

A Case for Modernism: Tracing Freud in Bloomsbury

Leslie Davison

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English.

Chapel Hill
2010

Erin G. Carlston

Gregory M. Flaxman

Pamela Cooper

Minrose Gwin

Nicholas Allen

ABSTRACT

LESLIE DAVISON: A Case for Modernism: Tracing Freud in Bloomsbury
(Under the direction of Drs. Erin G. Carlston and Gregory M. Flaxman)

This project traces Freud's impact on four members of the Bloomsbury group: Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Katherine Mansfield, and Dorothy Sayers. I contend that a Freudian influence is evident in the authors' concern with the ethical problems of attempting to perceive or embody absolute "truth" in language. All of the authors in this study suggest the existence of an inaccessible, unknowable core at the heart of psychic experience that seems comparable to the Freudian unconscious. This core produces "meanings" rather than "truths," and thus must be *interpreted* rather than *investigated*. These authors point to the need for an "ethics of interpretation" that can successfully "read" these meanings where a more forensic, reductionist, investigatory brand of psychology would fall short (or, worse, harm the subject of investigation). Though authors like Woolf and Forster were openly hostile to Freudian thought at times and neither Mansfield nor Sayers openly affirmed Freud's influence, this study will demonstrate a Freudian lineage behind this "ethics of interpretation," illustrating how Freud's "unconscious" wove its way into that of Bloomsbury.

Acknowledgements

I have several people to thank for their help in producing this project. First, I would like to thank my advisors, Drs. Erin Carlston and Gregg Flaxman. These giving and insightful mentors have consistently pushed me to go further with my ideas and provided invaluable support and feedback; I am so grateful to both of them. Thanks, too, to Drs. Nicholas Allen, Pamela Cooper, and Minrose Gwin, all of whom have been gracious and helpful reviewers of this project at its various stages. Finally, I am grateful to the Graduate School and UNC Department of English for their financial support throughout my graduate studies, and most particularly for the Scholars for Tomorrow and the Frankel Dissertation Fellowships.

Next, I must thank my dear friends and colleagues Cheryl Thayer (without whom I would not have survived the past 7 ½ years), Marc Cohen, Dr. Sarah H. Ficke, Dr. Amanda M. Page, Dr. Mary Raschko, and Hannah Bryant Rigby. I offer special thanks to Isabel, Sarah, and Brad Lindsay and Dr. Jennifer Larson, Doug Dorney, and their son, Colin, for giving me a lot to smile about when I most needed it. Deepest thanks to my friends, Drs. Skip Bollenbacher and Caroline Szymeczek, and my boyfriend, Ben Davidson (no relation—I hope), for their support and encouragement throughout this process.

I must thank my wonderful mother, Valerie, and the rest of my family for all their love and support. Thanks are also due to Margel Nusbaumer, my oldest friend, and to Kimberly Zirkle, the fastest friend I have ever made.

Finally, I would like to thank my friend Electra J. M. Bynoe, who once wrote a book for me. I dedicate this project to her memory with love and remembrance.

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Introduction

Quentin Bell, nephew of Virginia Woolf, begins his 1974 study of the Bloomsbury group, *Bloomsbury*, by noting how difficult it is to determine precisely when the group came into being. For the purposes of this study, I will pinpoint Bloomsbury's inception roughly in the late 19th century and very early 20th century, when many of the men who were undeniably at Bloomsbury's core, including Thoby Stephen (Virginia Woolf's brother), Clive Bell, Bertrand Russell, James and Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster, and John Maynard Keynes, formed a community at Cambridge in the "conversazione" society the Apostles. This community ultimately relocated to London, where Virginia and her sister, Vanessa, were living, and the era of artistic production and collaboration for which the group is most famous began.

Because of the group's early origins in the halls of Cambridge, philosopher G. E. Moore, with whom many of Bloomsbury's men studied as members of the Apostles, is often identified as Bloomsbury's greatest non-artistic influence. According to Bell, Moore's emphasis on the necessity and power of rationality seemed to condition among his former students the attitude that one could solve the world's greatest problems (including fascism) by turning always, ultimately, to cool reason, as opposed to superstition, nationalism, chauvinism, tradition, or even instinct or emotion (77). Indeed, Moore's influence is evident in Bloomsbury's opposition to Victorian and imperialist ideals. However, this project works against the grain of scholarship that identifies Moore as the group's most fundamental philosophical influence. In my explorations of

Bloomsbury writers Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Katherine Mansfield, and Dorothy Sayers, I discern the powerful influence of another figure who, like Moore, also made disciples of several Bloomsbury members: Sigmund Freud.

The Bloomsbury group's relationship to Freud is, appropriately enough, one fraught with ambivalence. Many of Bloomsbury's "members" were attracted to Freud's ideas and early advocates of his work in England, while others were more resistant to and suspicious of his brand of psychology. Yet Freud's influence is apparent in the work of Bloomsbury authors who span both of these categories. This fact is somewhat unsurprising, given that one could argue that both Freud and Bloomsbury started their careers "in earnest" in the same year. Freud's first published case studies appeared in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899, the very year that Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf entered Cambridge (*Bloomsbury/Freud* 4). Of course, it would be several years before Bloomsbury became aware of Freud. Although Brill's English translations of *Studies on Hysteria* and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* appeared in 1909 and 1910, respectively, it was only in 1913, with the translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that Freud became renowned in English literary circles. Freud became an important influence and discussion point in Bloomsbury when Leonard Woolf read *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1914 in anticipation of reviewing *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* for *The New Weekly* in that same year. Then in 1920¹, when Alix and James Strachey first traveled to Vienna to study with Freud, Jones convinced Adrian and Karen Stephen, Virginia Woolf's brother and sister-in-law, to pursue medical training in

¹ Elizabeth Abel identifies 1920 as a watershed year for Freud's influence on the London literati; in fact, in her view, Freud served as the emblem of post-World War I literary London (Abel 17)¹.

order to become psychoanalysts. As a result of their trip to see Freud, Alix and James were enlisted as the English translators of Freud's *Collected Papers*, which would ultimately be released on the same day that Woolf released *Mrs. Dalloway*.

In this study, I explore the ways in which a Freudian influence becomes evident in the authors' concern with the ethics of pursuing "truth," specifically with respect to human relations and discourse. All of the authors I discuss present a tension between the desire to "know" about others (or, sometimes, oneself) and the ethical and practical pitfalls that this effort often entails. When their characters pursue a kind of absolute or complete knowledge about others, they discover that it is ultimately unattainable—and, too, that there are ethical dangers inherent in the effort to delve too deeply into the secrets of the human mind. Moreover, these authors imply, any attempt to mine human behavior for a person's true thoughts and feelings is antithetical to forging actual sympathy, connection, or understanding. They all suggest that such an effort is necessary and illustrate the dangers of attempting to "opt out" of communication, but insist on a kind of "ethics of interpretation" to which one must adhere in asking questions about the human psyche.

These authors' concern with what Woolf terms the "privacy of the soul," which must be approached but not violated, echoes Freud's own theories of human consciousness and the unconscious. In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud arrives at a theory of the unconscious whereby the raw "truths" of psychic experience lie buried beneath the surface, only apparent to the conscious mind in the form of symptoms or dream work—that is, in forms that must be *interpreted*; if presented otherwise, this content could be extremely traumatic for the subject. Freud's work suggests the

usefulness and even necessity of attempting to interpret these representations, but also emphasizes the fact that the “truth” of this content, in its full and complete form, remains irrevocably inaccessible. Thus, Freud, like the authors in my study, distinguishes between “meaning” and truth,” suggesting that the former is what must be pursued in human relationships through an interpretive (as opposed to investigative) mode of inquiry. The kind of “resolution” that investigation produces is entirely distinct from the endpoint of Freudian analysis; as Michael Roth puts it, “the task of psycho-analysis is precisely to examine the scars of the spirit--and not to remove them, but to apprehend their meaning. Conflicts are laid bare by psycho-analysis, not resolved” (*Psycho-Analysis as History* 132).

The irony of this commonality between Bloomsbury and Freud is that authors like Woolf and Forster spent years resisting his ideas and denying his influence, precisely because they perceived him as an authoritarian scientist who pried mercilessly into the minds of his patients. Freud’s biography reveals that his early training and research interests were indeed rooted in a more reductionist, forensic approach to the human mind. As a young psychologist, he was more the scientific investigator than the interpreter, fascinated by the attempt to deduce the physiological origins of human behavior. As Angela Richards writes, Freud initially thought it might be possible to “disregard the conscious mental events and construct a purely physical chain, without any breaks in it, which would cover all the facts of observation. To Freud, whose early scientific career had been entirely concerned with physiology, this second possibility was at first irresistibly attractive.” Indeed, he “became intellectually fascinated by the possibility of constructing a ‘psychology’ out of purely neurological ingredients, and devoted many

months in the year 1895 to accomplishing the feat” (Richards, “Introduction to *The Unconscious*,” 162-163). Freud wrote to his friend and correspondent Wilhelm Fleiss during this time, telling him that he was working on something initially called the “Psychology for Neurologists,” which became “Project for a Scientific Psychology.”

This work remained unfinished, however, due to a profound shift in Freud’s thinking. This profound change in course stemmed from Freud’s realization that “even the elaborate machinery of the neuronal systems was far too cumbersome and coarse to deal with the subtleties which were being brought to light by ‘psychological analysis’ and which could only be accounted for in the language of mental processes” (Richards, “Introduction to *The Unconscious*,” 163-164). Richards notes that while one can see early indicators of this transition in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), it crystallizes only in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which “the neurological account of psychology [had] completely disappeared” and “much of what Freud had written in the ‘Project’ in terms of the nervous system now turned out to be valid and far more intelligible when translated into mental terms” (“Introduction to *The Unconscious*,” 164). Freud’s method here is entirely distinct from that of the earlier “Project.” Freud says as much himself in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, announcing: “I shall entirely disregard the fact that the mental apparatus with which we are here concerned is also known to us in the form of an anatomical preparation . . . and I shall carefully avoid the temptation to determine physical locality in any anatomical fashion. I shall remain upon psychological ground” (574). It is in the seventh and last chapter of this work that Freud most clearly signals this new direction. As Richards writes,

Here one gets to the core of the Freudian system of investigation. The psycho-analytic interpretation of dreams discovers the wish that is represented in the dream, but does not proceed beyond this discovery to discuss the physiological basis for the wish itself. To be sure, Freud enters into a complex metapsychological inquiry in the last chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but this is an investigation of the “frontier between the mental and the physical,” not of the realm of the biologists (or even the neurologists). In this chapter Freud moves beyond the mental only inasmuch as he investigates laws that govern its operations and “systems” that operate according to these laws. (Richards, *On Metapsychology*, 40)

Later, in 1915’s “The Unconscious,” Freud writes that the attempt to localize mental experience to nerve-cells and excitations has “miscarried completely” (176-177) and notes that “Our psychical topography has *for the present* nothing to do with anatomy; it has reference not to anatomical localities, but to regions in the mental apparatus, wherever they may be situated in the body” (177).

In this shift toward the study of mental events and away from an examination of the physiological, Freud truly made the “Copernican” move of which he was so proud—that is, he “prove[ed] to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind” (Introductory Lectures 353). In so doing, he decenters the subject; instead of being entirely free to pursue and obtain the “truth” about himself or others through forensic science or other forms of empirical investigation, the subject is at the mercy of this truth,

which, in turn, inevitably eludes him. Freud's theory of the unconscious is the product of his realization that there are always gaps in what can be seen and therefore explained within consciousness; the unconscious is what inhabits those gaps (Richards 168).

The transition in Freud's career that I have described above illustrates the divide between an "ethics of investigation" that drives the search for physical, measurable, and tangible truths behind human behavior and psychoanalysis, which understands the unconscious as something whose truths are essentially untouchable. In rejecting this ethics of investigation—which, as I will demonstrate below, is not purely the province of the scientist—Freud aligns himself with the authors in this study, who also critique and resist it. Although Freud's views often placed him at odds with artists (both within Bloomsbury and beyond), his approach to exploring the unconscious—particularly in terms of dreams—is distinctly literary. This quality of his work is evident in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he contends that the dream is the "royal road to the unconscious." Although he insisted on the scientific nature of psychoanalysis, Freud also recognized where his approach was different from other branches of science:

My presumption that dreams can be interpreted at once puts me in opposition to the ruling theory of dreams and in fact to every theory of dreams with the single exception of Scherner's . . . for 'interpreting' a dream implies assigning a 'meaning' to it—that is, replacing it by something which fits into the chain of our mental acts as a link having a validity and importance equal to the rest. As we have seen, the scientific theories of dreams leave no room for any problem of interpreting them, since in their view a dream is not a mental act at all, but a somatic process

signalizing its occurrence by indications registered in the mental apparatus. (128)

Here Freud exhibits the same confidence in psychoanalysis's ability to assign or perceive unitary meaning behind/within mental phenomena that Woolf finds completely odious, as I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 1. However, he also clearly places his theory in opposition to a totalizing science that insists that the reality behind dreams is chemical and electrical and, thus, entirely reducible to observable, quantifiable, explainable phenomena.² As Lacan puts it, the Freudian unconscious is like a language; it "speaks," presenting signifiers that should be interpreted and "read" in order to perceive *and create* meanings, rather than dissected with an eye toward discovering the entire architecture of the "reality" behind human behavior and mental activity. Indeed, Freud asserts that, when analyzing dreams, the restoration of the connections that are masked by the unconscious "has to be performed by the interpretive process" (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 347). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a work that we know Leonard Woolf read—and can reasonably assume Virginia was aware of—Freud presents a model of interpretation that, like Woolf's, is connective and associative rather than investigatory.

Yet, as already noted, Virginia Woolf mistakenly attributed the ethos of the reductionist scientific investigator to Freud long after he had abandoned the "Project." Chapter 1 outlines the origins of Woolf's suspicion of Freud, which, until 1939, led her to claim proudly that she had never "sat down" to read him. Woolf, who was disdainful of

²Of course, Freud nonetheless insists on his status as a scientist; after noting how more ancient forms of dream interpretation differ from most of the contemporary scientific accounts of dream phenomena, he says, "I have been driven to realize that here once more we have one of those not infrequent cases in which an ancient and jealously held popular belief seems to be nearer the truth than the judgment of the prevalent science of today. I must affirm that dreams really have a meaning and that a scientific procedure for interpreting them is possible" (32).

therapists in general largely due to her own experiences with mental health professionals (both as a patient and through her social circle), associated Freudian psychoanalysis with precisely the kind of science that attempts to probe too far into what in *Mrs. Dalloway* she terms “the privacy of the soul.” That novel obsessively meditates upon the tension between the human imperative to communicate and the irrevocable truth that one can never actually know (or communicate) one’s meaning entirely. As the novel weaves seamlessly in and out of its characters’ minds, its omniscience underscores how benighted the characters are. Ultimately, however, this hopeless condition creates the potential for the miraculous, Woolf suggests. The attempt to communicate and understand, once the hope for “knowing about” others absolutely has been abandoned, offers true hope for insight and connection for Woolf’s characters at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

However, Woolf’s novel also presents characters who persist in rooting out the “truth” of the mind at any cost—and the ones most guilty of this activity are psychologists. Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw, the novel’s most sinister figures, insist upon treating mental health care as a science of the quantifiable and measurable—in short, of what is knowable empirically. Though Woolf did not seem to draw a distinction between different kinds of psychologists, this psychological science is quite distinct from the brand Freud inaugurated with *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Whereas Freud’s therapeutic methodologies privilege the “talking cure,” Holmes and Bradshaw silence the hysteria of their patients, seeking instead to be “always scientific.” Through their “therapies,” they effectively destroy World War I veteran Septimus Warren Smith, who suffers from what we might now call post-traumatic stress disorder. Though he wants

desperately to communicate, Holmes and Bradshaw together largely prevent him from doing so; as a result, the traumas the war inflicted upon Septimus deepen rather than improve.

Woolf initially identified Freud as this kind of psychologist based on the little she knew of his methodologies. As I will discuss further in the chapter, she seemed initially to perceive in him the same kind of authoritarian, absolutist strain that she lampoons in the psychologist figures in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Yet, toward the end of her life, she became increasingly hospitable to Freud's ideas, and finally "sat down" to read him in 1939. Her final novel, *Between the Acts*, is heavily influenced by her reading of *Civilization and its Discontents* and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Though still in tension with Freud, Woolf's last novel demonstrates a deep and often sympathetic engagement with his theories. Ultimately, Woolf seems to agree with Freud regarding the nature of the problems and dangers he perceived in European societies and their communities leading up to World War II. However, she appears more optimistic than Freud that such ills could be ameliorated; at the end of *Between the Acts*, as in *Dalloway*, she affirms the power of "ethical" communication—and here, even more pointedly, of creativity—to create meaningful connection when logic and "truth" fail or, worse, do harm.

E.M. Forster is preoccupied with similar concerns in *A Passage to India*. Like Woolf, he critiques an "ethics of investigation" that attempts to root out absolute truths behind human behavior—an ethics which, in this novel, is the province largely of the British occupants of the fictional Indian town Chandrapore. Forster's novel portrays a community in which characters consistently try—and fail—to master the slipperiness of language. Moreover, the more these characters attempt to use language as a vehicle for

absolute truth, the more language escapes them, conveying unexpected and often illegible meanings. This slippage creates numerous communicative difficulties and forces the characters (and, by extension, the reader) to accept and even embrace language as an endless chase whose object—that is, the ability to relay one’s meaning in its entirety—remains hopelessly out of reach. In his treatment of language, Forster aligns himself with the Freudian-Lacanian theory of discourse, which theorizes that there is always a surplus of meaning—the *objet petit a*—which the speaker pursues but is never able to encompass in his or her speech. The stakes of recognizing this aspect of language are high in the novel, as it becomes the only means of resisting what Lacan would describe as a “master” discourse, associated with the Anglo-Indians, which consolidates power by claiming to bear the absolute “truth” about the world of Chandrapore.

Unlike Woolf and Forster, Katherine Mansfield was not resistant to psychoanalytic thought (although she criticized authors like D. H. Lawrence who she thought overused psychoanalytic imagery in their works). Like *A Passage to India*, Katherine Mansfield’s “Psychology” (1920) and “Je ne parle pas francais” (1920) seem to engage with Freudian ideas regarding the relationship between language and “truth.” In “Je ne parle pas francais,” Raoul Duquette claims an almost preternatural ability to know about himself and others and convey what he has perceived via his “art.” He attempts to make his language “at one” with the “truths” he describes, thus aligning his language with the Lacanian “master discourse.” In “Psychology,” the two unnamed main characters also seem to marshal the discourse of the master, claiming that they are able to communicate perfectly, embodying their exact intended meanings in language. As Lacan notes, however, the master occupies an unsustainable position, which one can

only attempt to retain through silence; as long as the subject is “in” language, she pursues the fragment of meaning—the *objet petit a*—that will always elude her and which her discourse will never be able to represent. Thus, in talking, she reinforces her own status as “divided.” Because language is the motor of desire, according to Lacan, a subject’s attempt to remove herself from language also effects a denial of desire—and the end result of such a denial is death. Such is the case in “Psychology,” in which the characters’ attempts to retain absolute control over themselves and their speech result in the end of their relationship and, ultimately, their embrace of a kind of living death.

The final chapter will examine a figure who resides on the periphery of Bloomsbury, Dorothy L. Sayers. As a detective novelist, Sayers would at first glance appear to be an unlikely proponent of the kind of “ethics of interpretation” that I have argued threads through these works by Woolf, Forster, and Mansfield. She writes in a genre that depends on the pleasures of full discovery and explanation, presenting an audience reeling from the impact of World War I with soothing fictions of death in which fault and the motives for violence are clearly assigned and explained. According to the conventions of the genre, the truth behind character motivations and events, insofar as they relate to the murder plot, must always be revealed in their entirety to the reader. Sayers indeed adhered to such conventions, which would seem to place her work in opposition to the novels and stories of Woolf, Forster, and Mansfield. Yet two of Sayers’s works, *Whose Body?* and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, illustrate the ways in which she, too, suggests the inadequacy and danger of the investigatory ethos; in fact, the murderers in both books are scientists whose crimes stem from a desire to contribute to knowledge of human motivations. Moreover, like Woolf, Forster, and

Mansfield, Sayers foregrounds the aspects of psychic experience that must remain shadowed. Like *Dalloway*'s Septimus Warren Smith, Sayers's detective Lord Peter Wimsey suffers from shell-shock, the result of his experiences in World War I. The approach to the end of a case triggers his symptoms, which manifest as nightmares about his war experiences. In drawing this clear link between the detectable and discoverable parameters of the novels' crime puzzles and the hazy contours of Wimsey's war memories, Sayers's work points to the presence of a deeper mystery behind the novel and beside/underneath its puzzles, one that requires a different mode of inquiry. Moreover, it ultimately draws attention to the traumatic implications of war, rather than declawing the specters of violence and mortality through scenes of solvable, fully explainable, motivated death. While Wimsey participates in the classical mode of amateur detection that results in a fully transparent solution to the central crime, he also becomes the means by which Sayers's novels highlight the inadequacy of this mode to solve or untangle the obscurities of the human mind. Thus, in Sayers we see the same traces of at least an intuitive sympathy with Freudian theory and method.³

I contend that all of the authors in this study engage with Freudian thought in interesting and unexpected ways, deploying an "ethics of interpretation" underpinned by a belief in an inaccessible, unknowable core at the heart of psychic experience that seems comparable to the Freudian unconscious. At a minimum, these authors suggest, such an ethics is more humane than the "ethics of investigation." At its best, however, it creates the potential for greater empathy, creativity, and understanding, and represents a

³And here perhaps the influence goes both ways, as we know Freud admired Sayers' work (Gay 166).

powerful means of resistance to forms of control and mastery that draw their strength from claiming to possess or access the absolute “truth” about human beings.

Virginia Woolf and The Privacy of the Soul: The Ethics of Interpretation in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*

Virginia Woolf's relationship to Freud can best be described as one of ambivalence. The use of the word "ambivalence" to begin such a discussion is appropriate, since Freud's theory of ambivalence ultimately conditioned her reflections, in late 1939, about patriarchy and fascism.⁴ Woolf's engagement with Freud in particular and psychoanalysis in general is central to her critique of the social and political ills portrayed in two of her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *Between the Acts* (1941). Yet, until 1939, Woolf claimed not to have read Freud and was explicitly hostile to psychoanalysis in her conversations and letters to friends in the 1920s, when Freud was becoming increasingly popular in English literary circles. However, Freud's influence is evident in *Mrs. Dalloway* in Woolf's suggestion that a kind of mystery, or what she terms "the privacy of the soul," lies at the heart of mental life. Woolf suggests that this "mystery" must be protected and preserved, rather than mined for its solution or "truth." I contend that Woolf's notion of human "mystery" is easily translated into Freudian terminology as the opacity of the unconscious. Indeed, Freud, too, envisioned the unconscious as a kind of necessary mystery at the center of psychic experience; the subject is unaware of—and, in fact, must be protected from—its truths. Of course, the great irony of this consonance between Woolf and Freud here is that, even as she was implementing a model of human "mystery" that seems profoundly psychoanalytic, Woolf

⁴This discussion appears in *Moments of Being* in "A Sketch of the Past."

appeared to lump Freud in with the forces of patriarchy, fascism, imperialism and proselytism that she viewed as threatening this “privacy.”

This chapter begins by exploring the complicated history of Woolf’s encounters with Freud in order to demonstrate the psychoanalytic lineage of the “ethics of interpretation” that Woolf offers in *Mrs. Dalloway*.⁵ Thereafter, it moves into a discussion of *Between the Acts*, which picks up *Mrs. Dalloway*’s concerns while dealing more consciously and explicitly with psychoanalytic concepts. While Woolf’s newly deepened understanding of psychoanalysis certainly contributed to the novel’s somewhat pessimistic view regarding the future of human political and social relations, Woolf’s last novel continues to advance an interpretive ethics that, as she suggests, resists the destructive and disintegrating forces that Freud perceives at the heart of the human psyche. Thus, in relation to this novel, I argue that Woolf turns to Freud in order to illustrate both the problem and its solution. She essentially uses Freud against himself, suggesting that the power of art and human expression, when engaged “ethically” through an interpretive mode that resembles psychoanalysis, can successfully counter the destructive impulses that Freud portrays as virtually unstoppable.

English Reception of Freud: Bloomsbury and Beyond

Despite the fact that the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press served as Freud’s English publisher starting in 1924, Virginia Woolf remained staunchly hostile to Freudian thought for much of her life and, in her diaries, claimed never to have sat down to read him until 1939. While her husband and many of her closest friends, including Lytton Strachey,

were touting Freud in British artistic/literary circles, Woolf aligned herself with Clive Bell and Roger Fry to form an anti-Freudian segment of Bloomsbury (Abel 17). The reasons behind Woolf's resistance to Freud are complex and can by no means be definitively located and summarized.⁶ That said, some of the sources of her objections become clear in her comments on Freud's "The Sense of Symptoms," Lecture 17 of *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, the only piece of Freud's Woolf admitted to having seen (while in the process of printing the Collected Papers) prior to 1939. In a 1924 letter to Molly McCarthy, Woolf lampoons Freud's case study of a woman afflicted with obsessional neurosis who was compelled to perform a particular ritual several times a day. Freud describes his patient's affliction as follows: "She ran from her room into another neighbouring one, took up a particular position there beside a table that stood in the middle, rang the bell for her housemaid, sent her on some indifferent errand or let her go without one, and then ran back into her own room" (323). He ultimately "solves" the case by linking the obsessional act to the patient's failed wedding night, which had occurred ten years prior. On that night, her husband (who was many years her senior) was impotent and, after rushing to and from his wife's room several times to try (unsuccessfully) to consummate the marriage, he splashed red ink on the wife's sheets to simulate consummation so he would not "feel ashamed in front of the housemaid when she [made] the bed" (324). However, he did not throw the ink in the place where such a stain would normally occur, and thus compounded the cause of his shame.

⁶Merry Pawlowski and Vara Neverow, among others, have discussed Woolf's aversion to Freud at length. Unsurprisingly, Woolf's objections seem to have stemmed primarily from Freud's theories of sexuality, which were normatively heterosexual.

Freud educes the link between this obsessional act and this chronologically distant event of the wedding night when the patient shows him the table next to which she always stands after summoning the housemaid, whose tablecloth has a visible stain upon it. From these clues, Freud concludes that his patient was re-enacting and revising the moment of her husband's shame by denying his impotence and even fixing the "mistake" of where he threw the ink on the bed:

It already seems proved that the obsessional action had a sense; it appears to have been a representation, a repetition, of the significant scene . . . If we examine the relation between the two more closely, we shall probably obtain information about something that goes further—about the intention of the obsessional action. Its kernel was obviously the summoning of the housemaid, before whose eyes the patient displayed the stain, in contrast to her husband's remark that he would feel ashamed in front of the maid. Thus he, whose part she was playing, did not feel ashamed in front of the maid; accordingly the stain was in the right place. We see, therefore, that she was not simply repeating the scene, she was continuing and at the same time correcting it; she was putting it right. But by this she was also correcting the other thing, which had been so distressing that night and had made the expedient with the red ink necessary—his impotence. So the obsessional action was saying: 'No, it's not true. He had no need to feel ashamed in front of the housemaid; he was not impotent.' (325)

Freud cleanly explains the impetus behind his patient's strange symptoms, connecting chronologically distant events to arrive at a surprisingly tidy picture of the underlying

cause of his patient's distress. In the letter to McCarthy, Woolf ridicules Freud's explanation, and in so doing, sheds light on the specific reasons for her aversion to Freudian theory: "I glance at the proof and read how Mr. A. B. threw a bottle of red ink on to the sheets of his marriage bed to excuse his impotence to the housemaid, but threw it in the wrong place, which unhinged his wife's mind,--and to this day she pours claret on the dinner table. We could all go on like that for hours; and yet these Germans think it proves something—besides their own gull-like imbecility" (qtd. in Abel 18). Woolf's hostility here likely stems in part from Freud's fixation on salacious private details and unquestioning faith in the centrality of heterosexual practices and concerns in defining healthy and "sick" psychical states.⁷ She may also have been turned off by the triumphant and definitive manner (or what Abel calls the "sense of conquest") with which he presents his findings to his audience (Abel 18).

Moreover, Woolf may have found evidence of psychoanalysis' patriarchal and oppressive leanings in what she probably perceived as a simplistic and reductive account of illness. Indeed, Woolf's retelling of Freud's case implicitly links its patriarchal, rationalizing, and totalizing tendencies to a problematic epistemological method that one could describe, to use the words of Woolf's character Septimus Warren Smith, as "above all, scientific" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 22; 168; 144). Her revision of Freud's case is extremely interesting and potentially instructive in unpacking (and complicating) Woolf's supposed resistance to psychoanalysis. As Abel notes, Woolf converts the wife's obsessional behavior from what Freud perceives as a highly motivated act into a (once again) illegible symptom, the compulsion to dump wine on the dining room table (18). Here, by making

⁷Elizabeth Abel, too, suggests that these might represent Woolf's primary objections (18).

the object of Freud's explanation not merely illegible but also absurd, Woolf goes beyond simply rejecting his account to condemn his very methodology as ridiculous; she converts his attempt to reveal the "sense" behind his patient's symptoms into nonsense. She does not deny that the symptoms of mental illness have meaning, but she may have taken issue with the ways in which Freud forces his way to a definitive explanation and imposes it as the unilateral meaning behind the compulsive behavior.

Woolf's encounter with this work points to what appears to have been one of her primary concerns about psychoanalysis: its potential to ignore human complexity and thereby devalue human individuality and creativity. Woolf's general aversion to psychological medicine is well-documented and is perhaps most pointedly clear in her portrayal of Sir William Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, the two "villains" of *Mrs. Dalloway*. As Douglass W. Orr has noted, however, her suspicion of psychoanalysis may have had more to do with personal encounters with psychotherapists and their patients than particular objections to psychoanalytic theory.⁸ "She knew intellectually that the practice of psychoanalysis would be quite different from that which she had encountered on Harley Street," Orr writes, but she gave the analysts she knew personally—i.e. the Stephenses and the Stracheys—"little credit for sensitivity" (4). In his letters to his wife, Alix, during her analysis in Vienna, James Strachey said that Virginia seemed to differentiate between psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts, reserving her vitriol for the latter.

⁸In her diary, Woolf noted the negative effects of psychoanalysis she perceived in those around her; in a May 1924 entry, she describes her brother Adrian as "altogether broken up by psychoanalysis" (qtd. In Orr 4), and in 1925 notes, when Alix and James return from 10 months of analysis for a vacation, that the pair look "gaunt" and "languid," respectively (Orr 3).

Woolf's mistrust of psychoanalysis may have stemmed in part from a perception that its aim was to colonize, label, and otherwise claim ownership over the aspects of human experience that it is the author's task to illuminate. Woolf's March 25, 1920 review of J. D. Beresford's *An Imperfect Mother* in the *Times Literary Supplement* indeed suggests that Woolf viewed Freudian psychology and literature as necessarily separate domains—and that she resented attempts (or, at least, ham-fisted ones) to blend the two. Entitled “Freudian Fiction,” the review takes Beresford to task for shunning creativity and characterization in favor of presenting a scientific case study of a family's Oedipal dynamics. She notes that *An Imperfect Mother's* approach is

strictly in accordance with the new psychology, which in the sphere of medicine claims to have achieved positive results of great beneficence. A patient who has never heard a canary sing without falling down in a fit can now walk through an avenue of cages without a twinge of emotion since he has faced the fact that his mother kissed him in his cradle. The triumphs of science are beautifully positive. But for novelists the matter is much more complex; and should they, like Mr. Beresford, possess a conscience, the question how far they should allow themselves to be influenced by the discoveries of the psychologists is by no means simple (199).

As in her analysis of Freud's case study of the woman suffering from obsessional neurosis, Woolf presents Freudian logic as absurd, a mode of inquiry and inference more rich in triumphant certainty (with results that are “beautifully positive”) than actual insight. Moreover, Woolf contends that Beresford's psychological approach robs his

characters of individual complexity and richness. In her critique, Woolf distinguishes between the scientific part of the mind that might find Beresford's novel interesting, and the creative one that necessarily finds that the book is "dull" and "has no human significance whatever." She finds that the narration positions the reader as a kind of therapist to its characters, lamenting, "We cannot help adopting the professional manner of a doctor intent upon his diagnosis." Given her professed aversion to psychoanalysis, Woolf surely resented this forced identification with the aggressive scientist "intent" on laying the truths of the mind bare. While Woolf admits that psychology and the notion of the unconscious could theoretically warrant the attention of the novelist, she deplores the fact that Beresford's use of "morbid psychology" drains humanity from his characters and ostensibly attempts to make Freudian theory the "patent key" that "opens every door." This key, she claims,

simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches. The door swings open briskly enough, but the apartment to which we are admitted is a bare little room with no outlook whatever. Partly, no doubt, this is to be attributed to the difficulty of adapting ourselves to any new interpretation of human character; but partly, we think, to the fact that, in the ardours of discovery, Mr. Beresford has unduly stinted his people of flesh and blood. In becoming cases they have ceased to be individuals. (199)

Thus, Woolf's problem with psychoanalysis, I would argue, is twofold: it represents a threat to her own artistic ethos and threatens, in its "ardour" for discovery, to probe the human unconscious with an instrument that is, at best, ill-suited for the job and, at worst, potentially (and perhaps catastrophically) invasive and injurious to the recipient

of its ministrations. Put slightly differently, Woolf confronts psychoanalysis with an eye to protecting what Abel has described as the artist's "discursive primacy" (14), but more generally because she believes that literary interpretation *and* creation (which she opposes to psychoanalytic "science" in her letter) provide the ideal means of rendering and appreciating human complexity. Alix Strachey seems to perceive the stakes of accepting or rejecting psychoanalysis for Woolf when she discusses why Woolf was never analyzed:

James often wondered why Leonard did not persuade Virginia to see a psychoanalyst about her mental breakdowns...I did not agree with James that it would be of help to Virginia. Leonard, I think, might well have considered the proposition and decided not to let her be psychoanalyzed . . .

Virginia's imagination, apart from her artistic creativeness, was so interwoven with her fantasies—and indeed with her madness—that if you had stopped the madness you might have stopped the creativeness too. It seemed to me quite a reasonable judgment for Leonard to have made then, if he did so. It may be preferable to be mad and be creative than to be treated by analysis and become ordinary. (Qtd. in Orr, 11)

Notwithstanding their mean-spiritedness,⁹ Strachey's thoughts shed some light on the ways in which Freud might have been perceived (by Woolf as well as others) as the representative of a normative and normalizing psychology whose "cure" could violate the artist's sacred spaces of creativity and inspiration. For Woolf, these potential downsides may have far

⁹Alix and Virginia were not the greatest of friends.

outweighed any potential therapeutic benefits of psychoanalysis, which, as noted above, she viewed as dubious.

Freud the Scientist, Freud the Author

The preceding discussion points to a tension in the discourse about Freud in Britain in the mid-1920s that underpins Woolf's initial suspicion towards Freudian psychoanalysis—that is, the tension between the dual claims of the literary and the scientific in Freud's thought, which I have already begun to discuss above. In 1914, several years before Freud was properly “discovered” by the London literary community, Leonard Woolf highlighted the literary aspects of Freudian “science” in his review of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in *The New Weekly*: “Whether one believes in [Freud's] theories or not, one is forced to admit that he writes with great subtlety of mind, a broad and sweeping imagination more characteristic of the poet than the scientist or medical practitioner . . . [H]is works are often a series of brilliant and suggestive hints” (qtd. in Abel 15). Although Freud and his supporters (including Ernest Jones) were often vehement in their claims that psychoanalysis was science as opposed to a philosophy (*Bloomsbury/Freud* 316), the 1920s in England marked a watershed moment in the literary establishment's attempts to appropriate Freud as a literary thinker.

