argues, the construction of racial divisions owed more to academic and bureaucratic than imperial concerns, it nevertheless eased the coexistence of empire and national identity: although the empire’s moral mission was to civilize other peoples and make them English, English national cohesion depended on the mission’s failure, which could then be ascribed to biologically based and thus intractable racial characteristics. A properly domesticated other, after all, is no



longer other, while an other who resists domestication justifies his or her own initial exclusion.

Even as national domesticity relies on the concept of foreignness for support, it also draws upon the internal domestic model of the family. Several studies have contended that English identity-formation took an inward turn after the Great War. Alison Light, for instance, argues that the war revealed the instability of a heroic, masculine identity that roosts on the empire's ever-expanding borders; in the ensuing decades, a "conservative modernity" returned the self to the middle-class home, establishing the domestic site as the foundation of Englishness. As Light admits, however, the interdependence of home and country is neither uniquely English nor uniquely modern. Amy Kaplan points out an inherent ideological and etymological link between the two types of domesticity: "the idea of foreign policy depends on the sense of the nation as a domestic space imbued with a sense of at-homeness, in contrast to an external world perceived as alien and threatening" (581-2). Writing of the turn inward that balanced nineteenth-century America's expansion outward, she suggests that "[p]art of the cultural work of domesticity might be to unite men and women in a national domain and to generate notions of the foreign against which the nation can be imagined as home" (582). The home, in other words, models the structure of domesticity, creating tropes of intimacy and foreignness that the nation can draw upon for its own support.

In Forster's novel, the classes likewise benefit from the binary opposition between national and foreign; the acceptance of the poor into a household metaphorically conflated with England draws them inside the boundaries of the nation. The English middle class that in the nineteenth century defined itself and, hence, English character against the working class finds a new counterpart in the foreigner, figured as racial other. The history of the relationship between class and nation is far murkier than the more or less unidirectional shift in focus we see in Forster's novels, which may reflect his biography more than his ideology. Orientalism, after all, does not emerge just as class distinctions begin to collapse. What is interesting, nevertheless, is the structural antagonism the domestic organization of society imposes on class and nationality, which, despite the acknowledgment of national differences in standards of living, rarely intersect ideologically in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representations of either category. In Kipling's *Kim*, for instance, poverty is a colorful adventure populated by picturesque castes rather than squalid classes; Forster's Chandrapore, though suitably squalid, has no equivalent of Leonard Bast, only symbolic slums that embed poverty in a distinctly Indian landscape.

Early twentieth-century representations of English poverty, likewise, tend to avoid questions of nationality that blur into questions of race. As *Howards End* tentatively connects the classes, shifting the burden of difference onto the racially marked national other, the more distant category in the map of social contiguity recedes almost out of view. Even as Forster obscures the story of empire and colonization that undergirds his domestic plot, however, he does so in a manner that draws attention to its elision. Margaret learns only after her engagement that Henry owes his wealth to the Imperial and West African Rubber Company. When she visits the headquarters, hoping to clear up the "formlessness and vagueness" that she associates with both Africa and Henry's African venture, she finds "just the ordinary surface scum" of the typical London office (83). Through the scene, Forster indicates his own novel's deliberately limited

scope, revealing not only how thinly the façade of everyday English life hides the institutions that scaffold it, but also how heavily it depends on their invisibility.

Though generally relegated to the background, the rest of the empire threatens English family life when it irrupts in isolated — and isolating — scenes. Imperialism bookends the novel in the form of Paul Wilcox, whose presence before and after his expedition to Nigeria disrupts the domestic equilibrium at Howards End. That empire interferes with interpersonal relationships is one of the few deliberate messages Forster acknowledges, however tentatively: Mulk Raj Anand recalls his rare admission of a “possible... motive of showing the awkwardness of personal relations in a world torn by politics” (“Reminiscences” 107). The romance between Paul and Helen, for instance, is an accident of contiguity that can last only a few pages; the house’s connective power is undercut not only by Helen’s spiritual distance from the Wilcoxes — she is, after all, an outsider to the family — but also by an imperialist revision of space.

For, as we can see in *A Passage to India*, if the empire is to sustain itself, it must reduce the influence of proximity by emphasizing resemblance, dividing neighbors by solidifying existing divisions into essentialized markers of identity. The imperial strategy of “divide and rule” has been well documented; in addition, the organizational schema used to administrate the empire ultimately reduced the primacy of spatial contiguity in favor of more abstract and potentially more regular categories. Although the strictly hierarchical Hindu caste system was not a British invention, the British census accelerated its spread by assigning each citizen a caste identity, even in regions where caste was fluid or relatively unimportant. Empire thus encouraged the conceptualization of what was actually a dynamic system as an “essentially static and autonomous logic separated from and prevailing over other principles of organization” (Brimnes 9; 20).

As ethnology swept the academic world at the close of the nineteenth century, it granted those divisions scientific justification: anthropologists purported to identify racial categories, based in part on skin color and measurements of head and nose widths, that either mapped onto or roughly correlated with the caste system they thought their predecessors had “misperceived” as religious in origin (Bayly 135). Although many ethnologists considered race a product of geography (136), fixed racial identities transcended and arguably destabilized a sense of place, since people who migrated from their place of racial “origin” brought their racial identities with them rather than integrating with their new surroundings. While such ethnic loyalties preceded ethnologists’ attempts to codify them, the concept of race stabilized ethnic identity by grounding it in biology rather than a shared culture that time and distance could eventually undo.

Blurring the lines between national and racial identity also allowed the English to maintain their sense of national cohesion far from the cultural and geographical milieu that gave rise to it. More than the clubs and imported foods that conjure miniature Englands in the Indian landscape, it is the belief in a natural division between the races that allows the Anglo-Indians of *A Passage to India* to value membership in their imagined community over participation in their geographical one. Forster, too, consistently if half-ironically perpetuates his contemporaries’ practice of encompassing both nationality and ethnicity under the umbrella category of race. In his novels and essays, the three categories that we may perceive as distinct merge conceptually; in order

to discuss his work, I will use the term “race” to refer to what Forster’s contemporaries and sometimes Forster himself conceived of as biologically rooted national character.

As race overtook place in the colonies, so did the English domestic site lose a degree of its fixedness. In *Howards End*, reminders of the empire strip physical contiguity of its power to create intimacy. The Wilcoxes, possessed by the “colonial spirit,” present “a firm front to outsiders” but cannot “live near, or near the possessions of, any other Wilcox” (190). The members of the family sublimate the domestic into its spiritual form; no longer a stable physical location, the home is the ever-shifting family “front,” the fluctuating, abstract border of a territory. If, as in Light’s argument, post-war England saw a contraction and stabilization of identity, identity just before the war was uprooted and made mobile, yet without sacrificing its domestic foundation. Just as the colonial English can preserve their Englishness far from London, the Wilcoxes do not depend on any one of their many houses for their familial identity. The romance between Helen and Paul, induced as it is by mere physical closeness, thus leads to “electrical discharge” rather than “sustained relations,” a kiss rather than an understanding (25). Only when the empire’s representative leaves the house can *Howards End* regain its domesticating power.

Though empire may weaken the link between intimacy and place, personal relations, at least of the sort domesticity fosters, depend on the same organizing principles that excuse or even encourage imperialism. As Margaret insists to Helen,

If Wilcoxes hadn’t worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn’t sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery. No — perhaps not even that. Without their spirit life might never have moved out of protoplasm. (164)

Margaret amends the common opposition between civilization and savagery, contrasting it instead with “protoplasm.” The shift in emphasis defines civilization as a process of definition and distinction that the current course toward “eternal formlessness” undoes (171). Both the pre-imperial past and the rapidly approaching post-imperial future appear to Margaret as amorphous masses, lacking clear borders that separate interior from exterior, domestic from foreign.

The one category that escapes the protoplasm is race, which takes on the status of the one true distinction against which all others can be measured:

Are the sexes really races, each with its own code of morality, and their mutual love a device of Nature to keep things going? Strip human intercourse of the proprieties, and it is reduced to this? [Margaret’s] judgment told her so. (224)

The novel eventually answers Margaret’s question in the negative, but the premise of the question goes unchallenged, for no non-white characters emerge to either support or disprove Margaret’s assumption. Race remains outside the novel’s visible horizon in order to mark that horizon: it maintains a sense of inside and outside that the destabilization of the class barrier threatens to collapse. In addition to social limits, race also sets the limits of the novel. To say that *Howards End* is not a novel about race is

more crucial a statement than it seems: it is actively and painstakingly not about race in order to be about class and gender.

*A Passage to India: Liberal Subjects of Sympathy*

In *Maurice*, Forster's posthumously published tale of an English public school boy's discovery and gradual acceptance of his homosexuality, love eventually conquers all, or at least socioeconomic snobbery. After having his heart broken by his schoolmate, Clive, Maurice eventually finds happiness with Clive's servant, Alec Scudder. "Embedded in class" (284), the two suffer through a series of misunderstandings that culminate in Alec's comic attempt to blackmail his lover during an encounter at the British Museum, an institution that both marks and unmakes class distinctions: it is "not merely a collection of relics but a place round which one [can] take — er — the less fortunate, quite so," as Mr. Ducie puts it (280). Nevertheless, Alec and Maurice eventually reach an understanding facilitated by physicality — a sympathy that begins, like the word itself, with attraction. Although their homosexuality drives them into a sort of exile, Forster leaves the terms of their exile vague, indicating their social rejection almost solely through Maurice's personal rejection by Clive. What comes to the fore, then, is not the gap between the lovers and heteronormative society, but the closeness the lovers themselves have achieved in spite of the socioeconomic gap between them. "A happy ending was imperative," Forster explains in his "Terminal Note." "I shouldn't have bothered to write otherwise. I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows, and in this sense Maurice and Alec still roam the greenwood" (312).

No such happy ending is possible in *A Passage to India*. The novel's central romance, the friendship between Fielding and Aziz, may not be overtly forbidden, but it is ultimately unhappier than that between Maurice and Alec. The love that dare not seek publication is conceivable at least to the imagination, but the merely unusual cross-racial friendship must face the disapproval of "the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House" and even "the sky" (322). The cross-class relationships that succeed, even if only tentatively, in *Howards End* and *Maurice* suggest that what divides Aziz and Fielding is more than the cultural differences between them or the hierarchy colonialism institutes. Forster thus suggests that race is a special category that cannot be surmounted in the same way as gender or class — at least not yet.<sup>12</sup>

In some sense, it is the imagination rather than the real world that cannot conceive of a friendship that bridges the racial divide. Perched on the border of the novel is what appears to be an irrefutable counterargument to its conclusion: the dedication to Syed

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that Forster surrenders before making any attempt to surmount racial prejudice. Paul B. Armstrong traces Forster's sly, ironic disarming of anti-Semitism in "Racial Exercise," which deconstructs the concept of racial purity without challenging the initial premise that one race is superior to another. Nevertheless, in turning the anti-Semites' biological argument against itself, Forster refutes only the argument at hand: the "mongrel" condition of Europeans does not neutralize the mistrust between Indians and the English because, aside from a growing population of what Forster calls "Eurasians," they share more distant ancestors than do Germans and Jews.

Ross Masood in honor, Forster writes, of “the seventeen years of [their] friendship.” The author, it seems, has succeeded where his characters have failed. Syed Hamid Husain would concur: he titles a book of letters between Forster and Indian correspondents *Only Connect: Letters to Indian Friends*, suggesting those friendships as the culmination of *Howards End*’s project. Though many of the letters themselves are strangely generic — only when Forster playfully thanks Masood for a pair of shoes does a hint of personality emerge — they hint at the deeper connections with which Husain credits Forster’s interest in India.

In fact, Forster’s personal experiences would seem to suggest that the romance between Aziz and Fielding would be more likely to succeed than that between Alec and Maurice. As Nicholas Edsall quotes John Maynard Keynes, Forster’s fellow “Bloomsberry,” society would happily ignore homosexuality as long as it remained untainted by a whiff of the gutter: “So long as no one has anything to do with the lower classes or people off the streets and there is some discretion in letters to neutrals, there is not a scrap of risk, or hardly a scrap” (180). When Forster first “had something to do with” a member of the lower classes, it was not with an Englishman: a possible inspiration for Alec Scudder was Mohammed el Adl, the Egyptian streetcar conductor with whom Forster began an affair while writing the second half of *Maurice* (Edsall). Though Forster and el Adl never attained Maurice and Alec’s mutual understanding — “in a certain sense the whole affair was a muddle,” as Jesse Matz explains (306) — the tram conductor was for the writer, like Alec for Maurice, an introduction to physical passion. Yet in Forster’s novels, no cross-race relationship can achieve the for “ever and ever that fiction allows”; even the heterosexual romance Forster planned between Aziz and Adela in the 1912-1913 outline devolves by the final draft into the rape trial, a pageant of misunderstanding (Rahman 80).

Why, then, can the novel not imagine what Forster presumably lived? Tariq Rahman suggests the possibility that the novel’s failed friendship refers to a particular romantic disappointment at the hands of Masood, but to extrapolate a personal romantic rejection to an entire nation seems an unusually self-indulgent move for a writer so suspicious of generalizations. Matz instead attributes *A Passage to India*’s unhappy closing to “melancholy realism,” an explanation that convincingly accounts for the novel’s persistent refusals of meaning. As he argues, “[m]elancholy [at the end of the novel] becomes refusal to imagine post-Imperial harmony, an insistence upon the wisdom of primary curiosity, against the falsifications of fictional longing” (315). But if imagining resolution is an interpretive stance, so is the refusal to imagine alternatives. For Freud, after all, it is the mourner, not the melancholic, who engages with reality.

Instead, I argue, what keeps the imagination from conceiving of a successful friendship between members of different races is the way the imagination conceives of the subject. The more unified the English national self becomes, the more distant it grows from its national other. In *A Passage to India*, in short, the problem of sympathy runs into the problems colonialism creates for the liberal subject, the autonomous individual who acts as “sovereign,” to use John Stuart Mill’s term, over his or her own states of mind. The self is already a fraught subject for Forster’s contemporaries, such as Woolf, who depicts the self as fragmented and changeable, and Joyce, who frequently presents the modern subject as always on the edge of slipping into solipsism. For Forster, the crisis of the liberal subject is inextricable from the crisis of liberalism as political ideology. As

David Glover contends, “not only was classical liberalism undergoing a crisis of identity in the years between 1880 and 1914, but liberalism's crisis was precisely *about* identity” (984).

But the crisis of liberal identity did not end after World War I, in part because the British Empire persisted. In the traditional reading of the Cartesian formulation, the subject's metaphorical analogue is the home; subjecthood, in other words, forms itself through a process similar to nationhood.<sup>13</sup> If liberal subjectivity requires the fixedness and boundaries the home implies, then colonialism, which produces internal fissures within the nation's self-conception even as it emphasizes the importance of the nation in identity-formation, threatens the subject's integrity. As Homi Bhabha argues,

[T]he liminality of the Western nation is the shadow of its own finitude: the colonial space played out in the imaginative geography of the metropolitan space; the repetition or return of the postcolonial migrant to alienate the holism of history. The postcolonial space is now 'supplementary' to the metropolitan centre; it stands in a subaltern, adjunct relation that doesn't aggrandize the presence of the West but redraws its frontiers in the menacing, agonistic boundary of cultural difference that never quite adds up, always less than one nation and double. (168)

What Bhabha calls the “deep” nation is constructed of essentialized traits posited against those of a “daemonic double”; Englishness is made of windy moors, Indianness of “tropical chaos.” But even as colonialism brings England and India into conceptual opposition, it changes the “scraps, patches, and rags of daily life” at each pole of the binary, making the supposed periphery part of the “metropolitan centre.” While *Howards End* maintains the fantasy of a strictly demarcated imperial center and colonial periphery, the colonies retain a submerged, “agonistic” presence even in London. *A Passage to India*, in which English characters struggle to reinstate the border between center and periphery while living in a city they consider parochial even for India, cannot even conjure the fantasy of “deep” nationality. The destabilization of the concept of the nation destabilizes the subject who identifies with it in two ways: first, by questioning the essential nature of what has become a fundamental part of identity, and second, by troubling the very concept of a self that depends on an other to mark its boundaries.

Fittingly, then, the characters in the novel who struggle to achieve cross-racial sympathy do so by attempting to revise the conception of subjectivity that makes race a marker of identity in the first place. Forster presents two means of resisting the modern liberal subject: a relinquishing and a doubling down. If the subject were to dissolve entirely, bringing down the boundary between self and other, then so, naturally, would impediments to the flow of emotion between subjects. Conversely, if the individual subject were radically individual — if, rather than arising out of a dialectical relationship between a “true” self and a particular set of circumstances, the *sui generis* subject were generated *causa sui* — the dividing lines of race and nation would be so superficial as to cease to divide. Neither option, of course, is a viable alternative except in the sort of

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<sup>13</sup> More recent studies, such as Rei Terada's, have challenged this view of the Cartesian subject, but because I am examining a period before poststructuralism, the traditional reading seems more pertinent.

philosophical vacuum the novel abhors, but Forster gives each an extended hearing, not because he fails to recognize their flaws, but rather because the ironic liberalism he settles on, if there were ever a real question of him settling on anything else, demands tolerance even toward what we may suspect are straw men. Furthermore, as Paul B. Armstrong suggests, Forster believed that “ironic indirection is the best way to defend and teach critical, coherently self-contradictory complexity” (288). Forster’s somewhat disingenuous experiment thus ultimately proves useful as a route through the “coherently self-contradictory complexity” of the relationship between sympathy and subjectivity.

Mrs. Moore, with her seemingly universal compassion, at first seems to prematurely solve the question of cross-racial sympathy. It is, after all, her apparent sympathy with Dr. Aziz that ignites the plot of the novel:

He was excited partly by his wrongs, but much more by the knowledge that someone sympathized with them. It was this that led him to repeat, exaggerate, contradict. She had proved her sympathy by criticizing her fellow-countrywoman to him, but even earlier he had known. The flame that not even beauty can nourish was springing up, and though his words were querulous his heart began to glow secretly. Presently it burst into speech.

“You understand me, you know what others feel. Oh, if others resembled you!”

Rather surprised, she replied: “I don’t think I understand people very well. I only know whether I like or dislike them.”

“Then you are an Oriental.” (23)

Although Mrs. Moore’s noncommittal response suggests that Dr. Aziz’s reaction results from a misreading — no one, after all, credits the doctor with unusual insight into others’ emotions — his enthusiasm nevertheless establishes the sense of complicity that, as a version of Hume’s contiguity, can enable sympathy. For the space of a conversation, the Indian doctor and the English widow become contiguous, while the Turtons and Burtons recede into the social distance, but the brief, contingent moment of sympathy that occurs in the mosque is hindered by the fact that it results even more directly than usual from the exclusion of another person. The source of the connection between Mrs. Moore and Dr. Aziz is also the only emotion that newfound complicity transmits: irritation at Mrs. Callendar. Under such circumstances, sympathy becomes a circular process in which the sympathizer needs not only to have experienced the emotion itself before, as Adam Smith contends, but also to have experienced the emotion in the same context. In other words, what connects Dr. Aziz and Mrs. Moore is less sympathy than agreement.

At other times, however, Mrs. Moore transforms into a figure for universal sympathy: the semi-divine Esmoor who transcends the limitations of subjectivity by infinitely expanding the maternal reach of her predecessor, Mrs. Wilcox. Her capacity for sympathy is in part a talent others project onto her, one that she acknowledges with a measure of cynicism: “her function was to help others, her reward to be informed that she was sympathetic” (95). Nevertheless, it reflects a sort of permeability of spirit, a capacity for “sudden sense[s] of unity, of kinship with the heavenly bodies” linked, at least during

the novel's early stages, to her religion (29). Mrs. Moore resists the tendency to categorize that leads to an objectifying understanding of the other as a composite of facts: after examining her memory of her encounter with Aziz, she recognizes that her son's impression of him is "all true, but how false as a summary of the man; the essential life of him [has] been slain" (34).

Although the "essential life" that underlies fragmentary images of character at first appears to be the deep subjectivity of liberalism, Mrs. Moore gradually comes to see it as utterly impersonal. Lacking distinguishing features, the essence of life becomes part of the great muddle that she encounters in the Marabar Caves, the echo that murmurs, "Pathos, piety, courage — they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value" (149). The muddle expands infinitely, encompassing people, objects, and ideals. Without the "permanent lines which habit or chance have dictated" (248) — socially prescribed differences crystallized into essential traits — the subject not only becomes indistinct, but also risks suffering indiscriminately: "How indeed," the narrator asks, excusing Fielding's seemingly unfeeling response to Mrs. Moore's death, "is it possible for one human being to be sorry for all the sadness that meets him on the face of the earth, for the pain that is endured not only by men, but by animals and plants, and perhaps by the stones?" (247).

In Mrs. Moore's case, however, a lack of boundaries does not lead to infinite sympathy. The "double vision" through which the elderly view the universe, apprehending at once its "horror" and its "smallness," is in another sense an awareness of a fundamental link between the two simultaneous yet mutually exclusive versions of infinity she encounters in the people she meets: the infinite, terrifying unknowability of the other and the infinite transferability and ultimate unimportance of his or her essence (207). Despite the fears the narrator expresses, a recognition of the underlying similarity among all people (not to mention animals, plants, and stones) does not ease the passage of sympathy that a conception of the other *qua* other has stymied. Like Margaret, who understands sympathy as meaningless without the grit of difference, Mrs. Moore no longer feels compelled to sympathize with others when she finds that they are not quite other after all. She "los[es] all interest, even in Aziz," to the point that "the affectionate and sincere words that she had spoken to him [seem] no longer hers but the air's" (150).

Furthermore, Mrs. Moore begins to view the type of "connection" Forster advocates in *Howards End* as a means of collapsing rather than overcoming differences. The domestic, which was for Margaret and Henry a means of connecting to the other becomes for Mrs. Moore a means of annexing him: "Why all this marriage, marriage? ... The human race would have become a single person centuries ago if marriage was any use" (201). In Forster's hands, the paradox of sympathy that Amit Rai identifies thus becomes a metaphysical as well as a social problem. The sympathizer eliminates difference not only afterward, through the charity sympathy inspires, but also beforehand, by clearing away the reason to sympathize in order to enable its passage.

The "boum" that muddles all distinctions is particularly frightening because it threatens the "primacy of the person," to borrow Armstrong's phrase (283). Despite Forster's concern with class, gender, and race in his novels, in his view, a person is not primarily a product of the social categories to which he or she belongs, although they may help shape his or her identity. Instead, identity-formation seems to take place in the negative spaces those categories create: the space, that is, of difference. As Brian May



puts it, “The liberal ironist seeks nothing larger than the discursive elbow room one needs to write or speak an autonomous self” (188).

Armstrong attributes Forster’s politics to his own difference, calling him an “insider-outsider,” a cultural authority whose closeted homosexuality secretly marked him as different. This status led, ultimately, to his reserved acceptance of a liberal politics of tolerance (283). I would add that it is *not* being a normative Englishman rather than *being* a non-normative Englishman that provides the impetus for self-construction. Perhaps counterintuitively, refusal of the negative (in yet another sense) connotations of the marginalized category opens a space for self-definition: the inadequacy of the socially prescribed characteristics of “the homosexual”—a category of criminality as much as identity until 1967—would presumably trigger a process of self-creation that normative John Bulls, with their national characteristics of “solidity,” “caution,” and disregarded “hypocrisy,” would not require (“Notes” 3).

Forster’s emphasis on negatively created identity correlates with a liberal preference for negative over positive liberty that extends to the formal level of both his argumentative and descriptive prose. Armstrong notes Forster’s penchant, particularly in his essays, for negative constructions. He defines tolerance, perhaps the only positively held tenet of his ironic liberalism, as “not being huffy, touchy, irritable, revengeful” (qtd. in Armstrong 292). His arguments, too, emerge at a positive only through a negative: he praises humanists for not being fanatics, democracy for not being totalitarianism. Positive qualities are those that are not negative: good exists in the undefined moments between evil acts.

The “boum” of the Marabar Caves is an all-encompassing, positive nothing, a sort of metaphysical totalitarianism—it horrifies because it is everything. To resist it, Forster must carve a space in the infinite muddle for an individual he conceives of as an isolated, negative something. Thus in attempting to craft some semblance of individual identity, Forster resorts again to negative constructions:

*Neither* a missionary *nor* a student, [Fielding] was happiest in the give-and-take of a private conversation. The world, he believed, is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence—a creed ill suited to Chandrapore, but he had come out too late to lose it. He had *no* racial feeling—*not* because he was superior to his brother civilians, but because he had matured in a different atmosphere, where the herd-instinct does *not* flourish. (62, emphases added)

Fielding’s introduction repeatedly pairs negative qualities with signs of his appreciation for negative liberty: it is his status as neither missionary nor student that somehow allows him to value private conversation with other well-meaning individuals, while his lack of racial feeling results from a negatively (and vaguely) defined “different” atmosphere. Fielding, the novel’s liberal ironist, “believe[s] in teaching people to be individuals, and to understand other individuals,” but never offers a positive definition of individuality (121). Identity ultimately seems a simple logical relation, as it is for Mr. Harris, the Eurasian: “When English and Indians were both present, [Mr. Harris] grew self-conscious, because he did not know to whom he belonged. For a little he was vexed by opposite currents in his blood, then they blended, and he belonged to no one but himself”

(91). Both English and Indian, and therefore neither,<sup>14</sup> Mr. Harris is equal only to himself.

To strip identity of the influence of social categories is thus to reduce it to a tautology. Deep liberal identity becomes subject to the decidedly illiberal philosophy of the Marabar Caves. As Professor Godbole explains, “the difference between presence and absence is great, as great as my feeble mind can grasp. Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence” (178). The missing presence still governs the space it once held: a man neither Indian nor English is still confined to the negative space those identities leave, which according to Godbole is no different from being both English and Indian. To twist May’s metaphor, the liberal’s elbow room leaves only spaces designed for elbows; one still cannot put one’s feet on the table.

But Godbole’s stifflingly collective account of humanity includes one caveat. After explaining to Fielding that Aziz is guilty of the evil that has befallen Adela Quested whether or not he has actually accosted her, Godbole concludes:

“When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs.”

“And similarly when suffering occurs, and so on and so forth, and everything is anything and nothing something,” [Fielding] muttered in his irritation, for he needed the solid ground.

“Excuse me, you are now again changing the basis of our discussion. We were discussing good and evil. Suffering is merely a matter for the individual.” (178)

The individual’s intrusion in the conversation seems especially odd in Godbole’s unremittingly prophetic voice, and thus quickly forces the professor down to an ironic register: “If a young lady has sunstroke, that is a matter of no significance to the universe. Oh no, not at all. Oh no, not the least. It is an isolated matter, it only concerns herself. If she thought her head did not ache, she would not be ill, and that would end it” (178). Godbole’s attitude toward his imagined sufferer and her mode of suffering is dismissive, as is his contention that she could heal herself through a greater exertion of will. His very dismissiveness, however, frees her from the weight of universal consequence: while suffering, the individual is not the negative of an all-encompassing whole, but rather a piece of it small enough to escape significance.

Although Godbole makes no direct mention of sympathy, the insignificant domain he allocates to the individual is sympathy’s traditional terrain. Godbole’s example of suffering — sunstroke — would only weakly trigger sympathy in Adam Smith’s view, but suffering also encompasses individual emotive responses to evil acts.

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<sup>14</sup> See Hortense Spillers, “Notes on an Alternative Model: Neither/Nor,” *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, Ed. Elizabeth A. Meese and Alice A. Parker, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 1989:165-188. Although Spillers addresses a different temporal, national, and racial situation, her theory of the mulatto seems applicable to a biracial figure in a colonial context.

Suffering, Godbole implies, cannot be dealt with in general terms, not because it would grow out of proportion, as Arendt would argue, but rather because it is “a matter of no significance to the universe” (178).

Godbole’s attitude toward suffering departs strikingly from the popular European view of Indian sympathy as recounted by Max Scheler: a “boundless sympathy, and especially...pity, for all creatures and indeed for the whole of creation” (77). According to Scheler, Indian sympathy cannot be considered true sympathy, because unlike Christian fellow feeling, it is simultaneously solipsistic and self-abnegating: its ultimate goal is to free the self from identity. The “Indian ethos,” Scheler argues, is “an early example of a truly *identificatory* outlook in the shape of a negative identification, in suffering, with the cosmos itself” (79) — a philosophy that resonates with that of the Christian Mrs. Moore rather than the Hindu Godbole. Forster’s departure from Scheler’s theory suggests that he views such an interpretation as the result of a particularly Christian encounter with Indian philosophy; Godbole, as Forster’s creation, presumably presents a version of Indian sympathy colored by the skeptic’s lens.

Godbole’s ironized Hindu philosophy is also directly opposed to Levinas’s: according to the professor, an individual problem like suffering cannot ethically necessitate a response, because it is insignificant. From Godbole, the charge of insignificance is less grim than from Margaret Schlegel; an event that is insignificant to Godbole’s universe is, in his somewhat circular definition, merely one that does not demand the other’s responsibility. If the individual is radically individual, immune to all generalization, then the barriers social differences raise to sympathy lose their power. But if it is ethically meaningless, then in what sense can sympathy matter?

Brian May indirectly links fellow feeling to individualism through the common ground of liberalism when he argues that the “the oldest kind of liberal” “prizes originality as much as sympathy” (202). The liberal subject as a contingent yet self-fashioning creature cannot coexist with Levinasian ethical imperatives, or any universals for that matter; the Romantic’s “laissez-faire of the spirit” (qtd. in May 202) cannot be a “spiritual or metaphysical” enterprise, although it is “nonetheless a powerful desire” (May 202). Ethical imperatives must take an individual form; responsibility must become desire. As May argues through Richard Rorty, the liberal “cares about other selves” (198) and “desire[s] to avoid cruelty and pain” (qtd in May 198). Sympathy, as the impetus of that desire, is an individual reaction to an individual emotion; though insignificant to the universe, it matters to the sympathizer and the recipient of his or her sympathy. In this model, the grit of difference that Margaret values is merely a means of generalizing what should be a private exchange. If sympathy is palliative rather than progressive, it need not overcome or even challenge social differences.

The purpose of the ideology of tolerance, however, is to allow room for those differences. Thus Forster seeks a version of sympathy as contingent as the subjects who feel it, yet capable of extending personal bonds to entire communities. The transition from the individual to the general, however, is where Forster’s solution stumbles. When Philip Dodd, for instance, reads Forster’s unequal romances on the individual level of “comradeship,” he can fend off charges of Orientalism by arguing that English middle-class characters’ erotic discovery of individuals from “lower” classes or cultures acknowledges and attempts to resolve some personal lack. When he defines this lack as the “inadequacy of Englishness,” the encounter becomes generalizable, but politically

unpalatable (216): “[W]hat the English...discover on their travels to other cultures is an intimacy with the Other,” he argues, “an intimacy that stands as a utopian model of what might come to pass not only between individuals but also between cultures” (216). As Dodd partially acknowledges, in using his characters’ intimacy with individual others as a general critique of Englishness, Forster perpetuates imperialism’s objectifying effect on interpersonal relationships despite his best intentions: as Chinua Achebe famously accuses Joseph Conrad, Forster reduces the other to a tool for self-critique. It is perhaps for this reason that he provides no clear sense of “how this utopian bonding between individuals can be generalized” (Dodd 216). Maurice may discover a comrade in Alec, but their bond is unique. Even the wide-ranging ending of *Howards End* hides its lack of specifics behind a utopian fade-to-gold. Dodd attributes Forster’s failure to generalize to his lack of ideology, but Forster’s ideology of tolerance is still an ideology, even if provisionally held. The problem, instead, is that challenges ethics can make to the ideology of tolerance must remain provisional rather than solidifying into prescriptions.

Not only does Forster provide no sense of how bonds between individuals can be generalized, but he also provides no sense that those individual bonds can escape the pressure of the general. Forster sees hope for relationships across the classes because the classes themselves have begun to denature in the melting pot of London, but in 1927, the empire maintains the same sway over personal relations that it does over their political context. Maurice and Alec can maintain a relationship by taking themselves out of context; Aziz and Fielding, who cannot unravel their social ties, must indefinitely defer their friendship. A sympathy guided by individual desire rather than universal ethics serves social intolerance as easily as tolerance; Forster himself, after all, remained publicly closeted in part out of sympathy with his mother’s sense of propriety (Edsall 179). In *A Passage to India*, sympathy — which non-liberals have already mobilized as a tool of empire — reinforces as frequently as it challenges the status quo. Sympathy, which is in its most basic form the exchange of emotions between subjects, cannot change as long as those subjects remain the same.

Forster retains his attachment to the liberal subject in spite of the shortcomings that his own work lays bare. As he responds to the obstacles his political philosophy poses to connection with suitably liberal tolerance, he reveals his single forthright prescription — “Only connect” — as wistful rather than imperative in tone. Instead of a goal to strive for, the coexistence of sympathy and liberal subjectivity becomes something to hope for passively enough to tolerate barriers to its achievement. Nevertheless, even if sympathy in Forster’s work remains formally similar to the sympathy of Hume, Smith, and the Victorian liberals, he maps the points of tension between liberal subjectivity and intersubjectivity in a way that will help us understand the revisions more experimental modernists make to both sympathy and the subject.

