

Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics

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Abstract

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This dissertation reanimates the multiple cultural and aesthetic debates that converged on the word *impersonality* in the first decades of the twentieth century, arguing that the term far exceeds the domain of high modernist aesthetics to which literary studies has consigned it. Although British and American writers of the 1920s and 1930s produced a substantial body of commentary on the unprecedented consolidation of impersonal structures of authority, social organization, and technological mediation of the period, the legacy of impersonality as an emergent cultural concept has been confined to the aesthetic innovations of a narrow set of writers. “Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics” offers a corrective to this narrative, beginning with the claim that as human individuality seemed to become increasingly abstracted from urban life, the words *impersonal* and *impersonality* acquired significant discursive force, appearing in a range of publication types with marked regularity and emphasis but disputed valence and multiple meanings. In this context *impersonality* came to denote modernism’s characteristically dispassionate tone and fragmented or abstract forms, yet it also participated in a broader field of

contemporaneous debate about the status of personhood, individualism, personality, and personal life.

This dissertation asserts impersonality's conceptual plasticity and makes a case for its paradigmatic importance in literary and cultural discourse of the 1920s and 1930s. Through literary texts that engage impersonality formally and thematically, the dissertation contextualizes narrative experiments in point of view within the broader questions about effaced individuality that the word *impersonality* condenses. By elaborating specific narrative criteria for impersonal fiction, "Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics" also addresses a critical gap in formal understandings of impersonality. New readings of canonical as well as less often studied modernists—Virginia Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, Tess Slesinger, Djuna Barnes, and Nathanael West—suggest that modernism is invested in not only performing impersonality but also interrogating it as a contemporary mode of sociality.

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DEDICATION

To my parents.

Introduction: Nobody's View

A truism of early-twentieth-century industrial modernity is that it was “impersonal” and “impersonalizing.” These words in particular signpost emergent understandings of British and American urban social life that seized on rationalization, vastness in scale, and the effacement of individuality as some of the era’s predominating features. It is also the case that *impersonality* has served from the early twentieth century onward as an indispensable descriptor for the formal innovations of Anglophone modernist literature. This dissertation argues that these two paradigms of impersonality—cultural and aesthetic—need to be examined in conjunction.

Although the Western discourse of aesthetic impersonality has pre-industrial roots spanning Aristotle to Immanuel Kant, its particular instantiation in modernism was profoundly engaged with the impersonal possibilities and lived experiences of the twentieth century. As modernist-era print culture attests, “impersonality” was amenable to a range of values and meanings, which modernist novelists variously took up and refashioned to their purposes as a thematic concern as well as an aesthetic ethos. In response to this entwinement of motif and form, “Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics” contends that impersonal narrative serves as a simulation technology for testing the consequences of a perspective that is not coincident with that of an individually qualified consciousness or a socially located subjectivity. Absent the communicative interface of an author or narrator, the uninhabited perspective of impersonal narration at its most extreme creates the effect of encountering the fictional world as though by direct feed. Via the technical maneuvers of impersonality, direct treatment becomes a fantasy of representation without mediation: of objectivity, totality, precision, and anonymity—concepts that qualify the era as well as the art. In this light modernist

literary impersonality appears as a variably mimetic and critical response to the impersonal experiences of twentieth-century modernity.

Hence this project's central premise is that impersonality did a great deal of cultural work to define the modernist era, and that scholars of the twentieth century have yet to fully reckon with its importance as a keyword.¹ In this sense the dissertation is indebted to Raymond Williams's watershed *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), which began with the perplexity of defining "culture" post-World War II and Williams's realization that its variable meanings in the "general vocabulary" of everyday discussion extended from profound cultural tensions and historical rifts.² In particular Williams takes note of the importance of "culture" "in two areas that are often thought of as separate—*art* and *society*," a coincidence that "posed new questions and suggested new kinds of connection."³ Although the separation between art and society may no longer be so readily taken for granted, *impersonality* for the most part has been discretely contained by these two contexts of use. Taking up the spirit of Williams's inquiry into "strong, difficult and persuasive words" that tell a story through their diffuse cultural commitments, this dissertation traces impersonality's discursive entanglements as one way of delivering a narrative of modernism.⁴

Impersonality in the ambit of modernism necessarily lends this narrative a prominent aesthetic angle but one that need not be limited to the few authors typically privileged as exemplars of the so-called doctrine of impersonality: namely T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. In

¹ A promising move in this direction is the inclusion of "impersonality" in Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam Hammond, and Alexandra Peat, *Modernist Keywords* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2014).

² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

literary criticism their aesthetic statements and practices have axiomatically anchored formal definitions of modernism to the eclipse of other authors and accounts. Since both Eliot and Joyce focus on the author's relation to the text and the mythic moment of artistic creation, the orthodox sense of impersonality also remains focused on the author's severance from the work, and as a consequence the technical methods and strategies of impersonality receive relatively scant attention. With the aim of enriching formal discussions situated in modernist studies, "Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics" therefore draws on insights and methodological tools from narrative theory, which, beginning in the modernist era, has developed useful ways of describing what exactly is impersonal about aesthetic impersonality.

Further, this dissertation expands the field of impersonality's theorists and practitioners to include Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, Tess Slesinger, Djuna Barnes, and Nathanael West. The exception to this project's cast of impersonalists is Lewis, whose outspoken rejections of impersonality in fictional and essayistic forms make patent its aesthetic outlines and cultural aspirations. Chapters accordingly focus on these five American and British modernist writers who theorize impersonality and its effects through a combination of theme and form. Novels from 1919 to 1936 together chart a broad course for impersonal possibilities in the interwar period.

"Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics" contributes to a small but growing body of scholarship that connects aesthetic impersonality to correlative cultural and social formations. The earliest study in this vein was Maud Ellmann's *Poetics of Impersonality* (1987), which traces the contradictions and duplicities inherent to the impersonal poetics of Eliot and, secondarily, Ezra Pound. Constructing a psychoanalytic framework to argue for their successive manufacture and disavowal of poetic selves, Ellmann reads impersonality as "a

structure of intransigent exclusions, vexed by the return of the repressed,” which for Eliot and Pound consists chiefly of individualism, Romanticism, and the philosophy of Henri Bergson.⁵ Ellmann argues that impersonality is ultimately a “subterfuge”; hence, “the more the poet tries to hide himself, the more he seems to give himself away.”⁶ Ellmann contests impersonality’s “purely aesthetic” relevance in order to take into account its embrace of “many cultural domains,” a position in accord with this dissertation’s investments.⁷ However, her treatment of culture is circumscribed by a focus on Eliot and Pound and the resonances afforded by their uses of impersonality—particularly those related to a reactionary political program that Ellmann argues is continuous with their impersonal poetics. “The doctrine of impersonality was born conservative,” she contends, and thus she articulates what has held out until recently as the presiding thesis of impersonality’s Eliotic vector.⁸ In the process Ellmann impugns scholars who have used impersonality “to rescue modernism from its racism and homophobia: to purify the poems of their authors’ politics, and hence to insulate aesthetics from history.”⁹

Tim Dean’s “T. S. Eliot, Famous Clairvoyant” (2004) mounts a concise intervention against Ellmann’s position and several decades of fervent attacks on impersonality’s political hygiene.¹⁰ As a corrective, his essay argues for impersonality’s ideological mutability and so clears space for renewed debate and more thorough contextualization of impersonality’s relation to modernism. In revisiting Eliot’s doctrine of impersonality Dean posits an “ethically

⁵ Maud Ellmann, *Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton, UK: The Harvester Press, 1987), 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 198–99.

¹⁰ Summarizing critiques by Terry Eagleton, Paul Morrison, and Kenneth Asher, Dean observes, “impersonality has fallen into such disrepute as to be deemed unworthy of serious consideration.” “T. S. Eliot, Famous Clairvoyant,” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Desire in T. S. Eliot*, ed. Nancy Gish and Cassandra Laity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 48.

admirable” conception of the impersonal as a “strategy of access” to otherness and others’ voices, thereby contesting the logic of concealment and evasion that underwrites critiques of impersonality such as Ellmann’s.¹¹ Dean’s essay is the first in a series of recent projects to take up impersonality in a broadened field of contexts and authors and invest in schemas other than conservatism for connecting impersonality to culture.

Sharon Cameron’s 2007 *Impersonality: Seven Essays* demonstrates the conceptual flexibility of her title concept by addressing disparate iterations of impersonality called to the fore by her six authors (Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Simone Weil, Eliot, and Herman Melville). From Empson’s reverence for the inscrutable faces of Buddhist statues and Weil’s self-reduction to a state of “vegetative” devotional attention; to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s annihilation of self in grief and endorsement of impersonality as “antidote for the egotistical, the subjective, the solipsistic,” Cameron encompasses a range of works that query the category of the person in writings she broadly classes as religious.¹² Arguing that “we don’t know what the *im* of impersonality means,” Cameron pursues the philosophical paradoxes of effacement, whereby “impersonality (as a practice, as an ethic, as a representation), since it is undertaken by persons, could only be contradictory by definition.”¹³ Although she states that her essays do not conform as “chapters with an overarching argument,” Cameron offers a provisional definition of impersonality that stresses human existence dislocated from particularity: “it is not the negation of the person, but rather a penetration through or a falling outside of the boundary of the human particular. Impersonality disrupts elementary categories we suppose of be fundamental to

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹² Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), xiv, 80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

specifying human distinctiveness.”¹⁴ Cameron’s book is both elegant and foundational in articulating multiple ways of thinking through and against personality and individuality as dominant forms within Western (and, in her study, largely American) culture. This dissertation likewise finds that impersonality “means different things for different authors,” but whereas Cameron’s authors each seem to invent impersonality whole cloth from their own commitments and her book stakes no historical significance on the evidence of her nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century set of texts, this dissertation is invested in locating impersonality within distinctively modernist historical and discursive frameworks.¹⁵

Rochelle Rives’s *Modernist Impersonalities: Affect, Authority, and the Subject* (2012) initiates the task of identifying modernist impersonality with an historically “coherent aesthetic and social milieu.”¹⁶ In particular, Rives connects the problem of impersonality to modernist negotiations with political authority and phenomenological encounters with the “world.” In Rives’s account, impersonality’s negation targets humanist constructions of selfhood and contemporary understandings of “personality” that for modernists connoted “a sham individualism characterized by emotive messiness and disorder.”¹⁷ However, as she argues, “the move away from the person toward a ‘world’ occasioned its own sense of anxiety about the potential loss of personal authority and spatial dimension impersonality entails”; thus “impersonality offered the potential of liberation but nonetheless emerged as a problem for modernists to negotiate.”¹⁸ Although Rives makes an important gesture toward impersonality’s multiplicity by pluralizing it in the title, ultimately her book drives at a cohesive synthesis that

¹⁴ Ibid., xvi, ix.

¹⁵ Ibid., ix.

¹⁶ Rochelle Rives, *Modernist Impersonalities: Affect, Authority, and the Subject* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸ Ibid., 4.

recruits authors including Eliot, Lewis, H. D., D. H. Lawrence, Mary Butts, and Elizabeth Bowen to a single project: each author is said to exemplify impersonality as both “radical freedom” in self-surrender and a recoil toward “authoritarian paradigms that reproduce often violent scenarios of invasion and control.”¹⁹ Although her thesis places our projects most directly at odds concerning Lewis (whom, as noted above, this dissertation takes as a staunch anti-impersonalist), “Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics” is likewise skeptical of a unifying dynamic by which impersonality can be defined and contained. Indeed, this dissertation argues that impersonality’s wide purchase as a cultural construct that feeds into modernist aesthetics proceeds from its heterogeneity and malleability, which is evident in contemporary periodical culture and remains a feature of literary engagements with a variety of discourses that claim the term.

Three frameworks serve to introduce this project: discursive, in order to establish impersonality as a keyword and reanimate its diverse inflections within modernist-era cultural commentary, magazines, and scholarship; aesthetic, to suggest how high modernism has dominated understandings of modernist impersonality; and formal, to elaborate a model for assessing impersonal narrative strategies with reference to modernist-era and subsequent narrative theory. What follows below is a brief accounting of each of those frameworks. Finally, the introduction closes by summarizing the dissertation’s four chapters.

I. The Vanishing Individual in Print

In a 1934 *Hound & Horn* (1927–1934) article titled “The Vanishing Individual,” Martha Gruening extrapolates from fourteen novels under review that “this impersonality of outlook...is

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

in the air, part of the ‘climate of opinion.’”²⁰ Her observation is not restricted to the novels at hand but instead casts fiction as “a reflection of an actual change in the world”: “never at any time in the world’s history has the individual been so powerless, so insignificant and so aware of his insignificance.”²¹ Gruening’s article usefully crystallizes widespread anxieties between the wars about forces that exceeded or denied the preeminence—or even relevance—of the individual. In the twenty-first century the term “impersonality” seems to have largely solidified along Gruening’s lines—for instance, as a necessary but lamentable consequence of post-industrial and digital anonymity—but in the early twentieth century it could also signify the individual’s disappearance into a higher order of scientific, spiritual, or ethical truth or, with more ambivalence, into technological or organizational efficiency. The following summarizes the discursive contours of debates that in modernist-era print culture were garnered by the perception of “the vanishing individual” and organized by the keywords “impersonal” and “impersonality.”

Among the most familiar contexts for encountering impersonality as word and concept are discussions of machine-age industrialism and social rationalization. If the nineteenth century dealt with scalar adjustments of diminished human significance vis-à-vis nature and the physical universe, the twentieth century, still reeling from these transformations, reckoned with further diminishment of the individual in relation to human structures of organization. American scholar Leon Carroll Marshall provides an unparalleled aggregation of these structures’ association with “impersonality” in his edited volume *Readings in Industrial Society* (1918). Marshall observes that “of the many changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the forces, both intellectual and economic, connected with it, few have been more striking in their consequences

²⁰ Martha Gruening, “The Vanishing Individual,” *Hound & Horn* 7 (1934): 320.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 318.

than the spread of impersonal relations.”²² He quotes from a colleague’s unpublished manuscript that “our impersonal organization of economic relations (if not of society) can best be described by the three adjectives, industrial, pecuniary, and urban,” and Marshall goes on to sketch the way these qualities either directly or indirectly manifest impersonality:

Impersonal relations go hand in hand with our pecuniary organization of society; they are inherent in our market organization; they lurk in our specialization and interdependence; the new technology is impersonality itself; even the administration of human beings in modern industrialism has strong tendencies toward an impersonal basis; over and above all the magnitude of the operations of modern society has made for impersonality. Oddly enough, this development of impersonal relations has not received the attention it deserves in our formal writings upon social and economic matters.²³

Beginning to address this task, the social theorists from whom Marshall excerpts offer a sweeping and yet on the whole fairly balanced appraisal of impersonality’s predominance over modern social life. Highlights include an adaptation of Georg Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* (1900), which argues for a condition of “individual liberty” arising from the fact that “money is able to form the most impersonal relations between men.”²⁴ In a 1917 government report titled “Impersonality in Modern Life” L. M. Powell construes “‘scientific management’ [as] an open

²² Leon Carroll Marshall, “Impersonal Relations: Problems at Issue,” *Readings in Industrial Society: A Study in the Structure and Functioning of Modern Economic Organization*, ed. Leon Carroll Marshall (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1918), 782.

²³ *Ibid.*, 783. Max Weber likewise calls money “the most abstract and ‘impersonal’ element that exists in human life.” “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 331.

²⁴ Adapted by S. P. Altman for the *American Journal of Sociology* (1904); excerpted as “Impersonality under the Pecuniary Régime” in Marshall, *Readings in Industrial Society*, 791.

recognition of the impersonality of our system and an attempt to use it to advantage.”²⁵ Powell also observes with relative neutrality that “a system of ‘anonymous production’—production by unknown persons for unknown persons” reduces interpersonal contact in society’s network of relations. Especially given the scale and influence of modern corporations, “human relationships give place to impersonal substitutes” like newspapers and magazines that serve functions performed under “a régime of personal relations” by a diverse circle of acquaintance.²⁶ Owing to bleaker implications, an excerpt from Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1912) contends that the systematicity of large-scale manufacturing crosses over from industrial processes into the psychology of the work force:

within the range of this machine-guided work, and within the range of modern life so far as it is guided by the machine process, the course of things is given mechanically, impersonally, and the resultant discipline is a discipline in the handling of impersonal facts for mechanical effect. It inculcates thinking in terms of opaque, impersonal cause and effect, to the neglect of those norms of validity that rest on usage and on the conventional standards handed down by usage.²⁷

Although the observations condensed in Marshall’s volume readily lend themselves to critiques of the anti-Fordist, “human cogs in a vast and impersonal machine” variety, Marshall situates the discussion within a set of open-ended questions—e.g., “‘the growth of impersonal relations makes greater room for individual liberty.’ Why or why not?”²⁸

²⁵ L. M. Powell, “Impersonality in Modern Life,” in Marshall, *Readings in Industrial Society*, 790.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 788; Marshall, “Impersonal Relations,” 785.

²⁷ Thorstein Veblen, “Standardization and the Machine Process,” in Marshall, *Readings in Industrial Society*, 440.

²⁸ Marshall, “Impersonal Relations,” 786; J. A. T. Lloyd, “War in Fiction,” *The Fortnightly Review* 110 (1919): 771.

More interventionist players in the discourse include then-President Woodrow Wilson and philosopher John Dewey. The theme of the “submerged” or “swallowed” individual sounds clearly from Wilson’s *The New Freedom* (1913), which argues for more aggressive corporate regulation.²⁹ Wilson claims “we are all caught in a great economic system which is heartless.... When we deal with [the modern corporation], we deal with an impersonal element.”³⁰ More nostalgically than Marshall or Powell, Wilson compares the impersonality of modern life to a personal past: “Yesterday, and ever since history began, men were related to one another as individuals. To-day, the everyday relationships of men are largely with great impersonal concerns, with organizations, not with other individual men.”³¹ Wilson hails this impersonal paradigm as “a new age of human relationships,” words that John Dewey quotes multiple times, and affirms as “no exaggeration,” in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927).³² Dewey was one of impersonality’s most articulate critics, and he alleged its crucial link to a broken philosophy of individualism that undermined both community and individuality. Dewey identifies “the invasion of the community by the new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior” as “the outstanding fact of modern life.”³³ More specifically, impersonality is for Dewey the signature feature of American life. Published in *The New Republic* (1914—), “‘America’—By Formula” (1929) argues that the characteristics that

²⁹ Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1913), 20; serialized in *The World’s Work* (1900–1932) from January to July 1913.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³² John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946), 96, 98, 126.

³³ *Ibid.*, 98.

distinguish the “American type” “fundamentally...spring from impersonality” and induce the “‘impersonalization’ of the human soul.”³⁴

Britain, too, had a sense of homegrown industrial impersonality, which surfaced in periodicals with clamors for a “new spirit of industry” and protection of “the human factor.”³⁵ Take for instance a piece from *The New Age* (1894–1938) in which Sir John Francis Hope rehearses an anonymous argument about industry’s impersonalizing effects that had appeared in the British weekly *The Nation*:

Everything, even the ownership of machinery, has become impersonal, for a limited liability company...has as we say, neither a soul to be saved nor a body to be kicked. The sense of “ownership, creation, distinction,” as “B.” puts it, has disappeared from most of our national life; and in its place we have impersonality, and a monotonous routine of life. The result is, in “B’s” opinion, that “we are forgetting how to feel,” we are becoming incapable of being impressed by new experiences even if they were accessible to us while we live in this squirrelcage.³⁶

Hope’s “squirrelcage” of impersonality is several ironic shades off Max Weber’s “iron cage” of rationalization, but whatever Hope’s attitude may be toward such assertions, his point—and ours—is that they were entirely “familiar.”³⁷ *The New Age* features many other examples that

³⁴ Dewey, “‘America’—By Formula,” *The New Republic* 60 (1929): 117, 118; later published in *Individualism Old and New* (1930).

³⁵ Chapter 1 takes up these formulations in more detail. A further example may be found in A. E. R., “A Mechanistic View,” *The New Age* 27, no. 1 (1920): 13–14.

³⁶ Sir John Francis Hope, “Drama,” *The New Age* 22, no. 17 (1918): 330.

³⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 1992), 123.

draw impersonality into critiques of capitalism, “the horror of wage-slavery,” and the dehumanization of commodified labor “as an impersonal thing.”³⁸

Hope’s “B.” expresses another commonplace when he claims to forget “how to feel.” Jeopardized feeling was routinely traced not only to industry but also to the city and the cultural impact of science. Among the city’s detractors are literary scholar Henry Seidel Canby and journalist Walter Lippmann, who integrate their critiques of the “inevitably standardized and anonymous” metropolis with circuits of demand for personalized mass media.³⁹ Canby’s 1926 “Anon is Dead” in *The American Mercury* presents apartment buildings like “beehive[s],” the modern university, and Prohibition-era clubs as all “essentially impersonal” and the denizen of this matrix “a mere fibre of the impersonal mass.”⁴⁰ Yet while the urban populace is stifled by desperate anonymity, Canby finds public sites like newspapers, billboards, and popular literature emblazoned with ego. Thus the “glorification of the capital *I*” and “egomania of our times” can be seen as compensatory, “a panicky, an almost hysterical, attempt to escape from the deadly anonymity of modern life...and the craving—I had almost said terror—of the general man who feels his personality sinking lower and lower into a whirl of indistinguishable atoms to be lost in a mass civilization.”⁴¹ In *Drift and Mastery* (1914) Lippmann argues that disorientated emotions can be traced to broken down “loyalties of place” and “little direct contact” among neighbors, and he likewise notes a compensatory dynamic that involves looking for consolation to the

³⁸ “Unedited Opinions: the Horror of Wage-slavery,” *The New Age* 11, no. 1 (1912): 15; “The Bondage of Wagerly: An Open Letter to the Trades Union Congress,” *The New Age* 13, no. 18 (1913): 503.

³⁹ Henry Seidel Canby, “Anon is Dead,” *The American Mercury* 8, no. 29 (1926): 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 80, 82.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80, 82, 79.

press—itself a prime dealer in impersonality.⁴² Thus, because “this impersonal quality is intolerable,” “you find an overwhelming demand upon the press for human interest stories, for personal details opened to the vast public.”⁴³

However, in addition to the alienation of what one writer terms “the chilled-steel armor of the city habit of impersonality,” urban anonymity could also represent a boon to individuals eager to escape scrutiny, closed ideas, and rigid social convention.⁴⁴ Published in a 1922 *New York Times Magazine*, “Women Alone in New York” by “One of Them” records the elation that urban anonymity made available to women in particular: “the thing which appeals most is the very impersonality of New York life—the feeling that no one cares what you are doing or why. A woman alone causes no comment, for she is only one in thousands.... No one cares! Ah, what freedom!”⁴⁵ Although the writer goes on to describe “the oppression of the wonderful impersonality of New York” when she finds a job hard to come by, her complaint incites an anonymous rejoinder in “‘Women Together in New York’ by Two of Them,” which testifies to unmitigated joy in urban freedom when the city is encountered as an industrious female duo.⁴⁶ These articles testify to the fact that modernity’s immensities of scale could be liberating as well oppressive, and, as Woolf’s *Night and Day* (1919) will affirm in chapter 2, impersonality represented for women novel advantages that find their most vivid representation in the exterior spaces of the metropolis.

In the context of positivist science “impersonality” could likewise convey radically divergent valences, as a signifier of both menace and truth. The modernist era coincided with the

⁴² Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1914), 154.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁴ “The Point of View,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 51, no. 4 (1912): 507.

⁴⁵ “Women Alone in New York,” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 24, 1922.

⁴⁶ “Women Together in New York,” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 11, 1923.

entrenchment of scientific objectivity as an unrivaled—though not uncontested—“epistemic virtue,” to use Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s term, and to a significant degree, the discursive force of “impersonality” draws from the scientific paradigm.⁴⁷ Scientific claims to “absolute” and “universal” truth were posited axiomatically in terms of impersonality. Articles in *Nature* (1869—) and *Science* (1800—) furnish these examples: “science is universally communicable and verifiable, or it is not science.... It is impersonal, as we say”; “the method of science” is “to eliminate the personal factor and to impart the character of impersonal absolute validity to the conclusions.”⁴⁸ Philosopher Bertrand Russell ascribes more breadth to the scientific project when he states its value in terms of “disinterested curiosity”: “the desire for a larger life and wider interests, for an escape from private circumstances...is fulfilled by the impersonal cosmic outlook of science as by nothing else.”⁴⁹

However, critics were alert to the fact that the postures and strictures of the scientific method exacted certain costs. As British writer Edwin Muir puts it, “the growth and dissemination of science has made our approach to experience more impersonal.”⁵⁰ Muir links modern constraints on feeling in particular to “science, enlightenment, scepticism—these make us look coldly, and involuntarily, automatically.... The theorist’s impersonality of intellect becomes insensibly an impersonality of general habit, and eventually an impersonality of

⁴⁷ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison locate the emergence of objectivity in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. They coin the term “epistemic virtue” to describe the ethical value that attached to self-distanced ways of seeing, arguing that the cultural force of objectivity was due, in part, to this twinning of episteme and ethics. *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 39–42.

⁴⁸ Charles Sedgwick Minot, “The Method of Science,” *Science* 33, no. 839 (1911): 124. “Science and Literature,” *Nature* 114, no. 2863 (1924): 400.

⁴⁹ Bertrand Russell, “Mysticism and Logic,” in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1919), 45; first published in *The Hibbert Journal* in 1914.

⁵⁰ Edwin Muir, “The Present State of Poetry,” *The Calendar of English Letters* 2, no. 2 (1926): 323.

feeling.”⁵¹ Wyndham Lewis’s critique is more pointed, alleging that science stages an outright attack on the coherence of the subject. As chapter 1 elaborates, Lewis construed the rhetoric of scientific impersonality as a mask behind which pernicious technocratic and personal interests could operate with impunity. Apposite to Lewis’s position is the judgment of French intellectual Camille Schuwer: if “we are persuaded that true knowledge is impersonal,” we are taken in by what “may be called the scientific fallacy.”⁵²

These critiques stem partly from the fact that in extended use scientific impersonality could be widely applied as shorthand for correct and ethical thinking. In *The Grammar of Science* (1892) Karl Pearson associates civic flaws with deficiently impersonal habits of mind: “it is in the want of impersonal judgment, of scientific method, and of accurate insight into facts, a want largely due to a non-scientific training, which renders clear thinking so rare, and random and irresponsible judgments so common, in the mass of our citizens to-day.”⁵³ Elmer Ellsworth Brown, a U. S. Commissioner of Education, advocates the convergence of “the judicial spirit and the scientific spirit” in moral education, arguing that

to cultivate the scientific spirit in the schools is to prepare for the exercise of the judicial spirit in the affairs of life. In both we have an example of the value of impersonality.... [W]e must shake ourselves free from personal considerations and look upon things objectively and impartially. We shall never get the highest good out of personality until we have given fair play to this impersonality.⁵⁴

Although vaguely counterintuitive, Brown’s move to identify scientific impersonality with the goals of humanism simply rehearses one of the era’s defining postulates. Philosopher Samuel

⁵¹ Ibid., 322.

⁵² Camille Schuwer in “Metanthropological Crisis: A Manifesto,” *transition*, no. 21 (1932): 133.

⁵³ Karl Pearson, *The Grammar of Science* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900), 25.

⁵⁴ Elmer Ellsworth Brown, “The Culture of Righteousness,” *The Methodist Review* (1909).

Alexander similarly avows that “ethics and the science of truth are concerned with the same subject, of impersonality,” which according to Alexander means being “purged of mere idiosyncrasy” so that “the attainment of impersonality or impartiality is the highest exhibition of personality.”⁵⁵ Historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford—a fierce critic of technological ideology, no less—argues that “until we have absorbed the lessons of objectivity, impersonality, neutrality, the lessons of the mechanical realm, we cannot go further in our development toward the more richly organic, the more profoundly human.”⁵⁶ The scientific spirit also lent credence to humanist political projects including the League of Nations, which was lauded in *The Atlantic Monthly* (1857—) “for its impersonal, scientific spirit[,]...unique in the history of international cooperation.”⁵⁷

However, even as impersonality posed in one sense as an ethical guarantor, in another it was synonymous with the ethical problems specific to industrial life. One of the guiding questions of Marshall’s *Readings in Industrial Society* concerns the need for “an impersonal code of ethics”; as Powell’s excerpt notes, “our morality built up in the days of personal relations is adapting itself very slowly to taking care of impersonal situations.”⁵⁸ British scholar B. Kirkman Gray formulates “the paradox of impersonal ethics” in attempt to apply impersonality’s positive potential—as a standard of right, impartial, or higher interests—to the impersonal problems of scale and distance in industrial society. Gray approaches the problem by addressing the “emotional preparedness” necessary to live ethically in an anonymous population and

⁵⁵ Samuel Alexander, “Collective Willing and Truth,” *Mind* 22, no. 85 (1913): 17, 30.

⁵⁶ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 363.

⁵⁷ Raymond B. Fosdick, “The League of Nations After Two Years,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 130 (1922): 266.

⁵⁸ Marshall, “Impersonal Relations,” 52; Powell, “Impersonality in Modern Life,” 791.

economy.⁵⁹ Gray purposes to show that it is “possible to love an average” in a symbolic sense that extrapolates individual love all the way to nameless faces and statistics.⁶⁰ Impersonal love is thus distinctly abstract, differentiated from the mere sensationalism and sentimentalism that tries to provoke personal, individual attachment to strangers—it means “find[ing] the Human in persons who cannot first of all or at any point be known as persons.”⁶¹

Gray concedes a touch of “mystical tendency” in his solution, and indeed the love that he describes is not far removed from a spiritual sense of impersonality that was especially important for forms of mysticism and deistic modifications of Christianity that followed the scientific upheavals of nineteenth-century faith.⁶² As editor for *The Nation and Athenaeum*, Leonard Woolf published in 1926 a reader survey that positioned impersonality as an agnostic alternative to a monotheistic God; the survey first asked, “Do you believe in a personal God?” and then “Do you believe in an impersonal, purposive, and creative power of which living beings are the vehicle, corresponding to the Life Force, the élan vital, the Evolutionary Appetite, &c.?”⁶³ While the results are interesting in their own right, the survey’s wording attests to the broad currency of impersonality as a synonym for “life force” and the most immediate alternative to a traditional

⁵⁹ B. Kirkman Gray, “The Ethical Problem in an Industrial Community,” *International Journal of Ethics* 17, no. 2 (1907): 227.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 217. Impersonality is one of the words favored by philosopher Charles Taylor to describe the modern paradigm of belief. As he puts it in *A Secular Age*, the “powerful understanding of an inescapable impersonal order, uniting social imaginary, epistemic ethic, and historical consciousness, becomes one of the...*idée forces* of the modern age” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 290.

⁶³ “The Questionnaire: Final Results,” *The Nation and the Athenaeum* (October 16, 1926): 75. “The élan vital” invokes Henri Bergson’s influence in popularizing an impersonal notion of “life force” with the publication of *Creative Evolution* (1907); however, as the grab-bag list ending in “&c.” suggests, the phenomenon the survey aims to capture extends well beyond Bergson. The survey ran simultaneously in *The Nation*.

conception of God.⁶⁴ In another example, Robert Briffault’s “Impersonality” in *The English Review* (1908–1937) refuses the paradigms of both self-interested egoism and self-sacrificing altruism in favor of a non-individuated spirit that subsumes all human existence: “the Life-force that actuates us is not directed towards our interests as individuals, but towards its interests; they are impersonal. Individuality, personality, are the compromises and limitations of our impersonality.”⁶⁵

Along these lines, impersonality was also an important principle for Christian Science and the Theosophy Society, whose notions of impersonality encompassed spiritual truth and divine insight. *The Theosophical Path* (1911–1935) published articles with titles like “Seek Happiness in Impersonality” and cheerful epigraphs like “Be impersonal. Be self-forgetful.”⁶⁶ Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy proposes that “to impersonalize scientifically the material sense of existence—rather than cling to personality—is the lesson of to-day.”⁶⁷ Carol Norton, who appends “C. S. D.,” or Christian Science Doctor, to his name on the title page of *Studies in Character* (1906), places impersonality at the center of an unwieldy amalgam of virtues that include universal love, Christian ministry, civic principle, and scientific truth. Promoting love as a “universal” “spiritual instinct,” Norton claims that “for personality it gives impersonality; for human greed, avarice, and selfishness it begets the creative and expanding

⁶⁴ Among Athenaeum readers, the survey returned a negative majority for both questions; for question two, 700 respondents believed in an impersonal life force; 892 did not; 257 were undecided.

⁶⁵ Robert Briffault, “Impersonality,” *The English Review* 32 (1921): 436. See too Briffault’s “We” in *The English Review* (November 1920): 405–415.

⁶⁶ H. Travers, “Seek Happiness in Impersonality,” *The Theosophical Path* 31, no. 1 (1926): 61; Jalie Neville Shore, “Some Personal Observations on Impersonality,” *Theosophical Forum and the Theosophical Path and Lucifer* 9, no. 4 (1936): 264.

⁶⁷ Mary Baker Eddy, “Deification of Personality,” *Miscellaneous Writings, 1883–1896* (Boston: Trustees Under the Will of Mary Baker G. Eddy, 1896), 310.

genius of philanthropy, unselfishness, and tender ministry.”⁶⁸ Yet unlike Briffault, Norton upholds individuality in opposition to personality so as to construe “impersonality [as] the highway to divine individuality.”⁶⁹ “An impersonal character is one who worships Principle rather than personality”; hence “impersonality is synonymous with mental breadth and unrestricted vision,” and, however improbable, “under the law of impersonality every individual moves in his own orbit in scientific relationship with every other idea.”⁷⁰

Even in all their diversity these examples of impersonality’s uses only begin to suggest the wide range of its ken; they do however serve to show the contours of an incredibly plastic term. Impersonality accommodated meanings that ranged from a pervasive hazard for personhood, emotion, and intimate connection to an ethical or interpersonal ideal; from urban alienation to collective affiliation; from the machine to mythic consciousness; from sub-personal matter to the supra- and transpersonal soul.

As chapter 1 develops in detail, impersonality served as an impactful counter-discourse to what Warren I. Susman has famously called “the culture of personality,” but it sustained many other antonyms as well. These include: the human and human meaning; the universe imagined under the authority of a personal (and usually Christian) god; the ego; consciousness; personal life as a network of direct social bonds, but also personal life as bourgeois family life, or simply life dominated by self-absorption; individualism; egoism; selfishness; personality as intrinsic (and possibly spiritual) uniqueness, personality as self-fashioned (and possibly superficial) social identity, or as self-ownership under the law (i.e., personhood); private property as a social and legal logic; personal bias, partiality, or interestedness; interiority; feeling and emotion; and an

⁶⁸ Carol Norton, *Studies in Character* (Boston: Dana Estes & Company, 1906), 20–21.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 80–81.

affective manner that might equally well be personable and sympathetic or puerile and effusive. Thus impersonality figures as a site of contestation and a node for wide-ranging perspectives on the individual's place and prospects in Western life. Although many of the modern transformations upon which the discourse of impersonality comments began in the nineteenth century or earlier, it is crucial that an awareness of the cumulative consequences of these transformations emerges with synthetic force in the first decades of the twentieth century. Too, while many of the preceding examples deliver familiar conclusions about the era, their reliance on the word "impersonality" bears particular significance. As this section has demonstrated, coeval with modernism, this awareness of an impersonal modernity coalesces into a widely recognizable gestalt, one which the discourse of impersonality serves to name and make available to debate.

II. The Platinum Standard

This holistic discursive context is crucial to understanding the purchase and particular novelty of impersonality within modernist aesthetics—novelty that is not encompassed by T. S. Eliot's landmark essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). Aesthetic impersonality did not begin with Eliot, but it has had a difficult time getting around him.⁷¹ Published in *The Egoist* (1914–1919), Eliot's essay supplies modernist criticism's platinum standard for impersonality. In it Eliot spells out an "Impersonal theory of poetry" from the perspective of the artist's relationship to, on the one hand, aesthetic tradition and, on the other, the creative process

⁷¹ As Rives observes, "accounts of modernism have cemented Eliot so forcefully to the idea of impersonality that it is nearly impossible to examine its meaning in the work of other writers without recourse to his essay" (*Modernist Impersonalities*, 3).

and the final artwork.⁷² Eliot claims that in acquiring an “historical sense” of the past (i.e., “the mind of Europe”; nonwestern traditions do not factor in), the artist submits to “a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”⁷³ Self-extinction is requisite to the artist’s inclusion in a canon that is fundamentally altered by coming into relation with the newcomer, and with only partial cogency Eliot explains “this process of depersonalization” in terms of artistic process. The poet supplies the sensations, images, and perceptions that are the primary materials of art—and in raw form they are essentially personal—and passively instigates their chemical breakdown and impersonal reconstitution as “new art emotion[s].”⁷⁴ In Eliot’s famous analogy, the production of poetry is comparable to the formation of sulphurous acid from oxygen and sulphur dioxide when they are introduced to a platinum catalyst. In the oxidation process of literary creation, “the mind of the poet is the shred of platinum” that leaves no trace of itself in the product, whether artistic or acidic.⁷⁵ Contesting Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility,” Eliot asserts that poetry is “not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.” Characteristic of the essay’s play between subjectivity and objectivity and between incommensurate and sometimes conflicting claims, this final torque idealizes both superior impersonality in art and affective sensibility in life.

⁷² T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Wasteland and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 104.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 102, 103.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

The essay is as evocative as it is gyiring and cryptic. Notwithstanding its allusions to a kind of literary alchemy, it “proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry.”⁷⁶ Twentieth-century literary criticism has supplied an army of such responsible persons who, in the course of interpreting and applying the essay, have had the collective effect of calcifying Eliot’s statement into a program that somehow speaks for a generation of writers without making itself overly clear. As Ellmann notes, Eliot is more apt to say what impersonality is not than to define what it is—or, we might add, to specify the concrete characteristics of literature-qua-sulphurous acid.⁷⁷ Not only has the monotony of hearing repeated a few of Eliot’s choice phrases given us a tin ear for the range of inflections that “impersonality” encompassed in the archive of modernist print culture, but his famously unlitid “practical conclusions” have authorized the aesthetic approbation of “impersonal” to stand in for both formal analysis and more nuanced inquiry into what “impersonality” may mean to different authors.

Furthermore, there is a certain historical imprecision that proceeds from the presumption of Eliot’s platinum standard. By convention “Tradition and the Individual Talent” has served, as Sanford Schwartz avers, as the “*locus classicus* of the impersonal theory,” but it is important to recall that this theory was not “new,” exactly; Eliot was not personally responsible for “adapting impersonality as an ideal for poetry,” as Charles Altieri suggests; nor, if we are speaking for Eliot’s contemporaries, did he make “the idea” of impersonality “commonplace” as Sharon

⁷⁶ Ibid., 107. Tim Dean references Eliot’s mediumistic channeling of tradition as “shamanism,” for instance. “Paring His Fingernails: Homosexuality and Joyce’s Impersonalist Aesthetic,” in *Quare Joyce*, ed. Joseph Valente (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 240.

⁷⁷ Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality*, 3–4.

Cameron puts it.⁷⁸ It would be better said that Eliot revived and rebranded earlier impersonal theories of art that spanned fiction, poetry, drama, and visual art. As Eliot would have been well aware, he wrote himself into an existing tradition, which comes through more clearly in certain statements by his contemporaries. Take for instance art critic Roger Fry, whose “Teaching Art” appeared in *The Athenaeum* (1828–1921) in September 1919, the same month as *The Egoist* printed the first installment of “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Like Eliot, Fry asserts that the primary material of art is personal perception or “reaction,” but that

this does not imply that Art is a purely subjective affair, that it is bound to be personal.

On the contrary, the best critics have almost always agreed that the greatest art is singularly objective and impersonal. But none the less the odd thing about Art is that this objective reality can only be attained by the artist exploring completely his own sensibility. What the artist does is to contribute to the general fund the record of that aspect of reality which is discernible from the particular angle of his own spiritual situation.⁷⁹

The correspondences with Eliot are notable. Both critics juggle the competing impulses of subjectivity and objectivity; Eliot defers to tradition, and Fry stakes the impersonal project in the “the general fund.” Although Eliot prefers chemistry to the Romantic resonance of “exploration,” the artistic task to explore one’s own sensibility in Frye more or less maps onto the role of Eliot’s poet to become a “receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images”

⁷⁸ Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early 20th-century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 170; Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 53; Cameron, *Impersonality*, viii.

⁷⁹ Roger Fry, “Teaching Art,” *The Athenaeum* 93 (1919): 887. Fry’s essay was also published in the U. S. in *The Living Age* 303 (1919): 204–206.

and to allow “impressions and experiences [to] combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.”⁸⁰ Whereas Eliot is more invested in producing “new aesthetic emotions,” Fry invokes “reality” as the aesthetic goal, but he limits its expression to the slice available from the perspective of an individuated talent that captures the same variety of impressions and experiences that equip Eliot’s poet. There is a case to be made that the most important contrast between their statements of impersonality is that Fry directly positions himself in relation to the critical and aesthetic tradition to which they both contribute.

British and American magazines of the 1890s in particular suggest a well developed public discussion that precedes Eliot and Fry by twenty to thirty years—indeed one anonymous book review goes so far as to pronounce impersonality a dead letter by 1897:

The old, out-worn formula, stating the difference between personal and impersonal literature, might have been left out. In fact, there is no such thing as genuine literature that is impersonal, and so far from truth is Mr. Bates’s statement that ‘the greatest artist is he who embodies emotion, not in terms of his own life, but in those which make it equally the property of all mankind’ that this is hardly worth saying. Practically nothing could be more untrue or more misleading...it is time that an empty shard of antiquated absurdity be dropped.⁸¹

This shard is far from Eliot’s platinum shred, but it is nonetheless an instructive precursor. Fifteen years later, Henry Newbolt reiterates this anonymous reviewer’s sentiment in the pages of *The English Review*. Although “generally described as controversial,” the impersonality of art

⁸⁰ Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 105, 106.

⁸¹ Review of *Talks on the Study of Literature* by Arlo Bates, *The Independent* 49 (November, 25 1897): 21.

as Newbolt sees it would be better treated “simply as a matter of history”; by 1912 the “*casus belli* [had] in reality disappeared,” and it was “an obsolete and illusory controversy.”⁸²

Inferable from these critics’ protestations is that impersonality was a conspicuous aesthetic issue of the *fin de siècle*.⁸³ Newbolt pursues his topic by quoting at length from Walter Pater and Gustave Flaubert, to whom may be credited much of the immediate impetus for the 1890s debates on the impersonality of art. Walter Pater’s essays “Style” (1888) and “Prosper Mérimée” (1895) both take impersonality as a central and contradictory concern of literary art but conclude on a note of skepticism:

Personality *versus* impersonality in art:—how much or how little of one’s self one may put into one’s work: whether anything at all of it: whether one *can* put there anything else:—is clearly a far-reaching and complex question. Serviceable as the basis of a precautionary maxim towards the conduct of our work, self-effacement, or impersonality, in literary or artistic creation, is, perhaps, after all, as little possible as a strict realism.⁸⁴

⁸² Henry Newbolt, “A New Study of English Poetry,” *The English Review* 11 (1912): 373, 389. Another useful point of reference is Bernard Bosanquet’s “On the Nature of Æsthetic Emotion,” published in *Mind* in 1894. Bosanquet agrees in principle that “the aesthetic emotion is ‘impersonal’” but considers “the word...a dangerous one” that gives rise “to serious fallacies in art-theory today. I should prefer to borrow the expression of a recent writer on a different subject, and call it ‘super-personal.’ In becoming aesthetic, emotion does not become something less but something more; it does not forfeit the depth of personality, but only throws off its narrowness, and modifies it by an enlargement which is also a reinforcement.” *Mind* 3, no. 10 (1894): 165.

⁸³ On impersonality’s enmeshment with Pater’s impressionism at the *fin de siècle*, see Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 1. As Saunders shows, Pater’s paradoxes of impressionist impersonality continue into modernism and are observable, in particular, in Ford Madox Hueffer’s “On Impressionism,” in which he states, “the Impressionist author is sedulous to avoid letting his personality appear in the course of his book. On the other hand, his whole book, his whole poem is merely an expression of his personality” (quoted in Saunders, *Self Impression*, 60).