The debate that ensued among critics and other reviewers when the Hogarth edition of the first two volumes of his *Collected Papers* were published in 1925 (on the same day that *Mrs. Dalloway* appeared) suggests that literary London eagerly claimed Freud as its own. As Abel notes:

This characterization of psychoanalysis as a literary rather than a scientific discourse became a leitmotiv in England; radically divided between

medical and humanist sectors in their evaluation of Freudian theory, British reviewers reached consensus on the imaginative status of the Freudian text. ‘Imagination’ is the recurrent term in the fierce debate that the publication of the Collected Papers provoked in the letters section of the *Nation and Athenaeum* (of which Leonard Woolf was literary editor) from June 1925 until October 1925, when an exasperated editor decreed, ‘This correspondence must now cease.’ Unsympathetic correspondents decried the high ratio of psychoanalytic theory to evidence, the reliance on analogy rather than induction, the lack of controlled tests or verifiable data, in short, ‘the flagrant and persistent disregard of scientific method.’ (15)

We have already noted, however, that at the same time writers such as Leonard Woolf were rescuing Freud from the critiques of science by resituating him in the literary sphere, even those who were literarily inclined (including Woolf) resisted his infringement upon their turf; as Abel puts it, “Paradoxically, Bloomsbury contributed to constructing a singularly literary version of psychoanalytic discourse, which intensified both its appeal and its potential threat to writers of imaginative texts” (15).

In addition, Freud’s views on art, as he expressed them in “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” (1907), would have been very unpalatable to Woolf, if she was aware of them; at best, they indicate Freud’s ignorance of the creative process and, at worst, his hostility toward the creative writer. Indeed, Freud’s comments in this essay smack of condescension and run almost directly counter to Woolf’s own vision of the artist’s role. According to Freud, “the creative writer acts no differently from the child at play: he

creates a fantasy world, which he takes very seriously; that is to say, he invests large amounts of emotion in it, while marking it off sharply from reality” (26). In this formulation, art provides a space in which artists can rediscover the pleasures of childish play, where even the portrayal of things that are unpleasant in real life can inspire pleasure for the reader.¹⁰ In short, he likens artistic vision to daydreams and fantasies, which in turn are mere conduits for gratifying hidden psychological desires. Even if Woolf did not read the piece, we know that she wrote Roger Fry in September 1924 to praise his defensive response to Freud’s essay in *The Artist and Psychoanalysis*; the letter was sent directly before she wrote Molly McCarthy excoriating Freud’s “red ink” case study (Abel 18).¹¹

Woolf, Truth, and the Unconscious

Yet, contrary to Woolf’s sense that her ethics and concerns ran directly counter to Freud’s, one finds that both authors shared something very profound and fundamental: a belief that a necessary mystery resides at the heart of human psychic experience. At the center of Freud’s formulation of the unconscious is the sense that its “truth” is always deferred, something one can circumnavigate but never directly access. As Lacan says, “The end that Freud’s discovery proposes for man was defined by him at the apex of his

¹⁰Of course, Freud is somewhat careful to distinguish between high art and popular art in his analysis, claiming that the latter is his real target in analyzing the creative imagination. Nonetheless, he makes such sweeping statements about art, myth, and even the modern novel (including the work of Zola) that it seems reasonable that Woolf and other high Modernists/”Bloomsberries” would have perceived his comments as references to their kind of work.

¹¹And, indeed, it isn’t hard to imagine that Woolf, whose work consistently denies the reader easy meaning or gratification, would be particularly bothered by Freud’s argument about literature’s role as pure pleasure.

thought in these moving terms: *Wo es war, soll Ich werden*.¹² I must come to the place where that was” (*Écrits* 171). This formulation highlights the centrality of this notion of absence, of a gap where “that was,” to Freud’s thinking about the unconscious; the meanings of the unconscious are always elsewhere, but one can and must approach them by circling the absences they have left behind. Meaning is always deferred, yet must be pursued. The unconscious resists attempts to be read, but yet the attempt must be made.

Such an assertion resonates with Woolf’s own meditations on the problems inherent in attempting to know or communicate with others. Within her novels, meaning in both interpersonal communication and art is elusive and, if attained, grasped only fleetingly. Both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts* suggest the tragic implications of this reality in a myriad of failed romances, conversational disconnects, and artistic failures. Yet Woolf insists on the importance of making the effort to communicate, with the caveat that these attempts must not involve the violation of what she terms “the privacy of the soul.” The trick, she suggests, lies in persisting in the attempt to connect despite these necessary gaps in understanding or “truth.” One finds, then, that there are similarities between Freud’s notion of the absence at the heart of the unconscious—an absence where meaning once was—that creates the need for psychoanalytic interpretation, and Woolf’s vision of a “centre” of experience whose meaning can (and must) be circumnavigated, but never fully explored or known.

Thus, while Woolf envisioned her artistic ethos in opposition to a Freudian methodology that is authoritative, totalizing, scientific, and patriarchal, I contend that the two fundamentally share an “ethics of interpretation.” For both authors, this ethics

¹²Literally translated, “Where it was, there I will be.” This could also be translated as “Where the id was, there the ego shall be.”

entails a rigorous reading of signs and symbols that is always conducted with an awareness of the limits of this inquiry. Freud undoubtedly attempts to align himself with other scientists, who, in Woolf's formulation, offer the antithesis of such an ethics; yet, sometimes in the moments when he most forcibly asserts the scientific nature of his efforts, he ends up foregrounding a more literary-interpretive mode in his thinking that resonates with Woolf's distinctly anti-scientific ethos. The essays adjacent to "The Sense of Symptoms"—essays that Woolf may have also read as she was preparing the proofs for *The Collected Papers*—foreground this duality in his work. They highlight the reasons for Woolf's mistrust of psychoanalysis but also, somewhat paradoxically, foreground her similarity to Freud. Freud's "Fixation to Traumas—The Unconscious," lecture 18 of the *Introductory Lectures*, provides a particularly interesting point of departure in discussing Woolf's convergences with and divergences from Freud, since its study very directly and powerfully illustrates the existence of a tension between the imperative "to know" about oneself and others and the dangers, pain, and even impossibility inherent in such a project.

"The Sense of Symptoms" (lecture 17) implements a language of discovery, explanation, and "probing" that, in contrast to the more gently exploratory methods of literature and art, may have struck Woolf as invasive and, above all, useless in its attempts to dig toward the "sense" or truth behind human "symptoms" or behaviors. Yet in the next lecture, "Fixation to Traumas—The Unconscious," Freud complicates and elaborates this discussion of psychoanalytic epistemologies. In so doing, he very clearly couples psychoanalytic methods with a literary mode of interpretation and, at certain points, implicitly places these methods in opposition to positivist science or what Lacan

might term the “heresy” of “the search [for] the meaning of meaning” (*Écrits* 150). Noting that the end of psychoanalytic therapy is to make unconscious processes conscious in order to alleviate symptoms (346), Freud unpacks this notion of what “knowledge” is within a psychoanalytic framework, beginning by tackling an obvious question: Shouldn’t a patient be cured if and when his therapist has discerned and communicated to the patient the problems underlying his symptom?

From what I have so far said a neurosis would seem to be the result of a kind of ignorance—a not knowing about mental events that one ought to know of. [. . .] Now it would as a rule be very easy for a doctor experienced in analysis to guess what mental impulses had remained unconscious in a particular patient. So it ought not to be very difficult, either, for him to restore the patient by communicating his knowledge to him and so remedying his ignorance. One part at least of the symptom’s unconscious sense could be easily dealt with in this way, though it is true that the doctor cannot guess much about the other part—the connections between the symptoms and the patient’s experiences--, since he himself does not know those experiences but must wait till the patient remembers them and tells them to him. But even a substitute can in some instances be found. One can make enquiries about these experiences from the patient’s relatives . . . Thus, by combining these two methods, we should have a prospect of relieving the patient of his pathogenic ignorance with little expense of time or trouble. (347 – 348)

As Freud goes on to note, however, this kind of happy resolution is actually impossible—and the moment in which this impossibility becomes apparent occurs when Freud suggests that methods by which psychoanalysis points to “knowledge” actually run counter to positivist epistemological models that pursue knowable/testable truths:

If only that was how things happened! We came upon discoveries in this connection for which we were at first unprepared. Knowledge is not always the same as knowledge: there are different sorts of knowledge, which are far from equivalent psychologically . . . The doctor’s knowledge is not the same as the patient’s and cannot produce the same effects. If the doctor transfers his knowledge to the patient as a piece of information, it has no result.¹³ [. . .] The patient knows after this what he did not know before—the sense of his symptoms; yet he knows it just as little as he did.

Thus we learn that there is more than one kind of ignorance. (348)¹⁴

We also learn that there is more than one “truth” at play here—and that the truth of a patient’s symptoms in psychoanalysis, far from residing in what Woolf perceived as the clear but ludicrously simplistic and far-fetched explanations of the lascivious psychotherapist, is personal and defies any attempt to quantify or investigate it in full. As Lacan puts it, the symptom is a metaphor (*Écrits* 166-167), and must be approached as one. Interpretation, rather than investigation, is necessary to discern meaning within psychic phenomena. Indeed, Freud argues that the very fact that symptoms only acquire “sense” via interpretation (as opposed to any other remedy) proves the existence of the

¹³That is, other than setting the analysis in motion.

¹⁴This is a lesson he learned firsthand in his analysis of Dora, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

unconscious: “To say it for our ends once again: the possibility of giving a sense to neurotic symptoms by analytic interpretation is an unshakeable proof of the existence of—or, if you prefer it, of the necessity for the hypothesis—of unconscious mental processes” (345 – 346). That is, the fact that interpretation proves to be an effective method for dealing with symptoms indicates that the object of study is something other than a “truth” that can be readily known or accessed in consciousness. In short, while Freud tries to leave room for science in his use of scientific terminology (e.g., “hypothesis”), he associates psychoanalysis with an interpretive, or literary mode appropriate to the unconscious.

There are some other moments in these lectures in which Freud distances psychoanalysis from scientific inquiry, insofar as the latter attempts to know and thereby conquer the terrain of the human mind. He compares psychoanalysis to two previous revolutions in thought: the Copernican view of the universe and Darwin’s theory of evolution. Freud claims that psychoanalysis promises to be equally damaging to the existing scientific and philosophical establishment: “. . . [H]uman megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind” (353). Here, Freud goes beyond challenging a science that attempts to know and act upon the human mind; in fact, he entirely decenters the subject who attempts to know anything—even about himself.¹⁵ Freud’s formulation “*Wo es war, soll Ich werden*”

¹⁵One could argue that Freud sets up the analyst as someone who “knows” about the unconscious in a way the average person can’t and is, as a result, immune from such decentering. Indeed, as I will note in chapter 3, Freud did attempt to become, to use Paul Verhaeghe’s terminology, “Freud-who-knew,” in his

embodies this decentering, for it indicates that the knowing subject has been displaced from its central vantage point, now forced to pursue meaning within the gaps where “it” once was.

It is serendipitous for my project that Freud’s comments on the unconscious, in a chapter adjacent to one we know Woolf definitely read, are offered in relation to his discussion of trauma.¹⁶ Indeed, trauma is deeply imbricated in Woolf’s indictment of a patriarchal English society in *Mrs. Dalloway* and her formulation of a mode of resistance to it. The story of war veteran Septimus Warren Smith is central to the novel not only because of its position as the correlate of Clarissa’s domestic experience of the “trauma” of marriage and sexuality, but also because it foregrounds two issues that are strangely related in the novel: epistemology and communication/expression. Through Septimus, the novel suggests the violence of certain scientific modes of inquiry and investigation that Woolf associates with the authority of the British state, and proposes that the efforts associated with genuine interpersonal connection via expression, communication, and creativity—in all their inexactness and imperfection—are the necessary salve to the wounds inflicted by such an invasive epistemology. Woolf’s linking of trauma to epistemological concerns resonates with Freud’s discussion of “different” kinds of knowledge and the unconscious in the introductory lectures and his more elaborated treatment of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), where he suggests that

treatment of his famous patient “Dora,” ascertaining the “truth” about Dora’s condition and then attempting to share it with her. This methodology backfired, however, and as a result, Freud realized the futility and danger of such an approach.

¹⁶It should be noted, however, that he does not very clearly define or explain the uniqueness of traumatic neuroses – that would come later, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

traumatic knowledge is a brand of psychic content that is entirely and uniquely unconscious, having bypassed consciousness entirely.¹⁷

While Septimus desperately seems to need something like the talking cure, he receives the ministrations of arch-scientists and patriarchs Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw, whose science ignores the kinds of messages or knowledge embodied in Septimus' memories of his traumatic wartime experience. Instead, they privilege the visible, knowable, and measurable truths of empirical science.¹⁸ Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Septimus spends the early part of the novel desperately trying to communicate "a message" to those around him, only to find himself feeling irrevocably separated from everyone, including his wife, and silenced by them. Those charged with the task of helping him are the most brutal in their dismissal of the importance of Septimus' attempt to communicate; immediately after Bradshaw has cut off Septimus in the latter's attempts to "confess" his guilt (as their session was almost over), Woolf

¹⁷It is significant that the novel suggests the central import of the unconscious and its movements through its very structure; the stream of consciousness narrative that allows Woolf to oppose the "time of the mind" to the time of the clock (represented in the repeated soundings of Big Ben) contains the suggestion of the unconscious's importance and, at the same time, inherently ties this foregrounding of the unconscious to the very act of free expression in the novel's prose. The importance of expression—artistic and otherwise—is central to Woolf's treatment of this "mystery" that I am arguing is analogous to Freud's notion of the unconscious.

¹⁸There is a vast body of Woolf criticism that has linked these scientists to British society and the British imperial state, as well as patriarchy more generally. As representatives of science, which Beverly Schlack identifies as one of society's "infected fathers" (61), Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw represent the assimilating, conversionary impulses of the "establishment" (Zwerdling 130 – 131). Lisa Low perceives a link here between the British state, as embodied in Bradshaw, and the fascist one, writing that Bradshaw has in fact *become* the latter (98). Like war, these doctors become a means by which the state continues to terrorize and violate Septimus, who suffers from shell-shock and is thus haunted by memories of war. Dr. Holmes practices a brand of psychological medicine whose faulty paradigms do not even recognize Septimus' problems as illness. Holmes' rough diagnostic (or interpretive) tools prevent him from providing his patients with a means, through an articulation of mental experience, of gaining the power to communicate with others and thereby become "well"; indeed reason, rather than expression, is the balm Holmes advocates. His valorization of science is presumably the inspiration for Septimus' frequent sarcastic assertions regarding the need to be scientific, "above all scientific" (22; 168; 144).

demonstrates how Bradshaw's scientific method directly opposes attempts at communication and connection and even artistic appreciation:

To his patients he gave three-quarters of an hour; and if in this exacting science which has to do with what, after all, we know nothing about—the nervous system, the human brain—a doctor loses his sense of proportion, as a doctor he fails. Health we must have; and health is proportion; so that when a man comes into your room and says he is Christ (a common delusion), and has a message, as they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself, you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months' rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve. (99)

One could argue that this notion of “proportion,” which Alex Zwerdling defines as atrophy of the heart and the repression of instinct or emotion (124), represents the same patriarchal and imperial philosophies that underpinned the war and, thereby, caused Septimus' illness. Indeed, Septimus clearly associates the successful repression of emotion with his attainment of more “masculine” attributes during his military service in the First World War.¹⁹ This proportion stifles not only emotion and personal expression, but artistic and literary expression as well:

He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square. There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when

¹⁹The irony is, of course, that he achieves this “success” in terms of a normative heterosexual definition of masculinity while, at the same time, achieving intimacy of an unspecified nature/level with Evans.

he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name. [. . .] But when Evans . . . was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very *reasonably*. (86; emphasis mine.)

Indeed, Septimus' appreciation of literature is one of the more significant casualties of the war in the novel. By placing literature at odds with this hyper-rational notion of "proportion" and the machinations of the British state, Woolf emphasizes the power of expression and art to resist certain explanatory models, normative systems, and social/state structures. Woolf implies that expressivity can constitute a powerful form of resistance to the patriarchal British state because its inexactness naturally resists the cold hyper-rationalism of a "proportion" that destroys interpersonal connections. Tammy Clewell argues that Septimus' tendency toward hyper-expressivity and his inability to escape traumatic memories of the war represent his immersion in a form of "Woolfian" mourning process that precludes both nostalgia and amnesia, both of which serve to reinstate the prewar status quo. Clewell's points here are heavily influenced by Freud, who, in "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," warned against mourning practices aimed at restoring lost cultural values; only recognition of these old values as irrevocably lost in the wake of the war, he argues, would enable civilization to rebuild and continue (203).²⁰ According to Clewell, Woolf's fiction revises Victorian mourning practices

²⁰Some explanation of Freud's theory of mourning vs. nostalgia might be useful here. For Freud, mourning is the process by which a loss preoccupies the mourner (in thoughts and expression) until the lost object can be relinquished; in his formulation, Freud is very careful to distinguish "mourning," which involves

directed toward forgetting the dead and salving emotional wounds, implementing instead an ongoing form of mourning that keeps the trauma fresh insofar as it maintains an awareness of and connection to the past (198). Moreover, Woolf's "anti-consolatory" brand of mourning rejects the gender divide that structured Victorian mourning; Woolfian mourning is not feminine, but something members of both sexes can and should perform by openly expressing (rather than suppressing) grief (198 - 199). Septimus engages in this brand of mourning, railing against human nature's ability to "recover from every wound."²¹ He refuses to forget the war, and thus wears insanity like "a badge of honor" (Zwerdling 131).²² Septimus himself seems to understand the importance of reclaiming his ability to achieve and appreciate expression and emotion, muttering aloud to himself, "Communication is health; communication is happiness . . ." (93) and insisting throughout the novel on his need to communicate an unspecified "message" to those around him. Septimus's situation highlights the tremendous difficulty—in fact, the near impossibility—of communication and connection while also suggesting their necessity.

Communication and Aesthetics as Resistance

In light of expression's central place in the novel, the Septimus-Clarissa doubling appears to have a somewhat unexpected purpose. While widely read as evidence of

meditation upon the lost object, from "nostalgia," which marks a failure to recognize the object as lost, an effort to ignore the psychic wounds left behind in order to move ahead.

²¹Virginia Woolf, notebook dated Nov. 9, 1922 – Aug. 2, 1923, 12, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

²²As part of this discussion, Clewell convincingly links consolatory practices, with their emphasis on forgetting and promotion of a masculine resolve to avoid emotionality and persevere, to the "symbolic resources" that "led to the outbreak and legitimation of the Great War" (202).

Woolf's attempt to link the atrocities of war to the violence that heterosexual norms and marriage inflicted on women in postwar British society, this doubling also foregrounds the high stakes that attend communicative and interpretive efforts for *Mrs. Dalloway*'s characters. Indeed, the association of non-communication with tragedy in Septimus' case casts a shadow over the seemingly less dangerous communication problems encountered elsewhere in the novel.

In a move that echoes Freud's assertion that the ability to give sense to symptoms proves the existence of the unconscious, Woolf's portrayal of interpersonal connections that are forged despite tremendous gulfs in understanding between characters suggests the existence of deeper meanings, ones that cannot be accessed through attempts to know or, more precisely, know *about* other people. These meanings are the province of Woolf's notion of the privacy of the soul and, as I have argued above, are comparable to the meanings of the Freudian unconscious. While connections often fail, leaving characters feeling hopelessly separated from those around them, Woolf also presents some moments when characters find a way to forge sympathy or understanding, and in each case, this "success" entails abandoning the attempt to know or dissect the minds of others. In many cases, this success involves connection through the aesthetic sense, i.e., the characters' irrational (or arational) appreciation of the beautiful. In others, it entails the effort to communicate and find expression even in the face of—or, perhaps, precisely because of—the inexactness of language.

The book first implies the centrality of this concern with language and expression in the airplane sequence, which constitutes a moment of mass interpretive failure. The sequence's many fragmented perspectives are unified by their focus on an airplane

skywriting above the London streets. The sequence, like the character of Septimus, clearly links the problem of interpretation to a postwar condition; Londoners stare at a plane that should remind them of aerial bombing²³ but do not make the association. It seems significant that this repression of memory and emotion is accompanied by their mass “illiteracy” when it comes to reading the skywriting. Although easily misread sympathetically as a great moment of communal interpretive effort, this scene seems to lampoon the characters’ efforts and highlight their futility in the face of their repression of memory and emotion related to the war. In this moment, Woolf suggests that the dual problem of interpretation and expression is crucially linked to experiences of trauma and repression within the novel and sets those topics and themes at *Mrs. Dalloway*’s center.

The Clarissa-Septimus doubling implies that the tremendous stakes of interpretation and communication in his case are present, too, in the communicative difficulties experienced in Clarissa Dalloway’s circle. These relationships represent far more than tangential, botched upper middle-class heterosexual romances; rather, they highlight the centrality of problems of communication and connection and their relationship to an “ethics of interpretation” that should govern attempts to connect with others and resist the machinations of patriarchy and the state. Often, characters achieve connection when the impulse to attain full understanding of the “truth” behind others’ motives is thwarted or abandoned, sometimes via the help of what I would qualify as aesthetic endeavors or efforts. This abandoning constitutes a move toward using a more ethical hermeneutics (as opposed to epistemology) that allows characters to understand other people and the world at large.

²³Which, while minimal in England itself during the First World War, was nonetheless one of the great technological innovations of that conflict.

The novel presents many relationships—romantic and otherwise—that are fraught with communicative difficulties; indeed, the novel’s central triangle represents only one example.²⁴ Clarissa and her husband Richard encounter many problems in their attempts to connect throughout the novel, and their relationship foregrounds the ways in which Woolf seems to link the importance of communicative effort to that of aesthetics more generally. Clarissa feels inadequate and unworldly when faced with the concerns with which Richard, as a member of the House of Commons, is preoccupied daily, and thus perceives a gulf between them. Likewise, Richard does not understand the values and desires that govern her daily existence (indeed she herself struggles to understand these), which might be read as evidence of an aesthetic impulse that runs counter to the purposeful activities of the British state, to which Richard contributes. The divide between Richard and Clarissa is encapsulated in the latter’s extreme regard for flowers: “She cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again)—no, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? But she loved her roses (didn’t that help the Armenians?)” (120). Clarissa’s aestheticism, which is manifest in her affection for flowers and her parties, is misunderstood by the two men in Clarissa’s life; Peter laments Clarissa’s penchant for frivolous social interaction, and Richard, too, fails to see the deeper meanings of what

²⁴Clarissa laments the difficulty of conveying and interpreting meaning in her reflections upon her relationships with various friends and family members, including her daughter Elizabeth, her husband Richard, and her former lover, Peter Walsh. Peter and Clarissa achieve various successes and failures in their attempts to understand each other.²⁴ Like Rezia and Septimus, Clarissa and Peter exhibit marked frustration and even hostility toward each other, each perceiving the other as unwilling or unable to communicate in any meaningful way. In her thoughts, Clarissa accuses Peter of lacking “the ghost of a notion what any one else was feeling” (46); indeed, when Peter attempts to “read” the scene of Septimus and Rezia conversing in the park, the reader finds how far Peter’s interpretations can stray from an understanding of what has actually occurred (71).

Clarissa perceives as an “offering” to others with whom she would like to connect (121). Clarissa embraces the unreason of aesthetic appreciation and idle chatter that, while viewed as merely frivolous and superficial by Richard and Peter, serve to create links where, in the rest of the novel, pure, cold reason cannot. Both men, in short, fail to recognize in her aesthetic and social impulses the attempt to build connections—in part because their modes for understanding and inquiry appear to be quite different from hers. As a result, their attempts to engage Clarissa often result in abysmal failure.

Significantly, Richard decides to bridge this divide by meeting Clarissa on her own “aesthetic” terms, bringing flowers home to her and resolving to articulate his feelings for her: “. . . he would go back directly after lunch and find Clarissa . . . he would tell her, in so many words, that he loved her. Yes, he would say that” (107). He repeats his intention several times to himself on his way home, promising to communicate his love “in so many words” and thinking to himself that “it is a thousand pities never to say what one feels.” When he finally arrives home with two bouquets of red and white roses, however, the sentiment remains unspoken (118). The flowers are, then, both a failure and a success for Richard; through his gift, he demonstrates that he knows what Clarissa values (even if he still doesn’t understand why), but nonetheless fails to complete the effort of expressing his feelings.²⁵ Aestheticism bridges the divide where speech fails, and becomes the means by which Richard manages to convey his

²⁵He finally loses his reticence at the end of the novel, when he finds it impossible to avoid telling his daughter that he is proud of her (194), thus achieving with her what he could not with Clarissa. Of course, the question of whether or not Richard does truly love Clarissa remains an open question; one might conclude, given the incompleteness of his understanding of her and his failed attempt to express the sentiment, that in fact he does not.

meaning despite the tremendous difficulty—in fact, impossibility—of ever being able fully to express what one is thinking or feeling.

As noted above, Septimus and his wife Rezia, too, experience a communication breakdown as result of Septimus' affliction—and here, as in the case of Clarissa and Richard, the aesthetic (mediated by flowers, no less) becomes a means by which a connection is made. Immediately prior to Septimus' suicide, as they work together to sew a hat, Septimus and Rezia talk and laugh about the woman for whom the hat is intended, and Septimus becomes absorbed in making the hat beautiful (143 – 144). The barriers to communication between them break down, and Rezia thinks “she could say anything to him now . . . he understood her at once” (146). Thus, the processes of communication and artistic production (insofar as the hat may be considered artistic), which run counter to Bradshaw and Holmes' curative methodologies, have a salutary effect on Septimus. Through this scene, Woolf implies that the inexactness of art and language are preferable to the science that attempts to “know” and “cure” Septimus, and thus that an ethical mode that places emphasis elsewhere—on understanding rather than knowing—is preferable and more beneficial for Septimus. In this case, it results in one of the few miraculous connections achieved via language in the novel.

The most interesting and unexpected moment of communicative success occurs at the end of the novel between the recently deceased Septimus and Clarissa, who had never met. Significantly, this success coincides with Woolf's allusion to a mysterious “centre” of human experience that, while approachable, can never be fully known or attained.²⁶

²⁶The fact that this discussion of a “centre” comes as Clarissa hears of a trauma is significant, too, as it points to a confrontation with a kind of psychic content that is necessarily and uniquely unconscious. As

The moment occurs at the party, which provides a site at which all of the diverse threads of thought and narrative parallels come careening toward the novel's own center.

Appropriately, Clarissa's primary mode of connection and meaning-making, hostessing, intersects with Septimus' death, which she comes to perceive as a communicative act (and it seems important to note here that some read the party as the moment of Clarissa's great psychological or spiritual suicide, and thus as a trauma analogous to Septimus's death). When Bradshaw discloses what has happened, Clarissa articulates the collision of these two acts by exclaiming: "Oh! . . . in the middle of my party, here's death . . . "

(183). She reflects on his suicide:

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more.

But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance.

Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death (184)

Certainly, Septimus' death has communicated something to Clarissa, and she believes that he has preserved his integrity by resisting the "forcing" of the soul (for she understands a great deal, without being told, about Sir William's character and its

already noted, Freud describes "traumatic knowledge" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as content that exists entirely in unconscious form, as it entirely bypasses the organizing processes of consciousness.

probable role in Septimus' suicide from having observed his interactions with Lady Bradshaw) (184 – 185). Though distanced from him in several profound ways (his death perhaps being the very least of them), Clarissa discerns a meaning in Septimus's behavior where the investigatory ethics of Holmes and Bradshaw found nothing of importance. Moreover, she perceives within his suicide a desperate attempt to preserve something private at the center of human psychic experience, "a thing . . . that mattered" that one always approaches through communication but can never quite access. The science of Holmes and Bradshaw probes this center in ways that are both ineffective and injurious to the subject of its therapies, whereas Clarissa's miraculous interpretive act here both enacts and expresses a commitment to retaining the privacy of this core.

Another form of miraculous understanding and interpretation occurs between Clarissa and the old woman she spies in the window opposite to hers. Watching the old lady move quietly through her rooms, Clarissa marvels:

Why creeds and prayers and mackintoshes? when, thought Clarissa, that's the miracle, that's the mystery; that old lady, she meant, whom she could see going from chest of drawers to dressing table. [. . .] And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn't believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another.

Did religion solve that, or love? (127)

Here, of course, Woolf purposely and self-consciously couches her conception of this "miracle" in indefinite terms, thus preserving the mystery at the heart of her own language. Indeed, Clarissa's enigmatic epiphany—"here was one room; there another"—

fails, at least initially, to inspire a similarly revelatory moment for the reader. Yet, if one rephrases the statement as “Here was one *person*; there another,” one may move closer to grasping Woolf’s “point” here. Given the novel’s fundamental concern with the problems and potentialities of communication, one can read Clarissa’s voyeuristic fascination with the old woman, and with the separation between their rooms and bodies, as emblematic of Clarissa’s general sense of emotional, intellectual, and communicative dislocation from those around her. In this scene, the miraculous consists in Clarissa’s ability to perceive this gulf while, simultaneously, seeing across it for this brief moment. She cannot move from her room to the old woman’s, or from her body into that of another,²⁷ but sees into this private, alienated space, thus forging a connection and perceiving meaning within it. Woolf suggests that there is something inherently valuable, beautiful, and indeed sacred in this moment, which simultaneously bridges and reaffirms the separateness of being. Clarissa’s revelation here thus stages the kind of ethical engagement that recognizes and respects these gulfs between human beings while nonetheless demanding that we attempt to connect with others through non-investigatory, non-invasive tactics.

Mrs. Dalloway seems ultimately to affirm that certain modes of communication, representation, and aesthetic production have the power to resist the coercive, assimilating efforts of the novel’s scientist figures. The key to this resistance, Woolf implies, lies in attempts—and not necessarily successful ones—to forge a connection with others that retains respect for the “mystery” at the “centre” of individual experience.

²⁷Indeed, this is the narrative’s function, a fact that dovetails nicely with the way Woolf conceptualizes art and representation as an effective means of navigating the distances and discontinuities inherent in communication.

This reading of Woolf implies that she, like Freud, differentiates between more absolutist modes of knowing and forms of knowledge that become visible via the imperfect and slippery workings of interpretation and aesthetic connection. Through Septimus' character, Woolf highlights the broader concerns (national, international, and societal) that are anchored to problems of connection and "knowing" on the personal level, and suggests that a Woolfian hermeneutics (i.e., ethical interpretation) is preferable to the invasive epistemological modes Woolf associates, via the characters of Holmes and Bradshaw, with patriarchy, science, and the imperial state. While Woolf would have sharply distinguished her hermeneutics from Freudian inference and logic as she understood them at this time, her ethics nonetheless depends on a notion of the "private" self that seems profoundly psychoanalytic. Indeed, ironically enough, *Mrs. Dalloway* may be more truly psychoanalytic than the crudely Freudian J. D. Beresford novel that Woolf critiqued so harshly.

Love, Art, and Violence *Between the Acts*

Started over a decade after *Mrs. Dalloway* was published, *Between the Acts* shares many of the previous novel's concerns. In 1939, the year in which she started *Between the Acts*, Woolf started reading and actually met Freud.²⁸ As Douglass W. Orr notes, "Her reading in December 1939 apparently included *The Future of an Illusion*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*" (9). While I will argue that Woolf's last novel is ultimately structured by the same opposition between the forces of "proportion" and those of the creative/communicative that was at

²⁸Humorously enough, he presented her with a narcissus at this meeting.

the heart of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's direct interactions with and receptiveness to Freud during the late 1930s necessitate a more complicated reading of Woolf's treatment of the unconscious in this novel. Whereas this notion of the unconscious was couched in terms of human mystery and privacy in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Between the Acts* is explicitly preoccupied with the unconscious impulses—with Eros and the death drive. This concern is at the core of the novel's anxious preoccupation with the forces of violence and aggression.

Woolf seems to have been particularly troubled by Freud's pessimistic conclusion that human nature does not tend toward peace. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argues that

men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. (*Civilization and its Discontents* 68 – 69)

Freud paints a picture of a “civilized society [. . .] perpetually threatened with disintegration” in which “instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests” (69).

Freud's discussion of group behavior and psychology in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* was equally worrisome to Woolf. She was clearly interested in

Freud's theory that humans were (at least to some extent) instinctively inclined to submit to the authority of others; in her reading notes for *Between the Acts*, she quotes Freud's disturbing account of how group influence can condition individual behavior: "We are reminded of how many [. . .] phenomena of dependence are part of the normal constitution of human society, of how little originality and personal courage are to be found in it, of how much every individual is ruled by those attitudes of the group mind which exhibit themselves in such forms as racial characteristics, class prejudice, public opinion, etc." (82). In these notes, Woolf adds "sex prejudice" to this list, thus implying that Freud's comments may have resonated with her own perception (made explicit in *Three Guineas*) that patriarchy and fascism were linked. Her revision to the list also opens the door for a revision of Freud's theory, one that insists upon considering gender difference when examining the bases of human conflict and the supposed power of the drives to effect destruction.

Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego paints a bleak picture of human inclinations within groups and probably (given that we know Woolf read it) contributed to the fearful tone of *Between the Acts*' musings on the future of community and art. Building upon the work of another psychologist, Le Bon, Freud outlines some known negative aspects of group behavior: "[A] group is impulsive, changeable and irritable. It is led almost exclusively by the unconscious. The impulses which a group obeys may according to circumstances be generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly, but they are always so imperious that no personal interest, not even that of self-preservation, can make itself felt" (14-15). Le Bon also emphasizes a conservative, repressive quality to groups that would be likely to provoke anxiety for the author of the feminist antifascist political treatise *Three Guineas*:

Since a group is in no doubt as to what constitutes truth or error, and is conscious, moreover, of its own great strength, it is as tolerant as it is obedient to authority. It respects force and can only be slightly influenced by kindness, which it regards merely as a form of weakness. What it demands of its heroes is strength, or even violence. It wants to be ruled and oppressed and to fear its masters. Fundamentally it is entirely conservative, and it has a deep aversion from all innovations and advances and an unbounded respect for tradition. (17)

Freud seems to concur with Le Bon's assessment, noting that "a group is an obedient herd, which could never live without a master. It has such a thirst for obedience that it submits instinctively to anyone who appoints himself its master" (21).

Despite the fact that groups encourage this instinctive obedience to authority within a collective—and, thus, are repressive to that extent—they also encourage the relaxing of inhibitions and the free reign of emotions and drives that are typically repressed, which represents another danger: ". . .[W]hen individuals come together in a group all their individual inhibitions fall away and all the cruel, brutal and destructive instincts, which lie dormant in individuals as relics of a primitive epoch, are stirred up to find free gratification." This portrayal of natural group behavior probably struck a chord with Woolf as she contemplated the future of humanity in light of the existence—and spread—of German fascism; indeed, it probably confirmed some of her fears regarding the potential for individuals or groups—or art—to resist the forces within the human psyche that create these repressive, violent dynamics. Through her reading of *Group Psychology*, then, she may have determined that the forces of emotion and unreason that

Mrs. Dalloway positioned as modes of resistance to the rational and rationalizing ethos of postwar patriarchal society could actually be complicit in—or even fundamental to—patriarchal violence.

Zwerdling and other critics (including Abel) have tended to argue that Woolf's fiction resists this Freudian "pessimism" by refusing his definition of human nature, which, unsurprisingly, seems based largely on analysis of masculine experience and the "innate" behavioral tendencies of men. As her addition of "sex prejudice" to the list of group-effected injustices indicates, Woolf was certainly thinking about the ways in which Freud is blind to gender difference; thus, it makes sense that she attempts to counter Freud's skepticism regarding the efficacy and future of pacifism²⁹ by placing her confidence in a "feminine human nature" that could resist the violence and coercion of the patriarchal state. As Zwerdling notes:

Freud's theory of war implied that believers in pacifism and nonviolence were intellectually naïve because their faith was founded on a misunderstanding of human nature. [. . .] [H]er way of looking at these issues differed from his. For he was a man and she was a woman, a distinction in "human nature" that from Woolf's point of view the psychoanalysts had not sufficiently taken into account.