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## 2.

Putting Ourselves in Mr. Ramsay's Boots:  
Woolf's Sympathetic Objects<sup>15</sup>

For Forster life consists of people and the larger universe, and he thinks so little of the picture gallery that he can use that very image to refer to that 'real', common life which is the stuff of fiction. For Woolf the stuff of fiction may be Mrs Brown, but the end of fiction is the work of art: neither Jacob nor the view from the room, but the room itself. (94)

David Dowling's summary of the aesthetic differences between Forster and Woolf could also frame their conceptions of sympathy. Forster, dedicated to individual liberty, can only feint at prescribing sympathy as a universal means by which to preserve it. Although later critics have challenged Dowling's indictment of Woolf as apolitical, her work reveals her greater willingness than her friend and sometime rival to turn the challenges of politics into art. To Woolf, the political tensions that complicate our ability to connect to one another are a call for formal experimentation rather than Forster's quietism and, ultimately, literary silence.

Like Forster, Woolf sees barriers to sympathy as symptoms of liberal subjectivity. Because the liberal self always needs an other, in order to sympathize with the members of one formerly ostracized group, we must simultaneously banish those of another; our desire to sympathize with people we perceive as unlike us leads us only to rearrange the ranks of outsiders, as do the men and women in *Three Guineas* who "drag in, for example, some old family servant, called Crosby, perhaps, whose dog Rover has died . . . and so evade the issue and lower the temperature" (129). The gulfs between the genders and classes are, in short, fractures in the liberal subject.

Though Woolf ultimately uncovers the same fractures as Forster, she responds to them with neither his resignation nor other writers' attempts to blast apart the entire structure and build it anew. Sympathy and the liberal subject are historically and structurally linked, with roots in the Enlightenment's valorization of individualism and a flowering during the Victorian period, which strove for an individualistic model of Christian charity and mutual understanding. A fully collectivist culture, after all, would presumably experience and process emotions differently from a culture in which every thought and feeling is believed to emanate from a unique mind.<sup>16</sup> The process of

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<sup>15</sup> Parts of this chapter draw on a previously published paper: "Odds, Ends, and Others: Objects and the Narration of Woolf's Servant Characters," *Woolf Studies Annual* 16 (2010): 111-132.

<sup>16</sup> I refer to differences in cultural (that is literary, philosophical, etc.) rather than individual experience because psychologists disagree about the extent of difference between personal emotional experiences in more collectivist and more individualist societies. While Paul Ekman has spent his career using facial expressions to identify the universal aspects of emotion, more contemporary work, such as Batja Mesquita's, contends that there is nevertheless a difference in the way members of different societies experience those emotions. According to Mesquita, "in individualist cultures there may

sympathy as outlined by Hume and Smith likewise assumes inimitable, separable selves whose need to imagine themselves in one another's place indicates the very distance between those places. Although Victorian liberalism does not have as central a position in Woolf's thought as in Forster's, it maintains a submerged presence that erupts when her novels touch on questions of intersubjectivity. Even as she shifts toward alternative models of the subject, one of her chief political concerns remains that of her predecessors: how do we understand one another across the dividing lines we have drawn across our society?

Woolf's ambivalence toward the liberal subject leads her to develop a version of sympathy that relies on multiple, contradictory paradigms of selfhood: the self as stable or transient, whole or fragmented, private consciousness or node in a social web. Between these competing selves, Woolf interposes as mediator the subject's traditional opposite: the object. She turns to the object world not only as a source of emotional content less encumbered by the social categories that divide the human world, but also as a means of shifting between different models of subjectivity. For in Woolf's work, objects occupy an unusual position that is not quite a negative space between subjects. Instead, the boundaries between subjects and objects shift and blur, allowing objects to both convey and evade attachment to particular subjects. An object, of course, can be powerfully classed or gendered — it is difficult, for instance, to associate mops and brooms with male aristocrats. However, objects possess a flexibility and potential for neutrality that subjects, who are assigned genders, classes, and races almost as soon as names and faces, cannot attain: the broom Crosby uses may be more closely associated with her than with Abel Pargiter, but because it sweeps his house and belongs to him in a legal sense, it is linked to him as well.<sup>17</sup> We assume that a character who transitions between genders or classes is revealing something fundamental about his or her identity; an object, however, can balance multiple associations at once or obtain entirely new ones upon being sold. Objects' transferability makes them an ideal means of transmitting the emotions people invest in them without the divisive markers of identity that attend people as subjects.

Even if objects allow us to span the gulfs between the genders or classes, the crossing remains arduous. Before Woolf can suggest a means of overcoming failures of sympathy between members of different social categories, she must call attention to the problems those divisions raise. Thus Woolf's attempt to both critique and revise cross-class and cross-gender sympathy ultimately leads her to rethink the broader relationships among class, gender, and the subject.

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be objectively more room for subjective interpretation than in collectivist cultures, where meaning tends to be established socially" (239).

<sup>17</sup> Of course, which social categories are primary and which secondary depends on the societies to which individuals belong — broadly speaking, the English novel tends to place greater emphasis on characters' class identities than does the American novel, which pays greater attention to race.



## Roots in the Cellar: Sympathy and the Servant Problem

Although Woolf's best-known political project is the dismantling of Victorian gender norms, her experiments with sympathy begin, both logically and chronologically, with class politics. Her ideological position in relation to class has long been a fraught subject; most critical assessments of this position have taken the form of condemnations or apologies which weigh her contributions to feminism against her less progressive attitude toward the working class (Quinn). At times, Woolf depicts the lower classes as incomprehensibly and unyieldingly different from her middle-class readers. As she contends in "Memories of a Working Women's Guild," her 1931 introduction to a collection of memoirs by members of the Women's Cooperative Guild, the different experiences of the middle and lower classes opened between them, as between the sexes, an impassable gulf. The kindness and mutual esteem Victorian reformers advocated, while still possible in a modern world wary of Christian charity, would take the form of a detached sense of *noblesse oblige*. The only sympathy Woolf and other bourgeois well-wishers could feel for working women would be an "aesthetic sympathy, the sympathy of the eye and of the imagination, not of the heart and of the nerves, and such sympathy is always uncomfortable" (CE 4:140). Because the bourgeois woman lacks knowledge of the working-class woman's experience, she replaces it with an objectified sort of understanding: "If my father was a blacksmith and yours a peer of the realm," Woolf insists in "Three Pictures" (1929), "we must needs be pictures to each other" (CE 4:151).

Nevertheless, although Woolf asserts in "The Niece of an Earl" (1932) that the novelist, and especially the English novelist, "is fated to know intimately, and so to describe with understanding, only those who are of his own social rank" (CE 1:221), in her own fiction, she does not entirely avoid attempts to cross the gulf that divides the classes. As Heather Levy notes, Woolf struggled throughout her career to find a means of responsibly depicting working-class characters, repeatedly "revising her strategies of writing the working-class woman's body," though she frequently chose not to publish the results (37). The servants on whom her middle-class protagonists depend, however, are an unavoidable presence in her published work. A "mongrel" with "no roots anywhere," the servant both inhabits and is excluded from the family home, occupying an unusual position between the cracks of feudal and capitalist frameworks (*Diary* 3:220). The tentative techniques Woolf develops in order to characterize working women thus fall even shorter of representing women who are not quite workers, but not quite *not* workers, either.

The unusual position in the household that makes servants so conceptually problematic is also what leads Woolf to the method she develops to represent them. As Hegel was so famously aware, one of servants' primary functions is to mediate between their masters and the world of things; even if they do not entirely belong to the household in the abstract, they are even more familiar than their employers with the material household. An association between servants and objects appears throughout Woolf's work; she sketches even the archetypal Mrs. Chailey of her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in large part through the "ornaments" with which she adorns her cabin, a collection crowned by the portrait of her dead mistress (24). For Woolf, Alison Light contends, things become "the repository of the immaterial--feelings, obsessions, needs and longings--evidence of a hidden inner life which [can] not be known or explained" (151). I

take Light's contention a step further: the objects that clutter Woolf's novels serve not merely as placeholders for unrepresentable inner lives, but rather as oblique representations of seemingly inaccessible interiors. For even if those objects deflect direct metaphorical readings, they rarely remain illegible, whether to the novels' characters or readers.

Thus Woolf addresses the problem of objectification by embracing rather than counteracting the association between servants and objects. As she writes in "Street Haunting" (1927), "objects...perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience," becoming part of "the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others" (*CE* 4:155-156). According to Walter Benjamin, this association between living spaces, household objects, and souls arose at the end of the nineteenth century with the *art nouveau* movement:

[*Art nouveau*] appeared, according to its ideology, to bring with it the perfecting of the interior. The transfiguration of the lone soul was its apparent aim. Individualism was its theory. With Vandervelde, there appeared the house as expression of the personality. Ornament was to such a house what the signature is to a painting. (169)

For Benjamin, the permeation of objects with their owners' souls naturally succeeds a commodity cult whose artists "transmit commodity-character onto the universe" and lift the people "to the level of the commodity." In an attempt to reassert control over the commodity, the collector, "true inhabitant of the interior," must "[strip] things of their commodity character by means of his possession of them." To Benjamin, this is a futile task, for replacing exchange-value with "connoisseur's value" merely swaps one sort of fetishism for another; the private collection of objects that attempts to create a "universe for the private citizen" instead transfigures those objects into "phantasmagorias of the interior," illusory reflections of a private, individual soul free of the marketplace's influence (169).

Woolf's interiors are neither as phantasmagoric nor as one-dimensional as those of the *art nouveau* house: objects in "Street Haunting" display facets of a personality already informed by economic forces rather than project an identity independent of the market. In other words, while Woolf's objects also reflect their owners' fantasies, they do so in a way that reveals rather than occludes the complex network of social, psychological, and economic contexts that give rise to those fantasies:

That bowl on the mantelpiece, for instance, was bought at Mantua on a windy day. We were leaving the shop when the sinister old woman plucked at our skirts and said she would find herself starving one of these days, but, "Take it!" she cried, and thrust the blue and white china bowl into our hands as if she never wanted to be reminded of her quixotic generosity. So, guiltily, but suspecting nevertheless how badly we had been fleeced, we carried it back to the little hotel where, in the middle of the night, the innkeeper quarreled so violently with his wife that we all leant out into the courtyard to look, and saw the vines laced about among the pillars and the stars white in the sky. The moment was stabilized,

stamped like a coin indelibly among a million that slipped by imperceptibly. There, too, was the melancholy Englishman, who rose among the coffee cups and the little iron tables and revealed the secrets of his soul--as travelers do. All this--Italy, the windy morning, the vines laced about the pillars, the Englishman and the secrets of his soul—rises up in a cloud from the china bowl on the mantelpiece. (CE 4:155)

The moment and the past that produces it, the place, the people, market forces, the relationship between nations, and even the weather inhere in the china bowl. As Bill Brown says of the titular object of *The Golden Bowl*, it is interesting not in its metaphorical significance, but rather in its ability to “crystallize events, relations, situations” (171). Once it enters the narrator’s possession, the bowl’s meaning must be read back through the filter of personality: it contains its owner’s experience of those multiple contexts and the effects they produced on her. Like the famous red carnation in *The Waves*, the bowl as phenomenon presents various faces to various viewers, although its status as property alters these faces to reflect the influence of its owner, while the bowl as an instance of the idea of a bowl possesses certain stable aspects of meaning.

Nor do Woolf’s objects merely transfigure the souls of connoisseurs of *objets d’art*. As Ruth Hoberman persuasively argues, Woolf not only includes kitsch in the array of noteworthy objects, but in fact privileges kitsch objects as hubs of emotional associations. Throughout Woolf’s novels, but particularly in *The Years*, objects wallow in their physical materiality, taking on an “emotive power that transcends their aesthetic limitations” in a system that devalues “‘social’ emotions and ‘literary’ associations” (Hoberman 81; 85). As kitsch--and, I would add, purely functional--objects produce meaning alongside objects recognized as art, the household, filled with the tools and knickknacks dragged in by each of its inhabitants, comes to reflect a multiplicity of souls rather than that of its male, bourgeois owner alone.

Objects’ emotive power thus becomes a means by which characters from different social groups can access one another as emotional beings. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa’s housemaid, Lucy, at first appears unable to see beyond the “picture” of her mistress. When Clarissa expresses her dismay that Richard will be lunching out without her,

Lucy share[s] as [Clarissa] meant her to her disappointment (but not the pang); felt the concord between them; took the hint; thought how the gentry love; gilded her own future with calm; and, taking Mrs. Dalloway’s parasol, handled it like a sacred weapon which a Goddess, having acquitted herself honorably in the field of battle, sheds, and placed it in the umbrella stand. (29-30)

The formulation almost exactly reproduces the “aesthetic” and imagined sympathy the daughters of educated men feel for working women rather than a more authentic experiential sympathy. Lucy’s sympathy is disembodied, lacking the “pang,” and she soon transforms Clarissa’s emotion into information, anthropological evidence of “how the gentry love.”

Lucy builds her fantasies of the gentry out of images she has collected while observing their appearances, actions, and possessions:

They would come; they would stand; they would talk in the mincing tones which she could imitate, ladies and gentlemen. Of all, her mistress was loveliest--mistress of silver, of linen, of china, for the sun, the silver, doors off their hinges, Rumpelmayer's men, gave her a sense, as she laid the paper-knife on the inlaid table, of something achieved. (38)

Her conception of her mistress relies almost entirely upon surfaces, and thus initially seems to resemble the inaccurate portraits that Woolf's hypothetical descendants of blacksmiths and aristocrats assemble of each other. However, for all its whimsy, Lucy's fantasy reveals a startling understanding of her employer: in the midst of a playfully superficial depiction of her mistress, she turns to "the sun, the silver, doors off their hinges, Rumpelmayer's men," a list that echoes Clarissa's early monologue in both form and content in a manner too precise to be entirely attributed to Woolf's style. By perceiving the emotional associations of these objects, Lucy is able to reproduce the emotions we have seen them evoke in Clarissa.

In fact, given the symbolic weight that objects bear throughout Woolf's work, not to mention their metaphorical status as accretions of the soul, Lucy's method of appreciating the gentry through the surfaces of their bodies and possessions may actually provide an effective means of understanding them. As in a Cubist painting, such a method bypasses the impenetrable surface of the totalized whole by breaking it into parts, creating new surfaces that can be juxtaposed in revealing ways. As Gertrude Stein explains, it is a means of accessing "the inside as seen from the outside" (156). The Cubist method spreads out the substance of deep identity into an array of observable objects, which detach from the individual who accretes them, shaking off the stigma of otherness that would otherwise divide observed and observer. The objects, like the Mantuan bowl of "Street Haunting," can thus become reinvested with the affective content that fills the hollow spaces of a sympathy based solely on knowledge.

Objects also provide a means of clearing away the assumed knowledge that characters' social positions generate. In *The Years*, the Pargiters' maid, Crosby, skims the borders of stereotype, and members of the family she serves focus on her more stereotypical traits in order to distract themselves from their sense of alienation from one another. Woolf's narrator at times perpetuates the Pargiters' view of Crosby. Both the narrator and characters draw frequent parallels between the servant and the old family dog, Rover, which diminish Crosby to a loyal pet or "a frightened little animal" (223). By using the dog to symbolize Crosby's service — his death, after all, almost immediately succeeds her retirement — Woolf perpetuates the myth that service arises out of a sort of instinctive devotion rather than the modern need to make a living.

The Pargiters' persistent reduction of Crosby to a type makes it difficult for them to sympathize with her. When not cast as a buffoon, the servant character is frequently an object of pity, as is Mrs. Chailey, whom Alison Light identifies as a "conventional figure of pathos" (67). By contrast, sympathy, which requires an ability to imagine another's emotional state, is less common between employer and employee. Thus Martin fails to comprehend the nature of Crosby's affection for him: "I'm Crosby's God," he announces, misreading maternal love as servile worship (230). Likewise, during the scene in which Crosby finally leaves Eleanor's service, the old retainer at first appears an object of pity. Eleanor can experience the servant's pain only in the abstract, as an emotion that belongs

to another person; instead of sympathy, she feels discomfort at her culpability in Crosby's grief.

However, after imagining Crosby's interaction with objects, Eleanor is able to gain access to the servant's emotional state:

She had known every cupboard, flagstone, chair and table in that large rambling house, not from five or six feet of distance as they had known it; but from her knees, as she scrubbed and polished; she had known every groove, stain, fork, knife, napkin and cupboard. They and their doings had made her entire world. And now she was going off, alone, to a single room at Richmond. (216)

The objects mediate the transmission of emotion between the women: Eleanor does not think of Crosby's attachment to the family, which would remind her of the class difference and thus reinstate a sense of estrangement, but of Crosby's attachment to the material household. Though Eleanor is familiar with the objects only from "five or six feet of distance," an imaginative leap of a few feet is easier to make than one that crosses the gulf between classes. Familiarity and a premature sense of nostalgia can thus emerge from the array of objects unimpeded by the complexities the servant herself produces.

Such a method facilitates not only characters' sympathy with one another, but also readers' sympathy with characters, as when Woolf uses such a method to briefly characterize the Dalloways' cook, Mrs. Walker:

It made no difference at this hour of the night to Mrs. Walker among the plates, saucepans, cullenders, frying-pans, chicken in aspic, ice-cream freezers, pared crusts of bread, lemons, soup tureens, and pudding basins which, however hard they washed up in the scullery seemed to be all on top of her, on the kitchen table, on chairs, while the fire blared and roared, the electric lights glared, and still supper had to be laid. All she felt was, one Prime Minister more or less made not a scrap of difference to Mrs. Walker. (165)

The characterization, like Lucy's of Clarissa, is limited, but even so, the cascade of objects provides the reader with an easier point of entry than would an image of the cook herself scurrying from place to place--an image that would not only throw up the usual barrier of mysterious otherness, but would also provoke the divisive emotions that accompany evidence of class difference. What the reader sees are the plates, saucepans, and tureens scattered across tables and chairs and, hence, the sense of agitation those objects convey, rather than the all-too-familiar image of the cook scurrying about a busy kitchen. The passage thus confronts the reader not with another person's frenzy of activity, but with an image of clutter that evokes the reader's own past experiences of frenzied activity, and thus provides the reader with grounds for identification. Though the scene's success is tentative — to communicate a single moment of a working-class character's inner life is hardly to bridge the class divide — it offers a point of entry into a mind that would otherwise seem inaccessible to Woolf's middle-class readers.

## In Search of a Sexless Sympathy

If to sympathize across class barriers, we must circumvent the problem of objectification, to cross the gulf between the genders, we must first resolve the problem of symbolization. Sympathy between men and women too easily fades into ur-narratives of gendered interaction; men and women become Men and Women, and any sympathetic exchanges between them become sexual acts. To early critics, *To the Lighthouse* was itself an ur-narrative of gender. According to Annis Pratt's pithy summary, a half-century of readers disagreed only on which gendered archetypes the Ramsays represented:

At one extreme we have those who see Mrs. Ramsay as Prototypical Mother and Mr. Ramsay as Tyrannical Male; at the other extreme those who see her as Devouring Female and him as her Victim. We have those who see the marriage as an anatomy of complementary male and female attributes, on the one hand; and, on the other, those who take it as an anatomy of sexual warfare. (417)

Gender is an even more fraught subject when combined with sympathy. Woolf was one of the most persistent critics of feminine sympathy and, what she finds still more troubling, the feminine imperative to sympathize. In both the Prototypical Mother and Devouring Female readings, *To the Lighthouse* exposes the self-abnegating violence of female sympathy, which subordinates female emotions to male ones, as women give flesh to the "arid scimitar of the male," taking in his emotions and radiating them back in more vivid, fertile form (38). The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay at times seems to consist entirely in these vampiric exchanges of feeling. Mrs. Ramsay, ever the willing victim, perpetuates this system by luring unattached women into her position, gathering a harem of sympathizers for her husband and his students like a sort of madam of emotion. She brings the rebellious Lily Briscoe into line, using the younger woman's sympathy with her to enforce the "code of behavior" that "behooves the woman... to go to the help of the young man opposite" (91). By reflecting Mr. Tansley's anguish on her own face, Mrs. Ramsay validates and perpetuates his emotion, translating it across the boundaries of gender and ideology into a form capable of overcoming Lily's will and drawing forth her sympathy.

Of course, neither Woolf's view of gender politics nor her understanding of sympathy is as simple as this gothic fable suggests. The sympathetic hierarchy reverses the more obvious gender hierarchy, raising the sympathizer to the position of judge: for Smith, the moment of sympathy is a moment of moral assessment. During the instant that passes between witnessing an emotion and deciding whether or not to reproduce it, the potential sympathizer performs a series of instantaneous judgments, taking into account the emotion's intensity, the degree to which it is displayed upon the emoter's body, the situation that gives rise to it, and any mitigating factors she has become aware of from previous encounters with her object of sympathy. Given the apparent imbalance of power in the sympathetic exchange, it comes as no surprise that some who have received or failed to receive Mrs. Ramsay's sympathy imagine her as an emotional tyrant, accusing her of "wishing to dominate, wishing to interfere, making people do what she wished" (57).

Mrs. Ramsay deems the charges “unjust,” and in some sense, she is correct (57): the regime of sympathy is in many ways more bureaucratic than tyrannical. Forster, through the mouth of an anonymous Indian friend,<sup>18</sup> accuses the English of “measur[ing] out [their] emotions as if they were potatoes” (“Notes” 6). It is the English sympathizer’s task to weigh these potatoes and assess their quality. After all, however closely Smith may tie sympathetic judgment to morality, the initial judgment his sympathizers make of another’s expression of emotion is not whether it is moral or immoral, but whether it is decent or “indecent,” appropriate or “a piece of ill manners” (33). The sympathizer, a regulator of emotion, does not invent the rules of propriety according to which he assesses feelings; his power lies only in deciding how strictly to enforce them. *En masse*, sympathy’s power is democratic, its tyranny that of the majority.

Whether vampiric or bureaucratic, sympathy threatens because it encroaches on the hallowed space of the individual. Forster’s response is to defang sympathy to the point of inutility, emphasizing its personal rather than regulatory function and thus sacrificing any possibility of progressive power in order to eliminate its challenge to individuality. Woolf, though more critical of sympathy on the surface, is not so quick to strip the term of its influence beyond the individual. Instead of removing sympathy from the realm of the social, she interrogates and ultimately attempts to reroute the path it takes through society.

If, like Forster and his Victorian predecessors, we imagine emotion as the private emanation of an individual heart, we cannot imagine that it passes unscathed through the public world. As I argued in the previous chapter, the layers of social identities that encircle Forster’s liberal subject serve as obstacles to the transmission of feeling. Woolf’s characters also experience such divisions, from the “gulf” that lies “even between husband and wife” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 120) to the class divisions that flatten the children of blacksmiths and peers into mere “pictures to each other” (*CE* 4:151). The duty to “merge” the individuals who “all [sit] separate” falls to the uniquely sympathetic women who frequently serve as the emotional hubs of Bloomsbury novels, semi-divine maternal figures who seem to possess the ability to transcend all social divisions. When she gathers her flock around the *boeuf en daube*, Mrs. Ramsay “hover[s] like a hawk suspended” over the people she unites, filled with “a smoke, like a fume rising upwards” that “hold[s] them safe together” (105). The image is at once powerful and nebulous, recalling Ruth Wilcox’s exchange of individuality for agency in *Howards End*. The sympathetic mother is a predatory and sharp-eyed but internally hazy figure, reduced to her maternal function. Mrs. Ramsay’s need to “[lose] personality” and reduce herself to a “wedge of darkness” in order to find some form of “rest” is also familiar from Forster’s description of Mrs. Wilcox (63). What the mother figure asserts through her extraordinary influence is not her own will, but some internalized social code — a collective, half-conscious force that emerges only in the form of popular yet meaningless phrases such as “We are in the hands of the Lord” (63).

Where Mrs. Ramsay differs from Forster’s maternal figures is in the nature of the spiritual force that envelops her consciousness. While Mrs. Moore sees an all-

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<sup>18</sup> It seems likely that this is the opinion of Syed Ross Masood, but the frequency with which Forster repeats it (it appears in slightly different form in Chapter 27 of *A Passage to India*) suggests that it struck him as particularly accurate.

encompassing, meaning-swallowing universe, Mrs. Ramsay sees a source of minor irritation. She is aware, in a sense, that she serves a power outside of herself — figured here as God, although Mrs. Ramsay’s casual atheism suggests that it is not so much an actual divine power as the common assumption that one exists. The platitude she is “trapped” into thinking is a “lie” (64), or at best an “insincerity” (64).

Yet in another sense, Mrs. Ramsay’s sympathy is as self-serving as it is self-abnegating. In Lily’s view, her mentor’s sympathy is not sympathy at all, but rather pity. Lily imagines Mrs. Ramsay’s weariness as “partly pitying people,” though “her resolve to live again” is also “stirred by pity” (84). Lily sees such sympathy as the solipsistic reproduction of the sympathizer’s own projected emotions; Mrs. Ramsay’s pity for Mr. Bankes is “one of those misjudgments of hers that [seem] to be instinctive and to arise from some need of her own rather than of other people’s” (84). We receive this account of Mrs. Ramsay’s sympathy only through a layer of mediation, and thus should not discount the possibility that it results from Lily’s projection of her own feelings onto Mrs. Ramsay. Nevertheless, if we trust Lily’s interpretation, Mrs. Ramsay’s process of projecting emotions onto others and reflecting them back strikingly resembles Hannah Arendt’s definition of pity, in which “the turbulent sea of emotion within” a person responds not to another individual’s emotion, but instead to an affective context (85). To the pitying subject, the outside world appears an “ocean of suffering” regardless of whether or not the individual inhabitants of that ocean actually suffer. Although the staid academics who populate Mrs. Ramsay’s vacation home in no way resemble the teeming *malheureux* of whom Arendt writes, pity pays little attention to the individuals it takes as its objects, because it responds instead to the personal needs of she who pities. In this sense, Mrs. Ramsay’s striking ability to sympathize across social barriers results from the fact that what she sees on the other side is her own reflection. When Mrs. Ramsay disperses into a “spray of life,” then, she does not sacrifice her flesh to the other, but, in an equally sexual metaphor, expands her boundaries to take the other inside her self (37).

On the other hand, pity’s roots in the personal provide Woolf with a means of escaping the all-encompassing generalizations Forster makes through Mrs. Moore. A form of pity that generalizes an individual’s emotions does not necessarily foreclose the possibility of a sympathy that responds to the other rather than the self. What Woolf critiques through Mrs. Ramsay is a particular process of emotional exchange, not the transmission of emotion itself. Mrs. Ramsay’s dominance over the novel’s characters has to some degree extended to its readers, whose interpretations often fixate on the novel’s most charismatic figure, but overshadowed by Mrs. Ramsay’s pity are alternative forms of emotional exchange that the novel’s other characters explore — forms that seek to overcome social barriers without relying on the centripetal power of a maternal personality.

The most prominent alternative to Mrs. Ramsay’s mode of sympathy is Lily’s. Lily’s deflection of Mr. Ramsay’s demand for sympathy is often read as a rebellion against the confining expectations of femininity. By drawing Mr. Ramsay’s attention to his boots instead of his sorrow, this reading claims, Lily refuses to play the female to his male and instead trains him in self-sufficiency. In Susan Bennett Smith’s interpretation, for instance, Lily refuses the traditionally feminine work of mourning, distracting Mr. Ramsay by drawing his attention to beautiful material objects that he has created and thus transferring his attention from Mrs. Ramsay to himself (321).



But the scene is not entirely critical of sympathy. Lily's initial refusal to sympathize is as much a failure as a deliberate act of rebellion. On the one hand, when Mr. Ramsay's "immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy pour[s] and spread[s] itself in pools at her feet," she only "draw[s] her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet" (152). Here, what prevents her sympathy seems like prim refusal, a virginal defense against the merging of boundaries that she fears will result from sharing a man's emotion. Although Lily interprets her failure as a sign of her insufficient femininity, it is also a result of the excessive, if warped, masculinity she ascribes to Mr. Ramsay. His pain is a "primal gust," an emanation from his essential maleness. Even the feminine metaphor for his grief — a "flood" or "pool" — is masculine in its "enormous weight"; his is a sadness of stern, English "heavy draperies," not of the "veil of crape" he imagines adorning Carmichael's French, emasculated body (151-152). Thus even when Mr. Ramsay appears effeminate, he simultaneously calls attention to his maleness: Mr. Ramsay's femininity appears not as an aspect of his character, but rather as a threat from which Lily, the genuine female, must rescue him. When Lily sees Mr. Ramsay in such gendered terms, she primes herself to view her own feelings and actions through a gendered lens. What results is the sense of an impassable distance between them, a distance that their failure to fully embody their respective genders increases rather than diminishes. A real woman, Lily tells herself, would possess instinctive knowledge of how to overcome the barrier, and thus she initially reprimands herself for her failed femininity instead of seeking an alternative path to connection.

So far, the novel has presented us with two alternative responses to the male demand for sympathy: Mrs. Ramsay's self-sacrificing pity and Lily's "peevish, ill-tempered," and hence insufficiently feminine paralysis (151). Both define the exchange of emotion in gendered terms; neither succeeds in transmitting emotion. The resolution to the war of the sexes eventually comes in the form of an object that makes visible even as it bridges the gap between opposing factions. Unable to sympathize with Mr. Ramsay or even to understand him as anything but the embodiment of tyrannical maleness, Lily breaks the tension by complimenting his boots. The boots are Mr. Ramsay's "own indisputably": "sculptured; colossal," seemingly capable of "walking to his room of their own accord, expressive in his absence of pathos, surliness, ill-temper, charm" (153). The four adjectives Lily attaches to the boots issue a rhythmic echo of the four attributes of Mr. Ramsay that she notices: "his concentrated woe; his age; his frailty; his desolation" (153). However, the characteristics that Lily sees in the boots lack the sense of fatality and isolation that she sees in the man. The boots convey their owner's personality, from pathos to charm, free of its symbolic weight. By accessing Mr. Ramsay through his boots, Lily reduces him from archetype to individual. Whereas "his bleeding hands, his lacerated heart" fail to evoke sympathy because they call for it on behalf of the idea of the suffering male, the boots succeed by revealing the possibility of a sorrow prior to or at least not immediately linked to gender, and thus transmitting the individual pain of an individual person. The objects, in other words, convey humanity when the human cannot.

On "the blessed island of good boots," a utopian land of neutral objects, bonds among individuals are as physical as knots in shoelaces: by three times tying and untying Lily's laces, Mr. Ramsay performs a ritual of connection and withdrawal back into himself. The shoes and their laces bridge the emotional gap gender has opened between Lily and Mr. Ramsay and thus allow her to feel sympathy for him, while the ritualized

nature of the connection gives a threateningly indefinite process a clear beginning and end. Nevertheless, by depicting Lily's sympathy as a ritual that takes place on an imaginary island, Woolf suggests that it is exceptional, if not artificial. Thus after the moment has passed, Lily's view of the world once again separates into gendered halves, and she finds herself troubled by her loss of the agency that feminine pity grants the woman. "Emptiness and "frustration" accompany a feeling that emerges only after the man's need for it has passed; the boots, by placing the sympathizer and her object on equal footing, so to speak, eliminate the sexual thrill of sacrifice and conquest. The ritual of the lace-tying now seems an empty act, a poor trade for the sexualized ritual that would initiate her into an ur-narrative of gendered interaction. The sense of something lost persists; an otherwise successful act of sympathy preserves the memory of past failure. Yet I would not argue that a lingering awareness of failure suggests that the entire exchange has failed. Instead, the scene's ambivalence is a record of the politics that hinder the passage of sympathy — impediments that objects' mediation of emotion can bypass but not dismantle. The memory of failure that marks successful sympathy acknowledges the extraordinary route that emotion must take around social divisions, and thus the persistence of those divisions.