⁸⁴ Pater, “Prosper Mérimée,” *Miscellaneous Studies: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1895), 28.

Flaubert's letters, published from 1887 to 1893, provided another set of impersonal pronouncements, including the gem "I am a pen in human form!"⁸⁵ An 1893 review of his correspondence in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1731–1922) explicates Flaubert's "imperious theory of impersonality" as the attempt of a lyricist "without the faculty of verse" to both resolve his realist attraction to "the lower side of humanity" and, anticipating Eliot, "escape his own unhappy personality by impersonal creation."⁸⁶ The most famous formulation of this theory in Flaubert's words is contained in his correspondence: "into [*Madame Bovary*] I put none of my own feelings and nothing from my own life. The illusion (if there is one) comes, on the contrary, from the *impersonality* of the work. It is a principle of mine that a writer must not be his own theme. The artist in his work must be like God in his creation—invisible and all-powerful: he must be everywhere felt, but never seen."⁸⁷

In English letters, this quotation is especially familiar because of its appropriation by James Joyce. If Eliot has been upheld as modernist impersonality's platinum standard, Joyce would constitute the gold. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus paraphrases Flaubert: "the personality of the artist... finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination.... The artist, like the God of the creation, remains

⁸⁵ On the publication of Flaubert's letters, see Laurence M. Porter, ed., *A Gustave Flaubert Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 74. Quoted in Newbolt, "A New Study," 384.

⁸⁶ Garnet Smith, "The Letters of Gustave Flaubert," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 274 (1893): 556, 551, 555.

⁸⁷ Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830–1857*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 229–230. This letter is dated March 18, 1857. Newbolt quotes a variation on this idea: "The dramatic form has this in its favour, that it wipes out the author. The author should be in his work as God is in the Universe, present everywhere, visible nowhere. Art is a second world, and the creator of it should deal with it like the creator of the world of nature: in every atom, every aspect there should be felt a power that is impassive, hidden, infinite" (in Newbolt, "A New Study," 385).

within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.”⁸⁸ As Max Saunders points out, there are problems with absorbing Stephen’s precocious aesthetic theory as “Joyce’s credo”—all the more since Joyce provides within the narrative a dialectical rebuttal to Stephen via his friend Lynch, whose subversive response moors the Flaubertian abstraction to materialism and politics. Yet as Saunders acknowledges, this statement has influentially represented a certain baseline understanding of modernist impersonality that figures in tandem with Eliot’s. In Hugh Kenner’s words, Stephen “gave the Flaubertian aloofness its definitive formulation.”⁸⁹

Paid tribute by Joyce’s flourish of the fingernail-paring artist, Flaubert’s vaunted detachment is one of modernist impersonality’s defining lineaments, but as this dissertation demonstrates there are others. Impersonality can also function through immediacy and immanence; for instance, as chapter 1 will examine, Wyndham Lewis deals Joyce a blistering critique for immersing himself in his mimetic world as though he were deep-sea diving. Furthermore, Lewis proceeds to redefine detachment as a mode that cannot dispense with the person behind the view. Virginia Woolf, too, presents an apt point of comparison to Eliot’s detachment since her description of the writing process uses images that otherwise closely resemble Eliot’s “finely perfected medium.”³ Woolf refers to herself as a depersonalized apparatus for receiving sensation: in the act of writing she is “merely a sensibility”; “a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays.”⁹⁰ Although the key to both Woolf’s and Eliot’s chemical metaphors is unselfconscious passivity, there is a crucial difference between her “sensitive plate”

⁸⁸ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Signet, 1991), 217. Dean reads the fingernail paring as a reference to Joyce’s manipulation of impersonality as a queer aesthetic; see “Paring His Fingernails.”

⁸⁹ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 34.

⁹⁰ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 2, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonvich, 1978), 193.

and his “catalyst” that distinguishes their theories of impersonal composition. For Eliot, artistic creation is a secondary process that happens in the poet’s mind but does not change it. “The more perfect the artist,” Eliot writes, “the more perfectly the mind will digest and transmute the passions which are its material” and emerge unchanged from the exercise.⁹¹ On this score, he is insistent; through the artistic process the catalytic mind “is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral.”⁹² By contrast, Woolf’s photographic plate is fundamentally altered by the chemical registration of “invisible rays” upon its surface, and no distinction holds between the primary reception of sensation and its “working up into” art, to borrow Eliot’s phrase.⁷ Woolf’s choice of metaphor stresses immediacy: the plate displays sensation directly as received, and the plate is reconditioned through the process of impersonal transcription. Whereas Eliot’s metaphor distances the artist from the end product in every respect, Woolf’s relies on proximity, idealizing in equal measure the artist’s receptivity and responsiveness, the implications of which are taken up in chapter 2.

The tension between immediacy and distance that plays out in Eliot’s and Woolf’s accounts of creation becomes a matter of technical variation in modernism’s narrative renderings of impersonality. Indeed aesthetic impersonality is not restricted to the questions of how creative production should be imagined, whether source materials are drawn from life, or how the work’s invisible cosmology should be envisioned. Crucially, it is also a question of formal effect—of craft. Although narrative studies since its proto-beginnings in the early twentieth century has been preoccupied with the “exit” of the author and the waning of narrative voice, these discussions have not found a prominent place within renewed interest in impersonality beyond

⁹¹ Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 104.

⁹² *Ibid.*

the high modernism of Eliot and Joyce.⁹³ Indeed even accounts that attempt to bring Eliot's impersonality into the cultural sphere as a program for negated personhood or elided agency tend to leave form behind. The following section attempts to rectify this gap by establishing a rubric for appraising degrees of narrative impersonality. The section begins by highlighting some of the ways impersonality has been conceptualized as a method of rendering both distance and immediacy and then proceeds to give the core criteria by which this dissertation defines narrative impersonality.

III. Impersonal Narrative

The technical discussion of narrative impersonality begins in earnest in the English-language tradition with Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), which supplies many of the foundational terms that held sway among modernist writers and set the stage for later-century reformulations. Lubbock plots a trajectory of Euro-American fiction towards what he supposed was its optimal development in the dramatic technique of Henry James. Lubbock's signature move is to claim that "the whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction" is "governed by the question of the point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story" and of who perceives the narrative's action as it unfolds.⁹⁴ Lubbock is prescriptive: a direct view of events (of consciousness or the exterior world) is better than a synthetic, panoramic tale orchestrated by a narrator. Thus he famously locates "the art of fiction" in "showing" instead of "telling" and lionizes the story that appears to "tell itself." In James's vocabulary, the auto-diegetic story is achieved through a "reflector" character, upon whose

⁹³ In 1932 Beach called the "exit" of the author "the most impressive aspect of the modern novel." *The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique* (Appleton-Century-Croft, Inc., 1960), 14.

⁹⁴ Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), 251.

mental surface narrative events are seen to reflect without the interference of the narrator (or author; so long as the narrator is not explicitly a character, Lubbock uses the two interchangeably, as do many modernists). The resultant perspective is dual, “the author’s as well as his creature’s.... Nobody notices, but in fact there are now two brains behind that eye; and one of them is the author’s who adopts and shares the *position* of the creature, and at the same time supplements his wit.”⁹⁵ The reader is thus positioned as an “onlooker” facing the action instead of a listener tuned to a storyteller.⁹⁶ The narrative becomes “an object that you [i.e., the writer] fashioned and abandoned to the reader, turning away and leaving him alone with it.”⁹⁷

Thus, with the text’s autonomy and author’s evaporation, Lubbock seems to arrive at the apogee of narrative art, yet surprisingly he is equivocal about “impersonality.” The dramatic method he promotes relies on a paradox that both diminishes and preserves the author’s agency, and in the end he is more concerned with maintaining direct lines of sight than with eliminating indications of authorial stance. Even with the use of reflector consciousnesses the author does not actually go away—hence the “two brains” behind the narrative eye. Contra Flaubert and his admirers, the author and his judgments only appear to retire, meanwhile

with every touch that [the author] lays on his subject he must show what he thinks of it; his subject, indeed the book in which he finds in his selected fragment of life, is purely the representation of his view, his judgment, his opinion of it. The famous ‘impersonality’ of Flaubert and his kind lies only in the greater tact with which they

⁹⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 271–272, 170, 188, 111.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 112.

express their feelings—dramatizing them, embodying them in living form, instead of stating them directly.⁹⁸

Under such circumstances, Lubbock concludes, impersonality is an “over-laboured” point—an aesthetic “*effect*” of subtlety and indirection but not the realized erasure of the author nor the attainment of objectivity cleansed of judgment and feeling.⁹⁹

On this premise Lubbock’s account of impersonality stands up admirably to subsequent narrative theory. For the most part impersonality has registered from *The Craft of Fiction* onwards as a narrative “illusion,” and “Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics” likewise approaches it as the conceit, not the actuality, of having eliminated signs of a communicating, organizing consciousness responsible for the narrative instance. As narrative theorist Richard Walsh argues, impersonality is best understood as “a fiction of a fiction.”¹⁰⁰ However, impersonality is a more useful fiction than Lubbock acknowledges. Whereas he takes for granted the fact that the author’s judgments remain readily recoverable even if unobtrusively presented, an important aspect of the modernist project propelled by narrative form is experimentation with what Virginia Woolf formulates as “the world seen without a self.”¹⁰¹ As a gambit to achieve this effect, impersonality is precisely the illusion that Lubbock describes but for which he does not fully account: a world accessed via “nobody’s view.”¹⁰² As Jonathan Culler puts it, “one should always be in a position to claim that a description fell off a lorry”: “impersonality involves...the desire to prevent the text from being recuperated as the speech of a characterizable narrator, to prevent it, that is to say, from being read as the vision of someone

⁹⁸ Ibid., 67–68.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 67, 113 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰⁰ Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 141.

¹⁰¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 287.

¹⁰² Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, 147.

who becomes an object that the reader can judge.”¹⁰³ Stated otherwise, impersonality does away with assurances that narrative effects are authorized and communicative of an intention and, even more radically, with the idea that “someone” could be held responsible for the narrative instance that produces the text.

What to call this minimally present “someone” is a question of narratological ontology that exceeds the scope of this project. Nonetheless, if impersonality is a fiction of the fiction, it means that, however effaced or diminished, some agent remains responsible for selecting, shaping, and animating the narrative discourse—that narrative is ineluctably “mediated.”¹⁰⁴ The possibilities for naming this agent are several and align with major theorists of narrative; variations include: author (after Richard Walsh; also the fashion of modernism);¹⁰⁵ implied author (Wayne Booth);¹⁰⁶ narrator (Gérard Genette and F. K. Stanzel; currently most

¹⁰³ Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 62.

¹⁰⁴ To state the problem in this way is to implicitly side with those theorists who insist from either a structuralist or rhetorical-pragmatic perspective on the ineluctable mediation of narrative (e.g., F. K. Stanzel, Wayne Booth, Dorrit Cohn, Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman, Roger Fowler, Susan Lanser, Richard Walsh, Barbara Dancygier) rather than with those who posit the potential autonomy of narrative language from communicative frames (e.g., Roland Barthes, Ann Banfield, Monika Fludernik). On the question of mediacy, see Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, “Mediacy and Narrative Mediation,” in *the living handbook of narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University), <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/mediacy-and-narrative-mediation>.

¹⁰⁵ Walsh argues that a “narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author.” *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, 78. If no “narrator” is posited as a “characterizable someone,” to borrow Culler’s term, Walsh argues that insisting on one effectively imposes on the text an additional diegetic frame without purpose. There is no danger in confusing authorial discourse with the biographical author’s views so long as the regime of fictionality (which Walsh develops in terms of rhetorical and pragmatic assumptions of genre) under which authorial discourse occurs is held firmly in sight.

¹⁰⁶ See Wayne Booth *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961).

conventional);¹⁰⁷ and unobtrusive, effaced, or covert narrator (Lubbock, Dorrit Cohn, and Seymour Chatman, respectively).¹⁰⁸ However, in the interest of playing along with impersonality's necessary ruse, this dissertation opts to name ephemeral narrative presences by the less established "authorizing consciousness"—or in chapter 2, Woolf's term of "impersonal being"—in order not to insist that impersonal narratives must have a narrator in cases where they go to great lengths to evade the suggestion of one.

The species of narrative considered "impersonal" in this dissertation has in narrative theory tended to span two separate categories whose shared characteristic is that both dispense with a distinct narrator: reflector-mode and neutral narrative.¹⁰⁹ As Monika Fludernik defines it, the difference between these two modes relates to whether or not the agent behind the narrative perspective is embodied as a figure in the text and whether perception is internal or external—between a focus on events in consciousness (potentially in perception of the world) and events exclusively in the world. Whereas in reflector-mode, perspective is understood to be internal and embodied by a character, neutral narratives are ostensibly abstracted from any personified agent posited by the text and offer an exclusively external view on events.¹¹⁰ Although complex theoretical debates attend these categories and the terms used to describe them, in the interest of fashioning practical tools for analyses the following simply defines these two modes, explains

¹⁰⁷ See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* [1972], trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* [1983], trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*.

¹⁰⁸ See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

¹⁰⁹ Chatman also posits continuity between the equivalents of neutral and figural narratives. "Impersonal narration" as defined by this dissertation would overlap with his categories of "minimally narrated" and "covert narration" (see Chatman, *Story and Discourse*).

¹¹⁰ Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, trans. Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik (London: Routledge, 2009), 36–37.

the advantages of combining them, and proceeds to develop a set of rhetorical and stylistic features that guide the narrative analysis conducted by this dissertation.

Reflector-mode, also called “figural,” narratives give immediate access to a character’s mind, which is seen to shape and color—or “focalize,” in Genette’s term—the narrative discourse.¹¹¹ In replacing the teller figure with the perceptions of a character, figural narratives allow a reader “to experience the fictional world from within, as if looking out at it from the protagonist’s consciousness.”¹¹² Free indirect discourse is the reflector mode’s enabling technique, and among modernists both figural narrative and free indirect discourse can be referred to as “interior monologue” or “stream of consciousness.” F. K. Stanzel’s classic example is Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; others include Dorothy Richardson’s *Pointed Roofs* (1915) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), which like Joyce’s *Portrait* are consistently focalized by a single character. Woolf pioneers a figural mode that switches reflectors midflight, as chapter 2 investigates with reference to *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

The prototype for neutral, objective, or “impersonal” narration is purely factual reportage of exterior events without any hint of an interpreting mind. In neutral narrative “the bare description of physical action is felt to be essentially unmediated, without overt thematic interpretation,” as Chatman puts it.¹¹³ In Fludernik’s words, “neutral” or “impersonal means...the focalizer gives away nothing about her/himself” and seems not to imply a “brain

¹¹¹ In classical narratology, the principal theorist of the reflector mode is F. K. Stanzel, who opposes it to the “teller mode” (see *A Theory of Narrative*). Despite its flaws Gérard Genette’s notion of “focalization” continues to be a useful interpretive tool for indicating that the aperture of a narrative’s point of view is filtered or narrowed according to a character’s limitations in knowledge and subjective and ideological disposition. Figural narrative is rendered in Genette’s typology via internal focalization featured as the dominant narrative mode.

¹¹² Fludernik, *Towards A “Natural” Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 48.

¹¹³ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 154.

[that] interprets what s/he sees.”¹¹⁴ Hence among cognate terms is “camera eye,” which Norman Friedman introduced as “the ultimate in authorial exclusion. Here the aim is to transmit, without apparent selection or arrangement, a ‘slice of life’ as it passes before the recording medium.”¹¹⁵ Among narrative theorists, the favorite example is Ernest Hemingway’s 1927 “The Killers,” which combines an emphasis on dialogue with stripped-down style and a stringently visual method for relaying external events.

To combine neutral and reflector modes under the heading of impersonal narrative is not to argue that they work in identical ways but instead to focus on their exemplary effect of appearing to bypass diegesis in favor of pure mimetic transmission. The advantage of a more capacious category is enhanced by the practical fact that these modes are frequently combined in modernist texts, along with some degree of omniscient privilege that is excluded from both modes in their purest forms. Narrative theory acknowledges to varying extents the fact that narrative is often modulated in method, but in driving for precise distinctions within totalizing structures of analysis, the field can at times favor categorization over interpretative payoff. It goes unacknowledged, for instance, that “The Killers” reaches its peak of interest when it breaks from camera eye to report, presumably from the perspective of a character, that the pair of hardboiled killers “looked like a vaudeville team.”¹¹⁶ In practice impersonality tends to be an uneven achievement whose slips are as critically compelling as its purest evacuations of authorial agency. Germane to this point is Fludernik’s acknowledgment that, although “pure

¹¹⁴ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 36–37.

¹¹⁵ Norman Friedman, “Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept,” *The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1955), 163. Christopher Isherwood’s claim to be “a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking” is typically cited as an illustration, but as Stanzel notes, Isherwood’s “narrative style is hardly influenced by [this program] at all” (*A Theory of Narrative*, 232).

¹¹⁶ Hemmingway, “The Killers,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 81, no. 3 (1927): 230.

reflector mode narrative” could conceivably exist without a narrator, “purity is an idealized concept, and *actual* narratives of the reflector mode frequently contain digressions into (usually) disguised evaluation of the narrative that must then be aligned with a ‘covert’ narrative voice.”¹¹⁷ Because this “ ‘covert’ narrative voice” may be rhetorically and stylistically patterned after that of a neutral-mode narrative, there is reason to bring them under a single category as two techniques contributing to an impersonal effect. Hence just as impersonality from a philosophical standpoint mediates between objectivity and subjectivity, so too does narrative impersonality involve extremities of exteriority and interiority, embodiment and abstraction.

In order to evaluate the degree of impersonality of a narrative (or narrative segment), this dissertation relies on a range of textual features that signal pragmatically or rhetorically a speaker recounting a story or a mind at work orchestrating the narrative production. The category of impersonal narration defined here has much in common with what Susan Lanser calls “effaced authority,” which she constructs as the “suppression of narrative self-consciousness, of contact between narrator and narrate, and of explicit markers of narrative stance.”¹¹⁸ However, Lanser is not specific in naming the stance markers she regards as “explicit,” which relates to a shortcoming of narrative theory more generally to define the role of “voice,” as Richard Aczel has forcefully argued. Although a static model cannot fully address Aczel’s call for narrative theory “to take into consideration the *expressive* potential of style itself” in terms of “tone, idiom, diction, speech-style,” this dissertation proposes a set of baseline features by which to

¹¹⁷ Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1993), 443.

¹¹⁸ Susan Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 104.

compare texts.¹¹⁹ According to this baseline, the impersonal prototype registers through absences: first, of signals of the text's rhetorical relationship to an audience and, second, of indicators of stance or psychology that could be attributed to a central, narrative-producing consciousness. In practice the degree of a work's impersonality can be judged by its minimization of certain stylistic features when they cannot be attributed to a focalizing character. These features include:

- spatial and temporal deictics (e.g., here, now, this, etc.)
- first- and second-person pronouns
- generic/gnomic sentences (universalizing statements of truth about the world that are not tethered to specific narrative events)
- foregrounded language, including metaphor and idiomatic expressions¹²⁰
- rhetorical questions
- modality and hedging
- localized irony (particular to a specific [set of] statement[s] rather than generalized across the work)
- evaluative adjectives and adverbs (including intensifiers and superlatives)

In some cases this method provides a vocabulary to describe the formal features of texts commonly accepted as impersonal; in others, it identifies texts that have not conventionally been deemed impersonal and places them in dialogue with more critically privileged works of modernist impersonality—for instance, Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed*, the focus of chapter 3.

¹¹⁹ Richard Aczel, "Hearing Voices in Narrative Texts," *New Literary History* 29, no. 3 (1998): 468, 472.

¹²⁰ These features overlap with Aczel's "overt rhetoricity." "Hearing Voices," 471.

Whatever the limitations of relying on static linguistic features for interpretation—and indeed these limitations surface in chapter 4 with impersonal novels that challenge the criteria given here—the benefits are several. Most importantly this model has the potential to ground conversations about impersonal aesthetics in shared criteria of analysis, so that “impersonal” can refer to something more specific than either critical consensus on a text or impressionistic labeling in any given instance of criticism. Furthermore, it allows us to register the deliberate work required by a real-life author to achieve impersonal effects, to gauge the significance of breaches in the impersonal illusion, and to consider these effects in relation to the work’s thematic investigation of related issues of negated personhood and effaced individuality.

IV. Chapter Overview

“Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics” begins with modernist impersonality’s most outspoken opponent in chapter 1, “Wyndham Lewis, Anti-Impersonal Artist.” Lewis’s vital insight for this project is that the perceptual intelligence envisioned as the agent behind a literary work is not an isolated aesthetic invention but, in Lewis’s view, of a piece with impersonality’s broader role of obscuring agency in cultural and political practice. Through his nonfiction works *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), *Time and Western Man* (1927), *The Lion and the Fox* (1927), and *Men Without Art* (1934), Lewis threads synthetic claims that repudiate impersonality as a tool for programmatic but veiled standardization and deceitful pretensions to truth under the aegis of scientific objectivity. Lewis’s holistic probing of the phenomenon draws connections among the discourses of philosophy, science, industrial production, contemporary advertising and journalism, high-brow aesthetics, and their low-brow assimilations in attempt to describe the state of Western culture and the status of the individual within it. Lewis focuses on “personality” as impersonality’s antithesis, yet he identifies a false dialectic between the two as

he traces the era's forfeited individuality not only to the domination of big business and governments he considered democratic only in name but also to mainstream obsessions with "personality" that nonetheless kept pace with a "contemporary disbelief in the efficacy or importance of individual character."¹²¹ Lewis instead defines his own investment in "personality" as the unified and consistent consciousness of self that underlies his art. The chapter argues that his commitment to personality as the autonomous subject of Western culture has significant formal implications for an anti-impersonal modernist fiction that also serves to clarify the mechanisms of aesthetic impersonality. Lewis makes plain that the logic of impersonality works not by detachment but by immersion—what he saw as an inability to distinguish distances and boundaries that preserve individuality, agency, responsibility, and ultimately the conditions necessary for art. In the novel *Snooty Baronet* (1932) Lewis adopts a recalcitrant narrative mode that this dissertation terms "personified detachment": a boisterous, fulminating voice that in Lewis's anti-impersonal aesthetic combines with a critically detached angle of vision.

Chapter 2, "Virginia Woolf and 'The Difficult Business of Intimacy,'" anchors this project's account of impersonality's positive potential. For Woolf impersonality is an ideal of sensory perceptiveness and transpersonal receptivity that crucially exceeds the focus on subjectivity to which her work is often reduced. Woolf's impersonality is defined in opposition to forms of private enclosure: personal life within domestic spaces or circles of acquaintance; and personality as an individuating envelope, a tinselly social covering that insulates individuals within egos. Through Woolf's essays, this chapter constructs a socially engaged theory of impersonality in order to trace its influence as a central problem and formal strategy of her

¹²¹ Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox: The Rôle of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1927), 287.

fiction. Narratively, *Night and Day* (1919) is among Woolf's most conventional novels, but it formulates a notion of "communion" as impersonal intimacy that sets the rudiments for her impersonal narrative strategy. Based on intersubjective immediacy and agile shifts among multiple reflectors, Woolf's narrative mode enacts the translation among individuals of atoms of imagination, sensation, and affect—"reality" and "life itself" in Woolf's vocabulary—to form webs of connection that are not bound by social roles. Thus impersonality as a form of narrative intimacy is for Woolf paradigmatic of both interpersonal relationships at their best and literature's role in constituting a public by communicating a common ground of intangible, subjective, but yet mutually available sensations, ideas, and feelings by which an era can come to understand itself. This narrative method is definitive of Woolf's subsequent novels, and the chapter looks to *To the Lighthouse* (1927) in particular to observe the effects of intersubjective collaborations in thought and feeling.

Chapter 3, "Tess Slesinger's Numb Modernism," focuses on Slesinger's novel *The Unpossessed* (1934), a bestseller in its time that addresses impersonality's engagement with collectivism in the anti-individualist intellectual climate of 1930s New York. This chapter positions *The Unpossessed* as a satiric response to masculinist orthodoxies of objectivity and scientific materialism in the discourse of radical magazine culture. To reconstruct a context for Slesinger's novel, the chapter draws on contemporary leftist periodicals that furnish instances of the kinds of claims and assumptions lampooned in Slesinger's novel. *The Unpossessed* is not only discursively enmeshed in this periodical culture but also takes as its central problem her characters' ineffectual ambition to start a Marxist magazine. The leftism of Slesinger's characters is built on nothing more revolutionary than a platform of reflexive negation, and, contra Woolf for whom impersonality points a way out of stifling conventionality, Slesinger

shows that impersonality can itself be ossified into dogmas and slogans; in this respect her critique returns our focus to the discourse of impersonality maligned by Lewis. Combining a multi-reflector narrative method comparable to Woolf's with a feminist critique of the pervasive anti-sentimentalism of impersonal discourse, Slesinger satirizes the deadened affect that results from programmatic refusals of subjectivity and personal life. This satire works by exposure: with ironic reticence Slesinger allows her characters to condemn their own impersonal agendas. Thus the novel's plot faithfully bears out the promises of anti-individual and anti-sentimental rhetoric by depicting its literalized consequences: broken individuals, aborted personal lives, and comprehensive numbness. In the process Slesinger shows affective impersonality to be a better basis for collective enterprise than misguided applications of scientific materialism to private life. Pitted against abstraction in particular, Slesinger challenges impersonality's disembodied imperative, which renders what this chapter calls "impersons": waifs unpossessed of self-agency and entirely unfit for collective action. "Unpossession" in this context signifies impersonality's function in evacuating perspectives of self-possession, and with it, both political conviction and emotional intensity.

The final chapter, "*Nightwood, Miss Lonelyhearts, and the Impersonality of Suffering*" takes two ambivalent accounts of impersonality in novels by Djuna Barnes and Nathanael West as instances of modernism's reckoning with social marginalization and rationalist pretensions to knowledge. Barnes and West differ from the formal strategies of earlier modernists chiefly in drawing renewed attention to the rejection of storytelling by in fact re-invoking a narrator who nonetheless neither communicates nor remains consistently in view. Thus writing at a time when impersonally rendered streams of consciousness had become old hat, Barnes and West remediate modernist impersonality, not in order to reinstate the storyteller's interpretive authority but

instead to foreground agendas against interpretation that function at formal and thematic levels. In Barnes, instead of stably conveying the narrator's vocal texture and representational slant, excessively figurative language serves as a blind, rendering the narrative's purposes and commitments still more opaque as the narrator becomes incorporated into the novel's ornate designs. West similarly posits a speaker who does not meet communicative obligations to an audience, but whereas Barnes's style is baroque, West's is cagily "bald," repelling imputations of judgment and irony as always potentially the thoughts of an eponymous reflector who remains elusive to rational capture. Both novels center on a set of related motifs that further the implications of their anti-communicative narratives: failed counsel; refusals to arbitrate in suffering; and interpretation as a force of symbolic and physical violence. For the oppressed and anonymous constituents of these novels, the refusal to counsel or adjudicate amounts to, on the one hand, a form of reprieve from interpretation and, on the other, abandonment to misery and anomie. Thus this chapter raises problems of arbitration that are inherent to impersonality's claims to impartiality, justice, and knowledge—problems not only endemic to the narrative worlds of Barnes and West but also applicable to the generic condition of the impersonal modernist novel. In the paradigms West and Barnes establish, there is no possibility for counsel even though counsel is continuously invoked; with reference to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" (1936) this chapter suggests that modernist impersonality's radical stance against interpretation is conditioned by the same refusals.

Conclusion

Together these chapters survey social, political, and cultural implications of modernist impersonality as an adaptive aesthetic form and contemporary imaginary. Thus at the same time as affirming impersonality as a crucial formal paradigm, "Impersonality and the Cultural Work

of Modernist Aesthetics” also extends its import to a host of other meanings that are active in the archives of modernist-era cultural thought and to which modernist writers actively contribute.

In particular, modernist writers show that impersonality is fundamentally implicated with point of view—either a sense that one is caught in the sights of something other than a person (e.g., bureaucracy, social science, or scientific management) or that one’s own view has been stripped of qualification. However, this dissertation argues that impersonal narration is an asymptotic goal: its attention to excising or suppressing markers of mediation may succeed up to but never reaching the point of denying the representational act in which the narrative originates.

In the end then this project posits impersonal narrative as a simulation technology for experiencing the world as though from nobody’s view or the perspective of the vanishing individual. As chapter 1 shows, for Lewis this simulation technology is as nefarious in fiction as it is in political life; thus as a corrective to the new formal consensus, his aesthetic purports to hyperbolically inhabit his narrative perspectives. In chapters 2 through 4, Woolf, Slesinger, Barnes, and West place the vanishing individual in the position of knowing, seeing, and transmitting the story—which is to say that to varying extents, or with variable consistency, they minimize the signs that betray the fact that the story is known, seen, or told by anyone at all. In toto, “Impersonality and the Cultural Work of Modernist Aesthetics” argues that these fictional simulations imaginatively amplify the consequences of a theoretical point of view without a person behind it in order to play out major debates of the era concerning the place of the individual in social life. Thus aesthetic impersonality demands to be understood in its collision with the forms of remote, faceless, and de-individualized social life that came to define the machine age and that figured so prominently in print discourse of the era. Impersonality

therefore not only serves as one of the key terms under which transatlantic modernist culture and art labored, but it also marks a site of reckoning that continues into our own century.

Chapter 1: Wyndham Lewis, Anti-Impersonal Artist

This chapter is premised on the under-recognized fact that in addition to the roles for which Wyndham Lewis is best known—novelist, painter, polemicist, cultural critic, modernist enemy-at-large—he also served as modernist impersonality’s reverse engineer. As part of an impossibly vast project to “lay bare the widely-flung system of cables connecting up this maze-like and destructive system in the midst of which we live,” Lewis sought to diagram the social, political, and aesthetic workings of the interwar status quo of British and American culture.¹ In the process he seized impersonality as a key hermeneutic for understanding the transatlantic mess of cables he observed.

Lewis disassembled impersonality as both an underlying concept and a modish discourse in order to expose its sources, means of transmission, and pernicious effects. His immense critical output of the second half of the 1920s and early 1930s reiteratively attempted to dismantle the “rationale” that impersonality “possess[es] today,” and his vehement objections register in negative its discursive and conceptual operations.² Throughout works of this period—in particular, the texts seeded from the colossal, unpublished manuscript “The Man of the World”—impersonality figures significantly into an all-pervading pattern of standardization that, according to Lewis, constituted a “war on *the individual*” and on “*that costly luxury, ‘personality.*”³ Indeed impersonality’s influence was apparent to Lewis in virtually every

¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Paleface* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929), 181–182.

² Lewis, “The Foxes’ Case” [1925], in *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society, 1914–1956*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 132.

³ Lewis, “Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change” [1926], in *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society, 1914–1956*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 150; Lewis, *Time and Western Man* [1927], ed.

expression of modern life and thought: in the failures of liberal democracy, the popularity of various forms of collectivism, the vulgarization and exploitation of positive science, the production of an increasingly docile and credulous public, that public's unthinking pursuit of "personality" as a token of social legitimacy, and the nearly universal bankruptcy of modern art.⁴

Having torn impersonality's mechanism apart, Lewis observes an important fact of its manufacture: that modernism's prized aesthetic impersonality is continuous with other, more broadly cultural forms of depersonalization. Impersonal art, in other words, is embedded in impersonal life. In effect Lewis's work contests the conventionalized identity between impersonality and modernist aesthetics by showing the former to be an extensive cultural problem to which, he claims, modernist artists made relatively derivative contributions, principally by "aping" science.⁵ Modernist writers emerge from this account as imitators, not progenitors, of the impersonal. As a related consequence, Lewis's argument stands to reposition impersonal modernist creative production with respect to its cultural context. Modernist

Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 80. Emphasis in original, here and throughout.

⁴ As Anne Quéma notes, Lewis's opposition to impersonality is invaluable to modernist studies because it "introduced a sense of contradiction and ambiguity in [a] debate" that has retrospectively condensed into doctrine. Even so, Lewis's take on impersonality has received little critical attention, and associations drawn in passing between him and impersonality have only confused the issue. *The Agon of Modernism* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1999), 125. Quéma herself, for instance, ultimately aligns Lewis with Eliot, claiming that Lewis did not sustain his opposition to impersonality (to the contrary, as late as 1950 Lewis continued to distance himself from it; see *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. Toby Foshay [Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1984], especially pp. 11, 30, 76). Critics' conscription of Lewis to modernism's impersonal camp may be spurred in part by his advocacy of an "inhuman" aesthetic, yet the lexical slippage (as when Jameson renders Lewis an "impersonal registering apparatus for forces which he means to record." *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979], 21) can make sense only in so far as the critic redefines impersonality to mean something other than what it meant to Lewis.

⁵ See Lewis, editorial in *The Enemy: A Review of Art and Literature* 1 (1927), rpt., ed. David Peters Corbet (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1994): x.

impersonality cannot hope to close off the autonomous artwork from contemporary life when it traffics in what was for Lewis a defining crisis of the era: the threatened status and location of the individual within the trajectories of Western thought and post-war socio-political transformations.

In this sense Lewis's analysis aligns significantly in substance if not tone with the central thesis of this dissertation: that impersonality was a salient cultural narrative of the early twentieth century and one on which modernism's signature aesthetic effects and theories were patterned. The present chapter argues that Lewis's distinctive contribution to this narrative was his outspoken, and often extremist, opposition to contemporary discourses surrounding the person. Lewis's extremism in fact forces into hyperbolic relief underlying cultural patterns and contiguities elided by subtler maps. Further, Lewis's critique extends to his literary practice. As impersonality's reverse engineer, Lewis takes the mechanism apart not to replicate it but to recommission its parts for a narrative anti-model characterized by two key features that advance the agenda of his cultural critique: 1) a narrative perspective insistently located in personified, specular, and rhetorical relations, and 2) the foregrounding of an authorial presence saturated with personality whose reality supersedes that of the depicted world and characters. Hence, in homage to Lewis's adopted epithet "'Personal-Appearance' Artist," this chapter introduces Wyndham Lewis, *Anti-Impersonalist*.⁶ It begins by synthesizing Lewis's sustained efforts to anatomize personality and impersonality and to expose their complicity in a transatlantic culture of impersonality; it then proceeds to develop a theory of Lewis's anti-impersonal aesthetic and to probe the virtuosic anti-impersonalism of the novel *Snooty Baronet* (1932).

⁶ Lewis quotes an *Apes of God* reviewer who labeled him a "*personal-appearance* satirist." Lewis embraced the slight as an astute encapsulation of his aesthetic and gave the title "Mr. Wyndham Lewis, 'Personal-Appearance' Artist" to the chapter dedicated to his theory of satire in *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell & Company, 1934), 115, 123.

I. The Person as Hero

Published in short succession between 1925 and 1927, the tomes hived off the 500,000-word “Man of the World” manuscript tend to, in Lewis’s words, “burst out in manifold byways” even as they extrude from certain core preoccupations.⁷ Many of the books’ concerns are familiar to Lewis critics, including trends that he terms the child-cult and the time-cult (i.e., the fashionability of, respectively, amateurish irresponsibility and Henri Bergson’s philosophy of sensation and flux), the scourges of feminism and homosexuality, a cultural obsession with “action” at the expense of cogitation (i.e., the ideology of the go-getter), the ubiquity of counterfeit revolution, and the reign of plutocracy passed off as democracy. This assemblage’s wide range and dispersal across multiple works render Lewis’s argument at best diffuse and at worst incoherent. The problem of miscellany is compounded by the fact that the books’ ostensible fields are wildly dissimilar. *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) combines political theory with analysis of contemporary cultural politics; *The Lion and the Fox* (1927) is a hybrid of Shakespearean criticism and Renaissance history; and *Time and Western Man* (1927) treats the position of the subject in contemporary literature, psychology, and philosophy. Given Lewis’s

⁷ Lewis, *Rude Assignment*, 183; Lewis is specifically addressing *The Art of Being Ruled*. A letter to Ezra Pound dated 29 April 1925 details the major works Lewis intended to publish from the larger “Man of the World” manuscript. Final titles include: *The Art of Being Ruled* (which combined material from an untitled book [“all about the question of CLASS”], *Sub Persona Infantis*, *The Shaman*, and *The Politics of Philistia*), *The Lion and the Fox*, and *Time and Western Man* (earlier titled *The Politics of Personality*). Pound/Lewis: *The Letters of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis*, ed. Timothy Materer (New York: New Directions, 1985), 144–145. For a gloss on transmuted and recombined titles, see Paul Edwards, afterword to *Time and Western Man* by Wyndham Lewis, 483–488.

sweeping ambition to analyze “what is obsessional in contemporary social life,” these texts suffer the weakness of being, as Ezra Pound put it, “all erbout everything in general.”⁸

A common denominator among Lewis’s cultural ideas might well be sought, pace Fredric Jameson, in the spirit of “the modernist as fascist” or at least in an unevenly reactionary antipathy to social change.⁹ Yet aside from oversimplifying Lewis’s politics, a symptomatic reading obscures the significance of other ways that he attempted to influence contemporary discourse.¹⁰ Even as there is no key to his critical work, a prevailing quality among the cultural perils that absorb his attention is the fundamental threat to personality that they pose. Tellingly, the word *impersonality* receives emphatic reiteration across *The Art of Being Ruled*, *Time and Western Man*, *The Lion and the Fox*, several essays drawn from the same material, and the journal *The Enemy* (1927–1929; edited by Lewis). This series of texts issues a salvo against impersonality on behalf of a beleaguered protagonist that goes by multiple names: intellect, mind, consciousness, ego, self, individual, and, summing up all the others, person and

⁸ Lewis, *Rude Assignment*, 12; *Pound/Lewis*, ed. Materer, 166. Pound refers specifically to *The Art of Being Ruled* when he says, “It wd. be hypocrisy fer me to say that books all erbout everything in general are of any gt. interest to me in partikiler.”

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*. As Lisa Siraganian notes, “Jameson’s label...retains a certain authority” despite important challenges that have offered more nuanced accounts of Lewis’s political thought. *Modernism’s Other Work: The Art Object’s Political Life*. (New York: Oxford, 2012), 54. See also Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Andrzej Gąsiorek, “Wyndham Lewis on Art, Culture, and Politics in the 1930s,” in *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, ed. Andrzej Gąsiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker, and Nathan Waddell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); and Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and “A Shaman in Common: Lewis, Auden, and the Queerness of Liberalism,” in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 206–237.

¹⁰ There is no better statement of Lewis’s politics than that contained parenthetically in “The Diabolical Principle,” where he avows “political views” that are “partly communist and partly fascist, with a distinct streak of monarchism in my marxism, but at bottom anarchist with a healthy passion for order.” *The Enemy*, no. 3 (1929): 70.

personality.¹¹ In Lewis's many-pronged defense of the autonomous subject, impersonality is an implied, and often identified, shadow.¹²

As an example of the close company Lewis's "person" keeps with the impersonal, take the elliptical opening paragraph of "The Foxes' Case," one of the first "Man of the World" pieces to be published:

The following sections... deal with the Person as hero—personality, itself, regarded as heroism: the conflict between the individual personality and the personality of the crowd; the effect in western countries of the democratic principle on the Person as hero, and his conversion into an anonymous and "impersonal" instrument; and the arrangement by which personal expression is recognized only on condition that it is agreed not to be the expression of a person, and that there is no person, in short, there at all. The hero in

¹¹ Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own* (1844) was influential in Lewis's early work and a point of reference for *Enemy of the Stars* (1914); however, as Edwards judges, Stirner probably did not have a lasting influence on Lewis, who came to reject the self-devouring nihilism of Stirner's philosophy of egoism (see *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*, 157). For this reason, Lewis's later, relatively loose use of "ego" alongside other terms for personality is not tightly tied to Stirner's particular brand of individualism that was powerful in shaping early modernism. See Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Paul Peppis, *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde: Nation and Empire, 1901–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹² The abstract "person" or "personality" Lewis references can for the most part be understood as white, male, heterosexual, and European, even as Lewis claims that "the *race* basis is... a hopeless one on which to found" cultural theory and that "the mind of the woman... is not, almost every one will admit, very different to that of the man" (*Time and Western Man*, 264; *The Art of Being Ruled*, 213). These caveats complicate the racial and gendered basis of his thought. Lewis nonetheless contorts his argument untenably in attempting to use signifiers of masculinity and whiteness to describe the autonomous intellectual person endangered by Western culture. Metaphors of the put-upon bull hero and the cow herd in "The Foxes' Case" are good examples of such contortion.

Shakespeare is used as an illustration. The impersonal, that is non-responsible and child-like, is shown to be the ideal of the majority of people.¹³

In the words of Paul Edwards, this “succinct summary...takes us to the heart of Lewis’s project as originally envisaged.”¹⁴ It compacts into an abstract Lewis’s wide-ranging cultural theory and produces the thesis that “the impersonal...[is] the ideal of the majority of people” and yet is inimical to the bonafide Person. For Lewis, the fantasy of there being “no person at all” behind acts of human agency constitutes a dominant pathology whereby the hero, as identified by rational independence and responsibility, is reduced to an instrument of the masses. So long as the anonymity of “no person” serves as imprimatur of authority and legitimacy, the hero’s artistic and intellectual expressions must be effaced in order to gain recognition. In either case, the Person is estranged from circuits of cultural production. Notably only a semicolon separates the instrumentalizing effects of Western life from the dogmatic erasure of “personal expression”: opacity notwithstanding, Lewis clearly articulates here the aesthetic problem of impersonality in close proximity to the social. As Edwards argues, “one of the key objectives of the *Man of the World* texts was “to preserve individualism, so that art remains possible.”¹⁵

Crucially, Lewis also differentiates the kind of personality that Persons have from “personality” as popularly endorsed, and collectively embodied, by the crowd. Essentially one condition constitutes his ideal: the uncompromised stability of a unified self. This unchanging, continuous element is fundamentally intellectual and conscious, allied with mental rather than emotional or sensational experience. Defined in *Time and Western Man* against the constantly renewed (and thus constantly expiring) self Lewis rejects as the Bergsonian “time-mind,”

¹³ Lewis, “The Foxes’ Case,” 120. First published in *The Modern Calendar of Letters* 2, no. 8 (1925): 73–90.

¹⁴ Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*, 190.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

“‘personality,’ as we use that term, is nothing but stability”; it is “the *conscious* life of will and intellect,” the “energetic self-feeling of the natural, autonomous man,” and a “specifically intellectual centre of control, and principle of authority.”¹⁶ However, as Lewis hints in the caveat “as we use that term,” “personality” was rife with ambiguity. He elsewhere claims that “personality is the only thing that matters in the world, but there is very little of it that matters—for the very good reason that most of it is spurious or feeble.”¹⁷ Here he pivots on at least two problems: that strong, authentic personality was rare by his estimate; and that the word itself equivocated. What his contemporaries popularly referred to as “personality” was merely “‘personality’ in the *Ballyhoo* sense,” anathema to the real thing.¹⁸

Taken in isolation, Lewis’s manipulation of the term seems to alternate between idiosyncrasy and inconsistency.¹⁹ Critic SueEllen Campbell claims something of this sort when she argues that Lewis tries to “distinguish his personality from subjectivity—the kind of personal involvement he admires from the kind he hates”—but that he inadequately defines the difference.²⁰ To answer Campbell’s objection, the operative context needs to shift from Lewis’s

¹⁶ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 343, 299, 297, 298. According to Lewis, time-centered philosophy turns “‘you’” into “the series of your temporal repetitions; you are no longer a centralized self, but a spun-out, strung-along series, a pattern-of-a-self, depending like the musical composition upon time; an *object*, too, always in the making, who *are* your states. So you are a *history*: there must be no Present for you” (*Time and Western Man*, 172). SueEllen Campbell offers a useful gloss on Lewis’s concept of personality as compared to Eliot’s: it is “individual,” “external, public, and sharable, not internal and private.” *The Enemy Opposite: The Outlaw Criticism of Wyndham Lewis* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), 59.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Hitler* [1931] (New York: Gordon Press, 1972), 183.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 75.

¹⁹ Rochelle Rives, for instance, interprets Lewis’s commitments in reverse of the present chapter, announcing “Lewis’s disdain for personality and corresponding advocacy of an impersonal escape from it.” *Modernist Impersonalities: Affect, Authority, and the Subject* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 1. This conclusion loses its grounding if Lewis’s provocations against impersonality are to be taken seriously and his championing of autonomous personality—as distinct from discursive, crowd-copied “personality”—is to be taken into account.