Her own understanding of the subject—not just in *Three Guineas* but from the start of her career—is based on distinguishing a masculine from a feminine human nature. (296 – 297)

²⁹These were offered in Freud's letter to Einstein, later published in *Why War?*

To some extent, Woolf's reading notes for *Between the Acts* confirm that she attributed certain negative aspects of Freudian "human nature" solely to the male gender—for example, her notes assert that "the emasculation of man" represents "the only hope of permanent peace."³⁰ That said, as I will argue in greater depth below, I do not believe that hope in *Between the Acts* resides in the purely "feminine," but rather in the aesthetic and expressive, which are not coded as strictly masculine or feminine (as was also true in *Mrs. Dalloway*, which Woolf's pairing of Septimus and Clarissa demonstrates).

Woolf's final novel marks a more complex engagement with the realities of the unconscious than that embarked upon in *Mrs. Dalloway*. While in *Mrs. Dalloway* the unconscious constitutes the sacred space of private human experience whose protection is the province of ethical interpretation, here it is a double-edged sword; it is both the source of the destructive drives at the heart of fascism and patriarchy and the font of creativity and human inclinations toward love and civilization. According to Freud, human civilization hinges on an almost epic battle between the two drives:

. . . Civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind. Why this

³⁰Freud's presentation of gender dynamics suggest places where Woolf, in particular, would find flaws—but, too, places where her own philosophies could intervene:

In the great artificial groups, the church and the army, there is no room for woman as a sexual object. The love relations between men and women remain outside these organizations. Even where groups are formed which are composed of both men and women the distinction between the sexes plays no part. There is scarcely any sense in asking whether the libido which keeps groups together is of a homosexual or a heterosexual nature, for it is not differentiated according to the sexes, and particularly shows a complete disregard for the aims of the genital organization of the libido. (122 – 123)

Freud's comments here leave the door open for a Woolfian rejoinder that, if *Three Guineas* is any indication, would suggest that the huge blind spots within this theory with respect to gender differences are largely responsible for often negative (and violent) aspects of group behavior.

has to happen, we do not know; the work of Eros is precisely this. These collections of men are to be libidinally bound to each other. Necessity alone, the advantages of work in common, will not hold them together. But man's natural aggressive instinct, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes this program of civilization. This aggressive instinct is the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world-dominion with it. And now, I think the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species. (81-82)

Zwerdling and others have focused on Woolf's clear preoccupation with Freud's theories of the "death drive," arguing that Woolf's novel is imbued with a fear of man's destructive instincts. Building on my discussion of Woolf's notion of the unconscious in *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, I would like to complicate this perception of Woolf's "fear" of the drives. While the novel appears to take its cues from Freud in presenting love and hate as inseparable, always bound together in varying alloys (*Civilization and its Discontents* 78), it nonetheless implies that the aesthetic, communicative, and artistic can successfully become part of Eros's "project" to overpower the destructive drives circulating in a British society about to plunge back into large-scale conflict.

In advancing this point, Woolf recasts Freud's theory of the drives in a very important (if not immediately obvious) way. She structures her novel around the tension between Freud's categories of love and hate, which manifests, I would argue, in the binary the novel sets up between art and violence or, to use the terms Blanche Gelfant uses to describe a similar tension in *Mrs. Dalloway*, between "the creative and the coercive" (231). Moreover, the novel appears to define this potentially redemptive art specifically as experimental, fragmented, and anti-narrative—in short, as Modernist.³¹ Woolf explicitly ties the novel's privileging of formal experimentation and anti-narrative elements to its preoccupation with the drives in Isa Oliver's cautious approval of Miss La Trobe's experimental directing techniques in the pageant that is the novel's central event: "The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot" (90–91). Here, Woolf suggests that art—and particularly, new experimental forms—represent vitality whereas plotting and the simple categories of love and hate lack importance, relevance, or force.

The novel's very title foregrounds art and violence and suggests their central import: the "acts" between which the characters are suspended could be read as either the acts within the pageant that the novel's characters put on or, alternatively, the two European wars, one past, the other about to begin (the novel is set in 1939, three months before England declared war on Germany). One could also read "acts" more generally as moments of action—and indeed, Woolf's prose and the pageant itself implement narrative rhythms that juxtapose action with duration and leave characters and/or audience members suspended between "acts" of various sorts. This emphasis on acts and

³¹In "Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts: Fascism in the Heart of England," Merry Pawlowski has already noted that Woolf uses experimental language and plotting to revise patriarchy and fascism.

action seems related to the novel's concern with violence, as the novel frequently contrasts the impulse to act with the impulse to create (or be creative), associating the former with violent or destructive tendencies. In an early description of Giles Oliver, one half of the novel's central couple, Woolf makes clear that the powers of language and art stand in diametric opposition to the forces of action and "progress" that she associates with war:

Giles nicked his chair into position with a jerk. Thus only could he show his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe—over there—was bristling like . . . He had no command of metaphor. Only the ineffective word 'hedgehog' illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. He, too, loved the view. And blamed Aunt Lucy, looking at views, instead of—doing what? (53).³²

The juxtaposition here of Giles' propensity for action with his failure to "command" metaphor provides an early and clear example of how Woolf associates an ethos of action and mastery (or "command") with violence and war, and opposes this violence to art via an emphasis on his lack of artistic impulses—or, at the very least, his ability to communicate any aesthetic sense—embodied here in his failure to use metaphor. Isa

³²One wonders whether this is a nod toward *A Room with a View*'s Lucy Honeychurch. Indeed, the fact that Forster's novel is intimately concerned with encounters between British culture and a foreign other lends credence to this suggestion.

Oliver,³³ too, draws out an opposition between war and language when she searches for a word “to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon” (15). Although Isa does not explicitly refer to a war plane, Woolf elsewhere in the novel associates the “aeroplane” with war—and thus the reader may reasonably perceive in Isa’s meditations her sense of imminent danger to herself and her country. She unconsciously compares and contrasts war and art in her thoughts again later, musing on the potential of the latter to “cure” the former: “What remedy was there for her at her age—the age of the century, thirty-nine—in books? Book-shy she was, like the rest of her generation; and gun-shy too. Yet as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt across on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne” (19).

The threat of violence is present not only in the international situation that constitutes the novel’s broader context, but also in the novel’s personal relationships. Alex Zwerdling has already noted that Woolf’s concern with violence on an international scale is linked to her focus on interpersonal conflict: “The pervasive feeling of contained violence in the personal relationships of the novel [. . .] are [sic] not directly caused by contemporary public events, but are meant to embody similar forces in a microcosmic setting. ‘War’ for Woolf meant the conflict between individuals as well as between nations” (304). In these relationships, the reader finds both the tension between Eros and

³³Artist figures (and unlikely ones) abound in and around Pointz Hall, the Oliver residence and the novel’s only setting. Isa, who disguises her collection of poetry as an account book (“lest Giles might suspect”) (50), is constantly generating metaphors and verse, repeating the latter to herself, mindless of whether others hear. William constitutes another unlikely artist figure who, like Isa, seeks to hide his aesthetic impulses; his friend Mrs. Manresa introduces him with “He’s an artist,” but William corrects her by saying “I’m a clerk in an office” (38). Finally, Lucy likens herself to a kind of actress when she tells Miss La Trobe (the pageant’s director and the novel’s most prominent artist figure) after the pageant: “What a small part I’ve had to play! But you’ve made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!” (153).

the death drive and, too, a smaller-scale version of Woolf's recasting of this dynamic; her opposition of art and violence is translated, in interpersonal relations, into a tension between violence and communication. Hence, we can return once again to some of the same devices and concerns that were present in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The novel highlights the extreme difficulty of surmounting difference and distance to achieve connection; as Zwerdling writes, "the world that [the novel] examines has been further broken down into something like an archipelago, with each character marooned on a different island" (323). As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, characters often fail to communicate with one another. Giles refuses to voice his displeasure with William Dodge's presence, although "his silence made its contribution to talk" (49). Miss La Trobe and Lucy Swithin, likewise, experience an instance of simultaneous failure and success of connection, when Lucy tries to tell Miss La Trobe what the pageant has meant to her: "Their eyes met in a common effort to bring a common meaning to birth. They failed" (152 - 153). While Miss La Trobe understands what Lucy leaves unspoken, Woolf implies that these avoidances of articulation, of conflict, of the process of communicating, constitute failure.

The pageant is emblematic of the novel's overall preoccupation with the role of aesthetics in the creation and maintenance of community and reveals the challenges and complexities of the relationship between art and the "we" of society. The novel's primary artist figure, Miss La Trobe, feels acutely the problem of using fiction, which often hinges on individual vision, to forge connections and understanding among its audience; if the space between individuals in *Mrs. Dalloway* is wide, the gulf between artist and audience in *Between the Acts* is wider. The pageant implements a

fragmentation that, paradoxically, represents this distance but is also part of La Trobe's effort to bridge it. Woolf's use of stream of consciousness in describing this gulf nicely embodies this contradiction, presenting the fragments of what we must assume are different audience perspectives, run together and thereby unified:

The tune changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Foxtrot, was it? Jazz?
Anyhow the rhythm kicked, reared, snapped short. What a jangle and a
jingle! Well, with the means at her disposal, you can't ask too much.
What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt.
Such an outrage; such an insult. And not plain. Very up to date, all the
same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put
the finger to the nose? Squint and pry? Peak and spy? O the irreverence
of the generation which is only momentarily – thanks be – “the young.”
The young, who can't make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old
vision; smash to atoms what was whole. What a cackle, what a rattle,
what a yaffle – as they call the woodpecker, the laughing bird that flits
from tree to tree. (183)

La Trobe highlights the fragmenting effects of her pageant's structure in the final play, in which the actors hold up bits of glass to the audience in a move that jars the audience considerably: “Ourselves . . . But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans, yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves . . . it was ridiculous. ‘Myself’—it was impossible. Other people, perhaps . . .” (178 - 179). However, here too Woolf suggests the potential for understanding through the thwarting of understanding, as

the fragmentation captures “us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts . . . That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair” (184).³⁴

Thus, here as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf is concerned with the rewards that attend the shift away from the search for “truth” or absolute meaning and toward the rigors of interpretation. This might explain why Miss La Trobe roundly refuses to explain the play to the Reverend G. W. Streatfield (“a piece of traditional church furniture” (190)) and is mortified when he offers his glib synopsis of the play: “We act different parts; but are the same” (192) (an idea gleaned from the observation that each actor has played several different parts in the performance). She does not desire transparency, easy explanation, or clear metaphors; as Bartholomew puts it at the end of the novel, “What she wanted, like that carp (something moved in the water) was darkness in the mud; a whisky and soda at the pub; and coarse words descending like maggots through the waters” (203).

Such artistic opacity becomes key to Woolf’s efforts to problematize the narratives of progress and regression that characterize a militaristic ethos and traditional (and especially imperial) narratives of history. Woolf uses narrative (or, rather, anti-narrative) devices—both within the pageant and on the level of the novel itself—to thwart any attempts to perceive the “history” offered in the pageant as progressive. While following a traditional timeline through English history starting with Chaucer’s England and working toward the present, the pageant itself actually seems to resist the march of progress in its frequent shunning of a plot. In the last play, La Trobe seems to

³⁴Elisions here are Woolf’s. Naremore comments on the reflexive element in *Between the Acts*’ fragmentation and subversion of audience, asserting that Woolf (who he claims is herself “in love with inaction” (91)), privileges discontinuities, pauses, and intervals as the loci of meaning-making and interpretive vigor, rejecting narrative continuity and “acting” as inadequate bearers of meaning. Naremore, thus, intuits the ways in which Woolf’s theories, philosophies, and methodology extend out of the plot to structure her novels.

replace plotting with the pure time of duration; she purposely leaves the audience suspended in an unusually long intermission, or interval, for “she wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality.” Unfortunately, she believes that the experiment fails, muttering to herself: “Reality too strong . . . Curse ‘em!” (179-180). This kind of experimentation seems to have been present throughout the play; as noted above, Isa Oliver remarks the confusion in the first play’s structure, wondering, “Did the plot matter?” The answer, she seems to conclude, is no: “The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot. Perhaps Miss La Trobe meant that when she cut this knot in the centre?” (90-91). Of course, Isa implies the difficulty of appreciating this kind of experimentation when she, immediately after engaging in these reflections, feels her attention pulled back to what is “happening”; however, as she watches the play, she affirms her appreciation of it, asserting: “It was enough . . . All else was verbiage, repetition” (91).

La Trobe’s reliance on fragmentation and denial of narrative progress are, paradoxically enough, central to her attempt to promote thoughtful discussion and connections among the members of her audience. Thus, her experimentations can be perceived as a form of resistance to the destructive, anti-progress forces of violence that produce social and political fragmentation and make human progress (at least in a Freudian formulation) impossible. Indeed, as I have already discussed, the fear of violence and human beings’ regressive tendencies are at the heart of the novel’s anxious mood. One pageant spectator suggests the possible link between this fear of the unruly drives and Miss La Trobe’s efforts when he or she wonders: “Did she mean, so to speak,

something hidden, the unconscious as they call it? But why always drag in sex. . . . It's true, there's a sense in which we all, I admit, are savages still" (199). Another spectator seems to perceive this paradoxical need to embrace misunderstanding in order to understand—or, put differently, to accept a feeling of disconnect in order to forge connection: "And if we're left asking questions, isn't it a failure, as a play? I must say I like to feel sure if I go to the theatre, that I've grasped the meaning . . . Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? . . . that if we don't jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?" (200).

The novel's preoccupation with fragmentation also translates into a marked anxiety regarding the potential of human beings to form communities, although ultimately Woolf seems hopeful about these prospects. Reading about the fragmentation of the prehistoric Pangea into different continents at the beginning of the novel, Lucy reflects upon the initial unity of these fragments—and takes special care to mention Britain's original unity with the European continent (8). Similarly, another character expresses a belief in a fundamental commonality across humanity when he asserts that human nature is the same in the west as the east (110). Though early in the novel Lucy affirms to herself "dispersed are we"³⁵ (103), the gramophone that La Trobe uses to provide a soundtrack picks up and finishes the phrase at the end of the pageant as:

³⁵This is one of two instances in the novel in which two characters think the same thing, independently of one another. The other moment occurs when Giles, Isa, and Dodge simultaneously express, in their private thoughts, a sense of unhappiness – but, strangely, these musings are phrased as though articulated, the latter two seemingly responding to the sentences preceding them (176). These coincidences may imply, perhaps, the novel's attempt to highlight underlying commonality across individuals. Finally, it's worth noting that after the play, Miss La Trobe begins to formulate a scene that bears a striking similarity to Woolf's prehistoric staging of the conflict between Isa and Giles at the end of the novel. This coincidence, like the others, seems to reinforce the presence of an undercurrent of common understanding or experience and, moreover, constitutes another example of Woolf's self-conscious authorship; she draws herself into analogy with La Trobe by having them write the same scene.

“Dispersed are we; we who have come together. But . . . let us retain whatever made that harmony” (196).

Woolf’s attempt to locate hope for human civilization in community might seem strange, given that her reading notes indicate she was particularly interested in the pessimistic aspects of Freud’s account of group behavior as she prepared the novel. It should be noted, however, that *Group Psychology* ultimately presents group behavior as complex. It is a two-sided coin; according to Freud, groups can indeed encourage the surfacing of baser human instincts, but they can also take on many positive attributes and exhibit commendable behaviors. In short, Freud’s stance on groups is ambivalent. Freud notes that whereas “with isolated individuals personal interest is almost the only motive force, with groups it is very rarely prominent”—that is, the desire to ensure the community’s stability will override individual concerns. Moreover, groups are “capable of high achievements in the shape of abnegation, unselfishness, and devotion to an ideal” when “under the influence of suggestion” (17). While a group’s “intellect” will always be lower than that of an individual, Freud asserts, its ethical achievements could potentially be either far lower *or* far greater (18). The group’s potential to inspire strong emotions among members is similarly two-sided. On the one hand, it creates the potential for close personal connections within groups. On the other, it can bring emotions to a fever pitch, provoking zealotry or, to pick a reference that would have particularly horrified Woolf, fascist behaviors:

The most remarkable and also the most important result of the formation of a group is the ‘exaltation or intensification of emotion’ produced in every member of it’ . . . In McDougall’s opinion men’s emotions are

stirred in a group to a pitch that they seldom or never attain under other conditions; and it is a pleasurable experience for those who are concerned to surrender themselves so unreservedly to their passions and thus to become merged in the group and to lose the sense of the limits of their individuality. (27)

The pleasure group participants feel is undoubtedly intense and of an unusual strength and type, and thus speaks to the positive connective aspects of group behavior. Yet the frenzy of emotion and the individual's total submersion within the group evoke images of the fascist collective in which such irrationality and erasure of individual thought were dangerous.

Moreover, the potential of language to forge connections even where reason and knowledge fail, so clearly positive in Woolf's writing, takes on an ambiguous cast in Freud's formulation (inspired by Le Bon) of the group's uses and responses to language: "A group . . . is subject to the truly magical power of words; they can evoke the most formidable tempests in the group mind, and are also capable of stilling them . . . Reason and arguments are incapable of combating certain words and formulas" (19). Here, the same irrationality and "magical power of words" that resisted the cold rationalism of proportion in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and thus was almost entirely positive there, takes on the power to destroy and heal connections between group members in Freud's theory.

Freud's complex vision of group dynamics and the drives' impact on free will seems to condition the novel's anxiety regarding the potential for human progress, an uneasiness that looms large over the end of the novel. *Between the Acts* closes with moments that both foreground our primal origins and, at the same time, point to the

potential for human progress. While reading her “Outline of History,” Lucy recounts prehistoric man’s evolution from the “half-man, half-ape” to the human being that “roused himself from his sitting position and raised great stones” (218).³⁶ This resurgence of the notion of progress after it was debunked via the narrative structure of the pageant, in tandem with the image of a potentially generative sexual union that ends the novel, strike a somewhat hopeful ending note. In the final lines of her final novel, Woolf writes:

The old people had gone up to bed. Giles crumpled the newspaper and turned out the light. Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; and after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (219)

This final passage is ambiguous. The animalistic images in Woolf’s language here, in the context of her reference to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, suggest the indelible element of brutality in human interactions. Despite the tenuously hopeful suggestion that this

³⁶Woolf’s imagery here may be intended to refer to Stonehenge. If so, the choice is interesting; mysterious, polytheistic, and nature “worshipping,” the Druids could serve as an emblem of a form of “mystery” that breaks the mold—in this case, the mold of Christian monotheism.

conflict could result in the creation of a child, one wonders, given the couple's insertion into this primal scene, how eagerly one might await the product of such a union³⁷.

Yet the book's final sentence offsets the implied animalism of this encounter. In fact, Giles and Isa will not fight as the dog fox fights the vixen; rather, they will engage in combat through a medium that neither of these animals possesses: words. Woolf truly leaves us with an open question with this rise of the curtain, the opening of a new act. The potential for savagery and brutality clearly remains present in Woolf's final figuration of human relations, but the novel closes with the image of two people trying to communicate—an image that, as the preceding has attempted to demonstrate, Woolf consistently places in opposition to the savage machinations and desires of “human nature.”³⁸ The book itself self-consciously participates in this resistance, and shares La Trobe's anxiety about its words' ability to counteract the violence of a new “act” in human history.³⁹

³⁷Indeed, it reminds me of the final lines of Yeats' “The Second Coming”:

“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

³⁸This juxtaposition of the regressive with the potentially regenerative seems to imply the futility of narratives that place human history on a straight line of either progress *or* regression.

³⁹Although it does not directly relate to my reading of how Woolf is using—and resisting—Freud, it should be noted that Freud discusses the ways in which (heterosexual) individuals can resist group influence by engaging in sexual relations: “Two people coming together for the purpose of sexual satisfaction, in so far as they seek for solitude, are making a demonstration against the herd instinct, the group feeling. The more they are in love, the more completely they suffice for each other. The rejection of the group's influence is manifested in the shape of a sense of shame. The extremely violent feelings of jealousy are summoned up in order to protect the sexual object-choice from being encroached upon by a group tie” (*Group Psychology* . . . 121). By contrast, interestingly enough, Freud asserts that homosexual love does not have this disintegrating effect: “It seems certain that homosexual love is far more compatible with group ties, even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual tendencies—a remarkable fact . . .” (*Group Psychology* . . . 123). One might be tempted to read Freud's comments here about the powers of heterosexual love to produce resistance to group influence as analogous to Woolf's suggestion that connection via communication and art can constitute a resistance to coercion and the ideology of a patriarchal imperial British society; yet, Freud's likening of the condition of being in love to the state of the neurotic should make us pause before making such an assertion: “It may be said that a neurosis has the same disintegrating effect upon a group as being in love. On the other hand it appears that where a powerful impetus has been given to group formation neuroses may diminish and at all events temporarily disappear . . . Even those

Despite this anxiety, perhaps the most powerful locus of hope in the novel resides in its very writing and form. The novel's presentation of La Trobe's Modernist pageant as an "offering" (analogous to Clarissa's parties or "idle" chatter) directed toward the building of community begs to be read in relation to what we know of Woolf's artistic frustrations, fears, and hopes with respect to her own historical context. Indeed, perhaps Woolf's rendering of La Trobe's "triumph" in offering the pageant might effectively sum up Woolf's own sense of her novels' larger purpose or meaning to the world around her: "Glory possessed her—for one moment. But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon. *It was in the giving that the triumph was*" (209; emphasis mine).

Conclusion

Like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Between the Acts* suggests that the mere effort to connect via art or communication is the great thing. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, this potentially mobilizing form of connection depends on the adoption of an "ethics of interpretation" that preserves the mysteries at the heart of human experience or, in Freudian terminology, of the unconscious. Thus, while inviolable, the unconscious in *Mrs. Dalloway* represents an element of human experience that can be navigated successfully, allowing for more meaningful and humane interpersonal connections. This confidence in the ability to navigate the unconscious is gone in *Between the Acts*, which is haunted by a more

who do not regret the disappearance of religious illusions from the civilized world of to-day will admit that so long as they were in force they offered those who were bound by them the most powerful protection against the danger of neurosis" (*Group Psychology* . . . 124).

explicit and proximate fear of violence. This fear is fed by Woolf's more developed understanding of a Freudian unconscious populated by two powerful and contrary drives, Eros and the death drive. In presenting the story of an artist's attempt to mediate community interactions and connections on the eve of war, Woolf's oddly haunting, bleak, and yet inspiring final novel may represent her own efforts to make an "offering" that could resist the forces of imminent violence.

Muddle, Mystery, and The Case of the Marabar Caves

In 1957, scholar Robert L. Selig sent E.M. Forster a copy of his M.A. thesis on *A Passage to India*. The thesis traced allusions in the novel to a wide and diverse set of influences, including psychoanalysis, Plato's myth of the cave, and Hindu mythology. In tracing this lineage, Selig's primary concern was to untangle the novel's central event, the incident in the Marabar Caves. Much to Selig's surprise, Forster responded in the following letter⁴⁰:

Dear Mr. Selig,

Many thanks for your interesting and generous thesis on *A Passage to India*, and for the M.S. copy of it which I am glad to possess. I hope you won't think me ungrateful and discourteous, but—as perhaps you presume—I fail to follow most [the original word that Forster wrote was "much," but he canceled it and wrote the sterner "most" instead] of your criticism. For one thing, you [Forster originally wrote "it" but crossed out the impersonal word and replaced it with the more accusing "you"] credit me with the reading of much I have never read. I never thought of Aum when I wrote Boum, and I was unaware of the subdivisions of the mystic syllable. I have never read Miss Weston, have only glanced at Frazer, have

⁴⁰Selig quotes the letter in an article offering a critical reevaluation of how to deal with the mysteries in *A Passage to India*. He ends up concurring with Forster's criticism of his article for its heavy-handed mining of the text for allusions and instead focuses on the playfulness of Forster's text.

never been interested in Plato⁴¹, never thought of his Cave in connection with the Marabar, and throughout your thesis have encountered inferences and comparisons that surprised me. You may reply that I knew all the above subconsciously, and then of course you have got me! And I realize even on the conscious level that there is plenty of sex in the book. All the same I think you go too far. You tend to make every hole, and every object that's longer than it's broad, into a sexual symbol—rather like G. K. Chesterton who regarded all objects intersecting at right angles as proofs of the truth of Christianity. Your affection for the book is evident, and I much appreciate it . . . I also agree with many isolated judgements—e.g. the approximation of Godbole and Mrs. Moore, and my failure to present Ralph. It is your critical method that I feel compelled to reject--and maybe my subconscious will one day rise to the surface, and demonstrate to me that I am wrong!

Yours truly,

E. M. Forster

(qtd. in Selig 473)

In the letter, Forster objects to Selig's effort to find specific meanings and allusions where, he claims, none was intended. His comments—and, in particular, his mockery of that potential critical fallback, “the authorial unconscious”—evinces a hostility toward forms of inquiry that “go too far.” Forster seems particularly antagonistic toward psychoanalysis in his dismantling of Selig's false reading,

⁴¹Whether he was interested or not, biographical information clearly indicates that he was well read in the Greeks and other philosophers.

lamponing the notion of a “subconscious” that could inform his own work. He suggests that Selig has used a flawed psychoanalytic apparatus to mine the novel’s ambiguities for clear symbols and “truths.” The irony of Forster’s antipathy toward such invasive truth-seeking methodologies is that it actually aligns him with Freudian psychology; in contrast to Forster’s perception of Freudian psychoanalysis, Freud’s work suggests that it is impossible for words to embody fully the meanings or “truths” beneath them. Although Forster, like Woolf, claims to have been resistant to reading Freud,⁴² his affinity for psychoanalytic thought is evident in *A Passage to India*. Just as I attempted to complicate the picture of Woolf’s links to psychoanalysis in the previous chapter, I intend to work against the grain of Forster’s professed reticence toward that school to illustrate its influence upon him.⁴³ Like Freud, Forster is fascinated by the division between language and thought. The truth that one wants to convey, both Forster and Freud assert, is never that which is said; thus, language is an endless chase after the elusive remainder of meaning—Lacan’s *objet petit a*—that is never represented:

In Lacanian theory, there is no such thing as a truth which can be completely put into words; on the contrary, the exact nature of the truth is such that one can hardly put it into words at all. There are always some elements of the Real which can never be verbalized. Lacan calls this characteristic ‘le midire de la verité,’ the half-speaking of the truth. . . .

[T]his is essentially a Freudian idea: complete verbalization of the truth is

⁴²In *The Art of Fiction*, Forster writes: “I couldn’t read Freud or Jung myself; it had to be filtered to me” (40; qtd. in Stone 334).

⁴³As Selig’s article notes, there have already been numerous psychoanalytic readings of *A Passage to India*; Wilfred Stone and Louise Dauner,⁴³ among others, have offered critiques of the novel that concentrate on the Marabar Caves and their potential resonances as a symbol of the unconscious.

impossible because primary repression keeps the original object definitively beyond the realm of language, which means at the same time *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The result of this is an endless compulsion to repeat, a never-ending attempt to verbalise the non-verbal. (Verhaeghe 102)

As Lacan so famously noted when he defined the unconscious as “the discourse of the other,” the problem at the heart of this “never-ending” pursuit of meaning is that of encountering and navigating the “otherness” within ourselves. We are spoken rather than speaking, each subject the product of all the repressions and other traces that act upon her when she enters language.

Forster’s novel presents a community whose members try—and fail—to master language’s slipperiness. However, the more these characters attempt to rely on language as the vehicle or bearer of absolute truths, the more it escapes them, conveying unexpected and often illegible meanings. This slippage creates numerous communicative difficulties, ultimately forcing the characters (and, by extension, the reader) to accept and even embrace the divide at the heart of language. Paradoxically, such recognition of one’s dividedness becomes the only locus of hope and future connection for Forster’s characters; it becomes a means of resisting a “master” discourse, associated with the Anglo-Indians, which consolidates power by claiming to bear the absolute “truth” about the world of Chandrapore.

Communication and the Ethics of Inquiry

Forster's concern with the difficulty of connecting and communicating spans his literary career. The very title of *A Passage to India* points to the centrality of communication to the novel. The versatile word "passage" can denote a channel by which two areas "communicate" with each other or, alternatively, a section of prose; thus, in either usage, the word refers to a process of connection. As the epigraph to *Howards End*, "Only connect," attests, Forster's works are often centrally fixated on the problem of bridging communicative gulfs against considerable odds. For example, Forster uses *A Room with a View* to explore experiences of failed connections both within and across national communities, which are also central to *A Passage to India*. *Maurice*, too, is concerned with its characters' struggles to connect—and, in particular, to embrace homosexual desire and relationships—in the context of a society that views such connection as an abomination. Forster began *Maurice* immediately upon returning to England from India, where he had started taking notes for *A Passage to India*. Thus, as Quentin Bailey has noted, these two novels have common roots that are often obscured, partially due to the fact that the explicit concern with homosexuality in *Maurice* finds only a repressed correlate in *Passage* (1). In both, the study of communication's limits gains dramatic heft from Forster's portrayal of how these limits thwart the central characters' pursuit of desire, love, and understanding.

A Passage to India suggests that human relationships and the motives and sentiments that drive them cannot be treated as simple "truths" that can be dissected, explained, and laid bare for all to see. In the novel's universe, failure to recognize this fact creates confusion and misunderstanding rather than connection, violating the same "privacy of the soul" that Woolf describes. Like Woolf, Forster suggests that attempts to

violate this privacy can be injurious—and are, at the very least, foolhardy, as the nature of the unconscious is such that the “true thoughts” behind what a subject says are never completely knowable, even to the subject himself; this is the mark of one’s dividedness as a subject. The novel insists on reminding the reader of these limitations of language and the elusiveness of “truth” in discourse. From its slippery narrator, whose authority waxes and wanes throughout the novel, to the Marabar Caves incident, which is both central to the novel and, yet, denied access to the diegesis, *A Passage to India* creates gaps in “truth” that force the reader to find other ways to discern and create meaning. Refusing to “read” invasively—that is, rejecting a mode of communication that presumes language can be dissected and all of its “truths” fully “known”—creates the potential for connection where none was previously possible, as this rejection shifts the emphasis from knowing *about* others to understanding them; the spirit of what is said or offered through language, rather than its literal “truthfulness,” becomes the focus.

Initially, Forster envisioned his novel as an attempt to foster greater cross-cultural understanding and amity between Indians and the British. Ultimately, though, he concluded that this aim must fail. In a letter to his friend and lover Syed Masood, a model for Aziz and the person to whom Forster dedicated the novel, he wrote:

When I began the book I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between East and West, but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable. I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits, and I am not interested whether they

sympathize with one another or not. (Forster 1985:15; qtd.
in Abu Baker 69)

Despite this disavowal of his goals in writing the novel, *A Passage to India* revolves around its main characters' pursuit of such connections even in the face of tremendous cross-cultural mistrust. From its very outset, the novel suggests a fundamental link between its presentation of the protagonists' desire for sympathy and its overarching concern with advancing an "ethics of interpretation." It begins with the arrival of Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested in the fictional Indian town of Chandrapore, where Mrs. Moore's son Ronny serves as city magistrate. The English ladies encounter a world in which broad cultural shorthand and generalizations abound in the relations between indigenous Indians and Anglo-Indians. The Anglo-Indians are eager to offer the newcomers their own brand of hard-earned "wisdom" about life in the area, a body of knowledge built upon a scaffold of stereotypes. This fact is evident in an early exchange between Adela and several of the wives of Anglo-Indian administrators. In this dialogue, Adela professes her desire to see "the real India," and a man we later discover to be Cyril Fielding, one of the novel's central characters, suggests in passing that she do so by "seeing Indians." In response to these two comments, the Anglo-Indian ladies offer Adela some pointed "truths" about life in the area:

'As if one could avoid seeing them,' signed Mrs. Lesley.

'I've avoided,' said Miss Quested. 'Excepting my own servant,
I've scarcely spoken to an Indian since landing.'

'Oh, lucky you.'

'But I want to see them.'

She became the centre of an amused group of ladies. One said, ‘Wanting to see Indians! How new that sounds!’ Another, ‘Natives! why, fancy!’ A third, more serious, said, ‘Let me explain. Natives don’t respect one any the more after meeting one, you see.’

‘That occurs after so many meetings.’

But the lady, entirely stupid and friendly, continued: ‘What I mean is, I was a nurse before my marriage, and came across them a great deal, so I know. *I really do know the truth about Indians.* A most unsuitable position for any Englishwoman--I was a nurse in a Native State. One’s only hope was to hold sternly aloof.’

‘Even from one’s patients.’

‘Why, the kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die,’ said Mrs. Callendar. (25; emphasis mine)

As the ladies note here, imperial social dominance depends heavily on an ability to discern the “truth” about the indigenous Indian population. Miss Quested’s well-meaning desire to learn about and understand a foreign context contrasts sharply with the ladies’ certainty and confidence in the “truth about Indians,” which has calcified their resolve to remain “sternly aloof.”

This tendency to create a taxonomy of human beings—thereby widening the cultural breach—is not solely the province of the Anglo-Indian women. Several indigenous Indian characters speak authoritatively of English behaviors, mores, and values in a way that similarly forestalls actual understanding or sympathy. When discussing with Aziz and Mahmoud Ali the question of whether or not it is possible to be

friends with an Englishman, Hamidullah asserts that English people are indistinguishable from one another once they have become fully acclimated to Anglo-Indian life:

‘They come out intending to be gentlemen, and are told it will not do. Look at Lesley, look at Blakiston, now it is your red-nosed boy, and Fielding will go next. Why, I remember when Turton came out first. It was in another part of the Province. You fellows will not believe me, but I have driven with Turton in his carriage--Turton! Oh yes, we were once quite intimate. He has shown me his stamp collection. ‘

‘He would expect you to steal it now. Turton! But red-nosed boy will be far worse than Turton!’

‘I do not think so. They all become exactly the same, not worse, not better. I give any Englishman two years, be he Turton or Burton. It is only the difference of a letter. And I give any Englishwoman six months. All are exactly alike . . .’ (7)

Hamidullah paints the Anglo-Indians using the same broad brush strokes that the English ladies use for his own countrymen, suggesting that, despite their best efforts to distinguish themselves (as Ronny Healsop or “red-nosed boy” has attempted to), they all end up “exactly alike.” Hamidullah’s position lacks nuance and is as flawed as the Anglo-Indian ladies’ dissertation on behavioral customs. It is significant, however, that he links his perception of a lack of distinctions between these men to the colonial context that demands adherence to certain rigid code of conduct (“They come out intending to be gentlemen, and are told it will not do”). These behaviors on both sides of the imperial divide imply that colonial power dynamics organize (and perhaps necessitate) this

approach to “knowing” about others. Moreover, they are also a product of it. Forster highlights a fundamental antipathy between power and friendship that underpins cross-cultural dynamics in the novel. As Forster goes on to demonstrate, the supremacy of one force seems to necessitate the eradication of the other. Cultural misunderstanding feeds and is fed by a particular ethics of knowing that privileges “pinning down,” categorizing, and generally determining the “truth” about members of another “group.” This discourse, in turn, becomes a means of gaining and stabilizing authority and represents the antipode to friendship and sympathy. One of the novel’s fundamental aims, I would argue, is to critique and thereby dismantle this ethics—the ethics of knowing *about* others—and replace it with the kind of ethics of interpretation that one finds in Woolf’s work, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, enables less invasive inquiry, privileging understanding over obtaining concrete truth or knowledge.