### Changing the Subject of Sympathy

Woolf's technique of transmitting emotion through objects reflects and, I would argue, promotes a change not only in her conception of sympathy, but also in her conception of the subject. The tensions in Woolf's treatment of subjectivity have been discussed extensively, in philosophical, psychoanalytic, and political terms.<sup>19</sup> Woolf's revision of sympathy interacts with her thinking on the subject along three main axes, all of them central concerns not only of Woolf criticism, but also of modernism in general: the subject-object axis, by which I refer to the cluster of questions about body and soul, thinking self and thought self, that descend from Descartes's *Meditations*; the fragmented-stable axis, which concerns the extent to which the subject is transitory, instantaneous, and multiple, or unified and enduring; and the social-individual axis, which weighs the subject interpellated by ideology against the private mind whose core, at least, is independent of the social world. The trend in Woolf criticism has been to align her with the first, more postmodern term of each dyad and explain her occasional

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<sup>19</sup> An early example, Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri's "The Nature of Being in Woolf and Duras," examines "the relation of the individual psyche to others, to the collective unconscious and to the sea of eternity; the effect upon all these relationships of the ontological security or insecurity of that individual psyche; individual isolation and communion and the modes of communion; the participation in an event and the relationship of the event to time and of time to eternity" (319). Later examples tend to approach these questions through particular theoretical lenses, as does Edward L. Bishop's "The Subject in *Jacob's Room*," in which he reads the novel's characters through Althusser, arguing that "Woolf is showing the action of ideology in constructing human character" (153). Lisa Dresner's "The Body and the Letter: the Fragmentation of the Male Subject in Woolf's *Orlando*," likewise, draws on both Althusser and Lacan in delineating the connections between politics and the fragmentation of the subject.

regressions by reinterpreting them through contemporary theoretical frameworks.<sup>20</sup> For the most part, I do not disagree. However, I argue that such interpretations tend to downplay Woolf's genuine ambivalence about the nature of the subject and, perhaps, some degree of attachment to the Victorian liberal beliefs she was so actively engaged in overturning. For even as she moves toward a new conception of subjectivity, she attempts to solve the problems the liberal subject raises on its own terms. Her revision of sympathy provides her with a means of resolving the past's inconsistencies in the philosophical language of the present. The Cubist method of scattering subjectivity across an array of objects holds in suspension competing conceptions of the subject: even as it imagines the individual as transient, multiple, and socially constructed, it continues to respond to tensions within a conception of the individual as stable, unified, and *sui generis*. The problems that the liberal subject raises thus have an afterlife beyond the reign of the liberal subject itself.

If these questions can be said to have an origin, it is in Descartes' classic dualism. After proving the existence of the thinking subject, Descartes himself admits, "I do not yet know clearly enough what I am, I who am certain that I am" (72). His descendants expanded on this uncertainty, pointing out a difference between the cogito — the subject currently engaged in thinking — and the "thing which thinks" (74). Heidegger's Being-in-the-World, for instance, rejects the idea of a transcendent mind prior to a body or, to use Descartes's example, a piece of wax, in favor of a subject embedded in the world. In more contemporary philosophy, the mind in the world becomes a mind made by the world, and the debate moves toward what I have called the social-individual axis, weighing what Charles Harvey describes as the "culturally unencumbered, world-purified spectator" against the self as a "collection of social-psychological attributes" (49). Harvey finds a compromise in Husserl's multiple senses of self: "(1) the sense of self as an empirical reality," or the empirical ego, "(2) the sense of self as a 'world-purified' or 'empty' self," or the pure ego, and the third sense that bridges the others, "the sense of self as a historically and socially constituted and constituting entity that knows itself as such, that is, the sense of self as 'transcendental'" (52). Woolf, like Husserl, refuses to choose between the thinking subject and the substantial self, but she does not unify the two with a transcendent third sense. Instead, she highlights the feeling of tension that such doubleness induces. Thus at her party, Clarissa Dalloway imagines "herself a stake driven in at the top of her stairs" and "quite [forgets] what she look[s] like" (170). The stake at the top of the stairs does not seem to represent her body, for it suggests a geometrical shape more than a material presence; Clarissa cannot even imagine its physical appearance. Instead, it seems to be her mind objectified — what her self thinks of when it thinks of itself thinking. The splintering of her mind into the stake at the top of

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<sup>20</sup> Ban Wang, for instance, criticizes readings of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s consciousnesses as "disparate" and "monadic," arguing that "the preoccupation with private consciousnesses... presupposes an outmoded notion of the subject that is believed to be autonomous, self-contained, and fully conscious of itself and which is assumed to be the source of meaning and thought, independent of social structure, discourse, and systems of signification—a notion of the subject which has been stripped of its validity by contemporary critical discourse" (177). Wang goes on to interpret the novel's apparently liberal "private consciousness[es]" as constructions of the symbolic order (178).

the stairs and whatever entity thinks of that stake induces a “feeling of being something not herself” (171). She faults her extraordinary surroundings for her sense of alienation, but it also results from the contradiction implied by thinking of her thinking self as an object — a thing rooted in the world.

This division complicates the transmission of sympathy, for in order to find another person worthy of sympathy, the sympathizer must imagine him or her as a subject: a currently thinking consciousness rather than a consciousness capable of thinking. For Edith Stein, the body enables sympathy<sup>21</sup>: because the “I” is “a unified object inseparably joining together the conscious unity of an ‘I’ and a physical body” (52), when I interpret the other’s body as a “sensing living body,” I impute to it a self like mine (57). Woolf’s novels, too, use the body as an intermediary between the self as thing in the world and the thinking self. In a shift familiar to us from late twentieth-century theory, the material body, no longer a weight that the mind must transcend, becomes a site and source of meaning. A mind steeped in Victorian liberalism would most likely imagine this newly reinforced relationship as reflective or revelatory — that is, as one in which the body reflects or reveals the mind. The thinking self accesses other thinking selves through their material dimension. The body’s motions reveal emotions; physical movement reflects inner activity. Yet even as Woolf’s novels at times maintain this sense of the mind as prior to if not independent of the body, at other times they issue a more radical challenge to Cartesian dualism.

Woolf’s depiction of sympathy is one of these challenges. In her work, the body does not merely express feeling, as in Smith’s theory, or perceive the sense-data that signifies another’s feeling, as in Hume’s. Nor does fellow feeling entail the spread of affect from body to body, as in empathy. Admittedly, Woolf often defers to the Enlightenment understanding of emotion as prior to its physical expression; in fact, she portrays Septimus Smith’s tendency to conflate the material world with his own interior state as a symptom of his madness. Yet as we come to believe by the end of the novel, Septimus may not be mad after all. Laura Doyle, challenging both liberal and postmodern views of the body, draws a connection between Woolf’s depiction of the physical world and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: “The body does not survive only beyond and against language and narrative; it survives with and in language and narrative, partly because language’s physicality extends the phenomenal world’s physicality, and vice-versa” (45-46). The body is neither a barrier to meaning nor a last holdout against the totalizing power of language. Instead, Doyle argues, language works with and through the physical world:

Speech has status as an object, as a heard or seen thing, in addition to its function as a vehicle of particular meanings. Like the knolling of Big Ben or the airplane

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<sup>21</sup> Stein uses the term *Einfühlung*, which is generally translated as “empathy,” though as I note in the introduction, this translation has been disputed. Nevertheless, the process she describes resembles the sympathy of Smith and Hume in that the sympathizer’s emotion is dependant on perception and “non-primordial” (11) — that is, not original to the sympathizer. Stein reserves the term *sympathy* for primordial emotions we happen to share with others but that do not necessarily originate in them; this is closer though not identical to the definition of *pity* in the Anglo-American tradition.

writing in *Mrs. Dalloway*, heard sounds and spoken words in Woolf's texts often take their import more from their shared externality than from the particular hour they indicate or the meanings they spell. (48)

Doyle also reverses this relationship: just as speech can become an object, so can an object speak. The “intercorporeal” space of objects is not an emptiness between subjects, but rather a medium of communication. Sympathetic exchanges, whether between character and reader or character and character, rely on this cooperation between materiality and meaning.

In fact, Woolf takes this cooperation a step further, as her narrators produce sympathy with and between characters by locating meaning simultaneously in selves and things, erasing the distinction between the corporeal and the intercorporeal. If the objects that communicate emotion between characters form a language, it is one that defies Saussure. In the portrait of Mrs. Walker in her kitchen, for instance, the room does not simply signify her emotion, but fuses with it: the clutter in the kitchen may symbolize Mrs. Walker's agitation, but it also produces, embodies, and communicates it. Woolf's description of the physical space Mrs. Walker navigates is also her description of Mrs. Walker's inner state, and the reader's sympathy is thus triggered by material objects and Mrs. Walker's emotions at once. Likewise, Lily cries in response to both Mr. Ramsay and his boots. The boots simultaneously convey and incarnate Mr. Ramsay's pathos; they are symbols of and extensions of the man. Jessica Berman, drawing on Mieke Bal and Gilles Deleuze, conceptualizes this intertwining of subject and object through the figure of the fold. As she lays out the connections enfolded in the image of Mrs. Ramsay's glove:

The twisting of the glove ... marks not only the particularity of a singular being—we could know Mrs. Ramsay by her glove's twisted finger—but also the experience of otherness tinged with the desire for intimacy made clear here by Lily's narrating perspective. The twisted fabric conflates terms even as it connects subject (Mrs. Ramsay) and object (the glove) or folds subject (Mrs. Ramsay) onto subject (Lily) onto subject (reader). (165)

The glove, in Berman's reading, folds subjectivity into the object world and subject into subject, serving as both symbol and conduit of intimacy.

Even when it is their own emotional state that characters attempt to access, their means of encountering themselves complicates the boundary between subject and object, interior and exterior. In *Between the Acts*, Isabella Oliver attempts to untangle her feelings for her husband and the “gentleman farmer” by looking at her physical self. When she gazes at the “three-folded mirror,” she sees “three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome face; and also, outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops” (13-14). The addition of the space outside the mirror is no accident, for the physical world's emotional content is not fixed in the body itself:

Inside the glass, in her eyes, she saw what she had felt overnight for the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentleman farmer. “In love,” was in her eyes. But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes and tooth-brushes, was the other love; love for her husband, the stockbroker—“The father of

my children,” she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction. Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table. But what feeling was it that stirred in her now when above the looking-glass, out of doors, she saw coming across the lawn the perambulator; two nurses; and her little boy George, lagging behind? (14)

A Cartesian mindset would encourage us to interpret “inner love” as more legitimate than “outer love,” yet the passage does not necessarily encourage such a reading. Instead, Isabella’s glance in the glass troubles the distinction between inside and outside: the slice of landscape that slips into her frame of view suggests that she cannot focus on one to the complete exclusion of the other. Furthermore, her son’s appearance at the edge of her vision shifts her focus even further outside, so that the looking-glass, once interiority’s home base in the external world, moves to the periphery.

Isabella’s tripartite view of herself in the looking glass also reflects another source of tension in Woolf’s view of the subject. Looking in the mirror, Isabella does not, as does Clarissa, “[draw] the parts together” into “one diamond,” “pointed; dart-like; definite” (*MD* 37), but rather remains divided into multiple facets. Jack F. Stewart has pointed out the scene’s Cubist geometry, comparing it to Picasso’s *Girl before a Mirror*. As he explains, “The mirror allows one to view different aspects of the same figure simultaneously from three different angles, while inside and outside, figure and ground, interact as segments of a single plane” (72). This “Cubist form-language” provides Woolf with a means of suggesting “the multiplicity of views that coexist within a single character” (73). Competing fragments of Isabella’s character not only coexist, but achieve prominence at the same moment, for unlike Clarissa, Isabella does not put a single facet forward.

The Cubist method facilitates the passage of emotion between individuals in a similarly contradictory fashion. In encountering others as collections of irregular, often disharmonious surfaces, sympathizers acknowledge their multiplicity. Despite the metaphor Clarissa uses to describe herself, Woolf’s characters do not resemble diamonds so much as Cubist paintings, collections of uneven fragments that may possess a sort of aesthetic order, but one that is constantly in flux. As Stewart notes, for Woolf, “the life of the mind lies in [the] *transitions* between planes and between people” (73, emphasis original). Objects convey knowledge through their interactions with one another, and thus this knowledge remains bonded to the particular arrangement of objects within the novel, much in the way the fragments of a Cubist painting become meaningful only in tandem. To extract a single object from the portrait of a character is to reify the insight it allows us in order to add it to our personal collection of facts — in other words, to harden a delicate and mutable kind of understanding into stereotype.

### Mediated Sympathy and the Flickering Self

An emphasis on movement and multiplicity at first seems incompatible with sympathy, whose object is not the fragmented individual spread out into an array of objects, but the unified soul that the sympathizer detects or projects beneath those objects. Other critics have noticed this tension in Woolf’s depiction of the sympathetic exchange. While arguing that Woolf insists on “the impossibility of easy sympathy” and

“confront[s] the reader with the limits of knowledge and representation,” Rachel Hollander reads the characters of *Jacob’s Room* as coherent, even when they are inaccessible (62). The self possesses an “essence,” even if it is “‘shut’ like a book” (50), and “depth,” even if it is made up of “the infinite possibilities of a succession of days which are furled in him” (57). The exceptional exchange of sympathy that occurs between Jacob and Simeon imprints one mind on another “indelibly,” suggesting a meeting of whole entities that, even if they are not actually indelible, behave for an instant as though they were. For the moment of sympathy, in other words, the object of sympathy is as stable and whole as the liberal subject.

This phenomenon results, in part, from the way Woolf’s characters attempt to comprehend one another. Lily Briscoe, for instance, imagines two different structural relationships between multiple and unified selves that ultimately privilege the latter. In her encounter with Mr. Bankes,

the load of her accumulated impressions of him tilted up, and down poured in a ponderous avalanche all she felt about him. That was one sensation. Then up rose in a fume the essence of his being. (14)

Here, she distils the other’s being from a pool of “accumulated impressions,” suggesting that the essence of the self is a part of every fragment, but that the rest of each fragment is mere ornamentation. This model of the self, though not quite identical to the liberal conception, mimics its division of the self into more and less essential parts.

Shortly afterward, Lily recalls a series of impressions of Mr. Ramsay:

All of this danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvelously controlled in an invisible elastic net—danced up and down in Lily’s mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree...until her thought which had spun quicker and quicker exploded of its own intensity; she felt released; a shot went off close at hand, and there came, flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings. (25)

In this image, the fragments of the self are all equally valid; what unifies them is not a central essence, but an overarching structure — an “invisible net” — that sometimes becomes visible, but that any destabilizing force can dissolve. The shape of the self is irregular and unstable, determined by the movement of its parts; the subject is less an essence than an effervescence. Nevertheless, this model still privileges the unified over the multiple self, for the subject does not consist of the gnats themselves, but of the invisible shape that surrounds them. In both examples, Lily’s moment of understanding is the moment at which the fragments cohere. In other words, Lily equates knowing the other with comprehending him as a unified being. The unified subject has this centripetal power throughout Woolf’s work; it could even be seen as the governing structure of *The Waves*, in which six voices ultimately converge into one.

This tendency to unify is difficult to escape even when the moment of understanding is instead a moment of acknowledged incomprehension. Even a Levinasian encounter — one that, as Hollander writes, “preserves otherness even in the midst of intense sympathy” (59) — treats the other as coherent in her mystery. Leora

Batnitzky argues that far from opposing Descartes's *cogito*, "Levinas means to return to what he claims is the fullness of the Cartesian sensibility, which, he maintains, affords access to a reality that cognitive knowledge cannot reach" (15). In Batnitzky's view, Levinas does not oppose the idea of a unified, unique subject, but only the idea that such a subject can be grounded in reason and instinct rather than "sensibility" — defined here as the "receptive capacity of the self to bear and be shaped by the world in which it lives" (15). Though Batnitzky goes on to argue that a self constituted by "an exteriority for which it cannot itself account" is thus as rooted in infinity as the other it encounters, infinity and multiplicity are not as synonymous as they seem (18). In fact, Levinas has been criticized for failing to acknowledge a multiplicity of infinities: as Luce Irigaray points out, even as Levinas proposes a means of engaging without comprehending the other, he thinks in terms of the other of a particular subject, failing to recognize that the feminine subject experiences an absolutely different world (69). "Communicating with the other," she reminds him, "is impossible within a single logic" (76-77). But the logic that Irigaray proposes in place of the masculine one is dual rather than infinitely divisible: in her universe, there are two worlds, both absolutely other to each other. It is this attraction to absolutes that leads sensibility to its tendency to unify what it receives, even if it does so in terms of incomprehensibility rather than comprehensibility. Thus in Hollander's example, Jacob and Simeon, however internally contradictory they may be, imprint their minds on one another as though they were woodcuts: complete, stable, and reproducible images, even if in the negative.

Of course, the exchange between Jacob and Simeon is one of those rare moments of intense receptivity that make other sympathetic exchanges seem impoverished; the novel's narrator mourns the mysteriousness of our fellow creatures, who appear before us like "a procession of shadows" except for those fleeting moments in which "the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid" (71-72). Ordinary, imperfect sympathy of the sort Woolf portrays through the Cubist method seems at first to acknowledge the multiplicity of the self, but ultimately imagines a unified subject in a slightly different way. A Cubist painting arguably gives equal weight to each of its fragments, locating meaning in the movement among parts rather than in any privileged object. This composition imposes certain limitations on the painting's analysis, for to consider the piece apart from the whole is to change its meaning. For instance, in Crosby's final appearance in *The Years*, the accumulated objects that once mediated the reader's encounter with the character have been reduced to a single object: Crosby's feet, which now bear the entire weight of her characterization. Lacking other objects with which to interact, the feet function as classic symbols, conveying so stereotypical an image of Crosby that we would lose little by replacing them with another of Woolf's descriptions of elderly servant characters: "They were old; they were stiff; their legs ached" (*TL* 139).

In order to avoid the reification of its parts, a Cubist description must remain whole. But in Cubism, wholeness is a fraught concept. The whole of a Cubist painting is supposedly created by the harmony (or disharmony) of its parts. Yet there is another way to mark the painting as a complete entity: the frame that separates it from its surroundings. Although Cubism depends on the interplay between center and periphery, interior and exterior, the frame creates a literal boundary between the work and the world. Furthermore, while the painting's fragments are irregular, the whole that the frame



creates is almost always rectangular. A few works may challenge these limits — Picasso’s “Still Life with Chair Cane,” for instance, incorporates actual chair caning and a rope frame that implies flexibility — but for the most part, the conventions of the medium shape the conventions of the style.

In a similar manner, the literary Cubist method challenges convention only within the limits of a narrative “frame.” The border of a description is marked temporally rather than spatially, for while the viewer of a painting can perceive the entire work simultaneously, the reader of a novel must impose simultaneity on an actually linear text. Although the reader can collect the pieces of a character’s description and give them equal weight, the passage will of necessity have a beginning and an end. But because the Cubist method blurs the boundary between description of the character and description of the world around her, what marks these narrative borders?

If we return to the moment in *The Years* at which Crosby leaves Eleanor’s service, we can see the way Cubist description leads characters to overlap with one another. When Eleanor thinks of “every cupboard, flagstone, chair and table in that large rambling house,” she may be thinking of the objects’ relationship with Crosby, but they are at that moment as much a part of her as they are of her servant (216). In fact, it is Eleanor’s own relationship with the objects that allows them to mediate her sympathy with Crosby. If the house is a part of both Eleanor and Crosby, then where does each person end? It seems at first that the other person’s body would serve as the natural border of identity, for that body belongs to the other person in a more immediate sense than does any object she can possess through emotional attachment or the social contract. Yet in this scene, Crosby’s body comes to contain emotions Eleanor feels, even if she cannot acknowledge them. At first, the narrator depicts Eleanor’s sadness as the result of a sympathetic exchange: “Tears were running freely down [Crosby’s] cheeks. For all Eleanor could do to prevent it, tears formed in her eyes, too” (217). But when Eleanor touches Crosby, the narrator draws attention to Eleanor’s possession of the tears: “[Eleanor] bent and kissed [Crosby]. She had a curious dry quality of skin, she noticed. But her own tears were falling” (217). Although the first example allows us to read Eleanor’s tears as a response to Crosby’s emotional state, the second example’s emphasis on Eleanor’s possession of the tears suggests that she is the origin of the emotion they imply. Crosby’s age, implied here by the “curious dry quality of [her] skin,” embodies the duration of Eleanor’s familiarity with the house she is leaving and her half-admitted attachment to it. Thus the other as object may, like an inanimate object, become part of the material self.

Instead, the border of the self seems to be the other’s subjectivity in the classic, liberal sense of the word. Eleanor diverges from Crosby only once she imagines her as a subject capable of her own emotions: “Crosby was so miserable; [Eleanor] was so glad” (217). The Cubist method thus relies on two different theories of the subject: for the space of the description, the narrative blurs the distinction between interior and exterior, whole and part, but in order to indicate the shift from one description to the next, it reverts to a liberal view of the self. The type of sympathy this method enables shifts to a Cubist view of the subject in order to open up the other that the liberal view of subjectivity has solidified into an object. However, in order to accomplish the goal of accessing the other’s interior state — a liberal convention — the narration must

eventually revert to a more traditional view of subjectivity. The modern technique, in other words, serves traditional ends.

The tension between the two views of the subject, one of which isolates the individual and another of which merges multiple people through the overlapping fragments of their identities, extends to Woolf's view of the self's relationship with the social world. The overlap of identities in the object world is only one instance of a theme that runs through *Mrs. Dalloway*. As J. Hillis Miller puts it, the rapid shifts from consciousness to consciousness that take place in the motorcar and skywriting scenes, among the novel's many other moments of mass connection,

suggest that the solid existing things of the external world unify the minds of separate persons because, though each person is trapped in his or her own mind and his or her own private responses to external objects, nevertheless these disparate minds can all have responses, howsoever different they may be, to the same event. (141)

This reading preserves an individualistic view of the self, who is "trapped in his or her own mind" even while connecting to others through the object world. Miller goes on to identify the narrative voice as a more powerful connective force, since it is composed of and a part of characters' minds, but the novel suggests a similar and equally important interweaving of characters' identities. The objects that attract multiple characters' attention are not the only points of connection between them; Woolf also imagines that friends are attached to one another

by a thin thread...which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one's friends were attached to one's body, after lunching with them, by a thin thread, which... became hazy with the sound of bells, striking the hour or ringing to service, as a single spider's thread is blotted with rain-drops, and, burdened, sags down. (112)

Here, the overlapping of selves in the object world is an object in itself, albeit a flimsy and changeable one. That the influence of social relationships on the subject is tenuous does not imply that it is unimportant, for the subject under society's influence is similarly unstable. The self of one moment is not the self of the next: as the threads stretch, sag, and reform, so does the subject. The self is not an isolated object in a vacuum, this image suggests, but a particular portion of an ever-shifting web of selves with whom it interacts. As Clarissa at times imagines, her self is part of "the ebb and flow of things" (9):

[H]ere, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (9)

Although the scene's visual analogue would be an Impressionist rather than a Cubist painting, its depiction of the self is similar to that implied by the Cubist method. The self

is both limited by others — “laid out like a mist” between them — and infinite — lifted as “the trees lift the mist,” “spread[ing] ever so far.” The geometry of the scene is contradictory, but the image as a whole is not; the trees both bound the mist and allow it to surpass them, as we have seen trees do to mist in life, although our logical sense tells us that borders should not both limit and not limit the objects they contain. We can easily resolve the problem, of course, by recognizing that Clarissa conceptualizes the same scene in two different ways, imagining the trees first as a frame, then as scaffolding. The contradiction results from merging the competing views of the mist — the self — as either constituted or merely demarcated by its position in a society of selves.

Woolf’s depiction of the way social relationships become part of the self may be at once more abstract and more personal than Forster’s portrayals of selves shaped by connections to club or country, but its spirit is similar. Forster, who sees the web as a threat, responds with an attempt to free the individual, if not reposition him as the spider at its center, but Woolf’s view of the social world’s influence is ambivalent in not only a philosophical but also a political sense. On the one hand, she concurs with Forster in indicting social influence on the self as an encroachment, particularly when the influence in question is that of the patriarchal family. Although many of the modernists and their successors criticize the Victorian period for its bourgeois individualism, the structure of the Victorian family encourages a collective rather than individualistic view of selfhood. The familiar ideology of separate spheres does not imply separate souls or interests: John Ruskin, for instance, scoffs at those who speak of “the ‘mission’ and of the ‘rights’ of Woman, as if these could ever be separate from the mission and the rights of Man; — as if she and her lord were creatures of independent kind, and of irreconcilable claim” (§54). Despite their association with opposite genders, the separate spheres denote two layers of a unitary identity gathered under the aegis of the man, such that even the supposedly feminine household reflects the interiority of the man who heads it.

Woolf’s novels bring to the forefront inherent contradictions between the Victorian models of the family and the self. In her work, as in the realist novels that preceded it, character emerges out of the dialectical movement between collective and individualistic models of identity.<sup>22</sup> This tension also agitates the diagetic level of the text, becoming an engine of plot: characters persistently resist subsumption in the collective, attempting to carve out a space for personal identity. Asserting that there is “even between husband and wife a gulf” that “one must respect,” Clarissa maintains an attic room cut off from the shared familial space (*MD* 120). However, her withdrawal does not entirely succeed, for the lifestyle she is unwilling to relinquish requires her to “pay back from [a] secret deposit of exquisite moments” — that is, from the substance of deep personal identity — “in daily life to servants, yes, to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard her husband” (29). She is “Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more” (11). “Mrs. Dalloway,” we may contend, is still a part of her identity, but Woolf suggests that her character is “Clarissa” in a more genuine sense. Here, the self formed by society is a self deformed by patriarchy.

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<sup>22</sup> I borrow the structure but not the terms of Lukács’s formulation of character in *Studies in European Realism*, since as Lukács would be first to admit, “type” does not accurately express the social level of identity in the modernist novel.

When the society counterposed with the self is the wider community rather than the family, however, it complements even as it constrains. It is something vital: “life; London; this moment of June” (4). The “leaden circles” of Big Ben, order imposed from above, are only one aspect of the society “one loves... so,” “making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh” (4). The society that creates us, Clarissa muses, is one we create in turn; though Big Ben and Parliament hover overhead, the passage’s depiction of the social world brings it into a mutually constituting relationship with the individual.

*Mrs. Dalloway* meanders between Big Ben’s leaden circles in the air and the “swing, tramp, and trudge” of ground-level society just as its view of the subject alternates between imprisoned individual and infinite mist (4). While Forster, attempting to choose between the isolated mind and the muddle of the Marabar Caves, ends up withdrawing from the decision and settling on passivity, Woolf chooses both options at once, embracing contradiction as the best way to represent complexity in a language that still operates, for all our criticism of it, according to a single logic. Woolf does not dismantle the liberal subject, but preserves it in a flickering, ghostly form.

Forster, summing up Woolf’s work in his 1941 Rede Lecture, concludes, “And sometimes it is as a row of little silver cups that I see her work gleaming. ‘These trophies,’ the inscription runs, ‘were won by the mind from matter, its enemy and its friend’” (qtd. Dowling 91-92). Though the image, half compliment and half criticism, seems to perpetuate a Cartesianism to which Woolf’s subjects do not conform, it fittingly commemorates the mind’s victory over matter by transforming the victoriously cerebral novels into tangible objects. The folding of body into mind into body in Forster’s image resembles not only Woolf’s enfolding of subjects and objects, but also the layering of different subjects that takes place in the process of sympathy. The new form of sympathy in Woolf’s work serves many of the same ends that it served for the Victorians: it forges bonds between Eleanors and Crosbys, Mr. Ramsays and Lilys, and it allows readers to identify with characters across the gulfs of gender or class. Yet in order to meet these Victorian goals, sympathy must change not only the route it takes from one subject to another, but the very nature of the subjects it seeks to connect. It could even be argued that it is traditional sympathy’s failure that drives modernist revisions of the subject, rather than the reverse. As Catherine Gallagher contends in *Nobody’s Story*, the foundational link between the novel and sympathy was a strained and twisted one; sympathy, despite its association with nature and instinct, has always been difficult. The eighteenth-century fictional subject eases the passage of emotion precisely because it is fictional and thus free of the boundaries to identification that separate real individuals. But when the novel becomes culture’s dominant medium and the nobodies begin to register as somebodies, new formal innovations must arise in order to permit the passage of sympathy. Thus Woolf’s sympathetic exchanges, which transmit emotion by conceiving of the space between us as the blurred, overlapping edges of amorphous, fragmented, and destabilized selves, begin and end with the liberal subject.

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## 3.

Unfastening Feeling in *Tender Buttons* and *A Long Gay Book*

In the Bloomsbury novels, we saw first a questioning, then a waning of the liberal subject. Forster found the relationship between emotion and subjectivity less comfortable than his ideological predecessors believed; Woolf, responding to the same instability, used a revised conception of emotion and its transmission to temper the bourgeois self with an alternative, contradictory model of subjectivity that we might call modernist. Other modernists did not hesitate to do away with the liberal subject entirely, at least on the surface. It is perhaps no coincidence that those writers less overtly interested in politics would more easily relinquish a model of selfhood that derives in large part from a liberal ideology. Gertrude Stein, whose all-consuming concern with language and tongue-in-cheek political pronouncements until recently led critics to conclude that she lacked a "political program," is of all the writers in this study perhaps the least attached to a coherent, stable subject (Davis 567). Of course, as Phoebe Davis and others argue, Stein's studied political insincerity was to some extent an insincerity in itself;<sup>23</sup> to disregard the liberal subject, after all, is as much a political as an aesthetic choice. In Stein's work, however, any political program must also be a formal innovation, for the political and the philosophical are inextricable from the linguistic.

Stein's characteristic experiments with the sentence are also experiments with the subject and thus, as I have been arguing, with sympathy. While the Bloomsbury writers turn to the relationship between subjects and objects as a means of overcoming impediments to emotional exchange, Stein approaches subjectivity and sympathy as joint problems of representation, halves of a puzzle that, when solved, displays an unexpected yet internally coherent image. Lacking Bloomsbury's strong ties to English liberalism, with its roots in empiricism and the Scottish Enlightenment, Stein draws from often diametrically opposed American and Continental traditions that lend her work a logical flexibility and skepticism toward conventional reality that underscore her kinship with the avant-garde painters whose friendship she enjoyed. Like Cubist paintings, Stein's depictions of subjects, objects, and the emotions that flow among them reconfigure expected relationships by dismantling them, analyzing their fragments, and rearranging them to create new wholes. Stein's revisions of sympathy and subjectivity strive for an accuracy that is measured not by conformity to either the real or a political ideal, but rather by an ability to reveal gaps and inconsistencies in the conventions that order our conception of reality.

Stein's experiments with the subject arguably begin with her transition from the "insistence" to the "lively words" styles, to borrow Marianne DeKoven's useful terms ("Why James Joyce..."). Repetitive insistence aims to construct a continuous present and thus seems to privilege questions of consciousness and subjectivity, whereas the lively

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<sup>23</sup> Recent studies have focused on the political writings that earlier critics dismissed as uncharacteristic, weighing, for instance, the extent to which her translations of Marshall Phillippe Pétain's speeches represent sympathy for the Vichy government. Barbara Will reads the ambiguities in Stein's translations not as evidence of insincerity, but rather a genuine ambivalence caused by her insecure position as a Jew in Nazi-occupied France.



words style brings language itself, in all its ambiguity and materiality, to the foreground. In *A Long Gay Book*, which was written during this transition period though not published until decades later, Stein's exploration of the relationship between subjectivity and emotion exposes the need for a more extensive revision of her understanding of subjects and objects. Thus in *Tender Buttons*, perhaps Stein's most famous work if not her most widely read, she plays with alternatives to the traditional relationship between subjects and objects, breaking down the scaffolding of the liberal self until we are left without subjects at all, much less human ones. If there are no subjects, properly speaking, in *Tender Buttons*, it may seem perverse to include the poem in a study of sympathy, for as we saw in the Bloomsbury novels, traditional sympathy assumes independent souls capable of producing, conveying, and receiving emotions, which in this model are themselves emanations of unique, separable subjects. Even if Woolf may challenge the liberal subject, she does so through the traditional opposition between subject and object, traversing the boundaries between people and things in a strategic manner that persistently reminds us of the lines she crosses. To preserve the possibility of sympathy in the absence of a subject would require a more radical rethinking of the way emotion is both produced and shared.

In order to understand the way Stein represents feelings without people to feel them, I turn to poststructuralist analyses of emotion.<sup>24</sup> Although it would be reductive to read Stein as a sort of deconstructionist *avant la lettre*, Stein's experiments with nonlinear language bear a striking resemblance, as Marianne DeKoven and others point out, to deconstructive concepts such as Derrida's "pluridimensionality" (88). More important for my purpose here is poststructuralism's rejection of what Rei Terada calls the "expressive hypothesis" — that is, liberal ideology's transformation of Descartes's *cogito* into "I feel, therefore I am." As Pieter Vermeulen notes, Terada's interpretation of deconstructionist theories of emotion bears an uncanny resemblance to Stein's depiction of emotion and its relationship with subjectivity. According to Vermeulen, Stein, like Terada, portrays emotions as transient phenomena that flow through "differential interspaces" rather than coagulate into "representational units" (154).

Where my argument diverges from Vermeulen's is his claim that Stein reacts defensively to the self-difference from which these emotions emerge. In Stein's lectures, he notes, the same narrative plays out again and again: Stein, speaking in the first person, encounters evidence of her divided self, which provokes an anxiety that she can only quell by asserting a stable subject. But Stein's lectures are only one limb of a body of work that overflows with contradictions; a lecture forces a particular narrative of subjectivity to which a poem or a novel need not adhere. Vermeulen reads Stein's lectures as "belated attempts at synchronization" through which she "can communicate directly to an audience" (156). However, a lecture is also a form of theater — a play

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<sup>24</sup> Although Stein uses "feeling" to refer to all types of emotion, theorists of emotion generally distinguish among emotional terms. As Rei Terada explains, "by emotion we usually mean a psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience whose physiological aspect is affect. Feeling is a capacious term that connotes both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions). Although philosophers reserve 'feeling' for bodily conditions, I use it when it seems fruitful to emphasize the common ground of the physiological and the psychological" (4).

about knowledge that stars a sole actor-teacher. The very medium of theater brings us face to face with our own internal divisions, but a lecture enforces a single voice, a single source through whom all knowledge flows. It acts, contrary to Stein's exhortation in *Tender Buttons*, as if there were a center, and thus modifies what it describes to fit the pattern that center imposes. As Stein declares in *A Long Gay Book*, a lecture molds rather than describes: "Lecture, lecture a hat and say it is a cat, say it is a lively description, say that there is collusion, to say this and say it sweetly, to say this and make alike service and a platter, to do this is horrid and yet when does kindness fail" (§698). Stein's lectures are uncomfortably univocal; the single, authoritative subject that they assert is always undercut by the disjointed self of the stage.