²⁰ Campbell, *The Enemy Opposite*, 60.

uneven usage of these terms to the transatlantic print culture that he omnivorously consumed. Lewis often stages his aversion to specious “personality,” for instance, in direct conversation with contemporary journalism, as when he criticizes the deployment of “personality” with reference to women’s fashion in a *New York Herald* article in order to argue for “personality”’s role in standardizing a compliant work force.²¹ Lewis undoubtedly paid attention to the language of popular print—indeed, his 1932 *The Doom of Youth* is substantially composed of analysis of periodical discourse, even including a “dossier” of facsimile news clippings. When Lewis’s cultural criticism is read through its engagement with contemporary popular discourse, it becomes clear that his bifurcated use of “personality” is an attempt to wrest its integrity from the ballyhoo.

II. Ballyhoo and the Popular Press

A “dynamic personality” means, in journalism an iron-jawed oil-king in an eight-cylinder car, ripping along a new motor-road, with a hundred-million-dollar deal in a new line of poison-gas bombs blazing in his super-brain, his eye aflame with the lust of battle—of those battles in which others fight and die.

—Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (1927)

Undoubtedly *personality*’s increasing cachet as a buzzword in the popular press and a rising field of post-war psychology presented complications for Lewis.²² Ever allergic to fashionability, he nonetheless set the stock of his theory by a word that was on both sides of the Atlantic exceptionally resonant among his contemporaries and flexible to the semantic

²¹ See Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 78–80.

²² Gordon W. Allport and Philip E. Vernon note that interest in the psychological study of personality “is largely a post-war phenomenon, but though recent it has already reached astonishing proportions.” “The Field of Personality,” *The Psychological Bulletin* 27, no. 10 (1930): 677.

promiscuities of diverse usage. Comments on the word's elusion of definition were commonplace—as psychologist W. H. Burnham writes, “what personality is, everybody knows; but nobody can tell”—and the word's pliability was crucial to its currency.²³ “Used to describe almost everything from the attributes of the soul to those of a new talcum powder,” “personality” was serviceably vague, hence “beloved by the journalist” who, it was said, “may twist it to fit any meaning he chooses.”²⁴ Yet despite, and perhaps because of, *personality*'s variability, it exercised incredible seduction. In the words of personality-psychology founder Gordon Allport, “personality, like Mesopotamia, is a blessed word; it induces in both the writer and in the reader a sweet sense of stability, security, and modernity.”²⁵ Even as early as 1912, Baptist minister John Herman Randall claimed in *The Culture of Personality* that “the study of human Personality”—“by far the greatest word in the history of the human mind”—“is claiming the earnest attention of all thoughtful minds.”²⁶ Post-war, it made regular appearances in the classified advertisements and obituaries of *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London and frequently graced descriptions of not only notable persons like civic leaders, politicians, and performers (typically in concert with adjectives like “amazing,” “indefinable,” “dynamic,” “attractive,” “remarkable,” “magnetic,” or “very human”), but also those of shopping centers, regions, cities, neighborhoods, companies, professions, schools, cars, notepaper, clothing, radios,

²³ W. H. Burnham, “Personality Differences and Mental Health,” *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 36 (1929), quoted in Allport and Vernon, “Field of Personality,” 681. Physician and author R. G. Gordon claims that “few people, except those who have given special study to the subject, are at all clear as to what they wish to define when they talk of Personality” but that even many psychologists declared the term impossible to define. *Personality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1928), 1. See also William Brown, *Mind and Personality: An Essay in Psychology and Philosophy* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927).

²⁴ K. A. Menninger, *The Human Mind* (New York: Knopf, 1930), 447, quoted in Allport and Vernon, “Field of Personality,” 683; Gordon, *Personality*, 1.

²⁵ Allport, review of *Social Psychology*, by Kimball Young, *The Psychological Bulletin* 27, no. 10 (1930): 731.

²⁶ John Herman Randall, *The Culture of Personality* (New York: Dodge, 1912), x, xiii, xi.

and cigarettes, all of which might distinguish themselves with “that peculiar quality described as ‘personality.’”²⁷

Despite the apparent *mêlée*, salient variations can be organized between ideas of internal essence and external display. In a comprehensive 1930 survey of personality research, Allport and Philip E. Vernon explain the “present confusion” as etymologically warranted given the duality of its root, *persona*: “the mask, the assumed appearance, the visible outward manner,” on the one hand, and “the innermost moral life, the true self, the substance or hypostasis,” on the other, are, as Allport and Vernon argue, “equally entitled to the term ‘personality.’”²⁸ The authors go on to note that the “comprehensive, socially conditioned *personality*” aligns roughly with the discipline of psychology and “the inner, unique *individuality*” with philosophy, yet even within psychology variation extending from psychoanalysis to behaviorism could be described in terms of personality’s relative location inside or outside the person.²⁹

Further, and beyond the academy, Allport and Philip’s comparative analysis sketches a usefully contemporary foundation for understanding *personality*’s flexibility in signaling both an inner quality and a social effect. The pattern they observe across American and European sources largely corresponds to the broader claims of cultural historian Warren I. Susman’s well known account of American popular culture. In his influential, if provisional, theory of an early-twentieth-century transition from character- to personality-centered U. S. culture, Susman depicts the new “culture of personality” through its joint focus on “the unique qualities of an

²⁷ “Labour Hopes In The North,” *Times*, November 7, 1922.

²⁸ Allport and Vernon, “Field of Personality,” 681.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

individual” and “the performing self that attracts others.”³⁰ Although Susman gives priority to the outward or surface “presentation of self in society” (it culminates in film celebrity and the semiotics of the close-up), the crux of many of his examples points to personality’s simultaneous importance as an inner, potentially spiritual, essence—hence an emphasis on self-realization, “the higher self,” and “being oneself” that likewise emerges from his discussion.³¹ In order to take Susman at the strength of his evidence, it must be acknowledged that the new era of personality did not dispense with depth. In the words of *Personality: How to Build It*—a title from Funk and Wagnall’s ten-volume Mental Efficiency Series and one of Susman’s core texts—personality was also “a wealth within us” of “innate originality.”³² Whether inward or outward personality dominates in any particular instance depends largely on context, and together they represent active, and potentially combinable, paradigms for imagining personality between the wars. As interwar examples from the London *Times* will demonstrate, personality’s double life as an inner ideal of individuality and a socially- and commercially-conditioned exterior made it available for all manner of permutations that, when placed under Lewis’s lens, effectively nullify the subject in the name of giving her an identity.

Indeed, the London *Times* can attest to *personality*’s latitude in British parlance for moving between the inside and outside of the person. Appeals to inner essence typically rendered “personality” a cognate for soul or more vaguely for inspirited personhood.³³ Weighty claims

³⁰ Warren I. Susman, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture,” *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 221.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 215, 217, 216, 218.

³² H. Laurent, *Personality: How to Build It*, trans. Richard Duffy, Mental Efficiency Series, vol. 10 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1916), 119.

³³ Raymond Williams makes note of this older sense of “personality” as “something we all once had” by virtue “of being a person and not a thing.” *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 194.

hinge on the concept of a fundamental spiritual core that defines the human and, often, the unique individual. That “the secret of the future rests in the mystery of human personality,”³⁴ for instance, is a recurrent view (and one that finds purchase in other circuits; consider a scholarly article called “Personality, the Final Aim of Social Eugenics” that evokes “the supreme value—we may call it at this time the final value—of personality”).³⁵ Christian theology provides the dominant set of assumptions as well as a scene of lively debate about personality’s survival after death and the doctrine of a personal god, whose personhood would ensure the sanctity and deep purpose of human personality. Secular versions of this idea also held sway, so that Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in 1924 could identify school teachers’ “primary concern” as “the unfolding of the child’s personality,”³⁶ and “the inmost shrine of personality” could be figured as “the pearl of great price entrusted to each one of us.”³⁷

The essential, innate self is also reliably at issue in discussions of modern industry, in which “personality” corresponds to the worker’s jeopardized personhood or capacity for self-realization.³⁸ In these discussions *personality* surfaces as a pivotal category for addressing the political climate of the 1920s. As reported from a 1923 Church Congress, one clergyman remonstrates that “man was in danger in modern industrial life of losing his personality. All the week long he was a ‘hand,’ and...he longed to feel that he was a man free to choose, free to

³⁴ “The Wisdom of History,” *Times*, September 24, 1921.

³⁵ These are the words of English psychologist James Ward in “Personality, the Final Aim of Social Eugenics,” *The Hibbert Journal* 15 (1917): 536.

³⁶ “Future of the Schools; Prime Minister On Education,” *Times*, November 29, 1924. Baldwin apparently makes use of a phrase circulating in discussions of education; see Harry Thielton Mark, *The Unfolding of Personality as the Chief Aim in Education: Some Chapters in Educational Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1912).

³⁷ “The Tyranny of Fashion,” *Times*, December 21, 1934.

³⁸ This sense of the word aligns with Sharon Cameron’s gloss that “*personality* stresses self-ownership, the *of* or possessive through which individuality is identified as one’s own.” *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), viii.

express himself.”³⁹ The idea that “a man’s work should develop, not stunt, his personality” had considerable traction.⁴⁰ The consequences of stunted personalities were forecast in political as well as spiritual terms, as when a Union leader in 1930 suggested that future strikes would be provoked by workers’ demands “for a chance to express themselves” rather than for higher wages or reduced hours. Even before Britain’s general strike of 1926 a key platform of the Labour Movement had been “the proper recognition of human personality.”⁴¹ In the months leading up to the general strike, variations on this idea, along with references to “the human factor,” were repeated in accord with a “new spirit in industry”⁴² that was urged by Prime Minister Baldwin and energetically debated in correspondence columns of the *Times*. Resonant language clearly exceeded Britain, as a similar construction was incorporated in a report issued by the World Economic Conference, which, convening in Geneva the following year, advocated

³⁹ “Church Congress; The Message and the World,” *Times*, September 28, 1923.

⁴⁰ Bernard M. Hancock, “Monotony In Work,” *Times*, September 24, 1923. A 1921 Ecumenical Methodist Conference issued a similar statement: “what was needed was an economic system...under which an unrestricted opportunity was given for developing personality that it might be brought into harmony with the great social, moral, and spiritual responsibilities that was devolving upon it” (“Human Needs of Industry; Mr. Henderson’s Plea,” *Times*, September 17, 1921). See too “Problems of Industry; Solicitor-General on the Age of Ugliness,” *Times*, January 31, 1924. It should be noted that the discussion exceeded private sector imbalances of power. A perceived dearth of personality among civil servants occasioned a 1930 article “Public Officers As Robots,” which alleged that “personality [was] too much submerged in public administration” and that “all over the civilized world at present time people were becoming...mechanized men” (*Times*, July 12, 1930).

⁴¹ “The Churches and Labour; Bishop’s Address to Congregationalists,” *Times*, October 4, 1922.

⁴² In a speech to the National Institute of Industrial Psychology, Baldwin cited “the human factor in industry [as] the most important factor” of “the new spirit” (“Psychology In Industry; Mr. Baldwin on Relief of Monotony,” *Times*, November 13, 1925). A spate of letters to the editor addressing industry’s “new spirit” appeared in November and December 1925; many expressed the sentiment that “the spirit of cooperation in industry is gradually but surely replacing the old spirit which regarded a workman merely as a ‘tool’ and failed to recognize that he had a personality” (Edmond J. Hill, “To the Editor of *Times*,” *Times*, November 21, 1925).

a balance between “the rationalization of industry” and the provision of “conditions of labour and living favourable to the development and strengthening of personality.”⁴³

In contrast, industry leaders deployed “personality” as an externally powerful soft skill or performance that companies could lucratively develop in employees, or at the very least in managers.⁴⁴ The ability to influence others through a “magnetic” or “striking personality” was cited as a key to bustling sales (“no one could sell without personality”) and advancement (“personality was one of the things that dominated success in commercial and industrial life”).⁴⁵ The “requisite personality” was perceived as the *sine qua non* of major players in trade,⁴⁶ but lower-level salespersons, too, needed to “develop” it as “that sensitive touch which informed the salesman how to handle every individual customer.”⁴⁷ A “delightful” or “charming” personality was said to have particular consequence for career women.⁴⁸ Angling to meet demand for trained

⁴³ “World Economic Conference; Report On Tariffs,” *Times*, May 18, 1927.

⁴⁴ See, for example, “Training for Business,” *Times*, October 2, 1934; “Personality in Business Scholarship Alone Not Sufficient,” *Times*, September 29, 1930; and Callisthenes, “The Inspiration of Personality,” *Times*, November 27, 1925. “Personality” also occasionally surfaced as a seemingly inborn “magical gift” for leadership; see “Choice of a Career; Leadership in Industry,” *Times*, June 4, 1924.

⁴⁵ “Women’s Earnings; Some New Fields,” *Times*, March 18, 1914; Callisthenes, “Personality And Salesmanship,” *Times*, May 10, 1928; “Personality in Business Scholarship Alone Not Sufficient,” *Times*, September 29, 1930.

⁴⁶ See Lynden Macassey, “Selling Goods Abroad; Prompt Conclusion of Contracts,” *Times*, February 28, 1929; and “Pinchin, Johnson & Co.; ‘An Ideal Balancesheet,’” *Times*, March 22, 1928. Outside the private sector, Robert Baden-Powell also singled out personality as a key leadership quality in a 1921 call for Scouting Commissioners. Candidates “must be ‘boy-men,’” Powell wrote; “that is, men who are able to lead by their personality, . . . who have not forgotten their own boyish impulses, enthusiasms, and temptations.” “Scouters Wanted; Call To Golfers And Other Patriots,” *Times*, October 22, 1921.

⁴⁷ “Miss Gladys Cooper As Saleswoman,” *Times*, October 1, 1927; see too “Salesmanship; Value of Training,” *Times*, June 29, 1931.

⁴⁸ “Women In Business; Loyalty to Employers and Personality,” *Times*, March 25, 1920; “The Woman’s View; Last Words on Starting a Business,” *Times*, March 9, 1922; “Business Careers For Women,” *Times*, July 18, 1925; and Callisthenes, “The Uses Of Imitation,” *Times*, June 14, 1924. For an earlier U.S. example, see “Personality and the Importance that Attaches to It in the Case of the Young Woman Who Must Be Self-Supporting,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1912.

salespersons, the Association of Technical Institutions determined in 1931 that “the real crux of the problem was personality” and “that schools could help to develop” it.⁴⁹

In particular, the connection between personality and business was a major selling point exploited by an aggressively promoted correspondence course called Pelmanism, which specialized in “the science and art of self realization.”⁵⁰ Pelmanism began as a memory-training course in London in the 1890s and was popularized in the United States and Britain in the first decade of the twentieth century; as early as 1903 Pelmanism claimed to be a purveyor of efficiency, and during the war it reinvented itself as a holistic mind-training program in personal and mental efficiency.⁵¹ Its over-sized advertisements with pictures and testimonials conspicuously announced the scientific basis for success in the pages of the *Times* and other major periodicals from the last years of the war into the 1920s. Subscribers reportedly numbered half a million by 1922 (with 70,000 in the armed forces),⁵² and by all accounts Pelmanism was an influential peddler of contemporary psychology—historian Mathew Thomson suggests that an explanation for the post-war surge in public interest in psychology would be better sought in

⁴⁹ “Salesmanship; Value of Training,” *Times*, June 29, 1931. In this regard the United States was a step ahead. A 1928 *New York Times* article reports on an initiative led by the Association for Personality Training to establish a pilot series of training conferences offered by New York University’s Extension Division (“College Personality Course Backed by a New Society,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1928; see too “N.Y.U. Again Plans Personality Study,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1928). On the basis of this success, N.Y.U.’s School of Commerce offered a full course in personality development in 1930 (“Personality Course Offered by N.Y.U.,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1930).

⁵⁰ *Pelmanism Lesson I: The First Principles of Pelmanism* (New York: The Pelman Institute of America, 1919), 2.

⁵¹ Despite its one-time popularity, Pelmanism has received little scholarly attention and survives in the lexicon primarily as the name of a solitaire game—a vestige of the company’s first specialization in memory development (see “Memory Means Money,” *Times*, February 21, 1903; “Astonishing Successes Recorded,” *Times*, July 25, 1917; and “Praise from Every Quarter,” *Times*, July 25, 1917). As of 1919, the company had headquarters in London, New York, Paris, Melbourne, Delhi, Durban, and Stockholm.

⁵² “Pelmanism in 1922,” *Times*, January 2, 1922; George Henry, “A Pelmanist Regrets,” *Times*, October 10, 1918.

Pelmanism than in Freud or psychotherapy, and author and scholar Robert Graves, writing with Alan Hodge, describes Pelmanism as “the first form in which psychology reached the wider public.”⁵³ The program promised to improve students’ “mental efficiency,” double or treble their income, banish all fear, and, crucially, lead step-by-step to magnetic personalities. By treating the human as at once ineffable soul and machine overdue for priming, Pelmanism capitalized on the equivocation that comprised personality discourse. It promoted the development of an extroverted persona who drew “the power of impressing your personality on others” from inner, unconscious resources.⁵⁴ Pelmanism broached the irony of a mass-market program purporting to train a person to be perfectly individual by way of a tepid clarification: “instead of trying to impose ‘cut-and-dried’ rules and methods of thought, [it] shows the student how to give effective expression to his or her own ideals, aims, and personality.”⁵⁵ Under directed study “a strong personality” could be acquired and one’s inherent uniqueness efficiently “realized” and “expressed.”⁵⁶

Commodity advertisers, too, availed themselves of the notion that individuals possessed inchoate personality but lacked the expertise to reap its advantages. “Personality,” that is, may

⁵³ Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23; Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918–1939* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1940), 54.

⁵⁴ “£2,000 A Year; The Road to a Big Income,” *Times*, May 11, 1915. *On Personality*, the tenth of twelve pamphlet-length Pelman lessons, identifies the subconscious as the seat of personality; emphasizes action, courage, and personal influence; discourages introspection; and touts the rule, “no impression without proportionate expression.” *Pelmanism Lesson X: On Personality* (New York: The Pelman Institute of Amercia, 1919), 12.

⁵⁵ Edward Anton, “‘Pelmanism’ in 1917,” *Times*, January 5, 1918. See too “‘Times’ Readers and the New Movement”: “The ‘System’ is in no sense of the word a mental strait-jacket. There are no hard-and-fast rules of thought and action. On the contrary, the student of the Course preserves and even enlarges his own individuality” (*Times*, November 10, 1917).

⁵⁶ “Remarkable Investigation by ‘Truth,’” *Times*, May 5, 1916; “The New Pelman Course,” *Times*, February 9, 1921.

have been mysterious, inimitable, and embedded in every prospective consumer, but it invariably needed help to surface. Nowhere was the balance between acclaim and intervention more deftly struck than in clothing advertisements that positioned vendors as helpmates to personality's expression. Harrods department store, for instance, offered its 1923 summer cape as a tool for disclosing the "value" of a woman's personality: "Every woman this Summer must have...the right *kind* of Cape—a Cape that you can wrap about you with the new caressing gesture that impresses the onlooker with the value of the personality the Cape enfolds."⁵⁷ "Personality" doubles here as a reference to a person's concrete body and intangible individuality. The new gesture may belong to fashion, the advertisement implies, and the right cape Harrods could supply, but the valuable personality inside was, in both senses, all yours.

An advertisement for the couture clothier Péron provides a more imperious example of this tactic, but it likewise demonstrates the use of personality to sell outward effect as an assurance of unique interiority: "YOU have an ideal of yourself. Everybody has an ideal mental picture stored away somewhere in their inner self. Péron can conjure that idea into reality, because he has models to suit every individuality, and he alone can express your personality in a beautiful exclusive charming model."⁵⁸ In other words, you, like everyone else, are an individual on the inside, but no one save Péron would ever know it. Manifesting personality depends counter-intuitively on the efficacy of Péron's artistry of the pre-designed but prescient model, expertly fitted to your inner (and, given couture, outer) self. Explicitly distinguished from "ordinary 'just-like-the-crowd' clothes," Péron's "exclusive models" nevertheless engage the ready-made's tension between originality and trend—what Jessica Burstein terms "the play between individualism and standardization that ready-to-wear...ushered in"—by insisting that

⁵⁷ "Necessities—and the New Gesture," *Times*, May 9, 1923.

⁵⁸ "Péron in London," *Times*, September 10, 1920.

“fashions are essentially individual” even if your individual “you” owes its realization to the replica of an idea that Péron has already had—and probably sold.⁵⁹ Whether couture or ready-made, garments should, in the words of another Harrods advertisement, “express the latest Fashion-tendencies” yet somehow also “be expressive no less of their wearer’s individual personality.”⁶⁰

Personality’s tension with standardization was brilliantly condensed in an advertorial column for Selfridge’s department store that ran in daily British papers, *The Times* included, from 1912 through 1939. Published under the pseudonym Callisthenes (and reportedly composed at least in part by founder Gordon Selfridge himself), the column educated its readers on modern shopping and, in the process, drew the store into personality’s privileged orbit—in fact personality was chief among the values that Selfridge’s rebranded for retail.⁶¹ If Callisthenes was right that “personality is always interesting, always the subject of the best talk,” the move was well calculated.⁶² From the mid-1920s to the early 1930s it published by the dozens articles that traded on personality’s currency, many bearing headlines like “The Inspiration of Personality,” “Effort Can Create Personality,” “The Hidden Lighting Of Personality,” and (twice) “The

⁵⁹ Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 165.

⁶⁰ Another Harrods advertisement beckons shoppers “in quest of Evening Modes that, whilst expressing the latest Fashion-tendencies, shall be expressive no less of their wearer’s individual personality.” “When Evening Comes,” *Times*, October 18, 1922. Advertising copy for Selfridge’s department store likewise promotes “clothes that are distinctive, that have charm, that reflect her personality.” “The Store of Wide Choice,” *Times*, March 8, 1920.

⁶¹ Gordon Honeycombe provides a detailed narrative of the Callisthenes articles, which numbered nearly ten thousand and appeared in a range of British periodicals; see *Selfridges: Seventy-Five Years; The Story of the Store, 1909–1984* (London: Park Lane Press, 1984), especially 171–174. On Selfridge’s publicity efforts to redefine shopping, see also Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Rappaport argues that “Selfridge departed from his English competitors not in specific arguments, but in his ability to weave together what were by now orthodox beliefs and make them his own” (159).

⁶² Callisthenes, “The Best Publicity,” *Times*, July 12, 1929.

Personality of a Business.”⁶³ Throughout, references to *personality* are flexible enough to encompass its entire range of discursive value.⁶⁴ Indeed, even as Selfridge’s asserts that authentic “personality is the growth of years,” it also points out—expediently, given its role selling housewares and personal effects—that “personalities change from week to week.”⁶⁵

The column’s reiterated message was Selfridge’s profound pride that every personality in the organization’s network should be allowed development, expression, and recognition: the company, the retail store, each employee, the city of London, and, above all, each member of the consuming public was a personality; nor did Selfridge’s neglect to defend the individuality of the ready-to-wear products it supplied.⁶⁶ Ever opposed to standardization, the store used the column

⁶³ Callisthenes, “The Inspiration of Personality,” *Times*, November 27, 1925; “Effort Can Create Personality,” *Times*, September 6, 1927; “The Hidden Lighting Of Personality,” *Times*, July 27, 1932; “The Personality of a Business,” *Times*, May 16, 1928 and December 15, 1931.

⁶⁴ An article titled “Personality” that opens with the Oxford Dictionary’s denotation of the word, for instance, merely offers a grab-bag definition of its subject, and articles often conflated personality and character even when nominally engaged in distinguishing the two (*Times*, July 23, 1928). “More often nowadays we talk of personality rather than character,” Selfridge notes, but he is not particular on the matter so long as the best of both are pegged to his name: “Whichever word is used, it is a doctrine of this house.... When we say we believe that such success as we have had to be due to personality in the members of the Store we mean what our fathers meant by character, courage, industry, honesty, sincerity, loyalty, enthusiasm and the pursuit of high ideals.” “Personality and Salesmanship,” *Times*, May 10, 1928. Susman would take note that Selfridge’s here appropriates the virtuous qualities of character for the contemporary clout of personality. Showing his resolve to have it both ways, an advertisement the following week titled “Character” claims “this store... was stamped with Personality from its beginnings. We have always fostered individuality and personality.” *Times*, July 30, 1928).

⁶⁵ Callisthenes, “The Personality of a Business,” *Times*, December 15, 1931; “People Will Have Variety,” *Times*, March 28, 1932.

⁶⁶ Callisthenes’s synthetic claim that “under all our interests in thought and work the ultimate interest is in human personality” (“Human Interest,” *Times*, February 4, 1934) reiterates a chain of related statements: “Our House has a *personality*”; it is “a place where personality grows”; and it has “helped to increase the personality of London” (“The Morning Toilette of a Mighty Business,” *Times*, July 18, 1925; “Where Personality Grows,” *Times*, October 2, 1933; “Cities and Their Stores,” *Times*, October 14, 1924). “All the world knows that in this House we set much store by personality,” and “visitors to our Store have often spoken of the charm of personality which they feel to be behind even the simplest of its services.” “Effort can create Personality,” September 6, 1927. Selfridge’s further professes to “have a gift of ‘realizing’ our

to differentiate itself from machine-age practices that reduced staff to “cogs” or “hands.”⁶⁷ In terms that expressly refute Henry Ford’s justification that “a great business is really too big to be human. It grows so large as to supplant the personality of the man,” Selfridge’s “fail[ed] to see why, with proper organisation, any great employer, be he a manufacturer, miner or what not, cannot be kept in friendly and almost personal touch with his employees.”⁶⁸ By like reasoning, Selfridge’s refused to refer to “the people who come” to the store as mere “‘customers,’ standard units of commerce with standard requirements.”⁶⁹ It insisted in many permutations that “every single member of the public who enter our doors we know is a personality,” promising that even the coldest of commercial transactions would be imbued with “the deeper quality...of

customers,” and if “every one of them is to us a personality requiring personal service,” so too is “every one of [our nearly 5,000 staff]...a personality...sure of being treated as a personality.” “‘Realizing’ Other People,” *Times*, January 17, 1930; “Discipline And Personality,” *Times*, July 31, 1934. On the individuality of Selfridge’s ready-to-wear suits, see Callisthenes, “An Old Prejudice Broken Down,” *Times*, May 24, 1928.

⁶⁷ Callisthenes, “We Do Not Speak of ‘Hands’ in Selfridge’s,” *Times*, May 17, 1930; “Discipline and Personality,” *Times*, July 31, 1934; “Individuality in a Staff of Thousands,” *Times*, November 2, 1934.

⁶⁸ Ford, *My Life and Work* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1922), 263; Callisthenes, “Individuality in a Staff.” Although Ford’s words ably represent his legacy, it is worth noting that *My Life and Work* is not unambivalent about the human costs of industrial development, which “has...led to an impersonal system wherein the workman has become something less than a person—a mere part of the system. No one believes, of course, that this dehumanizing process was deliberately invented. It just grew. It was latent in the whole early system, but no one saw it and no one could foresee it” (139–140). Placing dehumanizing developments in the past allows Ford to highlight his ameliorative view of twentieth-century business as service, “provid[ing] a livelihood” and an improved standard of living for everyone incorporated (264).

⁶⁹ Callisthenes, “A Business Strong in Human Nature,” *Times*, July 17, 1929.

personality.”⁷⁰ The result was the depiction of the department store—an institution often taken to epitomize standardized mass-consumption—as the cutting edge of convivial individualism.⁷¹

III. Workers, Newspaper Readers, and Other Machines

Standardized thought, or rather information, must in the end result in the disappearance of the individual altogether, and of all spontaneous thinking, except on the part of a controlling sect.... As we are a living organism, not a machine, nausea ensues.

—Wyndham Lewis, “Editorial Notes,” *The Enemy* 2

Selfridge’s savvy in manipulating these terms produced what Lewis might consider the apotheosis of ballyhoo personality. To label it as such should not diminish the seriousness of its effects, however; “ballyhoo” may do justice to Lewis’s contempt for advertising’s farcical rhetoric, but its connotation of cheap, showy nonsense makes light of his genuine sense of peril about the role of public media in “the organization of suggestion” for economic, political, and ideological control.⁷² In Lewis’s account of liberal democratic failure, “the press and other publicity channels,” including state-run education, function as instruments of indirect rule over a puppet public convinced of its liberty in thought and action even as “public opinion, snobbery, and the magic of *fashion*” monitor its nearly perfect uniformity.⁷³ The newspaper represents a powerful synecdoche for this combined effort of political instruction and commercial promotion

⁷⁰ Callisthenes, “Individuality in Business,” *Times*, August 18, 1930; “Manner and Matter,” *Times*, January 11, 1934. See too “Human Interest,” *Times*, February 3, 1934.

⁷¹ See for instance Rudi Laermans, “Learning to Consume: Early Department Stores and the Shaping of Modern Consumer Culture (1860–1940),” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 10 (1993): 79–102.

⁷² Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 116. As Douglas Mao observes, Lewis anticipates later theorists like Adorno, Althusser, and Foucault in arguing for the power of cultural discourse to shape the way individuals think and behave. “A Shaman in Common,” 215. Gąsiorek similarly compares aspects of Lewis’s cultural analysis to Frankfurt School theory, and to that of Adorno in particular. “Wyndham Lewis on Art,” 213.

⁷³ Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 434.

bent on concentrating wealth and power among ruling interests. According to Lewis—who, it must be remembered, witnessed firsthand the brutality of World War I trenches—contemporary European and American states produced newspaper readers rather than citizens, robots disposed “at a word (or...a week’s newspaper-suggestion)” to go to war or otherwise take orders from the “ideologic machine.”⁷⁴ Within this regime of standardization the vogue for personality plays a treacherous game, whereby the public is sold as assurances of individuality the precise formulas that secure its cooperation in conformity. Like “the word ‘free,’” personality is “a magical counter with which to enslave us.”⁷⁵ If for Lewis “the sense of personality, of being a person, is...the most vivid and fundamental sense that we possess,” then popular discourse becomes all the more insidious when it transforms the very idea of personality into a ready-made product for mass deception.⁷⁶

One of “the paradoxes of the present age,” Lewis argues in *Paleface* (1929), is that individuals have so very much to say about the personalities they have never been given the chance to realize; hence their “conversation about ‘developing their personality’ is a sentimental habit, merely.”⁷⁷ *The Art of Being Ruled* makes this argument in full. In consecutive chapters titled, headline-esque, “The Contemporary Man ‘Expresses His Personality’” and “People’s Happiness Found in Type-Life,” Lewis argues that however much the vast majority of his Western contemporaries speak of individuality and liberty, they are nonetheless eager to slot their so-called identities into social categories and assume the associated doctrines. Unwittingly they desire classification and automation, a “type-life” that renders them “obedient, hard-working machines, as near dead (feelingless and thoughtless) as they can get, without actually

⁷⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *Paleface*, 73.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 434.

⁷⁷ Lewis, *Paleface*, 75.

dying.”⁷⁸ In the context of this desire “personality” works as an hypnotic token that means the reverse of what it purports—homogenization, not individuation:

When people are encouraged, as happens in a democratic society, to believe that they wish “to express their personality,” the question at once arises as to what their personality *is*. For the most part, if investigated, it would be rapidly found that they had none.... If they were subsequently watched in the act of “expressing their personality,” all together and at the same time, it would be found that they all “expressed” this inalienable, mysterious “personality” in the same way. In short, it would be patent at once that they only had *one* personality between them to “express”.... It would be a *group personality* that they were “expressing”—a pattern imposed on them by means of education and the hypnotism of cinema, wireless, and press. Each one would, however, be firmly persuaded that it was “his own” personality that he was “expressing.”⁷⁹

Taken from this angle, claims to personality register as merely the rebroadcasting of discourse. The process of transmission was especially alarming for Lewis in that people taken in by the ruse mindlessly perpetuate it. Although these concerns reached their pitch in Lewis’s works of the 1920s, they are foreshadowed in *Tarr* (1918), where personality figures as a disease that is “catching” and renders characters “sicknesses for each other.”⁸⁰

In particular, Lewis singles out as “mischievous journalese” the collocations of “expressing” and “developing personality.”⁸¹ As the *Times* examples given above suggest, he is responding to catchphrases that appeared frequently in the contemporary press. In Lewis’s view these recurrent exhortations to “express” or “develop” personality mystified a precluded

⁷⁸ Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 173.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 169–170.

⁸⁰ Lewis, *Tarr*, ed. Paul O’Keeffe (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1990), 72.

⁸¹ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 78.

interiority that simply dressed up ruling political and economic interests. In mechanical response and “supplied with this formula, ‘expressing the personality,’ as a libertarian sugar-plum,” upstanding, newspaper-reading individuals are apt to divert their energies into various frivolous, type-bound self-fashioning that are expedient to capitalist production. Such is the crux of Lewis’s analysis in *Time and Western Man* of a *New York Herald* article (1926) debating women’s assertion of “their right to develop personality unhampered” by means of short hair and short skirts.⁸² According to Lewis the discussion is fatuous, since neither personality nor propriety is genuinely at stake. In sporting such fashions, “every woman is conscious of being a very daring and novel being,” yet she inevitably mistakes her impulse to push the envelope:

the *intention* behind the fiats of fashion, leading to “short skirts,” etc., is hardly to debauch the world. It is much rather intended to uniform and discipline it, to teach it to be neat and handy, *to induce it to dispense with that costly luxury, “personality,” instead of to “develop” it, as it pretends*; to train people to be satisfied to be just like their neighbours, hat for hat, and button for button, and finally to be *active*, so that they can *work*. Skirts are short for work, not love

—that is, for capitalist profit, not amorous adventure, let alone self-realization.⁸³

Because femininity organizes the puppet half of Lewis’s elaborate binary of rulers and ruled (the ruled are characterized, for instance, by dependence, irresponsibility, unconscious sensation, collectivity, fashion, and spurious “personality”), Lewis comes down especially hard

⁸² Lewis does not provide a citation for the article but specifies that the Y. M. C. A. meeting at which the discussion took place occurred in November, 1926.

⁸³ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 80. As historian Adrian Bingham shows, discussion about women’s fashion also exercised the British press. Bingham argues that editors often exaggerated a sense of controversy in order to stir debate, and in particular they would quote the conservative views of the clergy as agents provocateurs. *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53–54.

on feminine expressions of personality.⁸⁴ Even if (heterosexual) men, too, can display femininity, women (and queers) are prone to obsess over “sex specialization,” which incapacitates them, as all forms of class differentiation do, by converting them from self-defining persons into types.⁸⁵ Awkwardly for Lewis, he does not wish to be taken as anti-woman—“the mind of the woman,” he rebuts, when “stripped of [its] secondary equipment of grace and feminineness, is not, almost every one will admit, very different to that of the man”—but he also defines the rulers and the ruled in terms of “a sexual division” that slips easily and often from the “secondary equipment” of gender into a biologically determinant take on sex.⁸⁶ Women are thus far more likely than men to swagger across his pages in expression or development of dubious personalities. Even so, the principal point Lewis advances applies to all sexes with equal opportunity, viz. “to ‘develop the personality’ is an alluring invitation, but it invariably covers some process that is guaranteed to strip a person bare of all ‘personality’ in a fortnight.”⁸⁷

Personality stripped in a “fortnight” implicates the promises of heavily advertised self-help programs to develop personality in short timeframes—Pelmanism, for instance, predicted self-transformation in a mere “half hour or so spent daily for a few weeks.”⁸⁸ Indeed the boom in what was termed practical psychology—psychology adapted for the self-improvement of popular audiences—warrants particular attention as a feature of post-war British culture to which Lewis was keenly alert.⁸⁹ He derides “the quack who promises to develop such things [as personality]

⁸⁴ In Lewis’s system of binary distinctions, these feminine Romantic qualities are opposed by the classic virtues of independence, adult responsibility, intellect and consciousness, individuality, stability, and (Lewis-sanctioned) personality.

⁸⁵ Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 213.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 205, 99, 213.

⁸⁷ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 79.

⁸⁸ “Pelmanism in 1917; Remarkable Response from Readers of ‘The Times,’” *Times*, September 5, 1917.

⁸⁹ On practical psychology see Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, especially 18–19.

overnight”; notes that “the papers are always crowded with advertisements...to make hundred-per-cent business-magnates of you in three months”; and targets by name both Pelmanism and the autosuggestion method of Dr. Émile Coué, inventor of the famous self-help phrase “every day, in every way, I am getting better and better.”⁹⁰ Such time-delimited formulations of self-improvement were inimical to the constancy and active intellectual autonomy to which Lewis equates real personality. In particular, self-help’s fixation on time suggested to him an affinity with advertising that exceeded its reliance on actual publicity. The depthless “one-day world” of advertising promotes the illusion that the sensational moment is the horizon of identity, experience, and reality; parsed as “every day...I am getting better and better,” self-help appeared to be organized by the same principle. As Lewis puts it, “in the world of Advertisement, Coué-fashion, everything that happens today (or everything that is being advertised *here and now*) is better, bigger, brighter, more astonishing than anything that has ever existed before.”⁹¹ Self-help and advertising have in common this “world of hyperbolic suggestion” and romance with amelioration that hinge on total renewal from moment to moment.⁹² By subscribing to the “marvelous” and “unreal” one-day world of advertising and self-help, “the average man is invited to slice his life into a series of one-day lives, regulated by the clock of fashion. The human being is no longer the unit. He becomes the containing frame for a...sequence of ephemerids [sic],⁹³ roughly organized into what he calls his ‘personality.’”⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 75; *Time and Western Man*, 182. Émile Coué, *Self-Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion*, trans. Archibald Stark van Orden (New York: Malkan Publishing Co., 1922), 49. Coué prescribed twenty repetitions of this formula twice daily as a means to promote health and self-mastery. Coué’s fame peaked in Britain in 1922 with the publication of *Self-Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion* and two well publicized London lectures.

⁹¹ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹³ “The tabulated positions (of a heavenly body) for a series of successive days.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v., “ephemeris, n.,” accessed May 28, 2013.

Practical psychology typified another, closely allied threat to personality: it contrived to turn the person into a machine tuned for action instead of thought. Lewis was hostile to a cultural obsession with “mechanical *betterment*” that compelled the individual to apply to humans “methods proper to machinery.”⁹⁵ Couéistic self-hypnosis through the mechanical repetition of a phrase might be taken as exemplary in this regard, as might Pelmanism’s invitation to develop an original personality by following the directives of a generic manual. In its rhetorical embrace of the “human machine,” Pelmanism goes one step further. Advertised at the nexus of industry and mind-science as a “scientific system” for optimizing one’s “mental machinery,” Pelmanism equates the “strong personality” to an efficient engine.⁹⁶ For instance, one advertisement first defines the Pelman system as “the enrichment and application of personality” and goes on to remark

it is amazing to note how frequently a four-cylinder-power mind is working on the basis of a two-cylinder-power standard.... Any engineer knows that the problem which has to be solved in designing and constructing an engine...is largely the problem of generating, directing, and economizing energy.... It is largely the same with the human machine.⁹⁷

In tacit support of Lewis’s argument, Pelmanism acknowledges no incompatibility between its particular notion of “personality” on the one hand and mechanization’s systematicity on the other.

⁹⁴ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 12.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118. The problem as Lewis observed it was that this fervor for technical revolution—which could be genuinely progressive if abstracted from politics—was driven by the interests of industry tycoons and “opportunistic political mind[s]”; under such circumstances, mechanical progress as applied to the individual merely served to renovate the labor force according to the contemporary ideal of the tractable and efficient worker. *Time and Western Man*, 118–119.

⁹⁶ “How I won promotion,” *Times*, April 1, 1919.

⁹⁷ W. C. L., “Pelmanism: The Gospel of Action,” *Times*, January 2, 1919. It is worth noting that Ford’s Model T automobile had four cylinders.

The four-cylinder mind is an apt formula for what Lewis facetiously calls the “man-of-action,” a modern “functional creature” “hurrying, without any significant reason, from spot to spot at the maximum speed obtainable, drugged in that mechanical activity.”⁹⁸ “Everything in our life today conspires to thrust most people into prescribed tracks, in what can be called a sort of *trance of action*,” Lewis laments.⁹⁹ Lumped together with “specifics for more enterprising virility,” Pelmanism figures for him as a representative agent of that trance: a “prop for the will or fillip for the senses proper to a shell-shocked society.”¹⁰⁰ Other references to Pelmanism in Lewis’s texts likewise mock the busily programmatic, business-accented self-assurance that Pelmanized machines were said to acquire. Hence Lewis he coins “the dogmatism of [a] great class of business-like pelmanic seers” and the faux-courage of the weakling “Pelman-brave.”¹⁰¹ In these examples, Pelmanism has not produced persons with real acumen, courage, or confidence so much as action figures struck in symbolic poses. Lewis’s adjectival use of “Pelman” suggests that such poses remain indelibly branded by “group personality.”

Thus even as Lewis champions personality as “that most irreducible symbol of power or privilege or value” and “the most obstinate” barrier to standardization, he registers its popular conceptions as expressly antagonistic to this vision.¹⁰² As a result Lewis’s critical writings lend mixed support to Susman’s theory of an early twentieth-century culture of personality: Lewis

⁹⁸ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 20, xi.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xi. Analogues to “trance of action” in *Time and Western Man* include “doctrine of action” and “the gospel of action,” the latter of which happened to headline a Pelmanism promotional article of 1919 (published twice; W. C. L., “Pelmanism: The Gospel of Action,” *Times*, January 2 and 7, 1919). Lewis may have otherwise encountered the phrase as a chapter title in *The Present Conflict of Ideals; A Study of the Philosophical Background of the World War* by American philosopher Ralph Barton Perry; Lewis references Perry in passing in *Time and Western Man*, 212.

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 88.

¹⁰¹ Lewis, *The Childermass*, Part 1 (New York: Covici-Friede, 1928), 21; *Apes of God*, 227.

¹⁰² Lewis, “Creatures of Habit,” in *Creatures of Habit*, 150.

affirms a fascination with the word but challenges the concept that stood behind it. While Susman argues that personality gained currency as a way to cope with living “constantly in a crowd” in which one must try to distinguish oneself, Lewis counters that no genuine desire for distinction survived the dispensation that installed the crowd to begin with.¹⁰³ The ruckus about personality observable in self-help and newspaper rhetoric had succeeded only in habituating the crowd to individualist mannerisms that become ludicrously synchronized across a population. Ground out of an immense but veiled political machine, the discursive culture of personality amounted to a culture of impersonality. In effect, personality and impersonality formed a false opposition: according to Lewis, the culture was impersonalizing in every direction one could look.

IV. On “the Non-Impersonality of Science”

Lewis accounts for the impersonal culture in which ballyhooed “personality” played a significant role in large part by theorizing the grip over western civilization exercised by positive science and its putative core value of impersonality. As Mao argues, Lewis’s view of personality (in Mao’s words, “forceful subjectivity”) “as imperiled rather than imperial under modernity” stems above all from a sense of danger in “a technological expansion driven by an increasingly powerful instrumental reason.”¹⁰⁴ In Lewis’s analysis, the threat posed by scientific impersonality was multifaceted, ranging from its existential antagonism to personality to the political exploitation it enabled.

¹⁰³ Susman, “‘Personality’ and the Making,” 218.

¹⁰⁴ Mao, *Solid Objects*, 99.