While this tendency to stereotype is evident on both sides of the English/Indian divide, Forster is generally more preoccupied with the damage it causes when present among the “ruling race.” In addition to precluding friendship, this tendency frequently leads the English to root out and discern only very superficial “truths” behind Indian speech and acts. They create absurd categories for Indians and twist their behavior to conform to their own culturally determined notions of consistency, as I will discuss at greater length below. The superficiality of such efforts renders many situations involving Indians illegible to the English, even where meaning exists (Hunt 502-503). Mrs. Moore notes this very tendency when she reflects on a conversation with her son Ronny, the “red-nosed” boy to whom Hamidullah refers as the most recent convert to the “typical” Anglo-Indian mindset. In the exchange, Ronny castigates Aziz for making imprudent

comments about his supervisor, Major Callendar, in his first encounter with Mrs. Moore, comments which she in turn recounts to Ronny. As a fellow Anglo-Indian with “native subordinates,” Ronny initially feels obliged to pass Aziz’s comments on to others, despite his mother’s strident protests. Mrs. Moore understands that Aziz’s behavior was the mark not of disrespect but, rather, of an immediate and profound sympathy between them; he feels so immediately comfortable with her that he eschews the somewhat servile attitude he sometimes adopts with Anglo-Indians and describes his actual feelings. However, Ronny takes a very different stance on how freely Aziz spoke to his mother, interpreting their intimacy as evidence of an abominable forwardness and pretension on Aziz’s part. After the disagreement, she attempts to puzzle through the difference in their perspectives:

In the light of her son’s comment she reconsidered the scene at the mosque, to see whose impression was correct. Yes, it could be worked into quite an unpleasant scene. The doctor had begun by bullying her, had said Mrs. Callendar was nice, and then--finding the ground safe--had changed; he had alternately whined over his grievances and patronized her, had run a dozen ways in a single sentence, had been unreliable, inquisitive, vain. Yes, it was all true, but how false as a summary of the man; the essential life of him had been slain. (34)

In this passage, Mrs. Moore draws a crucial distinction between the literally true, factual account of the incident and her own sense of the actual spirit—or what I would call “meaning”—behind Aziz’s openness. She implies that Ronny’s attention to the factual details of her story obscures its larger significance as a moment of sympathy between

Mrs. Moore and Aziz; thus, as is often the case throughout the novel, he misses the point entirely. In this moment of tension between Ronny and his mother, Forster once again implies that the pursuit of literal truth precludes true understanding and, with it, the potential for friendship, whereas being open to less concrete, more nuanced forms of meaning creates the condition in which community becomes possible.

Ronny's attitude toward cross-cultural understanding and friendship represents the exact opposite of his mother's and is emblematic of the antipathy between power and friendship in the novel. In his capacity as city magistrate, he ardently pursues the factual and the "true" in an effort to enforce imperial authority: "Every day he worked hard in the court trying to decide which of the two untrue accounts was the less untrue, trying to dispense justice fearlessly, to protect the weak against the less weak, the incoherent against the plausible, surrounded by lies and flattery . . . it was his duty" (52). In so strongly associating Ronny's sense of duty with the ethics of "knowing about," Forster links this ethics both to the juridical system which Ronny represents and to the larger Anglo-Indian power structures that it serves. Thus, he clarifies the relationship between his novel's more localized concern with friendship, sympathy, and the dynamics underlying imperial control.

In a sense, this moment reveals a tension between two very different forms of law at the heart of the novel's universe: Anglo-Indian law and the law of the symbolic. Both of these systems deal with the problem of binaries—that is, of difference—but they are distinctly at odds in Forster's novel. Ironically, the ultimate function of the Anglo-Indians' divisive discourse is to create an illusion of wholeness—at least, for the Anglo-Indian subject. In emphasizing the racial and cultural alterity of the Indian subject and

his separateness from themselves, the Anglo-Indians attempt to deny their own fundamental dividedness as subjects of language. As Timothy Christensen puts it,

Race . . . specifies the imaginary relationship of the English to the traumatic kernel of the real. The "real" (which I would describe . . . as that empty "space" within language that gives birth to the process of symbolization while itself resisting all signification) is experienced within the novel as a resistance to the creation of full and satisfactory meaning within intercultural communication, and materialized within both the psychic and geographical space of the novel as the Marabar Caves. Race, most simply put, allows for the denial of the primordial difference of the cultural self from itself that is the condition of its conceptualization. It does so through the displacement of this difference onto an Indian other. (171-172)

In short, the English use their perceptions of Indian "otherness" to deny the absence or division at the heart of subjecthood; what is the province of the Lacanian "Other" (that is, the unconscious traces that encounters in/with language embody and leave within the subject) is displaced onto an inscrutable racial "other." Indeed, critic Sinkwan Cheng also perceives the "Horror" of the novel to reside not in what characters find in the "exceptional other," but rather in the vacuum that is at the heart of their own interactions (par. 23). In contrast to the law of the symbolic that instates this traumatic dividedness, and with it an endless and hopeless pursuit of this lost wholeness, the law of Anglo-India masquerades as a discourse that is whole, totally "at one" with the knowledge that it

pursues. In short, Anglo-Indian law deploys the discourse of the master,⁴⁴ whom Lacan describes as one who attempts to make his language at “one” with his own “truth.” Paul Verhaeghe describes the master as one who clings to “master signifiers”—that is, those signifiers that are meant to be identical to that which is signified. This discourse attempts to deny the fact that

[f]rom the moment man speaks, he becomes a subject of language (a divided subject in fact) who tries to grasp an object which lies beyond language, or, more accurately, a condition beyond the separation between subject and object. This object represents the final term of desire itself, but as it lies beyond the realm of the signifier and thus beyond the pleasure principle, it is irrevocably lost. At the same time, it provides the motor which keeps man going for ever. For Lacan, it constitutes the basis of every form of human causality. (105)

A condition of total silence (i.e., death) would be the only state in which the master could retain his status: “The only way to uphold the position of master is to remain silent. To avoid signifiers saves one from being divided by them. In the end, the only successful master is a dead one, one who has entered eternal silence” (Verhaeghe 109). The Anglo-Indians of Chandrapore resemble the master in this way as well, discerning and relaying a truth so definitive that further consideration or discussion of the relationship between Indians and Anglo-Indians is unnecessary. The discourse of the hysteric, which rips

⁴⁴In *The Other Side Of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar 17), Lacan described four different kinds of discourse into which virtually all speech could be organized: the master’s, the hysteric’s, the analyst’s, and the university’s. These discourses are defined by the relative positions of the subject, knowledge, the master signifier, and the *objet petit a* within a four-part algorithm, and describe the varying stances a subject can take with respect to the other elements.

open these “closed” cases by asking question after question of the master, is the means by which the master discourse is dismantled, as I will discuss below.

The novel’s Anglo-Indian characters insist upon making language match up with or embody the “truths” beneath it, and this tendency is especially marked in the more domineering Anglo-Indians who use “truth” as a kind of billy club. Even Adela Quested, who ultimately destabilizes this discourse and rejects the arid language of the hardened Anglo-Indians, initially relies on absolute facts or “truths” in making sense of Chandrapore’s social landscape. She believes in being fully frank, honest, and transparent in her expression of her own thoughts, and she expects that others will do the same. At times, these expectations cause her unknowingly to offend others or create misunderstandings. By contrast, Fielding is one of the few characters who can navigate and respect the limits of language in his efforts to forge community and understanding. The disparate attitudes of both Fielding and Adela become clear in their reactions to Aziz’s patently untrue narrative about Chandrapore’s history, offered in an effort to entertain Adela and Mrs. Moore:

He was wrong about the water, which no Emperor, however skillful, can cause to gravitate uphill; a depression of some depth together with the whole of Chandrapore lay between the mosque and Fielding’s house. Ronny would have pulled him up, Turton would have wanted to pull him up, but restrained himself. Fielding did not even want to pull him up; he had dulled his craving for verbal truth and cared chiefly for truth of mood. As for Miss Quested, she accepted everything Aziz said as true verbally. In her ignorance, she regarded him as ‘India,’ and never surmised that his

outlook was limited and his method inaccurate, and that no one is India.
(75-76)

Fielding's actions here, which demonstrate prudence and an awareness of the complex relationship between language and meaning, contrast favorably with an Anglo-Indian ethos that would have called for him to "pull up" Aziz for his inaccuracy. While Adela intends to behave differently, she nonetheless resembles her countrymen in her fixation on the binary of true and false. As a result, she bestows upon both the tale and the speaker the plenitude of the signifier of "India," painting a picture of wholeness where none is possible. In so doing, Adela shifts her attention away from the "truth of mood"—that is, from the friendliness and hospitality that stand behind Aziz's fabrications, which Fielding recognizes as more important than literal, factual truth—and thereby devalues it. She latches onto a lie and in so doing fails to discern the kindness and desire for amity that could forge enduring friendships, which carry more meaning than the "truth" behind the tale.

The attempt to *embody* truth in language also does violence in *A Passage to India*. For example, Adela's earnest desire to voice certain "truths" harms her attempts to build friendships with other characters. Two incidents that take place immediately prior to the (non-)event in the Marabar Caves suggest the dangers of her indelicate frankness. In these moments, Adela articulates ideas or opinions that the narration implies should remain unspoken. As a result, she damages her relationship with Aziz and obscures the spirit of community that inspires her speech. The first of these moments occurs when Adela notes her wish for a universal religion that would help bridge different cultures and minimize difference. Although Aziz admits silently to himself that he shares her dream,

he says that “as soon as it was put into prose it became untrue” (160). Shortly thereafter, Adela suggests that she, too, might become one of the Anglo-Indians who, she has been told, “all get rude after a year” (161). Aziz reacts angrily to her assertion because, while outwardly denying its veracity, he silently feels it to be apt. Unfortunately, Adela’s comments here destroy the very connections she is trying to build; for Aziz, at least, her efforts lack a necessary sensitivity or sensibility to the historical and cultural landscape that invest these statements with a certain emotional charge. These failures of communication presage the failures of meaning that occur with the incident in the caves.

Mystery vs. Muddle

As I have already begun to suggest above, *A Passage to India* stages resistance to what Lacan termed the “discourse of the master.” The master discourse is characterized by a speaker’s attempt to make himself “one” with his own language, as the Anglo-Indians attempt to do in their efforts to view and catalogue the “real” India. This effort is evident in the disdainful tutorials people like Turton offer to Miss Quested and Mrs. Moore as well as in Adela’s more ingenuous and well-meaning plan to see the “true” India by shunning this veil of prejudice. As also noted above, according to Lacan, such efforts must always fail. A signifier can never be perfectly one with that which it attempts to represent; instead, there is always an excess of meaning that eludes representation—the *objet petit a*—which creates an aporia at the heart of language. Thus, the perfect correspondence between language and truth that many of *Passage*’s characters pursue is impossible. As Verhaeghe puts it, “communication is always a failure, and, moreover . . . it has to be a failure, and that is the reason why we go on talking. If we

could understand each other we would all remain silent, and the perfect, dreamt-of *communio* would take place within an appropriate silence and with hands in front of closed eyes” (100). Indeed, the master can only attempt to retain his privileged position through such an “appropriate silence”; his “master status” depends on his denial of his own dividedness—that is, of his own status as a subject of language. From this position outside of language, he asserts a claim to “wholeness” that allows him to perceive, access, and relay truths via his discourse. However, as Verhaeghe notes, this position is false: “. . . The truth is that the master is also castrated. In Lacanian terms, he is divided by his introduction into language, just like any other speaking creature” (108). His denial of this castration is a denial of the unconscious for, as Lacan writes, “the unconscious is always manifested as that which vacillates in a split in the subject” (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 28). This denial eventually proves unsustainable, as it is impossible to live and avoid the law of the symbolic.

A Passage to India portrays the supremacy of the master discourse in the first half of the novel, only to dismantle it in the second half. Like Woolf, Forster rejects the ethics that proceeds from this discourse, attempting to replace it with his own “ethics of interpretation” that is similar to Woolf’s. Forster uses the terms “mystery” and “muddle” to describe the opposite poles of this ethical tension. He suggests that the former term can be used to describe solvable “puzzles” with a concrete solution, whereas “muddle” denotes the kind of slipperiness and messiness that characterizes social life

and, indeed, language. Muddles defy full explanation or knowledge; they must be “interpreted” rather than “known.”⁴⁵

The master pursues and claims access to the kind of ultimate “Truth” that is the province of mystery, but is often at a loss to find meaning in linguistic or social “muddles.” In particular, this master discourse proves inadequate for sorting through the incident in the Marabar Caves, the novel’s muddle *par excellence*. By contrast, the ethics of interpretation that the novel poses can navigate “muddle” successfully because it pursues “meaning” as opposed to “truth,” recognizing a certain necessary opacity at the heart of human affairs that the master’s discourse denies. The novel suggests that there are profound social and even political implications for being able to distinguish mystery from muddle, as human relations more often than not involve the latter.

Forster first introduces these terms and implies their importance to the novel’s larger related interest in language and the social in an early conversation among Adela, Mrs. Moore, and Fielding. The conversation revolves around yet another instance of cultural disconnect, the Bhattacharyas’ seemingly inexplicable failure to turn up as promised to retrieve the English ladies for a visit:

‘I do so hate mysteries,’ Adela announced.

‘We English do.’

‘I dislike them not because I’m English, but from my own personal point of view,’ she corrected.

⁴⁵As Harriet Blodgett puts it, “A mystery . . . as both denotation and usage attest, is explicable, a solvable puzzle, even if it be an enigma, difficult to explain as in a religious truth, whereas a muddle is but a meaningless mess” (24). Blodgett also notes that Virginia Woolf may have been responsible for giving Forster the “purposeful coupling of muddle and mystery to lead from the realm of reason to a realm of the spirit” (24), as the binary appears in *Jacob’s Room*, which Forster read.

‘I like mysteries but I rather dislike muddles,’ said Mrs. Moore.

‘A mystery is a muddle.’

‘Oh, do you think so, Mr. Fielding?’

‘A mystery is only a high-sounding term for a muddle. No advantage in stirring it up, in either case . . .’ (73)

While admitting that there are problems whose full solutions can be obtained, the novel also suggests that there exist situations—and, more specifically, those related to human and cross-cultural relations—whose meaning cannot be known because they proceed from something other than the purely rational. The notion of “mystery,” as Mrs. Moore frames it, retains confidence in the existence of truth even as this truth is obscured, while “muddle” is entirely senseless and offers no promise of clarity. Despite their genuine and well-intentioned desire to see the “real” India, Forster suggests that Mrs. Moore and Adela are doomed to confusion precisely because they attempt to discern logic and reason in the Bhattacharyas’ snub—that is, they treat it as a mystery that can be solved rather than the muddle for which there is no logical explanation.⁴⁶ Although Fielding claims that “mystery” and “muddle” are one and the same, his behavior and private thoughts imply a profound distinction. Rather than attempting to determine or elucidate the cause of the snub—that is, to “solve the puzzle”—he is eager to explain it simply as a “misunderstanding,” the “type of incident that had better not be cleared up” (72). It is likely that the Bhattacharyas never intended for their offer to be taken as genuine, and thus the “snub” resulted from a difference in social custom and produced a misunderstanding. As such, the reasoning behind this cultural shorthand—which, by its

very nature, depends on the parties' willingness and ability to read what must remain implicit— would be nearly impossible to explain to Adela and Mrs. Moore, whose codes differ dramatically; the rationale for the couple's actions could never be satisfactorily articulated for them. Fielding seems to recognize this fact, which is why he wants to leave the topic immediately; the terrain of muddle, the conversation implies, is far more treacherous than that of mystery. The novel ultimately points to the danger of conflating these terms when Aziz's very life becomes dependent on other characters' ability to identify what has happened in the Marabar Caves as a muddle, rather than a mystery.

"A Frustration of Reason and Form": The Marabar Caves

The Marabar Caves are clearly emblematic of all that is "muddle" in the novel, the ultimate symbol of the unknown and inarticulable aspects of human behavior and language that defy explanation. Forster's first extended evocation of the caves insists upon their resistance to representation, even while the narration denies this very resistance:

The caves are readily described. A tunnel eight feet long, five feet high, three feet wide, leads to a circular chamber about twenty feet in diameter. This arrangement occurs again and again throughout the group of hills, and this is all, this is a Marabar Cave. Having seen one such cave, having seen two, having seen three, four, fourteen, twenty-four, the visitor returns to Chandrapore uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all. He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind, for the pattern never varies, and

no carving, not even a bees'-nest or a bat distinguishes one from another. Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation—for they have one—does not depend upon human speech. It is as if the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim 'extraordinary,' and the world [sic] has taken root in the air, and been inhaled by mankind. (136-137)

Forster begins by asserting that the caves are utterly describable, but the description that follows is a strikingly unsatisfying list of mere measurements and shapes. What has often masqueraded as a strange form of "omniscient" narration throughout the novel founders terribly here, suffering from the same problems of representation that it describes and attempts to stand beyond. As a result, the reader, too, is at a loss to comprehend the caves. As Gail Fincham writes:

the authorial voice describes from a panoramic and omniscient perspective the Marabar outposts "which bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen" : . . . [T]he reader is invited to look through a transparent window at a world unproblematically out there (McCabe 39). But Forster uses the authoritative metalanguage . . . to obscure rather than reveal what is described (par. 24)

Thus, in a mirror image of the failures of authority and knowledge that the incident in the Marabar Caves will induce in the novel's Anglo-Indian characters, the "omniscient" narration—whose clearest "source" remains the Western author himself—falters and thereby forfeits any claim to being able to relay the "truth" of the Caves. Indeed, we "are forced to take note of what we can look at but not understand. Western

power and knowledge, embodied in the panoptic gaze, is undermined by such a strategy. In the context of the Marabar Caves, looking is not necessarily knowing, and it is certainly not controlling” (Fincham par. 24). The failure of this supposed omniscience becomes clearest, of course, when the narration entirely skips over the incident in the caves, undeniably the central incident in the novel; even the narrator him/herself is denied access to that moment. The caves resist all attempts to describe the essentials of what they “are” or what occurs within them. Visitors are hard-pressed to articulate their significance, Forster says, because their meaning cannot be conveyed in language; it “does not depend on human speech.” When asked to provide general details about the caves prior to the incident, Aziz admits he cannot. He claims he would need Professor Godbole to explain them (156), indicating that the caves require a mystical apprehension. In defying the organizational and representational functions of language, the caves symbolize the absence at language’s core—an absence that represents *not* an emptiness, as readers and critics of the novel have often assumed, but rather a place in which something is *missing*. Just as the aporia at the heart of language represents a place where the *objet petit a*—that is, the surplus of meaning that signifiers try and fail to represent, but which discourse is always pursuing—has “torn away,” so too do the caves embody a meaning that simply eludes us, rather than a place where there is none.

The incident that renders the Marabar Caves central to *A Passage to India* occurs when Aziz takes Mrs. Moore and Adela to visit them. In the moment before Adela and Aziz enter the caves, Forster foreshadows the caves’ significance as a symbol of language’s slipperiness by presenting yet another miscommunication, as Adela tries to make sense of this social “muddle” that surrounds her:

What a handsome little Oriental he was . . . She did not admire him with any personal warmth, for there was nothing of the vagrant in her blood, but she guessed he might attract women of his own race and rank, and she regretted that neither she nor Ronny had any physical charm. It does make a difference in a relationship—beauty, thick hair, a fine skin. Probably this man had several wives—Mohammedans always insist on their full four, according to Mrs. Turton. And having no one else to speak to on that eternal rock, she gave rein to the subject of marriage and said in her honest, decent, inquisitive way: ‘Have you one wife or more than one?’ The question shocked the young man very much. It challenged a new conviction of his community [. . .]. If she had said, ‘Do you worship one god or several?’ he would not have objected. But to ask an educated Indian Moslem how many wives he has—appalling, hideous! He was in trouble how to conceal his confusion. ‘One, one in my own particular case,’ he sputtered, and let go of her hand. Quite a number of caves were at the top of the track, and thinking, ‘Damn the English even at their best,’ he plunged into one of them to recover his balance. She followed at her leisure, quite unconscious that she had said the wrong thing, and not seeing him, she also went into a cave, thinking with half her mind ‘sightseeing bores me,’ and wondering with the other half about marriage (169).⁴⁷

⁴⁷It seems significant that, for Adela, sexual desire is often sparked by images of men whom she insists on making abject figures, including Aziz here and the punkah wallah in the trial scene.

In her unfiltered curiosity regarding Aziz's marital status (which seems to be informed by Anglo-Indian misapprehensions about the predominant Muslim marriage practices in India at that time), Adela demonstrates the same enthusiasm for pursuing the "truth" about Indians that the other Anglo-Indian characters evince. Moreover, she unwittingly voices an exotic fantasy of the debauched native customs whose sexual license is at odds with her cool English notions of proper sexual relations.⁴⁸

Her blunder catches Aziz off-guard; while he expects such insensitivity from the other English, he seems surprised to confront this stereotype among even the "English at their best," the group to which he had assigned Adela. Aziz retreats into a cave to avoid showing his distress, removing his hand from hers in a gesture that mirrors the social and psychic breach that has occurred. Adela too enters a cave (it is not clear whether she enters the same one as Aziz or not), and the narrative then cuts to the next chapter, when Aziz is waiting in his cave formulating an excuse he can give Adela for his sudden disappearance. When he exits, Adela has disappeared, the "incident" having already occurred. These unnarrated events drive action for the entire second half of the novel. All that is "known" for sure is that Adela leaves the cave in distress; thereafter, the event is identified as a sexual assault on or "insult" to Adela.

I contend that this moment stages a traumatizing confrontation with the absence at the heart of language. The caves become for *A Passage to India* what Freud and Lacan describe as a "navel" (Verhaeghe 43). According to Verhaeghe, the navel's "most essential characteristic is that there are no words for it" because it is part of "that register

⁴⁸Also, as I will discuss further below, she simultaneously demonstrates a forbidden attraction to Aziz, the denial of which may be the purpose of the rape narrative she presents in the wake of the incident in the caves.

which cannot be put into words” (Verhaeghe 23). As already noted, Forster foregrounds the caves’ resistance to representation even before the “incident” occurs, thus lending weight to this reading of the caves as a place of absence. The incident remains unrepresented because it is unrepresentable, a hole at the story’s center that drives character dialogue and interactions for over half of the novel.

Forster suggests the caves’ significance as a metaphor for this linguistic rupture in his description of Mrs. Moore’s reaction to the caves prior to the “incident.” Upon entering them, Mrs. Moore finds that the caves seem to strip signifiers of their underlying meaning. She is haunted by the cave’s echo, which, regardless of the word or phrase spoken, produces only the sound “boum”:

A Marabar cave had been horrid as far as Mrs. Moore was concerned, for she had nearly fainted in it, and had some difficulty in preventing herself from saying so as soon as she got into the air again. It was natural enough: she had always suffered from faintness, and the cave had become too full, because all their retinue followed them. Crammed with villagers and servants, the circular chamber began to smell. She lost Aziz and Adela in the dark, didn’t know who touched her, couldn’t breathe, and some vile naked thing struck her face and settled on her mouth like a pad. She tried to regain the entrance tunnel, but an influx of villagers swept her back. She hit her head. For an instant she went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic. For not only did the crush and stench alarm her; there was also a terrifying echo.

Professor Godbole had never mentioned an echo; it never impressed him, perhaps. There are some exquisite echoes in India . . . The echo in a Marabar cave is not like these, it is entirely devoid of distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof. 'Boum' is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or 'bou-oum' or 'ou-boum,'—utterly dull. Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce 'boum.' Even the striking of a match starts a worm coiling, which is too small to complete a circle but is eternally watchful. And if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently. (162-163)

Forster stages Mrs. Moore's confrontation with the dissociation of her own signifiers from their sense, foregrounding the fact that full meaning is inaccessible; it is impossible for language to catch up with the *objet petit a*, which I have suggested that the incident in the caves represents. For Mrs. Moore, this moment is incredibly traumatic; through it, she loses her spirituality, which in turn irrevocably damages her confidence in the potential for actual friendship, kindness, and intuitive connection: ". . . Suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor talkative little Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from 'Let there be Light' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'boum.'" She realizes she no longer feels the desire to communicate with anyone (166). Later, she dismisses Adela's questions about the echo by saying, "Say, say, say . . . As if anything can be said!" (222). The tenuous bonds forged between Aziz and Mrs. Moore

are sundered; Mrs. Moore loses interest as, Forster explains, “the affectionate and sincere words that she had spoken to him seemed no longer hers but the air’s” (166). In the end, Mrs. Moore fails to build connections across the cultural divide because she mistakes the apparent emptiness of “boum”—that is, the denial of absolute truth in language—for the failure of meaning itself. As a result, tragically, she discounts the value of communication, kindness, and other elements of social interaction that would engender sympathy.

Forster insisted that confronting the caves as an aporia was crucial to the experience of reading the novel—so crucial, in fact, that he claimed (at least initially) to share the readers’ ignorance of any true meaning or event behind Adela’s accusations. In 1924, Forster received a disgruntled letter from Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, who had read a draft of the novel and criticized the ambiguity of the caves incident. Forster responded:

In the cave it is *either* a man, or the supernatural, *or* an illusion. And even if I know! My writing mind therefore is a blur here—i.e., I will it to remain a blur, and to be uncertain, as I am of many facts in daily life. This isn’t a philosophy of aesthetics. It’s a particular trick I felt justified in trying because my theme was India. It sprang from my subject matter. I wouldn’t have attempted it in other countries, which though they contain mysteries or muddles, manage to draw rings around them (Furbank 2: 125; qtd. in Moran 597).

In short, Forster is reluctant to claim absolute control or knowledge of the Caves’ significance. Forster’s unwillingness to admit knowledge of the Marabar’s meaning—

much less share it with others—is significant, as it reinforces the caves’ status as a metaphor for the absence at the heart of language; the meaning of the event eludes Forster even as he describes it, just as any speaking subject’s truth is relentlessly pursued—but not embodied—in his own language. Thus, he forcefully asserts the necessity of the divide between language and meaning. In so doing, he both denies any “masterly” control over his own language and resists the discourse of the master more generally. Adopting what seems to be the opposite of his position in his letter to Selig, he suggests that any meaning that he could assign to the event is submerged in his own unconscious—where, he implies, it belongs.⁴⁹

Forster’s use of free indirect discourse throughout the novel underscores the novel’s rejection of the “true,” dislocating the thoughts from a clear speaker or source of authority. Forster scholar Gail Fincham comments that the novel’s style is notable first and foremost for being “unlike anything in his previous fiction” (par. 9). Bette London concurs:

Read in the context of Forster's earlier novels, what is striking about *Passage* is the absence of the distinctly discernible Forsterian voice: urbane, ironic, assured. What we have in its stead is a narrative gone mad—a shifting, slippery, unplaceable voice that seems to take its timbre

⁴⁹Indeed, in the letter to Selig, Forster claims enough knowledge of the Marabar Caves to identify what they were *not* (e.g., a modern dramatization of Plato’s cave or a mapping of unconscious archetypal symbols). While this apparent contradiction in Forster’s thinking may have been the product of the years that had elapsed between the two letters, it is intriguing to consider it as a result of resistance: Selig identifies the caves as the province of the unconscious, and Forster, like the patient who resists his unconscious thoughts coming to the fore, strains against this probing. In this interpretation, the caves embody or represent the unconscious not only of the novel and its characters, but of Forster as well; the text both embodies and represents unconscious forces in a strange and powerful way. It also suggests the larger stakes of opacity and unknowability for the novel.

from whatever voice it happens to be near. The resulting disturbances to the novel's surface articulate what might be called narrative hysteria: the breakdown or fragmentation of the narrative voice. The voice does not disappear, as several critics have claimed, but it persists, like the novel's celebrated echo, in distorted refractions of an original utterance that can never be reclaimed. (86)

The expansive and diffuse narrative voice mirrors Adela's hysterical reaction to the "incident" in the caves. The tension between her hysterical discourse and the master discourse of the Anglo-Indians who attempt to "solve" her case is central to the second half of the novel. As Lacan describes in the case of the hysteric, Adela's discourse is the means by which the master discourse is dismantled.

Adela Quersted and the Discourse of the Hysteric

Adela demonstrates the classic symptoms of the hysteric, who attempts to displace her own forbidden desires onto another. Thus, it seems significant that the moment in the Marabar Caves comes on the heels of Adela's meditation on desire. One could convincingly argue that what "happens" in the caves has everything to do with her attempt to displace the desires that awaken within her at that moment. Indeed, Adela's casual denial that she feels "any personal warmth" for Aziz is suspicious, and it is telling that her meditation on attractiveness and musings on polygamy precede this "event" that produces the symptoms of hysteria within her. At the very least, the moment is strongly suggestive of a sexual awakening that Adela attempts to deny. Forster himself identifies Adela's behavior as hysterical: "No one understood her trouble, or knew why she

vibrated between hard commonsense and hysteria. She would begin a speech as if nothing particular had happened. ‘I went into this detestable cave,’ she would say dryly, ‘and I remember scratching the wall with my finger-nail, to start the usual echo, and then as I was saying there was this shadow, or sort of shadow, down the entrance tunnel, bottling me up’ (214).

More than just emphasizing the aporia at the center of language, this moment in the caves reasserts the supremacy of desire and symbolic law, both of which the novel’s characters have attempted to deny or bypass in the first half of the novel. As Lacan argues, the master’s discourse, which is so prevalent in these early sections, thwarts language and, thus, in turn, desire; in insisting upon the absolute correspondence between his language and that which he attempts to represent, the master’s discourse denies the need to pursue the *objet petit a*. As noted above, the master can only truly retain his privileged position in silence; his position depends on preventing the pursuit of the *objet petit a* and thereby trying to “opt out” of the symbolic. The result of the supremacy of this master discourse in the first half of *A Passage to India* is aridity, miscommunication, and contention, as the novel’s vaguely sexed English characters widen the cultural breach through their “efforts” at expression and communication. According to Lacan, however, the master discourse is destabilized by the discourse of the hysteric, whose attempts to gain knowledge of her own desires are marked by the intense pursuit of the elusive “surplus.”

This tension between the discourses of the master and the hysteric is evident in the relationship between Adela and the Anglo-Indian “machinery of justice” that attempts to “help” her after the incident. According to Lacan, the hysteric frequently seeks out an

authority figure—a master—from whom she can attempt to gain knowledge about her condition; as Verhaeghe puts it, she “is always in search of an incarnation of the mythical master” to give her the knowledge she pursues (106). Similarly, Adela turns to the Anglo-Indian establishment to define the exact nature of her assault and mobilize her community’s response; her desire “express[es] itself by way of a demand, directed to the other” and prompts her to “turn the other into a master-signifier in order to get an answer” (109). According to Verhaeghe, the hysteric implores the master, “Tell me who I am, tell me what I want.” Whoever he is, the master is “supposed to know, he is supposed to know and to produce the answer.” Unfortunately, however, “this answer always misses the point” (110), which, indeed, proves to be the case for the Anglo-Indian “masters” who take charge of Adela’s case:

‘I know it’s all nothing; I must be sensible, I do try—’ Adela continued, working again towards tears. ‘I shouldn’t mind if it had happened anywhere else; at least I really don’t know where it did happen.’

Ronny supposed that he understood what she meant: she could not identify or describe the particular cave, indeed almost refused to have her mind cleared up about it, and it was recognized that the defence would try to make capital out of this during the trial. He reassured her: the Marabar caves were notoriously like one another; indeed, in the future they were to be numbered in sequence with white paint. (221)

Ronny assumes that he has understood what she is trying to say and, from his privileged position as both male and a representative of “justice,” attempts to help her have “her mind cleared up about it.” Yet, the reader knows he has not understood her, and his

method for reassuring her—i.e., the cave numbering system project—does nothing to address her sense that she has been victimized. Adela’s bizarre remark “I really don’t know where it did happen” is emblematic of the event’s slipperiness, as she implies that the incident eludes typical descriptors such as “where.” To their tremendous detriment, Ronny and the other colonials try—and fail—to impose a particular logic on the incident in the cave, the logic of a mystery whose “truth” can be determined. What Ronny terms the “machinery” of the imperial justice system grinds into motion after the incident, as the Anglo-Indians organize a trial and gather the witnesses and evidence necessary to present the facts that they believe will lead to Aziz’s conviction. They treat the incident as a simple crime whose nature and reason, once investigated, should be perfectly clear. The investigators’ attempts to arrive at a logical explanation by stringing together the few available pieces of “evidence” against Aziz are simultaneously comedic and frightening. The novel highlights the ridiculousness of these attempts to impose logic on the event by conveying an Anglo-Indian extrapolation from the physical evidence left at the “scene of the crime”: “The strap had been newly broken, the eye-piece was jammed. The logic of evidence said ‘Guilty’ (185). The fallacies in this “reasoning” are obvious. Moreover, in another equally absurd example of this logic, the evidence that puts investigators “on the track” of Aziz (186) is simply that Adela does not want to see the Indian driver after the incident. From this, the Anglo-Indians infer that an Indian committed the attack and, thus, that Aziz (who was close at hand when she entered the cave) must have been the culprit. In these descriptions of the procedure and evidence on which the Anglo-Indians base their case, Forster lampoons the supposedly orderly and logical investigatory processes directed toward obtaining the “truth” about the incident in the caves, ironically

juxtaposing investigators' mania to achieve a clear and logical explanation of the event with their completely irrational methods and conclusions.

Because the hysteric ultimately experiences the master's failed attempts at explanation as "profoundly alienating," she becomes the means by which the master's inadequacy is unmasked:

The hysterical subject prompts the other to know. What she desires is knowledge as a means of jouissance. This is structurally impossible and it transforms her from instigator of knowledge to source of failure, thereby demonstrating the fundamental lack. The hysteric not only sets up the man-master, but also unmasks him: his desire is also determined by *objet a*, so even he is divided. (Verhaeghe 111)

While the hysteric initially serves as a means of affirming the master's position and "sustain[ing him] in his illusion that he is at one with this knowledge," she always ends up unsatisfied; she discovers and reveals the master's inadequacy and tenuous position, thus undermining his discourse as well. Similarly, Adela Quested, who ultimately realizes that her "experience" in the caves is not "knowable" in the sense that Ronny and the other Anglo-Indians believe it to be, concludes that the search for the kind of absolute knowledge to which the master lays claim—and which she, too, had previously pursued—will always fail. Moreover, she asserts that pursuing such a truth can be injurious, lamenting, "All the things I thought I'd learnt are just a hindrance, they're not knowledge at all" (219).

At this moment, Adela begins to draw a distinction between the pursuit of "truth," which she has found unfruitful, and the search for meaning, which the novel suggests

creates the potential for human connection. She seems now to understand, as Debrah Raschke puts it, that there is a difference between the kind of absolute “truth” Plato envisioned outside his own cave (for which some have argued the Marabar Caves are a metaphor) and the meaning that “the dream world of the [Marabar] cave, as producing truths of its own” can bring to light (“Forster's Passage to India: Re-Envisioning Plato's Cave” 13). It seems significant that Adela follows her realization that a certain kind of knowledge is a “hindrance” with the reflection that she is “not fit for personal relationships,” as she appears to connect her failed effort to pursue “truth” with the fractured personal and cross-cultural relations that abound in Chandrapore. Forster emphasizes the causal link between this overreliance on order and rationality and the incidence of cultural and sexual disconnect and oppression in the chaos surrounding Aziz’s trial, wherein xenophobia and violent collisions between Indians and Anglo-Indians proliferate. As Gertrude White notes,

The effect of their experience in the Marabar is to quench every little flame of kindness and good will in those around them. The bridges thrown across the gulfs crumble; the abysses widen and deepen. Evil and negative unity alone is left. The English draw together more firmly than ever against natives, in a union that annihilates all reason, all justice, and all mercy. Fear and hate unite the Indians in Aziz's defense. (650)

While making his opening statements in the courtroom, Major McBryde unwittingly demonstrates the link between the “ethics of investigation” and imperial xenophobia in his discussion of Indian sexual preferences: “Taking off his spectacles, as was his habit before enunciating a general truth, he looked into them sadly, and remarked that the

darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not *vice versa*—not a matter for bitterness this, not a matter for abuse, but just a fact which any scientific observer will confirm” (243). In this speech, McBryde offers yet another “scientific,” masterly exposition of racial and sexual dynamics that, in its insistence on its own plenitude as an articulation of the “truth” about Indians, only serves the forces of fragmentation.