Most of Stein's work, however, straddles multiple genres. *Tender Buttons* has inspired a century-long attempt at classification: it is a Cubist poem or a Dadaist ekphrasis, a narrative without plot or characters (Kaufmann 450) or a "personal story" (Hadas 61). It draws upon poetry and prose, catalogues and philosophical treatises, but fits uncomfortably into any single generic tradition. The text's fragmentation and conglomeration of generic conventions does not free it from the constraints of formal structure, for an experimental genre creates conventions of its own. However, a work of art shaped by the spaces between multiple genres better suits a form of emotion that emerges from the spaces between representational units.<sup>25</sup> Counterintuitive as it may seem, this emotion of the between-spaces can only exist as a form of sympathy — as a transmission rather than an expression, a transition rather than a state. The representational units emotion evades are not merely the cross sections of feeling that we call, say, happiness or sadness, but also the locations we designate as emotion's endpoints: the subject and the object. As we saw in the novels of Forster and Woolf, because sympathy and subjectivity have always evolved in tandem, a critique of one necessitates a critique of the other. Only by revising sympathy and subjectivity together can Stein expand the range of sympathy beyond the human borders that even deconstruction allows to remain in place. In her work, carafes and cushions become not merely mediators of emotional transmission among humans, but instead active participants in a decentered and multidirectional form of sympathy.

#### Tenderness Without Buttons: Decentered Sympathy and Human Non-Subjects in *A Long Gay Book*

At stake in Stein's attempt to rethink the relationship between sympathy and subjectivity is the primacy of the human, particularly in the guise of the literary character. Her early "insistent" works, such as *Three Lives*, not only include fairly traditional characters, but also center on human psyches, most strikingly in "Melanctha": here, repeated clauses seem to cascade from a central consciousness, and objects appear only as accessories to Melanctha Herbert or Jeff Campbell. Although Stein depicts the titular character of "The Good Anna" in large part through her interactions with the external

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<sup>25</sup> Other works with similar generic complexity, such as *Geography and Plays*, represent emotion in a similar manner, but I focus on *Tender Buttons* and, to a lesser extent, *A Long Gay Book* as Stein's earliest iterations of this form of emotion.

world, its most relevant features are not objects, but rather the people and animals that accumulate around her.

By contrast, in *A Long Gay Book*, which was composed between *Three Lives* and *Tender Buttons* and has been read as a transition between the “insistence” and “lively words” styles (Berry 40), Stein begins to treat humans less like subjects and more like carafes or roasts, and we can thus begin to see hints of the sympathy Stein will create in *Tender Buttons*. Because *A Long Gay Book* begins with humans, however, it exposes limitations that *Tender Buttons* is able to occlude. As the book evolves from a style shared with *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* to one almost identical to that of *Tender Buttons*, it underscores the extent to which humans in literature are inextricable from historical conceptions of subjectivity even if they shed all the attributes of character.

Ellen E. Berry reads *A Long Gay Book*'s typology of humankind as an attempt to “represent the world according to the commonsense logic of realism” — an attempt that eventually “buckle[s]” under the weight of paradox and ambiguity in order to make way for a “new ‘logic’” and “new speaking position” that anticipate those of *Tender Buttons* (43). Yet even at the first stage of this evolution, Stein's classifications are not realism's, and her types are not Balzac's. Stein may share the realist aim of subverting a bourgeois focus on individual subjectivity, but the alternative she offers is closer to the taxometric than the social type.

Although the title of *A Long Gay Book* purports to describe demeanor rather than content, the book is in large part a meditation on feeling. The opening paragraphs document the loss of the subject, which is driven by and results in emotion:

There are some when they feel it inside them that it has been with them that there was once so very little of them, that they were a baby, helpless and no conscious feeling in them, that they knew nothing when they were kissed and dandled and fixed by others who knew them when they could know nothing inside them or around them, some get from all this that once surely happened to them to that which was then every bit that was then them, there are some when they feel it later inside them that they were such once and that was all that there was then of them, there are some who have from such a knowing an uncertain curious kind of feeling in them that their having been so little once and knowing nothing makes it all a broken world for them that they have inside them, kills for them the everlasting feeling; and they spend their life in many ways, and always they are trying to make for themselves a new everlasting feeling. (§2)

Upon coming to “feel it inside them” that they lacked “conscious feeling” as infants, “some” feel a loss of subjectivity — “the everlasting feeling” — and, in turn, develop a sense of self-difference — “a broken world for them that they have inside them.” The passage prefigures deconstruction's expressive hypothesis, which it illustrates through typical Steinian repetition: the “uncertain curious kind of feeling” of self-difference destroys the “everlasting feeling” of subjectivity and inspires the search for the “new everlasting feeling” that will fill in and erase that sense of division. The sense of a lack and subsequent feeling of longing are fairly traditional emotions: for those who suffer from the loss of subjectivity, feelings are “inside them” or “for themselves.” Stein makes

the deceptively obvious point that we would not feel dissatisfied by the loss of subjectivity if our feelings did not depend on it.

Stein's subsequent classification of humanity offers an alternative to this narrative of loss by dismantling the relationship between subjectivity and emotion. Although this process results in a decentered sympathy much like that we will find in *Tender Buttons* — one could even argue that *A Long Gay Book* itself ultimately transforms into *Tender Buttons* — it takes an expository route. The relatively traditional grammar with which *A Long Gay Book* begins implies a traditional subject that Stein must painstakingly dislodge. As she insists in one iteration of an early litany, "Every one has in them a fundamental nature to them with a kind of way of thinking that goes with this nature in them in all the many millions made of that kind of them" (§19). By beginning with "every one," she acknowledges a standard belief in isolable souls, each with "a kind of way of thinking" that at first appears to reflect the idiosyncrasies of a solitary consciousness. The end of the sentence shatters these beliefs: every "one" is merely an instance of "the many millions made of that kind of them." "Flavors" may provide variation within types: "the mixture in them of other kinds of nature to them gives a flavor to some kinds of them to some kinds of men and some kinds of women, makes a group of them that have to them flavor as more important in them than the fundamental nature in them" (§23). Although flavors can be more crucial than types, they do not reinstitute individuality, but instead group people according to an alternate system of classification. "Pauline" may exemplify the "the Pauline group," but we can also detect a "Pauline quality in Ollie" (§28). By naming the flavors that distinguish particular members from their own name-groups, Stein prevents us from interpreting differences as markers of individuality.

The substitution of types for individuals at first seems to bring them down to the level of traditional objects; each human being adheres to a certain form or combination of forms. A significant portion of *A Long Gay Book* details the formal characteristics that members of particular types display more or less prominently. Physical and mental characteristics are equally valuable criteria for classification; for instance, adjacent and formally similar passages explore the qualities of thinness and certainty (§40-42 and §43-45). Although Stein still associates thinness with "things" and certainty with "the thing at which [people] are looking," the distinction between subjects and objects dissolves when Stein delves into the relationship between categories and emotions (§43).

The characteristics of particular types lend different flavors to the emotions they express. "Every one loving any one is a thin one or a fat one or in between"; thus "Being a fat one and loving is something," "Being a thin one and loving is something," and "Being in between being a thin one and being a fat one and loving is something" (§51). "Loving" in a fat or thin manner is not evidence of individuality or subjectivity, because love, too, can be objectified: "Loving is something. Not loving is something. Loving is loving." "Anything," Stein insists, "is something" (§50). The assertion neutralizes distinctions between the abstract and concrete or the active and the static by allocating all actions and things to the category of concrete nouns. Although Stein allows brief excursions into the territory of verbs — later lists document what is "happening" (§60-62) and what is "being living" (§140-166) — "everything," "anything," and especially "something," end the dominant refrains. In future essays, Stein will criticize nouns for their solidity: "In so far as they mean noun they are scared and in place," she explains in

*How to Write*. “A noun needs recall needs being recalled needs recalling in order that they may not frighten them at one time” (121). Yet as a class, nouns are flexible in a way that other parts of speech are not. Because a noun “is the name of anything,” anything can be a noun; the territory of nouns is a solid, neutral ground on which former verbs and proper nouns can meet on equal footing (130).

Although we may imagine that converting all participants in the production of emotion to nouns would solidify emotion itself, Stein’s descriptions of feeling are ambiguous and decentered:

What is that one feeling that one who is feeling something in feeling something about that one being a sad one. That one is feeling something in feeling that being a sad one is what that one is then. That one being one and feeling something is feeling something about any one feeling something about what that one has been doing. That one who is one and feeling something is feeling something about something that one knew and has been neglecting. (*LGB* §238)

The first sentence illustrates feeling’s multiple reflections by unfolding the layers that normal syntax allows to overlap, creating repetitions that indicate separate orders of emotion. The initial question, “What is that one feeling,” has both holistic and specific answers. On a broader level, the question takes an entire paragraph to answer, but on a local level, it is answered in the next clause: “that one” is feeling “that one who is feeling something,” or the feeling of being engaged in feeling. The “something” that is felt also unfolds into “something about that one being a sad one.” The two phrases may seem interchangeable, but they describe two different levels of feeling: “that one” feels a sense of currently feeling, but also a sense of feeling sad. It is significant that “that one” does not feel sad, but rather feels the *feeling* of “being a sad one.” The sadness is not only a concrete noun but is also second-order: what one is doing when one is feeling what one is feeling is, to put it in more formal terms, sympathizing with one’s objectified self-conception.

At least until Stein transitions to the “lively words” style that ends the book, it is difficult to conceptualize this version of emotion because all of its participants are ossified stages of a single person’s process of self-sympathy. The “insistent” section of *A Long Gay Book* fractures what we conceive of as an individual into an array of nearly identical fragments. Stein has deconstructed the traditional subject, but his ghost still haunts the text: the participants in this form of decentered sympathy are objectified subject-shards that attempt to behave like objects. Furthermore, the insistent style’s creation of a “continuous present” — a goal Stein acknowledges in “Composition as Explanation” — discourages us from drawing temporal divisions between the different stages of self-sympathy. In other words, the continuous present discourages us from conceiving of the process of sympathy as something that occurs across time, but the division of the subject seems to require the passage of time. If we borrow Henri Bergson’s famous image of duration as an ever-changing elastic band that can be stretched or compressed to a mathematical point, we can imagine Stein’s process of sympathy as a band that is always compressed. *A Long Gay Book*’s unraveled description of “feeling something about that one being a sad one,” however, more closely resembles

one of Bergson's rejected representations, the filmstrip. The film may lurch and jitter as Stein doubles back and repeats herself, but it inevitably moves forward.

Further complicating *A Long Gay Book's* revision of sympathy is the fact that the reemergence of named characters leads the pieces of traditional emotion to reassemble; because proper nouns belong to unique entities, the very presence of a proper noun revives the dormant subject. Whereas "one" feels second-order emotions, "Boncinelli" self-consciously arranges what appear to be first-order emotions: "He was feeling and knowing that he was feeling he was knowing that he was arranging what he was feeling in what he had arranged in making the thing he knew he had been arranging" (§258). Even when a sentence does not include Boncinelli's name, his presence sways its grammar: the past progressive tense suggests represented thought, which, in turn, suggests (though it does not always require) a represented *thinker*. What results is the expressive hypothesis, stated as baldly as Stein ever states anything: "Boncinelli in feeling was feeling that he was living" (§257). The carefully arranged and preserved subject is the object of all feeling, which in Stein's later view is thus no feeling at all.

Stein attempts to interrupt this revival by driving a wedge between subjectivity and being:

Clellan is being one. In being one he is one, he certainly is one and in certainly being one he is doing something and in doing something he is expressing being one and in expressing being one he is not expressing being that one. In not expressing being that one he is one expressing being completely something.  
(§264)

Stein neutralizes the subject by equating "doing something," "expressing being one," and "not expressing being that one," all of which fall under the category of "expressing being completely something" — the form into which Stein spends the beginning of the book converting people, actions, and feelings. "Being one" is no different from "being something," and the expressive hypothesis is thus nothing more than a tautology: Stein's equation suggests that what the deconstructionists consider subjective emotion's founding statement, "I feel, therefore I am," should conclude "something that feels" rather than "a subject." Breaking the ties between names and subjectivity is a perpetual task; to portray nonsubjective emotions in which Clellan participates, Stein must convert "Clellan" to "one" every time he expresses a feeling. Despite the insistent style's repetition and syntactical overlapping, it does not depart enough from traditional narrative or grammar to reverse the tendency to imply a subject. Though Stein can divest proper nouns of their property with a single substitution, the resulting sentences are structured around a single common noun, which attracts the assumptions that accompany the subject: in the sentence Stein has unfolded, "he" and "one" are visible seams that indicate where the syntactical pleats were once gathered.

Thus it is perhaps unsurprising that *A Long Gay Book* eventually becomes nearly indistinguishable from *Tender Buttons*. About two-thirds of the way through the book, Stein begins to interrupt insistent passages with bursts of "lively words"; the final quarter resembles *Tender Buttons* not only in its attention to "little words," as Sherwood Anderson terms them, but also in its subject matter. The beginning of the book may treat proper nouns and pronouns as common nouns, but only at the end do we see the everyday



objects that we more typically categorize as nouns: “a feather” (§681), “half a sausage” (§689), and “little squares” (§692), for instance. In abandoning Boncinelli and Clellan for objects and food, Stein casts doubt on the success of her earlier project. *A Long Gay Book* begins as a catalogue of human types but ends as a catalogue of little objects, perhaps because Stein finds that she can only describe people as non-subjects if she assigns objects the same importance.

### Objects, Food, Rooms: Reflecting, Blending, and Diffusing the Subject

*A Long Gay Book's* retreat from the human leads us to the starting place of *Tender Buttons*. We can predict, upon reading the subtitle, *Objects, Food, Rooms*, that the work will not give the human being its usual place of prominence. Whether or not the text allows us to imagine the presence of humans at all is debatable. Although characters are less essential to poetry than to the novel, the collection of interiors we find in *Tender Buttons* sketches a plausible enough outline of an unseen human presence that many readers have assumed that the poem implies a human subject. Nevertheless, readers who seek a subject in *Tender Buttons* find one who is alienated and recalcitrant: Mena Mitrano, reading the work through a psychoanalytic lens, sees in “Objects” “a subject that emerges only reluctantly from [its] rupture with the object. The text engages an authorial persona that has no mind, a disembodied voice or a fragmented I that regresses back and inside the estranging descriptions of objects” (92). Likewise, in place of a sensate being, Pamela Hadas detects only “fragments of sensibility” (61). Whether or not we interpret this “fragmented,” “disembodied” persona as a subject or the absence of one depends on the theoretical framework we apply to the text, but the terms that both Mitrano and Hadas use to describe the text’s subject or lack thereof also underscore the role that objects play in Stein’s experiment. As I argued in the previous chapter, Woolf’s objects become surreptitious centers of emotion: their very objecthood projects an illusion of objectivity while they carry the weight of sentiment. In *Tender Buttons*, however, objects cannot maintain this neutral position, for the very nature of objecthood and its relationship with emotion is called into question.

In the three sections of *Tender Buttons*, Stein gradually dismantles the traditional narrative of subjects and objects in order to uncover a form of sympathy capable of surviving the death of the subject. The order in which Stein arranges the poem’s sections is, as she would say, “an arrangement in a system to pointing”: “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms” indicate a trajectory that individual pieces of the poem attempt to follow in miniature, although as we can expect from Stein, that trajectory is not entirely linear. “Objects” questions the notion that objectivity and subjectivity result from essential characteristics of the person or thing, suggesting that in every interaction between subject and object, the two positions are potentially reversible. In “Food,” Stein continues to break down the binary division of relationships into a subject and an object; just as the act of consumption transforms the consumed object into a part of the consuming subject, so does this section of the text blur the distinctions between subjects and objects. Finally, “Rooms” imagines a space in which both subjects and objects diffuse, so that actions, emotions, and characteristics cannot be attributed to particular sources. After these consecutive revisions of the subject, we are left with a model of subjectivity that presages

late twentieth-century poststructuralism's destruction of the subject and makes possible Stein's simultaneous development of a nonsubjective form of emotion.

The heading "OBJECTS" transforms us as readers into viewers of a series of surfaces, the exteriors of, for instance, "A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS," "GLAZED GLITTER," or "A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION." Each object at first seems, like the carafe, "a spectacle and nothing strange," an opaque surface of "a single hurt color," devoid of the complexity that its glass "cousin[']s" transparency would introduce. The subheadings' appearance of clarity — their definitional quality — depicts the objects as things to be objectified, to be fully understood and filed away as facts, and hence as closed and complete, incapable of subjectivity. The titles' persistent capitalization, like that of the headings in the "Aeolus" episode of *Ulysses*, emphasizes the physical nature of the text itself, slicing the poem into typographical as much as topical sections which become objects in their own right — objects that encompass other objects.

Yet this capacity to contain, so to speak, wrests open objects' closed borders. Stein's objects contain meaning in the same contradictory, fluid manner as her words: far from stripping words of denotation and context, as some critics have contended, Stein allows conflicting meanings to revolve.<sup>26</sup> Here, the contradictions contained in the words Stein chooses destabilize the objects she uses them to describe; by encouraging her readers to apply multiple interpretive lenses to her descriptions of objects, she changes the perspectives from which those objects are seen — or, she suggests, see. In "A Carafe," the "spectacle" of the carafe as viewed object becomes the spectacle that aids in vision, as though the carafe's morphological kinship with vessels made of glass introduces a material kinship with the glass in a pair of spectacles. This alternation between spectacle and spectator also occurs in the description of the carafe as a "blind glass": a property of the viewer faced with an opaque surface becomes a property of the surface itself. In other words, qualities of the viewer who perceives — qualities that pertain to subjectivity — attach to the objects the viewer perceives so that those objects become invested with their own form of subjectivity. This interdependence extends even further than that of phenomenology's noesis and noema: objects not only constitute the subjects who are supposed to constitute them, but are also capable of attaining the position of the absent subject who, in a traditional text, would view them. Stein's hybrid subject-objects result not from ventriloquism, as in Bill Brown's reading of hybrid object-subjects (942-947), but rather from a different carnival attraction: the hall of mirrors. The mutual and simultaneous construction of subjects and objects occurs through a series of

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<sup>26</sup> Jennifer Ashton, for example, argues that Stein's nouns neither reference the objects they are taken to denote nor the materiality of the words themselves, but rather the "function of reference" of the names themselves (602). Lisa Siraganian contends that the reader's reception of the art object is irrelevant to Stein, for whom the work of art and its context must remain separate (671). I agree that Stein uses words to reference their own referentiality and privileges their status as art; I disagree, however, with their claim that Stein does not simultaneously do the opposite. Stein refers to words' referentiality to widen rather than close their field of reference and allow them a range of different or even contradictory denotations.



reflections in which the positions of viewer and viewed perpetually rotate and take on one another's qualities.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of an object's subject-like position is the ability to feel. The emotions objects display in *Tender Buttons* are more than metaphors or charming anthropomorphisms. Colors can "hurt" ("Carafe"); a sixth and seventh tumbler can "hope" ("A Little Bit of a Tumbler"); a cloak can come to possess "feeling" and "resignation" ("Roastbeef"). Yet Stein's ambiguous grammar leaves us unsure *how* the objects are related to the emotions. "A single hurt color" can describe the color's pain or the pain it represents; the cloak's "system" has "feeling" and "resignation" and "success," but we do not know whether the cloak has devised that system or merely represents it. The objects' emotional capacity may make playful reference to William James's 1884 essay, "What is an Emotion?", which locates emotions in bodily rather than cognitive responses to stimuli. According to James, the body's instinctive response to an object transforms it from an "object-simply-apprehended" to an "object-emotionally-felt" (203). Although contemporary theorists of emotion usually refer to these bodily responses as affects, the difference here is not merely one of terminology: to translate James's theory into contemporary terms, affects *are* emotions. His definition of emotion shifts throughout the essay, at times referencing the corporeal changes themselves and at other times a vaguely defined response to those changes, but what remains consistent is the link between emotion and the physical world. Even the phrase "object-emotionally-felt" erases the traditional gap between an emotion and its trigger, so that the object itself can be experienced as a feeling. In a literal reading of James's essay, it is an object (the body) that feels other objects (the emotions). Thus if we view Stein through the lens her one-time teacher provides, we can interpret the ambiguously emotional objects as both triggers and receptors of emotion. The constant shifting of perspective between subject and object in "A Carafe" can also be read as a shifting of perspective between object and object, and the distinction between subject and object becomes still more arbitrary. In other words, Stein is not attempting, as it may first appear, to achieve dialectical unity between subject and object by revealing them as mutually constituting, but rather to achieve disunity by revealing them as overlapping and interchangeable. What appears to matter to Stein is the instability itself rather than its extreme states. As "A Carafe" concludes, "The difference is spreading."

The "difference" is also the self-difference in which deconstructive critics locate emotion and psychoanalytic critics like Mitrano locate subjectivity. For some of Stein's readers, difference registers social inequality: Mitrano sees the subject as gendered male, and the "disembodiment of the [female] speaker" as a sign of "alienation from an original source of language" (94). In Stein's work, however, difference and alienation are not necessarily value-laden terms, but rather descriptors of the necessary conditions for emotional experience. In "A Substance in a Cushion," a stain is a point of difference on an otherwise monochrome sofa cushion: "The change of color is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared." This difference allows for feeling; the soiled cushion evokes emotion whereas a clean one would not. Reversing the more typical tenor and vehicle, Stein uses gender relations as a metaphor for objects: "Callous is something that hardening leaves behind what will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men." "Callous" has at least three equally relevant meanings: it references the relative hardness associated with masculinity, the thick skin on a hand or

foot, and the insensitivity of those unable to feel. Here, Stein suggests that the hardening of feminine softness, and hence the blurring of gender roles, would allow for fewer feelings than a strict divide between the genders.<sup>27</sup> However, which member of a binary opposition is “the same” and which is “different” shifts with perspective: “Does this change. It shows that dirt is clean when there is a volume.” A large enough stain, after all, would change the dominant color of the cushion. For all the political valences of the metaphor, it seems relatively unconcerned with debates about feminism; what is significant for Stein is not the imbalance between the normative and non-normative positions, but rather the difference that the imbalance registers.

Stein locates emotion in a space, not a subject — a division, not an individual. Pleasure, for instance, arises from both the difference between a cushion and its cover and from differences between one cover and another:

A cushion has that cover. Supposing you do not like to change, supposing it is very clean that there is no change in appearance, supposing that there is regularity and a costume is that any the worse than an oyster and an exchange. Come to season that is there any extreme use in feather and cotton. Is there not much more joy in a table and more chairs and very likely roundness and a place to put them.

Even a covered cushion that appears unchanging is no worse than “an oyster and an exchange.” As an oyster contains a pearl, the cover contains a difference and thus a change that, like seasonal redecorations, results in “a violent kind of delightfulness” that is useless “if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it.” The triple negative acts out this sort of pleasure through successive turns in meaning, enclosing phrases within their opposites. The “delightfulness” of the sentence emerges from the violent shifts that yank the reader back and forth between interpretations. Although the reader may suspect that the pleasure in this case is wholly Stein’s, the text leaves the location of pleasure unclear. Difference may allow for delight, but we are not yet sure who, if anyone, is delighted, or even what delight entails.

This space of difference need not be empty, nor even stable. The blending of two poles of a binary creates a whole spectrum of differences: “Light blue and the same red with purple makes a change.” The space between subject and object is filled with intermediary forms. The muddling that troubles logic is, as Stein would say, “reasonable”:

It shows that there is no mistake. Any pink shows that and very likely it is reasonable. Very likely there should not be a finer fancy present. Some increase

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<sup>27</sup> This does not necessarily suggest that Gertrude Stein was opposed to feminism, for her pronouncements about women were typically inconsistent. Her own life would seem to contradict the recommendation that women behave in a feminine manner, although as Catharine Stimpson notes, Stein tended to describe herself in masculine terms (496). To cite only one of her many apparent political contradictions, Stein both praised Otto Weininger, author of the decidedly patriarchal *Sex and Character* (Stimpson 497), and wrote an homage to Susan B. Anthony (*The Mother of Us All*).

means a calamity and this is the best preparation for three or more being together. A little calm is so ordinary and in any case there is sweetness and some of that.

Stein does not oppose reason and emotion, but rather uses the same vague statements — “there is” and “it is” — to suggest both reasonableness (“there is no mistake”; “it is reasonable”) and pleasure (“there should not be a finer fancy present”; “there is sweetness”). Nor can Stein's reason be likened to cognition, which, in subjective theories of feeling, is vital to but separate from emotion. Denied origins any more specific than “a change” or “a calamity,” reason and emotion blend together so thoroughly as to seem indistinguishable, both emerging from the “purple” space between subject and object.

“Food” continues to muddle the distinctions between traditional opposites. The idea of food introduces the possibility that we can reverse the association between objects and exteriority without sacrificing those objects’ materiality. Eaten objects remain objects, and their transition from the outside to the inside of the body is, at least in a quotidian sense, a spatial rather than spiritual journey. Nevertheless, the very fact that objects can be eaten imbues them with structural complexity, suggesting that their opaque exteriors are neither complete nor stable, but instead may contain or become interiors. Our interiors, “Food” reminds us, contain not only our innermost selves, but also our stomachs and their contents.

The grocery list that opens the section equates the abstract and the concrete, sandwiching the “End of Summer” between “Butter” and “Sausages.” Here, foods and their connotations are reversible. In the section’s entrée, which, in accordance with the literal meaning of the word, is served before even the hors d’oeuvres, a dish and its connotations merge during the cooking and eating process – that is, the process by which an object becomes a food. “Roastbeef” begins with a scene of separation: “In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling.” When Stein repeats the last clause, however, she disrupts the balance between inside and outside and thus the distinction between properties of interiority and exteriority:

In the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching. All the standards have steamers and all the curtains have bed linen and all the yellow has discrimination and all the circle has circling. This makes sand.

“Feeling,” dislodged from its neat opposition with meaning, comes to encompass opposites (“resting” and “mounting”) and encroach on meaning’s territory (“recognition”). “Recurrence” exposes meaning as dependent on feeling, suggesting rituals that gain meaning through the feeling of significance that repetition produces. The pairing of “recurrence” and “pinching” also evokes dreams, whose meanings, in the most basic sense, are the dreamer’s feelings. The dreamer, though, is conspicuously absent. All of the concrete nouns are objects in the room, whose description melds meaning and feeling just as effectively as the earlier series of abstract nouns. Here, difference becomes sameness — “all the curtains have bed linen” — and sameness, difference — “all the

yellow has discrimination.” In the end, “This makes sand,” which encloses the difference of millions of distinct grains in the appearance of uniformity.

In this nebulous household, the roast beef transforms from a concrete object that contains meanings and feelings to a sort of air of meaning and feeling that encompasses multiple objects. What begins as meat becomes a cloud of associations; where we expect consumption, we find resumption: “Certainly the length is thinner and the rest, the round rest has a longer summer. To shine, why not shine, to shine, to station, to enlarge, to hurry the measure all this means nothing if there is singing, if there is singing then there is the resumption.” Song, with its layering of difference and repetition, “resumes” what was once a measure of meat, invoking the cycle of recurrence that produces meaning through feeling. Through song, we regain the origin of the roast beef:

The change the dirt, not to change dirt means that there is no beefsteak and not to have that is no obstruction, it is so easy to exchange meaning, it is so easy to see the difference. The difference is that a plain resource is not entangled with thickness and it does not mean that thickness shows such cutting, it does mean that a meadow is useful and a cow absurd.

Meaning is dispersed throughout the atmosphere rather than concentrated in its specifics; it is found in the changing dirt that indicates a useful meadow rather than the “absurd” individual cow or particular cut of meat. The next claim, “It is so easy to exchange meaning,” reinforces both the reversibility of subject-object relationships that we saw in “Objects” and the dependence of meaning on difference.

What, both Stein’s readers and mine may ask, does any of this have to do with food? The surface of “Roastbeef” depicts the preparation and consumption of beef as a ritual of transformation, a process that is useful, meaningful, and full of emotion — all traits traditionally associated with food. Food gains meaning and emotional resonance through repetition; food rituals, as Amy Shuman contends, often produce “excesses of meaning” through redundant exchanges (495). In the “portion exchanges” of Purim that she describes or, in a more secularized but still religiously inflected ritual, the exchange of Christmas cookies, an excess of meaning arises from the fact that the gifts are practically unnecessary and often even recycled. Both holidays introduce “generic expectations” (502): because food gifts are familiar, repeated year after year, and rarely cater to individual recipients, they exceed the specific, definite bond between giver and recipient produced by a targeted gift, such as a birthday present. As Shuman, drawing on Derrida, explains, “the space created by the excess disrupts the relationship between supposedly stable categories” (504). During Purim, she argues, “relationships (and the food itself) leak beyond their ordinarily monitored boundaries” (504), destabilizing the sense of social order and allowing social relationships to be “maintain[ed]” or “renegotiat[ed]” (506).

Although for Shuman, Purim ends, like most holidays, with stability restored and excess discarded (507), Stein takes advantage of the instability food introduces, refusing to assign meaning and feeling to specific, stable referents. In *Tender Buttons*, which focuses on objects rather than human actors, it is change, rather than exchange, that creates excess. Stein folds the idea of excess into her descriptions of the roast beef; the excess implied by the feast is located within yet leaks out of its central dish. The preparation of the roast blurs physical descriptions and emotional connotations by

conveying them with the same words: “Around the size that is small, inside the stern that is the middle, besides the remains that are praying, inside the between that is turning, all the region is measuring and melting is exaggerating.” The middle of the roast is “stern” rather than “hard,” a substitution that sends us on a detour through the emotional connotations of sternness before we comprehend the bone’s hardness. The praying remains force us to interpret the dead flesh through our own rituals of death, lending a ritualistic connotation to “the between that is turning,” which would otherwise describe only the physical transformation of the meat. Finally, we catch a glimpse of concreteness only to have it questioned: “all the region is measuring and melting is exaggerating.” Stein’s typical elision of punctuation allows us to read the conclusion in two different ways: “the region is measuring” and “melting is exaggerating,” which leads us to dismiss the change in the roast’s form as an exaggeration; or “the region is measuring and melting [and] is exaggerating” — that is, attaining definite parameters only to have them dissolve. As the roast’s melting juices “exaggerate” its carefully measured form, so do excessive meanings “exaggerate” the description’s language.

The excess induced by the doubling and blurring of denotation and connotation, inside and outside, takes Stein’s project in “Objects” one step further: subject and object are not merely interchangeable, but also overlapping. The “change” that enables feeling and meaning is not a simple shift between subjecthood and objecthood, but rather the unstable possession of both states at once. In other words, what is subject-like about a word, idea, or atmosphere becomes object-like even as its object-like aspects become subject-like. To disentangle object from subject and reinstate a binary view of their relationship would be a difficult task and one that is in Stein’s view useless. What matters is not whether we can identify someone or something as a subject or an object, but instead that we once conceived of concepts called “subject” and “object.”

Stein is thus able to detach feeling from its traditional source, the subject. Meaning, which traditionally requires an object that means and a subject that interprets that meaning, comes to depend only on the possibility of change, which can be found in the perpetual shifting between subject and object. This creates a paradox, in that the very change that undermines the difference between subject and object also depends on that difference in order to be a change at all. Nevertheless, the mess that “Food” leaves prepares us to accept “Rooms,” in which feeling and agency are completely detached from a stable subject position.

“Rooms,” the final section of *Tender Buttons*, at first suggests an entirely interior position. Spared the earlier sections’ segmentation, it takes a generic form that is something between an aesthetic manifesto and a stream of consciousness that lacks a central consciousness. The interiors and exteriors that made up “Objects” and “Food” here become centers and peripheries in a space that is wholly interior, and the reversals of subject and object that seemed geometrical in “A Carafe” come to more closely resemble a diffusion of perspective. “Rooms” begins with an exhortation: “Act so that there is no use in a center.” A “whole center and a border,” the disembodied voice explains, “make hanging a way of dressing.” In other words, an underlying structure (the hanger) becomes a kind of cover (“dressing”), replacing a sort of costuming that would allow for more flexibility. The reliance on the idea of a subject-object binary in “Food” is here revealed as a limitation, like a hanger that forces clothing into a shape that signals only emptiness.