According to Lewis, science fundamentally alienates individuals from themselves by imposing a materialist reality on the wrong scale for human life—irrelevant to and destructive of conscious, cognitive experience:

our life and personality, viewed as science obliges us to, is not *humanly* true or *personally* useful, any more than is the scarified, repellent picture of our skin under the microscope. Science makes us *strangers* to ourselves. Science destroys our personally useful self-love. It installs a principle of impersonality in the heart of our life that is anti-vital. In its present vulgarized condition science represents simply the principle of destruction.¹⁰⁵

In its purest form of investigative thought, scientific impersonality is nonetheless double-edged, a powerful source of innovation that staves off cultural stagnation as well as a hazard to that sense of self in which originate human reason, responsibility, and purpose. The most pessimistic view of this balance is, to quote Paul Edwards, that “Western society has lost its nerve and handed itself over to the machine which it has created.”¹⁰⁶ Pelmanism could be taken as a banal example of this failure of nerve; for hyperbolic examples, Lewis looks to contemporary psychology, specifically to the physiological theories of mind that gained influence in the academy and over the public imagination in the first decades of the twentieth century. In a keystone chapter of *Time and Western Man* called “The Subject Conceived as King of the Psychological World,” Lewis casts psychology’s notion of the personality/ego/subject (used interchangeably) as the body’s doomed king. In accord with the era’s mass democracy movements, the rabble of unconscious cells agitates to roust the king from power. In this trope of psychology’s regicidal coup, science serves the masses as “*revolutionary tribunal*: and the

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 464.

scientific method is the most admirable guillotine.”¹⁰⁷ To explain how this revolution came to pass, Lewis offers a brisk philosophic history of “the extinction of the ‘thinking subject,’ ‘mind,’ ‘psyche,’ or by whatever name it has gone” from Descartes and Leibniz to William James and Henri Bergson, whose theories of consciousness, in collusion with “einstenian flux,” broke up the personality into a piecemeal sequence of historically separate, instantly defunct selves; meanwhile Sigmund Freud, that “mephistophelian Dr. Caligari” of the unconscious, lurks in ambush of the autonomous intellect. Lewis’s history reaches its terminus in “the ‘motor’ explanations of contemporary psychological research” that locate personality itself within impersonal physiology.¹⁰⁸ For reducing the brain to a “servant of the vegetative apparatus,” Lewis indicts Louis Berman’s endocrinal theory of personality (published as *The Glands Regulating Personality* [1922]);¹⁰⁹ Robert Yerkes’s intelligence tests for codifying qualitative human data as mechanism, developed in support of the U. S. war effort; and the “last ditch” of John B. Watson’s behaviorist revision of personality as a “reaction mass” of predictable “habit systems.”¹¹⁰

Psychology’s grim trend toward human mechanization represented to Lewis not only the philosophic “evolution of the subject into the object” but also a broader technological trajectory designed for individual classification and control.¹¹¹ Central to this argument is the assertion that what passes for “impersonality” is never ideologically neutral. Lewis’s critique stands out for its insistence on the human agents who derive the theories and wield the tools of science; the assumption that such agency could be abstracted from the scientific method Lewis counts among

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 299.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 343, 297.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 336.

¹¹⁰ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 324; John B. Watson, *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1919), 420.

¹¹¹ Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 17.

“the most significant delusions of the present time.”¹¹² For even if it is conceivable that science in its purest inception might be impersonal as “a force of nature,” its applications by human beings, and still more its vulgarizations—“manipulated by a sort of priestcraft into a great religious and political weapon”—most certainly are not.¹¹³ Science is ineluctably enacted by humans enmeshed in political and personal interests who might, in the best-case scenario, be made aware of the ideologies in which they are steeped. Genuine impersonality is out of the question.

However threatening Lewis deemed the self-estrangement inherent to pure science, he pronounced far more menacing the ideological practices that putative objectivity could shield from inspection. Lewis ultimately identifies science with a public function of ideological laundering, given that it serves

to conceal the human mind that manipulates it, or that manipulates, through it, other people. For in its *impersonality* and its “scientific detachment” it is an ideal cloak for the personal human will. Through it that will can operate with a godlike inscrutability that no other expedient can give. It enables man to operate as though he were nature on other men. In the name of science people can be almost without limit bamboozled and managed.¹¹⁴

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44. Between *The Art of Being Ruled* and *The Lion and the Fox* Lewis wavers on whether the public remains duped by the impersonality scheme or has seen through it. Compare Lewis’s more positive assessment in *The Lion and the Fox* where he claims that the philosopher’s pretension to detached truth is “to-day...no longer accepted. The analysis of science has taught people to recognize the individual and his personal bias, at the heart of the philosopher’s system.” *The Lion and the Fox: The Rôle of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1927), 286.

In other contexts he makes the same argument for impersonality in literature. In these analyses, Lewis suggests that the manipulation of truth is not an abuse of objectivity but constitutive of the very paradigm that brings it into being. Thus the vulgarization of science is not equivalent to popularization but is rather “the organizing and adapting of certain chosen *truths*, or discoveries, of philosophy or science, to an ultimately political end,” producing a result that is not “an inhuman, objective bundle of pure scientific truth, but a personally edited bouquet or bundle.”¹¹⁵ In this guise, science “represents power and nothing else,” and impersonality maintains a monopoly over truth and the real.¹¹⁶

As evidence of a culture held in thrall to impersonality, Lewis lampoons a fashionable new pose that had migrated from the laboratory into everyday life. Scientists, first of all, were prone to fall wholesale for their gambit of anonymity, supposing themselves so far aligned with nature as not to be persons at all; but scientists were not the only ones to engage in such self-effacement:

Through admiring this “scientific detachment” and “impersonality” so much, Tom, Dick, and Harry begin to believe that they, too, are not *persons*, not *human*. A man (a quite ordinary man, not a man of science) will stand in front of another man (who knows him quite well and all about him) and pretend that he is not himself, that he is “impersonal,” that he is incapable of any emotions, appetites, or prejudices: that he cannot be angry, partial, offend, jealous, or afraid. And the strangest thing is that he *is believed*.¹¹⁷

Lewis perhaps only feigns surprise here. Donned out of neighborly admiration, impersonality figures as a kind of typological self-fashioning, or the hardboiled gentleman’s equivalent to the

¹¹⁵ Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 27.

¹¹⁶ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 295.

¹¹⁷ Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 27–28.

risqué lady's short hair and skirt. Button for button, deadpan for deadpan, the constituents of Lewis's public take up their neighbors' poses of impartiality as readily as the cut of their clothes; impersonality, too, can register as a fiat of fashion for a certain personality profile.

Lewis does not address the incongruity of his contemporaries constantly asserting both "personality" and "impersonality," but perhaps he does not need to. As catchwords, they represent cash value in, respectively, modern authenticity and authority, and in Lewis's analysis interwar culture traded freely in both. The conclusion is not just that Lewis isolates a duo of voguish frauds or a pivotal contradiction at the center of this cultural logic; more crucially at issue is something specific about these terms that facilitates commutation between persons and things.

Despite their apparent opposition, they would better be described as mirror images—mutual inversions of pretension and actuality. Whereas "personality" is a front for the impersonality of conformist, unconsciously iterated habit, "impersonality" disguises personally vested motivations and objectives. As Lewis argues, "this delusion of impersonality could be best defined as that mistake by virtue of which persons are enabled to masquerade as *things*"; in like fashion, the delusion of personality might be extrapolated as that mistake that allows things to masquerade as persons.¹¹⁸ These inversions of word and concept confuse human with mechanism and contribute to "the cheap, socially available simulacrum" that obfuscates the large-scale dynamics of exploitation and farce in which Lewis's democratic masses heedlessly participate.¹¹⁹ Indeed the lability of these terms equips them to serve vital and parallel functions in the arts of ruling and being ruled, of mechanizing and becoming mechanized. In so far as these terms are both inimical to the autonomous "Person as hero" in whom Lewis grounds his critical

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹⁹ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 120.

position, they should be generalized, on the balance, as a pernicious cultural impetus towards *impersonality*, at once imposed by subterfuge and fostered as a dishonest ideal.

V. Aesthetic Impersonality

Negativity and critique are overwhelmingly Lewis's primary modes, but whatever avenues of possibility he does grant within a culture of impersonality proceed from art. Consequently the aesthetic is a crucial dimension of his resistance to the concerns that have so far occupied this chapter, the tandem deceptions of mass-produced personality and instrumental impersonality. According to Lewis "the art impulse reposes upon a conviction that the state of limitation of the human being is more desirable than the state of the automaton," and the contemporary artist's function is to contest automaton incursions—to personally manifest the creative principle that allows humans "to feel that our consciousness is bound up with this non-mechanical phenomenon of life."¹²⁰ In a "'transitional' society" like interwar Britain or America, the artist's efficacy in this vocation depends first on her possession of an independent, creative mind and second on her willingness to engage in art and social politics avowedly as an artist—that is, to be

¹²⁰ Lewis, "Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time," *The Tyro: A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design 2* (1922), rpt. ed. B. C. Bloomfield (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1970): 26. This point coincides with positions taken by Hugh Kenner and Paul Edwards. In Kenner's words the artist's self is "the means by which the creative principle could be personified and made to live in the world." Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Books, 1954), 58; as Edwards puts it, artists' role is "to detach themselves sufficiently from the ideologies of their time and to project by an act of visionary (and critical) imagination, from the materials that their time presented to them, an ideal and values that could lead to a fuller and more meaningful life for their society." Edwards, afterword to *Time and Western Man*, 465. Lewis's advocacy of a redemptive or ameliorative art is undoubtedly out of tune with the animus that dominates much of his fiction and painting, yet it remains an important if puzzling complication of his artistic vision. Lewis is in fact emphatic on this score: genuinely creative art would make the world better. In the vein of Swift (an exemplar for Lewis), this may include art as derisive scourge—or the instigator of laughter as an "anti-toxin of the first order." *Men Without Art*, 114.

a partisan for art, prepared to challenge all socio-political developments averse to it.¹²¹ This position condenses in Lewis's cherished persona of "the Enemy," an uncivil, recalcitrant outsider who launches volleys at the impersonal orthodoxies that prevail in social, political, and artistic life. As Lewis makes clear in his opening to *The Enemy: A Review of Art and Literature* (1927), the enemy stance is a direct response to impersonality in the realm of aesthetics. "So named," *The Enemy*

publicly repudiates any of those treacherous or unreal claims to "impartiality," the scientific-impersonal, or all that suggestion of detached omniscience, absence of a *partis-pris*, which is such a feature of our time (in which every activity, even the least amenable to exact method, apes positive science).¹²²

Alongside feigned objectivity, two other deficiencies characterize aesthetic impersonality for Lewis: it preempts the artist's due recognition and influence, and it collapses the proper autonomy obtaining between a discerning viewer and an object. Renouncing the scientist's "detached omniscience," Lewis devises his corrective to impersonality as detachment of another order: an aesthetic perspective spatially distinct from its object yet saturated with stance and intention—a strategy this chapter terms "personified detachment." Congruent with Lewis's "external method" of satire—focused on visible exteriors instead of psychological interiors—personified detachment combines Lewis's philosophic investment in personality with his paramount aesthetic values of space and visuality.¹²³ So defined, detachment becomes a spatial

¹²¹ See Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 134. Lewis also occasionally declares himself to be "nonpartisan" (as in "I am not a partisan, but an independent observer...I am not a communist," etc. [*Art of Being Ruled*, 28]) but in these cases he refers to partisanship of an expressly political stripe. For instance in the editorial to the first *Enemy* issue he renounces nonpartisanship and goes on to say, without contradiction, that he has no politics (xv).

¹²² Lewis, editorial in *The Enemy* 1: ix–x.

¹²³ On Lewis's "external approach," see in particular *Men Without Art*, chapter 11.

attribute rather than an absence of interest. Although critics sometimes align Lewis's emphasis on detachment with impersonality, to confound the distinction misses an important outcome of his quarrel with modernism and, in particular, misconstrues his contributions to the problem of aesthetic impersonality. Despite Eliot and Joyce's near monopoly in the critical imagination over modernist theories of impersonality, Lewis offers a vastly more developed account, advanced in part via a fictional counter-model. As the second half of this chapter argues, the ethical and formal implications of personified detachment are pitted in direct opposition to impersonality and can be registered in manipulations of narrative perspective and voice in Lewis's fiction.

Against the grain of modernist thought, Lewis renews the assumption that the work of art conveys stance and emotion—"a personality and traces of passion and opinion"—that have no other origin than the artist. Contra Eliot's objective correlative or catalytic platinum shred, Lewis places the author in full personal possession of the thinking, feeling, and speech contained in the literary work.¹²⁴ He also insists (to an improbable degree) on the artist's responsibility for the ideologic implications of his ideas, "not merely to be a medium for ideas supplied him wholesale from elsewhere, which he incarnates automatically," but to critically filter and select the ideas

¹²⁴ Eliot uses the objective correlative to argue that any emotion expressed in a work of art should be entirely explained by the work's objective or external facts, arranged like a formula to evoke that specific emotion. See "Hamlet and His Problems," *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 141. According to Eliot's impersonal theory of art, the artist is not personally the source of the work's emotion but instead serves as catalyst to the creative process: like a shred of platinum in the production of sulphurous acid, the artist's mind is an inert agent in the aesthetic production of new combinations of feelings. As a result the work of art should bear no trace of the artist's personality. Lewis addresses Eliot's catalyst directly in *Men Without Art*: "I do not believe in the anonymous, 'impersonal,' catalytic, for the very good reason that I am sure the personality is in that as much as in the other [personal] part of this double-headed oddity, however thoroughly disguised, and is more apt to be a corrupting influence in that arrangement than in the more usual one, where the artist is identified with his beliefs" (91). In further rebuke to Eliot's chemistry laboratory, Lewis adopts the venerable (if regrettable) parturient metaphor of Shakespeare gestating characters; see *Lion and the Fox*, especially 13–14.

manifest in art.¹²⁵ “Artistic creation is always a shut-off—and that is to say a *personal*—creation,” and by this logic a genuinely creative universe entails a creator whose active, personal consciousness impresses itself in every aspect of the work.¹²⁶ Biography is not the emphasis but rather the texture, disposition, and convictions of an organizing artistic mind “experiencing things according to identifiable personal laws.”¹²⁷ By implication the creation safeguards the artist’s social stature and, more fundamentally, the existence of the “person” in Lewis’s honorific sense—a person defined by independent intelligence, responsibility, and creative capacity. These ideas are crucial to Lewis’s work of Shakespearean criticism, *The Lion and the Fox*, which is bookended by indictments of “the fashionable campaign against personality.” Lewis joins the academic fray surrounding the question of Shakespeare’s impersonality, but for him the stakes are more ethical than hermeneutic: to prove that Shakespeare is personally the motive force behind the plays stands to secure recognition at large for heroic genius and the existence of “such a thing as a *person* after all.”¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 136.

¹²⁶ Lewis, *Lion and the Fox*, 285–86; see too “Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art,” 31.

¹²⁷ Lewis, *Lion and the Fox*, 13–14. This interpretation departs from that of Max Saunders, who understands Lewis’s polemics of an “anti-humanist aesthetics [to] issue in an argument for autobiography.” *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 270. Lewis’s stringency in separating life from art, even if not strictly practiced (as for example in his use of personal experience as material for *Tarr*; see Paul O’Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* [London: Jonathan Cape, 2000], chapters 7 and 8) suggests that personality in his usage is better understood as an abstracted, intellectual self rather than a person identified with a certain verifiable, biographical narrative.

¹²⁸ Lewis, *Lion and the Fox*, 301. Shakespeare’s im/personality was a lively debate in the first decades of the twentieth century. Sidney Lee published a pamphlet called “The Impersonal Aspect of Shakespeare’s Art” in 1909; Harriet Monroe rejected the impersonality thesis in a 1916 number of *Poetry* (“Shakespeare,” *Poetry* 8, no. 1 [1916]: 32–43); and in the same month that Eliot published “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in *The Egoist* Edward George Harman composed the foreword to his monograph, *The “Impersonality” of Shakespeare* (foreword dated September, 1919; the book was not published until 1925). *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* names a host of other early-twentieth-century studies that carried on this

Aesthetic impersonality endangers these values and entails other risks, too—namely those proper to scientific practice. Beating Wimsatt and Beardsley to the punch of inventing fallacies to bolster the impersonality doctrine, Lewis coins the “‘impersonal’ fallacy” as “that admired method of insinuation whereby a particularly compendious pretended reality enables its creator to express himself as *though he were nature*, or a god.”¹²⁹ Farcical, pretentious, and dangerous, this “naturalist” art (in that it aspires to deliver a person-free view) is, like supposedly objective science or philosophy, ultimately “unsafe” in its utility for smuggling personal or ideological investments under the cover of truth. As one of Lewis’s fictional spokespersons puts it, “‘impersonality’ ... is a wonderful patent behind which the individual can indulge in a riot of personal egotism.”¹³⁰

A simile brings this threat comically into view: aesthetic impersonality “is a similar device to that whereby a man hunting a seal will cover himself with the skin of a dead seal, and, disguised in that way, stalk his prey.”¹³¹ The “genial bluff,” as Lewis calls it, is assuredly less than genial for the seal, whose error in judgment stands for that of an undiscerning art public that takes affably to its own predation. “The artist pretends to be nature: neither men’s wits nor senses are very sharp, and they are easily deceived. They say: ‘Why that *is* nature,’” and so accept the “impersonal” (elsewhere, “naturalist”) work as though it were a frameless, continuous

debate. Vol. 1, ed. George Watson and Ian Roy Villison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 1567, evidently already underway in the 1880s. See also Paul Stapfer, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity: Greek and Latin Antiquity as Presented in Shakespeare’s Plays*, trans. Emily J. Carey (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1880), 10, 260–272.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 286. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley were central in establishing formalist critical practice based on impersonal assumptions about literature. Two influential co-written essays, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) and “The Affective Fallacy” (1949), insist on the strict separation between, on the one hand, the internal or textual meaning of literature as the legitimate target for criticism and, on the other, external features outside the critical domain, including authorial intention and emotional effects experienced by the reader.

¹³⁰ Lewis, *Apes of God*, 259–260.

¹³¹ Lewis, *Lion and the Fox*, 286.

extension of lived experience instead of the hand-crafted representation it necessarily is.¹³²

Impersonality is in fact as “impossible” as it is “undesirable.” Despite the hunter-author’s charade of excluding himself from the scene of artistic transmission, his presence remains to any third-party observer patently obvious.

Once installed within the seal, the impersonal author is the ready manipulator of fictional techniques belonging to what Lewis variously calls “the *inside* method,” “telling-from-the-inside,” and “the internal method.”¹³³ Under this rubric he clumps together many of the defining formal features of modernist fiction: in (overlapping) narratological terms, the use of reflector figures, focalization, and free indirect discourse, all of which attain their effects by shifting emphasis from the teller’s mediated knowledge to characters’ immediate experiences.¹³⁴ Posted from within a character’s stream of consciousness (or unconscious “intestines,” as Lewis would have it) the narrative’s central intelligence—which Lewis generally equates with the author—conceals itself in a fluid internal reality to which readers seem to have direct access.¹³⁵

¹³² *Ibid.*, 286.

¹³³ Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 119; *Time and Western Man*, 100, 255; *Men Without Art*, 127, 128.

¹³⁴ “Reflector figures” and “focalization” both describe resources for routing narrative through character. Narrative theorist F. K. Stanzel takes the term “reflector” from Henry James, defining it as a character through whose “eyes” events and other characters are viewed; the reflector “thinks, feels and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator.” *A Theory of Narrative (Theorie des Erzählens; 1979)*, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 5. “Focalization” arises out of Gérard Genette’s narratological model, which seeks to disambiguate perspective—“who sees” or “who perceives”—and voice—“who speaks.” Genette introduces *focalization* to isolate the axis of perspective. See *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). On the ambiguities and problematic aspects of both terms, especially in terms of the ideological and visual registers of perspective, see Monika Fludernik, *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 341–347; and Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (London: Routledge, 2012), 36–38, 102–104.

¹³⁵ Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 121.

Lewis rejects the “internal method” aesthetically for its indefiniteness—its “flowing lines, the absence of linear organization” or of “linear properties whatever”¹³⁶—but the defect of indefiniteness further extends to an equally flawed phenomenology achieved in large part through the erasure of boundaries among selves and objects. This scenario of merging is the narrative equivalent to the philosophical error Lewis associates with the “time-mind”—his name for the chronologically-contingent self identified with the flux of sensation and derived from Bergson’s concept of time as subjectively qualitative *durée*.¹³⁷ By inhabiting the time-mind, “you lose not only the clearness of outline, the static beauty, of the things you commonly apprehend; you lose also the clearness of outline of your own individuality which apprehends them.”¹³⁸ Lewis associates the loss of outlines with a kind of limitless subjectivism that arises from identifying oneself with the objects of perception rather than allowing each to remain, in Mao’s apt phrase, “side by side, each in its proper repose.”¹³⁹

In the context of narrative, this appropriative subjectivity is one consequence of pretending to exclude the perceptive intelligence from creative acts of witness and transmission. The author’s self is supposedly reduced to the objective data that her sensory apparatus collects from inside character minds, but yet all fictional “data” is in the first place called into being at the author’s command, in expression of her will and intellect. Her supposed evacuation from the scene instead corresponds to her total permeation of its persons and objects.

This contradiction is acutely at issue in Lewis’s well known critique of James Joyce as the “inside method”’s exemplary practitioner and *Ulysses* (1922) as the nadir of time-minded

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 127; Lewis, *Satire and Fiction* (London: Arthur Press, 1930), 17.

¹³⁷ In *Time and Western Man*, Bergson takes the brunt of Lewis’s criticism, but allied philosophers of the time-mind include William James, Samuel Alexander, and Alfred North Whitehead.

¹³⁸ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 167.

¹³⁹ Mao, *Solid Objects*, 139.

naturalism. Lewis rejects *Ulysses*' putative "claim to be employing the 'impersonal' method of science" on the grounds that, despite its pretext of focalization through characters Bloom and Dedalus, the novel never departs from Joyce's subjectivity.¹⁴⁰ *Ulysses* instantiates for Lewis a fixation on the author that is personal in precisely the wrong way—not strident or direct, but furtive and claustrophobic, engulfing the reader in a private world at the expense of the respective independence of author, reader, and character. Hence the seal-suit motif of immersing narration inside its object recurs in Lewis's analysis of *Ulysses* as a diving suit, in this case distending the metaphor to its queasiest extreme:¹⁴¹

The method of doctrinaire naturalism...results in such a flux as you have in *Ulysses*, fatally. And into that flux it is you, the reader, that are plunged.... But the author, of course, plunges with you. He takes you inside his head, or, as it were, into a roomy diving-suit, and once down in the middle of the stream, you remain the author, naturally, inside whose head you are, though you are sometimes supposed to be aware of one person, sometimes of another. Most of the time you are being Bloom or Dedalus, from the inside, and that is Joyce.... But, generally speaking, it is *you* who descend into the flux of *Ulysses*, and it is the author who absorbs you momentarily into himself for that experience.¹⁴²

Simulated immersion inside character streams of consciousness thus belies the fact that the author is a suit the reader is wearing. Instead of aloof and disinterested, refined out of existence (per Dedalus of the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916]) the Joyce of Lewis's caricature

¹⁴⁰ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 101.

¹⁴¹ The diving suit makes a more literal debut in *Mrs. Dukes' Million*. There it serves Hercules Fain as a disguise, if not a full-blown immersion in another personality, as he makes his escape from Reza Kahn's gang of actors (completed by 1910, *Mrs. Dukes' Million* was not published until 1977 [Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1977], 349–351).

¹⁴² Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 100–101.

descends and merges into his creation, compelling the reader to do the same.¹⁴³ Although the image's convolutions do not entirely line up, the confusion furthers Lewis's point that the inside method entails all manner of psychic merging and appropriation, with inflections both sexual and digestive.¹⁴⁴

The impetus for seal- and diving-suit metaphors is a narrative theory that can be parsed in direct opposition to impersonality. Specifically Lewis rebuffs impersonal literature's pretension to dodge two parameters of third-person narration: in Erich Auerbach's terms, the questions of who speaks and who sees.¹⁴⁵ Counter to impersonality's ruse that no voice or visual perspective can be held responsible for the narrative instance, Lewis insists that the author can neither retire from the stage nor evade the medium's intimation of a speaker, even in places where no person is concretely designated. The supposition of speech in particular translates into a rhetorical model of literature that Lewis explicitly endorses as "the *politics of style*": "in literature it should always be recalled that what we read is the speech of some person or other, explicit or otherwise.... *There is an organic norm to which every form of speech is related. A human individual, living a certain kind of life, to whom the words and style would be appropriate, is implied in all utterance.*"¹⁴⁶ In concert with the suited metaphors' emphasis on author-reader

¹⁴³ James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Signet Classic, 1991), 217.

¹⁴⁴ To cast a wider contextual net, this fascination with inside-ness is related to Lewis's critique of subjects merging with objects in *The Art of Being Ruled*. The words of Julien Benda, which Lewis quotes, suffice to convey his sentiment: "let us learn to recognize, also, in their will *to install themselves inside* things, a kind of thirst to sexually invade everything—to violate any intimacy, and mix themselves in the most intimate recesses of the being of everything met." *Art of Being Ruled*, 268.

¹⁴⁵ Erich Auerbach asks of *To The Lighthouse*, "who is speaking in this paragraph? Who is looking at Mrs. Ramsay here?" *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 531. This distinction is typically taken up in narrative theory via Genette.

¹⁴⁶ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 113. Without reference to this particular passage, Hugh Kenner offers a useful gloss: "because of the social nature of language, it is impossible to *write*

relations, this implicit, “organic norm of speech” renders a theory of literature as the rhetorical encounter between an authorial speaker and an audience. Refuting the modernist ascendancy of “showing” over “telling” that Percy Lubbock first articulated, this speech-centered model suggests that “showing” is not equivalent to the delivery of an immediate fictional or psychological reality free from authorial intervention but is instead the deliberate action of a storyteller who mediates between audience and represented world.¹⁴⁷ In Lewis’s framework immediacy is a rhetorical effect, and “showing” a function of “telling” rather than an alternative to it.

On the question of “who sees,” Lewis is similarly literal. Presuming that the authorial eye never ceases to peer through the narrative scope, where ever it may be positioned, he constructs aesthetic impersonality as a problem of incompetent spatial relation that inhibits accurate, independent sight—a fatal flaw, given the pride of place accorded the eye in Lewis’s system of aesthetic values.¹⁴⁸ The eye in particular, “separating the viewer from the object of sight,” as Vincent Sherry explains, “achieves the distinctions on which clear conceptual intelligence relies”

like a force of Nature. You have to invent some sort of personality to speak the words, or else leave the words to coerce one into spectral existence without your approval” (*Wyndham Lewis*, 58–59).

¹⁴⁷ On showing and telling, see Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), which is discussed in the introduction to this dissertation.

¹⁴⁸ In Lewis’s words, “the eye is supreme,” and “whatever I, for my part, say, can be traced back to...*the eye*. It is in the service of the things of vision that my ideas are mobilized.” *Time and Western Man*, 134. This emphasis derives from Lewis’s identification as a visual artist and his intellectual commerce with political theories of the senses developed by Julien Benda and Rémy de Gourmont. In the words of Vincent Sherry, “whereas the democratic ear merges, the aristocratic eye divides. Separating the viewer from the object of sight, the eye also achieves the distinctions on which clear conceptual intelligence relies; it thus provides the emblem and instrument of a ruling intellectual elite.” *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5. These theories were foundational to Lewis’s aesthetic theory and practice.

in Lewis's thought.¹⁴⁹ The detached eye not only records and reports but reformulates the data of sensation in the production of cognitive perceptions. By contrast, as seal and diving suits illustrate, narrative premised on impersonal transmission attempts to merge with the object and hence to see through its eyes, or to collapse the specular function of narrative altogether in favor of blind immersion in the flux of internal sensation.

Within this framework, impersonality is incompatible with art's function, as Lewis articulates it, to introduce and maintain difference. If "science is the identifier," bound to "merge us in a mutually devouring mass," then art is "the differentiator" in that it preserves distinctions and distance—a place to stand and an angle at which to coolly observe the fray. Lewis's philosophic "wish to force apart the agglutinating, or interpenetrating, subject and object, or object and object" likewise constitutes a central tenet of his narrative theory.¹⁵⁰ His defense of the "linear properties" of art begins in the first place with the hardened outline of the artistic observer who preserves his distinction from the objects fixed in his sight.

Detachment is thus a definitive term for Lewis's narrative approach, but it is based on the primacy of space and vision rather than impartiality or dispassion.¹⁵¹ Whereas "to be 'impersonal' means to 'merely simulate' interest" (as Lewis puts it in his thorough-going critique of Eliot's theory of depersonalized art), his detached observer does not cede the obligation to remain attentive and invested, which is imperative to critical intelligence as defined against the automated habits of the machine or the chemical registrations of platinum.¹⁵² In his career

¹⁴⁹ Sherry, *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis*, 5.

¹⁵⁰ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 562.

¹⁵¹ Dedalus's fingernail-pairing artist-God, detached in the sense of bored, is again a useful point of reference; likewise Eliot's theory of depersonalized creation as the work of a "finely perfected medium" wholly detached from the personality of the artist. "Tradition and the Individual," 104.

¹⁵² Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 91.

retrospective *Rude Assignment* (1950), Lewis definitively disambiguates this commitment to detachment from impersonality when he consents

to the word “detached,” in the limited sense of habitually reserving judgment, and not expressing oneself by action, and, in perhaps the most important things, holding to the deliverances of reason. — Impersonal detachment is another matter. For the whole virtue of accurate observation is that it is a *person* observing.... De la Rochefoucauld, described by Voltaire as the most important writer of the Seventeenth Century, observed human nature with a detached eye. But he observed with some violence; one is always conscious of the person there.¹⁵³

The decisive stipulation of Lewis’s detachment, then, is that a person must be situated behind the perspective. The result is an anti-impersonal narrative mode of personified detachment defined by the parameters of space, vision, and personality.

VI. Personified Detachment in *Snooty Baronet*

Lewis does not go into the particulars of how exactly “one is conscious of the person there” behind the detached eye, but in the case of his own narratives there can be little doubt. The blustering narrative voice, satiric stance, idiomatic acrobatics, and jarring associations that are his stylistic hallmarks draw pointed attention to the person behind the view, observing, to be sure, with “some violence.” Not limited to style, personified detachment is equally in force in the expression of belief. Against the “dogmatic insincerity” of impersonality evacuated of commitment (as sanctioned by Eliot and I. A. Richards), Lewis prefers to err in the opposite direction: “‘the man, the personality’ should exaggerate, a little artificially perhaps, his beliefs—

¹⁵³ Lewis, *Rude Assignment*, 76.

rather than leave a meaningless shell behind him.”¹⁵⁴ The exaggeration may be as essential as the underlying beliefs; Lewis consequently favors overt, performative narrative speakers who make known beliefs and judgments that Lewis readily associates with the author even as they sometimes go to further extremes than the author himself. To this effect Ford Madox Ford recounts an anecdote in which Lewis accosts him in order to disparage the subtleties of literary impressionism: “you and [Joseph] Conrad had the idea of concealing yourself when you wrote. I display myself all over the page. In every word. I...I...I,” a polemic Ford differently transcribes several years later, as Max Saunders points out, several years later: “you fellows try to efface yourselves; to make people think that there isn’t any author and that they’re living in the affairs you...adumbrate.... What balls! What rot!... What’s the good of being an author if you don’t get any fun out of it?”¹⁵⁵ In the interest of getting some fun out of authorship, Lewis’s fictions evince not just the “traces of passion and opinion” detectable in Shakespeare’s plays but a surfeit of personality that contrives narrative as a performance art.

That Lewis locates the third-person narrative voice and eye in a person is formally evident through his narrators’ famously marked, idiosyncratic language and indications of satiric stance (their “sarcastic rattletrap,” in Bernard Lafourcade’s phrase) as well as in patterns of accentuated deixis and direct engagement with the reader.¹⁵⁶ For instance, although minimally editorializing on the whole, *Tarr* establishes on its first page a spatially located speaker with interpretive judgments on the narrative’s locale and its residents:

Paris hints of sacrifice. =But here we deal with that large dusty facet.... We are not however in a Selim or Vitagrach camp.... A hundred square yards at [the] centre [of the

¹⁵⁴ Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 91.

¹⁵⁵ Saunders, *Self Impression*, 269–270.

¹⁵⁶ Bernard Lafourcade, “Afterword: A Cock-and-Bull Story” to *Snooty Baronet* by Lewis, 255.

Knackfus Quarter] is a convenient space, where the Boulevard du Paradis and Boulevard Pfeifer cross.... The Café Berne, at one side, is the club of the “Grands messieurs Du Berne.” So you have the clap-trap and amorphous Campagna tribe outside.... These are the most permanent tableaux of this place.¹⁵⁷

In thus setting the scene through first-person plural, present tense, indexical markers, and precise spatial coordinates (“Paris hints,” “here we deal,” “we are not...in,” “at one side,” “so you have,” “this place”), *Tarr*’s narrator suggests spatial and temporal proximity to the bohemian quarter—at least his own, but perhaps also “yours.”¹⁵⁸ To take a post-“Man of the World” example, *The Revenge for Love* (1937) features intermittent narrative intrusions that emphasize the narrator’s speculative reasoning and colloquial voice: “I mean”; “as I said”; “as I daresay you can fancy”; “I suppose I ought to have given more details... (...we had better get all the jokes over before we start)”; “well, I’ve said it was *something* at first sight between Jill and Jack”; “I suppose he showed it in his face”; “it amused him slightly more...(or, if you like, it bored him less).”¹⁵⁹ These musings construct a rhetorical relationship with the reader and interject into an otherwise fairly realist narrative conspicuous reminders of an actively interpreting mind behind the observing eye.

Lewis’s most exaggerated instances of actively personifying detachment occur in *Snooty Baronet*, a first-person novel that nonetheless opens in third person with a fastidious description of the facial features of a man with a wooden leg disembarking a taxi. As it turns out, the face belongs to the first-person narrator, the eponymous Snooty Baronet, who materializes bodily in

¹⁵⁷ Lewis, *Tarr*, 21.

¹⁵⁸ Despite changes to the novel’s opening passages in Lewis’s substantially revised 1928 version of the novel, these essential elements of person, location, and time remain unchanged.

¹⁵⁹ Lewis, *The Revenge for Love*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1991), 119, 118, 180, 110, 111, 230.

the image he has just constructed. Having visually set the scene (perhaps from the vantage of the taxi's rear-view mirror), Snooty cuts into the frame to claim as his own the face and the unidentified perspective:

The face was mine. I must apologize for arriving as it were incognito upon the scene....

The fact is I am a writer: and the writer has so much the habit of the anonymous, that he is apt to experience the same compunction about opening a book in the First Person Singular (caps. for the First Person Singular) as an educated man must feel about commencing a letter with an "I."¹⁶⁰

The third-person fake-out mocks the operations of narrative anonymity in at least two ways. Snooty's "compunction about... 'the First Person Singular'" parodies the writer's or the cultured person's embargo against personality as *de rigueur* linguistic hygiene. More importantly, Snooty's opening gambit of popping out from behind an anonymous description dramatizes as sleight of hand the mechanics that make possible impersonality's effaced perspective. To be clear, however, Snooty's third-person is far from impersonal—the passage is a riot of irony, judgment, and interpretation, as conveyed in such quips as “the right side of the face had held out best!” and “the mouth...(like an escaped plush lining of rich pink)...spelled sensitiveness if anything, of an inferior order”—yet the surprise of Snooty's belated reveal is only intensified by the fact that he does a noisily poor job of concealing himself.¹⁶¹ Continuous across first- and third-person discourse, his distinctive voice attests to a perspective that was never empty in the first place.

The narrative implications of this third-person bluff become more pronounced when repeated mid-novel after an elided sex scene. (Due to the subject matter, Snooty feels

¹⁶⁰ Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, 15.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

“compelled...to break off [his] narrative” for the duration of the encounter.) Out of the bedroom in which Snooty has last depicted himself fully dressed, “a one-legged man hopped out...naked as God ushered him into the world.”¹⁶² A description ensues of the man vomiting while perched on the living-room settee, followed by this explication: “that one-legged naked man in the sumptuous second-hand Chelsea armchair...was me. (Upon my opening page I had to introduce myself, as you will recall. This time again I have to perform that office, as you might otherwise not have recognized me unclothed).”¹⁶³ The humor relies on Snooty’s absurdly visual idea of narrative: he does not depict himself in the action of undressing and faux-implies that an author could not otherwise expect a reader to recognize a character so radically changed in appearance without proper reintroduction—even if that character remains deictically identified with the narrating “I.” Snooty seems to assume an audience habituated to impersonal ploys and easily fooled by changes in narrative suit. The discomfiture of seeing a stranger in an intimate setting, one might surmise, would disrupt the visual sequence on which narrative relies. By way of escorting the reader out of the bedroom, Snooty interposes between images of his body clothed and unclothed a brief excursus on the fire flickering in the living room; to preserve visual continuity on resuming his account *après l’amour*, his perspective issues from the living room where he has delicately deposited the reader, and into which the naked man can be seen to hop.

By applying Lewis’s “external approach” to his own person, Snooty points out the potentially ludicrous capacity for narrative detachment that persists even in the first-person.¹⁶⁴

The pronominal shifts exaggerate to comedic effect the fact that, to use terms formulated by

¹⁶² Ibid., 49.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 49–50.

¹⁶⁴ In her reading of these two scenes, Burstein argues that Snooty’s detachment from the first person has a prosthetic function that is akin to his negotiations with his mechanical leg; hence there is “a certain kind of confluence between the mechanics of narrative and the body narrated” (75). See *Cold Modernism*, 68–69; 75–76.

narrative theorist Leo Spitzer, the “narrating self” can diverge from the “experiencing self” even as they belong diachronically to the same individual.¹⁶⁵ The upshot for Lewis’s anti-impersonal fiction is this: no perspective so fully submerges the narrative in a character’s consciousness as to render negligible the presence of an observing and judging person who tells the story and replicates in function the author’s own relation to the text. Although narrator Snooty may be identified with his story’s protagonist, he retains an external sense of authorial autonomy. He remains, that is, a “detached eye” with a mind behind it. One of the novel’s major concerns is making these fictional mechanics apparent.

Given Snooty’s pronounced exercise of authorial license, it is not incidental that Lewis designates him the author of a book called *Snooty Baronet*. The ostensible plot is the manufacture of a publicity stunt for Snooty’s next publication, a travelogue on the Mithraic cult of Persia. The research trip is intended to abort in a splashy, trumped-up kidnapping of Snooty and his entourage, comprised of Snooty’s literary agent Humph and lover Val. The fake kidnapping goes ahead but awry when Humph is killed by Snooty, who claims against Val’s word that, at least the second time, he pulled the trigger on purpose. Centered on the production of Snooty’s upcoming book, Lewis’s *Snooty Baronet* also is that book, the product of its own adventures, themselves designed for the promotion of said book. This metafictional Möbius strip is further complicated by the fact that, although engineering-trained and behaviorism-practicing Snooty claims a scientific temper and professes to transcribe events exactly as they happened, his fidelity to fact is in no way assured. To convey “field-work in animal psychology” (i.e., “mock-

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 298n3. This observation would doubtless be unsavory to Lewis since it smacks of the time-mind, carving out discrete selves from disparate moments of consciousness, yet Lewis employs it all the same, and to great effect, in *Snooty Baronet*.

researches” on behavior), Snooty sees fit to apply a new, “picturesque” “literary technique” that confounds the distinction between art and science, and he identifies himself as an author of “fiction.”¹⁶⁶

Oddly, though, Snooty declares that “the art of narrative is a different matter”: he is “not a narrative writer.”¹⁶⁷ The distinction points up narrative’s contested status in an age of impersonal realism. If Snooty is to be appraised by realist standards that call for the author’s erasure, he is undoubtedly right to deny the mantle of narrative writer. He draws continual attention to himself as the teller of his tale; disdains the inside method as a way to let events speak for themselves;¹⁶⁸ refers concretely to the narrative as a book (“on my opening page,” “these pages,” etc.);¹⁶⁹ and, perhaps most flagrant, regularly intervenes in the unfolding of events to directly address the reader. The first chapter, for instance, alternates between sparse elements of narrative development—a man with a wooden leg, a New York taxi ride, a parcel, a hotel, a telegram—and discursive asides that take hold of the reader in a rhetorical grip that never relaxes. Snooty arrives on the scene “incognito” with an apology for not introducing himself right away, rationalizing by way of defense that beginning in first person would lead “you” to “simply say to yourself, ‘This must be a dull book’ ...and throw the thing down” on account of “your” presumed prejudice against a hero with a disability. Many subsequent appeals likewise attest to Snooty’s apprehensive attentiveness to audience: “again I have to perform that office, as

¹⁶⁶ Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, 64.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 16. Snooty’s devaluation of “fiction” as an indiscriminate catch-all for prose is consistent with Lewis’s own appraisal; see “Appendix: The Taxi-Cab Driver Test for ‘Fiction’” in *Men Without Art*.

¹⁶⁸ As a good behaviorist, Snooty focuses on the surfaces of things and is suspicious of the word-habit that differentiates humans from other animals; it is thus “against [his] custom” to “allow [his] mind to chatter” in the wordy manner of stream-of-consciousness narration or to seek the equivalent in subjects of his narration or field-study (131).

¹⁶⁹ Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, 29, 251.

you might otherwise not have recognized me”; “it may have occurred to you that I show myself a little remiss as a lover, I do not know”; “as you probably know”; “do you know that sensation?”; “I rose from what an American would undoubtedly describe as a davenport—and if you are an American that is what it was”; “I suppose now I have to boil down for you what I read”; “if I didn’t make haste to enlighten you we shouldn’t be comfortable, I know. I understand.”¹⁷⁰

Snooty’s use of present-tense direct address gives priority to the telling of events over the events themselves,¹⁷¹ focusing attention on a hyper-authorial voice that does not permit the called-out reader to forget that she is audience to a narrative performance. If Snooty “could come out of this paper at you,” he would.¹⁷²

As the above examples suggest, Snooty verbalizes the calculated negotiations of readerly knowledge, expectations, and inference that a realist author must contend with, master, and conceal in order to construct the illusion of immediate reality. Professing “poor command of narrative form,” Snooty lays bare the realist workings that under the control of a smoother operator might function undetected.¹⁷³ Indeed, a primer for realism reconstructed from Snooty’s ongoing colloquy with the reader could proceed as follows: use colloquialisms as appropriate to make narrative language appear unmarked (e.g., “Old Valerie always got under my skin [I am apt to employ the idiom of those I suppose I am addressing, you understand me?]”); duly signal relocations in time and space (“Will you pass over the Atlantic with me as quickly as possible, please?”; “it is only necessary to skip a matter of ten minutes”); avoid foreshadowing (“I am however anticipating—as I believe it is correct for an author to say when he has outrun himself

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 50, 46, 202, 138, 29, 87, 22.

¹⁷¹ Narrative theorists distinguish these elements from each other as narration (*syuzhet*) and story (*fabula*). The distinction is not unproblematic, but it serves the purpose here of describing the reversal of impersonality that Snooty effects.

¹⁷² Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, 135.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 251.

as it were, in the appointed conduct of his narrative, as I notice I have just done”); fill in background information as required (“It is quite necessary for me to explain all these points to you in detail, as they crop up”)—but be circumspect with details (“I hate arriving in London and won’t bore you with that”; “when just now I spoke of the club...I did not tell you, but perhaps I ought”); evoke images by description (“My God I had forgotten. I suppose I have to describe her for you. That is a bore”); and reveal the protagonist by his habits (“I have to make you acquainted with all my habits, one by one”), motivation (“I will explain in a moment the reason for my sitting down to write this book”), and economic situation (“You have been wondering, I expect, how I manage to get about...I sympathize with you”).¹⁷⁴ Snooty’s metacommentary on the rules of realism accentuates the spoken quality of his discourse and ensures that the conventions he so chattily observes—often too late or too early and embellished by complaint or deliberation—have no possibility of taking effect as the props of reality. To point out the conventions means of course to flout the principal one: refrain from direct reference to the audience or literary work. In neglecting this, Snooty insists on the hyperbolically mediated status of his narrative. He forecloses mimetic experience by upholding the trilateral distances between artist, audience, and narrative that realism strategically collapses.¹⁷⁵

In these ways *Snooty Baronet* exaggerates anti-realist patterns that are evident throughout Lewis’s fiction, and critics have been alert to the ways that Lewis’s fiction more generally resists verisimilitude in the service of maintaining a distinction between life and art. Peter Nicholls calls the elision the two “the constant butt of Lewis’s satire”; the function of legitimate art is rather to refuse “osmotic identification and to create a fictional world in which we are denied the too-easy

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 23, 17, 49, 62, 47, 21, 45, 28, 26, 45, 22.