Mixing Meaning and Desire: Adela’s Epiphany

Somewhat paradoxically, however, the impossibility of gleaning truth from the Marabar Caves incident creates opportunities for new starting points for meaningful existence, as Adela’s realizations above begin to demonstrate. Indeed, many of the moments that occur subsequent to the incident—and particularly the trial—suggest a shift in approach among several characters who become increasingly able to recognize, countenance, and navigate the irrational and the unspeakable. For example, even before the epiphany of her trial confession provides her with partial vindication, Adela reveals that she has become more intuitive through her ordeal, as she is able to perceive without being told that Mrs. Moore believes Aziz is innocent; her sense of this sentiment is so strong, in fact, that she believes it *has* been spoken (226-227).⁵⁰

Adela’s reflections immediately prior to her epiphany regarding Aziz’s innocence juxtapose the memory of her attempt to “see” India with a growing realization that the “significance” she has attributed to Aziz is false, thus once again tying the “problem of knowing” to cross-cultural tensions:

⁵⁰Of course, it should be observed that Fielding has just sent Adela a letter expressing the same sentiment, but the assertion of Aziz’s innocence and the fact that she correctly perceives—without being told—that Mrs. Moore feels similarly still speaks to increasing attention to unspoken meanings in this second half of the novel.

Beneath her were gathered all the wreckage of her silly attempt to see India—the people she had met at the Bridge Party, the man and his wife who hadn't sent their carriage, the old man who would lend his car, various servants, villagers, officials, and the prisoner himself. [. . .] Since they last met, she had elevated him into a principle of evil, but now he seemed to be what he had always been—a slight acquaintance. He was negligible, devoid of significance, dry like a bone (244)

In regarding Aziz's figure and using negative terms ("devoid of significance") that mirror the void of the Marabar to describe him, Adela begins to confront the fact that the meaning of the event will always elude her, that there is always a gap where the "truth" of it used to be:

. . . when Adela came to give her evidence the atmosphere was quieter than it had been since the beginning of the trial. Experts were not surprised. There is no stay in your native. He blazes up over a minor point, and has nothing left for the crisis . . .

But the crisis was still to come.

Adela had always meant to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, and she had rehearsed this as a difficult task—difficult, because her disaster in the cave was connected, though by a thread, with another part of her life, her engagement to Ronny. She had thought of love just before she went in, and had innocently asked Aziz what marriage was like⁵¹, and

⁵¹In yet another example of miscommunication and failures of understanding in the novel, this is not actually the question Adela asked, although this may very well have been the information she intended to get at with her inquiries.

she supposed that her question had roused evil in him. To recount this would have been incredibly painful, it was the one point she wanted to keep obscure; she was willing to give details that would have distressed other girls, but this story of her private failure she dared not allude to, and she dreaded being examined in public in case something came out. But as soon as she rose to reply, and heard the sound of her own voice, she feared not even that . . . (252-253)⁵²

Although Adela's epiphany remains incomplete here, Forster demonstrates her nascent awareness that the incident is connected to her realization, achieved just before entering the caves, that she does not feel any desire for her fiancé; this is her "failure." This awakening occurs alongside her expression of interest in Aziz's marital life, which she clearly conceives of as exotic and perhaps even debauched (as she naturally assumes that he is allowed to have multiple wives). Thus, I would contend that Adela's thoughts about Aziz—or, at the very least, about his relationships—before entering the caves awaken forbidden desires within her that she cannot consciously accommodate or admit, and the rape narrative is the result. Although she suggests that Aziz experienced an illicit desire (i.e., the "evil" that was "roused" in him) in the caves, Adela's thoughts in the courtroom indicate a growing awareness that her own "problematic" desires are at the heart of this "incident" in the caves. The fact that Adela's ogling of the punkah wallah⁵³

⁵²It is important to note, too, that Forster once again draws a link between the caves' meaning and colonial occupation by preceding Adela's thoughts with the xenophobic sentiments of the Anglo-Indians in the courtroom.

⁵³The punkah wallah is one of the more overtly sexualized figures in the novel: "Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform near the back, in the middle of the central gangway, and he caught her attention as she came in, and he seemed to control the proceedings. He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is

facilitates her epiphany further indicates that her own desires constitute the key to the “muddle” of the Marabar Caves; just as easily as her forbidden desires originally prompted repression and displacement, here they reverse that process: “Questions were asked, and to each she found the exact reply. Smoothly the voice in the distance proceeded, leading along the paths of truth, and the airs from the punkah behind her wafted her on . . .” (252-253). As Ted Boyle argues, this moment represents the weakening of Adela’s rationalizing instincts in the face of desire and emotion: “This young woman who has approached marriage as though it were essentially a rational business transaction has been overwhelmed for a moment by her emotions, by her very real desire to experience the purely physical facet of marriage which her rational code will not allow her to recognize” (478). She thus experiences a truth that is felt more than it is “known”; while she can find no articulable explanation for what has happened in the caves to replace the story she is retracting, she is able to realize and convey the fact that Aziz is innocent (255). The event is followed by mass chaos and a proliferation of inconsistent stories about what has just taken place, thus shattering any hope for a consistent “truthful” account of even the trial: “The Indians rose too, hundreds of things went on at once, so that afterwards each person gave a different account of that catastrophe” (255).

Thus, Forster clearly shows the weakening of British imperial epistemology toward the end of the novel. The festival in the final “Temple” section, while often presented as evidence of Forster’s deep appreciation for the exhilaration, multiplicity, and

condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god—not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impress her” (241).

inclusiveness of Hindu religion, can be read more simply as a moment in which reason and the search for the “truth” behind life’s mysteries are abandoned (at least temporarily), with exaltation as the result:

All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear. Some jumped in the air, others flung themselves prone and embraced the bare feet of the universal lover; the women behind the purdah slapped and shrieked; the little girl slipped out and danced by herself, her black pigtailed flying. Not an orgy of the body; the tradition of that shrine forbade it. But the human spirit had tried by a desperate contortion to ravish the unknown, flinging down science and history in the struggle, yes, beauty herself. Did it succeed? Books written afterwards say ‘Yes.’ But how, if there is such an event, can it be remembered afterwards? How can it be expressed in anything but itself? Not only from the unbeliever are mysteries hid, but the adept himself cannot retain them. He may think, if he chooses, that he has been with God, but as soon as he thinks it, it becomes history, and falls under the rules of time. (322-323)

Though Forster couches his message here in spiritual terms, his vision of the “mysteries” behind life, with its veiled truths always a step ahead of the seeker, echoes the Freudian-Lacanian notion of the surplus of meaning which the signifying chain pursues but never “catches” or represents. This moment here seems to mark the end of this hunt for a truth

that must be “ravished,” a conclusion that produces in ecstasy for the ceremony’s participants.

Moreover, in the wake of the trial, Forster shows his characters resisting the urge to impose logic where it does not belong and benefitting as a result. Fielding observes that Adela “was no longer examining life, but being examined by it; she had become a real person” (272).⁵⁴ Aziz, who is sometimes read along with Fielding as emblematic of the masculine (and even Western) search for certainty and fixity (Raschke, “Forster’s Passage to India: Re-Envisioning Plato’s Cave,” 15), resists any impulse to value logic over emotion at the end of the novel. Upon meeting Ralph Moore, Mrs. Moore’s son, he realizes to himself that his sentiment for Mrs. Moore does not stand up to the scrutiny of pure reason, but that his love for her is real all the same: “What did this eternal goodness of Mrs. Moore amount to? To nothing, if brought to the test of thought. She had not borne witness in his favor, nor visited him in the prison, yet she had stolen to the depths of his heart, and he always adored her” (350). For this reason, he decides to love the stranger Ralph as well. Perhaps Aziz’s realization at the end of the novel that “life is not a scientific manual” (312) is evidence of his progress toward realizing that the illogic of love or sympathy can conquer the “tests” to which such sentiment is often put.

The most important result of this turn away from pure rationality for characters at the end of the novel is the potential for true connection and community (although,

⁵⁴That said, Forster qualifies his praise of Miss Quested by noting the Indian response to her confession, which was still perceived as too arid and spirit-less: “But while relieving the Oriental mind, she had chilled it, with the result that he [Hamidullah] could scarcely believe she was sincere, and indeed from his standpoint she was not. For her behavior rested in cold justice and honesty; she had felt, while she recanted, no passion of love for those whom she had wronged. Truth is not truth in that exacting land unless there go with it kindness and more kindness again, unless the Word that was with God also is God. And the girl’s sacrifice—so creditable according to Western notions—was rightly rejected, because, though it came from her heart, it did not include her heart.”

unfortunately, not the full achievement of it).⁵⁵ Losing his “usual sane view of human intercourse,” Fielding comes to believe that “we exist not in ourselves, but in terms of each others’ minds—a notion for which logic offers no support and which had attacked him only once before, the evening after the catastrophe, when from the verandah of the club he saw the fists and fingers of the Marabar swell until they included the whole night sky” (277-278). It seems significant that as Fielding shuns reason in his musings regarding the need to connect with the minds of others, he likens the caves to parts of the hand, thereby rescuing them from the ordered numbering system of Aziz’s trial and restoring them to the language of the human body. This image, then, contains the promise of both physical and mental connection, denying the dividing and disembodied forces of empire.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *A Passage to India*’s characters seem to realize, as Paul Verhaeghe puts it, that “[t]o lack the answer becomes the solution. Beyond the mysterious power of the master and the opacity of knowledge there is nothing to be found but the freedom of desire” (Viii). Unfortunately, the novel ends with the novel’s primary (closeted) couple remaining hopelessly separated.⁵⁶ However, by destabilizing the master discourse of British Imperialism within the novel’s universe, Forster opens the door for the adoption of an ethos with respect to both language and human relations that is more accepting of

⁵⁵This is the tragedy of the book’s final pages, in which Aziz and Fielding yearn for friendship with each other (as well as something beyond that). Although I have attempted to demonstrate that the end of the novel presents characters making some steps toward breaking out of a structure that stifles sentiment and other “irrational” forces, it is clear that the structure yet remains as the novel closes and is directly responsible for the impossibility of romance between Aziz and Fielding.

⁵⁶The couple here is Aziz and Fielding, who agree that they are not yet able to be “friends” due to sexual mores as well as their own situation within imperialism.

the “muddle” in both. Denying the “true” story behind the incident in the caves, the novel points to greater meanings beyond factual “truths” and suggests, through the frustrations posed by its opacity, the need for inquiry that can both navigate these meanings and respond ethically to the challenges of “knowing” other people.

The “Ultimate Porter” on the “Ultimate Train”: Katherine Mansfield and the Discourse of the Master

Of all the authors included in this study, Katherine Mansfield was perhaps the one most outwardly sympathetic to Freudian ideas. There exists significant evidence of Mansfield’s familiarity with Freudian psychoanalysis. She mentions it explicitly only once in her published work, in “Psychology,” but also demonstrates an interest in Freudian psychoanalysis in her unpublished story, “The Two Strangers” (Dunbar 88). Mansfield’s involvement with *The New Age*, a leading journal, facilitated her awareness of Freud. According to Pamela Dunbar, the appearance of Freud’s works on sexuality and repression was one of two events (the other being the Great War) that had a visible impact on Mansfield’s work:

[I]n the café society she frequented on first returning to London it would have been impossible to avoid hearing about them . . . several members of her circle were deeply engaged with his ideas. A. R. Orage, for a time a close friend of hers as well as an editor of the journal *New Age* which published some of her early stories, was a passionate disciple. (x)

Moreover, Mansfield was a friend to both Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who were (however grudgingly, in Virginia’s case) instrumental in the dissemination of Freud’s ideas in English literary circles. In addition, through her work at *New Age*, Mansfield met both Beatrice Hastings, who “helped [Mansfield] immerse herself in the intellectual currents of the day,” including psychoanalysis, and M. D. Eder, one of Freud’s first

English disciples. While Mansfield was critical of authors like D. H. Lawrence who, in her view, were heavy-handed in integrating Freudian symbolism into their fiction (Kaplan 51), she was nonetheless intrigued by the psychoanalytic ideas to which she was exposed.

Certainly, Mansfield possessed an intense interest in human psychology and the workings of the human mind. Like Virginia Woolf, to whom she is often compared on the basis of her fluid, allusive (and elusive) narrative style, Mansfield explores the inner workings of her characters' private self or "selves," navigating (often through free indirect discourse) their diverse and sometimes contradictory thoughts and perspectives. Indeed, she seems intrigued by the same "privacy of the soul" that Woolf sets up as a kind of sacred, inviolable center of psychic life. Reticent or tongue-tied exteriors mask a rich and often turbulent inner life that Mansfield's characters are unable or unwilling to describe to those around them. Thus, as in Woolf's work, Mansfield's characters often appear psychologically marooned; this is the case in both "Je ne parle pas francais" and "Psychology," the two works I discuss below.

Mansfield conceptualized individual identity as extremely fluid and fragmented. As Sydney Janet Kaplan puts it, "Katherine Mansfield's aesthetics are grounded in a precocious recognition of the self as many selves" (169). Her prose reflects this concern. Rather than being either clearly omniscient or limited, the "voices" in her fiction occupy an unstable space in between these two modes. In describing this unusual and unsettling aspect of Mansfield's work, Conrad Aiken argues that Mansfield doesn't submerge herself in her characters, but rather forces her characters to submerge themselves in her; she is their "ventriloquist" (qtd. in Bennett 6), using free indirect discourse to weave

seamlessly in and out of their minds and thoughts. The effect is profoundly decentering, as it precludes easy identifications between the reader and these stories' characters. In fact, as Bennett has argued, her work is "in a certain sense, unreadable." "Certainly," Bennett writes, "it would seem that the normal protocols of reading which necessarily include certain sympathies, certain identifications and certain ethical judgements are suspended and we are left in a state of hermeneutic, ethical and indeed literary uncertainty" (12-13). Mansfield fundamentally prevents her readers from gaining a stable or coherent picture of her characters, often creating grotesquely "dishonest" or fragmented ones and thereby forcing recognition of how unstable and fluid the notion of the "self" actually is. Indeed, her fiction often seems directed toward debunking generally accepted "truths" about identity and, in particular, about sexuality. According to Kaplan, Mansfield was "suspicious of the idea of the *essential* self" and "[h]er emphasis on roles and role playing reflects her sense of self as multiplicity, ever changing, dependent on the shifting focus of relationships" (37). Kaplan argues that Mansfield's awakening to her own bisexuality—and attendant realization that her own desires and identifications did not fit into one simple category—may have enabled this perception of the self's fluidity, providing "the impetus for newer, more elastic definitions of the self" (170).

Mansfield did have some sense that the recognition of the multifaceted and multiplicitous self could be liberating. In a 1908 letter to her cousin Sylvia Pane, she wrote: "Would you not like to try *all* sorts of lives—one is so very small—but that is the satisfaction of writing--one can impersonate so many people" (Letters I, pp. 18-19; qtd. in Kaplan 177). Yet later, in 1920, she reflected on the more frustrating side of

experiencing oneself as fragments, pondering the suggestion that one can be “true to oneself”:

True to oneself! which self? Which of my many--well really, that's what it looks like coming to--hundreds of selves? For what with complexes and suppressions and reactions and vibrations and reflections, there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor, who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys to the willful guests. (Journal, p. 205; qtd. in Kaplan 177).

Here Mansfield's frustration with feeling like a “proprietor” who has lost control of her own house echoes Freud's “Copernican” realization that “the ego . . . is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind” (*Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* 353).⁵⁷ In this maneuver, Freud profoundly decentered the subject who attempts to “know” himself. Freud's formulation “*Wo es war, soll Ich werden*,”⁵⁸ discussed at greater length in Chapter 1, embodies this decentering, for it indicates that the knowing subject has been displaced from its central vantage point, now forced to pursue meaning within the gaps where “it” once was. According to Michael Roth, “One can rightly say that the unified ‘I’ as subject was denied by Freud. More accurately, this unified ‘I’ was seen as something to be aimed at, not something given; the integration of the ‘involuntary’ facets of one's personality into knowing is the progress toward the ‘I’ as subject. It is a ‘progress’ that is

⁵⁷Mansfield goes even further than Freud in this regard, dismissing the potential of memory or confession, two key elements in psychoanalysis, as the mere hallmarks of a misguided belief in an “essential self” that lies within all of us.

⁵⁸This could be literally translated as “Where the id was, there the ego shall be”; as noted in Chapter 1, however, Lacan rejects that translation in favor of, “I must come to the place where that was” (171).

never complete” (Psycho-Analysis as History 56). That is, knowledge of the self can only be pursued asymptotically, as it exists only in fragments, some of which remain hidden or unknowable to the subject.

Mansfield’s insistence upon the status of the “I” as fragmented brings her into line with Freud as well as Woolf, Forster, and even Sayers. Although Woolf and Forster do not fundamentally deny the existence or integrity of the individual, they nonetheless emphasize the importance of uncertainties, inconsistencies, and fluidity within their characters’ perceptions of self and self-presentations. Sayers, too, ultimately destabilizes her characters’ identities, as we will see in the next chapter: while painting most of her characters in broad brush strokes in accordance with the conventions of the detective genre, she allows Peter Wimsey’s war experiences to intrude throughout her oeuvre in surprising and destabilizing ways, suggesting the complexities that lie beneath the simple “playboy” persona he fosters. In short, all of these authors challenge the notion that their characters can ever completely “know” about each other or be completely known themselves. But unlike Woolf and Forster, who frequently attribute the difficulties of “knowing” about others to problems of communication and language, Mansfield directly points to the instability of individual identity as that which precludes such knowledge; one cannot be “known” because there exist a multiplicity of “selves” within the individual who impinge upon and comprise (and compromise) one’s public “self.” This is not to say that Mansfield is not just as concerned as Forster and Woolf with problems of communication and connection—indeed, she is; she simply focuses more heavily on the multitudinous, fragmented nature of the self in this exploration. Nonetheless, in her focus on this self, like the other authors in this work, she echoes

Freud's decentered and decentering theory of an unknowable center at the heart of human experience—i.e., the unconscious—that undermines the subject's attempts to present itself as a coherent “whole.”

“Je ne parle pas français” and the Failed Master

In “Je ne parle pas français” (1920)⁵⁹, Mansfield explores identity via a profoundly unreliable first-person narrator, Raoul Duquette. He is at once extremely voluble and revelatory and, yet, evasive and profoundly dishonest. His narration is riddled with inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions that undermine his attempts to appear forthright. Duquette's character is repellent; as Virginia Woolf notes, the story “breathes nothing but hate” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* i.216),⁶⁰ presenting Raoul as loathsome and inviting the reader's contempt for him. Duquette's loathsomeness stems largely from his self-important pretensions to knowing about himself and others more deeply than the average person. As the story's first person narrator, Duquette frequently meditates upon the fragmented nature of human identity as though he occupies a privileged and “whole” position, superior to the masses and, thus, immune from such dividedness. Mansfield suggests that this confidence is not only odious, but also unfounded; in fact, she consistently undermines Duquette's claims to complete self-awareness and perceptiveness by juxtaposing his arrogance with evidence of his own inaccuracy and propensity to contradict himself.

⁵⁹The version I am working from, which was published in the collection *Bliss and Other Stories* in 1920, is an abridged (and sanitized) version of an earlier draft published by the Heron Press earlier in that same year.

⁶⁰Andrew Bennett quotes this diary entry in his article “Hating Katherine Mansfield.” Bennett notes that Woolf does not refer to the story by name, but contextual details, including the date of her entry, indicate she was referring to this story.

In portraying himself as the all-knowing and unfragmented “I,” Duquette attempts to occupy what Lacan terms the “master position.” As discussed in Chapter 2, the master clings to “master signifiers,” which masquerade as being identical to what is signified—that is, they obscure the lack (or division) that the subject experiences with his or her entry into language (Verhaeghe 105). Duquette depends on his narration to perform the same function, claiming to occupy a privileged position from which he is able to perceive and relay the “truth” of the people he observes. Duquette’s opening monologue implicitly contrasts the fragmented and debased condition of those he observes with his own superior vantage point as the all-seeing observer:

I don’t know why I have such a fancy for this little café. It’s dirty and sad, sad, sad. It’s not as if it had anything to distinguish it from a hundred others -- it hasn’t; or as if the same strange types came here every day, whom one could watch from one’s corner and recognise and more or less (with a strong emphasis on the less) get the hang of.

But pray don’t imagine that those brackets are a confession of my humility before the mystery of the human soul. Not at all; I don’t believe in the human soul. I never have. I believe that people are like portmanteaux -- packed with certain things, started going, thrown about, tossed away, dumped down, lost and found, half emptied suddenly, or squeezed fatter than ever, until finally the Ultimate Porter swings them on to the Ultimate Train and away they rattle . . .

Not but what these portmanteaux can be very fascinating. Oh, but very! I see myself standing in front of them, don't you know, like a Customs official.

'Have you anything to declare? Any wines, spirits, cigars, perfumes, silks?'

And the moment of hesitation as to whether I am going to be fooled just before I chalk that squiggle, and then the other moment of hesitation just after, as to whether I have been, are perhaps the two most thrilling instants in life. Yes, they are, to me. (43)

Denying humility in the "face" of a supposed "mystery," Duquette takes on a position as the master-who-knows all and intuits what is behind the façades of the "travelers" he meets. Duquette's reference to "portmanteaux," too, is suggestive. Although here he uses the word literally to draw an analogy between the people he observes and suitcases, it also echoes Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which Humpty Dumpty redefines "a portmanteau word" as the product of two other words, the combination of which creates an entirely new meaning. In the story, Humpty Dumpty displays an attitude toward language that seems eerily similar to Duquette's. Responding to Alice's charge that his use of the word "glory" to signify "a nice knock-down argument" was nonsensical, he asserts his absolute power to make a signifier stand for whatever signified he chooses and embody his entire meaning therein:

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you CAN make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that's all.’

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. ‘They've a temper, some of them—particularly verbs, they're the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what *I* say!’

‘Would you tell me, please,’ said Alice ‘what that means?’

‘Now you talk like a reasonable child,’ said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. ‘I meant by “impenetrability” that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life.’

‘That's a great deal to make one word mean,’ Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

Humpty Dumpty's asserts that one can choose to be the “master” of language, rather than vice versa; for him, the sign is not arbitrary, as structuralists would contend, but something into which you can cram any meaning you choose, bending it to your will and specific intention.

Humpty Dumpty's theory of language is echoed in Duquette's suggestion that he can describe and thereby, in fact, *determine* who these human “portmanteaux” passing

before his gaze are. One might argue that he initially qualifies his ability to “get the hang” of people, but even there, he does so by using the impersonal pronoun “one”; in this move, he distances himself from those average people who are “less” able to “get the hang of” others. Indeed, Duquette envisions himself as the Customs official who possesses the ultimate authority to identify and make public what people have left “undeclared” – that is, the “private” (in Woolfian terms) or “unconscious” (in Freudian ones) aspects of psychic life beneath our public selves. The metaphor of the Customs official emphasizes Duquette’s sense of his own particularity and wholeness, while he uses the symbol of the portmanteaux to suggest that all the other people he sees comprise a bloated jumble of different parts that remains constantly at the mercy of the Ultimate Porter and Train (on whose level Duquette, as Customs official, appears to be).

Duquette meditates obsessively upon his own existence and selfhood, and it is clear, despite his claims to being an observer of human nature in general, that he is his own favorite subject matter. Moreover, although he claims to be attracted both to his friend Dick and to Dick’s fiancée, Mouse, Duquette’s most intense desires appear to be directed toward himself. His loving description of his own features is by far the most sensuous moment of the story. This description occurs as he is meditating upon a letter from Dick, his supposed love object:

I read it standing in front of the (unpaid for) wardrobe mirror. It was early morning. I wore a blue kimono embroidered with white birds and my hair was still wet; it lay on my forehead, wet and gleaming.

‘Portrait of Madame Butterfly,’ said I, ‘on hearing of the arrival of *ce cher Pinkerton.*’ (53)

Duquette finds himself entirely distracted from the content of the note, entranced by his own image. Dressed in a kimono and imagining himself as Madame Butterfly awaiting her husband, he blurs the boundaries between male and female, desire and desired; he is self-sufficient and whole because he has made himself his own love object. The moment strongly echoes Freud's description of narcissists "whose libidinal development [has] suffered some disturbance" and who, as a result, "plainly [seek] *themselves* as a love-object" (*On Narcissism* 87).

In directing his desires inwards, Duquette effectively denies his own dividedness as a subject of language. In so doing, he reinforces his position "outside" of discourse and desire; rather than pursuing jouissance via an address to others, he speaks to and desires only himself. According to Lacan, this is precisely the position of the master. The subject's introduction into language serves as the motor of desire; thus, in denying this split at his core, the master both refuses to participate in its circulations and, in that refusal, claims access to a knowledge—that is, the *objet petit a*—that Lacan says necessarily eludes the speaking subject. Put slightly differently, the master pretends to have access to knowledge that is precluded by the very structure of language into which the speaking subject is necessarily inserted.⁶¹ He denies one of Freud's most profound discoveries, namely that "the Unconscious contains a knowledge which is unknown to the subject, and that this knowledge articulates a certain satisfaction beyond the subject" (Verhaeghe 105). Ironically, this insistence that he is "at one" with knowledge renders the master blind to his "own truth"—that is, that "even he is divided" (107). In order to

⁶¹According to Verhaeghe, the subject's pursuit of a truth that "remains unknown to himself" is "the motor and the starting-point of each discourse," even the ones other than the master's (101).

deny this fracture at his core, the master attempts to talk his way out of the problem, pursuing his lost unity through language. He does this “by accumulating signifiers combined into a network” (105), evincing hyper-expressiveness in an effort to embody or convey the knowledge that the master claims to possess. Ironically, then, “the cause of the original loss is used as a means to cancel this loss” (Verhaeghe 105).

In the manner of the master, Duquette is garrulous in his project of conveying the “truth” of a “submerged world” into which he claims to have insight. He consistently portrays himself as all-knowing, particularly with respect to himself, and suggests early on that his compulsion to communicate was inspired by his desire to relay the very sort of originary “truth” that Verhaeghe and Lacan identify as the impetus behind the master’s proliferating signifiers. After meeting Dick Harmon, the man for whom he claims to have developed feelings, Duquette locates the significance of their encounter in his wish to convey the whole of his life (“submerged” and otherwise) to another person:

. . . I was quite breathless at the thought of what I’d done. I had shown somebody both sides of my life. Told him everything as sincerely and truthfully as I could. Taken immense pains to explain things about my submerged life that really were disgusting and never could possibly see the light of literary day. On the whole I had made myself out far worse than I was -- more boastful, more cynical, more calculating. (51)

In his retelling of the incident, Duquette asserts his own mastery over the representation he has offered Dick, including the partial untruths or distortions. He admits freely to these inaccuracies because his awareness of them affirms the depth and extent of his self-

knowledge. Viewed as such, this moment of supposed surrender actually represents Duquette's effort to claim complete authority over his self-representation.

Duquette seems to conceptualize the author as a godlike entity who possesses superior knowledge and even control over what "truth" is. Early in the story, he asserts his own perfect and complete self-knowledge:

I date myself from the moment that I became the tenant of a small bachelor flat on the fifth floor of a tall, not too shabby house . . . There I emerged, came out into the light [. . .]

Ah, I can see myself that first evening . . . walking about on tiptoe, arranging and standing in front of the glass with my hands in my pockets and saying to that radiant vision: 'I am a young man who has his own flat. I write for two newspapers. I am going in for serious literature. I am starting a career. The book that I shall bring out will simply stagger the critics. I am going to write about things that have never been touched on before. I am going to make a name for myself as a writer about the submerged world. But not as others have done before me. Oh, no! Very naively, with a sort of tender humour and *from the inside*, as though it were all quite simple, quite natural. I see my way quite perfectly. Nobody has ever done it as I shall do it because none of the others have lived my experiences. I'm rich--I'm rich. (48; emphasis mine)

In this passage, he once again affirms his ability to see himself "perfectly" (albeit retrospectively) and embody these insights in his descriptions of himself. He asserts absolute control over his life story by setting its "beginning" in adulthood ("I date myself

from the moment that I became the tenant of a small bachelor flat on the fifth floor of a tall, not too shabby house . . .”), thus bypassing stages in his life—in particular, childhood and birth—in which he possessed little to no agency; he imagines himself simply emerging into being out of the ether that day. Moreover, he brags that he can see other aspects of the world “quite perfectly” and “from the inside,” and believes it is his duty as an author to convey the perceptions gained from his privileged perspective to the world at large.

However, as Lacan notes, the master’s paradoxical attempts to pursue his lost unity via language—the structure that created this disunity—necessarily fail, as the superior position the “master” attempts to claim is fundamentally unstable and cannot be sustained. The notion that the master and the master-signifier can be one and the same is false. The agent pretends to be at one with the master-signifier—“one and undivided” (Verhaeghe 107)—but must ultimately realize that admit his own dividedness as a subject of language (Verhaeghe 108).

In Verhaeghe’s formulation via Lacan, the speaker who attempts to be at one with his own “truth” finds that he ultimately loses control of it as it disperses across the proliferation of signifiers that convey and pursue it; the subject is “a passive effect of the signifying chain, certainly not the master of it. The agent of discourse is only a fake agent, ‘un semblant,’ a make-believe entity. The real driving force lies underneath, in the position of the truth” (101-102). The existence of language creates the condition in which the subject comes into being. Far from being the agent who controls the structure and content of language, the speaking subject is at the mercy of discourse. As an effect,

The ego does not speak, it is spoken. Observation of the process of free association leads to this conclusion, but even ordinary speaking yields the same result. Indeed, when I speak, I do not know what I am going to say, unless I have learned it by heart or I am reading my speech from a paper. In all other cases, I do not speak so much as I am spoken, and this speech is driven by a desire with or without my conscious agreement. This is a matter of simple observation, but it wounds man's narcissism deeply; which is why Freud called it the third great narcissistic humiliation of mankind. (Verhaeghe 101)

Thus, as much as the master might like to believe he can use discourse to his own advantage to bolster and validate his powerful position as "he-who-knows,"⁶² such control is impossible. He who speaks is always a subject of desire and, as such, is driven by it—"with or without [his] conscious agreement" (Verhaeghe 101).

Duquette's musings regarding his own identity ultimately embody and reveal his own "decentering." While Duquette portrays himself as a unified and all-knowing subject, his reflections are riddled with contradictions and evidence of his own fragmentation. This tension in Duquette's discourse becomes clear even in his very first real introduction to the reader: "My name is Raoul Duquette. I am twenty-six years old and a Parisian, a true Parisian. About my family— it really doesn't matter. I have no

⁶²I take this phrase from Verhaeghe's comparison of "Freud the seeker" and "Freud-who-knew," the latter being a failed master, according to him (56). According to Verhaeghe, "Freud-who-knew" held sway in Freud's case study of Dora, wherein he attempted to explain all of Dora's symptoms, motivations, and dreams in intricate detail, to the point where "Dora couldn't get a word in edgeways" (Verhaeghe 57). Instead of allowing her (and her unconscious) to speak, Freud attempts to explain the "truths" behind her condition for her. He ultimately disavowed his approach in this case and warned others against adopting it, as it thwarted the patient's ability to navigate and work through her unconscious thoughts and desires. Thus, the Dora case study revealed the dangers of attempts be the one "who knows" and explains—that is, of the master position, which Duquette attempts to occupy.

family; I don't want any. I never think about my childhood. I've forgotten it" (47).

Duquette's overview of himself and his life is sketchy, but it exudes the same confidence in his ability to convey the "truth" that is evident in his later assertions of a privileged authorial position. He seems particularly careful to deny the force or influence of memory in his life, as though he believes that admitting its significance would be to acknowledge forces that undermine or destabilize the individual:

. . . I've no patience with people who can't let go of things, who will follow after and cry out. When a thing's gone, it's gone. It's over and done with. Let it go then! Ignore it, and comfort yourself, if you do want comforting, with the thought that you never do recover the same thing that you lose. It's always a new thing. The moment it leaves you it's changed. Why, that's even true of a hat you chase after; and I don't mean superficially—I mean profoundly speaking . . . I have made it a rule of my life never to regret and never to look back. Regret is an appalling waste of energy, and no one who intends to be a writer can indulge in it. You can't get it into shape; you can't build on it; it's only good for wallowing in. Looking back, of course, is equally fatal to Art. It's keeping yourself poor. Art can't and won't stand poverty. (46)

Duquette values art—and, more specifically, writing—as a means of creating and asserting one's own reality; as a result, he fears the impact of memory (which the subject cannot alter) because it could undermine the efforts or authority of the artist to create a world for the reader. Above all, he wishes to consolidate the supremacy of an 'I' who

can set the parameters of his own existence, live in that present, and ignore anything he cannot directly alter or affect as unimportant.

Paradoxically, through Duquette's increasingly passionate disavowals of influences that could loosen his control over his own story and destabilize him, his dividedness as a subject becomes increasingly evident. His denial of the past—which, as Freud tells us, exerts a myriad of powerful pressures on the individual that are beyond his awareness or control—proves unsustainable. This fact is apparent when, immediately on the heels of this denial, he describes in significant detail the “one memory that stands out at all” for him:

When I was about ten our laundress was an African woman, very big, very dark, with a check handkerchief over her frizzy hair. When she came to our house she always took particular notice of me, and after the clothes had been taken out of the basket she would lift me up into it and give me a rock while I held tight to the handles and screamed for joy and fright. I was tiny for my age and pale, with a lovely little half open mouth -- I feel sure of that.

One day when I was standing at the door, watching her go, she turned round and beckoned to me, nodding and smiling in a strange secret way. I never thought of not following. She took me into a little outhouse at the end of the passage, caught me up in her arms and began kissing me. Ah, those kisses! Especially those kisses inside my ears that nearly deafened me.

[. . . .]

As this performance was repeated once a week it is no wonder that I remember it so vividly. Besides, from that very first afternoon, my childhood was, to put it prettily, ‘kissed away.’ I became very languid, very caressing, and greedy beyond measure. And so quickened, so sharpened, I seemed to understand everybody and be able to do what I liked with everybody.

I suppose I was in a state of more or less physical excitement, and that was what appealed to them. For all Parisians are more than half—oh, well, enough of that. And enough of my childhood, too. Bury it under a laundry basket instead of a shower of roses and *passons outré*. (47-48)

In this moment, it seems as though Duquettte momentarily loses control over his tale, admitting this memory of trauma to his narrative despite his assertions that the past does not matter. At first, he retains his absolute authority and knowledge by demonstrating a preternatural awareness of himself and his qualities at that age (“I was tiny for my age and pale, with a lovely little half open mouth—I feel sure of that”), but his description soon dissolves into something less affected and performed; he both reveals a moment in which he lost control and clearly undermines his own claims to a wholeness that depend on denying memory’s force. In so doing, he highlights the falsity and fragility of his position of “master.” Moreover, here he suggests the conditions that may have inspired him to seek this role in the first place; indeed, he claims that these encounters with the laundress first inspired him to believe that he could understand everybody and be able to “do what I liked with everybody” (47). Through his tales, he is not only denying the dividedness at his core that language instates but, also, the feeling of being violated—the

rupture—that trauma creates.⁶³ The absolute knowledge and control that are the province of the master represent a diametric counterpoint to the powerlessness of the molested child whose history continues to intrude upon and shape Duquette’s psychic life against his will.