The idea of a center adds its own limitations. Centers do not necessarily enforce fixed perspectives, as would a traditional subject-object opposition, but they nevertheless create “distribution,” which encourages “a contradiction” and “naturally returning there comes to be both sides and the centre.” The reversals of subject and object that occur in earlier sections of the poem are still possible under the constraints of a center, but a structure that contains a center indicates an “author of all that is in there behind the door,” whose existence, even in absence, reinforces that structure. The perhaps misleading clarity an author brings — “explaining darkening” — and the imposition of fixed relationships — “expecting relating” — are “all of a piece.” The presence of an author, even in the form of a suggestion, would be enough to undo the earlier sections’ experiments with perspective.

“Rooms” thus attempts to “act as if there is no use in a center” by dislocating the voice that speaks it, even if the presence of a voice at all seems to indicate thinking in terms of a center. The language of manifesto concludes with the apparent redundancy of a Biblical finale: “This was thought.” The summation insists on a consciousness, even as the passive voice denies that consciousness a definite position. Furthermore, the reversibility of the word “thought” — the action or object of thinking — maintains earlier sections’ flexibility of perspective, if only along a single axis. The Biblical echo, however, suggests an alternative means of dislocating the center, recalling the medieval formulation of a similar structure attributed to God: *centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam* (center everywhere, border nowhere). Rather than dislocate the center, the text spreads it throughout the room; the consciousness that the text implies is not fixed in a single mind, but instead incorporates an entire environment.

The language’s sheer difficulty contributes to the sense of the ubiquitous center; since individual words and sentences do not clearly evoke particular interpretations, initial meanings appear to arise in a tentative, indefinite form from the text as a whole. A sense of nostalgia pervades “Rooms,” but its origin lies not in specific sentences or even juxtapositions, but instead in distant connections and repetitions. Nostalgia, as Kimberly K. Smith recounts, originally signified a pathological yearning for home but evolved into a commonplace emotion, a longing for a time as much as a place (513). Like traditional sympathy, traditional nostalgia requires an object: “I can’t just feel nostalgic,” Smith claims. “I have to feel nostalgic for *something*, and generally for something past, out of reach, once known (to someone, at least) but lost” (508). In “Rooms,” nostalgia, like other emotions, depends on change. Repetitions of the word “change” locally refer to experimentation that seems desirable and exciting, but on a broader level they produce a sense of mourning through resonances with the allusions to memory in other sections of the text, such as the seemingly empty references to the past in “there were there” and the indications of the present’s failures in “this did not.” As is common in modernist texts, the object nostalgia takes is nothingness, an absence. More unusual than the absence of nostalgia’s object is the absence of nostalgia’s subject. The feeling of nostalgia hangs about the room but is not located in a human mind or, as in other sections of the poem, a particular object. Instead, it is formed through the interactions among multiple participants that are neither subjects nor objects — here, repeated words and empty

references.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the resonances with “Objects” and “Food” allow the emotion to spread beyond the room by spreading beyond “Rooms.” Nor do the borders of the text completely enclose its pleasure or nostalgia; instead, textual emotions expand to incorporate the reader. In “Rooms,” traditional sympathy is impossible, because there is no subject with whom to sympathize. Instead, the reader, like everything else in “Rooms,” both produces and is encompassed by the atmosphere of nostalgia.

How, without the aid of subjects and objects or even the rejected idea of a subject or an object, does the production of emotion work? The answer depends on a related question that the text has been skirting: what is an emotion? Given Stein’s complex attitude toward definitions, it is no surprise that she denies emotion, which she consistently calls “feeling,” a precise, stable denotation, but instead gathers together its various connotations, relatives, causes, and effects. In “Objects” and “Food,” we saw that “feeling” functions similarly, if not identically, to meaning; is not located in a particular subject; and depends on “change” and “resumption.” All three of these traits bear a striking resemblance to those that deconstructive theorists attribute to emotion, particularly in Rei Terada’s account of emotion in the absence of subjectivity. This should not be surprising in light of the goals Stein shares with deconstruction: challenging the stable relationship between signifier and signified, subject and object; granting attention to representation and indeterminacy; and, of course, playing with language. Although the theories that Terada draws upon postdate Stein’s by the better part of a century, the similarities between them will help us understand how “Rooms” can summon feelings that rely on neither subjects nor objects.

### Deconstructing Feeling, Reconstructing Fellow Feeling

Despite its subtitle, Terada’s *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the ‘Death of the Subject’* contends that the subject never was truly “alive.” Like Stein, Terada proposes the possibility of emotion without a subject; in Terada’s theory, not only does emotion not depend on a subject, but the subject is instead an illusion made possible by emotion. In what she calls the “expressive hypothesis,” which she traces back as far as Descartes, adherents of subjectivity fill in the space of “self-difference within cognition” with emotion, which they in turn interpret as evidence of subjectivity. Emotion, they argue, can be expressed only by a subject; therefore, if emotion exists, so must the subject. By this circular process, the very disjuncture that poststructuralists use to challenge the idea of a subject becomes evidence for its existence.

But if the expressive hypothesis is fallacious, and emotion can — or even must — exist without a subject, what would emotion look like? In Terada’s account, emotion without a subject ends up looking very much like emotion with a subject, for in a sense it is subjective emotion’s mirror image. Through Derrida, Terada argues that emotion emerges not out of ourselves, but out of our self-representations:

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<sup>28</sup> I use “participant” as a deliberately vague term that, at least in its historical form, encompasses both subjects and objects and evades the specific philosophical connotations of “being.” The scarcity of general terms that avoid connoting either subjectivity or objectivity underscores the difficulty of Stein’s project.

We are not ourselves without representations that mediate us, and it is through those representations that emotions get felt. Emotions are neither intentional nor expressive — not because they don't have objects, and not because we don't feel them on purpose, but because whether they are directed at objects or not, and whether we feel them on purpose or not, they take place on what must seem to be a mental stage peopled by virtual entities. (21)

All emotion, in other words, is second-order; to express Terada's argument in terms of my own, our emotions are a sort of sympathy for ourselves.<sup>29</sup> "We feel not to the extent that experience seems immediate," she continues, "but to the extent that it doesn't; not to the extent that other people's experiences remind us of our own, but to the extent that our own seem like someone else's" (22). As does Stein, Terada, following Derrida, locates emotion in difference, though in a difference of a particular kind: "the space between thinking and being" or "the self-difference that keeps experience short of subjectivity" (23).

Although this formula at first seems to restrict emotion to humans, though not human subjects, Terada's later translation of the theory into semiotic terms suggests a closer kinship with Stein: emotion is "the remainder that keeps the figural and the literal from matching," according to Derrida, or "what must be added to make [the figural and the literal] balance out," according to De Man (56). Despite the significant gap that the small shift creates between the two formulations, both incorporate the idea that Stein expresses in the humbler terms of meaning and feeling: emotion is made possible by difference. If for a consciousness capable of cognition, this difference is "the space between thinking and being," for an object, it would be the gap between an always-deferred "thing itself" and its textual representation; after all, for the deconstructionist, the space between thinking and being is not a disjuncture between mental representation and true experience, but instead merely the sense of a difference. "Roastbeef" can have emotion, then, because Stein gives the impression that she is not exactly describing roast beef. As Terada argues:

[T]he reduction to textuality... not only makes logical room for emotion, but summons emotion out of the economy of pathos: When there is no longer even any sense in making decisions about some secret beneath the surface of a textual manifestation ... , when it is the call ... of this secret, however, which points back to the other or to something else, when it is this itself which keeps our passion aroused, and holds us to the other, then the secret impassions us. The experience of being impassioned is itself an outcome of feeling compelled to look for passion although we cannot finally identify it. Because one does not find the source of it, one also does not run out of it. (47)

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<sup>29</sup> Terada prefers the term "pathos" to "sympathy," but as I have been arguing, such new or repurposed terms, while perhaps more precise, mask the extent to which current concepts of second-order emotion depend on and descend from eighteenth-century views of sympathy. Therefore, I will defer to Terada when I refer to deconstructionists' theories of second-order emotion but use "sympathy" when I refer to Stein's.



This formulation explains one of the processes by which “Food” produces emotion. It will not surprise adherents of deconstruction that this space of difference is also, for Stein, the space of excess: the gap between a thing and its description overflows with feeling, and thus, in Stein’s view, meaning. However, because this meaning cannot be fixed in place or identified, it functions like Derrida’s “secret” that impels passion. In fact, one of the reasons *Tender Buttons* so effectively produces emotion is that it appears nonsensical. The capitalized subheadings boast of clear meanings that the text obscures with a seemingly infinite array of interpretations. We search for the carafe hidden beneath “A Carafe,” only to begin to wonder whether or not Stein describes a real carafe at all. We can neither measure nor close the distance between the figural and literal, because we simultaneously believe in and disbelieve in the existence of the literal. As Terada explains in her reading of De Man, “The very pathos of desire replaces the absence of identity and . . . the more the text denies the actual existence of a referent, real or ideal, and the more fantastically fictional it becomes, the more it becomes the representation of its own pathos” (69).

Stein’s text represents its own pathos literally, in that it names particular emotions that we are supposed to feel in response to its modes of representation. In a common pattern, Stein will make a statement and then immediately inform us of its emotional impact, as in, “Any force which is bestowed on a floor shows rubbing. This is so nice and sweet” or “The sister was not a mister. Was this a surprise. It was” (“Rooms”). If we operate under the assumptions of traditional emotion, we find the emotions thrust upon us: because there are no subjects in the text to whom to attribute these emotions, there is nothing to announce those emotions as mediated, as other than ours. In other words, the emotions do not belong to entities under the author’s control — characters, say, or even the author herself. Instead, in a particularly bossy version of T. S. Eliot’s objective correlative, Stein presents them as the only possible emotional responses to the circumstances described.

This bossiness lends a twist to the Derridean theory. For so open a text, *Tender Buttons* is consistently didactic in tone. Perhaps the most common phrases — “there is,” “this is,” and their past tense equivalents — feature deictics that point emphatically, though only toward further mysteries; some, such as “they were that,” trap the reader in a circle of reference. Rarely do indexical words clarify anything; instead, they simply insist that something is being clarified, and that it is the reader’s responsibility to figure out what. Such mysteries do not compel emotion in the mesmerizing manner Derrida describes, but rather as an authoritarian parent compels a child. Readers’ responses to the text’s demands, judging by my undergraduate students’ reactions, generally fall into two camps: some students, following Derrida’s prediction, search passionately for the answers the text implies; most, interpreting the text’s deliberate difficulty as a form of mockery, turn away in anger and refuse to play Stein’s game.<sup>30</sup> Although the text may not effectively control which emotions it produces, it thus succeeds in implicating even resistant readers in its emotional production by making use of the very assumptions about emotion that it rejects. The didactic tone serves as a means to an end; what matters is not

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<sup>30</sup> The bimodal distribution of these reactions was consistent across three separate groups of students of varying levels of training; the antithetic response predominated in all classes, although slightly less so in the class of intended English majors.

so much the particular emotion the text claims to produce as its ability to produce emotion at all.<sup>31</sup> Surprisingly enough, Stein elicits emotion by borrowing a generic characteristic of the lecture, albeit in a decentered form: *Tender Buttons* molds its audience as does a lecture, instilling a difference that produces emotion.

In the text's economy of emotion, even the reader's anger is not his or her own property. What may frustrate resistant readers further still — or, on the flipside, delight obliging readers even more — is the way the text encompasses even those emotions that readers believe are their own by bringing them into structural relationships with the text's own production of emotion. Although this particular method of emotional production depends on the friction between the text and a traditional conception of emotion's relationship with subjectivity, if we return to the decentered emotion of "Rooms," we can see how the text includes the reader in its production of nostalgia without insisting that the reader feel nostalgia as would a subject. As I explained earlier, the nostalgia in "Rooms" does not arise from or attach to particular objects, but is instead generated by resonances between phrases or with other sections of the text. Repetition, which Stein has already linked to meaning and feeling, creates emotions free of ties to the particular. In order for this process to work, what is repeated must be equally free-floating: thus while some of the reiterated words and phrases are concrete nouns, most are terms of reference and comparison that form flexible relationships with other words and ideas. For example, "A little sign of an entrance is the one that made it alike" leaves the referent of "it" open and thus the chief descriptor of the sign, "alike," equally mysterious. Stein then qualifies "alike" with further terms of comparison: "If it were smaller it was not alike and it was so much smaller that a table was bigger. A table was much bigger, very much bigger." At first, we seem to be granted a fixed point that allows us to measure the otherwise unmoored comparisons: the table. The table seems to be a solid object that escapes the mirror maze of references. However, given the table's well-known role in philosophical history, we can presume that its reality is also in question. As it turns out, all we know about the table is that it is "bigger, very much bigger," than "it"; the table, too, is defined in relation to the other objects. The text thus presents us with repeated mysteries. Because the words and phrases in question are neither self-contained nor self-identical, rather than (or perhaps in addition to) deconstruction's "repetition with a difference," we encounter repetition *of* a difference. The passage's nostalgia arises out of neither a subject who encounters the text nor a subject that the text implies, but rather out of the structural relationship between multiple iterations of a mystery. Each subsequent iteration reflects the emotions the first mystery produces, but the later emotions are colored by their relationship with the past. Readers expand the text's production of nostalgia when they repeat the mystery yet again during the act of reading. This is not to suggest that the reader necessarily *feels* nostalgia; instead, nostalgia lingers in the space between reader and text, produced by their interaction.

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<sup>31</sup> Stein's depiction pointedly evades William James's complaint about studies of emotion: "The trouble with the emotions in psychology is that they are regarded too much as absolutely individual things. So long as they are set down as so many eternal and sacred psychic entities, like the old immutable species in natural history, so long all that *can* be done with them is reverently to catalogue their separate characters, points, and effects" (449).

To read Stein is thus to engage in a sort of scattered, amorphous, and mediated sympathy. Whereas in traditional sympathy an emotion is transmitted from one of two participants (the object of sympathy) to the other (the sympathizer), in this form of sympathy, emotion is produced by the interactions among an arrangement of potentially infinite participants, none of which can independently author the emotion. In “Rooms,” for instance, each individual object, including the reader, plays a role in the sympathetic ensemble. To any individual participant, the emotion produced is always second-order; no single subject, object, or in Stein’s case, subject-object, can possess it. Participants in this form of sympathy both produce the emotion through representation and relate to it as a representation, not as something intrinsic to themselves. Stein’s sympathy is less focused and more expansive than deconstruction’s pathos. In *Tender Buttons*, emotion does not emerge merely out of sympathy with a representation of oneself, but instead out of sympathetic (or antithetic) engagement with a text — that is, with a multifaceted act of representation. Because in traditional theories of sympathy, sight is the sense by which emotions are transmitted, it may be helpful to imagine the participants in Stein’s sympathy as arranged in a network of mutual gazes. The crisscrossing glances of multiple points of origin and destination produce emotions where they intersect and overlap. All participants access these emotions sympathetically, but none of them can be considered sympathizers or objects of sympathy.

Stein’s revision of sympathy affects more than the text’s emotional production. Because sympathy, as the eighteenth-century theorists and even Jamesian pragmatists maintained, mediates not only our affective relationships but also our approaches to texts, decentering sympathy also dislocates our experience of reading. After Stein breaks down the subject-object relationships through which traditional sympathy operates, we can read *Tender Buttons* neither by identifying with the fictive subjects we call characters nor by analyzing the text as animate subjects probing a compliant object. Instead, to read *Tender Buttons* is to interact on equal terms with the other constituents of its amorphous and perpetually evolving emotions.

At least in its purest state, the form of sympathy that Stein develops through and along with the “lively words” style survives only in an environment of lively words. Though Stein develops her form of sympathy in part as a means of expanding the boundaries of sentience and allowing for interpretive flexibility, an emotion that arises out of an “arrangement in a system to pointing” ultimately imposes more limitations on formal structure than does an emotion that begins at the nexus of perception and cognition or even, as in Woolf’s novels, one that originates in the interplay between an unstable subject and an array of objects. Thus only in *Tender Buttons* does Stein strictly adhere to a proscription on human characters; although everyday objects are more prominent in middle period works such as *Geography and Plays* and *Lucy Church Amiably* than in works that predate *Tender Buttons*, they are inevitably overshadowed by profusions of named characters.

The internal coherence we see in *Tender Buttons*’s apparent incoherence represents a temporary stage in Stein’s development. For all her radical experimentation, she, like Woolf, eventually enfolds tradition into her “new logic” despite the fallacies it may introduce: though humans in literature are always accompanied by the ghosts of their past incarnations, their conflicted history provides them with a productive indeterminacy, like that Stein will later attribute to verbs (“Poetry and Grammar”).

Although she uses the solidity of common nouns to break down the hierarchy subjectivity imposes on language, the shifting subject-objects that result require flexibility if they are to keep from hardening into a prescription. The emotions that linger in the spaces between fluctuating participants must also be able to incorporate change.

We can see hints of an eventual compromise at the end of *A Long Gay Book*, where Stein attempts to transform *human* into just another lively word. Here, a lady, however haughty, is no more consequential than a hat:

Climbing the same division with a haughty lady does seem no more monstrous than the return of a colored hat. There is no choice when the head is everywhere, none whatever and the same thing would be so changeable if the hair were made of that silk. (§609)

A human character who dominates the objects around her prevents “choice,” which, as Stein informs us in *Tender Buttons*, is necessary for the difference that creates emotion. “If the hair were made of that silk,” however — that is, if humans, like hats, were formed of ordinary matter — then “the same thing would be so changeable.” When the face is “open,” it can have silk hair, and thus “interpretation” and movement replace the “place of all decision” occupied by the proper name:

So kindly and so shingly and with a special temperature, so far and here and always there and all interpretation holding the place of all decision. There is no use in saying Madame. An open face has hair, it can have it so. (§624)

Without the stabilizing effect of proper nouns, emotions are free to shift and mutate in the spaces between common nouns, which are themselves “made by stretches” rather than fixed in place (*HTW* 122).

In *Lucy Church Amiably*, Stein expands this project, exchanging logical coherence for inclusion, interweaving litanies of objects and descriptions of humans so that they obtain significance only through one another. At the novel's opening, for instance, Stein pairs an introduction of the household chairs with an introduction of the people who sit in them. Later connections between names and objects are comically succinct, as in “Arthur John Carnagan matched silk” (14). If proper nouns threaten to reinstate a conception of emotion as the property of a subject, they do so temporarily; rather than repeatedly break down conventions and thus preserve their authority, as she does in *A Long Gay Book*, Stein tempers them with their alternatives. Even possession changes when thrust into an environment of lively objects: “Everybody is rich and what is a dandelion dandelion dandelion dandelion, what is a dandelion with or without hers” (23). Everybody is rich in dandelions not by owning them, but rather by interacting with them to produce pleasure: “When do they love to get richer melodiously with dandelion and in precision” (23). Objects, too, shift in order to accommodate both subjective and nonsubjective definitions of possession: the answer to the question “what is a dandelion” changes “with or without hers.”

As does Woolf, so does Stein come to see contradictory paradigms of subjectivity as lending plasticity rather than fragility to a nonsubjective system of emotion. Because the alternative to traditional sympathy that she develops in *A Long Gay Book* and *Tender*

*Buttons* thrives on difference, it functions best when the past irrupts but never solidifies. In Stein's logic, continuous presence need not be omnipresence; the new logic that arises through a critique of the old logic's inconsistencies does not itself collapse in the face of inconsistency, which it incorporates as a sort of temporally compressed intermittence. As Stein contends, "There is very little character in omnipresent. How many houses are there in it. It does not make a particle of difference if it is intermittent not a particle" (*LCA* 31).

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4.  
An Uncertain Sublime:  
Negative Sympathy from *Dubliners* to “Ithaca”

“Unequivocal sympathy would be romancing. [Joyce] denudes us of what we are accustomed to respect, then summons us to sympathize. For Joyce, as for Socrates, understanding is a struggle, best when humiliating.”

-Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*

The denuded figure who remains after Joyce strips away romance and respectability is, of course, Leopold Bloom. Bloom is the most sympathetic of Joyce’s characters in two senses: not only does Joyce “summon us to sympathize” with him, but he also summons Bloom to sympathize with nearly every person, animal, or thing he encounters. Bloom’s sympathetic urge is inextricable from his scientific mind. As “Calypso” opens, we see him “watch[ing] curiously, kindly, the lithe black form” of a cat:

They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to. Vindictive too. Cruel. Her nature. Curious mice never squeal. Seem to like it. Wonder what I look like to her. Height of a tower? No, she can jump me. (55)

Curiosity and kindness intertwine; his impulse to put himself in the place of the mouse leads to an attempt to imagine the cat’s perspective that is also an attempt to understand its position in the phenomenal universe. Where other modernists shy away from openly encouraging sympathy except in revised, abstract forms, Joyce makes Bloom an unapologetic sympathizer, a collator of sense-data and experience desperate to understand and connect with the world.

After Woolf’s effort to shift our attention from the subject to the object and Stein’s destabilization of the very paradigms that enable us to form the categories of subjectivity and objectivity, Joyce’s unabashed interest in the human, and this deeply humanist human in particular, may strike us as a regression. But sympathy doesn’t come easily in Joyce’s work; for all his receptivity, Bloom is a frustrated man whose attempts to connect usually fail. Even if Joyce does not predicate his rethinking of sympathy on the deconstruction of the subject or, in turn, dismantle an understanding of emotion based on that subject, the same tensions that lead many of his contemporaries to revise subjectivity drive him to probe the space around it.

Given Bloom’s fusion of sympathy and science, it comes as no surprise that Joyce approaches the problem of sympathy as a problem of knowledge. For Woolf, barriers to knowledge are barriers to sympathy, but for Joyce, what prevents sympathy is instead its very dependence on knowledge: the chief threat to emotional interaction is solipsism, not in the sense of self-absorption born of political and economic stratification, but instead in the sense of complete isolation from an unverifiable external world. Although the Bloomsbury writers are by no means uninterested in the effect of



epistemology on our relationship with the other, their examinations of sympathy focus largely on the social other occluded by the structures of ethnicity, gender, class, or nationality. Joyce's other, by contrast, is anyone outside the self. The fear, in his work, is not that we will fail to sympathize with others, but rather that there may be no others with whom to sympathize. Counterintuitively, he addresses this anxiety not by seeking a return to certainty, but rather by reimagining sympathy in terms of that radical uncertainty. In a radically uncertain universe, sympathy must have a different function; it cannot be the moral obligation it was for the Victorians, the political agent it was for Forster and Woolf, or even the interpretive plasticizer it was for Stein. Instead, sympathy enables us to reframe the loss of confirmation, offering an opportunity to imaginatively connect with an otherness we cannot verify.

Though Bloom may be the greatest of Joyce's sympathizers, he is not the first. In fact, Joyce lays most of the groundwork for Bloom's version of sympathy in *Dubliners*, in which he develops several interrelated concepts essential to his theory of emotional transmission in the absence of verifiability: negativity, the gnomon, the sublime, and the epiphany. The stories of *Dubliners*, like miniature laboratories, allow Joyce to test and refine these concepts, each of which will eventually become a signature feature of his style. But the formal quest to represent the unrepresentable, which Jean-François Lyotard posits as a central goal of modernism and of Joyce in particular, responds to a widespread modern uncertainty unique neither to language nor to texts. The human face, which for the Enlightenment philosophers was a repository of positive knowledge, is for Joyce not just subject to interpretation, but potentially uninterpretable, for the other's unknowable emotional state cannot be represented by conventional means. The formal tools Joyce develops to represent the unrepresentable also provide him with a method by which he both conveys unknowable emotions and depicts their transmission among characters. Thus negativity, the gnomon, the sublime, and the epiphany are both the means by which Joyce portrays sympathy and the means by which sympathy functions in his texts.

Each of these concepts fuels only one step of the process of sympathy, and thus only when elements that remain inchoate or indirect in the shorter stories cohere in the collection's final story, "The Dead," can we examine the unfolding of Joycean sympathy in detail. Because the positive knowledge of the other's emotion on which traditional sympathy relies has become suspect or unattainable, Joyce instead turns to a negative form of knowledge inspired by negative theology and Kant's concept of negative presentation, which provide alternatives to positive knowledge's reliance on sense-data. The gnomon, an incomplete shape that draws attention to its missing piece, offers a means of conceptualizing the formal method Joyce develops for representing the negative through the positive. Kant's sublime, which is in its most basic sense an emotional response to the representation of the unrepresentable, offers a model that Joyce follows in charting the process that leads from negative presentation to sympathy. Yet modeling sympathy on the sublime risks replacing the specific emotions it is meant to convey with a vague mystical suggestiveness, as in the negative definition of God, or even to an extent in the philosophy of Levinas. The epiphany, for all its religious and Romantic associations, allows Joyce to rein in this mysticism by tying the sublime to a specific situation and hence limiting the range of interpretation, replacing totalizing unknowability with an emotion-specific space of uncertainty. Only after outlining a structured, specific, and limited process of sympathy in "The Dead" — after stripping it

of its associations with Romantic effusiveness and Victorian sentimentality — can Joyce permit Leopold Bloom to sympathize freely yet remain a creature of modernity.

### “The Dead” and the Problem of Knowledge

The first and final step in Joyce’s response to the threat of solipsism is the epiphany, which both drives and caps the stories of his first published work, *Dubliners*. These two epiphanies are very different events: however crystallized the concept may seem to us, the Joycean epiphany does not maintain a stable definition even within *Dubliners*. In its earliest iterations, it is, like Woolf’s moment of being, a mode of knowing that is instantaneous and temporary, more akin to a rupture than a discovery. Though it releases a flood of knowledge, it does not necessarily open the floodgates of sympathy. In the collection’s first epiphany, the young narrator of “The Sisters” encounters the other’s interiority as an absence. When he goes to view the dead priest, whom he imagines “smiling as he [lies] there,” he instead sees a face that is “truculent, grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils” (5). The only openings in the priest’s sullen exterior are those vacant caverns, or, in another recollection, his gaping mouth, both of which represent his interior as an empty space. The first epiphany of *Dubliners* presents a problem of knowledge in terms of knowledge: the boy suddenly knows that the dead priest is unknowable. As long the epiphany’s revelation takes the form of knowledge, it is incapable of facilitating sympathy.

The collection’s later epiphanies soften the terror of this initial encounter with the other by providing a rarefied space in which sympathy or something much like it manages to succeed. In “Clay,” Maria’s accidental repetition of a verse in her song triggers Joe’s epiphany. Taken alone, the epiphany seems to be an experience of solipsistic pity, as Joe cries for his own conception of a life Maria does not recognize as tragic. However, the epiphany follows repeated references to Maria’s self-division and hidden dissatisfaction: her “minute body [that] nearly [shakes] itself asunder” (72), the brief admissions of displeasure that bubble up through her unrelenting insistence on happiness, the “disappointed shyness” in her eyes and the mouth that actually conceals itself, with “the tip of her nose nearly [meeting] the tip of her chin” (72), when we assume it smiles. Joe sympathizes with emotions Maria cannot admit to herself, the disappointments she shyly hides away through perpetual self-effacement: in a paradigmatic example of the readerly epiphany, Joe’s reconstruction of Maria’s emotional state draws together a collection of half-noticed hints, allowing the reader new insight into and perhaps even sympathy with the reticent character, even if only by tracing a faint circle around her emotions. Joe’s epiphany takes place in an instant; before we can understand what has happened, he is already looking for the corkscrew. The process by which the epiphany enables his sympathy remains as mysterious as its exact content: it is a gesture, not a diagram.

In “The Dead,” however, Joyce unfolds the epiphany of “Clay” and spreads it across narrative space and time, providing us with a more comprehensible story of sympathy’s initial failure and eventual evolution. It is in “The Dead,” I argue, that the other stories’ themes — the negativity of “The Sisters,” the solipsism of “A Painful Case,” the epiphany of “Clay,” and the unromantic, un-Romantic sublimity of “Araby”

— coalesce into a narrative about knowledge and emotion that ultimately produces a model of sympathy independent of certainty.

“The Dead” begins with the traditional dichotomy of sensing subject and sensed object, which reveals the dominant eighteenth-century conception of sympathy as a product of solipsism rather than a form of connection. We sympathize with the dead, according to Adam Smith, by “lodging... our own living souls in their inanimated bodies” (16). Likewise, sympathy in “The Dead” is at first a process of possession, a means of imagining the emotions we would feel if thrust into another’s situation rather than attempting to access her interiority. The story begins with a feint at focalizing with a servant girl, with whom we are already familiar from Woolf’s work as a symbol of the barriers social differences pose to identification, and hence to sympathy:

Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, was literally run off her feet. Hardly had she brought one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the ground floor and helped him off with his overcoat than the wheezy hall-door bell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest. (21)

Hugh Kenner points out that although the narrator at first appears omniscient, the entire opening takes place in Lily’s idiom (16). As our gazes follow Lily, the language encourages us to sympathize with her harried state: the “wheezy” bell evokes her shortness of breath as the hurried syntax of the multiply compound sentence scampers alongside her.

Yet Kenner’s observation could also be reversed: though the entire opening takes place in Lily’s idiom, the narrator remains detached, catching the character’s “self and voice” up into “the narrative machinery,” as Kenner will later describe the narration of Gerty MacDowell (17), but never quite merging with her interior monologue. Lily’s sway over the narration is brief. The narrator soon retreats to omniscience or even absence, relating the Morkan sisters’ history from a perspective unavailable to the young girl even while maintaining her speech patterns: “That was a good thirty years ago if it was a day” (“Dead” 22). After a brief return to language colored by Lily’s perspective, if just irrelevant enough to the present moment to quell any suspicion that it is her interior monologue – “They were fussy, that was all. But the only thing they would not stand was back answers” (22) – the narrator introduces the true center of interest, Gabriel Conroy, and Lily becomes opaque.

The story’s off-center opening, far from tempting readers to continue to focalize with Lily, prepares them for their later inability to sympathize with her, foregrounding sympathy as a problem under examination. When Lily reacts with unexpected bitterness to Gabriel’s inquiry about her marriage, we realize that what we initially read as signs of busy activity were instead insufficient markers of a deeper agitation. What was caught up in the narrative machinery was not Lily’s inner experience, but those signs of it that would have been perceptible to an onlooker’s senses: her manner of speaking and her scampering body. The emotional state that appears to color the language of the opening paragraphs turns out to have been one among many possible interpretations of her outward aspect.

Lily, with her mystifying exasperation, primes the reader for a succession of unreadable others who confront Gabriel, many of whom seem more likely objects of

sympathy: other men of his class, though not his breeding; Miss Ivors, who shares his literary bent if not his politics or gender; his aunts and cousin; his wife; and himself. Unlike Woolf, Joyce does not filter the problem of sympathy through the ethical prism of social difference, although he does not ignore the role social difference plays in the frustration of communication and understanding. Instead, by rapidly expanding the scope of Gabriel's failures of understanding to encompass — or, perhaps, to fail to encompass — every person he meets, Joyce frames the question of modern sympathy as a universal one.

In "The Dead," the "universal" problem that troubles sympathy is, in fact, specific to the post-Enlightenment Western tradition: knowledge's reliance on empirical observation. The narration establishes empiricism as the story's mode of knowledge production by introducing us to the story world through the representation of sense-data, particularly visual stimuli. Almost all of the important characters are introduced as seen objects, defined by "high colour," "glossy black hair," a "large flaccid face," "puckers and creases," or "the thick hanging lobes of his ears" (23-24; 28). We thus participate in the story's mode of knowledge-production and, hence, experience its shortcomings when characters initially described as clusters of sense-data defy their original characterization by communicating, whether through speech or through song: obedient Lily surprises us with her bitterness, timid Aunt Julia with her depth of soul, and even drunken Freddy Malins with his artistic sensibility. This is not to claim that Joyce presents a character's speech as a necessarily more reliable point of entry into her nature — Miss Ivors's verbal teasing baffles Gabriel and, potentially, the casual reader, as thoroughly as her conflicted expression. However, by contradicting the knowledge the narrator has dribbled out through representations of sense-data, speech leads us to question an epistemology that privileges the senses.

By training us in a flawed method of understanding the story's characters, the narrator ironically prepares us to better sympathize with the story's protagonist. For vision is also Gabriel's primary means of attempting to gain knowledge of others' emotional states, though it is almost always accompanied by mystification. Miss Ivors's expressions, for instance, consistently confound Gabriel: he avoids her eyes because he has seen "a sour expression on her face," only to react with surprise when she presses his hand firmly, and he finds himself unable to decipher the emotional state that produces both her laughing expression and her sudden departure (32, 37-38). In fact, Gabriel most often interprets others' expressions, especially those of women, as signs of confusion: Miss Ivors looks at him "quizzically" (33), Mary Jane has a "moody puzzled expression," (37), and Aunt Julia has the appearance of "woman who [does] not know where she [is] or where she [is] going" (24). The ubiquity of confusion, which also permeates the discussion of differences between Catholicism and Protestantism (41) and the cabman's arrival (48), indicates that Gabriel's inability to comprehend others' emotional states is only one instance of a widespread failure of understanding. Nevertheless, the particular frequency with which Gabriel diagnoses others with confusion suggests his own bewilderment as much as a recognition of the general air of befuddlement that pervades the party: the imprecision of vision as a tool for apprehending another's emotion leads Gabriel, fittingly enough, to register emotions that confuse him as confusion. Gabriel, initially a Smithean, makes two errors: he conflates observation with knowledge and, in

turn, mistakes the emotions he has projected onto the surfaces around him and re-perceived as visual data for emotions of external origin.