¹⁷⁵ Lewis develops this thesis more fully in *The Dithyrambic Spectator* (1931).

solace of sympathetic involvement.”¹⁷⁶ Not straightforwardly anti-mimetic either, Lewis’s method instead produces a form of mimesis that according to Nicholls “supplements the model” in that it seizes “the lack in its object [as] the condition for a satirical excess in its representation.”¹⁷⁷ Focused on style more than theory, Hugh Kenner registers Lewis’s antagonism to verisimilitude as the “fabrication of a world, hardly more than word-deep, by a species of verbal impasto.”¹⁷⁸ Conceived as pure surface instead of depth or duration, Lewis’s idea of art, as Lisa Siraganian puts it, “is a form of life independent of time,” existing on a “different order of experience,” and Lewis “satirizes those artists and critics” take art as “a frameless thing to be stepped into and completed by its beholders.”¹⁷⁹ In Paul Edwards’s description, Lewis’s narrators are “puncturers of illusion.”¹⁸⁰ This consensus is robustly grounded in Lewis’s writings but is in need of supplementation by his critique of impersonality, since one core problem with mimesis is that it covers over the fact of narrative production and negates the agency of the creative personality responsible. Rather than unfolding over time as an experience of sympathetic absorption, Lewis’s narrative is a viscous spectacle—if not a static barrage of discourse then at least the incredibly slow advance of a perceptive intelligence that monopolizes center stage. As Bernard Lafourcade argues, Lewis spoils the “fluid illusion” of narrative’s mimetic surface, yet to call him an “anti-novelist” as Lafourcade does too drastically circumscribes “the novel”: what Lewis targets is in fact the novel without a novelist.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Peter Nicholls, “Apes and Familiars: Modernism, Mimesis, and the Work of Wyndham Lewis,” *Textual Practice* 6, no. 3 (1992): 424.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹⁷⁸ Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis*, 92.

¹⁷⁹ Siraganian, *Modernism’s Other Work*, 58, 54, 53.

¹⁸⁰ Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*, 32.

¹⁸¹ Lafourcade, “Afterword: A Cock-and-Bull Story,” 258.

Conclusion

A certain discrepancy prevails between this chapter's construction of Lewis as assailant of impersonality and his more familiar personae as the zealous artisan of thing-like people and modernism's main technician of "inhuman laughter."¹⁸² Even as Lewis's theoretical writing laments the "rout of the Subject," his fictions proliferate automatons, machines, robots, dummies, dolls, and puppets.¹⁸³ This contrast spurs Kenner to identify a "latent contradiction" in Lewis's oeuvre: "*Time and Western Man* had argued that the behaviorist, in reducing the person to a set of predictable gestures, was insulting the human race. In the same year Lewis was producing a body of fiction on the premise that people were nothing else."¹⁸⁴ Kenner dubs this body of work "puppet-fiction," populated by figures who "incarnate the ideas the polemics are directed against."¹⁸⁵ This homology between criticism and fiction extrapolates from Lewis's satire an ontology of the human in which, for instance, "a person is nothing but such a mechanistic thing; we are ridiculous only when we pretend to personhood."¹⁸⁶ These are Hal Foster's words, and Michael North, among others, takes the same view.¹⁸⁷ Indeed there is a compelling case to be made for a Lewisian universe pervaded by impersonality. However, a critic practices the wrong kind of intentionalism when she assumes that because Lewis relentlessly stages, in his words, an "all-puppet cast," he endorses the vision of an all-puppet world.¹⁸⁸ Such views overstate Lewis's assertion that "'men' are undoubtedly, to a greater or less

¹⁸² Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 112.

¹⁸³ Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 337.

¹⁸⁴ Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis*, 107.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁸⁶ Hal Foster, "Prosthetic Gods," *Modernism/Modernity* 4, no. 2 (1997): 28.

¹⁸⁷ "For Lewis...human beings actually are mechanical objects, and it is the function of laughter to expose their pretensions to be otherwise." Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 117.

¹⁸⁸ Lewis, *Apes of God*, 81.

extent, machines” and so lose sight of the crucial spectrum of machinery that Lewis posits.¹⁸⁹ His system of thought depends on the perspicacity of an observer who is less of a machine than others to seize the absurdity and restage it as either comedy or ideology critique. Insistently present in Lewis’s fiction and non-fiction is the puppet master who stands detached from the scene but in the frame, authorizing the show and cuing the inhuman laughter. This figure indexes Lewis’s real-world commitment to the independent intellect, heroic person, or artist who throws the mechanized world into relief. It is for the sake of this figure that the cultural polemics wage their offensive against impersonality.

Lewis habitually casts his relationship to his characters as puppet mastery, exercised either directly by an authorial third-person narrator or through one of Lewis’s deputy “showmen,” who are in turn authorial creations that act on his behalf. A statement to this effect opens “Inferior Religions” (1917), an essay that somewhat cryptically introduces the aesthetic principles at work in Lewis’s early stories: “to introduce my puppets, and the Wild Body, the generic puppet of all, I must project a fanciful wandering figure to be the showman to whom the antics and solemn gambols of these wild children are to be a source of strange delight.”¹⁹⁰ In the 1920s and early 1930s delight modulates in tone to accommodate Lewis’s increasingly sardonic satire, yet the intention holds: Lewisian narrative is the registration of puppet antics on the mind of a detached but visible observer-narrator projected as Lewis’s agent. Edwards describes as a decisive moment in Lewis’s artistic progress the realization that this surrogate for the artist “needs to be included in the picture and is not a neutral observer, as his early narrators on the

¹⁸⁹ Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 116.

¹⁹⁰ Lewis, “Inferior Religions,” *The Wild Body: A Soldier of Humour and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928), 233.

whole believe themselves to be” (34); when Lewis rewrote his early stories for publication in *The Wild Body* (1927), he did so “entirely from this new perspective.”¹⁹¹

In subsequent fiction Lewis uses the new perspective, which this chapter has termed personified detachment, to carve out space for the author. Even in cases where he nominates a first-person showman to fill this role, Lewis has a way of edging personally into his fictions as a reminder of the artist’s reality outside the diegetic frame. His use of namesakes is well known—both *Snooty Baronet* and *The Revenge for Love*, for instance, feature the Lewis machine gun;¹⁹² *The Apes of God* pays tribute to “our solitary high-brow pur-sang Lewis”;¹⁹³ and other references to his name (in full, Percy Wyndham Lewis) include William Windham, Sinclair Lewis, and, Lewis’s own inventions, Captain Wyndham and Percy Hardcaster. Lewis also maintains a presence by using his theoretical writings as a critical apparatus to structure the novels’ ideas, and he uses the showmen as mouthpieces for delivering them—as, for example, when Horace Zagreus derides the status quo of fiction as the concurrence of “(1) a school of unabashed personal Fiction, and (2) a universal cult of ‘impersonality.’”¹⁹⁴ In this way Lewis’s characters not only embody the ideas that the polemics target, as Kenner contends, they also speak the polemics on Lewis’s behalf. These devices all serve as reminders that Lewis is ultimately the performance artist who owns the show.

Snooty Baronet’s ploy of slipping into third-person similarly suggests the possibility that any perspective internal to a narrative can be bested by one just slightly outside. This realization hits Snooty himself when he encounters a “particularly vivid” automaton that brings to the fore both the novel’s questions of personhood and mechanization and Lewis’s investment in retaining

¹⁹¹ Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*, 34.

¹⁹² Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, 172; *Revenge for Love*, 158.

¹⁹³ Lewis, *Apes of God*, 266.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 259–260.

traces of the artist's presence in the work.¹⁹⁵ Featured in a hatter's shop window, the puppet that Snooty sees bows, takes on and off a hat, and makes eyes at the small crowd in which Snooty stands transfixed. Snooty's "turning point" occurs when he realizes that he has synchronized with the automaton's gesture the removal of his own hat, and he sees in a plate-glass window that for a stranger who observed this lapse Snooty has supplanted the automaton.¹⁹⁶ Crisis ensues as Snooty becomes uncertain whether he can tell puppets from people or, worse yet, count on his own personhood: "I was for the first time placed in the position of *the dummy!*...I knew that *I* was not always existing, either: in fact, that I was a fitful appearance.... I saw that I had to *compete* with these other creatures bursting up all over the imaginary landscape, and struggling against me to be *real*."¹⁹⁷ Undoubtedly a Berkeleyian revelation of his own relativity, Snooty's discernment of the imaginary landscape of unreal beings striving to exist also pertains generically to the plight of characters. Kenner takes this moment as the culmination of Lewis's disillusionment, when he "came to accept the satiric premises" of mechanical, behaviorist humanity "as truth,"¹⁹⁸ but when interpreted through Lewis's metafictional play and the "Inferior Religions" assumption that Lewis's reality always encompasses that of his characters, the crisis instead folds back into the terms of the novel. At stake is the ontological status of the character, not the human. Spurred by the hatter's dummy Snooty intuits that he is a puppet precisely because he is one: *Snooty Baronet's* embedded delegation of authorial responsibility finds its terminus only in the person of the real author.

In this way Lewis's hyper-reflexive fictions take very literally the belief underlying "The Man of the World" polemics that independent personhood is founded on creative production, and

¹⁹⁵ Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, 137.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138

¹⁹⁸ Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis*, 107.

vice versa. In his political analysis Lewis consistently prefers transparent power over veiled manipulation, and, however problematic, his authorial autocracy proves an extension of that value. This continuity between Lewis's fiction and cultural criticism suggests an ethical dimension to his insistence on an aesthetic of personality; on it he stakes the existence of "such a thing as a *person* after all" and, further, the potential for art to steward cultural change at some critical distance from reigning fashions and political interests. In multiple genres Lewis contends that "it is the spirit of the artist that maintains this...differentiation of existence for us: our personal, our detached life," which alone stands to grant immunity from an impersonalizing culture's multiple forms of hypnosis.¹⁹⁹ The stringency of ideological awareness that Lewis believed was not only possible but a condition of responsible social conduct is effectively a creative act of authoring one's own consciousness, and he defines the artist in terms of this capability. For him impersonal literature is pernicious because even beyond abdicating the author's claims to personality and responsibility, it seamlessly contributes to a culture bent on impersonalizing human existence. The "contemporary disbelief in the efficacy or importance of individual character" he deemed fatal to art and indefensibly perpetuated by modernist impersonality.²⁰⁰

To find utility in Lewis's assessment of modernist impersonality does not require agreement with the profoundly negative valence he ascribes to it. Formally, Lewis pries impersonality apart from detachment in order to make the case that the two are crucially distinct. By interpreting detachment as an intellectual operation that requires spatial distance and personal investment, Lewis shows that impersonality's supposedly vitiated disinterest often enacts a kind of empathetic (or predatory) merging with the object. Impersonality's connotations of being cold

¹⁹⁹ Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, 268.

²⁰⁰ Lewis, *Lion and the Fox*, 287.

and unfeeling are thus potentially misplaced. The connection Lewis draws between aesthetic impersonality and cultural politics constitutes a further, vital insight. Whereas impersonality has conventionally been made to serve as grounds for the autonomy of the modernist work, Lewis provides a rationale for the opposite view. However conceived, narrative perspective and voice do commerce with dominant cultural and philosophic thought, Lewis argues, and modernist impersonality is from the start deeply involved in broader cultural patterns of renounced or forfeited individuality. Impersonality thus bears philosophical significance that cannot help but ramify through the literary text and implicate it in contemporary trends. Lewis turned out to be incredibly wrong in supposing in 1927 that, “fashionable superstition as it is, the use of the pretence of ‘impersonality’” was “liable to be exploded at any moment,” but impersonality’s persistence as a privileged aesthetic paradigm and critical standard only enhances the value of his attempt to make sense of its sources, means of transmission, and effects.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Virginia Woolf and “the Difficult Business of Intimacy”

Virginia Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting” (1927) conveys a departure from “the straight lines of personality” as fleeting but revelatory.¹ Roaming London at night on the pretext of obtaining a pencil, the speaker merrily “shed[s] the self our friends know us by” and surveys the city’s social and physical geography from an anonymous center of consciousness she calls “an enormous eye.” Penetrating and empathetic, the eye bears witness to strangers’ lives, which it avidly absorbs as “atmosphere” and transmits as fragments of narrative.² What the eye sees is less important than its perceptual ethos, and from the essay’s commentary emerges Woolf’s account of the advantages of a perspective pried apart from personality. “Street Haunting” suggests that an ideal state of receptivity is achieved first by physically departing the domestic shell of “one’s own room” with its “objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience” and next by discarding the crustacean exterior of personality itself: once broken, “the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others” exposes beneath “a central oyster of perceptiveness.”³ The exposed oyster-eye is the “I”’s homologue in that it locates perceptive existence but escapes identity’s imperatives to singularity, coherence, and continuity. Whereas life’s “circumstances compel unity; for convenience sake a man must be a whole,” the possibility remains that “the true self [is] neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes...that we

¹ Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” *Collected Essays*, vol. 4 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), 165.

² *Ibid.*, 164.

³ *Ibid.*, 155, 156.

are indeed ourselves.”⁴ “Streaked, variegated, all of a mixture,” the eye rivals one’s “main being” as the seat of the “true self.”⁵ Paradoxically we become ourselves through divestment and dispersal—when, on venturing into dark streets, we are in fact “no longer quite ourselves” but multiple, indistinct, and able to “put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.”⁶

In upstaging “personality” with some other “truer,” rawer, more mobile, and more connective sensibility, “Street Haunting” produces a distinctive set of qualities that throughout her career Woolf assembled under the rubric of the impersonal: acute receptivity, immediacy of sensation, detachment from self-consciousness and social molds, and extraordinary powers of empathy and imagination. As the writer’s errand to fetch a pencil suggests, “Street Haunting” offers a metanarrative—specifically, on the “pleasure[s]” of impersonal literary aesthetics. Indeed, one of the “straight lines of personality” left behind is the writer’s “I.” Yet within Woolf’s fictional worlds, too, numerous characters are compelled to shuck personality as they attempt to transcend “the minute span of actual experience” in favor of more capacious awareness and immediate contact with others.⁷ Woolf names impersonality as a kind of aesthetic “miracle” by which “life...becomes able to stand by itself” but also identifies it as subject matter that is vital to contemporary art.⁸ If personality is an individuating sheath that mediates contact with other human beings, impersonality is a state of extreme exposure to the world and

⁴ Ibid., 161.

⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁶ Ibid., 155, 165.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Three Guineas,” in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992), 7.

⁸ Woolf, “Life and the Novelist,” in *Granite and Rainbow*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), 46.

occasionally, perhaps only “for a few minutes,” to transpersonal understanding so vivid it verges on telepathy.

This chapter takes the form of engagement that “Street Haunting” describes as a paradigm for the renovated interpersonal relationships that Woolf uses impersonality to theorize and as a prototype for the narrative impersonality of her mid-career novels. The first of three sections develops Woolf’s concept of impersonality in public and literary life with reference to her non-fiction essays; the second looks to Woolf’s second novel, *Night and Day* (1919), as a case study of the transformations in intimate life that impersonality may allow for; and the third extends impersonality’s logic of connectivity to address Woolf’s narrative method in *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

By locating personality’s alternative in perception and affective identification rather than in detachment or objectivity, Woolf develops a largely unexamined strain of modernist impersonality. Her capacity to shift critical understandings of impersonality might be gauged by its ostensible heterogeneity with the signature elements of her work: subjectivity, emotion, and interior psychological experience. “The inward voyage,” subtitle to Harvena Richter’s 1970 monograph on Woolf, continues to signify as a routine if limited shorthand for her main concerns.⁹ Michael North notes that Woolf is “usually considered the most inward of all modern British writers,” and Maria DiBattista hails her the “Columbus of the Human Inside.”¹⁰ Woolf’s least sympathetic critic in this vein is undoubtedly Wyndham Lewis, who located in her fiction “mere personality” and the formal habit of “peeping” out from “the security of the private

⁹ Richter’s title is a play on the title of Woolf’s first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915). *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81; Maria DiBattista, *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 165.

mind.”¹¹ In recent decades, however, critics have overturned the presumed synonymy between Woolf and interiority by demonstrating her fiction’s persistent engagement with social and political issues and its negotiation with “solid objects” independent of human contemplation.¹² Further, as critics have noted, the most profound states of inwardness that Woolf depicts very often lead outward again toward an affectively-charged transpersonal realm that Woolf called “reality.” As James Naremore argues, Woolf “conceives of reality as something quite apart from the social order of experience.... This does not mean, however, that her reality is solipsistic; on the contrary, it can be seen and felt by everyone who will open themselves to it.”¹³ Melba Cuddy-Keane stakes a similar position in casting “identification” as “a route from the self outward” in that it “yields an extension and expansion of the self through its access to the collective unconsciousness.”¹⁴ North arrives at a comparable point but shifts the terms from the spiritual or para-psychological to the social realm: “though Woolf is intensely interested in the

¹¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell & Company Limited, 1934), 7, 168–169.

¹² Critics including Jessica Berman, Melba Cuddy-Keane, Jesse Matz, Anna Snaith, Rebecca Walkowitz, and Alex Zwerdling have pointed to central negotiations with social and political issues in Woolf’s fiction. Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 2000); Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986). Others including Ann Banfield, Bill Brown, and Douglas Mao have made compelling cases for Woolf’s serious engagement with the domain of objects and matter. Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Brown, “The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism),” *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 1–28; Mao, *Solid Objects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹³ James Naremore, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973, 35).

¹⁴ Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual*, 126.

interior worlds of her individual characters, those worlds are always connected by various threads to the many others who make up the outer world, so much so that those others become part of the individual self.”¹⁵

In various ways, critics have thus reckoned with Woolf’s simultaneous investment in terms that could be arrayed in coordinated binaries that roughly align with interior and exterior: subject and object, idealism and realism, private and public, vision and fact, unconscious and conscious, sensation and knowledge, feminine and masculine, and rainbow and granite.¹⁶ In much of the recent work in this vein, the accent falls on Woolf’s attempt to chart a course between opposites—to develop “tenuous points of connection” as James Harker puts it.¹⁷ As an especially rich point of contact, impersonality abuts much of this critical dialogue but, although occasionally mentioned, it has infrequently received sustained examination.¹⁸

¹⁵ North, *Reading 1922*, 84.

¹⁶ See Mark Gaipa, “An Agnostic’s Daughter’s Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism, and Ancestry in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 2 (2003): 1–41; Timothy Mackin, “Private Worlds, Public Minds: Woolf, Russell, and Photographic Vision,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 3 (2010): 112–130; Matz, *Impressionist Subjects*; Liesl M. Olson, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Cotton Wool of Daily Life,’” *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 2 (2003): 42–65; Megan M. Quigley, “Modern Novels and Vagueness,” *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 1 (2008): 101–129.

¹⁷ James Harker, “Misperceiving Virginia Woolf,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 2 (2011): 2.

¹⁸ “Impersonality” is not a keyword in Naremore’s *World Without a Self*, but his focus on “a kind of unity [that] exists outside the ego”—which, with reference to Woolf’s own terminology, he calls “communion”—overlaps in many ways with the present chapter’s focus on impersonality (25). Daniel Albright’s *Personality and Impersonality: Lawrence, Woolf, and Mann* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) and Robert Kiely’s *Beyond Egotism: The Fiction of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) offer useful orientations, although impersonality becomes dispersed among a broader set of themes. In both monographs a conventionally modernist concept of impersonality loosely frames discussions of a dynamic between interiority and self-transcendence in Woolf’s novels. More recently, Anthony Cuda casts Woolf’s impersonality as “a vision of the artist’s voluntary dissolution” and “a version of modernist impersonality rooted not in detachment or aloofness, but in the intimate and personal experiences of weakness and powerlessness.” *The Passions of Modernism: Eliot, Yeats, Woolf, and Mann* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina

Ann Banfield's compendious study of Bloomsbury thought, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (2000), is the first to begin to take the full measure of impersonality's importance to Woolf's work. Banfield reads Woolf's writing as a philosophical oeuvre, continuous in itself, commensurate to and in dialogue with the theories of fellow Bloomsbury intellectuals Bertrand Russell and Roger Fry. Banfield claims that Woolf achieved in fiction what Russell's too limited conception of aesthetics discounted from possibility; she projected a "world seen without a self," and thus rendered in art a defining concern of Russell's philosophy: "the whole problem of how knowledge can transcend personal experience."¹⁹ According to Banfield Woolf's "implicit theory of modern knowledge" is interwoven in an "art of the unobserved," based theoretically on the rejection of personality and formally on the suppression of the narrating "I."²⁰ The Woolf that emerges from Banfield's illuminating analysis is a philosopher intensively engaged in questions of perception, abstraction, and empty perspectives, and for whom "reality...is fundamentally external, inhuman."²¹ This chapter augments Banfield's work by addressing a dimension of Woolf's impersonality that is

Press, 2010), 160. Grounded in Woolf's descriptions of illness, violence, and suffering, Cuda's account stresses impersonality as a state of receptivity, but in an altogether different affective frame than that of the present study. More in line with this chapter's argument is Katerina Koutsantoni's conclusion drawn from Woolf's *Common Reader* essays that "Woolf's alternative to subjectivity was not objectivity but intersubjectivity." "The Impersonal Strategy: Re-visiting Virginia Woolf's Position in *The Common Reader* Essays," *Women: A Cultural Review* 20, no. 2 (2009): 170. Along similar lines, Lisa Low argues that Woolf's advocacy of impersonal writing is related to her androgynous synthesis of gendered writing and embrace of an "empathic and democratic" ethos. "Refusing to Hit Back: Virginia Woolf and the Impersonality Question," in *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, ed. Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997): 259. Conversely, Quigley argues against the notion that for Woolf "'impersonality' is possible or desirable," finding instead an insistence "that language reveals personality." "Modern Novels and Vagueness," 115.

¹⁹ Quoted in Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 129.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 52, 54.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

not given to logic and cannot be subsumed under an “inhuman” reality: communication, relationships, and what Woolf calls the “difficult business of intimacy.”²²

I. Public Interiorities

[Russell:] Do you never see things impersonally?

[Woolf:] Yes. I see literature like that. Milton, that is.

—Woolf, *Diary*

Woolf grounded her concept of impersonality in literature at multiple levels: she modeled it after the likes of Milton and Shakespeare; developed it in fiction through cross-pollination with Bloomsbury philosophy; and adapted it to re-envision literary culture and its role in society at large. As a concept of authorship, Woolf’s impersonality aligns to a significant extent with doctrines articulated by Anglo-modernisms’ best accredited impersonalists, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. In the essay “Personalities,” for instance, Woolf describes impersonality as a form of authorial effacement consonant with Joyce’s restatement of Flaubert (as voiced by character Stephen Dedalus): “the personality of the artist... finally refines itself out of existence” so that “the artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.”²³ Compare Woolf: whereas “the imperfect artists... never manage to say the whole thing in their books” and so “wield the power of personality over us,” “great artists” “manage to infuse the whole of

²² Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 331.

²³ Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Signet, 1991), 217.

themselves into their works, yet contrive to universalize their identity so that, though we feel Shakespeare everywhere about, we cannot catch him at the moment in any particular spot.”²⁴

These two accounts diverge on the point of Joyce’s final embellishment: the artist-God “paring his fingernails.” The ironic or arrogantly blasé gesture signals the aesthete’s refined detachment amid a scene of virtuosic control, but Woolf’s artist is sincere in her invisibility, all but eliminated from a universe left to stand by itself.²⁵ Woolf’s point of focus instead becomes the reader’s faint discernment of the author’s absent presence. Woolf goes on to perch briefly on the notion that “the people whom we admire most as writers, then, have something elusive, enigmatic, impersonal about them,” but, in a characteristic swerve of her “turn & turn about method” of essay writing, she concludes by unsettling the ground of this familiar valuation.²⁶ It cannot be made to “square with the facts,” Woolf avers; taste in books is “as little accountable as our likings for people in the flesh.”²⁷ Concluding that personality, too, may have its place in literature, she leaves suspended both the monolithic statement of modernist aesthetic value and its refutation. A more reliable sentence in the essay also happens to be less definite: “it may be that the greatest passages in literature have about them something of the impersonality which belongs to our own emotions at their strongest. The great poet and the lover are both

²⁴ Woolf, “Personalities,” *The Moment and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 171, 170.

²⁵ As Banfield argues, Woolf manifests “a literary version of Bloomsbury agnosticism, rejecting the theological vocabulary of an omnipresent, omniscient ‘narrator’ as the text’s hidden God. Such an invisible presence is merely a hypothesis to hold the fragmentary world together.” *The Phantom Table*, 344.

²⁶ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 2, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonich, 1978), 247. See Cuddy-Keane, who describes Woolf’s rhetorical method as “speculative and open-ended,” adapted to examine the process of arriving at any given view and to encourage the reader’s active, dialogic engagement. *Virginia Woolf, The Intellectual*, 132–136.

²⁷ Woolf, “Personalities,” 171.

representative—in some way anonymous.”²⁸ Woolf thus succeeds in destabilizing impersonality as a supreme aesthetic standard even as she reaffirms its possibility—and advantages—as a literary mode.

Despite her agnosticism as a critic, Woolf’s descriptions of her own writing process side decisively with the impersonal and the anonymous. “I believe unconsciousness, and complete anonymity to be the only conditions...in which I can write. Not to be aware of oneself,” as she describes in a 1922 letter.²⁹ Elsewhere she refers to herself as a depersonalized apparatus for receiving sensation in terms that bear comparison to T. S. Eliot: “when I write I’m merely a sensibility”; “a porous vessel afloat on sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays.”³⁰ Woolf’s metaphors stresses immediacy and receptivity, and the impersonal artist’s “sensitive plate” becomes a prime means to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall.”³¹ Woolf’s famous statement on modern fiction’s impending task has often been taken as the seal of her subjectivism, but her choice of words favors other possibilities. To establish a reference point for the “life or spirit, truth or reality” or “essential thing” that fiction must catch, Woolf directs her reader to internal but generic experience: “look within” and examine “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day.”³² Consciousness is potentially as impersonal as a photographic plate, and the data it mediates—“atoms,” “invisible rays”—likewise imply a physical, impersonal process of reception. Rather than stressing the atoms’ subjective variations, Woolf focuses on temporal change. The atoms “shape themselves” differently day by day and

²⁸ Woolf, “Personalities,” 168.

²⁹ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 2, 47; Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 239.

³⁰ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 2, 193. For a comparison of Woolf’s and Eliot’s respective concepts of impersonality, see the introduction to this dissertation.

³¹ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” in *The Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt, 1984), 150.

³² Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 149.

their “accent falls differently from of old”; she does not say that they fundamentally differ from mind to mind. The writer’s job is to render public the contemporary inflection: “is it not the task of this novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit [of life]?”³³ The collective status of “life” and “reality” become more explicit in later iterations. “A Room of One’s Own” specifies, for instance, that “it is the common life which is the real life and not...the separate lives which we live as individuals.”³⁴ Because the writer “has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality,” Woolf assigns it “his business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us.”³⁵

At stake in Woolf’s account of the writer’s exposure to atoms is the status she ascribes to events in consciousness, a question that Banfield contends is best answered in the context of Bloomsbury’s materialist philosophy.³⁶ Alfred North Whitehead’s position is representative: “whereas the subjectivist holds that in [sense-]experience we merely know about our personality,” “in our sense-experience we know away from and beyond our own personality.”³⁷ Philosopher Jaakko Hintikka argues that Russell and G. E. Moore, too, considered sense-data “objectively existing entities,” “*objects* of our immediate perceptions, not a part of the act of perception.”³⁸ Banfield and Hintikka agree that Woolf adapts this logic of impersonal sensation, yet their accounts only partly describe Woolf’s “atoms.” As Woolf criticism amply elaborates,

³³ Ibid., 150.

³⁴ Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own,” in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992), 113.

³⁵ Ibid., 110.

³⁶ Banfield argues that the issue is central to an understanding of modernism: “The debate about modernism stands in need of a new formulation which takes into account its revolutionary conception of the objects of sensation, at once physical and subjective.” *The Phantom Table*, xi.

³⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 89. Banfield contends that the assimilation into art of this realization brings about “the step of Impressionism.” *Phantom Table*, 382.

³⁸ Jaakko Hintikka, “Virginia Woolf and Our Knowledge of the External World,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38, no. 1 (1979): 11.

thoughts and feelings in her fiction have the propensity to travel beyond the confines of the individual body—they too count among the non-personal phenomena of reality that are sensible to others and so provide indexes to a world held in common.³⁹ Maureen Chun refers to this phenomenon as “a strange contiguity between the physical world and thoughts and feelings.”⁴⁰ Woolf in fact presupposes the impersonality of intense emotion when she says that literature at its best shares something in common with it.⁴¹ Far from defining private interiorities, emotion tends to thin “the walls of partition” between individuals.⁴² To Banfield’s elegant formulation that “art for [Bloomsbury] connected feeling to knowledge,” then, it is important to add that for Woolf, feeling in itself constituted a form of impersonal knowledge that art is obliged to express.⁴³ Like “the enormous eye,” the artist’s “sensitive plate” conceptualizes a narrative apparatus capable of absorbing the full spectrum of affective and sensory data that consciousness encounters.

Woolf’s construction of herself as an author is thus vitally connected to what she alleges to be missing from modern literature: an impersonal reality that impinges mentally and bodily on the individual and that is foundational to a community’s feeling of inhabiting a common age.⁴⁴ The possibility of impersonal emotion introduces a way to reconcile a double-bind at play in Woolf’s criticism: she praises writers for “stimulat[ing] so briskly...the senses of sight, of sound, of touch—above all, the sense of the human being, his depth and the variety of his perceptions,

³⁹ See especially Maureen Chun, “Between Sensation and Sign: The Secret Language of The Waves,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 1 (2012): 53–70; Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, North, *Reading 1922*.

⁴⁰ Chun, “Between Sensation and Sign,” 54.

⁴¹ Woolf, “Personalities,” 168.

⁴² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Mark Hussey (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 115.

⁴³ Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 359.

⁴⁴ Woolf tends to identify community temporally as one’s “age” or generation, but hers is also clearly geographically bounded by Britain or Europe, implicitly by race, and very often by class.

his complexity, his confusion, his self⁴⁵; but objects that such achievements shade inevitably into egotism. In advancing both claims, Woolf's essays on contemporary literature maintain a fine balance between identifying as vital material for modern writers the complex impressions that compose human consciousness and faulting her contemporaries for writing too narrowly of this same material, circumscribing it within private experience and personal relations.

In sum Woolf diagnoses modern literature with rich potential but debilitating "self-consciousness" and a prevalence of the masculine "I" that in "A Room of One's Own" casts an iconic shadow across the page.⁴⁶ "Our age is rich in lyric poetry; no age perhaps has been richer," Woolf observes in "Poetry, Fiction, and the Future" (1927); "but for our generation and the generation that is coming the lyric cry of ecstasy or despair, which is so intense, so personal, and so limited, is not enough."⁴⁷ Peggy Pargiter's misadventure with a poet at *The Years's* (1937) culminating party delivers a parable on this insufficiency. Peggy, a doctor, falls into conversation with a young poet, male. Among his words "I, I, I" is all she can make out; "it was like a vulture's beak pecking, or a vacuum-cleaner sucking, or a telephone bell ringing," and it leaves her "feeling like a person whose blood has been sucked."⁴⁸ Peggy's summary of the poet's all-too-modern fault—of a piece with vacuums and telephones—is emblematic of a broader cultural failure that straddles art and life: "he could not free himself, could not detach himself."⁴⁹ When Peggy interjects her own first-person singular, she finds that "the fire went out of his

⁴⁵ Woolf, "How It Strikes a Contemporary," 238.

⁴⁶ Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge of Art," in *Granite and Rainbow*, 14. Woolf's original title for this essay was "Poetry, Fiction, and the Future," published in the *New York Herald Tribune* (August 14, 1927); it was retitled by Leonard Woolf for this collection. "A Room of One's Own," 101.

⁴⁷ Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge," 12.

⁴⁸ Woolf, *The Years*, ed. Eleanor McNeese and Mark Hussey (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2008), 342–343.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 343.

face”; “up he got and off he went.”⁵⁰ So the parable counsels: the modern poet will speak only of himself, make inordinate demands on his interlocutor, and confirm by his departure that there is no basis for exchange or common ground.

From literature, however, Woolf demanded exactly that: dialogue and impersonality. “How It Strikes a Contemporary” (1923) translates this point as the writer’s capacity to generalize:

To believe that your impressions hold good for others is to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality.... [O]ur contemporaries afflict us because they have ceased to believe. The most sincere of them will only tell us what happens to himself. They cannot make a world, because they are not free of other human beings. They cannot tell stories because they do not believe that stories are true. They cannot generalize.⁵¹

To generalize one’s impressions, to believe implicitly in a foundation of shared material and spiritual existence, releases the writer from the strain of imposing his singularity on an audience held tight in the confessional grip.⁵² For this reason Woolf suggests paradoxically that detachment from other humans cultivates common ground among them: it affords the freedom to “make a world.”⁵³

In this phrase Woolf invests particular power along the lines of what Eric Hayot defines as an *aesthetic world*: “the unity of form, diegesis, and feeling composed by the rough totality of the

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Woolf, “How It Strikes,” 238. On the necessity of generalizing, see too “The Narrow Bridge,” 22.

⁵² As Jesse Matz has shown, Woolf’s notion of “impression” negotiates an equilibrium between materiality and essence, objective perception and subjective response. See *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*.

⁵³ On these grounds Woolf greatly admired Marcel Proust: “we realize him only as an envelope, thin but elastic, which stretches wider and wider and serves not to enforce a view but to enclose a world.” “Phases of Fiction” [1929], in *Granite and Rainbow*, 123.

work.”⁵⁴ Hayot argues that as social, conceptual, formal, and, affective constructs, aesthetic worlds are “always a relation to and theory of the lived world.”⁵⁵ For Woolf an aesthetic world constitutes an idealized form of non-personal communication; it encompasses at once a comprehensive vision of its creator’s experience but, by virtue of its detachment, opens a space in which others may exist, empathize, dissent, and hold dialogue. “Certainty” of a common lived world, Woolf claims, “makes it possible to write,” but the relationship evidently cuts both ways. Literature begins with a belief that one’s impressions hold true for others, and in turn it becomes a means for testing those impressions’ generalizability among a reading public. Impersonal literature thus stands as an indispensable cultural resource for renewing a convergent reality.

Woolf stakes this claim explicitly in the essay “Anon” (all but finished at her death in 1941), where she speculatively tracks the progression of English literature from the anonymous balladeer, Anon (“the common voice singing out of doors”), to the named author of the printed book.⁵⁶ In its time anonymity was “a great possession” because it allowed the artist to “tap the reservoir of common belief.”⁵⁷ Anon “was not self conscious,” and her anonymity (for Anon “was often a woman”) “gave the early writing an impersonality, a generality” that constituted a common wealth: “every body shared in the emotion of Anon[’]s song, and supplied the story.”⁵⁸ Works by Anon in effect provide Woolf with an English correlate to “the impersonal literature” of ancient Greece, which could direct a steady, communal gaze toward emotions that would

⁵⁴ Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 44, 42–43.

⁵⁵ Hayot, *On Literary Worlds*, 44, 45. Woolf says something very similar in “A Room of One’s Own”: “Since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life” (73).

⁵⁶ Woolf, “Anon,” first published in Brenda R. Silver, “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, no. 3–4 (1979), 382.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁵⁸ Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own,” 49; Silver, “Anon,” 382.

“blind and bewilder an age like our own.”⁵⁹ English Anon could similarly say out loud “what every one feels” “but [is] too proud to admit.”⁶⁰ With the advent of the individual, the printing press, and the author publicized by name, Woolf observes irrevocable shifts toward fragmentation and proprietary experience.

If modernist contemporaries have lost faith, then, fault should not rest entirely with them. Even the previous generation, Woolf supposes, “could claim a more representative,” “impersonal” “character than anything of the sort we can show now.”⁶¹ In an “age of fragments” individuals are “more self-contained,” and writers no longer compose with the force of their age behind them.⁶² For literature to recapture its general relevance, Woolf argues that it must “stand further back” from the partitioned minutiae of private psychologies to which contemporary life has been consigned, but at the same time it must “generalize” and “dramatize” the perceptions and emotions that “have so far escaped the novelist.”⁶³ For Woolf such affective and sensory experiences in themselves constitute objects of interest rather than mere props to the personalities they could be said to reveal. The middle course that Woolf charts between the solipsism of modern literature and the lifeless materialism of Edwardian realism therefore hinges on the impersonality and collective importance of internal experience.⁶⁴ Across multiple essays of the 1920s, Woolf appraises the novel’s future as a communicative medium according to its promise to deliver the dramas of feeling and perception that encompass but exceed individual existence.

⁵⁹ Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek,” in *The Common Reader*, 23, 37, 34.

⁶⁰ Silver, “Anon,” 397, 383.

⁶¹ Woolf, “Henry James: The Old Order,” in *The Death of the Moth* (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1970), 137.

⁶² Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 335.

⁶³ Woolf, “The Narrow Bridge,” 20, 23.

⁶⁴ For Woolf’s critiques of the Edwardians, see “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.”

Woolf suggests that the new novel's departure from the old will show most starkly in relieving "personal relations" of their emphasis. "If the end of life is not to meet, to part, to love, to laugh, if we are at the mercy of other forces, some of them unknown, all of them beyond our power, the urgency of these meetings and partings is blurred and lessened," and the novel must take stock of what happens to the mind in the interstices of social routines.⁶⁵ Woolf gives an account of the alternative in "Poetry, Fiction and the Future." The new novel

will give, as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail.... [I]t will express the feeling and ideas of the characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle. It will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people's relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. For under the dominion of the novel we have scrutinized one part of the mind closely and left another unexplored. We have come to forget that a large and important part of life consists in our emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone; we are not entirely occupied in personal relations; all our energies are not absorbed in making our livings. The psychological novelist has been too prone to limit psychology to the psychology of personal intercourse; we long sometimes to escape from the incessant, the remorseless analysis of falling into love and falling out of love, of what Tom feels for Judith and Judith does or does not altogether feel for Tom. We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Woolf, "Phases of Fiction," 119.

⁶⁶ Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge," 18–19.

In this passage, as elsewhere, Woolf's deprecatory use of "personal relations" depicts social life as a comedy of pantomimes and chess games played out by "personalities"—conventional, self-conscious, self-preserving identities that are consistently represented as constrictive exterior coverings (the shell, the envelope, or "outer thing") rather than things in themselves. As Woolf makes clear, "reality" glances off such surfaces, and throughout her fiction a certain stagey quality pervades the rituals of social convention.

Although Woolf's critique of social life may appear to confirm her in subjectivist leanings, it is a mistake to assume that she aims to quarantine from all human contact the "soliloquy in solitude" that is to anchor the new novel. At issue is the type of contact. In the passage above the sticking point is that the "impersonal relationship" for which "we long" finds representation in literature. Given the specter of solipsism in a fragmented age, it is no small matter for Woolf to claim the first-person plural, let alone to associate it with a common desire. Fragmented in personal relations but galvanized through literary contact with a reflective mind, "we" constitutes a literary community. Even if experienced in solitude, the imaginative or phenomenological experience we have in common is in many ways more unifying than life's tumult of meetings and partings.

A further implication is that, when manifest in literature, "the mind" and its private ruminations are triangulated with an audience. The "soliloquy in solitude" becomes a means to some more essential form of communication as the novel draws together, across individuals, those parts of mind most recessed from social or personal life.⁶⁷ The "impersonal relationship"

⁶⁷ In her early diaries Woolf makes a suggestive statement to this effect: "I feel sometimes for hours together as though the physical stuff of my brain were expanding, larger & larger, throbbing quicker & quicker with new blood – & there is no more delicious sensation than this.... I think I see for a moment how our minds are all threaded together.... It is this common mind that binds the whole world together; & all the world is mind." *A Passionate Apprentice*:

for which we long, therefore, exceeds a relationship with non-personal or non-human reality to encompass the interpersonal, but on new terms. Indifferent to personality or social roles, this relationship would be better described as transpersonal, thriving not on mutuality or reciprocity but on the impersonal “emotions,” “ideas,” “dreams,” and “imaginings” that transcend individuals yet have the capacity to connect them.⁶⁸

The premise of an impersonal relationship founded on transpersonal experience is concretized in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) through the conceit of co-presence in a railway carriage among character, writer, and reading public. In the essay Woolf tells the story of encountering on a suburban train an unknown woman who makes a silent but “overwhelming” impression.⁶⁹ Woolf dramatizes the exacting business of rendering her “vision” for an audience, and the incident occasions her enduring metaphor of narrative method: the close observation of “an old lady in the corner opposite.”⁷⁰ “Mrs. Brown” comes to represent the desideratum of fiction, for “she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.”⁷¹ The writer’s duty is “to realize her character” by becoming “steep[ed] in her atmosphere”—to exercise, in Jesse Matz’s apposite

The Early Journals, 1897–1909, ed. Mitchell Alexander Leaska (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), 178–179. Cuddy-Keane takes this statement to be a comment on Woolf’s “idea of a linguistic communal consciousness” spurred by the experience of reading (131).

⁶⁸ The set piece for this kind of communication is Clarissa Dalloway’s intimacy with Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although they have never met, on hearing of Septimus’s death Clarissa intuits certain notes of his principal preoccupations: the desire to communicate, the horror of Dr. Bradshaw, and the refrain quoted from *Cymbeline*, “fear no more the heat of the sun.” *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1981), 186. At different times on the same day, Clarissa and Septimus both see in a shop window a book open to these lines of the play, and as Douglas Mao cogently argues, it provides a conduit between the characters. Mao observes that “common object[s] of contemplation” frequently perform this kind of “intersubjective mediation” in Woolf’s novels. *Solid Objects*, 54.

⁶⁹ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 320, 323.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 337.

phrase, “total perceptivity.”⁷² Akin to Simone Weil’s “attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears,” this state of total perception eclipses the proto-narrator’s self.⁷³ In terms affective and sensory Woolf describes the phenomenon of “character imposing itself upon another person” and the experience of becoming passively receptive to the imposition.⁷⁴ To capture character on its own terms is to catch Mrs. Brown’s mind mid-soliloquy; it affords insight “not merely of [character] itself, but of all sorts of things through [her] eyes” and so achieves the ideal of the mind’s impersonal relationship—to feelings and ideas in general, but further, to anyone in the vicinity prepared to engage her.⁷⁵

It is at this juncture that the reader boards the train. “A writer is never alone,” since “there is always the public with him—if not on the same seat, at least in the compartment next door,” and the public, too, is obliged bear witness to Mrs. Brown.⁷⁶ “As partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs. Brown,” readers are tasked with holding the writer accountable to a worthy description of her subject. The reader must likewise become steeped in Mrs. Brown’s atmosphere and assume responsibility for her representational welfare. As Rachel Bowlby observes, Woolf uses the railway compartment to improvise on certain features of the sitting room as a gathering place: the railway carriage is “a public space superficially identical to a private one, so that the anonymity of the limited number of passengers is all the more significant from its contrast to the scene of intimacy it

⁷² Ibid., 340. Woolf’s interest in becoming surrounded by another’s atmosphere also surfaces in “Street haunting”: “It is always an adventure to enter a new room for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we breast some new wave of emotion” (164).

⁷³ Quoted in Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 117.

⁷⁴ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 324.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 325.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 332.

resembles.”⁷⁷ The difficulty with Bowlby’s formulation, however, is that it estranges intimacy from anonymity. It assumes that reader and writer behave as the Edwardian writers do when, in Woolf’s caricature, they embark the train but do not “so much as look at” Mrs. Brown. Woolf’s rail compartment retains all the strangeness that Bowlby attributes it, meanwhile introducing a kind of intimacy in “total perceptivity” that Woolf pointedly distinguishes from the personal relations of the sitting room. By piling writer, character, and public into a single compartment, Woolf transforms the partitioned privacy of literary composition and consumption into a shared, pseudo-public space that is intimate not in spite of but by virtue of its impersonality.

In this sense Woolf updates for her fragmented era the trope of literature as “common meeting-place.”⁷⁸ In lieu of Anon’s mythic “reservoir of common belief,” she offers the space of mechanized public transport.⁷⁹ On board, an empathetic practice of witness, defined by proximity and receptivity without personal engagement, takes the place of Anon’s unqualified claim to a common world.

The train metaphor is apt for another reason than just physicalizing the impersonal narrative situation of strangers in close spaces. It also imparts a sense of hazard that must govern

⁷⁷ Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 5.

⁷⁸ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 331.