Duquette’s desire to deny language’s function as an address to an “other” outside of oneself is clear in the story’s very title, which derives from a phrase Dick’s fiancée utters multiple times throughout the story. The phrase is obviously a paradox; through it, she uses a language she claims she doesn’t know in order to deny fluency. Dick notes that the statement is a lie when Mouse first makes it, but she repeats the phrase several times, and Duquette takes it up as a kind of mantra, thus indicating its significance beyond the literal (and false) assertion that Mouse doesn’t speak French. Mansfield implies that it represents Mouse’s perception of the difficulty—if not impossibility⁶⁴ — of actual communication and intimacy with others. Thus, it is appropriate that the phrase resonates with Duquette, and that Mansfield makes it the title of her (or, rather, his) story. For Duquette, it represents his own refusal of the social functions of language, a resolve to “opt out.”

As Duquette’s story of the laundress and numerous other contradictions within his story indicate, however, Duquette’s attempts to remain firmly in his own solipsistic vacuum are only marginally successful. Duquette’s inability to ignore memories of the past undermines his efforts to exercise complete control over his tale; language slips

⁶³Duquette frequently denies the existence of splits and divisions, as is evident not only in his imperious “I” narration, but also in his blurring of gender boundaries.

⁶⁴From her first meeting with Duquette until their parting after Dick has abandoned her, the shy Mouse seems to use the phrase to indicate a feeling of isolation or nervousness around others.

away from him, relaying thoughts and memories which he clearly wished to repress and thereby thwarting his attempts to make discourse the vehicle of a very deliberate, carefully composed story about himself. Ironically, then, it is in these moments of lost control that Duquette comes closest to relaying the truth of his own “submerged world.”

Conquering Love: “Psychology” and the Evasion of Desire

As noted above, “Psychology” (1920) is the only one of Mansfield’s stories in which she explicitly mentions psychoanalysis. As Mansfield scholar Pamela Dunbar notes,

In keeping with the general British coyness about acknowledging any acquaintance with Freud, Mansfield nowhere mentions his name. But in “Psychology” (1919?⁶⁵), one of her most intriguing stories, she does refer to the then revolutionary technique of ‘psycho-analysis’—and in a context which makes clear she has an understanding of what it involved. And whilst her declared approach to her art was devoutly anti-theoretical the content and layered structure of many of her stories show what appears to be a considerable debt to the lead metaphor and insights of depth-psychology. (x- xi)

Appropriately, given this explicit nod to Freud, the story focuses on the relationship between language and desire that is at the heart of Freud’s thought.

“Psychology,” like “Je ne parle pas francais,” is a story preoccupied with its characters’ failure to recognize and accept the “impossible” conditions imposed on all subjects of

⁶⁵This “?” is in the original.

language. “Je ne parle pas francais” explores this problem with respect to a single character who attempts to envelop a vast “perfect” knowledge of the wider world within his own narration—who, in a sense, wants to swallow the world whole. In so doing, he avoids the pursuit of the *objet petit a*, the last term of desire that remains always out of reach for the subject of language. In short, he denies the Lacanian “Other” that comprises the unconscious traces that encounters in/with language embody and leave within the subject, instead channeling desire only toward his own images and fantasies of himself. By contrast, “Psychology” presents a similar avoidance of desire, but within a relationship. Although they do not share Duquette’s solipsism, the two unnamed characters in the story evince the same confidence in their ability to “know” about one another without participating in or contributing to the circulations and uncertainties of desire itself. Like Duquette, they attempt to set themselves apart from language as the motor of desire, with disastrous results.

As in “Je ne parle pas francais,” the protagonists in “Psychology” are artists; he is a novelist and she is a playwright. The story takes place largely over a single visit the man pays to the woman’s home studio, during which they engage entirely in superficial chitchat about the arts and other “weighty” matters. Like Duquette, Mansfield’s unnamed protagonists attempt to take on the master’s position insofar as they claim to be “at one” with the truth that lies beneath the words they and others speak. This conceit hinges on the pair’s perception that they are able to effect a “complete surrender” to each other, laying themselves bare through their arid discussions of the arts and other impersonal matters:

Like two open cities in the midst of some vast plain⁶⁶ their two minds lay open to each other. And it wasn't as if he rode into hers like a conqueror, armed to the eyebrows and seeing nothing but a gay silken flutter—nor did she enter his like a queen walking soft on petals. No, they were eager, serious travelers, absorbed in understanding what was to be seen and discovering what was hidden— making the most of this extraordinary absolute chance which made it possible for him to be utterly truthful to her and for her to be utterly sincere with him. (84)

The two are supremely confident in their “extraordinary” ability to speak and perceive everything about each other, even that which is “hidden” to everyone else. As Mansfield’s language makes clear, they view their powers to know about each other as “absolute.” It is notable that Mansfield is careful to deny an element of domination in these characters’ efforts to know each other, which would seem to distinguish them from the kind of truth-seeking in which characters like Adela Quested, Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw, and Raoul Duquette engage. Yet I would argue that the element of “mastery” in the Freudian-Lacanian sense is still present in the couple’s insistence on gaining access to that which is hidden within discourse and using language in a way that is “utterly truthful.”

Verhaeghe (using Lacan) argues that the pursuit of such absolute “truth” in discourse is both misguided and, indeed, fatal to the human being as social creature. As already noted, Lacanian psychoanalysis reveals that communication must always be a failure in the sense that it can never fully embody the meaning or intent behind the

⁶⁶This may be a reference to the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah (two of the “Cities of the Plain”), and thus allude to the sterility of their relationship and foreshadow a crisis.

speaker's words. In fact, if this "dreamt-of perfect communication and sexual relationship" were possible, then

the truth would find complete expression in the desire of the agent for the other, thus realizing the perfect relationship between them, whose product would be the definitive satisfaction that embraces the truth. This Hollywood scenario would be conditional upon everything taking place outside the realm of the signifier, otherwise it would be structurally impossible. Once one speaks, the verbalization of the truth of the matter becomes impossible, resulting in the impossibility of realizing one's desire in the place of the other . . . and thus in the impotence of the convergence between product and truth. (Verhaeghe 103)

Lacan's formulation of the master's discourse reveals, then, that the couple's claims to have achieved perfect understanding through speech must necessarily be false. The achievement of speech that could actually embody truth would herald the end not only of language, but also of the speaking subject itself for, as already noted in Chapter 2, language "provides the motor which keeps man going for ever" and which "[f]or Lacan . . . constitutes the basis of every form of human causality" (Verhaeghe 105). The master pursues this silent state because he perceives it as his only way of avoiding or denying his own dividedness but, ultimately, the living master must always be deposed. On the evening the story takes place, the couple in "Psychology," like the faltering master, depends more on silence than speech in attempting to maintain their privileged, all-knowing position with respect to each other—particularly when they are on the verge of admitting passion to their relationship. Unfortunately, their failure to recognize this as a

flawed approach leads to the demise of their friendship entirely; they discover that, in addition to forestalling romance, silence prevents any kind of meaningful human connection.

As already noted, silence stops the signifying chain that is the vehicle of desire. Such a lack of passion is crucial to the special “communion” that the couple has achieved in their friendship, having already reached an advanced enough age (30) to forego such things:

And the best of it was they were both of them old enough to enjoy their adventure to the full without any stupid emotional complication. Passion would have ruined everything; they quite saw that. Besides, all that sort of thing was over and done with for both of them -- he was thirty-one, she was thirty -- they had had their experiences, and very rich and varied they had been, but now was the time for harvest -- harvest. Weren't his novels to be very big novels indeed? And her plays. Who else had her exquisite sense of real English Comedy? . . . (84)

While their attempts to express themselves in language through their artistic efforts might suggest a desire to communicate, it appears they have frequently avoided communication—and desire itself—in their everyday life, and that their art is in fact the means by which they avoid actual discourse. Like Duquette, they may value their art because it provides them with the illusion of complete, God-like control over the worlds (and words) they create. Certainly, here they turn to thoughts of their writing in order to avoid the messiness and inexactness that a frank conversation about their feelings would entail. Their perfect harmony depends on their patently absurd resignation at 30 and 31,

respectively, to being “past” passion. Moreover, in their view, this position outside the circulations of desire affords them a privileged, detached perspective on human behavior. In this way, too, they resemble Duquette.

Like the flawed therapist who asserts his authority by becoming the one “who knows,” the couple affirms their superior knowledge and perspective by “diagnosing” the afflictions of their own “sick” society:

He got up, knocked out his pipe, ran his hand through his hair and said: “I have been wondering very much lately whether the novel of the future will be a psychological novel or not. How sure are you that psychology *qua* psychology has got anything to do with literature at all?”

“Do you mean you feel there’s quite a chance that the mysterious non-existent creatures -- the young writers of today -- are simply trying to jump the psychologist’s claim?”

“Yes, I do. And I think it’s because this generation is just wise enough to know that it is sick and to realise that its only chance of recovery is by going into its symptoms -- making an exhaustive study of them—tracking them down—trying to get at the root of the trouble.” (86)

This direct reference to psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis highlights the fact that it is not society but the characters themselves who are “afflicted.” In fact, this moment constitutes their attempt to cover their growing realization that their relationship has reached a moment of crisis and combat the profound paralysis they experience with this epiphany. A shift in their relationship becomes apparent when the man notes that the

woman's studio is the one place that disrupts his perfect detachment from the world around him:

“I simply haven't got any external life at all. I don't know the names of things a bit— trees and so on—and I never notice places or furniture or what people look like. One room is just like another to me—a place to sit and read or talk in— except,” and here he paused, smiled in a strange naïve way, and said, “except in this studio.” He looked round him and then at her; he laughed in his astonishment and pleasure. He was like a man who wakes up in a train to find that he has arrived, already, at the journey's end.

“Here's another queer thing. If I shut my eyes I can see this place down to every detail--every detail . . . Now I come to think of it—I've never realised this consciously before. Often when I am away from here I revisit it in spirit—wander about among your red chairs, stare at the bowl of fruit on the back table—and just touch, very lightly, that marvel of a sleeping boy's head.”

[. . .]

“I love that little boy,” he murmured. And then they were both silent. (85)

Somewhat like Duquette, the man is inclined to privilege his own internal reality and its logic over the external; the environment in which he reads and talks is typically just a backdrop to his life rather than a component thereof, and, significantly, other people simply blend into it. In noting this avoidance of “any external life,” the man

acknowledges an inclination to live outside of discourse and the social. The woman's studio thwarts this cool detachment because it represents a place in which he finally begins to countenance the possibility of admitting desire into his life. In noting this sensation has existed for some time before becoming conscious, moreover, he tacitly acknowledges the existence of psychic forces beyond his conscious control—that is, of the unconscious itself. Of course, he immediately perceives this loss of control as frightening and potentially devastating. His loving returns “in spirit” to his friend's house reveal the growth of a dreaded “passion” that could “ruin everything.” His focus in particular on the statue of the sweetly sleeping child invokes the specter of sexual reproduction and childbirth, bringing its possibilities into their theretofore placid and sexless relations. Mansfield further emphasizes this moment's status as a sexual awakening through images of stirred waters; in this transition, their comfortable silence becomes dreadful:

A new silence came between them. Nothing in the least like the satisfactory pause that had followed their greetings -- the “Well, here we are together again, and there's no reason why we shouldn't go on from where we left off last time.” That silence could be contained in the circle of warm, delightful fire and lamplight. How many times hadn't they flung something into it just for the fun of watching the ripples break on the easy shores. But into this unfamiliar pool the head of the little boy sleeping his timeless sleep dropped -- and the ripples flowed away, away -- boundlessly far -- into deep glittering darkness.

And then both of them broke it. She said: "I must make up the fire," and he said: "I have been trying a new . . ." Both of them escaped. She made up the fire and put the table back, the blue chair was wheeled forward, she curled up and he lay back among the cushions. Quickly! Quickly! They must stop it from happening again. (85)

Mansfield contrasts the aridity of the fire in which the woman seeks refuge—and which she envisions as able to enclose (and thereby protect) the lost, comfortable silence they previously enjoyed—with the image of threateningly boundless waters into which the child's head falls, the form this "new" silence has taken in her mind. In its fluidity and mention of the child, who as noted above represents a clear symbol of fertility and sexuality, the image is emblematic of the desires they attempt to deny.

After engaging in some idle conversation about novels and psychology, the couple briefly regains some of their equilibrium during their "diagnosis" of the afflictions of their generation, which I have already mentioned above. At first, it appears that this conversation has enabled them to regain the superior position outside actual discourse (as opposed to chatter) that they previously occupied, complete with their special silent telepathy: "On the talk went. And now it seemed they really had succeeded. She turned in her chair to look at him while she answered. Her smile said: 'We have won.' And he smiled back, confident: 'Absolutely'" (86). In this wordless "exchange," they seem to have regained their perfect silent communion and the sense of command with which they began the story. However, it does not last, and the silence that was once stabilizing becomes fatal to their relationship. They find that despite their best efforts at remove, detachment, and silence, they have been "inserted" into language in the sense that Lacan

describes, and escape is impossible. Mansfield's narration reflects a sensitivity to the precariousness of their position, noting that the woman senses the potential to be "destroyed" if they were to "give way" to their feelings.

Unfortunately, the couple ultimately fails to recognize that the greater danger lies on the other side, in refusing to admit desire. Mansfield implies that the couple would need to find a way to articulate their feelings, in all their inexactness and threatening amorphousness, in order for their friendship to survive this moment. Yet they ultimately fail to see the possibilities of expression and articulation as anything other than potentially devastating. At first, they entertain the possibility of a romantic relationship, as the imperative to speak strengthens and intensifies and the tenuous sense of triumph they have achieved through "psychology" dissolves into a realization of its falsity: ". . . the smile undid them. It lasted too long; it became a grin. They saw themselves as two little grinning puppets jiggling away into nothingness" (86). With this new sense of unease in their silence comes a sense of the sterility of their current state, as well as some inclination to embrace the "thrill" of uncertainty:

[. . .] They were silent this time from sheer dismay.

The clock struck six merry little pings and the fire made a soft flutter. What fools they were—heavy, stodgy, elderly—with positively upholstered minds.

And now the silence put a spell upon them like solemn music. It was anguish -- anguish for her to bear it and he would die—he'd die if it were broken . . . And yet he longed to break it. Not by speech. At any rate not by their ordinary maddening chatter. There was another way for

them to speak to each other, and in the new way he wanted to murmur:
'Do you feel this too? Do you understand it at all?' . . .

Instead, to his horror, he heard himself say: 'I must be off; I'm
meeting Brand at six.' (86-87)

His longing to articulate questions rather than speak in the authoritative voice of the literary critic that he hid behind previously is significant, as it creates the potential for him to speak in a way that goes beyond "maddening chatter" and opens up the opportunity for meaningful discourse between them. Yet he finds himself unable to speak in this "new way"; in a moment that, ironically, reveals just how little he is master of himself or his speech, he is surprised to hear himself declare that he must go immediately.

The woman outwardly accepts his excuse and resumes their inane conversation, affirming his reasons for leaving, but inwardly reflects that a crisis has occurred with his failure to articulate anything beyond his intention to leave: "'What the devil made him say that instead of the other?' . . . 'You've hurt me; you've hurt me! We've failed!' said her secret self while she handed him his hat and stick, smiling gaily. She wouldn't give him a moment for another word, but ran along the passage and opened the big outer door" (87). The two characters remain silent while she attempts to "plead" with him telepathically: "Why don't you go? No, don't go. Stay. No-go!" (87). She directly links his imperious attitude to this failure of speech, reflecting that he is "superior to it all," including the fantasy of life together, represented in her vision of sharing a garden, that his "spiritual vision" had inspired for her (87). Interestingly, their "telepathy" retains some little integrity or efficacy here; through free indirect discourse, he "responds" to her

reflections that he could not share her vision of the shared garden: “She was right. He did see nothing at all. Misery! He’d missed it. It was too late to do anything now. Was it too late? Yes, it was. A cold snatch of hateful wind blew into the garden. Curse life! He heard her cry ‘*au revoir*’ and the door slammed” (87). Yet this mode of language-less “discourse” is revealed here as meaningless, as it completely fails them in their attempts to resolve the crisis through a new understanding. The scene is somewhat reminiscent of Joyce’s “The Dead,” which concludes with Gabriel Conroy resigning himself to a bloodless existence after a momentary awakening of desire for his wife.⁶⁷ Mansfield implies here that the man’s failure to communicate inspires a similar resignation. The wind that blows in from the garden appears “cold” and “hateful” in the wake of his inability to express his feelings, thus indicating that the garden has transitioned from a symbol of life and fertility to one of cold, barren aridity. Indeed, his exclamation “Curse life!” indicates that in opting out of language and thereby closing the door on any potential romantic relationship with the woman, he has committed to avoiding life itself. Mansfield’s characters thus bear out Lacan’s assertion that to avoid the circulations of discourse entails death. The couple’s shared telepathy, however remarkable or rare, is worthless (to say nothing of harmful) because it allows them to stand outside of the very system that powers desire and, thus, the drive for life.

Indeed, for the woman, too, this moment produces a kind of vacuum of feeling and meaning, an ending or death that parallels the “end” of the non-speaking subject as described by Lacan. At the end of the story, the woman descends into a “black gulf” of

⁶⁷In the story, Gabriel’s failure to pursue his desire for his wife (awakened in a fleeting moment, after several years of ostensibly passionless marriage) and inability to communicate his feelings relegate him to the ranks of the living dead, Joyce implies. The story ends with Gabriel lying silently in bed as snow blankets the world, unifying the living and the dead and implicitly likening them.

despair: “Running back into the studio she behaved so strangely. She ran up and down lifting her arms and crying: ‘Oh! Oh! How stupid! How imbecile! How stupid!’ And then she flung herself down on the *sommier* thinking of nothing—just lying there in her rage. All was over. What was over? Oh—something was. And she’d never see him again—never” (87). Though the woman changes her mind about seeing him again at the end of the story, Mansfield signals that this moment represents the utter, irrevocable failure of desire in the story’s final moments. At the end, a friend visits the woman, “an elderly virgin” and “pathetic creature” who comes by frequently with flowers (which are often “soiled”), expecting every time to find herself and her kindness turned away. Up to this point, the female protagonist has unfailingly invited her in, but in this moment she lies and says that she has “got someone with [her]” and is “hopelessly busy all evening” (88). The older woman is openly good-natured at the snub and insists on leaving the flowers she has brought with her friend:

‘It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter at all, darling,’ said the good friend.
‘I was just passing and I thought I’d leave you some violets.’ She fumbled down among the ribs of a large old umbrella. ‘I put them down here. Such a good place to keep flowers out of the wind. Here they are,’ she said, shaking out a dead bunch (88).

The old woman’s appearance at that particular moment and persistent kindness inspires a strange and ambiguous moment of “epiphany” for the younger woman, through which she seems to achieve some sense of resolution for this inner crisis:

For a moment she did not take the violets. But while she stood just inside, holding the door, a strange thing happened . . . Again she saw the

beautiful fall of the steps, the dark garden ringed with glittering ivy, the willows, the big bright sky. Again she felt the silence that was like a question. But this time she did not hesitate. She moved forward. Very softly and gently, as though fearful of making a ripple in that boundless pool of quiet, she put her arms around her friend.

‘My dear,’ murmured her happy friend, quite overcome by this gratitude. ‘They are really nothing. Just the simplest little thrippenny bunch.’

But as she spoke she was enfolded—more tenderly, more beautifully embraced, held by such a sweet pressure and for so long that the poor dear’s mind positively reeled and she just had the strength to quaver: ‘Then you really don’t mind me too much?’

‘Good-night, my friend,’ whispered the other. ‘Come again soon.’

(88)

One could read this moment as a celebratory embrace of love as it exists outside of heterosexual romantic relationships, here in the form of a friendship between the two women. Ironically, however, I would argue that this is the moment in which their friendship is most false and that the embrace represents the younger woman’s newfound resolve to shun meaningful connection hereafter. Her decisiveness in the face of the “silence that was like a question” as she embraces the older woman might indicate that she now pursues such a relationship, but her choice for the object of this gesture belies that notion. The woman’s friend, elderly and virginal, is a fairly obvious and perhaps

even crude symbol of deferred desire and aridity, as are the dead flowers⁶⁸ for which the woman thanks her friend by hugging her. Moreover, it is significant that the woman lets her lie stand, failing to invite her friend into her house and instead imploring her to “Come again soon.” In using this phrase, she both delays intimacy and offers only the most generic invitation; indeed, as a staple of the neighborhood shopkeeper (or, worse, his silent window signs), it contains very little warmth. Finally, the fact that she embarks upon the embrace with extreme care to avoid “making a ripple in that boundless pool of quiet” implies that her regained resolve stems not from a decision to tackle the question posed by the silence, but to ignore it. In so doing, she seems to abandon all the possibilities embodied in the image of the little boy, which had represented so much promise for her and her male friend earlier in the story.

Mansfield indicates as much when she describes the female character’s return to the inner sanctum of her studio, where she tidies the scene of her undoing on the sofa: “The *sommier* was very untidy. All the cushions ‘like furious mountains’ as she said; she put them in order before going over to the writing-table” (88). Having achieved order there once again, she writes her male friend a letter expanding upon the conversation about the psychological novel in which they had earlier sought refuge. She signs the latter with the same phrase she had used with the elderly virgin: “Good-night, my friend. Come again, soon.” This moment could conceivably represent an achievement, insofar as the woman overcomes her distress to contact her male friend and indicate her willingness

⁶⁸The elderly woman notes that she has protected the flowers from the same chill wind that the male protagonist mentioned during his exit, while he was in the throes of disappointment and confusion over the missed opportunity with the woman. In echoing that moment here, Mansfield telegraphs once again the connection between this moment of failure between the couple and the desiccation and sterility that the woman and her flowers represent.

to try to achieve intimacy with him once again. Yet the impersonality of this first “attempt” to connect implies the opposite. In the letter, she resorts once again to safe topics and delivers an “invitation” that she had used the moment before to turn her older friend away.

Conclusion

Mansfield’s tales reflect an awareness of the fact, best articulated by Lacan, that opting out of the circulation of desire and language has dire consequences. It is impossible ever to achieve “perfect” communion of the kind pursued by the couple in “Psychology,” and the attempt to be at one with language, to be master of it, necessarily fails—and takes the subject with it. Mansfield’s characters refuse to be part of the system of language and, in that, refuse desire itself. This refusal is at the heart of their pathologies, engendering a solipsism that is, ultimately, profoundly devastating.

A Mystery without Solution: Death, Trauma, and the Unconscious in Dorothy Sayers

“It is fortunate for the mystery-monger that, whereas, up to the present, there is only one known way of getting born, there are endless ways of getting killed” – Dorothy Sayers.

The work of detective novelist Dorothy Sayers is not often included within the canon of Bloomsbury fiction. That said, both her biography and her fiction reveal suggestive connections and affinities between Sayers and the world of artists like Virginia Woolf. Sayers lived in Bloomsbury for a significant portion of her adult life and, thus, was embedded in the area’s “bohemian” culture and allowed it to inform her work. The character Harriet Vane, who was first introduced in Sayers’s 1931 novel *Strong Poison*, provides a kind of mirror to Sayers’s life in Bloomsbury. Like Sayers, Vane is a detective novelist who has an affair with a “real” novelist named Philip Boyes. The relationship between Boyes and Vane is based on Sayers’ affair with John Cournos, an American novelist and journalist whose work aligned more closely with that of the Modernists than Sayers’s. Barbara Reynolds, Sayers’s close friend and biographer, notes that Cournos was “in touch with literary and Bohemian London and he and Dorothy may have had friends in common,” suggesting that both Sayers and Cournos circulated within London literary circles.⁶⁹ Cournos was dismissive of Sayers’s writing career, however,

⁶⁹Cournos interviewed the likes of H.G. Wells, John Masefield, G. K. Chesterton, and Gordon Craig. Craig invited Cournos to join the Theatre Committee, whose members included W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Ralph Hodgson (Reynolds 132). According to Barbara Reynolds, he received recognition as an Imagist after his first novel, *The Mask*, was released in 1919.

and *Strong Poison* mirrors this tension in the relationship between Boyes and Vane.⁷⁰

Despite the fact that Sayers's status as a detective novelist alienated her from more "literary" writers like Cournos, these biographical overlaps represent moments of dialogue between her world and that of the more "established" literary community in London. Her letters mention Mansfield and indicate that she read both Woolf and Forster, commenting frequently (and not altogether kindly) on the latter.⁷¹

Sayers's tendency to explore and often critique the gender conventions of her era brings her in line with Modernists and Bloomsburians such as Virginia Woolf. Sayers's brand of feminism, like Woolf's, rejected conceptions of gender centered entirely on otherness and difference. As critic Laurel Young writes:

Whatever she thought of feminism as such, Sayers could not help but be aware of herself as a New Woman. Her life was radical for her time, but consistent with the theoretical model of other intellectual women of the Golden Age, especially those associated with the Modernist movement in literature. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, and Gertrude Stein "rejected an older, Victorian or Edwardian female identity, tied as it was to sexual purity and sacrifice" and "wished to free themselves completely from considerations of gender, to be autonomous and powerful individuals, to enter the world as if they were men." (Smith-Rosenberg 295; qtd. in Young, par. 10)

⁷⁰In another major point of intersection between fiction and reality, Boyes does not believe in the institution of marriage but convinces Harriet to live with him regardless, proposing marriage only after he has "tested" her commitment by seeing the extent to which she is willing to shun conventional social strictures; this plot point mirrors Cournos's attempt (albeit unsuccessful) to convince Sayers to live a similarly unconventional lifestyle (and indeed, after the attempt failed, he revealed that his adamancy about not getting married was a test—and that he would have married her eventually if she had sufficiently proven her love).

⁷¹Cf. *The Letters of Dorothy Sayers*, ed. Barbara Reynolds, vols. 2 and 3.

Young argues that while it is not known conclusively whether Sayers read Woolf, she seems to have been influenced by her *A Room of One's Own*, specifically in her vision of the brain as ‘that great and sole true Androgyne’” (“HNQH” 44; qtd. in Young, par.11). Harriet Vane novels frequently meditate upon the special challenges women faced in the early part of the 20th century, which Sayers herself confronted. In particular, both Sayers and Vane were preoccupied by the challenge of wanting to maintain professional and personal autonomy while still granting romantic relationships a role in their lives. Strikingly, like Woolf’s fiction, Sayers’s work pairs a focus on gender dynamics with portrayals of central male characters directly affected by their service in World War I. Throughout the novels in which she appears, Harriet Vane struggles to reconcile her position as a feminist New Woman with her passion for Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers’ most celebrated detective, who suffers from the “emasculating” symptoms of shell shock. Through this pairing of Harriet’s fraught experience of gender difference with Wimsey’s posttraumatic stress disorder, Sayers draws together the same two primary victims of patriarchal British society—women and veterans—that Woolf identifies in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Ironically, two novels in which Vane does *not* appear foreground one of the most profound commonalities between Bloomsbury and Sayers. In two of her interwar detective novels, *Whose Body?* (1923) and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928), Sayers demonstrates the same concern with the ethics of knowing that is apparent in the works of Woolf, Forster, and Mansfield discussed in earlier chapters. As in the case of these other authors, Sayers’s interest seems conditioned by an awareness of Freud’s notion of the unknowable or unconscious content at the heart of mental life.

Sayers and the Detective Novel

Sayers's emphasis upon the existence of “the unknowable” within human experience appears at odds with the traditional conventions governing the classical detective novel. Critics generally agree that the Golden Age of detective fiction in Britain arose during the interwar period as a soothing, consolatory genre, staging situations in which all of a particular community’s uncertainties and anxieties could be dispelled via the detective’s solution of a crime (which was often a murder).⁷² According to this reading, the Golden Age detective novel served as a mode of escape from the uncertainty and instability of postwar life in Britain. As Julian Symons puts it, “the fairy tale land of the Golden Age was one in which murder was committed over and over again without anyone getting hurt” (104). Symons asserts that the murder mystery novel’s relationship to “reality” changed drastically after 1914, claiming that whereas the pre-war novel more or less reflected social and political conditions accurately, the detective novel became retrospective after 1914 and thereby avoided a response to war (19). In his 2005 overview of the detective genre, Charles Rzepka argues that, by presenting situations in which a clear “rational intention” underlies acts of violence and death, the interwar detective novel became a reconstituting, solidifying, and normalizing force (153).⁷³

⁷²According to Carl Lovitt, the Golden Age of “classic” detective fiction extended from roughly 1918 to 1939 (Walker and Frazer 68), thus spanning the interwar period in Europe. Works in that genre became tremendously popular during this time; according to Julian Symons, the number of crime stories published multiplied by five from 1914 to 1926, and by ten between 1914 and 1939 (118). These stories became especially popular among women, who were in “surplus” after the war. According to Charles Rzepka, writers of detective fiction, recognizing shifts in male-female demographics among middle-class readers, assured this popularity by moving away from plots focused on “adventure elements” to “plots of ratiocination and inspired observation verging on ‘intuition,’ capabilities which most women at the time were more inclined to admire” (158).

⁷³Rzepka goes on to argue that, beyond exorcising the physical and emotional threats posed by reality and, specifically, post-WWI England, the mystery novel was able to allay social and class-related concerns by creating a world in which solid class boundaries remained well-defined and a ruling upper class still

Accordingly, the Golden Age detective epitomizes that which is logical, orderly, and explainable; as critic Gayle Wald notes, he is “a human metaphor for order, as possessor of all codes, representative of logic and science” (Walker and Frazer 100).⁷⁴

To some extent, these aspects of the Golden Age detective novel place it in opposition to the experimentations and innovations of Modernism. In fact, Marjorie Nicolson’s 1929 essay “The Professor and the Detective” valorized detective fiction “precisely because it provided an escape not from life but from ‘high’ Modernist literature” and moved away from an “excessive subjectivity” toward “welcome objectivity” (qtd. in DiBattista 178). According to Carolyn Durham, Nicolson perceived in Joycean avant-garde Modernism “such crimes as subjectivity, purposelessness, pessimism, emotionalism, and formlessness,” which are “avenged by the causal structure, intellectual engagement, purposeful plot and character, and rational order characteristic of the classic detective novel” (par. 5). This perceived natural antipathy between

populated and controlled the English countryside’s ‘big houses’ (153). Somewhat ironically, the group that critics have identified as most directly targeted and reassured by the creation of these images of pre-war gentility was the English middle class. Rzepka writes:

For those with some disposable income the interwar years were devoted to getting things back to normal. It was to this group of readers—white collar clerks, retail employees, professionals and academics of both sexes, conservative politicians and middle-class housewives, all of whom were relatively well educated and well placed to advance in the post-war economy – that detective fiction in the Golden Age most directly appealed. With its reliable evocation of order out of disorder, its respect for the rule of law in defence of life and property, and its faith that a rational intention informs even the most baffling acts of violence, the new genre of detection seemed tailor-made to allay the anxieties that lingered below the superficial complacency of British middle-class life (153).

⁷⁴For W. H. Auden, similarly, detective novels stage society’s confrontation with and ultimate absolution of sin. According to Auden, the fictional murderer commits a crime against society (wherein the victim who could seek restitution is removed, and the social collective forced to take his or her place), and thereby exposes all members of this society to accusations of guilt. The detective confers absolution by “giving knowledge of guilt,” identifying the real murderer and thereby restoring the rest of society to a state of innocence. This resolution, Auden argues, allows the reader to “[indulge in the] fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, where one knows love as love and not as the law” (Winks 24). One can see how this staging of guilt from which society is ultimately absolved might make the detective novel attractive during the interwar period.

Modernism and detective fiction might explain the curious fact that, while making numerous literary references, fewer than a dozen crime stories written during the Golden Era make any reference to the work of *modern* authors (Symons 125).⁷⁵

Sayers's work is most often considered to fit comfortably within the conservative and formulaic restraints governing the genre. Dorothy Sayers herself believed that the murder mystery was necessarily divorced from its reality and context: "These mysteries made only to be solved, these horrors which [the reader] knows to be mere figments of the creative brain, comfort him by subtly persuading that life is a mystery which death will solve, and whose horrors will pass away as a tale that is told" (qtd. in Winks 53). Moreover, in 1941's *Mind of the Maker*, she wrote:

The desire of being persuaded that all human experience may be presented in terms of a problem having a predictable, final, complete and sole possible solution accounts, to a great extent, for the extraordinary popularity of detective fiction . . . It is significant that readers should so often welcome the detective-story as a way of escape from the problems of existence. It 'takes their minds off their troubles'. Of course it does; for it

⁷⁵Critic Michael Holquist suggests that detective fiction complemented (rather than opposed) Modernism. Like Nicolson, he notes that intellectuals during the interwar period used detective fiction as a respite from the young century's philosophical and intellectual challenges. He writes: "Is it not natural to assume . . . that during this period when rationalism is experiencing some of its most damaging attacks, that intellectuals, who experienced these attacks first and most deeply, would turn for relief and easy reassurance to the detective story, the primary genre of popular literature which they, during the same period, were, in fact, consuming? The same people who spent their days with Joyce were reading Agatha Christie at night" (147). In his widely-cited 1950 essay "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" Edmund Wilson rails against a critical tendency to value detective fiction for its ability to provide this "escape" from Modernism. Wilson defends artists like Joyce and Woolf against critics such as Maugham, De Voto, and Krutch, who assert that literature has become so excessively philosophical, psychological, and symbolic that the detective novel has become the only form of "pure story-telling" in their time (Winks 38). Denying detective fiction's artistic merit on the basis of the level of the writing, Wilson accuses the detective novel of being mere food for a lazy mind whose "silliness" and "harmfulness" place it somewhere between smoking and crossword puzzles on a list of diversions (Winks 39).

softly persuades them that love and hatred, poverty and unemployment, finance and international politics, are problems, capable of being dealt with and solved in the same manner as the Death in the Library . . . Life is no candidate for the detection club . . . (qtd. in Coomes 154).

Sayers seems to have concurred with Nicolson's assessment of detective fiction as a direct counterpoint to Modernism--and, more generally, to high culture itself. In "Aristotle on Detective Fiction," Sayers clearly opposes the detective novel to examples of contemporary fiction that are, according to her, lengthy and dull works that use stream-of-consciousness techniques to explore the "morbid psychology" of their characters (Winks 27). Sayers deplors "that school of thought for which the best kind of play or story is that in which nothing particular happens from beginning to end" (Winks 25). This is a style that she pointedly lampoons in *Gaudy Night*,⁷⁶ in which Harriet attends a literary party and is told about a novel called *Mock Turtle*. Apparently a Modernist work containing "some powerful anti-Fascist propaganda" that is only "a bit too long," *Mock Turtle*

. . . is about a swimming instructor at a watering-place, who had contracted such an unfortunate anti-nudity complex through watching so many bathing-beauties that it completely inhibited all his natural emotions. So he got a job on a whaler and fell in love at first sight with an Eskimo, because she was such a beautiful bundle of garments. So he married her and brought her back to live in a suburb, where she fell in love with a vegetarian nudist. So then the husband went slightly mad and contracted a

complex about giant turtles, and spent all his spare time staring into the turtle-tank at the Aquarium, and watching the strange, slow monsters swimming significantly round in their encasing shells. But of course a lot of things came into it—it was one of those books that reflect the author’s reactions to Things in General. Altogether, significant was, he thought, the word to describe it. (219)

As a critic, her assessment of such novels was equally scathing: “The detective story is sharply distinguished from the kind of modern novel which, beginning at the end, rambles backwards and forwards without particular direction and ends on an indeterminate note, and for no ascertainable reason except the publisher’s refusal to provide more printing and paper for seven-and-sixpence” (27).⁷⁷ According to Sayers, instead of providing this supposedly undirected focus on psychological interiority, detective novels are concerned with advancing the plot through action (Winks 16; 29). In fact, in some of her essays, Sayers forcefully asserts that the psychological must be avoided altogether in the detective novel. In her 1929 introduction to the *The Omnibus of Crime*, she writes: “Make no mistake about it, the detective-story is part of the literature of escape, and not of expression” (Winks 82) and “does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement. It presents us only with the *fait accompli*, and looks upon death and mutilation with a dispassionate eye. It does not

⁷⁷Whether or not she means to deride the entire body of contemporary Modernist works, Sayers makes clear that she has at least some of the canonical Modernists in mind when making comparisons between detective fiction and the contemporary novel, noting one could not make a detective novel as long as *Ulysses*, for “effect of final discovery would be lost” (Winks 28). Somewhat amusingly, she is careful to explain that she means Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and not the *Odyssey* itself. The irony of this comment is, of course, that readers of *Ulysses* have remarked that this story demands exactly the same readerly faculties that detective fiction requires, including attention to small details or “clues” and a willingness to forgo understanding until the end.

show us the inner workings of the murderer's mind—it must not . . .” (Winks 77).