Nor is a Romantic projection of the self onto the surrounding landscape a reliable route to self-comprehension. An accidental glance in the mirror turns Gabriel's gaze back at himself, closing the visual circuit necessary, in Smith's view, for the flow of emotion:

As he passed in the way of the cheval-glass he caught sight of himself in full length, his broad, well-filled shirt-front, the face whose expression always puzzled him when he saw it in a mirror, and his glimmering gilt-rimmed eyeglasses. (157)

The mirror establishes a model system for traditional sympathy *in vitro*: two like figures at a modest distance from one another exchange a direct gaze. Nevertheless, the transfer of emotion fails to occur. Rather than identifying with his own face, Gabriel sees it as one more source of confusion: it is "the face whose expression always puzzled him." Although he projects himself into the image in the mirror — it will later mediate his "shameful consciousness of his own person" (158) — he then objectifies that image, closing off his own subjectivity. As Bill Brown notes of the typical Henry James character, "his self-consciousness assumes an utterly physical dimension," becoming as much a thing in the world as the objects it perceives (162). So strong is the tendency of vision to objectify that Gabriel reifies even his own subjectivity. Before the epiphanic moment of sympathy at the end of the story can occur, Joyce must find a way to circumvent sympathy's reliance on the objectifying gaze.

One possible means of rerouting sympathy's dependence on vision is to shift that reliance to audition. Speech, of course, introduces the problem of reliability and compounds the specter of infinite interpretation that already haunts language. Some critics instead suggest music as Joyce's privileged mode of emotional communication. Robert Hass argues for music's ability to allow character, memory, and emotion to emerge through the occluding screen of the visual: Aunt Julia "reveals the soul of an artist" through the form of "a befuddled old woman," while the "distant music" Gretta hears on the stairs expresses the love she shares with both Gabriel and Michael (30, 32). But even in Hass's analysis, any insight into the other's emotions gained through his or her response to music turns inward, and the other reverts to the status of object, even if she is an "object of mysterious beauty, fascination, and desire" (32).

Watching Gretta, Gabriel asks himself what "a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, [is] a symbol of" (48). Rather than a subject engaged in deriving meaning from music, Gretta becomes an art object, a container for her own meaning, albeit an indeterminate one. In fact, it is the "grace and mystery in her attitude" that leads Gabriel to reduce her to a symbol in the first place, as if his initial failure to access her inner state transforms her into a well of potential knowledge to be deciphered (48). Here, Joyce reverses the more typical understanding of the relationship between objectification and mystification, in which the subject's objectification of the other raises barriers to understanding. Instead, the frustration of the subject's desire for knowledge of the other encourages her objectification. The reversal suggests that not only the means of attempting to obtain knowledge, but also the very desire for knowledge circumvents the flow of emotion.

The desire for definite knowledge of the other already envisions the other as an object, as static enough to be held in the mind. Although the desire to know Gretta completely is driven by jealousy in Gabriel's case, Joyce suggests that all quests for knowledge of the other are driven by a sort of jealousy, a desire to possess the other rather than grant her freedom. Whether knowledge of the other is obtained through vision, conversation, or mystical revelation, to conceive of it as knowledge as such is to fail to acknowledge the other's mutability and transience — her unknowability.

### The Gnomon, The *Critique of Judgment*, and the Modern Sublime

In addition to the more famous epiphany, *Dubliners* introduces a concept indispensable to Joyce studies and, I argue, to Joyce's revision of sympathy: the gnomon. The gnomon, which originates in "The Sisters" as part of a thematic trinity with "paralysis" and "simony," is a geometrical term that has come to symbolize the process of negative presentation, which Joyce adapts from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In Euclid, the gnomon is the figure that remains when a smaller parallelogram is removed from the corner of a similar parallelogram. The literary gnomon, according to Bernard Benstock, is "a nonappearance suggesting a presence made palpable only by its absence" (520). The analogy Benstock draws is not quite accurate, for as Thomas Dilworth notes, the Euclidean gnomon refers to what remains rather than what has been removed, and thus does possess a positive form: instead of a nonappearance, it is an appearance that implies an absence by stressing its own incompleteness. In other words, the gnomon represents not the idea negatively presented, but the reduced or lacking appearance that suggests the presence of the unrepresentable. To extend the analogy to modern sympathy, the gnomon corresponds to the face whose confused and confusing expression reveals its failure to visually represent an emotional state. Like a hollow peg inserted into a hole, the gnomon uses a positive container to introduce an absence into a space designed for a presence; it thus allows negativity to fit into the structure of sympathy, which is built, after all, to transmit positive data.

The gnomon could be taken as a figure for one of the formal projects of modernism: representing that which resists representation, or what Lyotard calls "an aesthetics of the sublime." Modernist aesthetics, Lyotard argues, "allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (*PC* 81). His claim may not be universally applicable, either as a description of the sublime or of modernism: his sublime, while indirectly honoring Edmund Burke's concepts of obscurity, privation, infinity, and difficulty, shies away from the appreciation for windswept moors and craggy precipices that tie Burke, justly or not, to the Romantics, but no version of the sublime could shrink down to a manageable enough size for a modernism that strives for Hulmean Classicism. Nevertheless, Lyotard's understanding of the sublime as the feeling produced by attempts "to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists" resonates with a particular strain of modernism, one as interested in experimenting with representing the loss or absence of the logos as in chronicling the everyday with finitude and restraint (78). Furthermore, the sublime is not confined to the realm of aesthetics; though for Kant, aesthetic emotions are distinct from other emotions, the means by which the sublime evokes a particular aesthetic emotion —

what Kant refers to as a sublime experience or feeling of the sublime, though in ordinary speech the feeling and the process that produces it are given the same name — can be used, with the assistance of the gnomon, to convey a wide range of emotions. In fact, because Joyce approaches emotion as a formal as much as a philosophical issue, his contributions to aesthetics are not merely analogous to but also essential to his revision of sympathy.

To many critics, the master of the sublime strain of modernism is Joyce, who, according to Umberto Eco and Lyotard himself, epitomizes the modernist quest to create nostalgic pleasure through the formal structuring of the unrepresentable. As Eco contends, Joyce encompasses chaos in the “chaosmos,” rejecting the notion of an all-encompassing order even while reducing chaos’s “apories within the form of the Ordo that was rejected” (47). Although traditional Joyce criticism sees his ascent — or descent — into the epistemological doubt of high modernism beginning with *Portrait*, several recent studies have convincingly argued for the inclusion of at least “The Dead,” if not all of *Dubliners*, in this category.<sup>32</sup> While I agree that the stories of *Dubliners* more closely approach a Hulmean neo-classical aesthetic than any of Joyce’s later works, the collection as a whole presages, in a more modest form, *Ulysses*’s evocation of the sublime through an architectonic structure that encloses themes of ambiguity, uncertainty, and disorder.<sup>33</sup>

What critics interpret as a sometimes uncomfortable but more often successful union of the embrace of chaos and the nostalgia for order correlates with Joyce’s stated aesthetic aims. In his critical writing, Joyce challenges the notion that modern writers must surmount the lingering influence of Romanticism in favor of Classicism, arguing instead that the two “temper[s]” are poles of an ahistorical dialectic that art must strive to synthesize (*OCPW* 53). To oppose the Joycean sublime to Hulmean Classicism would be to set up a false dichotomy, for, as Ginette Verstraete argues, Joyce’s sublime develops in conversation rather than agreement with the Romantic sublime. According to Verstraete, Joyce rethinks the eighteenth-century concept in which “the negative synthesis of senses and reason is ‘naturalized’ as immanent to the imagination,” which “subsumes all otherness” (15). Verstraete reads Joyce through Schlegel, who combines the positive, “egotistical” sublime of the Romantics with the negative sublime of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. Nevertheless, Joyce seems to view Kant’s third *Critique* as more than one pole of a synthetic sublime. Instead, he uses Kant’s theory to moderate not only the Romantic, but also the Classical temper: in his musings on aesthetics in the Pola Notebook, for instance, he amends a theory of beauty drawn largely from Aristotle’s *Poetics* and

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<sup>32</sup> Neil Murphy provides a useful summary of this debate while defending his claim that “the epistemological crisis that dominates modernism is already implicit in . . . *Dubliners*” (174).

<sup>33</sup> Readers have proposed several competing or interlocking theories of the structure of *Dubliners*, including parallels to the human life cycle (Joyce’s own suggestion), the *Divine Comedy* (Mary Reynolds), and Euclidean geometry (Thomas Jackson Rice). Rice also raises the possibility that Joyce imposed a structure on the stories only in the late stages of composition. The fact that critics agree that the collection’s design is architectural but fail to agree on which style it quotes suggests how deeply Joyce’s structure and content interpenetrate.

Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* with a Kantian discussion, written in what almost seems a parody of the philosopher's style, of the subjective pleasure that can be gained from apprehension of an object regardless of its individual qualities (*OCPW* 105-107).

I approach Joyce's notion of the sublime through the *Critique of Judgment* not only because of its elastic role in his theories of aesthetics and its utility in understanding his use of negative presentation as a conduit to sympathy, but also because of the *Critique's* widespread application throughout modernism, its criticism, and its descendants. A Kantian notion of the sublime permeates early instances of modernism, such as French *fin de siècle* poetry: as Bo Earle argues, in *Harmonie du soir*, Baudelaire "demonstrates a kind of deliverance from the regress of self-negation that consists in a sublime vision of that regress as such" (1025). Furthermore, both Lyotard's theory of the modern and post-modern sublime and Adorno's influential *Negative Dialectics* draw heavily on even as they revise the *Critique of Judgment*. The Kantian sublime offers modernism a starting point for an aesthetics of negativity and doubt, suggesting a means of obtaining understanding through the lack or excess of perception — a method that would bypass the barrier to understanding posed by the enigmatic face of the other. In addition, Kant, unlike many of his followers, does not divorce aesthetics from emotion; in his theory, emotion and aesthetics are both interrelated and structurally parallel. Though the beautiful is predicated on taste and thus independent of emotion, at least in an ordinary sense, the sublime is so bound up with feeling that Kant at times refers to it as an emotion in itself. Moreover, aesthetic emotions are so called because they structurally resemble emotions such as happiness or sadness: the experience of the sublime and even the experience of beauty rely on subjective responses triggered by but not reducible to negative presentation or sensual perception. Kant's sublime thus provides a model according to which Joyce can approach the problem of emotion as a problem of aesthetics.

An aesthetics based on the sublime, however well suited to the task of making "visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* 78), at first hardly seems amenable to the representation of sympathy. According to Kant, a sadness transmitted by moral principles is sublime, "whereas that springing from sympathy can only be accounted beautiful" (130). Kant considers sympathy beautiful because in his estimation, unlike in Hume's or Smith's, it transmits "tender" rather than "spirited" emotions, which devolve into sentimentality before reaching the intensity that the sublime requires. Kant's limited conception of sympathy seems more closely aligned with what I have been calling pity than with the Scottish Enlightenment models that more directly influenced the English and Irish literary traditions. However, Kant's aesthetics would tie even a Smithean or Humean conception of sympathy to the beautiful, for in the Scottish theories, sympathy transmits emotion through the medium of the senses, particularly vision.

The senses, Kant explains, are the means by which we perceive the beautiful, even if we can experience beauty only through the subjective rather than the objective sense. In other words, beauty does not lie in the object that can be perceived in the form of sense-data, but rather in the subjective response to the perception of that data. The sublime, on the other hand, does not directly involve sense-data at all. As Kant explains,



[T]he sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. (92)

In fact, it is the imagination's inability to transform what it senses into sense-data — to comprehend the magnitude of what the senses perceive — that initiates the process that leads to the experience Kant terms the “mathematical sublime” (103-105).

One route to the creation of a modern sympathy that no longer depends on sensation, then, is to align it with an aesthetics of the sublime rather than the beautiful. Kant's key to sublime representation is “negative presentation,” which he defines, negatively enough, as an “abstract mode of presentation” that is “altogether negative as to what is sensuous” (127). In one famous example, he explains that Judeo-Christian religion achieves sublimity by representing morality and, what is more important, God himself, without resorting to sensation — an account that would appeal to Joyce, given his interest in negative theology.<sup>34</sup>

Drawing on Kant, Lyotard ties negative presentation to one of the chief tenets of deconstruction, arguing that “what remains presentable for the objects of rational Ideas is the inadequacy...of all presentation.” A sublime feeling arises when this “discrepancy” revives “the Ideas that are always absent to presentation” (*AotS* 69). Objects in the world still play a role in this process, but not through sense-perception: in Lyotard's example, the “raging ocean” that would simply appear “hideous” to perception evokes sublime emotion through its negative reference to an unrepresentable idea, which Lyotard takes to be the “absolute of power, freedom” (69-70). Although it at first seems that the ocean itself evokes the sublime experience, the triggering actually occurs through a somewhat circular process in which the subjectivity (as opposed to the classical subject) that perceives the ocean attempts to substitute the visible object for an unrepresentable idea, fails to do so, and thus reminds him or herself of the idea of unrepresentability.<sup>35</sup>

A sublime sympathy would have to function through the negative presentation of emotion rather than the sense-data that indicate fixed emotional states. Negative presentation allows the traditional structure of sympathy, which requires an object, to remain intact: it recognizes traditional sympathy's need for a phenomenon, an object apprehended by the senses, even while replacing that object with an absence. In this version of the sympathetic process, the other's face takes the place of the ocean in Lyotard's example. When perceived through the senses, a facial expression presents a caricature or misrepresentation of emotion, as when Miss Ivors's scowl initially strikes Gabriel as a sign of unequivocal dislike. However, when Gabriel fails to easily substitute “unequivocal dislike” for the scowl, the face also negatively presents the unknowability of Miss Ivors's emotional state.

The least knowable and potentially most sublime face in “The Dead” is that of Michael Furey, Gretta's dead lover. Michael Furey's expression remains perpetually

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<sup>34</sup> For a reading of the role negative theology plays in Joyce's work, see Colleen Jaurretche's *Sensual Philosophy*.

<sup>35</sup> This is Lyotard's postmodern version of Kant's theory that a raging ocean is in itself horrible, and can only evoke the sublime through human intuition (92).

invisible, accessible, if at all, only through the mediation of a series of failed representations. Gabriel can attempt to envision the eyes of his wife's dead lover only by interpreting her description of them, or rather that description's impossibility. Even while telling her story, Gretta herself cannot experience traditional sympathy with her lover, for she fails to transform the emotional content of his expression into knowledge. Instead, she repeats the placeholder for that content: "[S]uch an expression in them – an expression!" (56). Her second reference to the eyes doubles their unknowability by repeating empty signifiers: "I can see his eyes as well as well!" (57). All of the phrase's possible referents are unknown: we know neither what she sees the eyes *in addition to* nor what she can see them *as clearly as*. The eyes, seen in a third reading as empty wells, foreclose rational speech and thus the communication of knowledge. Gabriel's failed attempt to picture his wife's inexpressible memory dissolves his solidified understanding of her tale into a mixture of partial knowledge and uncertainty. The eyes form epistemological voids into which the story's message collapses. When he realizes that their indefinite content, Michael's emotional state, lies at the center of Gretta's story, he understands not only that he has missed the point of the story, but also that its point is a discontinuity.

Nevertheless, even as Michael Furey's eyes seem to break through Gabriel's self-absorption by reminding him of the incomprehensibility of the other, they initially fail to lift him out of the solipsism into which he, like all inhabitants of Joyce's modernity, threatens to descend. In fact, the conflation of the unknowable other with the incomprehensible expression on the other's face may reinforce a solipsistic attitude by providing a means of substituting it for Emmanuel Levinas's demand to respect the other's infinitude. Since the other's expression only reinforces the indeterminacy that the sympathizer already understands, he or she may sympathize without attempting to understand the other's emotional state or even acknowledging the other's independence from the self. In other words, infinity, rather than defying totalization, may instead provide a way of conceptualizing the unknowable and possessing it as knowledge.

Sublime sympathy thus risks slipping into something much like pity, a process that uses the other to remind oneself of what one already feels, or in this case, knows. In Kant's view, such treatment of the other does not present an ethical problem: just as, in the mathematical sublime, reason supercedes the might of nature, in the negative presentation of the other's emotion, reason comes to encompass the other's infinitude. Although the imagination cannot conceive of the other's emotional state, reason can master the other through the concept of infinity. For Joyce's revision of the transmission of emotion to remain a version of sympathy rather than pity, however, it must demand more than a reminder of the other's incomprehensibility. Thus "The Dead" does not end with Gabriel's "generous tears," but continues on to the story's epiphany (59).

### Epiphany and Error

When Joyce first explicitly defines the epiphany, it appears to be the gnomon's near-opposite. As explained in *Stephen Hero*, it reveals not an absence, but a presence: the *quidditas*, or "whatness," of a thing:

First we recognise that the object is one integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a thing in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is that thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany. (213)

In Stephen's understanding, drawn largely from Aquinas, not only does the epiphany require an object, but it also takes place within the object: it is the object, not the subject, that "achieves its epiphany." Here Joyce diverges sharply from Kant: while for Kant, the thing-in-itself can never be experienced through the senses but only gestured at through ideas, for Stephen, the "soul" of the object "leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance." His definition of the epiphany hinges on the interpretation of the preposition: if, as the preceding sentences imply, "from" indicates a starting point, then the soul of the object emerges through the perfect arrangement of empirical phenomena; if "from" instead means "out of" or "through," then the vestments function as a phenomenological veil drawn over the noumenon, or the thing itself, which is inaccessible to the senses. In either case, what the epiphany reveals is a positive object — to borrow Kant's language, it reveals a noumenon considered from an empirical perspective, which, for Kant, is an illusion.

Both potential definitions resonate with a Romantic concept of the moment, particularly the Wordsworthian "spot of time" from which, as several critics contend, the modernist epiphany descends. In Ashton Nichols's history, the Romantic epiphany revises the religious vision, introducing an element of indeterminacy that allows it to develop into its more famous iteration: the modern epiphany that Joyce the artist deploys rather than the medieval epiphany that Stephen the character explains. As Nichols argues, "[t]he modern literary epiphany... offers a new form of meaning in which the moment of inspiration is absolute and determinate, while the significance provided by the epiphany is relative and indeterminate" (4). The Romantics, he explains, render the ordinary remarkable "by an imaginative transformation of experience. The visible reveals *something* invisible, but the status of the invisible component is left unstated. Its mystery becomes part of the value of the experience" (21).

Nevertheless, the Romantic epiphany does not allow for sympathy because both its object and its significance are, in one sense or another, the self. As Nichols continues,

In the new form of epiphany inaugurated by Wordsworth, the perceiving self flows into the world. It then sees in the world its own powers, reflected in the processes of nature, manifested in particularly intense imaginative perceptions, and preserved by memory. (21)

Just as in the Romantic sublime, the tension between the senses and reason is located in the individual imagination, in the Wordsworthian epiphany, the "self flows into the world" and reads itself back through nature. To borrow Verstraete's description of the "egotistical" sublime, in the Romantic epiphany, the self "subsumes all otherness." Unlike Woolf's objects, which, when invested with emotion, facilitate sympathy by mediating between multiple beholders, the object of the Romantic epiphany can contain

only the self's emotions, and thus can foster only self-discovery. If the Romantic epiphany can transmit emotion at all, it does so through pity, and thus functions in a manner almost identical to the traditional model of sympathy that Joyce critiques at the beginning of "The Dead."

Robert Langbaum reads the Joycean epiphany as one species of a modern genus that also includes the Wordsworthian spot of time. According to Langbaum, the distinguishing factor is their choice of objects: while Wordsworth's epiphanic objects draw from Burke's list of qualities that produce sublime feeling, Joyce "usually produces the sublime effect out of small, sharp details delivered in a flat diction" (54). In other words, the modern epiphany steps down from Romantic heights by drawing its objects from a modest neo-classical collection. Langbaum's classification appears to adequately describe some of the epiphanies in *Dubliners*, particularly the final line of "Araby": "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (21). The object that achieves its epiphany is the entire bazaar, but the significance it reveals is entirely internal: the narrator discovers his own vain romanticism by projecting it onto and reencountering it through the "porcelain vases and flowered tea-sets," the "fall of the coins," and the merchants' inane conversation (21).

However Romantic it may seem, the epiphany of "Araby" critiques romanticism with both a miniscule and majuscule "r"; it is no accident that the object of the narrator's romantic fixation shares her surname with James Clarence Mangan.<sup>36</sup> The young boy can bestow a romantic glamor upon Mangan's sister and the "syllables of the word *Araby*" only by Romantically projecting his desires onto them like the lamplight that fragments the girl into symbols of the beauty he sees in her: the "white curve of her neck" and her glowing hair and hand (19). In Joyce's parody of Romanticism, the boy's "senses [seem] to desire to veil themselves" as he instead constructs the other out of the matter of his own dreams, whether of "Eastern enchantment" or romantic love (18-19).

The epiphany effects the narrator's sudden transition from Romanticism to Classicism out of a vision that encapsulates the fall from the exotic to the familiar, from glowing light to empty darkness, and from self-importance to humility. Nevertheless, the transformation proceeds through Romantic projection: the boy draws a sobering, even Classicist meaning from his vision of ordinariness, but it is a meaning that comes from within. His Classicism, in other words, is still Romantic in form. It thus comes as no surprise that even in his disillusioned state at the end of "Araby," the narrator remains incapable of anything approaching sympathy. His decidedly unromantic vision of the women at the bazaar grants them no more subjectivity than his romantic gaze allows

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<sup>36</sup> The resonances between "Araby" and Joyce's description of Mangan's poetry suggest a reading of the story as an allegory of its author's own artistic development:

Though even in the best of Mangan the presence of alien emotions is sometimes felt the presence of an imaginative personality reflecting the light of imaginative beauty is more vividly felt. East and West meet in that personality (we know how); images interweave there like soft, luminous scarves and words ring like brilliant mail, and whether the song is of Ireland or of Istambol [sic] it has the same refrain, a prayer that peace may come again to her who has lost her peace, the moonwhite pearl of his soul, Ameen. (*OCPW* 57)

Mangan's sister, but instead merely removes them from the lamplight. The women are still objects, even if they have ceased to glow.

An epiphany capable of enabling sympathy must escape the requirement that it either originate in the imagination, as for the Romantics, or signify a totalizing indeterminacy, as in the modern sublime. The *modernist* epiphany, as opposed to what Langbaum and Nichols call the *modern* epiphany, resists the Romantic cycle of projection and reintegration and thus offers a more promising starting point for sympathy. As the Stephen of *Portrait* says of the "esthetic image in the dramatic form," the modernist epiphany reverses the order in which its Romantic predecessor develops: rather than reencounter the human imagination projected onto nature, it perceives "life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination" (233). The quotation, of course, describes an artistic rather than epiphanic process. Nevertheless, its insistence on life, not the imagining subject, as art's point of origin underscores Joyce's departure from both the Romantic epiphany and the Kantian sublime.

The quintessential example of the Joycean epiphany is Stephen's vision of the bird girl in *Portrait*:

She was alone and still, gazing out to sea; and when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance of his gaze, without shame or wantonness. Long, long she suffered his gaze and then quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them towards the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither. The first faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither: and a faint flame trembled on her cheek. (186)

What differentiates the bird girl from Gretta, Mangan's sister, and most of Joyce's other feminine recipients of the male gaze is her choice to look back. The returned glance does not eliminate the power structure at play in the exchange, for it is Stephen who looks and desires, while the girl reacts to his gaze with "quiet sufferance," with its attendant connotations of pain and patience rather than willing acceptance. Nevertheless, when the girl pushes back against Stephen's attempt to objectify her, she reveals to him that life is more than a projection of his imagination, and — ironically, given *Portrait's* autobiographical nature — that he is therefore not the only possible subject of art:

Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. [...] He felt above him the vast indifferent dome and the calm processes of the heavenly bodies; and the earth beneath him, the earth that had borne him, had taken him to her breast. (186-187)

Although the insistence on error at first seems a throwback to a Romantic reading of Milton, it also suggests the frequency with which attempts to recreate life out of life will err. Through Stephen's epiphany, Joyce ties error inextricably to both "life" and "glory" — the matter and result of art. Any attempt to recreate life, he suggests, will inevitably

get it wrong. The claim resists the subsumption of otherness by the artist's imagination, instead positing life as independent of and not entirely accessible to the artist who perceives it. Stephen's interpretation remains an interpretation, and thus his account of the bird girl's glance may interpret her emotional state just as clumsily as Gabriel does Lily's haste. Still, even as the text leaves her emotions perpetually indeterminate, it presents the fiction of an actual emotional state that the bird girl herself can access, even if it lies beyond Stephen's understanding and, perhaps, the reader's and the author's.

Even as the emphasis on error acknowledges the fundamental unknowability of the other, it resists reducing the other to a symbol of his or her own mystery. While rejecting the Romantic model, Stephen's epiphany obeys the first part of Nichols's definition: it presents an "absolute and determinate" moment with a "relative and indeterminate" significance. I would amend "relative and indeterminate" to "relatively indeterminate": while the epiphany's meaning is open to multiple interpretations, it does not easily collapse into a reminder of the indeterminacy of all meaning. The sublime feeling that Stephen experiences arises out of a more muted frustration of the imagination than the utter failure Kant describes. In his attempt to recreate life, Stephen does not fail; he errs. Error is more modest than failure, for it does not universalize its mistakes, but instead requires the existence of a correct answer to prove the proffered suggestion wrong, even if that answer can never be accessed. It implies an imagination gone awry rather than rendered mute by the absolute. Stephen may err in his attempt to represent the bird girl's feelings, but he does not use their inaccessibility as an excuse to reduce them to signs of inaccessibility itself.

### The Space of Epiphanic Sympathy

Gabriel's moment of sympathy at the end of "The Dead" is, in a traditional reading, a moment of non-sympathy: "Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love" (59). Gabriel directly contradicts Smith's definition of sympathy when he insists that the emotion he imaginatively constructs is one that he has never actually experienced. He makes no attempt to relate Michael's emotion back to other emotions he has felt or witnessed; the emotion is decidedly *not* known, not crystallized into fact. Ironically, it is this lack of knowledge that allows Gabriel's experience to maintain the skeleton of traditional sympathy. When he encounters an absence in place of a sign of emotion, he recognizes his own experience of the lack of an emotion. Instead of interpreting Michael's inaccessible emotion as nothing, or as a sign of his absolute otherness, Gabriel identifies it as "love," a feeling he has never truly experienced. He may not succeed in reproducing Michael's emotion, but he can draw on the absence in his past experience in order to imaginatively construct a space for the emotion Michael feels for Gretta.

What I am calling Gabriel's moment of sympathy could be more precisely termed a moment of negative sympathy. Gabriel has never experienced and cannot comprehend the emotion he sympathizes with, and thus rather than the emotion itself, he feels his inability to reproduce it — not an utter inability, a total failure, but a specific, locatable inability, one contained within a space called "love." Gretta's inadequate description of her lover's eyes functions as a gnomon that reveals the incomprehensible emotion behind them: Michael Furey's eyes, which take the place of the sensual trigger that initiates

sympathy, are not only unseen, but impossible to describe or visualize. The gnomon stymies Gabriel's typical process of registering his failure of understanding as the other person's confusion, thus rendering it amenable to his system of knowledge. The ensuing epiphany prevents the absent image from collapsing into nothingness by lending it a sense of significance.

Yet in the course of his epiphany, Gabriel does not experience a vision that symbolically represents what the invisible eyes cannot convey. Instead, the epiphany extends the denial of his senses:

Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead has one time reared and lied in was dissolving and dwindling. (59)

What Gabriel experiences could almost be read as a lack of images: forms he cannot "apprehend," a "grey impalpable world," a "dissolving and dwindling" reality. The frustration of his senses is part of the epiphany's revelation; Michael Furey's eyes, the epiphany's invisible trigger, allow him to experience a vision without vision, to be "conscious of" what he cannot "apprehend."

Not only does Gabriel's epiphany occur through negative presentation, but it also evokes a feeling of the negative sublime, though more in the vein of Lyotard's variation than Kant's original conception. Reason does not eventually triumph by conceptualizing the experience that overwhelms Gabriel's imagination. Instead, like the speaker of a Baudelaire poem, Gabriel has a vision, albeit a visually indeterminate one, of his own experience of self-dissolution and incomprehension in the face of the unrepresentable.

However, to claim that Gabriel's epiphany signifies unrepresentability itself, as Lyotard's theory suggests we should, would be to overlook the specificity of the sympathetic exchange that takes place: both Gabriel's emotions and the other, inaccessible emotions that trigger them are particular, complex states that cannot be reduced to a general meaning, even if that meaning is the lack of meaning. Like the bird girl's inner state, the inaccessible emotions resist a definite, stable significance, but they are not infinitely indeterminate. Though Gabriel has never felt Michael's emotion himself, he "[knows] that such a feeling must be love." In other words, even if Gabriel fails to fully understand the other's emotion, he can locate it within certain parameters. Presented in this context, "love," unlike the labels that caricature emotion earlier in the story — "confusion," "bitter[ness]," "joy," or even the previous iterations of "love" — signals its own inadequacy even as it attempts to describe an emotion. "Love" marks a particular space that roughly locates even if it does not pinpoint an emotional experience. Thus, instead of locking a self-contradictory, fluid array of emotions into the narrow confines of what Gabriel thinks a man must feel for a particular woman, "love" marks the space of what it is possible for such an emotion to feel like. What Gabriel sympathizes with is an unverifiable possibility.

## The Imperfections of “Ithaca”: Leopold Bloom’s Science of Sympathy

The controlled, negative sympathy that closes “The Dead” may seem poorly suited to the excessively positive — and, at least on the surface, positivist — Leopold Bloom. After all, while Gabriel Conroy may be satisfied with a single, epiphanic moment of potential connection, for Bloom, sympathy is a mode of being. Nevertheless, Gabriel’s shift from a form of emotional understanding that depends on knowledge to one that instead hovers between error bars opens up a means by which Leopold Bloom, the scientist-sympathizer, can navigate his world. *Ulysses*, as Umberto Eco reminds us, is the work in which Joyce fully embraces multiplicity: in his most famous novel, he draws on and undercuts the version of sympathy outlined in *Dubliners* to create a phenomenon that toward the end of the novel he finally names a “similar difference” (693): a surface distinction belied by a formal or structural likeness that forges an unexpected connection. The uncertain universe and incomprehensible other that drive Gabriel Conroy to restrained negativity lead Leopold Bloom to a similarly different positivity, a positivity that begins from a position of negativity and reacts by embracing excess. In *Ulysses*, Joyce responds to the failure of a sympathy based on knowledge not by winnowing ignorance down to a narrow space of possibility but rather by increasing speculation to improve the likelihood of connection.

The consequences of an epistemology of uncertainty are best seen in “Ithaca,” which at first appears to be a classic application of the old epistemology. “Ithaca” proceeds in the form of a catechism, albeit one that pairs that quintessential religious form with the language of science, underscoring the similarities between the two truth-systems. The narrator splits into two roles, questioner and answerer, though both draw from the same pseudoscientific vocabulary and sentence structure. Each query the questioner poses receives what is formatted as a single answer, even if its content often overflows that structure; through the classic modernist strategy of introducing tension between form and content, “Ithaca” ironizes Catholicism and logical positivism, not to mention their shared attachment to the idea of an ordered cosmos.

Yet Joyce’s ironic deployment of the language of science is not a complete rejection, but rather an expansion, a means of loosening its strictures to make room for sympathy. The scientific form and vocabulary encourage readerly sympathy with Bloom through a variation on the technique Joyce uses to misdirect readers in “The Dead”: the language mimes the thought processes of Bloom’s scientific mind, but the parodic tone — produced by frequent moments of excess, such as Bloom’s overflowing disquisition on water or his absurd conceptualization of the relationship between his age and Stephen’s — reminds us that what appears on the page is merely an approximation. In other words, we receive not the precise inner life of Leopold Bloom, whose specificity may alienate us, but a cartoon that, in sketching the extremes of Bloomian interiority, lays down boundaries between which we may locate his experiences. Transferred to a comic context, Gabriel’s negatively defined space of emotion takes on the bold lines of the caricature.

Not only does Joyce use science to caricature Bloom, but Bloom also caricatures science, welcoming contingency and error into knowledge. Loose similarities that academic science would consider either insignificant or unverifiable become sources of connection. For instance, in what may be a parody of Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*,



“Bloom, diambulist,” “Milly, somnambulist,” and “Stephen, noctambulist” reveal their shared genus, “ambulist,” even though they do not separate neatly into species: most somnambulists and noctambulists are also diambulists, and a somnambulist is usually also a noctambulist (695). This disorganized schema artificially places overlapping species in parallel, hinting at Bloom’s emotional response to his interactions with Stephen by relating his current attempt to mentor the young man to his past attempts to instruct his daughter. The reader can sympathize with Bloom through a sort of imprecise triangulation in which Bloom’s relationship with Milly and Milly’s similarity with Stephen are the (approximately) known points used to (approximately) locate Bloom’s emotional response to Stephen.