⁷⁹ Woolf repeatedly posits public transit as a space of potential encounter. In *Jacob’s Room*, for instance, the narrator remarks “the proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other’s faces. Yet few took advantage of it” (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1985), 64–65. The narrator of “A Mark on the Wall” (1917) similarly observes, “as we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue.” In *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1985), 85–86. “An Unwritten Novel” (1920) in many ways recasts the encounter with Mrs. Brown as fiction. In this humorous sketch, a first-person narrator is “pierced” by the intense sorrow of a woman who is once again seated opposite on a suburban train. *Complete Shorter Fiction*, 113.

their every attempt at communication. After all, the meeting place is mobile, the contingencies of modern travel imply an intimacy constantly at risk, and, as Woolf insists, there exist no conventions to stabilize the process. Although “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” occasions the memorable statement that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed,” the essay is concerned less with pinpointing the post-1910 character (note that Mrs. Brown is no icon of the modern woman) than reckoning with what this change has meant for writers’ ability to “get into touch with” readers, establish “common ground,” and broach “the far more difficult business of intimacy.”⁸⁰ Indeed Woolf’s famous provocation about character in 1910 has tended to obscure her subsequent shift in emphasis: “all human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.”⁸¹ Woolf’s charge is that literary conventions and codes of manners have not adapted to these relational shifts, and she targets any “convention [that] ceases to be a means of communication...and becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment. At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay,” Woolf writes, “but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship.”⁸² If literature were a social call, “you [would] have to talk about the weather and nothing but the weather throughout the entire visit.”⁸³ In literature as in social life, intimacy is impeded by outmoded conventions that connect individuals about as

⁸⁰ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 331. The significance of December 1910 is typically linked to London’s Post-Impressionist Exhibition as marker of a transformed aesthetic paradigm. For a fuller account, see Banfield, *Phantom Table*, 9–11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 321. It is also worth noting that Woolf largely derives her image of Mrs. Brown from the latter’s tense exchange with a disagreeable man of business. In transforming Mrs. Brown into an emblem, Woolf mutes the fact that character acquires definition in interpersonal exchange. Whether or not Mrs. Brown exemplifies character changed “in or about December 1910,” it remains the case that she becomes legible through relationship.

⁸² Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 334.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

well as a collapsed bridge: the broken remains lay out the intention to establish a link but effectively block the way to new constructions. While the Edwardians would render Mrs. Brown in houses and hot water bottles, Woolf deems their materialism “ruin” and “death” for her generation because it fails to put writer, reader, and Mrs. Brown in touch—in fact, it actively impedes the efforts of new writers to communicate differently. Hence an era of fragments both literary and social.

In response, Woolf positions impersonality on the axes of both life and literature as a reparative form. As Walkowitz argues, Woolf held “the conviction that social norms are embedded in traditions of literary style,” and to some extent Woolf purports to influence contemporary norms through style itself.⁸⁴ By capitalizing on impersonality’s connective possibilities, Woolf privileges the novel as a communicative form that also has the capacity to reconceive relational norms in social life. At the same time as Woolf’s essays deliver an account of and rationale for her narrative mode of impersonal intimacy, her novels apply literary form to reinvent community along more impersonal lines. As this chapter argues, the narrative relation of impersonal intimacy is paradigmatic of idealized forms of interpersonal connection within the social worlds of her novels—in *Night and Day* between Katherine Hilbery and Ralph Denham; in *To the Lighthouse* between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay; and in multiple novels as an intuitive form of confidence struck up between strangers.

II. Alone together in *Night and Day*

Since we do not know each other...we can talk freely.

—Woolf, *The Waves*

⁸⁴ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, 84.

Woolf's first two novels orbit the question of whether impersonal intimacy is realizable in personal life—specifically, in heterosexual couple-form. The question usefully crystallizes in the voice of Terence Hewet in *The Voyage Out* (1915) as he observes that “one never is alone, and one never is in company.”⁸⁵ Anticipating Woolf's pronouncement that “life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end,” Terence determines that the paradox of solitude has “something” to do with “bubbles—auras—what d'you call 'em? You can't see my bubble; I can't see yours; all we see of each other is a speck, like the wick in the middle of that flame. The flame goes about with us everywhere; it's not ourselves exactly, but what we feel.”⁸⁶ The visible, wick-like speck of the social self could be termed personality, opaque and definite. The surrounding field—aura, bubble, flame, halo, envelope, life—is impersonal. Although “not ourselves exactly,” it is composed of the essential part of experience (“what we feel”) and takes priority over the defined and private entity of the personality. Social life could be imagined as the stably choreographed play of obscure specks, buffered in space by luminous fields; thus isolated, “one is never in company.” Yet if the atmosphere produced by “what we feel” might be privileged above “ourselves,” then in some sense one might be always in the company of other flames or bubbles without directly perceiving them and so indeed be never exactly alone. Woolf's first two novels are dominated by this disparity of speck and bubble, and in *Night and Day* in particular, she begins to sketch the conditions for being alone together, when one impersonal bubble comes into direct contact with another. In Terence's vision, the collision results in an intimacy that is striking for its spaciousness rather than any sense of unity produced: “‘supposing my bubble could run into some one else's bubble—.... Then—then—then—...it would be an e-nor-mous world,’ he said,

⁸⁵ Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1948), 108.

⁸⁶ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 150; *The Voyage Out*, 109.

stretching his arms to their full width, as though even so they could hardly clasp the billowy universe.”⁸⁷ In some sense this event proves fatal for Terence’s counterpart in *The Voyage Out*, but his vision precisely describes the ideal that *Night and Day* manifests as a dyad “travelling the dark paths of thought side by side towards something discerned in the distance which gradually possessed them both.”⁸⁸ In this version of intimacy, a vastly expanded world encompasses but does not fuse individuals. *Night and Day* does not quite bear out the euphoria that Terence imagines, but it does convey with more tempered optimism the possibility of an intimacy founded on impersonality.

Although *Night and Day* is typically interpreted as a comedy of misaligned lovers, Woolf’s investment in the novel is better identified with the drama of three characters who test impersonal alternatives to Victorian domesticity. Katherine Hilbery, charged with hosting visitors to her upper-middle-class family and assisting on the biography of a poet grandfather, lives in a state of pliant vacancy in the daytime and ardent study of mathematics and astronomy once the house is asleep. After breaking off a tepid but conventional engagement to William Rodney, she enters with Ralph Denham into a new arrangement that leads to a marriage promise but above all safeguards imaginative liberty. Ralph, a bright, socially-aspiring barrister, is torn between a sense of duty to support his middle-class family and aspirations to the independent life of an intellectual—either retiring to a remote cottage to write a book or submerging himself in philosophy and law. Mary Datchet, a new woman alone in the city, works as secretary for a suffrage organization and oscillates between desiring a fortress within which to guard her

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Woolf, *Night and Day*, ed. Suzanne Raitt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 532. Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests that Rachel Vinrace’s death by fever in *The Voyage Out* relates to her inability to become an equal partner to Terence given the immobilizing gender ideology she has absorbed. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 49–53.

emotions and ascetically renouncing individual life altogether. As with Terence's "e-nor-mous world," impersonality in each of these cases is indexed to scale. Mathematics, astronomy, law, philosophy, politics, and asceticism serve as metonyms for dimensions of impersonal existence that exceed the minute parochialism, emotional entanglement, and familial obligation of conventional personal life in the still-Victorian society Woolf depicts.

In the novel's calculus, however, pursuit of the impersonal runs the inverse risks of solipsism and social isolation. Rather than dispensing with individuality, Katherine, Ralph, and Mary each verges on converting it into a prison. The dilemma, as expressed by Katherine, is one that resonates throughout Woolf's later novels: why "should there be this perpetual disparity between...the life of solitude and the life of society?"⁸⁹ The question is plainly a variation on *Night and Day*'s title, which references the opposition between, respectively, solitary mental life and social exchange—or, as Melinda Feldt Cumings elaborates, the nighttime's egoless and semi-mystical vision of unity versus the daytime's limitation to material facts and privately bounded individualities.⁹⁰ As Cumings argues, "the protagonists must continuously and creatively synthesize these poles, symbolically transforming the mundane reality of the day according to the visionary ideals of the night."⁹¹ More than a philosophical ideal, however, this synthesis is cast as a practical imperative for living with other people. The reconciliation of solitude and society hinges on whether and under what circumstances imaginative, impersonal life might be compelled to surface and reshape the terms for human connection. The novel closes on at least two speculative answers: the alloy of impersonal solitude and intimacy that Ralph and

⁸⁹ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 356.

⁹⁰ See Melinda Feldt Cumings's analysis of the novel's symbolism in "Night and Day: Virginia Woolf's Visionary Synthesis of Reality" [1972], in *Virginia Woolf: An MFS [Modern Fiction Studies] Reader*, ed. Maren Linett (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009): 87–97.

⁹¹ Cumings, "Night and Day," 87.

Katherine attempt to forge—an arrangement he calls “communion”—and, more tenuously, Mary’s universalist, politically-engaged devotion to “the good of the world,” which bears resemblance to the impersonal attitude of service that Woolf admired in Fabian leader Beatrice Webb.⁹²

Night and Day’s opening scene contains in miniature the rift between solitude and society that immobilizes Katherine: on a Sunday evening in Chelsea, “four-fifths” of her mind drifts from the practical remainder obliged to pour tea for visitors. However perfunctory the performance, her competence is underscored by the narrator’s emphasis on the multiple orders of typicality with which she complies—gender, class, and age, day of the week, and time of day. Repeating the scenario “for the six hundredth time, perhaps,” she dispatches her hostess duties “automatically” with few words and a “calculated” social manner, reserving the better part of her attention for the free “play” of “her unoccupied faculties.”⁹³ Although there is reason to call this automatism impersonal, within Woolf’s framework it is in many ways the reverse: in society, Katherine displays the barest, most generic shell of personality but nothing in excess. If Woolf’s concept of impersonality privileges interpermeability, then Katherine’s apparent vacancy is better described as impervious than impersonal. As the narrator avers, personality is an “envelope” that “shelters us so conveniently from our fellows,” and in the case of Katherine, who specifically stands out as “what one calls a ‘personality,’” it seals her off from affective exchange or even accurate observation.⁹⁴

⁹² Woolf, *Night and Day*, 533.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3, 13, 10.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 283, 48. The idea of protective envelopes was salient for Woolf. In a 1925 diary entry she attempts to explain fashion cliques as collective envelopes: “people secrete an envelope which connects them and protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies. These states are very difficult (obviously I grope for words) but I’m always coming back to it.” *Diary*, vol. 3, 12–13.

Nonetheless, Woolf makes clear that Katherine guards a distinct affective life below the opaque surface. The opening tea-party hints at this life when Ralph discerns that Katherine “attended only with the surface skin of her mind,” and a later scene with her fiancé William suggests that her “dream state” in distraction is in fact thick with feeling and sensation, for “there dwelt the realities of the appearances which figure in our world; so direct, powerful, and unimpeded were her sensations there, compared with those called forth in actual life.... It was a place where feelings were liberated from the constraint which the real world puts upon them.”⁹⁵ As Katherine eventually articulates, in “actual life” and the “real world,” emotions circulate in economies of expectation, obligation, and debt that impede any sense of abandonment to spontaneous feeling. She finds “any intercourse between people [to be] extremely partial,” since “from the whole mass of her feelings, only one or two could be selected” for inspection at the expense of all the rest.⁹⁶ Thus while Katherine outwardly may be as “aloof,” “cold,” “inscrutable,” “distant,” “remote” “detached,” “silent” and “inaccessible” as others perceive her⁹⁷—and even she fancies herself “a practical, absent-minded person, better fitted to deal with figures than with the feelings of men and women”—her resistance to emotion belies objections rooted in social scripts for feeling more than it evinces a wholesale rejection of feeling per se.⁹⁸ Ralph, in particular, seems to see this in her; one of the earliest augurs of their romance is his perception of Katherine’s eyes as “almost impersonally direct,” which signal a state of complete

⁹⁵ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 7, 144.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁹⁷ These adjectives occur with great frequency in *Night and Day* (e.g., 19, 247, 283, 249, 285, 299, 453, 179, 379, 56, 443, 499, 443, 84, 328, 146, 181, 202, 178).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 286–287.

receptivity that is not at odds with the “creature of uncalculating passion” that he takes her to be.⁹⁹

Indeed the puzzle of Katherine’s character can be traced directly to her affective relationship to impersonality. Mary gives an apt description of this non-emotional intensity when she strains to name the “hidden impulse” or “incalculable force—[some]thing [Katherine] cared for and didn’t talk about”—that carries her “on smoothly, out of reach.”¹⁰⁰ In the plot’s most literal sense this impersonal force is a passion for mathematics and the “sacred pages” of calculations she produces secretly at night under cover of a Greek dictionary. Despite the “unwomanly nature of the science,” Katherine “infinitely” prefers “the exactitude, the star-like impersonality, of figures” to “the turbulent map of the emotions” and the “confusion, agitation, and vagueness” of literature.¹⁰¹ Even as mathematics is plainly Katherine’s vocation manqué, as synecdoche it gestures to her broader attachment to nonhuman objects and magnitudes of existence that render negligible the individual and the human; hence “star-like” impersonality and a fascination with astronomy, a discipline linked to Woolf’s “interest in a modern human re-scaling,” to quote critic Holly Henry.¹⁰² In *Night and Day* Woolf reworks the nineteenth-century tradition of conceptualizing human insignificance via stargazing, and Katherine implicitly invokes as literary predecessor the heroine of Thomas Hardy’s epistemological romance, *Two on*

⁹⁹ Ibid., 353, 150. By contrast, Katherine’s first fiancé William is repelled by the same qualities; e.g., “something indescribably cold and impersonal in her manner” makes him flinch, and being “a man naturally alive to the conventions of society he was strictly conventional where women were concerned,” he finds “something improper” in her “self-forgetfulness” (266, 249).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 182.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 349, 42.

¹⁰² Holly Henry, *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 87.

a Tower (1882).¹⁰³ Whereas Hardy's Lady Constantine recoils from "impersonal monsters" viewed through her lover's telescope, exclaiming "O, pray don't...it quite annihilates me," Katherine actively cultivates a sense of dissolution in infinity.¹⁰⁴ In the solitude of a wintry garden she lets "the stars [do] their usual work upon the mind, [freeze] to cinders the whole of our short human history" so that "the pupils of her eyes so dilated with starlight that the whole of her seemed dissolved in silver and spilt over the ledges of the stars for ever and ever indefinitely through space."¹⁰⁵ Katherine's rapture in impersonality is identified with a total loss of boundaries and personal significance.

Within the novel's spatial reasoning, it is crucial that the inhuman experience of dispersal into a starry universe occurs outdoors and in the country, abstracted from the pragmatic constraints of social life. Solitude in the city, by contrast, is equivocal. Urban crowds with their "complete indifference" to individuals promise "at least a temporary exaltation," but Katherine has been groomed to live inside privileged houses, in "the grasp of the family system."¹⁰⁶ Even her mathematic pursuits unfold alone in the privacy of a suburban room. In her room the "incessant and tumultuous hum of the distant traffic" intrudes as a figure for "the thick texture of her life," which she finds "so hemmed in with the progress of other lives that the sound of its own advance was inaudible."¹⁰⁷ Seeming to anticipate her later moment of obliteration by starlight, Katherine fantasizes an empty space wherein "all this petty intercourse..., this life made up of the dense crossings and entanglements of men and women, had no existence

¹⁰³ Woolf read *Two on a Tower* in 1908 and found Lady Constantine's flimsiness to be a liability to the novel. Woolf's main critique is that the romance plot between Constantine and Swithin, her young astronomer lover, overtakes the novel's larger exploration of the universe's vastness in relation to human finitude. *Passionate Apprentice*, 386–387.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, ed. Norman Page (London: Everyman, 1999), 30, 29.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 462, 22.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

whatever.” She concludes that “from one’s fellow-beings” there is no escape and closes the window “with a sigh.”¹⁰⁸ The gesture is futile—blocking street sounds cannot disembody her from the matrices of personal life (and the task to which she returns is superlatively personal: a letter writing campaign to unsnarl a family dispute)—but more significantly within Woolf’s language of signs, shutting the window cues the solipsistic danger of drawing hermetic boundaries.¹⁰⁹ To avoid solipsism impersonality must be relational, but here Katherine is pictured as the “self that sits alone in the room at night with the blinds drawn,” against which Woolf later cautions in “A Letter to a Young Poet” (1932). In an irrevocably social world, cloistered imagination proves an insufficient resource to sustain impersonal life.

It is fitting, then, that Katherine and Ralph form their liaison outdoors but in the city.¹¹⁰ After several awkward, sometimes ill-tempered encounters at tea tables and in sitting rooms, their intimacy begins as they track down a cab and Katherine “exult[s]” because (as the narrator points out) Ralph “does not hinder any flight” of her mind; she can imagine the view through a telescope even as he talks of his affairs.¹¹¹ A watershed meeting in Kew Gardens settles the precise terms of the incipient romance. What begins as a mutual fantasy of living alone as hermits in country cottages shifts into a negotiation of an impersonally intimate friendship. Katherine rejects outright Ralph’s opening bid of skepticism that one could ever live entirely

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 106–107.

¹⁰⁹ As Banfield argues, windowed rooms “for contact” constitute Woolf’s revision to Leibnitz’s monadology (see Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, esp. 110–112).

¹¹⁰ As Suzanne Raitt notes in her introduction to a recent edition, “in *Night and Day* all negotiations of relationships...takes place outside the house, in the danger and turbulence of the streets.” Introduction to *Night and Day* by Virginia Woolf, xxiii. Janis M. Paul similarly argues that “in the streets Katherine’s new sense of self-definition is paradoxically allied with the sense of self-diffusion, a union which, in Woolf’s estimation, comprises true freedom—a mergence of self in a larger, anonymous world that transcends the limitations of both culture and individuality.” *The Victorian Heritage of Virginia Woolf: The External World in Her Novels* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1987), 89.

¹¹¹ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 315.

unattached. Absolute sincerity, she argues, is possible under no other condition: “if you have no relations with people it’s easier to be honest with them.”¹¹² Her exemplary companion is “an occasional man with a beard” met at a lunch shop, from whom one simply parts without personal ties. By contrast, in relationships “obligations always grow up. There are feelings to be considered.”¹¹³ Ralph finally carries the argument, however, by naming the terms to be settled in advance: “such a friendship must be unemotional”; in “choos[ing] to fall in love” one incurs all the risk; “neither [person] is under any obligation to the other”; and “they must be able to say whatever they wish.”¹¹⁴ By accepting Ralph’s terms Katherine trades the absolute isolation of star-like impersonality for the negotiated freedom of impersonal intimacy. In her idiom, she has found a way “to step” “without essential change” between night and day: Ralph “destroys [her] loneliness” but not her solitude.¹¹⁵ With an agreement thus reached in the open air, they adjourn indoors to tea.

It is important to note that, at the level of plot, the novel’s synthesis of night and day does not transpire with a wedding ceremony in the daytime of convention but rather in ongoing negotiations in the dark.¹¹⁶ Ralph and Katherine together reach toward an ideal of “communion”—the ability, as Ralph describes it, “to pass in and out of each other’s minds”

¹¹² Ibid., 354.

¹¹³ Ibid., 354.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 355.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 356, 531. Whereas Raitt suggests that Katherine’s fear of intimacy relates to “a diminution of self,” this chapter interprets the object of her fear as the imperative to assume a subjectivity contingent on personal relationships and obliged to persist in coherence. Raitt, Introduction to *Night and Day* by Woolf, xxv.

¹¹⁶ The novel’s registers of symbolism are not absolute. Night and day and outdoors and indoors overlap conceptually without mapping evenly onto each other. With reference to *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf claimed that she “couldn’t manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether its [sic] right or wrong I don’t know, but directly I’m told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.” Quoted in Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 472.

without ever quite coalescing in unity.¹¹⁷ Woolf portrays this relation in the novel's closing tryst as Ralph and Katherine call and answer each other as "nightingales" across a dark expanse: "from the heart of his darkness he spoke his thanksgiving; from a region as far, as hidden, she answered him."¹¹⁸ With this final passage *Night and Day* elides the "marriage" that critics have sometimes read into the novel's ending.¹¹⁹ Instead Woolf offers an evening's parting at a half-open door, on the threshold between the light of the house and the darkness of the garden.¹²⁰ In remaining unfulfilled, marriage is rendered more abstract than the novel's generically comedic focus on heterosexual matchmaking might suggest. The incomplete marriage plot above all furnishes a conventional frame inside which to recast the terms of intimate relationship; Michael Levenson observes that marriage in *To the Lighthouse* "becomes a general figure for relations between self and society," and his insight could be applied as rewardingly to *Night and Day*.¹²¹ There, too, Woolf employs marriage as a metaphor for, in Levenson's words, "living in community without jeopardizing...solitude."¹²²

Furthermore, marriage is not the only solution that Woolf supplies to the novel's central problem. Directly prior to the half-lit parting in the garden, Ralph and Katherine stroll past the apartment belonging to Mary Datchet and see her light as "a sign of triumph," "an expression to them both of something impersonal and serene in the spirit of the woman within, working out her

¹¹⁷ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 406.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 535.

¹¹⁹ Julia Briggs, for instance, comments that the novel "ends, uniquely for Woolf, in marriage." *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 29.

¹²⁰ Suzanne Raitt observes that windows serve in the novel as symbols of transition (introduction, xxii). Doors, too, could be said to perform the same function, especially given the novel's potent final note outside a half open door shedding house light.

¹²¹ Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 212.

¹²² Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate*, 213.

plans far into the night.”¹²³ *Night and Day* thus closes by juxtaposing these two visions of impersonal life: the enormous world (Katherine in fact sees it as a “globe”¹²⁴) of Katherine and Ralph’s communion and the selfless nobility of Mary’s work.

This pairing of scenes formally foregrounds *Night and Day*’s investment in the anomalous figure of the impersonal woman, pioneered in two variations in the characters of Mary and Katherine.¹²⁵ Without recourse to “the usual masculine impersonality and authority,” each woman traces for herself an intermediary option between seclusion and conventional marriage in order to secure her claim to some larger existence.¹²⁶ In effect, *Night and Day* narrates the uncertain early signs of a process that, as Woolf details in the 1929 essay “Women and Fiction,” had

turned the English woman from a nondescript influence, fluctuating and vague, to a voter, a wage-earner, a responsible citizen, has given her both in her life and in her art a turn toward the impersonal. Her relations now are not only emotional; they are intellectual, they are political.... Hence her attention is being directed away from the personal centre which engaged it exclusively in the past to the impersonal.¹²⁷

The description “fluctuating and vague” could not find a better referent than Katherine’s mother, devotee of Romantic literature and representative of a tradition of women trained to live entirely through the emotions of personal life. In *Night and Day* Woolf identifies the next generation of

¹²³ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 533.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Woolf underscores the strangeness of this figure by showing impersonality to be so closely related to masculinity in characters’ minds that one serves as cipher for the other—hence the repeated attribution of “masculine” ease and unselfconsciousness to Katherine and her closeted sense of “the unwomanly nature” of mathematics (*Night and Day*, 139, 298, 42). As a later instance of the “impersonal” woman, compare Evelyn Waugh’s sangfroid aviatrix Lady Rattery in *A Handful of Dust* (1934).

¹²⁶ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 11.

¹²⁷ Woolf, “Women and Fiction,” in *Granite and Rainbow*, 83.

English women with a “turn toward the impersonal” not least by lexically associating both Katherine and Mary with the word *impersonal*. Moreover Katherine and Mary are defined by their impersonal investments: their efficacy in practical affairs and dedication to intellectual freedom in the respective fields of science and politics.

It is important to Woolf’s generic vision of the modern English woman that Mary and Katherine’s doubling encompasses variation in class, temperament, and degrees of involvement in public life. While Katherine’s inclination to the impersonal registers her reaction against the Romantic tenor of her family’s prestige and the privileged constraints of her social circle, the impetuses to Mary’s impersonality are political commitment and necessities economic and emotional. The daughter of a rural parson, Mary has migrated to London alone and aspires to an independent working life. While Katherine assists at home with the family biography project, Mary earns (or aspires to earning) wages at a feminist organization.¹²⁸ Counterpoised to the illustrious conventionality of the Hilbery’s tea table in Chelsea, Mary’s rooms near the Strand are a hub for informal political and artistic gatherings. Whereas Katherine doubts the importance of emotion in daily life, Mary deems it paramount but also perilous to autonomy. Across these differences, however, the impersonal thread that connects Mary and Katherine is fundamental to the novel’s design: from the experience of de-individuation, each derives a sense of consolation and purpose. Hence Mary’s question “what do I matter compared to the cause?” finds a perfect echo in Katherine’s observation that compared to the stars, “our affairs don’t seem to matter very much.”¹²⁹

¹²⁸ The narrator is coy regarding Mary’s economic situation: Mary “earned, or intended to earn, her own living, and had already lost the look of the irresponsible spectator, and taken on that of the private in the army of workers.” Woolf, *Night and Day*, 44.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 172, 206.

Mary's story diverges from Katherine's in that she comes to impersonality by crisis, not proclivity. After disappointment in love (i.e., Mary loves Ralph, but Ralph loves Katherine), Mary is divided by impulses to hoard her feelings in privacy or to divest everything in despair: she weighs an "immured life" of guarded and stagnant feeling against a bare life "bereft of anything she could call her own."¹³⁰ Mary undergoes what the narrator terms a "curious transformation from the particular to the universal" when she realizes that, if reinterpreted as impersonality, dispossession opens into a plenitude of feeling that connects her to her fellow beings and releases her from despair.¹³¹ An urban crowd's anonymous crush of faces and bodies again provides a catalyst for the recognition of this "new scale of life" and relief from the "acute consciousness of herself as an individual."¹³² A moment in silence sitting next to Katherine produces a feeling much like Ralph and Katherine's communion, which Mary "could not help believing...[was] shared."¹³³ In renouncing a desire for personal happiness, Mary dismantles the "stone wall" of personality that had kept her loneliness intact.¹³⁴ She finds an exalted mode of self-abstraction that allows her at once to experience a point of view and stand outside of it; expanding "into that impersonal condition which was so lofty and so painless," "she was at once the sufferer and the pitiful spectator of suffering; she was happier than she had ever been; she

¹³⁰ Ibid., 290.

¹³¹ Ibid., 273. This interpretation differs radically from that of Jesse Wolfe in *Bloomsbury, Modernism, and the Reinvention of Intimacy*, which claims that the novel "blames [Mary's] headstrong idealism for her fractured life" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 19. Contra Wolfe, this chapter argues that Mary's "damage[d]" personal life becomes the impetus to her discovery of "the impersonal life," which draws her into the novel's larger schema.

¹³² Woolf, *Night and Day*, 272, 271.

¹³³ Ibid., 291.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

was more bereft; she was rejected, and she was immensely beloved.”¹³⁵ Impersonality thus represents to Mary both a palliative for life’s suffering and an ascetic reward for sacrifice.

By defining Mary at the intersection of public work and impersonal transformation, Woolf bestows on her the mantle of the social reformer. This figure recalls Woolf’s own acquaintance with Sidney and, especially, Beatrice Webb, socialist strategists, urban planners, and engines of the Fabian Society.¹³⁶ In 1918 Woolf records feeling in their company

exalted above a waste of almost waveless sea, palish grey...the little ripples which represented character & life love & genius & happiness. But “I” was not exalted; “I” was practically non-existent. This was the result of a talk with Mrs Webb.... There’s something absolutely unadorned & impersonal about her. She makes one feel insignificant, & a little out of key.¹³⁷

B. Webb counseled Woolf that “one must cultivate impersonality above all things,” and for Woolf impersonality was the Webbs’ most striking (if also disconcerting) quality.¹³⁸ Woolf’s appraisal of the Webbs was undoubtedly conflicted, but she makes clear that to their credit they were open-minded, superlatively sensible, and possessed of a panoramic view of themselves in society. Woolf was impressed by their indomitable sense of purpose in socioeconomic reform, and she documents B. Webb’s claim that her life was governed by “two aims...; one is the passion for investigation by scientific means; the other the passion for producing a certain good

¹³⁵ Ibid., 284, 291.

¹³⁶ Co-founders of the London School of Economics and the socialist paper the *New Statesman* (1913–), the Webbs spearheaded the Fabian socialist movement, which advocated a non-revolutionary, heavily bureaucratic transition to a communal, classless society. Both Leonard and Virginia Woolf were Fabian members, and L. Woolf’s Fabian work on international relations “made his name” and figured influentially in the drafting of the League of Nations. See Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 342.

¹³⁷ Woolf, *Diary*, vol.1, 193.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 196.

state of society by those investigations.”¹³⁹ The Victorian legacy of service that B. Webb embodied appears to have been influential in connecting Woolf’s idea of an evacuated self to a certain mode of participation in the larger community.¹⁴⁰ In *Night and Day*, as elsewhere, Woolf reworks her feeling of personal discomfort or insignificance into a condition of possibility.¹⁴¹ That Woolf was at the time of this encounter with the Webbs in the process of writing *Night and Day* suggests in particular a potential connection between the Webbs and Mary, whose light at the novel’s finale represents to Katherine and Ralph both Mary’s “plans for the good of the world” and her sage, candid atmosphere of impersonality.¹⁴² Further, the connection underscores Mary’s importance to the novel in signposting an alternative to both the conventional life of personal relations and the reinvented heterosexual dyad.

Through the impersonal trajectories of Katherine, Ralph, and Mary, *Night and Day* explores on the level of theme key ideas that Woolf would shortly after attempt to extend into form. In this respect *Night and Day* both is and is not a modern novel. In Woolf’s own account of her career, *Jacob’s Room* (1922) punctuated the end of her early writing with the discovery of “voice” and a faint glimmer of “method”—“a necessary step,” she said, “in working free.”¹⁴³ *Night and Day* factors into this account as an earlier exercise in composition comparable to

¹³⁹ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 1, 196.

¹⁴⁰ Berman, for instance, credits “the promise of Fabianism” and influence of the Webbs as key sources for Woolf’s “thinking about community” in the 1920s. *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism*, 125.

¹⁴¹ Hermione Lee gives a less sanguine account of Woolf’s impressions of the Webbs. In Lee’s words, they “made her feel ignorant and small.” *Virginia Woolf*, 342–343. Indeed, Woolf acknowledges as much, yet when she writes “‘I’ was not exalted; ‘I’ was practically non-existent,” she does not comment on her sense of insignificance beside her more relevant husband, as Lee suggests, but rather on the world view that B. Webb imparted, by light of which any individual was bound to feel their “own nothingness.” *Diary*, vol. 1, 196.

¹⁴² The spectre of Beatrice Webb may also loom in Ralph’s discourse against “great men” in his first conversation with Katherine (*Night and Day*, 15); Woolf documents B. Webb’s asseverations to the same effect in her diary (vol. 1, 194).

¹⁴³ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 2, 186, 208.

“copy[ing] from plaster casts...to learn anatomy” and a benchmark from which subsequent innovations can be gauged.¹⁴⁴ Regarding form, the appraisal is just. The novel plainly features a narrative mind at work, personified and telling a story, and in sensibility the narrator is Victorian: augustly informed, reasonable, perceptive, evaluative, a touch moralizing at times but detached in the sense of being disposed to fairly weigh various characters’ points of view. The following sentence illustrates the multiple inflections of stance that characterize the narrative idiom: “Denham had accused Katherine Hilbery of belonging to one of the most distinguished families in England, and if anyone will take the trouble to consult Mr Galton’s *Hereditary Genius*, he will find that this assertion is not far from the truth.”¹⁴⁵ This one fell swoop evaluates Ralph’s reported statement; asserts a truth-value about the world; nods politely toward an audience that could “take the trouble” to make its own inquiries; and aims an ironic quip at the father of eugenics.¹⁴⁶ The suggestion that the narrative is written self-consciously for and by a Brit finds confirmation elsewhere, as in the phrase “our British trees.”¹⁴⁷ Indeed, to use Woolf’s own unfavorable judgment, “the old relations between author and character are observed.”¹⁴⁸ In *Night and Day* the narrative arc, too, is in many ways Victorian, proceeding with realist fidelity from tea table to dinner table and back again, meanwhile incorporating requisite excursions to

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, 55. Woolf’s aim in writing the novel was, as Natania Rosenfeld puts it, “to have done with literary forebears.” *Outsiders Together: Virginia and Leonard Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 74–75.

¹⁴⁵ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 32.

¹⁴⁶ As Henry points out, Galton included the Stephen family in *Hereditary Genius* (1869). “Woolf nevertheless appears to have had little respect for Galton’s eugenic objectives,” Henry determines, and the passage quoted above goes on to employ *reductio ad absurdum* to indicate as much.

¹⁴⁷ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 347.

¹⁴⁸ The phrase appears in Woolf’s review of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, which likewise exhibits the fault of maintaining the old literary relations. “An Essay in Criticism” [1927], in *Granite and Rainbow*, 86.

the English countryside, coincidences both serendipitous and calamitous, maternal interventions in matters of the heart, and concluding on the comic note of two impending weddings.

Woolf's Victorian narrative nevertheless frames an intensely modern investigation of impersonality. *Night and Day*'s variations on "the impersonal life" present multiple vectors for seeing ways to integrate with the social fabric while also stripping away personality and personal life, as noted above. More importantly, however, *Night and Day*'s engagement with impersonality lays groundwork for Woolf's hallmark explorations in intersubjective consciousness of the 1920s and begins to trace lines of connection among problems of knowledge, viewpoint, affective communication, and public communities that figure prominently throughout her career. In particular, the novel uses impersonality as a resource to rescript outworn social conventions and to reassess modern conditions for intimacy along the lines of "absolute sincerity," intellectual freedom, receptivity to feeling, and detachment from personal obligation. These qualities Woolf reconfigures as an ethos for a narrative method rooted in impersonal intimacy. Thus Ralph's sense that "he had stepped over the threshold into the faintly lit vastness of another mind, stirring with shapes, so large, so dim, unveiling themselves only in flashes, and moving away again into the darkness" describes the conditions of Woolf's impersonal narrative perspective in novels from *Mrs. Dalloway* through *The Waves*.¹⁴⁹

III. Narration from Mind to Mind

An early typescript of Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts* (1941) contains an extraordinary description of what might be considered the ontology of an impersonal narrative presence.¹⁵⁰ The passage opens with an empty dining room set for lunch:

¹⁴⁹ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 531.

¹⁵⁰ Woolf cut the passage in the next draft of the typescript, which at that time was titled *Pointz Hall*.

But who observed the dining-room? Who noted the silence, the emptiness? What name is to be given to that which notes that a room is empty? This presence certainly requires a name, for without a name what can exist? And how can silence or emptiness be noted by that which has no existence? Yet by what name can that be called which enters rooms when the company is still in the kitchen, or the nursery, or the library; which notes the pictures, then the flowers, and observes, though there itself, the room is empty....

Certainly it is difficult to find a name for that which is in a room, yet the room is empty; for that which perceives pictures, knife and fork, also men and women; and describes them; and not only perceives but partakes of them, and has access to the mind in its darkness. And further goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body creating what is not mind or body, not surface or depths, but a common element in which the perishable is preserved, and the separate become one. Does it not by this means create immortality? And yet we who have named other presences equally impalpable—and called them God, for instance, or again The Holy Ghost—have no name but novelist, or poet, or sculptor, or musician, for this greatest of all preservers and creators. But this spirit, this haunter and joiner, who makes one where there are two, three, six or seven, and preserves what without it would perish, is nameless. Nameless it is, yet partakes of all things named....

This nameless spirit then, who is not 'we' nor 'I,' nor the novelist either; for the novelist, all agree, must tell a story; and there are no stories for this spirit; this spirit is not concerned to follow lovers to the altar, nor to cut chapter from chapter; and then write as novelists do 'The End' with a flourish; since there is no end; this being, to reduce it to the shortest and simplest word, was present in the dining room at Pointz Hall, for it observed

how different the room was empty from what the room was when—as now happened—people entered.¹⁵¹

This nameless spirit or impersonal being “observes,” “perceives,” “describes,” and—notably—“partakes” but, unlike the “novelist,” does not “tell.”¹⁵² It is receptive, sympathetic, and participatory, but it can claim no first person from which to speak; even as it can be said to exist, it does not attend to its own existence. In Woolf’s aspirations its function is to transmit a holistic transcript of reality by synthesizing material and mental truth as one “common element” in which are united everything and everyone present, as well as the relations between. Indeed not only the multiplicity of perspectives but also the circuitry of connections between them becomes a priority as the being moves “from mind to mind and surface to surface” to create its synthesis. This scene of meta-narration makes explicit what is otherwise subsumed as form: a fantasy of an empathetic universality with a light touch. It brings existence into accord without exactly manifesting the supernatural; it extends beyond the material without transcending it (an idea in a mind, for instance, might be as easily apprehended as a fork on a table); and it provides a model for an almost perfect sympathy that is necessarily asymptotic: with “access to the mind in its darkness,” the being can come infinitely close to another mind without actually becoming it. The impersonal being would seem to partake in communion, in Ralph Denham’s sense of the word.

¹⁵¹ Virginia Woolf, *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: John Jay Press, 1983), 61–62; manuscript pages from July 3, 1938, 57–58. Richter brings this passage to critical attention in *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (138). Whereas Richter considers this presence to be one of the “subjective voices” at work in Woolf’s fiction, this chapter contends that the essence of this nameless “being” is instead its a-subjectivity since it possesses no will, no interior, and no mind (139).

¹⁵² If this narrative speaker has any affinity with Woolf, a hint of irony must play on the claim that “the novelist, all agree, must tell a story.” Woolf after all was a novelist who aspired not to tell stories, steered clear of the altar, and often dispensed with chapters.

One of the passage's peculiarities is that it takes an overt narrator (in evidence in the battery of rhetorical questions, the pronoun "we," and the emphatic adverb "certainly") to describe a presence that could be relied on, if it did not itself have to be recorded, to cast the scene without leaving a trace. In this way the excerpt foregrounds a division of labor that is central to Woolf's impersonal designs, between the narrator or authorizing consciousness and the impersonal being. The narrator in this passage intimates its collaboration, if not identification, with the novelist in the mundane tasks of production (to make judgments, tell the story, plot events, "cut chapter from chapter," impose an ending, etc.) and in safeguarding the frame of representation in which the impersonal being can "preserve and create." It falls to the impersonal being, then, to perceive and partake of essence, "life itself," or reality, as Woolf variously names the vital thing that modern fiction must at all costs endeavor to capture. From 1920, when Woolf began to discern her method, through the early 1930s with the publication of *The Waves*, her formal innovations rely on reapportioning the space of fiction from this narrator to the impersonal being.¹⁵³ In a diary entry announcing her "idea of a new form for a new novel," she writes of her vision that "one thing should open out of another" with "no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular."¹⁵⁴ What remained was to give "looseness and lightness"; to "get closer and yet keep form and speed, and enclose everything, everything"—"the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist." Everything possible was to come under the province of the impersonal being's "light spirited stepping."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Susan Snaider Lanser notes that manuscript revisions tend to efface suggestions of the author. See *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 113.

¹⁵⁴ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 2, 13–14.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Nonetheless, although the novelist recedes markedly from Woolf's fiction, she does not altogether "vanish" post-*Jacob's Room*, as Ann Banfield claims.¹⁵⁶ Nowhere is an authorizing consciousness more in evidence than in "Time Passes," the reputedly "impersonal" middle section of *To the Lighthouse*. On the mimetic level the label retains some justification: "Time Passes" depicts human absence and impersonal nature as the Ramsay family's house in the Hebrides stands empty for a span of ten years. This impersonality, however, is distinct from the section's narrative form, which is saturated with signs of a narrating presence that not only perceives but also knows, conjectures, desires, and references itself. With the exception of minimalist, bracketed paragraphs of news about the Ramsays and, obliquely, World War One, "Time Passes" is the least impersonal section of *To the Lighthouse*.

Nearly every formal marker of consciousness is present in its first paragraphs. Conjunctions "so" and "but" open sections and paragraphs, invoking a reasoning mind that casts its rejoinder to preceding propositions: "So with lamps all put out"; "So some random light"; "But what after all is one night?"; "So loveliness reigned."¹⁵⁷ These abrupt, isolated conjunctions are common in Woolf's writing, but elsewhere there is typically available a character to whom the thought might be attributed, and in those cases they interlace one perspective with another. "Time Passes," however, excuses all its characters (first in sleep and then in absence) with the remark that "there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, 'This is he' or 'This is she,'" let alone anyone to transition, conclude, or rebut.¹⁵⁸ Once characters have retired, speculative verbs and hedging adverbs proliferate: "nothing, it seemed, could survive"; "nothing it seemed could break that image"; "but here surely"; "one might imagine"; "it

¹⁵⁶ Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 343.

¹⁵⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 129, 130, 131, 133.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

seemed”; “it seems impossible”; “almost it would appear.”¹⁵⁹ With the house either asleep or empty a narrator’s mind is by default the only one that could be alert to such seeming, and a pattern of hedged negation vaguely pleads with forces beyond its control. Frequent deictics “here” and “now” designate if not the narrator’s presence in the scene then at least her discursive reference to the story she tells.¹⁶⁰ The speech gesture “after all” recurs, as in a parenthetical reminder or clarification, presumably for an audience: “(the house was ramshackle after all).” Foregrounded language calls attention to the forces that conspire against order—especially the personification of “certain airs” that “ventured indoors” and “nosed round bedroom doors”: “almost one might imagine them...questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper,” and, “musingly,” “gently,” pausing to question the human effects of books and torn letters.¹⁶¹ Lexical clues of a human consciousness are present, too, as in a simile associating a natural scene “from which life had parted” with the view “seen from a train window.”¹⁶²

The most significant expressions of a narrative speaker, however, arise from attempts to recuperate meaning from human absence. At first acquaintance with the predatory airs that threaten to claim the house, the speaker finds consolation in the presence of the sleepers. Faith in human exemption from deterioration initially seems to be enough to force back the nosing airs; for “here surely, they must cease,” the speaker implores; “whatever else may perish and disappear...[h]ere one might say...you can neither touch nor destroy. Upon which, wearily,

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 129, 133, 130, 130, 131, 133, 132.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 130, 131, 132, 133. As we will see, Ann Banfield contests this interpretation of past-tense deictics; see *The Phantom Table*, 317.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 130. Due to this pattern of personification, J. Hillis Miller deems “Time Passes” not to be impersonal; however, from this point our accounts diverge as Miller proceeds to the bizarre conclusion that the novel is narrated by the silent, opium-smoking poet, Augustus Carmichael. “Mr. Carmichael and Lily Briscoe: The Rhythm of Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*,” in *Modernism Reconsidered*, ed. Robert Kiely et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983, 181–183.

¹⁶² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 133.

ghostlily,” the airs bestow their final flourishes and depart.¹⁶³ “But what after all is one night?”: the rhetorical question foreshadows the entropy that is about to set in as a single night becomes “a pack” of nights that lengthen with approaching winter.¹⁶⁴ Spiritual consolation in a moonlit autumn scene offers brief reprieve: “It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking; which, did we deserve them, should be ours always. But alas,” such consolation is as short-lived as the seasons.¹⁶⁵ Having claimed a first-person pronoun and a moral framework in which it is possible to say “deserve,” the speaker interprets “a drench of hail,” winds, and whitecaps as signs that the reality behind the curtain “does not please” divine goodness, and so “it seems impossible that... calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole.”¹⁶⁶ Transposed to metaphysical terms that harmonize with the seasons, this is the “the age of fragments” that Woolf perceived in modernist society and literature, but here its recognition is marred by despair.¹⁶⁷ The pathetic fallacy of winter storms prepares for the blunt descent of loss, delivered in brackets in the barest of prose: “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.]” “Time Passes” does not sustain its note of despair, however; as clement seasons return so too do suggestions that “good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules.”¹⁶⁸

Woolf thus supplies a set of formal features that plainly evince a diegetic human mind actively shaping the narration at the moment when all mimetic consciousness has vacated the

¹⁶³ Ibid., 130.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 132.

¹⁶⁷ Woolf, “How it Strikes a Contemporary,” 234.

¹⁶⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 136.

scene. As constructed by this consciousness, the house never emerges from a human paradigm. Even when it is altogether “deserted,” by the caretaking efforts of Mrs. McNab as well as the Ramsays, the narrative view remains unrelentingly anthropomorphic, as demonstrated, for instance, in the statement that “life had left” the house despite the toads, thistle, swallows, rats, and butterflies that take up residence inside the same paragraph. Mao argues that “it is an abhorrence of the possibility of human extraneousness that makes it so difficult to get down in prose the house empty of inhabitants, eyeless and featureless”; it produces, in Mao’s phrase, “a gazer addicted to a self-projection.”¹⁶⁹ “Time Passes” spells a hiatus in impersonal narration by introducing a narrator poised to think affectively of the non-human and to grasp at coherence in the face of decay.