According to this argument, in-depth psychologies would “clog” what S. S. Van Dine has termed “the narrative machinery” (Symons 10) of the detective novel, which, in turn, would prevent the emotional catharsis that Sayers suggested was the primary object of reading a detective story.⁷⁸

In practice, Sayers's interest in character psychologies was greater and more complex than the preceding statements might suggest. While staying out of the minds of her criminals (for the most part), Sayers provides a good deal of insight into the psychology and motivations of her detectives, Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane. Throughout the series of novels in which Harriet appears, Sayers portrays Vane's ongoing struggle to reconcile her desire for intellectual and physical independence with the prospect of sexual partnership. In fact, in novels like *Gaudy Night*, such “superfluous” concerns arguably present tensions and questions that are far more interesting than the mystery at hand.⁷⁹ Moreover, Sayers delves deeply into the psychology of Wimsey and explicitly ties this exploration to the way he conducts investigations. Educated at Eton and Oxford and descended from a noble family, Wimsey initially appears to be simply a spoiled playboy who provides detective services for his own amusement. Yet Sayers quickly disabuses her reader of this perception,

⁷⁸In her 1946 essay “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” she conceptualizes the mystery novel as a new incarnation of Aristotelian tragedy, wherein the reader obtains emotional catharsis through “the final discovery” of the denouement (Winks 28), and the feelings of pity and fear aroused by the criminal situation are ultimately dissipated.

⁷⁹Indeed, the end of *Busman's Honeymoon* pairs the couple's final achievement of marital intimacy with Peter's breakdown at the end of a case, when Harriet (and, therefore, the reader) learns the back story behind Peter's sufferings from shell shock. Gayle Wald has commented upon the destabilizing impact romance has in Sayers's novels. She notes that while detective fiction generally seems to embody the forces of order and logic, the means by which society's ills will be “cured,” authors like Sayers integrated sexual politics into their novels in ways that foreground and emphasize (rather than repressing) romance and desire as irrevocably destabilizing influences that the detective's authority cannot entirely counter.

fleshing him out as a deeply complex character. In *Whose Body?*, Sayers's first novel and the first work in which Wimsey appears, she explores the psychological turmoil that has resulted from his service in the war, which underpins his ostensibly frivolous interest in detection. Through such character psychologies and references to the hidden (and, indeed, unconscious) aspects of psychic experience, Sayers frequently compromises the stability and soothing plenitude of her novels' psychical universe. In so doing, she suggests the enduring presence of larger problems and traumas for her characters that seem stubbornly—and threateningly—to resist solution or even understanding.

The Mystery that Must Remain Unsolved: Sayers, Shell Shock, and the Unconscious in *Whose Body?*

“It's disquieting to reflect that one's dreams never symbolise one's real wishes, but always something Much Worse . . .” – Harriet Vane, *Gaudy Night* (Reynolds 81)

Sayers's interest and skill in exploring psychological issues in her novels increased throughout her career. Despite her espoused enthusiasm for the “rules” of detective fiction that she helped to set out, she also strove to bring the detective novel back into the tradition of Sheridan Le Fanu and Wilkie Collins by fleshing out characterization and essentially bringing it back to the “novel of manners” (Connelly 36). This effort entailed the very attention to character psychology that her essays critique. As Laurel Young writes,

Sayers states that her goal in writing detective fiction was to bring it back in line with the mainstream of English literature; she wished to produce a

text "less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel" (208).

Although this had been her intention from her first detective novel, *Whose*

Body? (1923), Sayers felt she did not achieve it until *Gaudy Night*. (par. 1)

As noted above, milestones in Sayers's life were often translated into her fiction. In *Gaudy Night* (1937), Harriet Vane reflects on her own struggle to reconcile a more literary form with the detective genre, ultimately deciding that she must "abandon the jigsaw kind of story and write a book about human beings" (302).⁸⁰ Vane's epiphany mirrored Sayers's own self-conscious realization of the need to make the detective novel more psychologically complex.⁸¹

Sayers appears to have been interested in advancements in the psychological sciences during her lifetime, including Freud's theories. It is perhaps unsurprising that a detective novelist would be intrigued by Freud, who explicitly likened psychoanalysis to detection when he noted: "In both we are concerned with a secret, with something hidden" ("Psycho-analysis and the Establishment of the Facts in Legal Proceedings" 108). Critic Kelly C. Connelly argues that Sayers's work comes close to fitting into a more literary and psychological subsection of the detective genre called the "whydunit," which was directly influenced by developments in psychological medicine in the early 20th century:

The "whydunit" is heavily influenced by Freud's attempts to explain the unconscious motivations behind man's actions, focusing not just on the

⁸⁰Laurel Young discusses this quote in her article about this transition in Sayers's writing.

⁸¹As Connelly notes, this attempt is less about eliminating the formulaic, puzzle-oriented focus of detective fiction and more about finding, in Sayers's words, a "new and less rigid formula [. . .] linking it more closely to the novel of manners and separating it more widely from the novel of adventure" ("Introduction" 36).

facts of the case but also on the psychological issues raised by the criminal's actions. Sayers does not quite reach the "whydunit," as the focus of her novels remains solely on the psychology of the detective rather than that of the criminal. Nonetheless, Lord Peter's appreciation of the impact of his actions on the criminals suggests a new concept of the criminal as a complex figure rather than as a symbol of evil. (40)⁸²

As Connelly notes, Sayers herself was reflective regarding this shift in both her work and the genre as a whole—and Freud was largely responsible for making this progression possible:

Sayers wrote favorably about the few changes that were being made to the detective story in the late years of the Golden Age. In particular, she observed with pleasure that "a little more psychological complexity is allowed than formerly" (33). In "Chesterton and the Modernist Context," John Coates explains that the works of psychologists, including Sigmund Freud, changed man's sense of himself in the years prior to the First World War [. . .] (52). By raising questions about the state of man's personality and of the possibility of untruth and potential criminal impulses in the heart of every man, Freud changed the world's view of the self. As Sayers noted, issues of Freudian psychology began to appear in

⁸² Connelly is not entirely correct in her assertion that Sayers failed to explore the psychology of her criminal characters in any kind of depth (cf. *Gaudy Night* in particular). Moreover, while Sayers almost universally focalizes her narratives through her detective characters and often fails to delve deeply into the psychology of her criminals, Lord Peter is always thoughtful and reflective regarding the motivations of his prey. Thus, it is difficult to claim that Sayers neglects the psychology or motivations of any character but her detectives.

the detective novel, slightly shifting the focus of the formula from plot or puzzle to character development. (36)

Several events in Sayers's life also contributed to her interest in psychology and, more specifically, in the condition of "shell shock." Coming into adulthood during World War I, Sayers herself survived several zeppelin raids when she taught school in the port town of Hull for a period in 1916 (Reynolds 91). She also encountered many men who informed her portrayals of characters haunted by the specters of war—and it is in these portrayals that her interest in the Freudian unconscious becomes most visible. In a July 1915 letter to her friend Muriel Jager, Sayers notes that both her uncle and cousin were ill from their war experiences and one (she does not say which) was afflicted with "neuritis" (Reynolds 85).⁸³ In 1916, while an undergraduate at Oxford, Sayers wrote a poem entitled "To Members of the Bach Choir on Active Service," one of several works she produced during that time period that contained a "note of realism" conditioned by the civilian population's growing awareness of the horrors of trench warfare (Reynolds 92). Later that year, her translation of a 16th century sonnet about Icarus by Desportes was published in the *Oxford Magazine*, on a page otherwise filled with death notices for Oxford undergraduates. Thus, even this more retrospective artistic effort did not escape a form of collision (via a visual juxtaposition) with the war and its impact.

Sayers later fell in love with Captain Eric Whelpton, a soldier who had "invalided out" of the army and suffered from both bouts of amnesia and fainting fits, the latter of which were eventually tied to polio. This frail soldier would later become at

⁸³It seems important to note, too, how the arrival of these men affected Sayers's mother, who Sayers reports almost had "another of her nervous attacks" as a result of the visit. In short, Sayers's awareness of psychological illness and nervous problems in particular appears to have been acute.

least partial inspiration for *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*'s George Fentiman. Whelpton was a victim of shell-shock who suffered from what Sayers termed "nameless nerve attacks" and amnesia (112, 106). Biographer James Brabazon notes that Sayers was forced to attend to Whelpton's various health needs with a care and meticulousness that mirrored the dynamic she would create between Lord Peter Wimsey and his butler, Bunter. Bunter served as Peter's batman in the war and came into his service post-armistice when he discovered Peter was suffering from a nervous breakdown.⁸⁴ Whelpton himself noted that he saw "the figure of a detective" taking form in Sayers's mind during the period of their intimacy, asserting that he and another man named Charles Crichton became the inspiration for Peter Wimsey (114).

Sayers's marriage to war veteran Oswald Arthur "Mac" Fleming further influenced Sayers's portrayals of war's impact on its participants. When Dorothy met him in 1925, he was a reporter for *News of the World*. He had served in both the Boer war, where he served as a war correspondent, and World War I, during which he both assisted in ammunition transport to the Royal Artillery forces in France and served as special correspondent to the *Sunday Chronicle*. According to Barbara Reynolds, "Like many veterans, he had been gassed and still suffered from the effects of what was then called shell-shock" (179). Mac's daughter from his first marriage, Ann Schreurs, later said that she thought her father's personality had been irrevocably altered by his experiences in the war. In addition to his own traumatic experiences, two of his brothers were killed and another badly injured. The stories that Sayers heard from Mac and his

⁸⁴We only learn the full parameters of Bunter's return to Peter in Sayers's last novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*.

friends were to form the basis of many of her portrayals of war veterans, particularly in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (Reynolds 189).

In addition to gaining this firsthand awareness of the effects of “neuritis,” neurasthenia, and other war-related psychological conditions through relationships throughout her young adulthood, Sayers seems to have been aware of Freud’s work on “war neuroses” and other psychological issues as early as 1923, when *Whose Body?* was published. In that work, Julian Freke, the murderer, is the author of a psychological work entitled “An Answer to Professor Freud, with a Description of Some Experiments Carried out at the Base Hospital at Amiens.” What at first seems like a passing reference to the existence of a dialogue—and, ostensibly, debate—between the fictional Freke and Freud seems more significant when the reader discovers the novel’s larger interest in the ethical problems that attend efforts to know the “truth” about the minds of others. *Whose Body?* is centrally focused on such ethical problems. It distinguishes between a form of knowing or inquiry that seems Freudian—that is, respectful and cognizant of the existence of the unconscious—and a more scientific one that is invasive, directed toward obtaining absolute, complete knowledge of a person or situation.

Freke clearly chooses the latter of these two ethical modes, while Lord Peter spends much of the novel straddling the line between them. Although his career as a detective leads him, like Freke, to pursue the hidden “Truth” behind human behavior, Peter’s sufferings from shell shock force him to confront an arena in human life in which such truth is both meaningless and unobtainable—that is, the unconscious. As I will discuss at greater length below, Freud’s work on trauma posits the existence of a form of traumatic knowledge that is the exact opposite of “simple” empirical knowledge.

Wimsey confronts this “alternative” content in recurrent nightmares and flashbacks that recur most frequently as his cases near solution. These nightmares remind Wimsey of the profound psychic consequences of death and killing. They draw his attention away from the pursuit of full “truth” and solution, which Wimsey finds highly pleasurable, and toward the human consequences of his investigation for both the victim and the murderer (who will probably be put to death if convicted).

He is torn between these two ethical systems for the majority of *Whose Body?* The novel revolves around the mysterious appearance of a nude (except for a pince-nez) corpse in the bathtub of a Wimsey family acquaintance. The body is initially thought to be that of a missing financier, Sir Reuben Levy (though this notion proves false, Wimsey does later discover that Levy has indeed been murdered by the same person who put the lookalike body in the bathtub). As the case begins, Peter reflects upon the tension he feels between the pure intellectual enjoyment he gains from solving crime “puzzles” and the knowledge that what feels like a game to him involves the brute realities of murder, violence, and criminal punishment. That is, Lord Peter worries that his pursuit of truth comes at the expense of—or, at least, involves a total disregard for—human beings. In *Whose Body?*, Wimsey discusses his ambivalent feelings toward his hobby with Inspector Charles Parker:

‘It’s a hobby to me, you see. I took it up when the bottom of things was rather knocked out for me, because it was so damned exciting, and the worst of it is, I enjoy it—up to a point. If it was all on paper I’d enjoy every bit of it. I love the beginning of a job—when one doesn’t know any of the people and it’s just exciting and amusing. But if it comes to really

running down a live person and getting him hanged, or even quodded, poor devil, there don't seem as if there was any excuse for me buttin' in, since I don't have to make my livin' by it. And I feel as if I oughtn't ever to find it amusin'. But I do.' (127)

Significantly, Wimsey links his desire to solve mysteries with his need to recover from the traumas of war, the details of which are described here (as throughout the Wimsey novels) only in pieces. Wimsey provides some further details later in the novel, when he discusses his condition with Dr. Freke: “. . . I took up these cases as a sort of distraction. I had a bad knock just after the war, which didn't make matters any better for me, don't you know” (181). These moments reflexively suggest that Wimsey's exploits might serve a similarly soothing function for the reader, as critics have argued was detective fiction's primary purpose during this time. However, in discussing his interest in solving murders for “fun” and his experiences in the war in the same breath, Wimsey draws attention to this darker side of his own psychology and highlights the fact that attempts to “know” can have an ethical dimension. Moreover, Wimsey's comments work against the notion that detection (or reading detection, for that matter) is a matter of pure pleasure. Although Wimsey claims that his enjoyment of pursuing murderers would be pure if it occurred “on paper”—that is, through fiction—he finds he is unable to avoid associating his “hobby” with far more serious ethical concerns. Furthermore, in articulating this association, the novel reflexively thwarts the reader's ability to “enjoy every bit” of the pursuit “on paper.” Thus, both Wimsey and the novel that contains him foreground the seriousness beneath his “frivolity.”

In this discussion between Wimsey and Parker, Parker attempts to allay Wimsey's feelings of guilt by arguing that the detective's duty is to pursue truth at all costs:

. . . '[Y]ou're thinking about your attitude. You want to be consistent, you want to look pretty, you want to swagger debonairly through a comedy of puppets or else to stalk magnificently through a tragedy of human sorrows and things. But that's childish. If you've any duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders, you must do it in any attitude that comes in handy. You want to be elegant and detached? That's all right, if you find the truth out that way, but it hasn't any value in itself, you know. You want to look dignified and consistent—what's that got to do with it? You want to hunt down a murderer for the sport of the thing and then shake hands with him and say, 'Well played—hard luck—you shall have your revenge tomorrow!' Well, you can't do it like that. Life's not a football match. You want to be a sportsman. You can't be a sportsman. You're a responsible person.' (130)

While Parker's dismissal of Peter's insistence on "playing the game" rings true in a postwar context in which this genteel notion of "fair play" has been more or less destroyed by the scale, violence, and seeming inexplicability of war, his insistence that the search for "truth" is an absolute good is much more problematic within the larger context of the novel. In fact, Peter's tendency to question the ethics of attempts to find

the “truth” behind mysteries represents a crucial difference between his own efforts and those of the murderer he pursues.⁸⁵

That murderer is Dr. Freke, the scientist who has supposedly written the article responding to Freud’s work on shell-shock victims. Freke is a neuroscientist who, while maintaining a psychiatric practice on Harley Street, remains significantly more passionate about his research at the hospital, where he dissects human brains. He is the quintessential empiricist scientist who values the tangible and visible above the theoretical—in that sense, he resembles the Freud who pre-dates the *Interpretation of Dreams*. When showing Parker the place where he stays when doing this research, he tells him: “It’s a fatal thing for a theorist, Mr. Parker, to let the practical work get behindhand. Dissection is the basis of all good theory and all correct diagnosis. One must keep one’s hand and eye in training. This place is far more important to me than Harley Street, and some day I shall abandon my consulting practice altogether and settle down here to cut up my subjects and write my books in peace. So many things in this life are a waste of time, Mr. Parker” (111). Here, Freke indicates he strongly prefers a form of investigation that involves literally opening and peering inside the human brain, which, significantly, necessitates the death of the thinking subject. His coldly scientific curiosity regarding the human brain is, in fact, his primary motive for murdering Sir Reuben Levy. Even though he admits initially to possessing a “sensual” motive for killing Levy—namely, that years ago Levy stole his fiancée and eventually married her—he claims that

⁸⁵This is not to say that Parker does not perceive a need for Peter to subscribe to a coherent ethical code in his investigation, but, for him, that mostly involves eschewing immature and/or snobbish behavior in order to get the job done—with “truth” as the ultimate goal. Thus, while possessing the best of intentions, Parker here resembles Freke in arguing that “truth” is a supreme goal that should trump all others. I do not suggest that Sayers means to imply that Parker is “the same” as Freke – but he does, perhaps, represent a more banal advocate of an ethics that can easily become injurious or even dangerous.

his murderous plans ultimately stemmed from a desire to use Levy's brain for his research. In his confession to Lord Peter, he writes:

Of all human emotions, except perhaps those of hunger and fear, the sexual appetite produces the most violent, and, under some circumstances, the most persistent reactions; I think, however, I am right in saying that at the time when I wrote my book, my original sensual impulse to kill Sir Reuben Levy had already become profoundly modified by my habits of thought. To the animal lust to slay and the primitive human desire for revenge, there was added the rational intention of substantiating my own theories for the satisfaction of myself and the world.

Admitting that Lord Peter has found him out and thereby "spoiled the completeness of [his] demonstration," Freke goes on to request coolly that he make an account of Freke's murderous experiment "known among scientific men, in justice to my professional reputation" and asks that Wimsey make arrangements for his brain to be preserved as a means of ensuring his own legacy (195-196, 211). Sayers's description of Freke's physical features reflects the eerily clinical, detached, and invasive curiosity he possesses: "A face beautiful, impassioned and inhuman; fanatical, compelling eyes, bright blue amid the ruddy bush of hair and beard. They were not the cool and kindly eyes of the family doctor, they were the brooding eyes of the inspired scientist, and they searched one through" (178-179). Freke thus represents a brand of inquiry that is invasive and even violent, one that is deadly when applied to one's relations with human beings.

As noted above, one of the most profound anxieties underpinning *Whose Body?* is the question of whether Wimsey's ethics of inquiry and detection is different from Freke's—that is, more psychoanalytic than forensic. Sayers highlights the potential link between the two men and their methods in the same conversation between Parker and Freke quoted earlier, when Parker basically restates, in slightly different language, the very analogy Freud drew between the criminal and the hysteric. Rather than comparing the detective to the analyst, however, Freke links detection specifically to the work of a forensic scientist:

‘ . . . I have no doubt many of your diseases work quite as insidiously as any burglar.’

‘They do, they do,’ said Sir Julian, laughing, ‘and it is my pride, as it is yours, to track them down for the good of society. The neuroses, you know, are particularly clever criminals—they break out into as many disguises . . . But when you can really investigate, Mr. Parker, and break up the dead, or for preference the living body with the scalpel, you always find the footmarks—the little trail of ruin or disorder left by madness or disease or drink or any other similar pest. But the difficulty is to trace them back, merely by observing the surface symptoms—the hysteria, crime, religion, fear, shyness, conscience, or whatever it may be; just as you observe a theft or a murder and look for the footsteps of the criminal, so I observe a fit of hysterics or an outburst of piety and hunt for the little mechanical irritation which has produced it.’

‘You regard all these things as physical?’

‘Undoubtedly. I am not ignorant of the rise of another school of thought, Mr. Parker, but its exponents are mostly charlatans or self deceivers.’ (112)

Freke links the truth-seeking impulses of criminal investigation to the kind of scientific inquiry he conducts. The fact that he has apparently engaged in some kind of intellectual debate with Freud in print (as noted above), paired with this moment in which Freke takes a sideways shot at psychoanalysis and their “charlatans” and “self deceivers,” indicates that Freke himself believes that his own methods stand in opposition to psychoanalytic theory. He contrasts psychoanalysis with his brand of reductionist science, which asserts that physical phenomena can be reduced down to their very chemical components. For him, the “truth” of human experience resides in each chemical reaction and electrical firing within the human body, and he insists upon pursuing that truth regardless of the cost.⁸⁶ The difference between Freke-ian forensic science and Freudian psychoanalysis is clarified in the story of Freud’s own career. As I already mentioned in the introduction, Freud trained as a doctor and was initially, like Freke, intensely interested in the neurological and anatomical bases of psychological phenomena before he took a decisive shift in the *Interpretation of Dreams* toward analysis and interpretation of what was *not* observable or quantifiable—that is, the “gaps” in mental events in which the unconscious is manifest. Like the younger Freud, however, Freke is focused solely on the “neurological ingredients” of behavior and psychic experience, ignoring the subtleties of “the language of mental processes” upon which

⁸⁶This tendency becomes clear in Freke’s statement that he would love to “have the exploring” of some of the brains of the people who espouse belief in psychoanalysis so he could explain their flawed thinking (113).

psychoanalysis ultimately came to focus. In his conversation with Parker, Freke claims detection is analogous to his own ethics of inquiry, the polar opposite of “charlatan” Freudianism.

Sayers further implies the potential link between detection and science when she likens Peter’s authoritativeness about literature to Freke’s all-encompassing knowledge of human bodies. This suggestion appears in the third-person limited perspective of a medical student named Piggott whom Parker has invited to Peter’s house as a consultant on the case. The medical student describes what he perceives to be Peter’s unsettling habit of “knowing” about literature in the way that Freke attempts to know about cadavers: “. . . Lord Peter had a funny way of talking about books . . . as if the author had confided in him beforehand, and told him how the story was put together, and which bit was written first. It reminded you of the way old Freke took a body to pieces” (157).⁸⁷

Ultimately, however, Sayers reveals that Wimsey resists the ethical traps that characterize Freke’s brand of inquiry. As Wimsey’s uncle Paul Legardie says in a preface to later editions of some of the Wimsey novels, Peter has the “valuable quality of being fond of people without wanting to turn them inside out” (xi), and both his methods and the profound empathy he seems to feel (albeit unconsciously and against his will) toward those affected by his investigation distinguish him from Freke. Sayers makes Wimsey’s war experience and consequent sufferings from shell shock the vehicle for this empathy, which in turn engenders an investigatory approach that is more associative

⁸⁷Peter’s ability to know about books so absolutely, to the point of seeming to understand the intentions behind each artistic choice, draws attention to a potential point of reflexivity in the novel. The detective makes literature a matter of “knowing all” in much the same way that the Golden Age detective novel is said to provide its readers with the complete and ultimate truth behind its intrigues. In a sense, as this moment strongly suggests, Wimsey’s struggle throughout the novel to stake out his ethical position with respect to knowledge and inquiry mirrors the novel’s attempt to do the same for detective fiction.

(and, therefore, Freudian) than forensic (or “Freke-ian”). Indeed, Wimsey’s methods seem to align with a more Freudian model that locates significance in the association between ideas, objects, or characters, rather than relying purely upon forensic clues or pure logic. As Wimsey explains, “it’s only in Sherlock Holmes and stories like that, that people think things out logically” when committing crimes; as a result, the search for meaning must take a different approach. According to Wimsey, the key to concealing a crime is to “prevent people from associatin’ their ideas” (123), which implies that successful detection depends on the ability to connect people or ideas. Similarly, in psychoanalysis, analysis of the patient’s symptoms or the “clues” in an individual case depends on being able to trace the unconscious connections between the “psychic predeterminants” via interpretation and make them conscious to the patient (Introductory Lectures 345). Wimsey solves the crime when he is able to find the connection between two crimes that initially appear to him to be separate (171).⁸⁸ As Wimsey reflects when solving the case, Freke’s success in getting away with the murder depends on preventing investigators from making certain associations (173). Wimsey’s ability to make the obscured connections makes the crucial difference when all other forms of investigation fail.

Wimsey is often painfully aware and respectful of inquiry’s ethical dimensions, whereas Freke, who is willing to kill for the sake of scientific knowledge, clearly believes

⁸⁸The crime Wimsey is called in to investigate is the unexpected appearance of a dead body in the bathtub of Thipps, an architect who knows Wimsey’s mother. The police initially assume the body to be that of Sir Reuben Levy, a financier who has recently disappeared, but that turns out to be untrue. Wimsey ultimately discovers that it is actually the corpse of a workman who died of natural causes, and that Levy remains missing. He only solves the crime when he figures out how the corpse and Levy’s disappearance are truly related. Freke’s plan becomes compromised when Wimsey is able to link Levy to Battersea Park, where the anonymous corpse of the workman that was initially assumed to be Levy was found (“He reckoned, of course, on nobody’s ever connecting Levy with Battersea Park” (171)).

that the attainment of truth and knowledge should trump any ethical concerns. This is not to say that Wimsey is ever unsuccessful in his investigations or refuses to reveal the guilty party, but he consistently reflects upon the ramifications of inquiry and attempts to be humane even toward the murderer in his efforts to lay the facts of the case bare. His concern for all of the parties involved in the investigation—and the responsibility he feels toward them—clearly stem from Wimsey’s memories of feeling responsible for the lives and well-being of his men during his service in World War I. The end of his cases routinely triggers symptoms of shell shock. In *Whose Body?*, for example, his realization that Freke is the murderer prompts him to have a nightmare later that night about an incident whose full parameters remain undefined, but which clearly pertains to the war:

Mr. Bunter [. . .] was aroused in the small hours by a hoarse whisper, ‘Bunter!’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Bunter, sitting up and switching on the light.

‘Put that light out, damn you!’ said the voice. ‘Listen—over there—listen—can’t you hear it?’

‘It’s nothing, my lord,’ said Mr. Bunter [. . .] ‘Why, you’re all shivering—you’ve been sitting up too late.’

‘Hush! no, no—it’s the water,’ said Lord Peter with chattering teeth; ‘it’s up to their waists down there, poor devils. But listen! can’t you hear it? Tap, tap, tap—they’re mining us—but I don’t know where—I can’t hear—I can’t. Listen, you! There it is again—we must find it—we must stop it . . . Listen! Oh, my God! I can’t hear . . . I can’t hear anything for the noise of the guns. Can’t they stop the guns!’ (140)

Wimsey's tendency to associate the "game" of investigating murders and the ramifications of discovering the guilty party with the trauma of his wartime experiences indicates that he does not share Freke's cold-bloodedness in his pursuit of truth. The difference between the two men becomes clear in their dialogue when Wimsey, having concluded that Freke is the murderer, visits him under the pretense of seeking treatment for the renewed symptoms of shell shock. Freke explains Wimsey's symptoms entirely in terms of physical brain injury and notes that the "sense of responsibility" Wimsey seems to feel with respect to the vaguely defined trigger situation (that is, the discovery of the murderer in the Levy case) has stimulated the damaged regions of Wimsey's brain; thus, he suggests that Wimsey "must learn to become irresponsible" (183).⁸⁹ Wimsey clearly cannot match Freke's sangfroid, however, as his very decision to seek Freke's "help" is an act of warning; Wimsey seems to feel morally obligated to allow his prey time to escape or at least give him an opportunity to decide for himself how to proceed, having been caught. It seems significant that Freke entirely misunderstands the nature of Wimsey's feelings of responsibility. When he asks Wimsey to forego them, he is really only asking Wimsey to forego his obligation to pursue the truth—which, as the murder itself proves, is the only consideration of real importance for Freke. For Wimsey, however, this responsibility pertains to the duty to protect human lives; this is the specific aspect of wartime experience of which Wimsey is reminded when solving cases, which is replicated in his dreams. His reluctance to involve himself in helping a criminal along to the gallows originates from the horror of responsibility he developed through his experience as a soldier.

⁸⁹Of course, he has selfish reasons as well for doing this; he has realized that Wimsey is there to warn him that his plan has been discovered.

In linking the solution of the crime to Wimsey's wartime memories, Sayers complicates any attempt to read the novel as a "soothing" fiction. While Wimsey indeed achieves full knowledge of the motives and actions that contributed to the crime's execution, his traumatic memories bring the fraught post-World War I context to the fore, rather than suppressing it. Moreover, and most importantly, Peter's symptoms serve as reference to a form of knowledge that is not visible, measurable, or knowable—that is, that resists the efforts of the forensic scientist. Traumatic knowledge resides entirely in the unconscious; indeed, for Freud, the defining characteristic of a traumatic event is that it entirely bypasses the processes within consciousness that would limit, order, and assign meaning to it and goes straight to the unconscious (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 33). Building upon Freud's formulation, Cathy Caruth asserts that the meaning of trauma lies not in the historical referent of what is perceived and can be described (what she calls "simple knowledge") but in a moment that is lost to consciousness and cannot be known, seen, or recorded. Thus, in bringing these spaces of "alternate" knowledge to the fore via Wimsey's nightmares, the novel attends to aspects of human experience that can never be investigated or known.

Significantly, Freud himself points to the crucial difference between Wimsey and Freke when he qualifies the analogy he draws between the hysteric and the criminal, each of whom possess a "secret" that needs to be detected. The crucial difference between the two, Freud notes, is that "[i]n the case of the criminal it is a secret which he knows and hides from you, whereas in the case of the hysteric it is a secret which he himself does not know either, which is hidden even from himself" (108). *Whose Body?* draws the same distinction between these two forms of "secret knowledge." Whereas the novel

certainly presents “truths” that can be pursued and laid bare, Wimsey’s illness points urgently toward what cannot be known, and thus undermines any claim he might stake to being the “possessor of all codes” that Wald describes. Sayers does provide the reader with the solution to the murder mystery, but in bringing the ethics of inquiry under scrutiny and suggesting the enduring power of the “alternate” form of unconscious knowledge for which trauma is a referent, she creates a far less enclosed universe than one might initially suppose.

War and Trauma in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*

Sayers’s 1928 *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* is even more directly engaged with the post-WWI context, and particularly with the lingering psychic effects of the war on its veterans. Here, as in her treatment of Wimsey’s post-traumatic stress disorder in *Whose Body?*, Sayers’s allusions to these lasting effects point to a larger structuring tension between two different modes of knowing—one scientific, and another which is, if not specifically psychoanalytic, certainly concerned with psychic content that is hidden, unconscious, and therefore technically “unknowable.” Even more than *Whose Body?*, *Bellona* resists the comforts and tidiness that typically characterize the endings of detective novels, even while it stages a conventional denouement wherein the guilt is clearly assigned and the murderer expelled from the community that serves as the novel’s backdrop. Once again, in this novel, Sayers’s stated anti-Modernist ethos and belief in the value and necessity of adhering to generic conventions seem distinctly at odds with both her novel’s style and its concerns.

The novel's very premise places the war at the story's center, thus thwarting any claim one could make that Sayers ignores the pain of war's wounds in English society. Its title brings the importance of war to the fore; the titular club at which the "unpleasantness" takes place is named after a Roman goddess of war, and this name, juxtaposed with the priggishness of referring to a murder as an "unpleasantness," seems to encapsulate a tension between awareness and avoidance that structures life in post-World War I England. To some extent, Sayers attributes such priggishness and forgetfulness to an older generation of Britons who did not fight in World War I and who therefore do not understand the special nature of the conflict, its scale, and its lasting impact. The tension between the older generation and the young crop of veterans seeking to cope is central to the novel, but I contend this antagonism has less to do with generational distance than vast differences in attitude toward the importance of memory and remembrance to the process of healing. The novel's focus on remembrance is central to its exploration of the ethics of knowledge and inquiry.

Opening on Armistice night, the novel makes the war a primary focus from the start; events related to ceremonies and traditions of this day figure heavily in the concealment and ultimate discovery of the crime. The opening scene foregrounds the tension between forgetting and remembrance as forms of healing as Wimsey reflects to another club member and veteran: "Cheer up. All this remembrance-day business gets on your nerves, don't it? It's my belief most of us would only be too pleased to chuck these community hysterics if the beastly newspapers didn't run it for all it's worth. However, it don't do to say so. They'd hoof me out of the Club if I raised my voice

beyond a whisper.”⁹⁰ Here, Wimsey seems skeptical of the efficacy of these ceremonies, but his critical stance is largely inspired by the media’s exploitation of them, rather than an objection to the communal effort to honor the dead and heal. In fact, Wimsey’s attitude towards veterans like George Fentiman reveals a sensitivity to the enduring presence of war’s memories that his earlier comments obscure.

Eerily evocative of Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” the first scene previews the way in which the novel veers away from the intrigue of the “pure” puzzle into murkier—and, indeed, more Modernist—artistic waters. It opens with Lord Peter and Captain George Fentiman, both veterans of the war (and both of whom, we soon discover, suffer from shell shock) joking about the blurring of the line between the living and the dead in the Club and its members:

‘What in the world, Wimsey, are you doing in this Morgue?’
demanded Captain Fentiman [. . .].

‘Oh, I wouldn’t call it that,’ retorted Wimsey amiably. ‘Funeral Parlor at the very least. Look at the marble. Look at the furnishings. Look at the palms and the chaste blonde nude in the corner.’

‘Yes, and look at the corpses. Place always reminds me of that old thing in *Punch*, you know—‘Waiter, take away Lord Whatsisname, he’s been dead two days.’ Look at Old Ormsby there, snoring like a hippopotamus. Look at my revered grandpa—dodders in here at ten every

⁹⁰Despite being apparently dismissive of Remembrance Day activities, Wimsey is nonetheless there to attend a dinner hosted by Colonel Marchbanks, who lost his son in the war and holds the event annually for his son’s closest friends. Wimsey’s attendance and clear reverence for the event and its host seem directly at odds with the cynicism he offers in nearly the same breath in which he announces his purpose for being in the Bellona that day.

morning, collects the *Morning Post* and the arm-chair by the fire, and becomes part of the furniture till the evening. Poor old devil! Suppose I'll be like that one of these days. I wish to God Jerry had put me out with the rest of 'em. What's the good of coming through for this sort of thing?' (1)

While easily read as a simple lampooning of the staleness and even obsolescence of Club life, this moment clearly links the effects of war to this feeling of staleness and, like Eliot's poem, evokes a pervasive sense of loss and acute awareness of mortality that persists even ten years after the armistice. George goes on to reflect upon the enduring impact of the war on its veterans when Peter asks Fentiman how he is doing:

“Oh, rotten as usual. Tummy all wrong and no money. What's the damn good of it, Wimsey? A man goes and fights for his country, gets his insides gassed out, and loses his job, and all they give him is the privilege of marching past the Cenotaph once a year and paying four shillings in the pound income-tax. Sheila's queer too—overwork, poor girl. It's pretty damnable for a man to have to live on his wife's earnings, isn't it? I can't help it, Wimsey. I go sick and have to chuck jobs up. Money—I never thought of money before the War, but I swear nowadays I'd commit any damned crime to get hold of a decent income.”