Beneath “Ithaca’s” scientific catechism is a second, flexible structure, a deliberately sloppy geometry in which shapes are similarly different and vice versa. After discussing Bloom’s reaction to Milly’s departure for school, the answerer notes that the “temporary departure of his cat” was “perceived by him similarly, if differently” (693). The questioner probes this relationship:

Why similarly, why differently?

Similarly, because actuated by a secret purpose: the quest of a new male (Mullingar student) or of a healing herb (valerian). Differently, because of different possible returns to the inhabitants or to the habitation.

In other respects were their differences similar?

In passivity, in economy, in the instinct of tradition, in unexpectedness.

As?

Inasmuch as leaning she sustained her blond hair for him to ribbon it for her (cf neckarching cat). Moreover, on the free surface of the lake in Stephen's green amid inverted reflections of trees her uncommented spit, describing concentric circles of waterrings, indicated by the constancy of its permanence the locus of a somnolent prostrate fish (cf mousewatching cat). Again, in order to remember the date, combatants, issue and consequences of a famous military engagement she pulled a plait of her hair (cf earwashing cat). Furthermore, Silly Milly, she dreamed of having had an unspoken unremembered conversation with a horse whose name had been Joseph to whom (which) she had offered a tumblerful of lemonade which it (he) had appeared to have accepted (cf hearthdreaming cat). Hence, in passivity, in economy, in the instinct of tradition, in unexpectedness, their differences were similar. (693-694)

The similar differences between Milly and the cat at first appear to consist of motives — both leave Bloom in pursuit of something — but later appear to be vague geometrical resemblances. Milly is like the cat, the parentheticals contend, because she arches her neck or fiddles with her hair in a similar way. These surface similarities correspond to

deeper similarities, whether of affect, habit, or personality: the arch of the neck represents, results from, or is identical to passivity. The parallel shapes may appear to reinstate the primacy of vision, but they resist vision's objectifying tendency by emphasizing their blurry outlines: though the scientific language leads us to expect precision, the narrator prevents us from determining the precise relationship between a shape and its corresponding affect or inclination. Instead, all relations, like that between Milly and the cat, are reduced to a vague "cf," that sleight-of-word that indicates a similarity between two entities without explaining how they are similar. In "Ithaca," Joyce deflates the sublime uncertainty that concludes "The Dead" by revealing his famous multiplicity as a sort of intellectual negligence.

In deflating the sublime — or, to borrow Ellison's language, denuding his text of all the aspects we have come to admire — Joyce creates a more widely applicable if less frequently successful model of sympathy than one that proceeds through the negative epiphany. Epiphanies are by definition rare; sloppiness is ordinary. Leopold Bloom may have a scientific mind, but it is a messy one, unable or unwilling to sort valid from invalid hypotheses, relevant from irrelevant data. The question "What in water did Bloom, waterlover, drawer of water, watercarrier, returning to the range, admire?" (671) receives forty-one answers, of which some, such as "its climatic and commercial significance," group characteristics with grammatical and alliterative rather than logical similarity. Whereas Gabriel's epiphany allows him to locate love within narrow confines, Bloom's scientific imprecision opens many potential spaces for connection. In some cases, this ease of connection leads to absurdity:

Why was the host (reluctant, unresisting) still?

In accordance with the law of the conservation of energy. (692)

The questioner answers his own question: Bloom is still because he is "reluctant, unresisting." The answerer, failing to notice that his job has been done for him, draws a loose connection between physical stillness and the stillness of physics that interrupts the reader's possible sympathy for Bloom with laughter.

In other cases, the compulsion to synthesize enables connections that would otherwise fail:

His mood?

He had not risked, he did not expect, he had not been disappointed, he was satisfied. (676)

The answer at first appears to be a narrative: "He had not risked," therefore "he did not expect," therefore "he had not been disappointed," therefore "he was satisfied." However, the Bloomian approach to science encourages us instead to read the answer syncretically. Satisfaction is a vague emotion, perhaps less precise even than love: each instance of love takes a single object (even if that object contains multiple entities, *e.g.*, "humankind"), but satisfaction may take as few as zero ("I'd be satisfied with nothing") or as many as an infinite number of objects ("Nothing would satisfy me"). Furthermore, the criteria by

which we measure whether or not an object has been attained to the point of satisfaction is unclear. In "Calypso," Bloom craves a kidney, but he may feel satisfied to different degrees and in different ways by eating an entire kidney, merely tasting a kidney, or sating his hunger with another type of meat. To return to the example from "Ithaca," we can better sympathize with Bloom's satisfaction by placing it within the bounds of simultaneous actions and emotions: somewhere in an area that includes not risking, not expecting, and not being disappointed, we can locate this particular sort of satisfaction.

This process of triangulating emotional states from unexpected similarities and synchronicities has drawbacks other than a lack of precision. The bias toward inclusion rather than exclusion may produce sympathy where it is unwarranted or occlude the differences between emotional states, as we see when Stephen and Bloom engage in a classic male bonding ritual. Parallel urination forges a confraternity that, like that of Milly and the cat, could be abbreviated "cf." This similarity is imperfect: the acts of urination are "first sequent" and only "then simultaneous," and they follow dissimilar trajectories (702). Nevertheless, the physical parallel's slight imperfections are not enough to account for the men's divergent thoughts. Each thinks of the "invisible audible collateral organ of the other" and is presented with a "problem," but in Bloom's case, that problem concerns earthly matters of "irritability, tumescence, rigidity, reactivity, dimension, sanitariness, pelosity," and in Stephen's, the question of the proper degree of adulation to grant the foreskin of Jesus (703). The bonding ritual becomes a vehicle for expressing the men's dissimilarity, and thus questions the ability of "similar differences" to produce connections.

Yet if we interpret the scene as an instance not of parallelism, but of parallax, we can begin to see how the apparent weaknesses of a sympathy based on approximate geometries are actually integral to the model. According to Barbara Heusel, the entire novel follows a parallactic structure, leading us to look first through the "artist's" eyes, then through "the common man's" (or in my view, the scientist's). This structure culminates in the urination scene, in which the convergence of the two men's urine symbolizes the viewer's new "depth perception" (135). But the depth perception that the scene appears to enable is an illusion. The men's viewpoints never actually overlap, but instead draw so close that they produce an approximation of coincidence. In fact, the scene's final question introduces yet another instance of parallax:

What celestial sign was by both simultaneously observed?

A star precipitated with great apparent velocity across the firmament from Vega in the Lyre above the zenith beyond the stargroup of the Tress of Berenice towards the zodiacal sign of Leo. (703)

Bloom and Stephen may simultaneously observe the shooting star, but they do so from slightly different viewpoints. Parallax presents a mode of sharing a similar experience, differently. The men's experiences are overlapping but individual, brought together by an object that evokes the idea of empirical reality, even if its observers have no way of verifying its existence. The object may function as a gnomon, in that its gesture toward the empirical reminds the observer of empiricism's failure, but it also provides comfort simply through the act of pointing outside the self. An external world that cannot be

verified can still be a source of connection, Joyce suggests, provided it turns heads in the same general direction.

In the reader's world, furthermore, the shooting star is a matter of historical record.<sup>37</sup> Like the bird girl in *Portrait*, the star — actually a meteor — suggests, in opposition to the phenomenologists, that reality is independent of our ability to perceive or understand it. Whereas the bird girl dismantled Stephen's self-pitying solipsism by revealing his plea of ignorance as an excuse to avoid sympathy with the other, the shooting star answers Bloom's attempts to step outside his own point of view by hinting that he is not merely staring at empty space. By pointing outside the novel to the nonfictional world, and thus to a universe that the characters can never empirically experience, Joyce models a means of conceiving of the possible existence of the unverifiable. Bloom and Stephen never actually walk upon the common ground they find, literally because it is in outer space, but more significantly because its existence cannot be verified on the novel's own terms. Readers, however, can form this connection on the characters' behalf, not because our record, being scientific, is absolutely true — to modern science, even gravity is still only a theory — but because it provides an external point of reference.

If the novel is a metaphor for solipsism's prison of the skull, then *Ulysses*'s persistent references to a world outside the novel offer a means of breaking out of that prison. The novel forms these references by identifying promising spaces of connection and sending threads toward them that another person — in this case, the reader, but in the case of sympathy, Stephen or the bird girl or even an entirely hypothetical other — must attach at the other end. For all Joyce's scientific language, sympathy in this sense is a leap of faith: Forster's "only connect" becomes "only attempt connection." The acknowledgement that we share responsibility for connection with another is not so much a demand on the other as an abdication of one's own power; the would-be sympathizer does not expect success and in fact has no way of measuring it. If Bloom sends out too many threads of potential sympathy, leaving many to break off or tangle, this is a sign of generosity as much as sloppiness. *Ulysses*, after all, embraces excess. For a model of sympathy that maintains the constraints of "The Dead" even while incorporating Leopold Bloom's sensitivity to symmetry, we must await Joyce's successor, Beckett.

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<sup>37</sup> According to Donald and Marilyn Olson, on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1904, a meteor passed from Lyra to Leo at about 1:16 A.M., Dublin local mean time (77).

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5.  
Sympathy for Surds:  
The Unverifiable Emotions of Beckett's Prose

Hamm: [...] Can there be misery—  
*(he yawns)*  
 —loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now?  
*(Pause.)*  
 My father?  
*(Pause.)*  
 My mother?  
*(Pause.)*  
 My... dog?  
*(Pause.)*  
 Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But  
 does that mean their sufferings equal mine? No doubt.  
*(Pause.)*  
 No, all is a—  
*(he yawns)*  
 —bsolute,  
*(proudly)*  
 the bigger a man is the fuller he is.  
*(Pause. Gloomily.)*  
 And the emptier.

-Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Hamm's question introduces the sort of half-trivial, half-substantial philosophical tangle that would have appealed to Stephen Dedalus: to what extent do different categories of creatures — living, half-dead, or nonexistent, or perhaps subject, object, or neither — suffer? How do we measure suffering, and how do we detect it in creatures whose mental activities are entirely opaque to us? How, in other words, can we sympathize with our fathers, mothers, and dogs? If Joyce's response to a similar line of questioning was to offer us a flexible form of sympathy that leaves room for error, Beckett's is to render the entire enterprise absurd.<sup>38</sup> Hamm expresses "no doubt" that the

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<sup>38</sup> The claim that Beckett's work is absurd has not gone unchallenged. Michael Y. Bennett, for one, questions Martin Esslin's influential characterization of the Theater of the Absurd, arguing that "meaning-making, not meaninglessness, is integral to the plays characterized as absurd" (8). However, Esslin's preface to the 2009 edition of *The Theater of the Absurd* appears to head off this critique. Esslin contends that he did not intend to rigidly define a movement, but instead to introduce a means of accounting for the shared characteristics of a group of writers, such as "certain techniques in the handling of exposition, delineation of character, use of dream and hallucination, etc." ("Forward Forty Years On"). Absurdity, in this view, is as much a formal as a thematic

objectified creatures around him experience a misery equal to his, even as the question itself makes his doubt clear. The explanation for his conclusion is similarly contradictory. A bigger man, like Hamm, can contain more misery than his dustbin-dwelling parents or invisible dog, but the same amount of misery would leave more of his larger body empty and thus be proportionally smaller. In *Endgame*, the modernist recourse to the object world, exemplified by Woolf, is just as absurd as the old Enlightenment glorification of the subject. Yet to reduce the question of sympathy to absurdity is not, as it first appears, to dismiss it. Instead, Beckett removes sympathy from a realist context and allows it to be reformulated in postmodern terms, terms that reflect modernism's destabilization of emotion, subjectivity, and classical logic.

Throughout this dissertation, I have been tracing intertwining developments in modernist concepts of sympathy and selfhood. As the poststructuralist — perhaps even posthuman — self developed, sympathy began to shift from a mode of emotional transmission between subjects to a sort of resonance among entities that can be classified neither as subjects nor as objects. In the course of Samuel Beckett's work, however, these developments occur during the opening, not the endgame: the absence of the subjective self is not a discovery he stumbles upon, but instead an already formulated idea with which he must come to terms. His response to the modernist critique of subjectivity is well-covered territory; although readers offer varying interpretations of the alternatives he presents to the traditional subject, they have come to a rough consensus on certain aspects of the Beckettian self. The quintessential Beckett character, if such a shattered creature can have a quintessence, is "split apart on the inside," as Sarah Gendron puts it, "unrecognizable even to itself" (51). These fragments of a self are not Romantic projections, emanations of a single, dominant subjectivity. To Slavoj Žižek, a Beckett character is a zombie subject, "a subject without subjectivity." Many critics argue that this absent or nonsubjective subject is a product of language, whether via its creation of the "I" by "tortur[ing] the human body into repeating itself as mind" (Bersani and Dutoit) or its division of that subject through shifting pronouns (Gendron 58). Language's simultaneous creation and dispersal of the subject allows it to be read, in Gendron's view, as a Deleuzian virtual object — that is, as an entity that contains an internal fissure that allows it to become a fragment of itself (51). In short, for these readers, Beckett's non-subject is its own estranged Other.

Self-estrangement may have frightening connotations for the English liberal, but for the Irish nihilist, as for the French poststructuralist, it is a source of creative possibility. In fact, as Bersani and Dutoit argue, self-narrativizing, not to mention narrative in general, would be impossible without language's fragmentation of the self. The individual, after all, is his or her own fiction, a "fable of an identifiable biographical self" that can be told after language splits off a determinate "he" or "she" from an otherwise indivisible, invisible "I." In this sense, the subject is not the self's natural state,

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characteristic; an absurd text's rejection of conventional forms of meaning is not necessarily an embrace of meaninglessness, but instead an attempt to rethink the nature of meaning and its relationship with representation. When I call Beckett's work "absurd," then, I do not mean to imply that it is devoid of meaning, but rather that meaninglessness is both a topic it places under consideration and an element of its form.



but its terrifying absolute horizon, beyond which lies the black hole of *Company's* "unthinkable last of all. Unnamable. Last person. I" (22).

In *Company*, self-identity leads to solipsism, and self-division provides companionship. As Nirit Salmon-Bitton contends, "fragmentation is not a destructive but rather a constructive condition for overcoming isolation and creating a self" (146). Deprived of all external confirmation, the one on his back in the dark risks "narrative paralysis" and hence an end to self-creation (144). However, the fragmentation of his identity enables an "intrasubjective" process of self-construction propelled by communication among different narrative positions; self-division arranges "a wondrous meeting between the positions of internal creator and internal reader" (152). The interaction between the splinters of the self "distance[s] the traumatic events of the present" while "creatively draw[ing] close a past full of warmth and empathy" (152).

Warmth and empathy, whether of the present or an illusory past, are themselves made possible by communication among multiple entities, virtual or otherwise. In the solipsistic universes Beckett fashions, it is fragmentation that enables the post-subjective self to engage in the production of emotion. As I explain in Chapter Three, Gertrude Stein divides the characters of *A Long Gay Book* into multiple parts in order to allow the structural relationships between those fragments to produce sympathy and thus emotion. In many of Beckett's works, too, the structural harmony — or, just as often, disharmony — among the splinters of the self is the only available machinery for emotional production. But the structures that organize the spare environments of Beckett's prose function differently from those that undergird the extravagant clutter of a Stein poem.

Unlike Stein's structural devices, which almost appear to have arisen organically from the messes they contain, Beckett's organizational schema are meticulously designed and yet subtly undercut by notches of irony. Beckett's ironized, evacuated notion of structure may grow out of Joyce's attempt to fashion a cosmos capable of incorporating chaos, but what Joyce renders sublime, Beckett makes absurd. We can visualize Beckett's ironic structure through Hugh Kenner's reading of *Mercier and Camier* as a sort of anti-impressionist painting: close up, "we are attended by Reason, Farce (which springs from the forehead of Reason), and Structure, the handmaiden of Farce. But as the book proceeds, the mere fact that we are familiar with more and more of it prompts longer and longer views: and these long views disclose local coherence to be enveloped by the absurd" (73). The novel takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to the Joycean *ordo*, carefully fitting local absurdities into a rational scheme that upon a second glance is revealed to be absent.

Other of Beckett's works build and undermine a sense of order through the postmodern allegory. As Anthony Uhlmann explains, allegory "is a form that allows literary texts to engage with abstract systems, or fragments of abstract systems," connecting representation to the represented. In the postmodern revision formulated most influentially by De Man, the represented is itself another representation; meaning emerges out of this chain of reference rather than an ideal truth that underlies the text. For instance, the Belacqua of *More Pricks than Kicks* refers back to Dante's Belacqua, who in turn refers to indolence. However, this mountain of references has no tropological Paradise at its peak; indolence never succeeds in becoming Indolence. The Purgatory of the *Purgatorio* may be present in Beckett's stories, but only as yet another representation.

The empty shapes that remain after postmodernism has stripped religion of absolute

truth offer another approach to understanding Beckett's structure. The *via negativa*, which also influenced Joyce, presents an alternative to absurdity by providing a theological means of rationalizing absence. Negative theology approaches God by mapping the spaces in which he is not present, circling an inexpressible divinity by defining what is not divine. A number of critics have proposed that Beckett's negative allegories function in a similar manner.<sup>39</sup> Borrowing from both the *via negativa* and the modernist concept of the empty center, the Beckettian allegory circles a space of nothingness, marking absence's presence.

In many of his works, but most evidently in *Company*, the absence Beckett circles is the subject: ironic structure is a strategy not only for revealing the absence of the subject, but also for depicting characters within that absence. If, as Bersani and Dutoit suggest, *Company* is an allegory of self-making through language, the self that is made is one without stable characteristics, a definite past, a given name, or any of the familiar attributes of identity. Beckett offers us several fragments of a character that would seem to represent aspects of a self: the one on his back in the dark, the voice that comes to him, the "you" of the vignettes that voice narrates, and even the narrator who conveys these other fragments to the reader. Yet the characteristics of these potential symbols are arbitrary:

[F]eeling the need for company again he tells himself to call the hearer M at least. For readier reference. Himself some other character. W. Devising it all himself included for company. In the same dark as M when last heard of. In what posture and whether fixed or mobile left open. He says further to himself referring to himself, When last he referred to himself it was to say he was in the same dark as his creature. Not in another as once seemed possible. The same. As more companionable. (35)

Any tangible quality exists only "for readier reference"; names can be flipped upside down, bodies vaguely oriented, and universes exchanged. The semblance of a self located at the nexus of these fragments would be similarly contingent. Furthermore, lest the symmetry of these possibilities suggest a more stable structure than he intends, Beckett interrupts their mirroring with a third term. When the narrator speaks "further to himself referring to himself," he both remains the narrator and becomes the narrated, though his creator does not in turn become the created. The original split between "I" and "he" loses its Cartesian symbolism when an additional "he" buds off the "I." The "I" can never be thought without undergoing a transformation; references abound, but what they refer to is always deferred. The unstable structure that Beckett builds around the subject reveals the instability of its contents.

Beckett's insistence on the contingency of order at first seems to be countered by his ongoing interest in mathematics, which manifests itself throughout his work: we find it in the absurd arithmetic of *Watt*, whose protagonist compulsively solves logic puzzles

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<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Mary Brynden, "Beckett, Maritain, and Merton: The Negative Way" in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 21 (2010) and Marius Buning, "First Stirring of the 'Via Negativa' in *Eleutheria*" in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 9 (2000).

and calculates probabilities<sup>40</sup>; in the intricate numerical symbolism of *Krapp's Last Tape*, in which all significant numbers are divisible by three (Borriello), though the number itself has only a reflected significance borrowed from myth and religion; and in the methodical, almost melancholic calculations of *Company*, in which "simple sums" are "a help in times of trouble" (32). Kenner attributes Beckett's "concern with number" to "pedantry" and "the Pythagorean and Augustinian pursuit of essences":

The universe of number is not only one whose internal relationships are locked in place for the pedantic intellect to fondle in tranquility forever, it is also a world devoid of gritty specification. Its points have position without magnitude, its forms not only formal perfection but ideal non-existence. (104)

On its surface, mathematics appears to derive its ability to provide comfort from the stability it seems to represent in an increasingly unstable universe. After all, in the popular imagination, it is so closely associated with consistency and absolute truth that for George Orwell, Beckett's contemporary, the denial of a mathematical truth,  $2 + 2 = 4$ , deals the ultimate blow to a stable reality.

But another of Beckett's contemporaries was Kurt Gödel, whose numbering system treats Orwell's sacred 2 and 4 not as stable symbols, but as arbitrary signifiers: Gödel numbers, which their namesake used in the proof of his famous incompleteness theorem, assign numerical signifiers to the elements of formal systems. Hugh Culik contends that Beckett was probably familiar with Gödel, who is the most likely object of the writer's reference to a mathematician who "used a different principle of measurement at each step of his calculation." Beckett's development from the Joycean of *Murphy* to the postmodernist of *Company*<sup>41</sup> roughly parallels similar developments in mathematics, which saw its own version of modernism with Gödel, Hilbert, and Einstein<sup>42</sup> and by the end of the twentieth century moved, as Clayton Dion recounts, toward the postmodern, "embracing the unexplainable rather than trying to force an ultimate solution" (224). Fittingly, then, Beckett interweaves problems of language with problems of mathematics, using the formal system comprised of numbers as an allegory, albeit a postmodern one, for the formal system comprised of letters. Culik offers as an example Beckett's frequent

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Hugh Kenner's discussion of the frogs that croak "Krk! Krek! and Kirk! at nine-beat, six-beat and four-beat intervals" (86).

<sup>41</sup> Stephen John Dilks offers an alternate but not necessarily exclusive narrative of Beckett's "departure from Joyce's house," in which Beckett constructs an image of Samuel Johnson as an alternate influence with whom he can temper his Joycean inclinations (288). Beckett's Johnson, as Dilks describes him, is solipsistic and self-absorbed, torn between a wish to escape from desire and a terror of annihilation — in short, the human incarnation of themes Beckett explores in *Company*. Furthermore, Beckett's selectively curated understanding of Johnson's work was undoubtedly a lens through which he viewed the eighteenth century and, therefore, presumably an influence on his revision of sympathy.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Gray's *Plato's Ghost: The Modernist Transformation of Mathematics* documents the parallels and, at times, direct interconnections between mathematical and philosophical shifts during the early twentieth century.

analogy between the Pythagorean inability to name irrational numbers and literature's inability to express parts of the self that are independent of language. This analogy, Culik argues, justifies Beckett's quest to develop a literature capable of representing "silent modes of being," and his subsequent strategy of approaching the unnamable through "approximation." For Beckett, mathematics, as a flexible system formed by the interrelationships among arbitrary numbers, becomes a way of understanding — though never mastering — what is contingent and transitory about other structures of thought and representation, and it is thus to mathematics that he frequently turns in his attempt to rethink emotion and sympathy.

### *Murphy's Sympathetic Chess*

The analogical relationship between sympathy and mathematics makes less surprising Beckett characters' persistent tendency to grow sentimental about arithmetic and arithmetical about sentiment. In early works, such as *Murphy* (1938), the mathematical flavor of human interaction appears to be a function of character. The world of *Murphy* is Murphy's; all other characters, the narrator informs us, are "puppets" (loc. 1513). However, Murphy serves as a prototype for Beckett's standard "old man," whose lack of stable characteristics allows him to stand in, albeit imperfectly, for all humans.<sup>43</sup> Murphy's tendency to understand himself and his relationships with others in mathematical terms lays the foundation for Beckett's later development of a version of sympathy capable of functioning in a universe built of evacuated structures rather than tangible objects.

Murphy first turns the language of mathematics on himself, using it to dismantle the fixed, socially prescribed, and easily legible version of identity exemplified by the career man Celia so desperately wants him to become. After another character refers to him as a

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<sup>43</sup> Murphy, of course, is fairly young, but in his self-division, isolation, and relative lack of a personality, he prefigures the nearly anonymous elderly males (Krapp, Malone, the central figures of *The Unnamable*, *How It Is* and *Company*, etc.) who appear in the majority of Beckett's works. The most significant complication to the "old man's" universal status is his marked difference from Beckett's "old woman." Beckett appears to acknowledge the failure of his old man to represent all humans through his occasional depictions of female characters (if they can be called characters). In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, an eye attempts to perceive an old woman with only slight success, although this difficulty may be exacerbated by the woman's death. In *Not I*, another work that stars an old woman, or at least the female actor who plays the Mouth, the central figure remains estranged from both the life she narrates (as the title suggests, she never utters the word *I*) and from the audience, whose relationship with her is mediated by the indeterminate-sexed Auditor. In both cases, a female figure presents an even greater challenge to representation than a male one. Winnie of *Happy Days* is an exception to this difficulty, but she differs from the "old men" in her cheerful garrulousness and apparent possession of a personality.

"surd," or irrational number,<sup>44</sup> he comes to understand himself and his relationships with others in terms of an absurd mathematics — Murphy's supposition that surds lead to absurdity is in line with the etymological relationship between "surd" and "absurd" (loc. 1035). As in the Joycean universe, however, this absurdity is contained. Murphy repeatedly calls other characters "closed systems," establishing solipsism as the basic human condition through the depersonalized language of physics (loc. 1382). He divides his own closed system — "a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without" (loc. 1359) — not for company, as do later Beckett figures, but instead out of a compulsion to systematize. Foremost among the three pieces into which he slices his mind is the "matrix of surds," the womb of irrationality, which, like its Greek or Manichean equivalent, is a chaos of constant, meaningless motion and change (loc. 1411). Yet like a mathematical matrix, the matrix of surds is contained within brackets: it does not open the closed system of the self but instead creates an internal universe that renders the outer one obsolete.

The brackets around and within Murphy's self create a "gulf" between him and the people around him. The sensations that would kindle sympathy in the eighteenth-century theorists' prototypical man for Murphy have no connection to feeling at all, because the "virtual," which he defines as that of which he has only mental experience, and the "actual," defined as that of which he has both physical and mental experience, are partitioned in his mind: "He neither thought a kick because he felt one nor felt a kick because he thought one" (loc. 1371). The walls Murphy erects between the virtual and the actual prevent sensations from triggering cognitive responses and thus sympathy not only for others, but also for himself. Even sympathy for the virtual self of Rei Terada's theory is impossible, because Murphy locates feeling entirely in the territory of the actual, such that there exist only affects and abstract conceptions of emotions, not the emotions at their intersection.

Although Murphy may refuse sympathy, it lingers at the horizon of possibility: characters may not successfully forge connections, but they reach tentatively across the gulfs between them. The novel's "puppets" are capable of a stunted form of sympathy, as we see in the "long look of fellow-feeling," replete with "calm, pity and a touch of contempt," that Celia and Miss Carridge exchange (loc. 2792). This fellow-feeling is not quite theirs, but rather an externalized "solid wall of wool," porous yet concealing, that connects them while dividing them from each other and from the feeling they share. Nevertheless, the moment of partial sympathy provides an alternative to Murphy's embrace of solipsism and introduces the possibility — further explored in *How It Is* — of feelings that evade the liberal concern with authenticity.

Even the novel's titular "seedy solipsist" is not as hermetically sealed as he imagines (loc. 1087). He is capable, for instance, of noting his similarity with the inmates of the asylum and feeling something, however inchoate, in response. In fact, he thinks of the inmates as "proxies" for the physical life he cannot experience, which seems to suggest, in a reversal of Terada's theory, that he would be able to connect to the actual part of himself through sympathy for others (loc. 2272). Murphy eventually abandons this

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<sup>44</sup> A number is considered irrational if it cannot be represented in its entirety. Unlike rational numbers, which end in terminal or repeating decimals, irrational numbers extend to infinite decimal places. The best-known example is  $\pi$ .

possibility; even Mr. Endon, the inmate with whom he feels the greatest kinship, lies outside the brackets of his universe, although in the Humean model he would be the ideal candidate for sympathy.

Nevertheless, Murphy's chess games with Mr. Endon suggest an alternate mode of interaction with the potential to grow into a version of sympathy. The initial matches are more choreographed dances than true games, involving parallel actions rather than interactions:

Each made his move in the absence of the other, inspected the position with what time remained, and went away. So the game wore on, till evening found it almost as level as when begun. This was due not so much to their being evenly matched, or to the unfavourable conditions of play, as to the very Fabian methods that both adopted. How little the issue was really engaged may be judged from the fact that sometimes, after eight or nine hours of this guerrilla, neither player would have lost a piece or even checked the other. This pleased Murphy as an expression of his kinship with Mr. Endon and made him if possible more chary of launching an attack than by nature he was. (loc. 2255)

Neither player attempts to defeat the other or to expose the other's pieces to even the threat of danger. In defiance of the eighteenth-century and especially the Victorian models of sympathy, Murphy and Mr. Endon respect each other's stasis; their fellow feeling involves no desire to improve (or in this case, worsen) the other's condition. In fact, Murphy feels the greatest kinship with Mr. Endon when the other displays no desires, expresses no identifiable emotions, and is in fact physically absent. The chess games, while antithetical to Smithean or Humean sympathy, appear to instead suit E. M. Forster's passive revision of sympathy until we realize that they do not connect a pair of individuals so much as a pair of mirror images; they are instances more of symmetry than of connection, of systemization than of nature, and the men who play them do so more in the manner of machines than of individuals, operating according to formal rules rather than flashes of cognition.

We are forced to accept Murphy's refusal to bring solipsism and sympathy into alignment — and are able to predict his eventual fate — when he tries to lose his last game with Mr. Endon. Murphy's attempt at self-destruction indicates the complete failure of sympathy, while the earlier games represented a sympathetic exchange that was merely incomplete. In direct contrast to Celia's "silence not of vacuum but of plenum," the nothingness Murphy experiences after the game ends consists not of an inability to receive stimuli, but instead of the absence of stimuli (loc. 1827):

Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence (to abuse a nice distinction) not of *percipere* but of *percipi*. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing... (loc. 2863)

What Murphy previously interprets as his inability to connect to the outer world becomes a belief in the absence of anything outside the self. The non-existence of the real, which

Murphy once saw as contingent on his internal division, becomes absolute reality. For Murphy, this nothingness is initially a “pleasure” and a “treat,” the anticlimax he aimed for but could never achieve with his oddly onanistic rocking chair games. Later, however, when he looks into Mr. Endon’s eyes and sees reflected there nothing but Mr. Endon’s blindness to his presence, the impossibility of sympathy becomes less pleasurable. Murphy half-consciously narrates the experience in the manner of a medium rather than a subject:

“the last at last seen of him  
himself unseen by him  
and of himself”

A rest.

“The last Mr. Murphy saw of Mr. Endon was Mr. Murphy unseen by Mr. Endon. This was also the last Murphy saw of Murphy.”

A rest.

“The relation between Mr. Murphy and Mr. Endon could not have been better summed up than by the former’s sorrow at seeing himself in the latter’s immunity from seeing anything but himself.”

A long rest.

“Mr. Murphy is a speck in Mr. Endon’s unseen.” (loc. 3008-3017)

The absence of himself that Murphy sees in Mr. Endon’s eyes differs from the comforting absence of *percipi*, just as the peace of negative annihilation differs from the torment of “positive annihilation,” a concept Beckett gleaned from the letters of Samuel Johnson (Dilks 290). Although Dilks contends that Beckett’s work cannot reproduce Johnson’s vision of positive annihilation without adopting Johnson’s religiosity, this scene nevertheless presents a rough analogue: when he looks into Mr. Endon’s eyes, Murphy endures a positive experience of nothingness. This is not an originary nothingness that offers freedom from imposition, but instead an imposed absence that damns him, as Johnson’s God damns the sinner, to the hell of “Mr. Endon’s unseen.” Mr. Endon’s inability to sympathize with Murphy, which results from an inability to recognize his presence, is fatal both to Murphy and to sympathy. The potential for sympathy that the earlier chess matches evoked could overcome only the isolation caused by the gulfs between people; it cannot overcome the complete absence of others.

Murphy’s encounter with Mr. Endon’s indifference allows Beckett to pinpoint the specific problem that sympathy must overcome: the inability to experience the other’s presence. However, whether or not the others that sympathy requires must be independent beings or whether puppets will suffice remains an open question. While the answer to the question would matter to a realist and arguably matters in *Murphy*, which, while hardly realist, at least borrows its trappings from reality, it ceases to matter in

Beckett's later work. For the middle and later Beckett, as Salmon-Bitton and others have noted, estranged pieces of the self are not necessarily worse company than the others we more typically think of as strangers; this is arguably the entire premise of *Company*. In these later novels and plays, which are universes of Murphys rather than universes of Celias and Nearys against which a Murphy must define himself, behavior that was once opposed to normal interaction becomes an alternate mode of interaction better suited to an isolating environment. What we must dismiss as failed sympathy in the context of *Murphy* is in the context of *How It Is* or *Company* a measured success.