On first conceiving of the section, Woolf called the piece “impersonal” (“this impersonal thing, which I’m dared to do by friends, the flight of time”), but it may have struck her differently after it was written.¹⁷⁰ It certainly did not appear “impersonal” to her friend Roger Fry, a Bloomsbury artist and art critic whose opinion she highly esteemed: “to tell the truth I do not think this piece [“Time Passes”] is quite of her best vintage.... She is so splendid as soon as a character is involved—for example the old *concièrge* [Mrs. McNab] is superb—but when she tries to give her impression of inanimate objects, she exaggerates, she underlines, she poeticizes just a little bit.”¹⁷¹ Fry reiterated this appraisal as Woolf worked on *Pointz Hall*, imparting, in her opinion “the best criticism I’d had for a long time”: “that I poetise my inanimate scenes, stress my personality; dont [sic] let the meaning emerge from the matière.”¹⁷² “Poetisation,” as Woolf

¹⁶⁹ Mao, *Solid Objects*, 60.

¹⁷⁰ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 3, 36.

¹⁷¹ From a letter to Marie Mauron, wife of the French translator of “Time Passes.” *Letters of Roger Fry*, vol. 2, ed. Denys Sutton (New York: Random House, 1972), 598.

¹⁷² Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 5, 200.

glosses in her biography of Fry, is “that imposition of the writer’s personality for which there is no exact critical term.”¹⁷³ That Woolf so heartily endorsed Fry’s appraisal of her inanimate scenes in the later novel suggests that “Time Passes” may not furnish an adequate example of the impersonal, either.

These claims stir generative contention with Banfield’s *Phantom Table*. Her insightful treatment of Woolf’s impersonality privileges “interludes” such as “Time Passes” as crucial components in Woolf’s aesthetic program precisely because they instantiate “the impersonal landscape” in the “absence...of a human observer.”¹⁷⁴ Through these interludes, Woolf’s “impersonal style” realizes in fiction what Bertrand Russell’s Leibnitz-derived realism achieves in philosophy: it formulates a way to describe reality by correlating a multiplicity of perspectives. As Jaakko Hintikka explains, theoretically unoccupied perspectives (egoless but subjectively located in time and space) are key to Russell’s realism because the logical production of a single “unified external world” requires an aggregate of perspectives so large that it must make use not only of perspectives actually occupied by subjects (“private worlds”) but also “potential perspectives”—hypothetical positions in space and time that could as well be occupied by an instrument as by a mind.¹⁷⁵ Both Hintikka and Banfield argue that Woolf’s narrative method is analogous to Russell’s theory. As evidence of Woolf’s integration of such potential perspectives, Hintikka zeroes in on ambiguous moments of attribution where a

¹⁷³ Woolf, *Roger Fry* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 209.

¹⁷⁴ Banfield defines an “interlude as a “description of unoccupied places and times”: “moors, the snowfield, the sea and the dunes of the seashore,” or an empty house. *The Phantom Table*, 147, 139.

¹⁷⁵ For a comparison of potential perspectives to technical instruments, see Banfield, “Describing the Unobserved: Events Grouped Around an Empty Center,” in *The Linguistics of Writing*, ed. Nigel Fabb (New York: Methuen, 1987), esp. 265–267.

judgment of a character surfaces without a contextually viable source.¹⁷⁶ In these moments, he argues, Woolf may use “ ‘possible observers’ not exemplified by any actual person in the story,” rendering “a writer’s counterpart to Russell’s use of possible perspectives.”¹⁷⁷ Banfield takes a more absolute stance, arguing that an empty perspective is instantiated by narration itself. The novelist “achieves this multiplication and assemblage of perspectives” through her own total disappearance (as well as that of the narrator, if such could be said to exist); with “I” suppressed, the central “vantage-point becomes unoccupied,” and this narrative “empty center” “yields a self-generated language beyond a speaker’s control.”¹⁷⁸ Further, sentences unoccupied by any third-person subject play a critical role in “fill[ing] in the interstices” and so providing continuity.¹⁷⁹ By showing the possibility for an empty landscape, character-less interludes like “Time Passes” “[provide] the necessary scaffolding to correlate” the multiple perspectives of Woolf’s fiction into a description of a continuous and unified reality, independent of any given mind.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Narrative scholars variously attribute such moments to a collective voice, gossip, the interpolated voice of ideology, or an authorial narrator. Hintikka takes his example from Auerbach’s famous “Brown Stocking” analysis, where the judgment of Mrs. Ramsay that “never did anybody look so sad” cannot be attributed to any of the characters nor, according to Auerbach, to “Woolf,” since “she does not seem to bear in mind that she is the author and hence ought to know how matters stand with her characters.” Quoted in Hintikka, “Virginia Woolf and Our Knowledge,” 10.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 343, 344.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 350.

¹⁸⁰ Banfield takes the premise of “potential perspectives” further by asserting the insubstantiality of character: “the locative metaphor of the narrator entering a character’s mind only approximates how the novelist represents subjectivity. For neither characters’ minds nor a narrator to enter them exist.” *Phantom Table*, 349. This stance seems to produce unproductive conflict with Woolf’s injunction for writers and readers alike to believe deeply in and devote loyalty to character, so as to “never, never desert...Mrs. Brown.” “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 337.

Given its scope *Phantom Table* is understandably sparse in formal analysis, but the assumption of a “self-generated language” “detached from all agency” points obliquely to Banfield’s earlier work on “unspeakable sentences.”¹⁸¹ In a monograph by this name Banfield, “working as a linguist in the Chomskyan paradigm,” identifies certain sentence constructions that can serve neither communicative nor expressive functions in Chomsky’s generative grammar.¹⁸² She argues that free indirect discourse (renamed “represented speech and thought”) in particular arises out of universal grammar as a written resource that “release[s] language from its subjection to communication.”¹⁸³ More specifically, the capacity of literary language to place deictic spatio-temporal reference (e.g., “here” and “now”) in the past tense results in sentences that could not be produced by any real-world speaker. For Banfield, this is the domain of narration without an “I”; by definition it is impersonal.¹⁸⁴ For this reason it misses the mark to pose to Banfield the question of why the quintessentially unoccupied view in “Time Passes” should so insistently signal an authorizing consciousness. Banfield’s elimination of narrative agency on linguistic and logical grounds exempts her from demonstrating the particular impersonality of Woolf’s “impersonal style”; by the same token, her framework renders invisible or negligible the traces detailed above of consciousness and subjectivity in “Time Passes.” These differences are foundational.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 350.

¹⁸² Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul), x.

¹⁸³ Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*, 521.

¹⁸⁴ Banfield’s argument regarding “here” and “now” in past-tense sentences appears in *The Phantom Table* abbreviated form; see 315–318.

¹⁸⁵ As provocative as Banfield’s thesis has proven, her position has not been widely taken up. One exception is Susan Ehrlich, who effectively adds the narrator back in. For a critique of Banfield’s premises and an overview of Ehrlich’s revisions, see Jacob Mey, *When Voices Clash: A Study in Literary Pragmatics* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999), 21–22. Another important exception is Monika Fludernik, who integrates an adaptation of Banfield’s “empty

A rhetorical approach, by contrast, presumes that narration must always begin with a diegetic act over which the author has agency. As narrative theorist Richard Walsh argues, “stories, of whatever kind, do not merely appear, but are told,” and their telling constitutes a communicative gesture (albeit one governed by fictive, not informative, conventions).¹⁸⁶ Within this framework, narrative impersonality registers as a rhetorical fabrication that attempts to erase its originary gesture in diegesis and that plays instead at the illusion of pure transmission of the mimetic world.

Woolf’s interest in the social scenario of reading and “the difficult business of intimacy” suggest that her narrative commitments find more affinity in the rhetorical camp than the linguistic. In fact the *Pointz Hall* excerpt conceptualizes narrative impersonality in terms highly consonant with Walsh’s—as a fantasy of pure mimetic transmission of the imagined world. Even as this mode suppresses the novelist’s diegetic act, traces persist, and Woolf’s fiction holds the impersonal being and the novelist in dynamic tension. Hints of an authorizing consciousness alight infrequently throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.¹⁸⁷ As in “Time Passes,”

center” into her comprehensive theory of narrative. See *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* [London: Routledge, 1996].

¹⁸⁶ Compare Banfield: “language” creates the “fictional world...by the narrative fiat” (*Unspeakable Sentences*, 529).

¹⁸⁷ The interplay between free indirect discourse and narration is especially evident in moments where feelings, opinions or affectations of expression may appear at first to belong to the narrator but retrospectively insinuate themselves into a character’s idiom. This occurs, for example, at *Mrs. Dalloway*’s party when a professor occasions an unflattering description: “nodding urbanely, the Professor stepped delicately off.” The adverbs register an ironic stance that is assumed in the internal satire of another character’s thoughts only after some delay. Released from conversation with the professor, the satirist repeats the idea of “delicate stepping” in rehearsing the parody he will perform: “the Professor on Milton; the Professor on moderation; the Professor stepping delicately off” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 177). Dorrit Cohn provides another example of this dynamic in *Mrs. Dalloway* where a set of generic sentences in present tense (Cohn calls them “gnomic”) and the pronoun “we” appear after the fact to express the thoughts of Peter Walsh, who, once introduced (“Peter Walsh said to himself”) becomes implicated in the preceding judgments due to “semantic continuity, supported by the continuity

they serve as reminders of an authorizing consciousness never wholly dispensed with, or potentially as suggestions that the impersonal being is always in danger of materializing as the artist. As Woolf said, tellingly, of *To the Lighthouse*, “it is all in *oratio obliqua*. Not quite all, for I have a few direct sentences.”¹⁸⁸

Woolf’s impersonal narration is defined by agile and minimally mediated shifts between characters’ minds or consciousnesses, which register at once as visual perspectives, interior voices, and embodied phenomenologies.¹⁸⁹ Because the focalizing perspective often switches mid-paragraph or mid-sentence without any distinct marker of the boundary, character minds appear to come flush with each other or even overlap. The ambiguity can suggest tacit accord or collaboration in collective thought or feeling. In the opening of *To the Lighthouse*, an important sequence of these shifts establishes between Mrs. Ramsay and her six-year old son, James, the possibility of affective continuity that frames the novel’s first section, “The Window.” Mrs. Ramsay’s assurance of a sailing trip to the lighthouse appears to “[convey] an extraordinary joy” to James, who sits by her side engrossed in cutting up an illustrated catalogue of home goods.¹⁹⁰ Attribution is uncertain from the outset. The prospect of James’s joy invokes some measure of unidentified rhetorical stance, first, in the impression that James has “looked forward” to the expedition “for years and years it seemed” and, second, in the present-tense generic opinion

of tense.” Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 75.

¹⁸⁸ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 3, 106. Banfield clarifies Woolf’s use of “*oratio obliqua*”: “she means not indirect speech as traditionally designated, but what Clive Bell means by it, namely the translation of Proust’s term ‘style indirect’” (*Phantom Table*, 314).

¹⁸⁹ As Cohn puts it, “the narrative text appears as the adjunct of the narrated monologue [Cohn’s term for free indirect discourse], rather than the other way around” (*Transparent Minds*, 115). In his meticulous reading of the fifth section of part 1 of *To The Lighthouse*, Erich Auerbach observes that “the writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae” (*Mimesis*, 534).

¹⁹⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 7.

about “that great clan” of people for whom “even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the moment.”¹⁹¹ Responsibility for these assessments wobbles equivocally between the (as yet unposited) narrator and Mrs. Ramsay, who is inclined to exaggerate, make such rulings on the inner lives of her children, and, specifically, to shelter “that bundle of sensitiveness,” as she later refers to James.¹⁹² By implication, Mrs. Ramsay seems to feel or think the novel’s opening passage as she gazes at James. James’s view surfaces affectively and visually somewhere in the sentence “James Ramsay...endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss.”¹⁹³

Because Mrs. Ramsay sympathizes so intensely with his feelings, it is unclear at which point her perspective shades into his. “Fringed with joy,” however, the refrigerator appears to be the object of James’s intent perception, as are the images that begin the next sentence:

The wheelbarrow, the lawnmower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling—all these were so coloured and distinguished in his mind that he already had his private code, his secret language, though he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity, with his high forehead and his fierce blue eyes, impeccably candid and pure, frowning slightly at the sight of human frailty, so that his mother, watching him guide his scissors neatly round the refrigerator, imagined him all red and ermine on the Bench or directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs.¹⁹⁴

Some of James’s concrete images refer to illustrations from the catalogue, since Mrs. Ramsay later picks up among the cuttings “a mowing machine” to match James’s “lawnmower” and “a

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., 45.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 7–8.

gentleman in evening dress” to match the “dresses rustling.”¹⁹⁵ Along with hope for the lighthouse trip and perhaps sounds in his immediate environment, these pictures seem to combine for James into a multi-sensory gestalt. Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective is announced by “his mother, watching him,” but the description of James’s forehead and eyes attest to an earlier switch—potentially at the em-dash—and the intimacy between them is spelled by the indeterminacy of the boundaries between their thoughts and feelings.

Even so there is a distinct possibility that Mrs. Ramsay gets James wrong. Without knowing where Mrs. Ramsay reemerges in the extended sentence above, it is difficult to ascertain whether she has assessed James’s hopeful state correctly: is he “transfix[ed]” in a creative swirl of undifferentiated feeling, or does he “distinguish” and “code” his images into a “secret language”? This is to say that mindreading may blend with misreading—and indeed Mrs. Ramsay elsewhere proves fallible at intuiting others’ feelings.¹⁹⁶ However, misinterpretation would only matter in as much as we attempt to “know” James definitively; what Woolf demonstrates instead is the process of knowing him. In the framework Woolf develops Mrs. Ramsay’s intention to affect and be affected by James’s feelings is an account of their relationship.

The tension between knowing and intending to know recurs formatively in Lily Briscoe’s relationship to Mrs. Ramsay, but conversely, Lily may presume to know less than she does. For Lily, Mrs. Ramsay represents an unfathomable object of adoration: “what was the spirit in her,

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 65.

¹⁹⁶ For instance at a dinner party Lily reads masked pity in Mrs. Ramsay’s attentions to the widower Mr. Bankes; Lily’s interpretation proves accurate (for Mrs. Ramsay has just turned to her guest thinking “poor man! Who had no wife, and no children”), and so, too, does her objection that Mrs. Ramsay’s pity is misplaced as “one of those misjudgments of hers” (86). Lily’s impression is borne out when Mr. Bankes thinks about how “he did not enjoy family life” and wishes he had dined alone so that he could work (91).

the essential thing, by which, had you found a crumpled glove in the corner of a sofa, you would have known it, from its twisted finger, hers indisputably?”¹⁹⁷ In pursuit of an answer and “intimacy itself,” Lily recalls drawing physically “close as she could get” to Mrs. Ramsay, wishing first to access the “sacred inscriptions” stored in her “mind and heart” and, next, to merge with her “like waters poured into one jar.”¹⁹⁸ From Lily’s viewpoint, Mrs. Ramsay remains impervious (for “nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing!”), yet Woolf indicates that Lily discerns in Mrs. Ramsay something commensurate with Mrs. Ramsay’s own experience of essence.¹⁹⁹ “Not as oneself did one find rest ever,” Mrs. Ramsay reflects, but only somehow in both “being oneself” and “losing personality” as “a wedge-shaped core of darkness.”²⁰⁰ In its shape and darkness Mrs. Ramsay’s impersonal core bears resemblance to two of Lily’s visions of her: the “triangular purple shape” representing Mrs. Ramsay in Lily’s abstract painting and the piece of night sky that Lily pictures as she attempts to apprehend the essence of the crumpled glove: Mrs. Ramsay appears as “clear as the space which the clouds at last uncover—the little space of sky which sleeps beside the moon.”²⁰¹

The key to Lily’s insight may in fact lie in her final and most modest metaphor for approaching Mrs. Ramsay. Despairing not only of reading secret inscriptions and merging with her object but even of “know[ing] one thing or another thing about people,” Lily imagines herself “like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste”

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 54.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 66, 65. The contradictions of being and not being oneself at the same time—corresponding, respectively, to an impersonal self that is “invisible to others” and the social self of personality—recalls similar distinctions in “Street Haunting” and *The Voyage Out*. Like Woolf’s street haunter, Mrs. Ramsay feels most “herself” and “free for the strangest adventures” when this self “shed[s] its attachments” (Woolf, “Street Haunting,” 65).

²⁰¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 53.

and “haunt[ing] the dome-shaped hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people.”²⁰² The final appended fragment underlines the oddity of Lily’s position in this metaphor. As both bee and hive, she suggests some notion of a free-agent consciousness that is detachable from the subject and mobile in seeking others. As a bee, Lily feels herself shut out from her hive of interest, yet she underestimates the power of hovering receptively in the vicinity. In *To the Lighthouse*, after all, one does not have to bore inside another to witness the weather of their consciousness, and Lily proposes in spite of herself a different mode of access: not to intrude into the interior but to hover in the atmosphere. Lily’s dissatisfaction undoubtedly stems from the human limitation of occupying only a single view. She is a single bee, and it would take a swarm to adequately see Mrs. Ramsay: “one wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with,” although fifty would still not be “enough to get round that one woman.”²⁰³ Nonetheless, the efficacy of haunting Mrs. Ramsay may be gauged by the fact that it changes her in some way that is perceptible to Lily. “For days there hung about [Mrs. Ramsay]...more vividly than anything she said, the sound of murmuring,” and as Lily gazes at Mrs. Ramsay in the drawing-room window she wears “to Lily’s eyes...the shape of a dome” suggestive of both hive and wedge.²⁰⁴

Lily’s means for attempting to “know” Mrs. Ramsay are not far removed from those of impersonal narrative. As metanarrative device, Lily’s epistemic apiary is striking but not entirely

²⁰² Ibid., 54–55.

²⁰³ Ibid., 201.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 55. For this reason it does not make sense to conclude as Martha Nussbaum does that because “the hives are sealed” Lily’s “knowledge is unattainable.” “The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” *New Literary History* 26, no. 4 (1995): 731.

Woolf's invention.²⁰⁵ The trope of seeing into "hives, which were people" in a section called "The Window" alludes to an explicitly metanarrative moment in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*²⁰⁶ in which Sterne's fictional biographer invokes the Greek god Momus's lament that humans were not fashioned with a window through which to view the heart. With such a glass installed, "nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man's character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and look'd in,—view'd the soul stark naked;—observed all her motions,...then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen, and could have sworn to."²⁰⁷ As Dorrit Cohn argues in another context, Sterne's "optical wish-dream" serves as a metaphor for the power and mechanics of the novel to reveal the hearts of its characters.²⁰⁸ In adapting the metaphor of the soul as bee-hive, Woolf implicates Lily's desire for intimate knowledge of another with the narrative's desire to know its characters—in Woolf's words, to "never, never desert Mrs. Brown."²⁰⁹ Woolf emends Sterne's metaphor by adding the bee in flight, and with it, the possibility of approaching hives by other means than a chair pulled up close. Woolf's fiction

²⁰⁵ Woolf again involves Lily in metanarrative reflection later in the novel: "One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires" (*To the Lighthouse*, 201).

²⁰⁶ Woolf appears to have had Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759) on her mind as she was writing *To the Lighthouse*. She wrote multiple articles on Sterne between 1909 and 1928. ("Sterne" and "Eliza and Sterne" appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1909 and 1922 respectively; "A Sentimental Journey" was published in the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1928, after *To the Lighthouse* was finished; and "Sterne's Ghost" was written in 1925 but not published until after Woolf's death.) After reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1925, Lytton Strachey had recommended *Tristram Shandy* to Woolf as a model for a looser structure (Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 3, 32). Woolf's diary records that as of December 1926 she was reading Sterne (vol. 3, 119).

²⁰⁷ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Laurence Sterne* (Cambridge, MA: The Jenson Society, 1906), 119–120.

²⁰⁸ Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 3.

²⁰⁹ Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 337.

often suggests that characters' sensory and affective perception compensates for the absence of Momus's window, and her impersonal narration, like bees loosed from their hive and licensed to enter and exit others at will, casts the novel's means of knowing characters as paradigmatic of characters' means of knowing each other.

In its dynamism and betweenness, Woolf's impersonality avoids what she called the "damned egotistical self" that "ruins Joyce & [Dorothy] Richardson," a comment on the "narrowing & restricting" quality of becoming locked into a single focalizing ego (or two, in the case of *Ulysses*).²¹⁰ Indeed, the impersonal being works along a spectrum; if on the one hand it risks betraying signs of stance and so materializing as the author, on the other it risks losing mobility by becoming fused with a particular character. Woolf's alternative is to aim between these two varieties of static singularity. A narrative that keeps moving has the capacity not only to illuminate the psychological complexities of individuals via triangulated viewpoints but also to draw the threads of connection that travel between them. For this reason it is crucial that Woolf's impersonal being of narration "goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body." The being's travels—like the bee's—sketch the arc of the relationship.

Conclusion: Strange Travelling Companions

The public is a strange travelling companion.

—Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown"

Prosaic definition of the metro: collectivity without festival and solitude without isolation.

—Marc Augé, *In the Metro*

²¹⁰ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 2, 14. Naremore traces Woolf's distaste to the fact that Joyce's "experiments tended to imprison the reader inside an individual ego" (*The World Without a Self*, 63).

Among Woolf's metaphors for impersonality—the enormous eye; sensitive plate; starry infinity; nameless being; abandoned house; de-hived bees—perhaps none is more evocative of the “common element” than urban traffic. Omnibuses, trains, and streams of pedestrians crisscross Woolf's fiction with experiences of urban anonymity that are very often affective in nature. These impersonal communities of feeling are bound together on the basis of contingency, fleeting encounter, and a shared purpose. An exemplary instance can be found in *The Waves*: as an overnight train approaches its London station Bernard revels in a sense of “community in the rushing train” that coalesces around a unified desire to arrive.²¹¹ “Over us all broods a splendid unanimity,” Bernard observes as he resists the trip's conclusion with its attendant obligations to resume individual claims to identity and possession.²¹² “Unmoored...from a private being,” he finds amid foot traffic, too, “strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy” that assimilate him into the crowd.²¹³ Bernard's moments of public anonymity recall others from Woolf's body of work: most famously, in *Mrs. Dalloway* a crowd is united in the desire to know which dignitary occupies a motor car driving past and what word a sky written advertisement has spelled. Both world wars, too, produced an affective collectivity according to Woolf: “a whole people...concentrated on a single point” and “the community feeling: all England thinking this same thing...at the same moment.”²¹⁴ These experiences posit a form of immersion in collective atmosphere that distills relationship into pure feeling. Indeed Bernard associates this kind of loss of self with a plenitude unavailable in “our own experiences,” in which, distracted by vanity,

²¹¹ Woolf, *The Waves* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 112.

²¹² Ibid. On the connection between “splendid unanimity” and Woolf's engagement with the French *Unanimisme* movement associated with Jules Romains and his novel *Mort de Quelqu'un* (1911), see Allen McLaurin, “Virginia Woolf and Unanimism,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 9, no. 1 (1981–1982): 115–122.

²¹³ Woolf, *The Waves*, 114.

²¹⁴ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 1, 217; vol. 5, 215.

envy, love, and hate, “we are [incompletely] merged.”²¹⁵ As manifest in “this omnipresent, general life” and “the general impulse,” impersonality, too, has its splendor.²¹⁶

The Waves makes for a fitting place to conclude since it weaves together most adroitly Woolf’s pursuits of impersonality in theme and method. In some ways the telos of Woolf’s arc toward narrative impersonality, *The Waves* is largely composed of quoted character monologues that are unbroken by narration save the occasional inquit phrase (e.g., “said Bernard,” “said Jinny”) to signal a change in speaker. Interleaving the monologues are interludes that observe from a beach changes in light and sea; more impersonal than “Time Passes,” these segments give only slight, stylized suggestions of an authorizing consciousness in the form of frequent similes (signaled by “like” and “as if”) and deictic markers (“here” and “now”). The novel is otherwise entirely absorbed in the lyric minds of its six characters. *The Waves* also occasions Woolf’s best known expression of impersonal perception—Bernard’s question “how describe the world seen without a self?”²¹⁷ Despite representing the apotheosis of the self’s reduction, this moment is nonetheless no more a triumph of impersonality than is “splendid unanimity,” for it is just as temporary. Even in the twilight of his life Bernard finds that the self inevitably reasserts itself; he must collect “the particular coat that belongs to me...and be off. I, I, I, tired as I am, spent as I am...even I, an elderly man...must take myself off and catch some last train.”²¹⁸ In this way *The Waves*, like Woolf’s other writings, attests to the intermittence of impersonal modes of being, and the external landscape “seen without a self” yields not only to Bernard’s resurrected “I” but

²¹⁵ Woolf, *The Waves*, 248.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112, 113.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 296. As Bernard regains the world with a self, he is spurred by one final “new desire,” and so in the novel’s penultimate sentence he rallies what egotism remains for a Byronesque standoff against death: “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (*ibid.*, 297).

also to his awareness of intersubjective identity dispersed among his friends (“I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct?... There is no division between me and them”²¹⁹). Impersonality thus pivots between the inhuman and the transpersonal; “the world seen without a self” that evades human apprehension finds its complement in the “splendid unanimity” that unifies non-personal communities of mind.

In balancing the external, “star-like impersonality” of a world without a self with another relational, inter-human form that has served as this chapter’s focus, Woolf’s impersonality pits itself against social conventionality but not against the sheer fact of contact among individuals. Woolf theorizes impersonality as a communicative mode that leads out of the programmatic and deadening aspects of Victorian social life without either reverting to Romantic individualism or aspiring to a triumphantly modern kind of egotism. Woolf instead anchors impersonality’s positive potential for modern culture in its promise to renovate the terms of intimate relationships. Crucially, this is also a promise for fiction. That the novel is likewise a community of feeling Woolf makes clear when she argues that a book is not the “form which you see but emotion which you feel” and that “both in writing and in reading, it is the emotion that must come first.”²²⁰ As analogue to the train, the novel is tasked with producing impersonal intimacy and a community feeling under the most demanding of constraints: writer, reader, and Mrs. Brown are, after all, aboard a train that, like Bernard’s, is “rushing to that station where we must all get out.”²²¹ “Splendid unanimity” is what Woolf’s impersonality aims not only to show but also create, if only for a few moments at a time.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 288.

²²⁰ Woolf, “On Re-reading Novels,” in *The Moment*, 161.

²²¹ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 333.

Chapter 3: Tess Slesinger's Numb Modernism

*Tess Slesinger's book, "The Unpossessed," has sold 2700 copies in its first ten days after publication and the "intellectuals" it lambasts are making New York hideous with their cries. \$2.50 at all bookstores.*¹

—Simon and Schuster, New York, *New York Times*, May 25, 1934

To date, twenty-three bright young men have written to Tess Slesinger telling her that her Bruno Leonard, in her book, "The Unpossessed," is exactly like them and where in blazes did she get such intimate information?

— Simon and Schuster, *New York Times*, May 28, 1934

If you haven't yet been pinked with the accusation that you're one of "The Unpossessed," it's probably because you haven't been in any arguments recently. (You can expect it any minute, though. Over 600 copies of Tess Slesinger's book were sold yesterday, several possibly to your friends.)

— Simon and Schuster, *New York Times*, June 1, 1934

Simon and Schuster's plucky series of *New York Times* advertisements conveys at least two facts about Tess Slesinger's satire of ineffectual New York radicals and a left-wing magazine that fails to materialize. First, *The Unpossessed* was a big hit on publication, especially in New York; "lambast[ing]" " 'intellectuals' " apparently made good sport and produced saleable notoriety. A smiling author photo accompanied each advertisement, and in the novel's wake Slesinger achieved the success of a minor celebrity.² Second, *The Unpossessed* was billed as of its time, right up to the minute. Subtitled "A Novel of the Thirties" and dedicated "to my contemporaries," the novel insists on being read as a critique of its immediate historical moment and of the leftist

¹ This sales figure was revised in the following day's advertisement: "Over 4500 copies have been sold to date of which more than 1200 copies were sold this week." *New York Times*, May 26, 1934.

² Slesinger's popularity as an up-and-coming writer led to an exceptionally lucrative Hollywood screenwriting contract. Metro-Goldwyn-May lured Slesinger away from New York in 1935 by offering her a weekly salary of \$1,000 per week, which was on par with that of F. Scott Fitzgerald and roughly three times those of Nathaniel West and William Faulkner. See Shirley Biagai, "Forgive Me for Dying," *The Antioch Review* 35, no. 2/3 (1977): 231, 234.

intellectuals it portrays.³ Although Simon and Schuster's advertisement copy pitches these intellectuals as specimens of a recognizable and replicable type—one that *Times* readers apparently might have found it provocative to be typecast as—*The Unpossessed* owes its marginal survival past the 1930s largely to the fact that Slesinger's characters bear resemblance to a prominent group of intellectuals with whom Slesinger was personally involved.⁴ Calling her satire a critique of the intellectual type gets closer to the novel's point, but both the ad copy and later critical appraisals centering on Slesinger's biography sell the novel short by privileging character. This chapter argues that *The Unpossessed* levels a more significant critique at the discourse of radical impersonality that produces Slesinger's unpossessed intellectuals than at the hapless, at times tenderly pathetic, intellectuals themselves. *The Unpossessed* delineates the era's depersonalizing emotional paradigm in order to critique the role that anti-sentimental discourse plays in defeating the aspiration to collective action. This argument contests characterizations of the novel as an a-political paean to futility, reading *The Unpossessed* instead as an indictment of a certain mode of conjuring collectivism and leftist commitment that is at cross purposes with its own aims. Specifically, *The Unpossessed* is a satire of the anti-sentimentalism that dominates discussion and leftist ambition in Slesinger's fictional Greenwich Village of the early 1930s. Peopled by ghosts, corpses, and puppets, the novel proliferates what we might term *impersons*: intellectuals characterized by gutted personal lives, negated emotion, and numbed sensibility. They are, in the words of Bruno Leonard (23 more of whom presumably roamed New York in

³ Contemporaneity is a keynote of Slesinger's work. Slesinger published a volume of short stories in 1935 called *Time: The Present*, which, on the questionable wisdom that the stories "transcend their setting" and time, was republished in 1971 as *On Being Told that Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover and Other Stories* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), x.

⁴ After a brief stint as a bestseller, *The Unpossessed* appears to have been forgotten until Murray Kempton revived it in 1955. See *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955). *The Unpossessed* was reissued in 1966 by Avon Books, in 1984 by Feminist Press, and in 2002 by New York Review of Books.

1934), “victim[s] of the twentieth century social disease” that the novel devotes itself to describing.⁵ In pursuit of the epidemic, *The Unpossessed* gets beyond futility to an etiology of numbness.

The novel takes place in the fall of 1932, primarily in New York, but with brief excursions to Paris and, via reminiscence, to rural New England and suburban Chicago.⁶ In the words of one reviewer, the plot includes “no development, unless you count the progress from one fiasco to another.”⁷ Said fiascos are structured by three intertwining plots involving five main characters and a band of radical students known collectively as the Black Sheep. Bruno and his two friends, Jeffrey Blake and Miles Flinders, propose a radical magazine to which Bruno’s zealous undergraduate students, the Black Sheep, insist on contributing. Meanwhile Bruno’s cousin and love interest, Elizabeth Leonard, makes her prodigal return from the artistic enclaves of Europe, and Miles and his wife Margaret Flinders negotiate marital peril. The fiascos consist

⁵ Tess Slesinger, *The Unpossessed: A Novel of the Thirties* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), 283.

⁶ Margaret suggests that the novel takes place in the year after the Scottsboro boys were found guilty: “last year it seemed that the Scottsboro boys must hang without much ado” (9–10). The botched defense and mob persecution of nine African-American youths accused of raping two white women became a cause célèbre for the Communist Party. In April 1931 eight of the Scottsboro boys were found guilty and sentenced to death by electrocution; Margaret alludes to the retrial ordered by the Supreme Court over a year later, in October 1932. While *The Unpossessed* foregrounds the failure of the American revolutionary movement to produce the gender equality it formally espoused, the novel also points through such allusions to the movement’s similar inadequacy in addressing racial inequality. The Scottsboro reference surfaces in a list of the various abstract ways that Margaret Flinders participates in radical culture but yet feels personally remote from the issues at stake (“you have never been out of your country or even to the south of it,” she tells herself; “yet you make out checks from your meager income to send to the Scottsboro boys quaking in Alabama jails; you subscribe to a German paper which names writers you will never read...” [10–11]). As a second example, the party that concludes *The Unpossessed* includes a token African-American guest who is bewildered by repeated presumptions that he must be a celebrity like Paul Robeson or the Communist Party candidate for Vice-President (whose name the New York gentry fail to recall; they refer to James W. Ford, who first ran with William Z. Foster in 1932’s federal election).

⁷ Robert Cantwell, “Outlook Book Choice of the Month,” *New Outlook* (June, 1934): 53.

of repeated instances of inaction and negation: work on the magazine's manifesto produces ideological strife but few words and no program for action; Elizabeth returns to the United States for Bruno but their mutual ardor dissipates in witticism and whiskey; Jeffrey's tactical maneuvers with the bourgeoisie and the anti-Stalinist Left are exposed as merely failed amorous adventures; and Miles, recalling the lost Puritan faith of his childhood, eddies in the realization that Marx is his second god to fail. *The Unpossessed* tops its fiascos with two final calamities. The magazine's lavish gala and Hunger March fundraiser goes awry when Bruno withdraws his inaugural speech from the envelope only to find his notes torn to shreds. Standing before a restive crowd of conservative socialites, fellow travelers, and young Marxists, Bruno instead delivers a cynical and drunken oration rejecting middle-class radicalism altogether. Finally, the Flinders' near brush with a personal life is negated by Miles's retreat into his emotional shell and by their semi-mutual choice to abort Margaret's pregnancy.

This chapter begins by surveying contemporary reviews of *The Unpossessed* and the few subsequent analyses of the novel that have shaped its reception as a work of imaginative biography. We then turn to a context that is arguably more impactful for Slesinger's satire than her personal history: the leftist periodical culture that comprises *The Unpossessed's* cultural background as well as its explicit theme. Articles from leftist periodicals of the early 1930s suggest the topography of a discourse that values objectivity, science, and collectivism at the cost of individually oriented emotion and personal life; the privilege accorded to impersonality in this discourse provides a framework for reading *The Unpossessed* as a satire of the Left's gendered anti-sentimentalism. After examining the significance and consequences of the novel's eponymous concept, unpossession, in relation to intellectuals' chronic negation of feeling, the chapter closes with an extended analysis of a scene in which Slesinger sketches the minimum

affective requirements for political action. The novel's two events that posit regenerative personal and political futures both rely on characters' affective permeability and exchange: Margaret's decision to get pregnant and the group's decision to produce a magazine. In these fleeting opportunities, we see that Slesinger proposes a political alternative to negation and numbness that proves no match for the emotional patterns regulated by radical discourse.

I. Contemporaries, Critics

Critically and commercially, *The Unpossessed* produced a modest sensation. Its robust sales registered on bestseller lists of 1934 and prompted a fourth printing within the first month of publication. The novel received considerable mainstream acclaim and the recognition of a few, largely negative reviews in leftist periodicals. Several of the novel's qualities stand out among the press clippings: its modernist style, sharp edges, and vivid depiction of a contemporary atmosphere of feeling. The liberal press said it captured Depression-era intellectuals' "bewilderment and waste almost perfectly,"⁸ and even the Marxists conceded its technical finesse despite objections to the defects of an absent author.⁹ While many reviewers agreed that Slesinger's wit "slashed," "cut," and "bit," they were divided on the merits of her assault on the intellectuals.¹⁰ Those who reviewed *The Unpossessed* for liberal audiences

⁸ Cantwell, "Outlook Book Choice," 53. On characters' typicality see also J. Donald Adams, "'The Unpossessed' and Other Recent Works of Fiction," *New York Times* (May 20, 1934); Horace Gregory, "These Neurotic Young Folks," *New York Herald Tribune Books* 10, no. 36 (May 13, 1934): 2; and T. S. Matthews, "Rackety Jackets," *The New Republic* (May 23, 1934): 52. Several critics on the Left rejected the verisimilitude of Slesinger's portrait of contemporary intellectuals; see Edwin Seaver, "Phony 'Intellectuals,'" *The Menorah Journal* 22 (1934): 188–189 and Joseph Freeman, "'The Unpossessed,' a Novel in the Post-War Tradition of Futility," *The Daily Worker* (June 2, 1934).

⁹ Freeman, "'The Unpossessed,' a Novel," 7; Philip Rahv, "Storm Over the Intellectuals," *New Masses* (May 29, 1934): 26.

¹⁰ Edith Walton, "The Book Parade," *The Forum and Century* (July, 1934): 4; Rahv, "Storm Over the Intellectuals," 26; Ferner Nuhn, "The Lost Generation and the New Mortality," *The*

frequently called it brilliant and lauded its exposé of “parlor radicals.”¹¹ For instance it was called “one of the very best of recent American novels” and, elsewhere, “quite simply and dogmatically the best novel of contemporary New York City that we have read”; as of July, the latter reviewer deemed it not the best but the “brightest” book of the year so far.¹² Meanwhile the leftist press faulted Slesinger’s lack of political commitment. It deemed her either too personal (as Philip Rahv implied in the *New Masses*) or too detached (according to Joseph Freeman in *The Daily Worker*); yet whether she wielded her knife “in psychological spite” from outside the narrative frame or anxiously estranged herself from “feelings” about her characters, the absentee author was typically seen by the Left to fail in the same way: she made ambiguous her stance toward the revolutionary movement.¹³ “In a time of crisis like the present,” wrote Edwin Seaver in a review for *The Menorah Journal*, “obligations [to the revolutionary proletariat] are paramount,” and Slesinger did not fulfill them.¹⁴

Even apart from such political exigencies, it is unsurprising that *The Unpossessed* was badly received by publications of the kind it satirizes. According to Lionel Trilling, Slesinger was the first to represent in fiction radicalized American intellectuals, and her portrait did not flatter.¹⁵ Opprobrium from *The Menorah Journal* (1915–1962) in particular seems a matter of course given Slesinger’s personal connection to it. She was married to the journal’s assistant editor, Herbert Solow, from 1928 to 1932 and through him became acquainted with the journal’s

Nation (May 23, 1934): 598; Lewis Gannett, “Books and Things,” *New York Herald Tribune* (May 10, 1934).

¹¹ Walton, “The Book Parade,” 4.

¹² Cantwell, “Outlook Book Choice,” 57; John Chamberlain, “Books of the Times,” *The New York Times*, May 9, 1934; Chamberlain, “Books of the Times,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 1934.

¹³ Rahv, “Storm Over the Intellectuals,” 26; Freeman, “‘The Unpossessed,’ a Novel,” 7.

¹⁴ Seaver, “Phony ‘Intellectuals,’ ” 189.

¹⁵ See Lionel Trilling, “A Novel of the Thirties,” in *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965–75*, ed. Diana Trilling (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1979), 16.

other core members: Anita Brenner, Elliot Cohen, Clifton Fadiman, Albert Halper, Felix Morrow, Henry Rosenthal, Trilling, and more peripherally, Max Eastman and Sidney Hook. *The Menorah* began as a secular, culturally-pluralist magazine committed to Jewish humanism and aligned with the wider Menorah Movement.¹⁶ The journal aimed to cultivate a community of modern, cosmopolitan Jews grounded in a sense of shared ethnic history and humanist philosophy. Under Cohen's editorial direction through the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, *The Menorah* moved steadily left in its politics and aspirations. The journal and its writers became intensely involved in the factional skirmishes that played out across other leftist periodicals like *The Modern Quarterly* and *New Masses*, and Solow and Cohen in particular were instrumental in organizing anti-Stalinist opposition to the Communist Party.¹⁷ Hence Slesinger witnessed, and to some extent participated in, the radicalization of a group of talented young writers who, like her characters, turned to leftist magazines as vehicles for activism and dissent. Hook would later claim that Slesinger "never understood a word about the political discussions that raged around her," but for several years she undeniably lived close to the storm's

¹⁶ Beginning in 1906 as a Harvard student society, the Menorah Movement arose out of a non-partisan intercollegiate association devoted to the study of Jewish knowledge and history. Its purpose, defined as intellectual, moral, and patriotic in nature, was to enrich contemporary American culture through "the promotion in American colleges and universities of the study of Jewish history, culture, and problems, and the advancement of Jewish ideals" (from the constitution of the Intercollegiate Menorah Association, quoted in *The Menorah Movement For the Study and Advancement of Jewish Culture and Ideals* [Ann Arbor: Intercollegiate Menorah Association, 1914], 9).

¹⁷ Alan M. Wald's *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* gives an authoritative account of the personalities, social networks, and Marxist debates of 1930s New York. On the *Menorah* group in particular, which Wald credits as driving "one of the most important yet least documented developments in the evolution of modern American culture" (27), see chapter 1, "Jewish Internationalists" and chapter 2, "Dissident Communists." See also Wald's "The Menorah Group Moves Left," *Jewish Social Studies* 38, no. 3/4 (1976): 289–320.

center.¹⁸ When Slesinger and Solow divorced, she also broke ties with the *Menorah* and with New York's intellectual left. Dedicated to her contemporaries, *The Unpossessed* issued an ironic and definitive farewell. Hence Trilling claims in his afterword to the 1966 edition that "those who knew Tess Slesinger when she wrote *The Unpossessed* were aware that the book was not only a literary enterprise but also a personal act. It passed judgment upon certain people; in effect it announced the author's separation from them and from the kind of life they made."¹⁹

In criticism of *The Unpossessed* from 1955 to 2009 attention to the personal act has overwhelmed the literary enterprise. Substantive engagements with the novel are few, and, with the exception of Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire*, taken up below, critical accounts of *The Unpossessed* are to varying degrees limited by Slesinger's biography and historical connection to *The Menorah Journal*.²⁰ As a result, *The Unpossessed*'s ability to describe the group tends to

¹⁸ Quoted in Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 40. At the time he knew Slesinger, Hook was a prominent and outspoken Marxist philosopher and professor at New York University. Distinguished by historian John Patrick Diggins as "America's most original Marxist thinker" for his attempt to merge Marxism with pragmatism, Hook eventually recanted his support of radical politics. *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 159. Wald identifies Hook's relatively sudden swing from anti-Stalinist communism in the 1930s to "fanatical" anticommunist conservatism post-World War II as a trajectory characteristic of the New York intellectuals who composed the 1930s anti-Stalinist Left (see *New York Intellectuals*, especially 3–6). Hook's appraisal of Slesinger's political acumen is undoubtedly complex. His condescension is unexceptionally misogynist (he goes on to consign Slesinger's capabilities to the realm of female authors and "moods"; "Tess could talk about Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen," but in the realm of politics she merely "caught the psychological mood of some of Herbert's friends" [quoted in Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 40]), but Hook's retrospection must also have been affected by the ideological contortions requisite to his own political reversal.

¹⁹ Trilling, "A Novel of the Thirties," 5.