Fentiman's voice had risen in nervous excitement. A shocked veteran, till then invisible in a neighbouring armchair, poked out a lean head like a tortoise and said “Sh!” viperishly.

“Oh, I wouldn't do that,” said Wimsey lightly. “Crime's a skilled occupation, y'know. Even a comparative imbecile like myself can play

the giddy sleuth on the amateur Moriarty. If you're thinkin' of puttin' on a false moustache and lammin' a millionaire on the head, don't do it. That disgustin' habit you have of smoking cigarettes down to the last millimetre would betray you anywhere." (2)

The exchange highlights the untenable position of the veteran in the postwar context, thus resisting the kind of cultural erasure with which detective fiction is normally credited. Moreover, far from distancing the detective intrigue from the brute reality of murder, Sayers uses the exchange to lay the groundwork for George Fentiman's motive to kill, suggesting a potential link between criminal behavior and societal conditions. Wimsey highlights this dialogue's foreshadowing function in his parodic vision of how George's murder of a millionaire would be solved forensically in the traditional detective story.

At the end of the chapter, George's comment that he is unable to distinguish between the living and the dead in the Club is revealed as horrifyingly apropos when he and Wimsey discover that George's "revered grandpa" is, in fact, literally dead:

Wimsey bent down over General Fentiman and drew the *Morning Post* gently away from the gnarled old hands, which lay clasped over the thin chest. He touched the shoulder—put his hand under the white head huddled against the side of the chair. The Colonel watched him anxiously. Then, with a quick jerk, Wimsey lifted the quiet figure. It came up all of a piece, stiff as a wooden doll.

Fentiman laughed. Peel after hysterical peel shook his throat. All round the room, scandalised Bellonians creaked to their gouty feet, shocked by the unmannerly noise.

‘Take him away!’ said Fentiman, ‘take him away. He’s been dead two days! So are you! So am I! We’re all dead and we never noticed it!’

(3)

The discovery fulfils the grotesque promise suggested by George’s ramblings about the living dead and Wimsey’s attempt at parody in response to George’s proposed turn toward crime. What should arguably be a purely serious, tragic, and shocking moment becomes darkly humorous when the corpse can be lifted, somewhat unexpectedly, as easily as a doll. Moreover, George’s reaction implies the inescapability of the psychic wounds inflicted upon him, as it is the first indication that George suffers from shell shock.

The development of the murder plot in *Bellona* often hinges largely upon character points or events related to these armistice celebrations or the war’s impact on the novel’s characters. For example, Sayers consistently returns to the topic of George’s “nerves.” In a conversation between Wimsey and Mr. Murbles, the lawyer who hires Wimsey to investigate the circumstances of General Fentiman’s apparently natural death, Sayers compares the manliness of George’s brother and fellow veteran, Robert, to George’s “weakly” response to war’s traumas:

‘I don’t know Robert very well,’ interjected Wimsey. ‘I’ve met him. Frightfully hearty and all that—regular army type.’

‘Yes, he’s of the old Fentiman stock. Poor George inherited a weakly strain from his grandmother, I’m afraid.’

‘Well, nervous anyhow,’ said Wimsey, who knew better than the old solicitor the kind of mental and physical strain George Fentiman had

undergone. The War pressed hardly upon imaginative men in responsible positions. ‘And then he was gassed and all that, you know,’ he added apologetically.’ (12)

While apparently apologizing for George’s sensitivity here, Peter seems far more sympathetic to it than Murbles. Sayers goes on to contrast this sensitivity to the brutality and callousness that attend Robert’s “frightful” heartiness. According to George,

[Robert]’s so thick-skinned; the regular unimaginative Briton. I believe Robert would cheerfully go through another five years of war and think it all a very good rag. Robert was proverbial, you know, for never turning a hair. I remember Robert, at that ghastly hole at Carceny, where the whole ground was rotten with corpses—ugh!—potting those swollen great rats for a penny a time, and laughing at them. Rats. Alive and putrid with what they’d been feeding on. Oh, yes. Robert was thought a damn’ good soldier. (83)

In contrast, Sayers portrays George as entirely unhinged as a result of his wartime experience; like *Mrs. Dalloway*’s Septimus, he frequently mutters to himself (171) and experiences hallucinations (122). Perhaps most significantly, George’s compromised mental state leads him to believe that he has something to “confess,” even though he has committed no real crime. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the content of Septimus’s confession arguably pertains less to a particular act or offense than his wider sense of having committed acts that extend far beyond the boundaries of typical human experience. One could argue that a similarly amorphous and complex impulse inspires George to admit

falsely to murdering his grandfather.⁹¹ Although his confession fits well within the traditional detective formula because it represents the final step in the novel's construction of George's illness as a red herring, it is strange and unsettling because George has no concrete reason (other than his illness) for believing in his own guilt. Thus, through George's confession, Sayers blurs the line between the assignable, expiable guilt that the detective novel supposedly stages and then alleviates, and the more amorphous, illogical, and inexplicable guilt of the survivor.

In addition to highlighting the importance of George's experiences and symptoms and contrasting them favorably with Robert's callousness, the novel presents Robert's lack of sensibility as detrimental to several characters, including Robert himself. We learn that Robert Fentiman found his grandfather dead in the Bellona Club's library and, as he assumed that the elderly general died of natural causes, felt no qualms about attempting to conceal the body. He did so because the general's rich and ailing sister has written a will giving a significant portion of her wealth to her brother *only* in the case that she predeceases him. Robert, as the heir to the general's fortune, is thus anxious to make his grandfather's death (which, in fact, preceded his sister's) appear to have occurred later. His coolness makes it possible for him to concoct a daring plan for preventing his grandfather's body from being found, which complicates Wimsey's investigation once he determines that the general did not, in fact, die of natural causes. Robert's calm and lack of emotion not only allow him to handle his grandfather's body multiple times in the process of concealment, but also to take advantage of Remembrance Day's two minutes of silence (during which everyone in the Bellona Club goes outside on the balcony) to

⁹¹The reader is not actually privy to the exact moment of George's confession; instead, he learns of it when Wimsey does, via Parker.

transport the body. In so doing, he commits egregious outrages against family, country, and fellow veterans. Robert suffers greatly from the consequences of his irreverence, as it leads him into his one major error in attempting to misrepresent the time of his grandfather's death. He fails to replicate the dress his grandfather was likely to adopt on Remembrance Day accurately, forgetting to place a poppy in the general's lapel. This mistake is what convinces Peter Wimsey that the general did not die in the Club on that day, but rather some time before. Thus, Robert's inattentiveness to the wounds of war and their importance leads directly to the failure of his monetary aspirations. Just as the novel seemingly cannot avoid portraying the realities of war—even within a genre that ostensibly works against such remembrance—so Robert ultimately finds he cannot ignore their importance and impact.

Bellona's portrayal of George and repeated emphasis on grief are components of a larger foregrounding of trauma and its signifiers within the novel. As such, they point to the existence and importance of unconscious forces that these characters must negotiate in order to communicate and operate effectively. Like *Whose Body?*, *Bellona* places a tension between the scientific and interpretive modes at the center of its story, the latter being the mode that Sayers suggests can (and must) achieve such negotiation. As in *Whose Body?*, the fact that the murderer in *Bellona* is a doctor is suggestive of a larger critique of scientific forms of inquiry and knowing or the "ethics of investigation." Both novels present scientists who pursue truth and knowledge at any cost and tie the murderer's decision to kill to his desire to pursue professional objectives that are equally violent and damaging.

At first, Sayers suggests that *Bellona*'s murderer, Dr. Penberthy, is the antithesis of *Whose Body?*'s Dr. Freke. During the coroner's inquest, Mr. Murbles favorably compares Penberthy's sensitivity and "decorum" to the cheerfully clinical interest Dr. Horner takes in General Fentiman's corpse when it is exhumed for an autopsy:

'Ah! very nice indeed,' said Dr. Horner appreciatively, as the corpse was disengaged from the coffin and transferred to the table.

'Excellent. Not much difficulty over this job. That's the best of getting on to it at once. How long has he been buried, did you say? Three or four weeks? He doesn't look it. Will you make the autopsy or shall I? Just as you like. Very well. [. . .] I suppose we'd better secure the stomach, as it stands. . . . Pass me the gut, would you? Thanks. D'you mind holding while I get this ligature on? Ta.' (Snip, snip.) 'The jars are just behind you. Thanks. Look out! You'll have it over. Ha! ha! that was a near thing. Reminds me of Palmer, you know—and Cook's stomach—always think that a very funny story, ha! ha!—I won't take all the liver—just a sample—it's only a matter of form—and sections of the rest—yes—better have a look at the brain while we are about it, I suppose. Have you got the large saw?'

'How callous these medical men seem,' murmured Mr. Murbles.

'It's nothing to them,' said Wimsey. 'Horner does this kind of job several times a week.'

'Yes, but he need not be so noisy. Dr. Penberthy behaves with decorum.'

‘Penberthy runs a practice,’ said Wimsey with a faint grin. ‘He has to exercise a little restraint over himself. Besides, he knew old Fentiman, and Horner didn’t.’ (120-121)

Indeed, Horner’s cavalier and almost boisterous attitude contrasts sharply with what appears to be Penberthy’s reluctance to participate in the autopsy. As the reader soon discovers, however, this reticence can be attributed to the fact that he has murdered the General so he can pursue his own dissection projects. In fact, Dr. Penberthy is remarkably like Julian Freke in both his career interests and the ruthlessness of his ambition. Like Freke, he is a dissector who seeks to understand the whole of human (and particularly criminal) behavior—in this case, by investigating the behavior of glands. Sayers suggests the tremendous stakes of Penberthy’s investigations in Lord Peter’s dialogue with Father Whittington at Penberthy’s lecture. Father Whittington is attending in the hopes that Penberthy’s research on glandular functioning will present solutions to some of society’s “heart-breaking problems.” When Wimsey comments, “Glad to see there’s no antagonism between religion and science,” Whittington replies, “Of course not. Why should there be? We are all searching for Truth.” Having been joined by Penberthy, however, the priest gently suggests the danger of attempting simply and unilaterally to correct certain aspects of human behavior:

[. . .] ‘Well, Dr. Penberthy, I’ve come, you see, to hear you make mincemeat of original sin.’

‘That’s very open-minded of you,’ said Penberthy, with a rather strained smile. ‘I hope you are not hostile. We’ve no quarrel with the Church, you know, if she’ll stick to her business and leave us to ours.’

‘My dear man, if you can cure sin with an injection, I shall be only too pleased. Only be sure you don’t pump in something worse in the process . . .’

‘I’ll be as careful as I can,’ said Penberthy. (143)

Ironically, just as sin originates from man’s inability to resist tasting the fruit of knowledge (according to Whittington’s Christian beliefs), Penberthy’s scientific interest in pursuing the origins of criminality is directly responsible for his decision to commit the sin murder. The priest, Penberthy, and Wimsey return to the topic again after the lecture, and again emphasize the high stakes of Penberthy’s cold science:

‘Well,’ said Lord Peter, ‘have the altars reeled?’

‘Dr. Penberthy has just informed me that they haven’t a leg to stand on,’ replied the priest, smiling. ‘We have been spending a pleasant quarter of an hour abolishing good and evil. Unhappily, I understand his dogma as little as he understands mine. But I exercised myself in Christian humility. I said I was willing to learn.’

Penberthy laughed.

‘You don’t object, then, to my casting out devils with a syringe,’ he said, ‘when they have proved obdurate to prayer and fasting?’

‘Not at all. Why should I? So long as they *are* cast out. And provided you are certain of your diagnosis.’

Penberthy crimsoned and turned away sharply.

‘Oh, lord!’ said Wimsey. ‘That was a nasty one. From a Christian priest, too!’

‘What have I said?’ cried Father Whittington, much disconcerted.

‘You have reminded Science,’ said Wimsey, ‘that only the Pope is infallible.’ (150-151)

Penberthy reacts badly to the priest’s comment about diagnosis, of course, because he has “misdiagnosed” the General’s death as natural—for his own nefarious purposes, as the reader later discovers. In this exchange, Sayers links the presumed scientific infallibility that Wimsey perceives (through the lens of Whittington’s concerns) within Penberthy’s ethos to the “mistaken” diagnosis, which proves to be the sign of an even greater “evil.” Thus, in this moment, Sayers directly links “infallible science” itself to the ethos that drives Penberthy to murder.

Like Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, Sayers suggests that the artistic impulse stands in opposition to this clinical scientific mode and can serve as a force of resistance (or foil) to it. This suggestion is latent in her presentation of the character of Ann Dorland, Penberthy’s former lover and one of the suspects in the general’s murder. Dorland’s characterization points to the existence of connections among Sayers’s portrayal of this “redemptive” artistic mode and both Modernism and psychoanalysis.

The conflict between science and art in the novel is actually embodied in Dorland’s character. Dorland is a penniless relative of the general’s sister, Lady Dormer. Ann stood to inherit the majority of Lady Dormer’s estate, as the elder woman had made Ann the primary beneficiary of her wealth in the event that her brother predeceased her. Thus, Ann becomes a primary suspect. Wimsey discovers that while naturally inclined to pursue Modernist painting and interested in modern authors, Dorland is pulled toward

more scientific interests (including chemicals and glands) by her relationship with Penberthy. This alliance and her scientific interests bolster the case against her in the general's murder. Wimsey notes the evidence of her prior artistic leanings while searching her apartment, as he comes across some well-read—albeit dusty—modern and Modernist works:

‘M-m. Well now. Let’s start with the shelves by the fireplace. Dorothy Richardson—Virginia Woolf—E. B. C. Jones—May Sinclair—Katherine Mansfield—the modern female writers are well represented, aren’t they? Galsworthy. Yes. No J. D. Beresford—no Wells—no Bennett. Dear me, quite a row of D. H. Lawrence. I wonder if she reads him very often.’

He pulled down *Women in Love* at random, and slapped the pages open and shut.

‘Not kept very well dusted, are they? But they have been read. Compton Mackenzie—Storm Jameson—yes—I see.’ (182)

In addition to these literary interests, Wimsey and Parker discover that Dorland is a painter, ostensibly in the Modernist school. Although both detectives note that her work is poor, it is nonetheless significant that her artistry appears to be a passion away from which Penberthy lures her. More importantly, however, one of her paintings actually becomes Wimsey’s key to solving the mystery; in it, he recognizes a Modernist rendering of Penberthy and divines that the two were romantically linked, which provides a crucial link in his reconstruction of events. Through Penberthy and Dorland and their respective interests, Sayers highlights the tension between the scientific and the interpretive,

positioning the latter as a mode of resistance to the former—and, indeed, as the key to his own solution.

Significantly, the first conversation between Wimsey and Dorland, in which the relationship between Penberthy and Dorland is revealed to the reader, contains several references to Freudianism and Freud. When Wimsey is trying to determine the nature of Ann Dorland's distress, he asks, "Is it Freudian, or sadistic, or any of those popular modern amusements?" Although she initially suggests he is on the wrong track in this regard, she eventually admits that the man she was seeing (Penberthy) claimed that she "had a mania about sex," and says, "I suppose you would call it Freudian, really" (203). Although it remains unclear how applicable Freud's theories would actually be to her "condition," it seems important that Freud's name comes up frequently at the very moment at which science and art, and the forms of knowledge they embody and offer, are so forcibly compared in the contrast between Dorland's artistry and Penberthy's science.

One could argue that Wimsey's successful reading of the artistic sign (i.e., Dorland's painting) finds an analogue in his reading of Dorland's psychological signs or symptoms, when he notes, "You're not the kind of woman to be upset about nothing" in response to Ann's remark that Penberthy dismissed her emotions as dysfunction. In a sense, Wimsey's success in the *Bellona* case is due to his ability to read the signs of art and human nature effectively. It seems far from accidental that here, as earlier, Wimsey asserts the relevance and importance of emotional responses that appear illogical and inexplicable to others. He affirms that Dorland surely has some kind of reason for acting the way she does, just as he defended George against unjust critiques that did not take his shell shock into account. His attention to the more amorphous signs of the unconscious

and creativity proves more efficacious than a scientific methodology that looks to dissection and the reduction of human behavior to glandular function.

This deemphasizing of the power of reason and logic undermines any attempt to view the novel as mere intellectual puzzle. The novel further undermines such claims by drawing attention to—rather than eliding—the genre’s potentially escapist function and linking it to the realities of war. Affirming the comforts that creating art can afford, Wimsey says to Dorland:

‘ . . . I wish I could do something of that kind. As I say, I have to fall back on books for my escape. Reading *is* an escape to me. Is it to you?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well—it is to most people, I think. Servants and factory hands read about beautiful girls loved by dark, handsome men, all covered over with jewels and moving in scenes of gilded splendor. And passionate spinsters read Ethel M. Dell. And dull men in offices read detective stories. They wouldn’t, if murder and police entered into their lives.’

Even in the same breath that Wimsey acknowledges detective fiction’s escapist function, he reminds the reader of the unpleasant reality of “real” murder and violence. In so doing, he dispels the conditions under which the larger novel, the one he operates in, could serve as a mental retreat from such realities. As the conversation continues, the extent to which Sayers’s novel bucks the conventions of the genre becomes increasingly clear:

‘I don’t know,’ said Ann Dorland. ‘Of course, a detective story keeps your brain occupied. Rather like chess. Do you play chess?’

‘No good at it. I like it—but I keep on thinking about the history of the various pieces, and the picturesqueness of the moves. So I get beaten. I’m not a player.’

‘Nor am I. I wish I were.’

‘Yes—that would keep one’s mind off things with a vengeance. Draughts or dominoes or patience would be even better. No connection with anything. I remember,’ added Wimsey, ‘one time when something perfectly grinding and hateful happened to me. I played patience all day. I was in a nursing home—with shell shock—and other things. I only played one game, the very simplest . . . the demon . . . a silly game with no ideas in it at all. I just went on laying it out and gathering it up . . . a hundred times in an evening . . . so as to stop thinking . . .’

‘Then you, too . . .’

Wimsey waited, but she did not finish the sentence.

‘It’s a kind of drug, of course. That’s an awfully trite thing to say, but it’s quite true.’

‘Yes, quite.’

‘I read detective stories, too. They were about the only thing I could read. All the others had the War in them—or love . . . or some damn’ thing I didn’t want to think about.’

‘You’ve been through it, haven’t you?’ said Wimsey gently. (200-201)

Ironically, while still affirming detective fiction’s potential to serve as a kind of psychic balm, this detective novel presents its hero as someone who finds such escapism practically impossible. Even when playing chess, a game of pure strategy, he finds himself reflecting upon the history of each piece and the “picturesque” or aesthetic components of play. Thus, while admitting that in general the genre may serve this sublimating purpose, Sayers prevents her own fiction from doing so. She both makes the reader self-conscious and presents a detective who is constitutionally unable to avoid considering the human implications of even the “purest” intellectual endeavor. Rather than ignoring or sublimating traumatic occurrences within the story of motivated murder and clearly assignable guilt, the novel foregrounds the effects of war and trauma and makes the potential link between the genre’s obsession with death and the postwar condition explicit. Moreover, in drawing attention to the shadowy contours of traumatic memory and its lingering effects, the novel once again suggests the power of a knowledge that stems from the unmappable and unknowable unconscious and implies the inescapability of trauma’s effects.

Although ultimately providing its readers with a soothing solution, whereby the guilty party is discovered and his poisonous influence removed, the novel ends on an unsettling note—one that, appropriately, once again makes reference to the war. Colonel Marchbanks suggests a link between the lingering effects of war and Penberthy’s decision to commit murder, as the doctor was an army surgeon in the Great War:

“Dear, dear! Sometimes, Lord Peter, I think that the War has had a bad effect on some of our young men. But then, of course, all are not soldiers by training, and that makes a great difference. I certainly notice a less fine sense of honor in these days than we had when I was a boy. There were not so many excuses made then for people; there were things that were done and things that were not done. Nowadays men—and, I am sorry to say, women too—let themselves go in a way that is to me quite incomprehensible. I can understand a man’s committing murder in hot blood—but poisoning, and then putting a good, lady-like girl into such an equivocal position—no! I fail to understand it.” (222)

This speech reflects the same disconnect between the older and younger generations that was apparent at the beginning with the reaction of Club elders to George’s “hysteria.” It also draws attention to the disintegration of concepts such as traditional notions of “honor” and the profoundly damaging effects of war on its participants. Even if the Colonel demonstrates little understanding or empathy for those afflicted, his monologue highlights the need for both in its outlining of the links between societal ills and the postwar condition for the men who fought.

Although Marchbanks succeeds in allowing Penberthy to regain some of this lost “honour” by providing him with a gun to use for suicide, Penberthy’s death carries only a tenuous sense of closure and resolution. It leads directly into the conclusion of the novel, which, like the opening, at first glance reads merely as a wry characterization of the older generation as stuffy and out of touch. Upon more careful examination, however, one finds it actually contains ominous references to the enduring presence of the war and

violence in the world of the characters. In this moment, Wetheridge, the club's resident voice of the indignant and put-upon older generation, is once again threatening to quit the Club with his refrain that it "isn't half what it used to be":

"Look at all the disturbance there has been lately. Police and reporters—and then Penberthy blowing his brains out in the library. And the coal's all slate. Only yesterday something exploded like a shell—I assure you, exactly like a shell in the card-room; and as nearly as possible got me in the eye. I said to Culyer, 'This must *not* occur again.' You may laugh, but I knew a man who was blinded by a thing popping out suddenly like that. These things never happened before the War, and—great heavens! Great heavens, William! Look at this wine! Smell it! *Taste* it! Corked? Yes, I should think it *was* corked. My God! I don't know what's come to this Club." (228)

This image of a fireplace that mimics the sounds and even physical dangers of shellfire conveys the sense that the Bellona Club (and perhaps Europe at large) is haunted. The specter of violence is, as throughout the novel, inescapable.

Wimsey, Trauma, and the Return of the Repressed

As this final scene highlights, the problem at the crux of postwar life in *Whose Body?* and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* is that the conflict continues into the present for several of Sayers's characters. Through moments in which even a cheerful fireplace takes on a sinister cast and references to the frightening dreams and memories of her veteran characters, Sayers stages the relentless return of the event, which is a

defining characteristic of trauma. By serving as a reference to trauma and traumatic knowledge, Sayers's novels forcibly break from the mold of Golden Age detective fiction and align with the work of Modernists and Bloomsburians such as Woolf.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes a trauma as a moment of “accident” in which traumatic stimuli surprise the conscious mind and thereby bypass it, as consciousness is caught unprepared to master and order this energy (33; 38). Put differently, it is a “lack of any preparedness for anxiety” (36). One strange aspect of trauma, Freud notes, is that the mind tends to return compulsively to unpleasant or traumatic subject matter, often causing a person to repeat or re-enact the traumatic situation (for example, through dreams or in play), a tendency that runs counter to Freud's observation that humans typically seek the pleasurable and avoid that which is unpleasant (24). He determines that the compulsive return to traumatic events in dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations must constitute the mind's attempt to order retrospectively the event via the secondary processes that were bypassed in the moment of the original trauma.

Peter Wimsey certainly exhibits the symptoms of trauma and “shell shock” as a result of his service in World War I. Although Wimsey himself views his turn toward detective work as a mere “drug” or cure that serves as a distraction from traumatic memory, one could also argue that his compulsion to detect is actually part and parcel of the same repetitions that constitute the brain's attempt to master the “unbound energies” that result from trauma. Taking this logic to the level of the novel itself, one could also say that Sayers's obsessive return to the subject of Wimsey's illness allows her novels to stage a “working through” of trauma on a literary level. Like Peter's traumatic

symptoms, Sayers's references to Wimsey's illness are fragmentary, incomplete, and scattered over a long period of time, each mention providing a partial index to the meaning underlying his behavior. Her novels typically broach the subject of Peter's illness when he is about to finish a case, which, as noted above, triggers nightmares for him. In 1927, Sayers produced an introduction to *Unnatural Death* ostensibly written by Peter Wimsey's uncle, Paul Austin Legardie, that offers details regarding Wimsey's history and war experiences for the first time in Sayers's novels. Describing the series of events that led to Peter's breakdown after the war (which was partially caused by the desertion of his fiancée Barbara while he was still serving abroad) and eventual turn to detection, Legardie writes:

The only trouble about Peter's new hobby was that it had to be more than a hobby, if it was to be any hobby for a gentleman. You cannot get murderers hanged for your private entertainment. Peter's intellect pulled him one way and his nerves another, till I began to be afraid that they would pull him to pieces. At the end of every case we had the old nightmares and shell-shock over again. (xi)

Legardie notes that Wimsey's cases have prompted his condition to improve: "Of late he has become a little more ready to show his feelings, and a little less terrified of having any to show" (xii). While more symptomatic than curative, Peter's repeated involvement in murder mysteries does mimic the process by which the trauma victim attempts to gain

mastery over the experience that haunts him, prompting greater expressiveness and openness, if not an actual cure.⁹²

Sayers as Freudian, Sayers as Modernist

References to Wimsey's illness and memories of war punctuate all of the novels in which he appears, but it is only in her final Wimsey novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, that Sayers provides the reader with more complete narrative treatment of his condition. Moreover, it is the novel in which Sayers makes a link between her brand of detective fiction and Modernism most explicit. While most of the novel's chapters, in line with the tendency Symons noted, use epigraphs from pre-20th century sources, the chapter in which the murderer is revealed, "Prickly Pear," differs dramatically; in the place of these older and generally more literarily conservative choices, Sayers uses a selection from T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men":

This is the dead land
This is the cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star . . .

Between the idea

⁹²According to Legardie, Wimsey was an incredibly delicate (his nickname was "Flimsy") and sensitive boy who possessed "beautiful frankness" prior to the war, when he lost these qualities and affected an "impenetrable frivolity of manner" and "a dilettante pose" (x).

And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

The choice is both startling, given the poetic choices for all the other epigraphs, and suggestive, given that the chapter begins with Harriet's inquiry into Peter's nightmares. Evoking a dry, barren, and dead world not dissimilar to Eliot's "Waste Land," the poem is often read as Eliot's condemnation of a post-World War I West. Through its placement immediately prior to the revelation of the murderer's identity and Harriet's mention of Peter's nightmares, as well as its reference to the murder weapon (a cactus), the poem is emblematic of the surprising complexity and depth that stand behind Sayers's "frivolous" literary offerings and forges a direct link between her work and the larger contemporary tradition of Modernism. The poem embodies references to trauma, death, and the post-World War I context, and, as the epigraph to *Busman's* chapter of resolution, suggests their enduring influence and presence in the novel's world as well.⁹³

This moment perfectly embodies the hybridity of Sayers's detective fiction, which, while certainly embracing some of the conventions of the genre, also breaks the

⁹³It seems significant, too, that the book does not end with the capture of the murderer, but goes for almost 80 more pages, describing Peter's breakdown after the end of the case and providing further details about his condition. The presentation of these details coincides with one of the major challenges Harriet Vane has faced in her short marriage to Peter; thus, Sayers implies a subtle connection between death and romance that has existed throughout the Wimsey/Vane novels. Indeed, if death (in all its forms) is the central trauma upon which the Wimsey novels have focused up to this point, love runs a close second (and Legardie's reference to Wimsey's former fiancée in a discussion of his experience as a soldier and subsequent illness implies as much). *Busman's Honeymoon*, more than any of the other novels, foregrounds this fact. As the novel draws to a close and Peter suffers a breakdown, his mother acquaints Harriet with further background about his war experiences. Harriet is then faced with the challenge of treating Peter with appropriate sensitivity and respect and the newfound intimacy that their new "arrangement" has created. Thus, both violence and love meet and seem to register as traumatic for Wimsey at the novel's close, although Harriet is ostensibly able to help him through the breakdown.

mold in a variety of ways. Both *Whose Body?* and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* highlight the way in which Sayers's breaks with detective fiction conventions demonstrate an affinity of concern and purpose with both the Modernists and, more specifically, the members of the Bloomsbury group. Like the Bloomsburians, Sayers showed herself to be critical of modes of inquiry and knowing that failed to encompass or respect human privacy or the importance of memory or experience. The linkage between the concerns of these authors is clear in their common interest in trauma and the war. For all of them, trauma becomes an index to forms of knowledge that cannot be ascertained by scientific or clinical means. Thus, it points toward an ethics of interpretation and inquiry that is both more generally respectful of the mysteries at the heart of human experience—psychic and otherwise—and also potentially redemptive and ameliorative in a postwar world reeling from the after-effects of global conflict.

Epilogue

The contrast between “truth” and “meaning” is at the heart of the works in this study. Hayden White once made the comment that the truth cannot set us free—but meaning will. To a large extent, this idea is fundamental to these Bloomsbury group texts and their marshaling of Freudian psychoanalysis. “Freud-who-knew,” who attempted to elucidate the “truths” at the heart of his patient Dora’s neurosis, failed in his analysis, whereas Freud the seeker formulated a notion of the unconscious that became the basis of a more ethical—and effective—way of asking questions about the human psyche. In effect, Freud discovered that path to understanding begins with a willingness to ask a question to which there is no definitive answer.

The works by Woolf, Forster, and Mansfield discussed above share this perspective with Freud. In Woolf’s universe, the attempt to understand another person, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable barriers to comprehension, is at once necessary and, yet, rare and miraculous. In both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, the most hopeful moments occur when characters abandon cold, pure reason or bland empiricism to embrace connection, often through art. This shift in attitude allows certain characters to preserve the “mystery” at the heart of human experience or “privacy of the soul,” which cold science (represented in *Mrs. Dalloway* by Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw) probes and violates, much to the detriment of the “probed.” Septimus Warren Smith chooses to commit suicide rather than submit to the invasive methodologies of his doctors, which entail silencing him while using absurd physical metrics, such as

Septimus's weight, as a measure of his wellness. Woolf presents communication and connection, even when they don't "make sense," as constituting a form of resistance to the noxious patriarchy that Woolf perceived at the center of post- and interwar British life.

Naturally, the ability to claim knowledge of the absolute "truth" about other people represents a powerful means of consolidating control and authority. Like Woolf, Forster explores this aspect of the drive for "truth" and its negative impact. In colonial Chandrapore, the Anglo-Indians solidify their power by learning the "truth" about Indians, marshaling what Lacan would identify as a master discourse. Such discourse claims to be absolutely and entirely at one with the reality or "truth" that it describes. The incident in the Marabar Caves destabilizes this master discourse and gives rise to the discourse of the hysteric in the form of Adela Quested's rape narrative, which reveals the master discourse's inadequacy to the task of representing pure, unvarnished "truth." Though Adela destroys many relationships in the process of finally realizing that a rape did not occur, the manner in which her hysteria destabilizes the predominant Anglo-Indian discourse of logic and rationality creates the potential, at the end of the novel, for greater understanding and communication in the future, particularly with respect to the "forbidden" love of Fielding and Aziz. The potential to live and talk outside of imperialism and the master discourse it marshals is not yet entirely possible at the end of *A Passage to India*, but the realizations that the incident in the Marabar Caves provokes—for both the characters and the reader—represent a source of hope that such a possibility is imminent.

Katherine Mansfield, too, explores the dangers of the master discourse in two of her stories, “Je ne parle pas francais” and “Psychology.” Both of these stories focus on artist figures who, like the Anglo-Indians in *A Passage to India*, lay claim to being able to embody the absolute truth of what they describe in their discourse. In “Je ne parle pas francais,” the narrator claims access to a privileged perspective on both himself and others; as a detached artist, he can see everything in the “jumbled portmanteau” of human nature and relay each detail to his reader, no matter how depraved. In “Psychology,” the central couple hide behind their art and supposed ability to communicate “perfectly” with one another, sometimes telepathically, in order to opt out of discourse altogether. Though they believe they are uniquely able to use language to convey their thoughts in their entirety, their failure to articulate their feelings for each other, in a moment of emotional crisis, undermines this claim. When confronted with this crisis, they fall silent, which as Lacan asserts is the only tenuous and fleeting recourse the master can take to avoid being revealed as divided; in opting out of the circulation of desire and the pursuit of the *objet petit a* that is at its core, the speaking subject avoids having to admit a sense of lack that would drive that search. By refusing to speak to each other in any kind of meaningful way, the couple submits to a kind of “living death,” becoming a cautionary tale about dangers of marshaling this kind of discourse.

As I have already noted, Dorothy Sayers occupies a strange place in this collective of artists in conversation with Freud. Firstly, of course, she is not typically considered part of the Bloomsbury group, even though she lived and worked there and much of her writing referenced her Modernist contemporaries. Secondly, as the purveyor of classical detective novels that generally followed a rigid formula and adhered to

certain rules, Sayers viewed herself and her work in opposition to the efforts of the Modernists, which she often found scattered and purposeless. Finally, unlike the works by Woolf, Forster, and Mansfield discussed above, Sayers's detective novels hinge on the pleasures of full discovery; they create a universe in which all ills and unknowns ultimately have a motivation and "truth" at their core that can be discovered through reason and empirical investigation.

Sayers also places a detective suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder at the center of many of these stories, thus complicating any claim her novels might stake to being a mindless balm for a postwar British society in desperate need of escapist fare. Sayers undermines her own "soothing" portrayal of motivated, explainable death by consistently drawing attention to the specters of war that haunt her characters, and most particularly Lord Peter Wimsey. In allowing references to Wimsey's unconscious thoughts and fears to seep into her orderly murder puzzle, Sayers references a different kind of "truth"—or, rather, meaning—that is more powerful than the solution at the end of her novels. Although the classical detective is often associated with a forensic scientific mode of investigation dependent on empirical physical evidence, Sayers aligns Wimsey with a more Freudian psychoanalytic mode of going about "knowing" (as opposed to knowing *about*) others—and, in fact, it is the murderers in *Whose Body?* and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* who are the hard scientists, not the detectives. Wimsey, by contrast, is consistently attentive to the ethical dilemmas and stakes of pursuing the truth behind the murders he investigates, and always weighs the human impact of his efforts against the benefits of discovery and knowing the "truth" behind a crime.

More importantly, however, he is a vehicle through which Sayers brings the specter of war—and the power of unconscious meaning—to the fore. In explicitly linking Peter's nightmares about his experiences as a soldier to the conclusions of his cases, Sayers thwarts any kind of escapist pleasures the novel could afford with respect to the Great War. Moreover, the pleasures of full discovery are partially countered by the unsettling presence of Wimsey's unconscious memories.

None of the writers above ever explicitly expressed an artistic indebtedness to Freud. Sayers and Mansfield seem to have been more openly hospitable to psychoanalysis, while Woolf and Forster expressed emotions ranging from suspicion to outright hostility toward Freudian thought. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Freud's revolutionary rethinking of the human psyche and the division between consciousness and the unconscious influenced all of these writers. In particular, they all demonstrate an interest in deconstructing the notion that an absolute, discoverable "truth" exists at the heart of human emotions and motivation, and point to the ethical and practical problems of pursuing such knowledge. In this way, these authors' "ethics of interpretation" resembles Freud's formulation of the unconscious, which posits the existence of knowledge and psychic content that remains necessarily unknown to the subject. In Freud's formulation of the unconscious, which Lacan expanded upon, the subject's status as divided, which places him or her perpetually in pursuit of content that cannot be known or represented, provides a motor for life; thus, to attain full knowledge of such content would essentially be fatal to the subject. One finds a correlate for these stakes in the work of Woolf, Forster, Mansfield, and Sayers, all of whom mediate upon the devastating consequences of pursuing only hard truths and facts with respect to human

relationships. These authors suggest that implementing an “ethics of interpretation” in one’s dealings with others represents a powerful means of fostering connections and sympathy among individuals; in fact, it may be our only hope for survival.

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