#### Symmetrical Sociability in *How It Is*

Like many of his middle and later works, *How It Is*, Beckett's 1964 translation of his 1961 French novel, *Comment c'est*, takes place in an isolating landscape, a vast, empty expanse somewhere between the muddy prison of Dante's gluttonous sinners and his marsh of the wrathful. Crawling through the muck with only cans of "tunny" to satisfy his gluttony and a limbless creature upon whom to vent his wrath is a typically lonely protagonist, if he can be considered such, who is narrated from the inside out.<sup>45</sup> The novel begins with the narrator alone:

life then without callers present formulation no callers this time no stories but mine  
no silence but the silence I must break when I can bear it no more it's with that I  
have to last

question if other inhabitants here with me yes or no obviously all-important most  
important and thereupon long wrangle so minute that moments when yes to be  
feared till finally conclusion no me sole elect the panting stops and that is all I hear  
barely hear the question the answer barely audible if other inhabitants besides me  
here with me for good in the dark the mud long wrangle all lost and finally  
conclusion no me sole elect (loc. 72-77)

Even his solipsism lacks solidity; the absence of others is merely the "present formulation," both provisional and contingent. A character like Murphy would experience no friction with this environment and thus have nothing against which to create himself. The swamp or bog of *How It Is* is an environment that makes solipsism the norm yet houses no subjects capable of becoming "closed systems," for the novel's presentation of subjectivity has already shifted away from *Murphy's* and past even Murphy the character's, taking as a given a shattered, transient, and contingent replacement for the liberal subject. This view of subjectivity changes the definitions of self and sociality and hence the sympathy that depends on both. The same passive, tentative connections that in *Murphy* could indicate only some failed or stunted version of sympathy here offer hope for the possibility of human (or even sub-human) interaction.

*How It Is*, as is typical of Beckett, at first appears to have a fairly simple geometry. Its skeleton is the equilateral triangle formed by the narrator, Pim, and Bom, according to

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<sup>45</sup> For the sake of convenience, I will refer to him as "the narrator," although his alienation from the inner voice that tells his story complicates that status.



which the narrator repeatedly insists he divides his narrative, although the accuracy of his claim is almost immediately thrown into question by the references to Pim that interrupt “part one” (loc. 186). Furthermore, the narrator refers to the time he spends with Bom as “After Pim,” a designation that stresses Pim’s importance over Bom and thus offers an alternate equilateral triangle — “Before Pim,” “With Pim,” and “After Pim” — that challenges the triangle formed of characters.

While the relationships that create these triangles could be read as parodies of social interaction, they have also been interpreted allegorically. The pattern of the allegory that Bersani and Dutoit outline but do not label in “Beckett’s Sociability” would perhaps be best described as fractal: in their reading, the novel’s diagram of interaction has the potential to repeat infinitely, forming an internally self-similar figure of a wider society. This fractal pattern begins not with the narrator’s equilateral triangles, but instead with a quadrilateral that is visible only from without: two tormentors approach two victims and torture their stories out of them. The two victims then approach each others’ tormentors and torture *their* stories out of them. Each member of this interaction meets only two other members, creating the illusion that their relationship is triangular. Yet even if only through his tormentor’s and victim’s narratives, each member is subtly influenced by the inaccessible corner of the quadrilateral.

If, instead, we imagine the victim and tormentor as corners of two interlocking quadrilaterals of which the narrator forms the shared corner, the pattern can repeat infinitely, with billions of tormentors crawling toward billions of victims. Each life story potentially bears the influence of billions of other stories:

number 814327 may speak misnomer the tormentors being mute as we have seen  
part two may speak of number 814326 to number 814328 who may speak of him to  
number 814329 who may speak of him to number 814330 and so on to number  
814345 who in this way may know number 814326 by repute (loc. 1023)

Here we find one of the many “potentially infinite series” that, as Ann Banfield notes, abound in Beckett’s work (189). Although the passage may conjure the image of billions of torturers and victims waiting in line at the post office, its stiffly bureaucratic tone is in fact one of the means by which it evokes the possibility of a society. To the liberal humanist, society may be formed of interactions among individuals, but in the universe of *How It Is*, number 814327 does not require an organically formed identity; it is perfectly adequate for him to receive it like a ticket from a machine. What creates the semblance of a larger society is that 814327 senses and influences both 814326 and 814328, who in turn sense and influence the integer-individuals beside them. The absence of names and identifying features makes the existence of additional old men more believable and, oddly enough, easier to imagine: 814327 implies 814326 in a way that, say, Malone does not necessarily imply Molloy. Furthermore, although 814327 does not in turn imply 814328, the sequence of numbers provides us with a system capable of conjuring him, while only Beckett’s intervention informs us that it is Malone who succeeds Molloy. The influence each victim’s story bears on his tormentor’s narrative opens up the possibility that we can interact with others whose existence we can never confirm through our senses — a possibility that enables us to imagine a society.

Bersani and Dutoit see the possibility of sociability as a product of language; rather

than a stable self, the narrator is a “stopping point for voices, an intersection of extortionary speech-acts, a collecting depot for all the words whose source of transmission remains uncertain.” Any semblance of an identity forms through (literally) tortured speech:

We incorporate language as a command: speak, and this is all it says to us, it originally sends us no other message. *How It Is* divides that command into two stages: the imitation of sounds (which is the narrator’s repeating of the voices, “I say it as I hear it”), and the inevitable self-identification — more fundamentally, self-constitution — which such repetition entails. The mute tormentor’s semiotic system could be read as beautifully translating the self originating experience of language as a brutalization of the body. Indeed, language tortures the human body into repeating itself as mind, as a conscious self.

This process leads Bersani and Dutoit to the deliberately perverse hypothesis that the “structure of coercion” produces a “pleasant result,” namely society, which can in turn generate sociability “from within the operations of torture but perhaps also in excess of them.”

The sadomasochistic origins of this society recall another component of sociability that Bersani and Dutoit do not discuss. Sympathy, which in Laura Hinton’s view operates through a “perverse gaze” that endorses “sadomasochistic, scopophilic practices,” is the missing force that allows language to transform the tortured body into the conscious self that is its repetition as mind (2). After all, the process of self-formation narrated in *How It Is* involves three figures, not the two found, for instance, in Levinas’s or Hegel’s theories of identity construction.<sup>46</sup> The self-constitution through language that Bersani and Dutoit recount is only half of the process that the novel depicts, for the relationship between Pim and the narrator is merely symmetrical, not identical, to the relationship between the narrator and Bom. While torturing Pim, the narrator is not conscious of the pain he causes:

happy time in its way part two we’re talking of part two with Pim how it was good moments good for me we’re talking of me for him too we’re talking of him too happy too in his way I’ll know it later his way of happiness I’ll have it later I have not yet had all (loc. 405)

The exchange of torture for language is as choreographed as Murphy’s chess games with Mr. Endon, consisting of precise descriptions of the interactions of physical parts (loc.

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<sup>46</sup> Although the triad of Pim, Bom, and the narrator could map onto one of the Freudian trinities, the dominant image of a chain of old, male bodies seems to resist a Freudian theory of identity. Furthermore, when Beckett references psychoanalysis, he tends to do so in a manner that frustrates allegorical readings. For example, Martin Kevorkian reads *Watt* in light of H. J. Watt’s critique of Freudian dream interpretation, arguing that while the novel and its potential namesake share an “avoidance of transcendent signification,” Beckett’s references to the psychoanalyst are equally obfuscating, “not so much scratching as polishing a well-worn surface of interpretive failure” (429).

411-417). While the narrator recognizes Pim's sounds as cries of "fright," albeit a fright in which he can "catch orchestra-drowned a faint flageolet of pleasure" and one that is "already fatuity on [the narrator's] part it's possible," the fright is more an aesthetic representation of an emotion than an emotion in itself (loc. 417); we could best imagine it as a symphonic piece for strings and flageolets, entitled "Fright." At the imaginary moment of the initial, "naïve" encounter — imaginary because all events are concurrently narrated by an internal voice already aware of the future — the narrator is neither self-conscious nor capable of recognizing Pim as a separate being involved in the production of separate emotions. The narrator can sympathize with Pim only by disrupting the proposed structure of his narrative, importing the future self of the estranged inner voice, who has undergone the same experience.<sup>47</sup>

The future narrator imported into the scene has already experienced part three: when the exchange is reversed and repeated — when Bom in turn tortures speech out of the narrator — the narrator belatedly recognizes his treatment of Pim. This recognition is at its most basic level merely an acknowledgment of symmetry: the third section's refrain, "As I to Pim Bom to me," has a chiasmic structure that presents each exchange between Bom and the narrator as the near-mirroring of an exchange between the narrator and Pim. It is a near rather than perfect mirroring because Bom is almost but not quite Pim, and, what is perhaps more important, "me" is almost but not quite "I." As Banfield argues, "Once the sway of habit is broken, repetitions are revealed as poor substitutes for 'a succession of losses'" (196). Bom may be symmetrical to Pim, but he is not the return of Pim, for Pim has been "lost" (loc. 134); "Pim is finished" (loc. 744). The self as object of thought — "me" rather than "I" — has also been lost, at least in part: "all that not Pim I who murmur all that a voice mine alone and that bending over me noting down one word every three two words every five" (loc. 746). The present "I" can only approximate the past "me," for memory is inexact: the voice has recorded only one third to two fifths of the story. Yet even if the particular has been lost, the generic nature of being that once threatened to overwhelm the particular maintains the possibility of connection: "I" may not be identical to "me," but the two entities approximate one another. The narrator can use the method by which "I" relates to the emotions of "me" as a model for parsing the emotions of the other, whose position in relation to the narrating voice is more similar to "me" than "me" is to "I." Recognizing Pim's experience as like but not identical to his own allows the narrator to recognize Pim's response to that experience as an array of emotions resembling but not equal to his own. The recognition of both the similarity between the emotions and the difference in their physical and temporal points of origin is necessary for the narrator to recognize Pim as an object deserving of sympathy — a creature capable of emoting, if not a subject in the traditional sense — and, hence, to sympathize with him.

At first, the narrator's sympathy with his victim and tormentor appears to take a surprisingly traditional form, one that almost seems to imply the existence of liberal subjects. Where Beckett's version of sympathy diverges is in its dependence on the symmetrical structure of the exchange alone. Adam Smith's requirement that the

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<sup>47</sup> To be more precise, the inner voice speaks as though it has undergone the experience, but whether or not this is true is one of the many puzzles that the partitioned narration creates, one that is not necessarily meant to be solved.

sympathizer have past experience of the emotion with which he sympathizes remains only in evacuated form: the previous experience merely enables the recognition of repetition. The narrator's statement, "I'll know it later his way of happiness," collapses Smith's sequence, combining recognition of Pim's emotion with the narrator's reproduction of that emotion. Rather than a mere accessory to sympathy, symmetry is both the mechanism by which sympathy occurs and its sign: it is through the narrator's declaration of the similarity between the two, further emphasized by the possessive pronoun, "his," that we recognize his sympathy with Pim. Moreover, Beckett's sympathy is emptied of content and context, ignoring moral judgment and contiguity. The narrator's sympathy with Pim's pain does not suggest that his cries were fitting responses to that pain. Nor is the narrator's sympathy with Pim's "way of happiness" a way of absolving himself of guilt for Pim's suffering. In defiance of Hume, the narrator's sympathy occurs when he is farthest from Pim, who has already traveled to the opposite pole of the path he eternally traces; sympathy occurs only when its object is already lost and the opportunity to act is over.<sup>48</sup> All that remains of traditional sympathy's strict requirements is the skeleton of resemblance.

The reduction of sympathy to symmetry makes possible a larger society free of the constraints of individual identities. Because the self of *How It Is* is produced through language, as Bersani and Dutoit argue, the infinite migration of narratives along the chain of torturers and victims suggests a similar transience of identity — as the narrator puts it, "the essential would seem to be lacking" (loc. 1100). Sympathy that occurs through the recognition of symmetry is independent of any stable conception of identity, relying instead on the momentary emotions that arise out of particular configurations of bodies, the narratives they voice, and the social roles they play. The nearly identical iterations of the pattern across the imagined whole allow the narrator to extrapolate his sympathy with Pim to the hypothetical person 814327 currently being tortured by the hypothetical person 814328. The reduction of selves to statistics, which elsewhere appears threatening, here produces the possibility of connection. In other words, *How It Is* presents a method for sympathizing with an other of whom we have no sensory evidence, and who may not even exist.

Sympathy has come full circle: Beckett's postmodern variation is the near-mirror image of the eighteenth-century version that Catherine Gallagher outlines. The eighteenth-century sympathizer could feel alongside the protagonist of a novel precisely because he or she was fictional; the postmodern sympathizer sympathizes with all others as though they are fictional, because they all very well may be. The life stories the anonymous old men narrate come detached from their owners, if they have owners at all. Like Samuel Richardson novels, they purport to be authored by their subjects. There is no

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<sup>48</sup> As Banfield notes, for Beckett, both pain and pleasure can be focused only at a distance, when the too-present object of desire becomes "an object of regret returned as an image seized only in retrospect, glimpsed through the Proustian telescope, separated from the desirer by time and forgetfulness" (197). The ability of distance to avoid the "caricature furnished by direct perception" (*Proust*, qtd. in Banfield 197) can be seen in Beckett's depiction of sympathy as well. The narrator of *How It Is* can sympathize with Pim only after Pim has been lost and returned as an image — that is, as a cognitive representation.

distinction between fiction and non-fiction when all life stories follow the trajectory of rumors, requiring the appearance of truth less and less as they pass from narrator to narrator. We can sympathize with the protagonists of these stories whether or not they are true and whether or not their characters exist, for just as the syllogism frees the logical proof from the need for true premises, so does a sympathy based on symmetry escape the question of whether or not the emotion it reproduces is authentic. While for the realist, a sympathy that incorrectly reproduces the other's feelings devolves into self-serving pity, in Beckett's worlds, where everything is conditional and there are thus no true feelings to reproduce, it is the only sympathy possible.

### The Irrational Irritation of *Company*

While *How It Is* presents a version of sympathy compatible with the possibility of solipsism, it leaves certain questions unanswered. The symmetry that triggers sympathy and, hence, introduces the possibility of a society, still depends on the preexisting skeleton of that society. For instance, the narrator's sympathy with Pim arises out of their symmetrical social positions, however primitive: what they share is the "victim" corner of the social triangle. In a sense, *How It Is* presents a re-creation myth for a society that postmodernism has thrown into question rather than a means of accounting for the possibility that such a society never existed. Like most of the revisions of traditional sympathy that I have outlined, it depends on the simultaneous deconstruction and maintenance of the system it challenges. In *Company* (1980), Beckett tests the ability of a sympathy based on evacuated structures to withstand the absence of even a society of Pims and Boms. Here, mathematics becomes both an analogue for and an alternative to sympathy; the two modes test the extent to which it is possible to create a version of sympathy and, through it, a society that requires no others or even solid objects, but instead only unstable, provisional structures.

*Company* is split into two different narrative modes, which correspond to what may be two separate universes: there is, on the one hand, the third-person story of the "one on his back in the dark," whose environment is entirely provisional, and on the other, the second-person vignettes narrated by a disembodied voice and heard by the one on his back, who may or may not be their protagonist (5). The past encapsulated in the vignettes may present a concrete world teeming with others and objects, but it "cannot be verified," and it is the hearer's choice whether or not to claim it (5): he or at least his narrator initially assumes that it belongs to another, but the voice repeats itself "as if willing him by this dint to make it his. To confess, Yes I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes I remember" (12). *Company* thus foregrounds the contingency of the already provisional narratives of *How It Is*. While each old man's story of life "in the light" appears to belong to him, even if that sense of ownership is repeatedly challenged, the past life related in the vignettes comes already estranged from its alleged protagonist. If the old men are tortured into speech and hence self-consciousness, the one on his back is tortured *by* speech, pressured into accepting a self for which he has insufficient evidence. *Company* thus privileges neither the subject, as in Victorian liberalism, nor the object, as in Woolf's critique of liberalism. When the existence of the self is as uncertain as the existence of the other, solipsism is no longer the chief threat to sympathy. Instead, sympathy must be able to survive not only the absence of verifiable emotion, but the

persistent frustration of the impulse to verify.

*Company's* narrative bifurcation is one means by which Beckett undercuts any evidence that begins to cohere into a univocal allegory. The relationship between mathematics and emotion shifts between and even within the two narrative modes, destabilizing programmatic revisions of sympathy even as they begin to coalesce. This instability prevents us from determining whether mathematics is an analogy for or a mode of sympathy, allowing the text's response to an unverifiable universe to remain unverifiable in itself.

In some cases, the analogy between sympathy and mathematics is relatively straightforward. When two bodies align like symmetrical right triangles with a mutual glance as their shared leg, sympathy flows easily:

You are on your back at the foot of an aspen. In its trembling shade. She at right angles propped on her elbows head between her hands. Your eyes opened and closed have looked in hers looking in yours. In your dark you look in them again. Still. You feel on your face the fringe of her long black hair stirring in the still air. Within the tent of hair your faces are hidden from view. She murmurs, Listen to the leaves. Eyes in each other's eyes you listen to the leaves. In their trembling shade.  
(39)

Emotion travels down the straight line from one vertex to another, but the bodies' geometrical alignment seems to merely represent rather than enable sympathy. It is the utterance, "Listen to the leaves," that initiates the sympathetic exchange; before the woman speaks, the hearer instead fixates on the movement of her hair on his face, which she cannot possibly feel alongside him. The mutual glance thus seems a metaphor for the sympathy that communication makes possible rather than the route sympathy travels.

In the murky universe of the one on his back in the dark, however, both company and mathematics are elusive. Here, what at first appears to be a similar alignment of right triangles fails to enable sympathy because the shapes formed are both indistinct and provisional:

From ranging far and wide as if in quest the voice comes to rest and constant faintness. To rest where? Imagine warily.

Above the upturned face. Falling tangent to the crown. So that in the faint light it sheds were there a mouth to be seen he would not see it. (38)

The space initially presented as the corner of a triangle is a diffuse area, one that has been proposed by the imagination rather than fixed in space through observation and measurement. In fact, in this universe, relative positions can never be determined, much less precisely measured: "The voice comes to him now from one quarter and now from another. Now faint from afar and now a murmur in his ear" (12). Even the rotation of a body is arbitrary. Whether the hearer lies supine or prone is a question the hearer or his narrator weighs through informal rather than formal logic, and settling upon the prone position opens up new questions: "Prone how? How disposed the legs? The arms? The head? Prone in the dark he strains to see how best he may lie prone. How most companionably" (16). This question — "How most companionably" — underlies all

determinations that in a conventional universe would depend on observation and measurement. Certain proportions, certain measurements, and certain angles, this question implies, create companionship. Furthermore, if we combine this proposition with the premise that companionship is elusive because math itself is elusive, then math is not merely an analogy for but rather a necessary component of companionship.

The division between math's analogical and essential functions does not always neatly coincide with the split between *Company*'s narrative modes. Within the relatively concrete, second-person vignettes, which are scattered like jewels throughout the uncertain darkness, we witness a fully developed version of the structure-based sympathy of *How It Is*, one that presents a veneer of consistency and completeness. Scenes of interaction among characters that we would expect to borrow from the vocabulary of traditional sympathy instead almost exclusively use the language of mathematics. A romantic connection, for instance, occurs not when sentimental feelings are exchanged, but rather when the segments of two bodies align: "For when bolt upright or lying at full stretch you cleave face to face then your knees meet and your pubes and the hairs of your heads mingle" (33). This symmetry is not merely a means to but rather a mode of sympathy. The reader, and, we can presume, the hearer who is the story's purported protagonist receive this description of shared measurements where a more traditional narrative might relate a scene of affection. Because the protagonist's past is entirely contained in the vignettes — he has no memories with which to fill the interstices — the measurements are his entire experience of the relationship. For both the hearer and the version of himself that he hears, the similarity between his and his lover's measurements is the emotional connection between them, not just a literary contrivance that symbolizes that connection. Thus his attempt to understand her current emotional state, which is also her current physical position, involves calculating the changes that kneeling or sitting would make to their relative heights — that is, changes to their bodily alignment.

But an emotional connection formed through bodily symmetry does not necessarily escape its participants' compulsion to verify. At the end of the vignette, its provisional protagonist opens his eyes and realizes that the perfect mirroring he imagined was an illusion:

You ... open your eyes to find her sitting before you. All dead still. The ruby lips do not return your smile. Your gaze descends to the breasts. You do not remember them so big. To the abdomen. Same impression. Dissolve to your father's straining against the unbuttoned waistband. Can it be she is with child without your having asked for as much as her hand? You go back into your mind. She too did you but know it has closed her eyes. So you sit face to face in the little summer-house. (34)

The woman's potential pregnancy disrupts the symmetry between the two bodies and thus the emotional exchange that it enables. After her lover becomes aware of the possibility of pregnancy, his emotional state no longer resonates with hers. Though their bodies maintain the appearance of symmetry, this alignment fails to facilitate sympathy between them when a hidden third body may be present. Yet if the pregnancy is real, the apparent symmetry has been false all along; only when its falsehood becomes evident does its ability to forge emotional connection break down. This is not to suggest that the relationship between symmetry and sympathy has always been false, but rather that it

depends on a perceived rather than an absolute truth. Nevertheless, in the concrete world of the vignettes, one in which the senses presumably convey true information, sympathy cannot defy the apparent reality those senses perceive.

Even when we disregard the question of truth, a sympathy dependent entirely on structure fails to convey conventional emotions. In an earlier memory, the hearer's imitation of his father's chuckles also equates sympathy with symmetry, presenting in pantomime the mirrored expressions of eighteenth-century fellow feeling. The chain of chuckling takes place in the same summerhouse, which is a "rustic hexahedron. Entirely of logs. Both larch and fir. Six feet across. Eight from floor to vertex. Area twenty-four square feet to furthest decimal. Two small multicoloured lights vis-à-vis. Small stained diamond panes. Under each a ledge" (31). The summerhouse is bilaterally symmetrical. The lights are "vis-à-vis," as are the ledges, and, as the hexahedral shape implies, each wall is identical to the one opposite. The father and son, positioned face to face by the building's architecture, also display bilateral symmetry: "When he chuckled you tried to chuckle too. When his chuckle died yours too. That you should try to imitate his chuckle pleased and tickled him greatly and sometimes he would chuckle for no other reason than to hear you try to chuckle too" (32). Unexpectedly, it is this exchange's perfection that detaches sympathy from emotion. The exchange may take the form of traditional sympathy, but the symmetrical expressions are alienated from rather than identical to the feelings that they conventionally convey. The boy's chuckle is not a display of mirth, but a reference to his father's chuckle. Furthermore, in a reversal of the sympathetic process, the formal chuckle empties the imitated chuckle of content, so that the father finally chuckles "for no other reason than to hear you try to chuckle too." Though the father's laughter may ultimately result from amusement, its immediate cause is its symmetry with his son's laughter, and this deliberateness distances his amusement from its expression. The problem is no longer the emotions' unverifiability, which, as we saw in *How It Is*, is not a problem after all, but instead their complete absence: when symmetry is only a mode of and not also an analogy for sympathy, it ceases to convey more than empty signifiers.

The version of sympathy presented in the vignettes fails because of this tendency to seek a perfect symmetry, one that continues to be "true" beyond the point to which the senses have access. In other words, when sympathy seeks mathematical perfection rather than approximations, it conveys absence rather than emotion. The closer to identity symmetry comes, the less effectively it functions as a mode of sympathy, for the surfaces it involves grow emptier. If structure alone is incapable of transmitting more than the empty shell of an emotion, and thus the formal pattern that serves as a foundation for sympathy is insufficient for the transmission of emotion, what additional factors are necessary?

We can begin to address this question by turning to the eighteenth century's answer, the subject. Since *Murphy*, Beckett's work has further dismantled the liberal conception of the subject and discarded the detritus with which it traveled: the soul, a social position, and, as we see in *Company*, a distinct past. The *via negativa* brings us closer to an answer: what remains after the death of the subject is what makes company possible. But the *via negativa*'s weakness is that it takes one of its boundaries for granted: if the answer to the question lies in the space between what it is not and nothingness, then nothingness also requires definition. When the question is one of sympathy — of the



transmission of emotion between two entities — the lower boundary appears to be solipsism, or the absolute absence of others, animate or not. *Company*, as Beckett makes clear by the end of the work, presents an effort to resist solipsism by fragmenting the self. Despite this premise, the lonely self that has been fragmented does not automatically succeed in providing company, for the shards of the splintered self can descend into solipsism themselves:

The voice alone is company but not enough. Its effect on the hearer is a necessary complement. Were it only to kindle in his mind the state of faint uncertainty and embarrassment mentioned above. But company apart this effect is clearly necessary. For were he merely to hear the voice and it to have no more effect on him than speech in Bantu or in Erse then might it not as well cease? Unless its object be by mere sound to plague one in need of silence. Or of course unless as above surmised directed at another. (7)

The voice alone — that is, the sensation of sound alone — is not sufficient company. Instead, a mental response is necessary, even if it is as slight as a "faint uncertainty and embarrassment." Whether this response must be cognitive, or whether an affect will suffice, at first remains in doubt:

In order to be company he must display a certain mental activity. But it need not be of a high order. Indeed it might be argued the lower the better. Up to a point. The lower the order of mental activity the better the company. Up to a point. (9)

What appears to constitute "mental activity" is a feeling of friction, of resistance. As Forster contends through Margaret Schlegel, sympathy that flows too easily is no better than sympathy that fails to flow at all: emotional connection requires "grit," a sort of mental irritation. After all, the simplest means by which the voice can challenge solipsism is to "plague one in need of silence." Yet as we will see later in the text, it is not the affect — the itch — but the cognitive response to that affect — the desire to scratch — that allows grit to become company, much as a grain of sand forms a pearl only by stimulating nacre production in an oyster. The one on his back longs not merely for an itch, but for "an itch beyond the reach of the hand or better still within while the hand immovable. An unscratchable itch. What an addition to company that would be!" (45). Company may require the simplest of emotions, those that barely rise above affects, but some cognitive response is necessary.

This formulation at first appears to resemble many other modern and even proto-modern visions of subjectivity, especially Lacan's, as Žižek points out. Nevertheless, what raises fragments of the self to the status of "company" is not, say, the introjection of external desires that Lacan describes, but rather the ability of those deeply embedded splinters to annoy us. Because the past paternal influence the hearer receives is forced upon him and not necessarily true, any introjected paternal desire is artificial, less like Freud's layer of an onion than a surgical plate. Such a plate can be irritating but not constituting; it may initiate a mental response, but it does not create a mind. Because the content of this particular plate is nothingness, it fails to produce not only a subject, but also company.

According to Žižek, it is not in the symbolic or the imaginary stages, but rather in the Lacanian Real that Beckett's work dwells. "We touch the Lacanian Real," he explains, "when we subtract from a symbolic field all the wealth of its differences, reducing it to a minimum of antagonism." But Lacan's antagonistic Real, which we experience as a shock or rupture, is too brief and violent a form of company for *Company*. Company does not shock; it pesters. To call its challenge to our system of comprehension a disjuncture is too dramatic: instead, it requires only the infinitesimally small and possibly imagined space between approximation and perfection, which offers just enough friction to irritate.

A sympathy based on structure requires a symmetry that is noticeable but immeasurable, one that persistently reminds us of its imperfection, like the "unscratchable itch" for which the hearer yearns (45). Thus the voice denies the hearer propositions that he could test:

Why does it never say for example, You saw the light on such and such a day and now you are alone on your back in the dark? Why? Perhaps for no other reason than to kindle in his mind this faint uncertainty and embarrassment. (6-7)

By refusing to tie the provisional past it relates to a verifiable — or seemingly verifiable — present, the voice introduces a source of irritation in the hearer that provides both speaker and listener with company. A perfect accounting of the hearer's experience (which, as Hugh Culik contends, would be impossible) would convey nothing but empty signifiers. If, as Culik proposes, we must instead approach the unnamable through approximation, narrowing but never closing the gap between language and the unrepresentable, we can find company in the space that act of approximation never traverses — the space of error that it implies. In effect, Beckett has reversed the positive and negative spaces of Joyce's version of sympathy: a sympathy located within imprecise parameters, as we see in "The Dead," reflects a failure of precision and thus a melancholic longing for verifiability, but *Company* embraces postmodern uncertainty, finding sympathy in those parameters' imprecision.

Where the isolated hearer finds sympathy and company, then, is not in the provisional concrete past, which conjures the family, hometown, and childhood that serve as tropes for traditional human warmth. Instead, sympathy results from the friction between fragments of the shattered self: between the voice and the hearer, the creator and the creature. Each has a slightly different mode of counting — that is, a different way of structuring and accounting for experience, whether through narrative or a minimal mental response. The negotiation between the versions of experience that the voice relates and the hearer undergoes creates the irritation and uncertainty necessary for the two figments to interact. Even the suspicion that the voice's story is false is an addition to company:

What visions in the dark of light! Who exclaims thus? Who asks who exclaims, What visions in the shadeless dark of light and shade! Yet another still? Devising it all for company. What a further addition to company that would be! Yet another still devising it all for company. Quick leave him. (49)

If the visions are fiction, they have a creator, a vague and unidentifiable source who

stimulates the hearer to ask, “Who?” Asking the question highlights another point in the darkness, another “Who” to serve as company. The mental activity that the hearer may share with these possible entities is sufficient common ground for sympathy, as the narrator has already informed us; the greater risk in the postmodern world is that these figments will be insufficiently distinct. The annoyance that Beckett makes a prerequisite for sympathy staves off the collapse of one figment back into another. The hearer’s persistent ambivalence about the voice, manifested at times as a wish to escape it — “Quick leave him” — is thus also an attempt to keep it present by marking its separation from other fragments of the self. Whether or not sympathy is desirable on a practical or moral level is a question Beckett refuses to address, but what is clear is that those who sympathize cannot find the experience fully desirable.

Ambivalence, of course, is an unsurprising response to a sort of sympathy that depends on the friction between modes of counting. As the fragments gradually integrate toward the end of the text, and the creator claims ownership of what he now considers a “fable,” language itself begins to collapse:

[F]inally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labor lost and silence. And you as you always were.

Alone. (51-52)

With the end of language and the end of sympathy comes a sense that “labor lost and silence” are ultimately preferable to company. Yet the final, semantically unnecessary “Alone,” isolated in its own paragraph, is no more desirable than the persistent irritation of company. The ending offers us no final word on the value of sympathy, language, and unverifiability, but instead only indicates the alternative: solipsism, silence, and if not exactly truth, then at least the absence of falsehood.

The two alternatives feed into the two major comprehensive theories of Beckett’s work that Shane Weller examines: Beckett as nihilist (the camp in which Weller places Lukács and Žižek) and Beckett as anti-nihilist (spearheaded by Adorno and defended by most poststructuralists). Weller, drawing on Derrida’s reading of Beckett — or, rather, his refusal to read Beckett in any official capacity — offers instead the hypothesis of a “double failure of nihilism” (24), in which the appearance of certainty at times gives way to

an experience of unknowing in which the distinction between the possible and the impossible, the heroic and the non-heroic, nihilism and resistance to nihilism no longer holds. Such an experience of indecision or unknowing, beyond any certitude of impossibility or even of undecidability or unknowability, would require us to attempt to think of the relationship between Beckett and nihilism in terms of an uncanniness no longer conceived in a strictly Nietzschean manner through a rhetoric of liminality... For might not nihilism be the ‘uncanniest of all guests’ precisely because it leaves us in no position to determine whether it is standing at the door or not? (26)

Weller's insight offers a means by which we can conceive of the two unpleasant possibilities between which *Company* oscillates not necessarily as alternatives, but rather as two fragments of the "double failure" and, in a sense, double success of both. This state of uncertainty and indecision, as Weller argues, is both an embrace of and resistance to totality: radical uncertainty cannot be certain even about itself.

In the humbler terms of the solitary individual on his back in the dark, uncertainty offers room for a slight mental response, whereas certainty, like perfect symmetry, forecloses the need for thought and feeling. Furthermore, the sort of sympathy that arises from an uncertain universe provides us with a way to pass our time within it. If we cannot make value judgments or the political action that depends on them, as Lukács would prefer, and we cannot trust in the superiority of nothingness enough to pursue our own annihilation, as Murphy does, then we can take advantage of the space uncertainty leaves us to devise and sympathize with our company.

The stripped-down, uncertain form of sympathy with which Beckett leaves us may not appear to resemble the ordered, empirical sympathy of Smith or Hume, but it still bears marks of its heritage. Far from embracing the resurgent empiricism of empathy, with its automatically triggered neural circuits, Beckett's sympathy lingers in the doorway of the impossible. Sympathy is not a given; it requires imaginative work, even if that work is as simple as the utterance that divides the self from itself and produces the irritating company of the other. Such structurally incorporated distances — between the sympathizer and the recipient of sympathy; between a feeling, whether it is an undeniable emotion or barely more than an affect, and a fellow-feeling; between the self, even if it falls short of a subject, and its company, even if it is merely a figment; between possibility and certainty — are what remain after sympathy sheds most of its eighteenth-century trappings, from the liberal subject to a prescriptive ethics to an empiricist epistemology. Like concrete, sympathy gains flexibility and hence durability through a deceptively solid composition whose entrained absences turn out to be structurally integral. As we see when Beckett reduces sympathy to little more than its structure, it is the form of sympathy that allows it to persist in postmodernity, for sympathy's flexible solidity better suits an uncertain world than the strict fluidity of empathy.

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