²⁰ Phillip Abbott, "Are Three Generations of Radicals Enough? Self-Critique in the Novels of Tess Slesinger, Mary McCarthy, and Marge Piercy," *The Review of Politics* 53, no. 4 (1991): 623; Biagi, "Forgive me for Dying," 224–236; Janet Sharistianian, afterword to *The Unpossessed: A Novel of the Thirties* by Tess Slesinger (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1984), 359–386; Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 180–185. Teres provides a brief sketch of *The Unpossessed* but otherwise focuses on the novel's criticism and the biographical account made familiar by Biagi and Sharistianian. Sharistianian's afterword to the Feminist Press edition

serve as measure of the novel's consequence. Constrained by its context, *The Unpossessed's* claim to a place in American literary history is as a significant failure, deserving a substantial footnote for its introduction of an American intellectual type and its analysis of gendered constructs but inadequate to its task of characterizing Slesinger's eminent contemporaries. Indeed *The Unpossessed* owes its (marginal) perseverance in literary history to its dubious status as a "document" of the thirties. "Document" is the term Murray Kempton applies in his retrospective *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties* (1955), in which he resurrects Slesinger's "almost forgotten" novel as "accurate enough to be considered still a roman à clef" and "almost our only surviving document on a group of intellectuals."²¹

Kempton's terms have persisted. In *The New York Intellectuals*, Wald puts Slesinger's roman à clef in the service of his historical account of the *Menorah* intellectuals. While his treatment aspires to balancing the literary enterprise of *The Unpossessed* with its evidentiary

of *The Unpossessed* continues Biagi's pioneering work in piecing together Slesinger's history as a writer, feminist, and political activist and in situating *The Unpossessed* in the context of Slesinger's full career. Although this chapter agrees with Sharistanian that Slesinger "writes out of an unprogrammable feminism" (374) and that her "point...is that politics must begin with and circle back to home" (378)—especially if "home" can be understood as a synonym for "personal life"—Sharistanian's argument diverges from the present one by placing considerable emphasis on the novel's autobiographical impetus, arguing that *The Unpossessed* "separate[es]...the author into the two main female characters" (374). Abbott gives a sustained analysis of *The Unpossessed*, but copious interpretive errors and faulty assumptions render Abbott's claims incoherent. Contra Abbott, "the dissolution" (608) of Miles's and Margaret's marriage does not occur, for example, nor does the moment when "Norah is chided for her attempt to introduce women's concerns as part of the magazine's agenda" (614); Bruno is not solely responsible for his failed intimacy with Elizabeth (615); and neither Margaret nor Elizabeth achieve the "political lucidity" and personal renewal that Abbott attributes to them (615, 623)—furthermore, it is Slesinger, not Margaret, "who will seek a new life without her husband and the [magazine] circle" (623).

²¹ Kempton, *Part of Our Time*, 122–123. When *The Unpossessed* was reissued in 1966, a *New Republic* review furnished Kempton with the opportunity to revisit his earlier appraisal. It was far less generous, concluding, "the life which endures in her grievance [i.e., *The Unpossessed*] is instead in what is personal" (27). Even apart from its grammar, this remark stumbles by imposing on *The Unpossessed* the same language of critique that the novel works to undermine.

usefulness, he nonetheless deems “a failure” the fact that the novel does not “portray the political essence of the group.”²² *Menorah* intellectuals’ political thinking in all its rigorous complexity is missing, Wald argues, thus rendering the book “limited,” if nonetheless “impressive.”²³ Even Trilling, who confutes Kempton and cautions against “insufficiently critical” uses of the novel as “document,” judges it according to standards of realist accuracy.²⁴ Trilling contends that *The Unpossessed* “would have been a better book still if the author, by a firmer commitment to actuality, had set a more substantial historical scene, if she had encompassed the political particularities of her time.”²⁵ In an attempt to attend seriously to the literary enterprise, he locates the novel’s agon in the timeless categories of nature and spirit, life and idealism; rather than arriving at a persuasive account of what the novel does and means, however, he succeeds only in shifting its locus of significance from the *Menorah* group to Slesinger herself. She assumes in Trilling’s reading the embodiment of the “*mystique* of Woman”—i.e., the nature/life half of the dialectic—with which the novel ultimately sides, and so it teeters at the edge of “that so often graceless thing, a novel of feminine protest.”²⁶ Her “*parti pris*,” both personal and gendered, obstructs a more objective and balanced account of the dialectic that so exercised radicals of the 1930s. Trilling’s brief passage analysis illustrates the blind spot of his critique: he identifies the language of Miles’s Manichean dialectic as Slesinger’s own in order to commend the glimmer of what he thinks Slesinger could have achieved. Writing more recently, Morris Dickstein errs more egregiously in his history of 1930s culture. Dickstein’s inclusion of *The Unpossessed* is

²² Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁴ It is worth noting that Trilling also maintains that “none of the characters is a literal, or even nearly literal, representation of the person to whom the character may be referred” (“A Novel of the Thirties,” 19).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21, 23.

praiseworthy in itself, but he persistently wrenches propositions belonging to characters or the novel as a whole into the form of authorial statements (“says Slesinger,” “Slesinger sees,” etc.). Borrowing his yardstick from “real life” *Menorah* events and personages, he refashions *The Unpossessed* as a retaliative memoir. Hence he finds that “Slesinger writes more as a feminist than as a radical,” echoing historian Richard H. Pells’s assessment that the novel’s issues “ultimately become more sexual than political.”²⁷

Interpretations framed by biography and focused on character have thus tended to conclude that “politics was not [Slesinger’s] subject” and so to confine *The Unpossessed*’s implications—and by extension feminist interventions more generally—to the personal realm as defined against the political.²⁸ This conclusion is all the more striking when applied to a work that mocks the division between the personal and political in the first place and to a narrative that works assiduously to excise traces of an authorizing agent from which the author’s views could be traced. By the terms of the roman à clef, the novel’s political analysis registers as too thin and too “feminine,” its dual critiques of gender and radicalism seem to clash, and Bruno’s final speech appears to stand for both “Slesinger’s basic view” and the novel’s supposed political upshot that intellectual radicalism is futile.²⁹ Yet while internecine leftist debates of the 1930s indeed manifest in the novel as slogans and posturing, their presence is not peripheral as mere gestures. The atmosphere of sloganeering and posturing is itself the subject of the novel. When hermeneutic attention shifts from character to discourse, two things become evident. First, *The*

²⁷ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 512; Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), 404.

²⁸ Trilling, “A Novel of the Thirties,” 20.

²⁹ In Wald’s interpretation, the essential point of both the novel and Bruno’s speech is the “uselessness of diseased intellectuals to the revolutionary movement” (*New York Intellectuals*, 69).

Unpossessed makes a substantive political argument beyond factional Marxist polemics, and second, its source materials are drawn not only from caricatured individuals but more importantly from certain abstract constructions of value that precede and permeate the terms of explicit political debate.³⁰

Along these lines Paula Rabinowitz provides a crucial intervention by identifying gendered language and reproductive narratives of 1930s radical culture as discursive contexts for the novel. Rabinowitz shows that *The Unpossessed* “needs to be read as a ‘document,’ not about 1930s male literary radicals, but of women’s re-gendering of the 1930s revolutionary novel,” and in particular, of Slesinger’s reconfiguration of the metaphors of gender difference that underwrote the period’s dominant narratives of revolutionary action.³¹ Rabinowitz is right to identify political discourse as the novel’s central satirical target, but the implications of that discourse extend beyond gender, which plays a constitutive, but not a monopolizing, role in the novel’s multi-faceted critique of radical impersonality. That is to say, the novel’s center lies not in the discourse of gender but rather in the gendered discourse of impersonality. Addressing contemporary radical debates at the meta-political level, Slesinger exposes how self-defeating axioms about the right ways to radically live, think, and feel are woven out of the discursive value insistently accorded to objectivity over embodied complexity, to collectivism over individualism, and to the abstract cause over personal life. In *The Unpossessed* these impersonal values are both inherently gendered and, tautologically, available to describe gender difference.

³⁰ Robert M. Adams, a reviewer of the 1966 edition, makes a similar assertion when he claims that Slesinger “got beyond ideology.” See “Restorations,” review of *The Unpossessed* by Tess Slesinger, *New York Times* (October 20, 1966).

³¹ Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 64, 141.

II. Radical Discourse in an Age for Objectivity

“This is the age for objectivity,” declares one of *The Unpossessed*’s young radicals; “the subjective went out with individualism.”³² These phrases epitomize the rhetoric of radical impersonality that the novel parodies and condense many of the key terms of 1930s leftist discourse: objectivity, collectivism, and a sense of contemporaneity synchronized with the revolutionary cause. The significance of Slesinger’s manipulation of this discourse becomes visible when *The Unpossessed*—and particularly the language of its male radicals—is read in relation to leftist periodical culture of the late 1920s and early 1930s, specifically Marxist and left-leaning liberal journals such as *The Modern Quarterly* (1923–1952), *New Masses* (1926–1948), *The Communist* (1922–1944), *The New Republic* (1914–), *The Nation* (1865–), and *The Partisan Review* (1934–1937; 1938–2003).³³ Demonstrating a modernist’s fascination with the quotedness of language, Slesinger lifts notable and recurrent phrases that circulated in these journals’ pages and re-coins them as clichés. *The Unpossessed* appears in this framework as a pastiche of contemporaneous Marxist idioms and a rebuttal to the doctrines they cite. Indeed Bruno’s torn-up gala speech, drifting to the floor in hundreds of paper shreds, could be taken to represent pastiche itself, as so many scraps of discourse sifting through the air. In this sense Slesinger was less, as one reviewer dubbed her, a “psychic adept at picking things out of the air” than a sharp-witted verbal collagist with a good ear.³⁴

The lexical overlap between radical periodicals and *The Unpossessed* demonstrates Slesinger’s broadly citational method. In addition to collectivism and scientific objectivity, to which we return below, the language that Slesinger takes from leftist discourse belongs to

³² Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 104.

³³ *The Modern Quarterly* converted to *Modern Monthly* from 1933–1937 and reverted to *The Modern Quarterly* from 1938–1952.

³⁴ Chamberlain, “Books of the Times” (May 9, 1934).

several main tropes: disease, death, and decomposition; dead ends (and their cognates—blind alleys, cul de sacs, futility of any variety); reproduction (including embryos, rebirth, ripeness, but especially forms of reproductive failure—impotence, sterility, stillbirth, abortion); popularized psychoanalysis; and what can be termed public feeling—in this case, a sense of urgency and epochal confusion combined with a sensibility favoring the hardboiled over the sentimental. Bruno’s repeated references to figurative disease, for instance, are indebted to leftist phrase-making about “our American disease.”³⁵ Radical writer and journalist Meridel Le Sueur vividly describes “a middle-class malady...a sickness common to all of us nourished on rotten bourgeois soil” in which “people [are] rotting, dying in this dead class like plants decaying in foul soil.”³⁶ More succinctly but to roughly the same point, Kenneth Burke avers that “beneath a seasonal economic ill lies a basic cultural ill.”³⁷ Resonant statements in the leftist press often combine multiple tropes, as in Edmund Wilson’s bracing conclusion to a 1932 *New Republic* article that designates the blind alley as the place liberal culture goes to die: “that other [i.e., capitalist] world is dying at the end of its blind alley; but this other [the Marxist], just coming to maturity, has its immense creative work to do.”³⁸ Bruno imitates this weave of dead ends and embryonic beginnings in his Hunger March speech: he announces, “I am with message” but, when the message aborts, he instructs his students to “leave us rotting in [the] blind alley” from which Wilson excepts himself.³⁹ Bruno’s and Jeffrey’s speeches are both punctuated by the kairotic imperatives that echo throughout leftist cultural criticism: Slesinger inserts stock phrases—“the time is ripe,” “it’s time we took our stand,” and “it’s time our party organized”—that chime with

³⁵ Edmund Wilson, “Tennessee Agrarians,” *New Republic* (July 29, 1931): 279.

³⁶ Meridel Le Sueur, “The Fetish of being Outside,” *New Masses* 14 (February 26, 1935): 22, 23.

³⁷ Kenneth Burke, “Boring from Within,” *The New Republic* 65 (February 4, 1931): 329.

³⁸ Wilson, “Marxist History,” 228.

³⁹ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 280, 285.

“the time has come” and “one must decide now between two worlds” in the leftist press.⁴⁰ Similarly, the “confused individualist/bourgeois/liberal,” “the straddling intellectual,” and the “tired radical” are reliable epithets that Slesinger adapts as characterization: the novel teems with cognates of “confusion” and “bewilderment,” and her “straddling” intellectuals are indeed perpetually “tired.” Slesinger also repurposes the phrase “boring from within,” which references a radical strategy that in earlier decades had been subject to bitter contention. The phrase resurfaces as the title of a 1931 *New Republic* article by Kenneth Burke, who half-facetiously advises leftists to ditch Marx and join Tammany Hall or the Y. M. C. A. in order to insinuate revolution from inside of capitalist “conformity itself” and so avoid both party dogma and bourgeois backlash.⁴¹ Substituting for Burke’s irony an absurdly solipsistic fantasy of espionage, Jeffrey claims “boring from within” as a revolutionary tactic that licenses him to advance the cause by partaking in bourgeois decadence, particularly in the form of sex with capitalists.⁴²

This sampling shows Slesinger’s engagement with her era to be intensively attuned to the language of radical culture. Further, she not only parodies leftist language but focuses particular attention on certain discursive markers of value and dismissal that surface insistently in leftist periodicals. She seizes on two topoi that both endorse impersonality and devalue individual emotions: scientific objectivity and collectivism. In leftist discourse these two values function as trumps.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 86, 9, 224, 271, 278; Granville Hicks, “The Crisis in American Criticism,” *New Masses* 8, no. 7 (February, 1933): 5; Wilson, “An Appeal to Progressives,” *The New Republic* (January 14, 1931): 234; Michael Gold, “Notes of the Month,” *New Masses* 5, no. 11 (1930): 3.

⁴¹ Burke, “Boring from Within,” 328. In earlier incarnations, “boring from within” typically signified a strategy for infiltrating and radicalizing labor unions. See Paul Frederick Brissenden, *The I. W. W.: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1920); and “Red Party Plans to ‘Fool’ Workers; ‘Boring From Within’ Only Way of Educating Them to Radical Communism, Speakers Say,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1921.

⁴² Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 158.

As defined in two *New Republic* and *Modern Quarterly* articles of 1932, Marxism is an adamantly scientific enterprise: “Marxism...is a scientific point of view,” “not a crying after the moon, but a scientific approach to the problem of revolution.”⁴³ These are conventional formulations, and indeed the leftist press brims with like statements banking on the premium status of objectivity and science as guarantors of value. Even as combatants in factional debates, both literary and philosophical in bent, might question the scientific validity of opponents, they accept the premise of scientific value. Max Eastman, for instance, “in the effort to make revolutionary thinking scientific,” attacked Marxism on the grounds of skeptical objectivity, conducting a long and erratic campaign to junk dialectical materialism as “animistic” religiosity.⁴⁴ Sydney Hook, who in Wald’s words evolved “a complex argument that Marxism is ‘scientific’ while not a ‘science’ per se,” eviscerated Eastman in a famously vituperative exchange in the pages of *The Modern Quarterly*.⁴⁵ Hook claimed that Eastman knew “next to nothing about scientific method” and only gave it “lip service” via “a rather emasculated brand of instrumentalism.”⁴⁶ Eastman’s retort pretends to trump the trump: “Hook refuses to have Marxism restated in this scientific...manner.”⁴⁷ Hook’s position was also impugned by Earl Browder, Chairman of the Communist Party USA, who vaunted “the futility of logical agility in conflict with the objective truth of the monolithic Marxian system.” “Only this understanding of the objective scientific character of our program and our philosophy,” pronounced Browder as

⁴³ Wilson, “Marxist History,” 227; V. F. Calverton, “The Role of the Intellectuals,” *The Modern Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1932): 10.

⁴⁴ Max Eastman, “A Master Magician,” *The Modern Monthly* 7, no. 6 (July, 1933): 290; quoted in Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 116.

⁴⁵ Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 121–122.

⁴⁶ Sidney Hook, “As to Max Eastman’s Mentality,” *The Modern Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1931): 90; “Marxism, Metaphysics, and Modern Science,” *The Modern Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (May, 1928): 389.

⁴⁷ Eastman, “A Master Magician,” 293.

Communist Party mouthpiece, “gives us the capacity for carrying through the proletarian revolution.”⁴⁸ As these skirmishes illustrate, theoretical debates evoked science both for and against the empirical method of dialectical materialism: advocates charged detractors with misunderstanding Marx, and detractors charged advocates with subscribing to “sentimental theology” and “disguised religion.”⁴⁹

These arguments enact an impasse between scientific objectivity and scientific Marxist doctrine. Each writer claims to have a more authentic grasp of scientific method and to be the stauncher theorist of modern revolution. As a result scientific claims thrive in leftist discourse virtually unassailed and, in doing so, they rely on a formulaic set of dismissals. Playing science against predictable targets, polemics are peppered with accusations of sentimentalism, “emotional faith,” “emotional belief,” and “religious emotion.”⁵⁰ In the same vein, Wallace Phelps and Philip Rahv damn critics for whom “Marxism is not a science but a *sentiment*,” who substitute “gush on the one hand, and invective on the other, for analysis.”⁵¹ Hence, not only is science constructed in opposition to emotionality and faith, but the gendered perils of failing to be “hard-boiled about radicalism”—that is, oriented by principle and data not “individual

⁴⁸ Earl Browder, “The Revisionism of Sidney Hook,” *The Communist* 7, no. 2 (1933): 146; “The Revisionism of Sidney Hook (Concluded),” *The Communist* 7, no. 3 (1933): 299.

⁴⁹ Hook, “Why I Am a Communist: Communism without Dogmas,” *Modern Monthly* 8, no. 3 (1934): 161; Eastman, “The Doctrinal Crisis in Socialism,” *The Modern Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1931): 427.

⁵⁰ Hook, “Why I Am,” 153; Eastman, “Excommunication and Exorcism as Critical Methods,” *The Modern Monthly* 7, no. 5 (1933): 211; Eastman, “Excommunication,” 210.

⁵¹ Wallace Phelps and Philip Rahv, “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature,” *The Partisan Review* 1, no. 3 (1934): 5. It is worth noting that John Dewey and Morris R. Cohen turn the same terms against communism when they state their objections in paired *Modern Monthly* articles entitled “Why I Am Not a Communist.” Morris finds communists “quite unscientific in their claims,” and Dewey comments that “the emotional tone and methods of discussion and dispute which seem to accompany Communism at present are extremely repugnant to me.” Morris, “Why I am Not a Communist,” *Modern Monthly* 8, no. 3 (1934): 141; Dewey, “Why I am Not a Communist,” *Modern Monthly* 8, no. 3 (1934): 137.

emotion” and dogma—surface in the vocabulary of emasculation, gush, and sentiment. In other words, Marxists can sound a lot like modernists.⁵²

The collectivist trump, too, operates through emotional disavowal, and indeed the disavowal of anything construed as personal, private, or individual. In 1927 V. F. Calverton declared individualism already an “anachronism” under attack by “the whole structure of contemporary society.”⁵³ This statement lends credence to Pells’s claim that individualism functioned as “the chief symbolic villain for most intellectuals” of the 1930s, and as such, it figured as collectivism’s sentimental foil in the leftist magazines.⁵⁴ Literary or activist solidarity with the proletarian collective was touted as the single alternative to capitalism as well as to the spirit of narcissism and escapism that pervaded the 1920s. In Newton Arvin’s words, “a truly proletarian literature would mean a break with the mood of self-pity, with the cult of romantic separatism, with [the] sickly subjectivism and melodramatic misanthropy” that characterized the 1920s’ emotionally indulgent individualism. Arvin adds, “this much is almost too clear to deserve stating,” which is to say that by the 1930s, individualism had expired and begun to “stink,” and no writer or intellectual needed to point out what had long since assaulted the nose.⁵⁵ Yet discursive value is pegged to exactly such reiterations of the already commonplace, and

⁵² George Soule, “Hard-Boiled Radicalism,” *The New Republic* (January 21, 1931): 262. On modernism’s pejorative collocation of the sentimental with femininity, see Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). In Clark’s words, “the term *sentimental* makes a shorthand for everything modernism would exclude” (9), and Anglo-American modernists used it to construct an avant-garde in opposition to the feminine.

⁵³ V. F. Calverton, “Sex and Economics,” *New Masses* 2, no. 5 (1927), 12. Calverton’s full statement is that “the whole structure of contemporary society is in revolt against this individualism which has become devastatingly anachronistic.”

⁵⁴ Pells, *Radical Visions*, 112.

⁵⁵ Newton Arvin, “Individualism and American Writers,” *The Nation* (October 31, 1931): 293; “stinking individualism” appears in Le Sueur, “The Fetish of being Outside,” 23.

statements of individualism's demise did in fact bear repeating from the late 1920s through the 1930s.

In a 1938 issue of *The Partisan Review* Trilling spells out the rationale underlying collectivist doctrine. In retrospect and with a note of criticism, he summarizes the “cultural tradition of the intellectual Left” according to the “emotional tendencies” or foundational assumptions that 1930s radicals consistently positioned beyond dispute: “that the collective aspects of life may be distinguished from the individual aspects; that the collective aspects are basically important and are good; that the individual aspects are, or should be, of small interest and that they contain a destructive principle; that the fate of the individual is determined by social forces.”⁵⁶ This list specifies the warrants that authorized the reflexive pejoration and dismissal of the personal and the private in leftist discourse. According to many radicals, any facet of human life deemed “an individual and not a social affair...[was] therefore of little significance”; the revolutionary “must, therefore, constantly strive to proceed from the personal to the general.”⁵⁷ Hinging on “therefore,” these statements elevate the value of collectivism to a logical premise.

This discursive tradition produced an insistent rhetoric of self-denial. Upton Sinclair provides an instructive example in his contribution to a 1927 *New Masses* symposium on “the correct revolutionary proletarian attitude towards sex.”⁵⁸ Sinclair advises radicals to “regulate

⁵⁶ Lionel Trilling, “The America of John Dos Passos,” *The Partisan Review* 4, no. 5 (1938): 27. The list continues: “that the social forces now dominant are evil; that there is a conflict between the dominant social forces and other, better, rising forces; that it is certain or very likely that the rising forces will overcome the now dominant ones.”

⁵⁷ Calverton, “Sex and Economics,” 11; Granville Hicks, “The Crisis in American Criticism,” *New Masses* 8, no. 7 (February, 1933): 5.

⁵⁸ As both a structurally determinant aspect of society and, by most standards, a quintessentially private matter, sex represents a limit case for the collective/individual binary. That private concerns were inconsequential to social objectives was incontrovertible, but whether sex was

their lives effectively” in order to commit themselves entirely to the workers’ cause, which meant disavowing as vestiges of “capitalist decadence” happiness, prosperity, and non-instrumental sexuality: “Real revolutionary proletarians are recognized by the fact that they make sacrifices for the cause; they regard the future of the working class as of more importance than their individual prosperity and happiness. And their sex life will be tested by that attitude.”⁵⁹ Sinclair frowns especially on sexual affairs that waste time in “a tangle of futile and distracting emotions,” but trifling is not the precinct of sexuality alone; his protocol “would apply equally as well to any...other activities...[including] eating and drinking, waking and sleeping, walking and talking.” “So perhaps I haven’t said very much,” Sinclair concludes, but to the contrary, his brief commentary speaks volumes about the mechanisms of repudiation and prohibition that sustain collectivist discourse, particularly in its campaign against “futile...emotions.”⁶⁰ Coding emotions as waste, he likewise casts suspicion on any personal activity that cannot be called to collective account.

Sinclair presents leftist impersonality as truism: commitment to the cause entails all-encompassing self-sacrifice. Yet despite his suspicion of private experiences, Sinclair’s notion of “sacrifice” could itself be cast as an expression of middle-class entitlement, both sentimental and personally motivated. John Darmstadt implies as much when he upbraids Sinclair in *The Modern Quarterly* for being a middle-class poser who appropriates working class exigency in order to

purely personal and how sexual life could be recuperated from the framework of bourgeois privacy and property was subject to debate. The *New Masses* symposium also featured Calverton as a discussant. Whereas Sinclair’s “Revolution—Not Sex” argues that sexual relations must either make people “better workers” or reproduce future workers for the cause (*New Masses* 2, no. 5 [March, 1927]: 11), Calverton’s “Sex and Economics” advocates sexual freedom. Calverton argues that radicals must oppose private property in sexual as well as economic life, and so refuse “the bourgeois family with its marital system of monogamy” (12).

⁵⁹ Sinclair, “Revolution—Not Sex,” 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

promote himself as a revolutionary savior: “There is a difference between the *class-conscious* revolutionist fighting for *life*,” he argues, “and the *self-conscious* uplifter-of-others upon whose ‘sacrifice’ the destiny of the working class depends!”⁶¹ According to Darmstadt, Sinclair dons a “crown of thorns” to prescribe radically tinged “Christian sacrifice” and Puritan morality from the position of bourgeois privilege; true proletarian sacrifice, by contrast, is what capitalism exacts from workers in return for their most basic survival.⁶² Through his use of Christian metaphor, Darmstadt parodies Sinclair as a sentimental martyr instead of simply a self-aggrandizing hero. Darmstadt’s satiric evocation of the Passion suggests that Sinclair traffics in pathos as well as egotism under the veil of ascetic social service—an insinuation that Slesinger repeats when she depicts Bruno standing “crucified” before a crudely painted banner of proletarian Hunger Marchers.⁶³

If one charge against self-sacrificing radical intellectuals was that in collectivism they sought martyrdom, another was that they used the workers’ cause to escape from personal problems. Indeed the collectivist creed held in tension the imperatives to surrender oneself to the cause but yet not to do so as a means of escape.⁶⁴ In a moment of gutting recognition, Miles Flinders states the problem in terms of subconscious deception: “he saw [his radical friends] suddenly, coming together less from their belief in revolution...than from some terrible inner need in each of them to lay out his own personal conflicts in terms of something higher, to solve

⁶¹ John Darmstadt, “The Sexual Revolution,” *The Modern Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1927): 140.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 276.

⁶⁴ I am indebted to Pells’s account, which casts this issue as a defining tension of the 1930s (*Radical Visions*, 96–150). In Pells’s words “the decade’s dominant assumption [was] that one could overcome inner turmoil by becoming part of a stable community, that private problems could be solved through collective outlets” (115).

his private ends camouflaged as world-problems, secretively in public.”⁶⁵ The impersonality of higher causes and world-problems, in other words, is potentially always an intellectual subterfuge for hiding personal problems in plain sight. Here Miles affirms the skepticism expressed by liberal commentator Joseph Wood Krutch a few months before *The Unpossessed* was published. “Is it not possible,” Krutch muses, “that some revolutionists have become what they are because they found difficulty with themselves as individuals, and discovered in the professional denunciation of the capitalist system a very successful means of running away from the selves which they dared not face?”⁶⁶ Krutch received an answer in the *New Masses* from Marxist writer Rebecca Pitts, who justifies radical impersonality and parries Krutch’s charge of escapism in kind: she diagnoses Krutch a “confused individualist” who has fallen for the capitalist ruse of locating modern integrity in “personality.”⁶⁷ The “‘modern’ attitude” is defined by “a lack of positive faith—in anything,” Pitts writes, which causes individuals to recede from the social world and locate all significance in their private selves:

In the brutal chaos of the modern world the individual is detached, lost—poignantly aware of his isolation, and of vast impersonal forces at work, to which it is hard to lend human meaning. The honest bourgeois soul seeks salvation from this Hell; but he seeks it *for himself*. Thus he places the emphasis squarely where it should not be—on *his own personality*. This conception of integrity as personal acquisition is precisely what falsifies the position of all these individualists.⁶⁸

Pitts argues that the solution to the chaotic impersonality of modern life is not to invest in personality but the opposite: to submit one’s self to the ordered and virtuous impersonality of the

⁶⁵ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 188.

⁶⁶ Joseph Wood Krutch, “What the People Want,” *The Nation* (December 27, 1933): 746.

⁶⁷ Rebecca Pitts, “Something to Believe In,” *New Masses* 10, no. 11 (March 13, 1934): 17, 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14, 15, 16.

workers' cause. Accordingly she names Marxism "the only legitimate heir" to faiths expired under the pressures of modern science and skepticism. Abjuring mere "intellectual assent," she advocates "deep surrender" and "renunciation" of "the separate 'I'" to "the collective 'we.'"⁶⁹ Notably, she describes modern personality as an impulse to "acquisition," conveying psychic adjustment in terms of capitalist accumulation. In contrast communism works by divestment. It entails "giving one's life away," renouncing "the personalistic ego," and merging one's purpose with the collective revolutionary movement.⁷⁰ Pitts translates communism into a spiritual doctrine, rhyming collective ownership of the "functionally subordinate" self with the economic abolishment of private property.⁷¹

Hence Pitts's account of collectivism vividly renders the affective appeal that was suppressed in Sinclair's. Casting radical collectivism as a conversion narrative, Pitts's communism epitomizes the "sentimental theology" that Hook, Eastman, and Browder so noisily reject (even as they allegedly purvey it in quieter forms).⁷² These contrasting views represent two strains of leftist discourse that seem to work against each other: at their extremes, scientific Marxism insists that faith is an emotion, and emotions are waste-products of ideology, whereas sentimental collectivism preaches that political commitment transpires by faith alone. Yet, despite their incongruity, scientific Marxism and sentimental collectivism both depend on self-abnegation. As *The Unpossessed* asks us to see, their shared value in impersonality is as significant as their differences. These two discursive strains roughly correspond to what James T.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 15, 16.

⁷¹ Ibid., 15.

⁷² Pitts seems to anticipate such a judgment. In a later article she recounts her own moment of radical conversion in terms of experiencing "a new emotion" and prefaces her story with the counterclaim, "does this seem too personal? It isn't so personal." Hers, she writes, is the story of the new masses. "Women and the New Masses," *New Masses* (December 1, 1936): 15.

Farrell defined in 1936 as two “streams in revolutionary [literary] criticism”—“mechanically deterministic ‘Marxism’” and “revolutionary sentimentalism”— and as Farrell explains, despite “starting from opposite poles, [they] usually meet in the same rut.”⁷³

Slesinger rehearses the conflicts that constitute radical discourse not to arbitrate these strains, but rather to show that impersonality is the rut where they both wind up. They collaborate in rendering personal life and emotion pejorative terms and in expelling the pragmatic bases for individuality. Pells argues that the 1930s was characterized by “an almost religious need to believe in something regardless of its truth,” but Slesinger shows that belief was at the same time undercut by suspicion of sentimentalism: fervor had somehow to be quixotically sublimated into rational conviction.⁷⁴ On the flip side, Slesinger portrays scientistic radicalism as closeted religiosity that aspires to but never fully achieves the consolation of faith. Indeed in Slesinger’s analysis, scientism and collectivism articulate two poses that radicals awkwardly attempt to strike but cannot hold. Her intellectuals fail to rhetorically navigate the contradictions between them, and their discursive dead ends are reified as lived ones. Wobbling between the risks of sentimentalism and intellectualized escapism, Slesinger’s intellectuals espouse unpossession as radicalism’s lowest common denominator.

III. On Unpossession

Combining propertylessness with faithlessness, Slesinger’s title phrase designates a species of alienation that *The Unpossessed* devotes itself to examining. Unpossession is the ambivalent product of, on the one hand, a studied, modern evasion of restrictive ties in the name of freedom (in Bruno’s words to proto-flapper Elizabeth, “don’t get possessed, kid”) and, on the

⁷³ James T. Farrell, *A Note on Literary Criticism* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1936), 29.

⁷⁴ Pells, *Radical Visions*, 190.

other, the surrender of selfhood and private ownership as prescribed by radical discourse of the 1930s.⁷⁵ Indeed, as Pitts has made clear, unpossession fits intuitively with the anti-acquisitive logic of communism. As Stuart Gilbert wrote for a 1932 issue of *transition* on collectivism, “to the collectivist ‘possession’ is an ugly, almost obscene word.”⁷⁶ It follows that unpossession might signal a corrective. Taking the novel’s characters as referent, “the unpossessed” inverts—and negates—the syntax of liberal philosophy’s founding premise, possessive individualism.⁷⁷ It converts the possessive individual herself into property, but does so in order to reject the relation of possession altogether. In Marxist as well as in modernist terms this could be a good thing, and indeed Slesinger’s satire hinges on the potentially positive outcome of individuals liberated from the expropriating gears of both capitalist production and bourgeois social values. Yet her intellectuals fail in every way to make good on this potential: they do not adopt Pitts’s transcendent collectivism or Marxism’s ideal of the liberated proletariat’s self-reclamation—nor do they successfully revert to liberalism’s promise of unfettered individual freedom. Slesinger’s unpossessed are denizens of the dead end.⁷⁸

At stake in this failure are Slesinger’s implicit theories about what constitutes personhood and political commitment. As the remainder of this chapter will show, these two are deeply related. Slesinger’s debt to Dostoevsky helps to bring at least her theory of political commitment immediately into view. *The Unpossessed* alludes to Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, as the novel

⁷⁵ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 115.

⁷⁶ Stuart Gilbert in “Metanthropological Crisis: A Manifesto,” ed. Eugène Jolas, *transition* 21, (March, 1932): 119.

⁷⁷ The phrase “possessive individualism” is attributed to C. B. Macpherson. See *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁷⁸ See Etienne Balibar, “‘Possessive Individualism’ Reversed: From Locke to Derrida,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 9, no. 3 (2002): 307–311.

was known in English during Slesinger's lifetime.⁷⁹ In addition to adapting his title, Slesinger borrows from Dostoevsky the suggestion that revolutionary belief is a form of spiritual possession.⁸⁰ Residing inside the body, conviction is thus an animating entity that one incorporates. Imagined as possession, belief is also exogenous; originating outside and infiltrating the individual, it is a foreigner that permeates and integrates itself with the believer. Hence under the aegis of possession, one not only incorporates but is reciprocally incorporated into belief; the relation links the possessed corporeally to a context that extends beyond its boundaries. A Dostoevsky character remarks upon this ambivalence between insides and outsides when (in a later translation of the novel than the one Slesinger would have had access to) he insists, "it was not you who ate the idea, but the idea that ate you."⁸¹ Crucially, whereas possession in *The Possessed* is a state of demonic inhabitation by revolutionary ideas, its reversal in Slesinger's neologism poses a new problem rather than a corrective to Dostoevsky's. For Slesinger unpossession designates a vacuity where radical conviction should reside, and it characterizes an individual sealed against infiltration.

⁷⁹ English editions available in the 1930s used Constance Garnett's 1916 translation, *The Possessed*. The correction of Dostoevsky's title to *Demons* in the latter half of the century makes clear that Dostoevsky's focus was not fixed on his revolutionary anti-heroes but rather on the demons that possess them. According to Richard Pevear, the demons "are ideas, that legion of isms that came to Russia from the West." Foreword to *Demons* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, trans. Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Knopf, 1994), xvii.

⁸⁰ In fact Dostoevsky's novel resonates throughout *The Unpossessed*. Two shared elements are particularly salient: first, *The Possessed* likewise features the print organs of revolutionary organization, including manifestos, pamphlets, and a printing press; and second, its precipitating event is an extravagant party that is meant to bring together the town's social elite and revolutionary subversives. The party's spectacular failure, like that of Slesinger's Hunger March benefit, culminates in a self-sabotaging speech by a noted humanist scholar of the community.

⁸¹ Quoted in Pevear, foreword to *Demons* by Dostoevsky, xviii. Constance Gardner translates "eating" as "mastering"; however, "eating" an idea that in turn "eats you" better illustrates the corporeality of possession.

In *The Unpossessed* this hermeticism is evident in radicals' resistance to feeling—especially that belonging to others. Affect theorists suggest why: emotion is catching.⁸² Whereas Dostoevsky's revolutionary mastermind recognizes that “socialism spreads principally through sentimentality,” Slesinger's radicals permit no such incursions.⁸³ With the significantly porous exception of Margaret Flinders, Slesinger satirizes her intellectuals for their vigilance in preventing, in Brennan's phrase, “the transmission of affect” from penetrating them.⁸⁴ Brennan's description of the individual “concerned with securing a private fortress...against the unsolicited emotional intrusions of the other” might well be taken as a portrait of Miles Flinders.⁸⁵ His exemplary self-enclosure is best expressed by Margaret, who dubs him a “hard-shell baptist [sic] beetle,” “impenetrable” and “cloistered.”⁸⁶ Inside the carapace, hard formulas derived straight from scientific Marxism hold sway; for example, that “economic determinism [is] responsible for even private motives”—“even most marriages.”⁸⁷ As Bruno observes, Miles “[shrinks] from warmth.”⁸⁸ Hence it falls to Miles to perform the novel's opening and emblematic gesture of emotional refusal. When Margaret goes to kiss him upon arriving home, he repels her with a

⁸² See Anna Gibbs, “After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Ahmed develops a nuanced model of the “sociality of emotions,” which, strictly speaking, she distinguishes from contagion theories of emotion. I don't differentiate between them here because each holds that “emotions circulate” (10); Ahmed's finer distinction between the respective circulation of emotional objects versus “emotion as such” does not come into focus in *The Unpossessed* (10–11).

⁸³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 385.

⁸⁴ For instance Margaret describes her boss's presence as an “aura [in which] she lived all day” and Miles as “a constant frightened consciousness” that communicates into “the very lining of her being” (13). She reflects that “*she* became whole (she knew it shamelessly) only when her self was merged”; Miles, by contrast, “feared drowning” (156).

⁸⁵ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 15.

⁸⁶ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 53, 51.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

“hand shot up as though to ward off something.”⁸⁹ The perception belongs to Margaret, who interprets the gesture—correctly, as we learn when the scene replays with Miles as focalizer—as an attempt to “lay...a smoke-screen between them.”⁹⁰ What he wards off is less the physical contact of a kiss than her warm feelings that threaten to engulf him. From Miles’s perspective she accosts his hard intellect with the insidious oblivion of love and comfort—“here came Margaret, *at* him, it seemed (a wistful aunt, a helpless mother, ill-disguised) with that peculiar look of hope planned to seduce him.”⁹¹ Miles, both “stifled” and “swallowed” by the soft feelings he ascribes categorically to women, repulses the sally with a hand and follows with a violently rationalized rebuttal: Margaret “wouldn’t see a social trend...unless it was crammed down [her] personal throat.”⁹² In other words, to Margaret, the revolutionary idea would have to be force-fed.

In a later conversation narrative focus again centers on Miles’s effort to ward off emotion, but in this second instance the gesture is verbal, and the feelings he repels are his own. Describing a severe New England childhood, he is torn between his preference for rationality and nostalgia for harder times. The irony is funny and worth pausing over: Miles is sentimental about austerity. The incongruity is also very much to the point, for Slesinger choreographs the moves of anti-sentimentalism as thoroughly ambivalent and at least as sappy as Margaret’s affection for Miles. Hence Miles recognizes and strives “to cancel” “his own sentimentality” at the same time that he revels in the stony perseverance of New England ancestors. His tone zigzags between puritanical tenderness and, as corrective for sentiment, economic determinism. His farmer forebears stayed on unyielding land, he says, “ ‘only because it challenged them. And

⁸⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁹¹ Ibid., 16.

⁹² Ibid., 17, 18.

of course, for economic reasons,' he added hastily, as if to cancel his own sentimentality"; then, with uncertain referent, "he let it go," pursuing his feeling one impression further only to condemn as "the profoundest individualists" the ancestors "with hard brains" he exalts.⁹³ This he "threw in, again in the tone of self-discipline, to assuage his intellectual conscience," and then again he "let it go, abandoning himself to memory."⁹⁴ In this scene feeling gets the better of Miles, but only definitively when he shuts out both Margaret and the present and can replay nostalgia within the closed vault of his mind. As this scene illustrates, Miles indeed has feelings that persist through his efforts at cancellation, but they move beneath what Bruno calls his "hollow granite shell."⁹⁵ To remain free "to breathe in his own private rhythm," Miles resists affective circuits that necessarily link him to others.⁹⁶

Miles's near equal in impenetrability is Elizabeth, who is not "hard-shell[ed]" but "hard-boiled," who grows "gayer and harder" each year and whose wit is a "barbed wire fence" through which "no one can come and touch" her.⁹⁷ No stranger to physical contact, Elizabeth is nonetheless emotionally untouchable. Like Miles, she is introduced to the narrative in the midst of refusing affective incursions. Parting from a bohemian lover in Paris who sagely "mete[s] out just how much sentiment she could take," Elizabeth in her opening scene can "not resist not sobbing."⁹⁸ Despite thinking that she may have found love and may not want to leave, words like these "she could not help not saying again not not once [sic] but not numberless times."⁹⁹ The excess of negation in these sentences and throughout the scene mimics a habit of refusal so

⁹³ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 96, 98, 119.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 95, 92.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 91.

thoroughly assimilated that it shuts down incipient feeling with nearly the automation of a reflex. The cognitive failure of parsing negation in triplicate (“not not once but not numberless”) could be understood as simulating an anesthesia that blocks feeling at the physiological sensor. Hence the final goodbye wrenches only metonymic tears from a disputed copy of *Ulysses* that “burst into passionate weeping on the floor.”¹⁰⁰ Should grief become sensible, Elizabeth taunts herself back into line with “you donkey, you sentimentalist, you cry-baby, you sissy”; in gynophobia, too, Elizabeth keeps pace with Miles.¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, in the inner workings of both characters Slesinger underscores an ambivalent mismatch between the feelings they expect to have and actually do have. Despite their hardness, some part of Miles “want[s] to be taken out of his shell” and some part of Elizabeth “to be loved and desired and possessed”; yet neither one, in Elizabeth’s words, can “stand it when it happens,” and each works sedulously against these desires.¹⁰² Often comically, *The Unpossessed* portrays characters amid the labor of what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild elsewhere calls “emotion work”: “the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling.”¹⁰³ The outcome is less important than the effort, Hochschild argues, since “failed acts of management still indicate what ideal formulations guide the effort.”¹⁰⁴ These ideal formulations constitute “feeling rules”—the socially shared, often tacit guidelines that determine appropriate feeling in particular contexts. As Elizabeth’s and Miles’s attempts at emotional management suggest, the rules operative in *The Unpossessed* systematically contest emotion’s legitimacy in contexts that range from mundane to exigent. Indeed the novel defines its era in

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰² Ibid., 19, 93.

¹⁰³ Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 561.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 562.

terms of an emotional paradigm that accords with historian Peter Stearns's observation that a new "aversion to emotional intensity" emerged in the 1920s and took hold of American emotional culture in the 1930s.¹⁰⁵ As Slesinger shows, modernist aesthetes (e.g., Elizabeth) and scientific Marxists (e.g., Miles), despite their ideological feuds, collaborate in fashioning and enforcing the era's anti-sentimental ideals.

By Slesinger's account, discourse performs an important role in the process. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick contends in another context, "there isn't a distinction to be *made* between sentimentality and its denunciation."¹⁰⁶ In *The Unpossessed*, labeling a feeling, utterance, or behavior "sentimental" registers as a disciplinary intervention. Bruno, for instance, catches himself in the act of sentiment five times, and even Margaret stays her expectations of intimacy by calling herself sentimental.¹⁰⁷ As June Howard notes, when sentiment is employed pejoratively it appraises emotions that come in the wrong kind or quantity—they are either "affected and shallow" or "excessive" and hence betray their own fabrication. The sentimental marks emotion's moment of being "*recognized* as socially constructed."¹⁰⁸ The difficulty, however, is in determining the limits of appropriate or authentic feeling, and characters' nervousness about sentiment in *The Unpossessed* manifests in the vigilance they direct toward the regulation of all forms of emotional expression.

Indeed, if, as the Black Sheep bleat, "only results matter" and "everything in the world...is propaganda," then in fact there isn't a distinction to be drawn between spontaneous

¹⁰⁵ Peter Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 11.

¹⁰⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 153.

¹⁰⁷ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 170, 171, 174, 178, 285, 58.

¹⁰⁸ June Howard, "What is Sentimentality?" *American Literary History* 11, no. 1 (1999): 65, 66. Howard's gloss derives in part from Ann Douglas's account in *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

feeling, of the correct kind and in the correct quantity; and inauthentic, ideologically constructed sentiment.¹⁰⁹ As leftist periodicals insisted, any feeling that could be construed as “sentimental,” “private,” or “personal” cued bourgeois solipsism for intellectuals of the 1930s. Thus when Jeffrey cavils about “selling out...old friends” he frets that he is giving in to “atavistic bourgeois sentiment.”¹¹⁰ “Bourgeois argument” collocates with “sentimental” and “specious” in the Black Sheep’s crib notes for revolution, which sanction only concrete objectives like full bellies and absolute industrial efficiency to achieve them.¹¹¹ It is, after all, the “age for objectivity,” and according to Bruno “the intellectual...is a scientist.”¹¹² Indeed the suspicion of psychological emotions that Kathleen Woodward attributes to twenty-first-century intellectuals is evident among their predecessors in *The Unpossessed*: Slesinger’s characters likewise see “belief in a meaningful interior life” as “a telltale symptom of the neoliberal [i.e., liberal in *The Unpossessed*] conception of the autonomous individual whose emotions are a fetishized form of private property.”¹¹³ Hence appeals to interiority or private interests are taken as reactionary and the idea of “personal life” as unintelligible, if not reprehensible.¹¹⁴ “What exactly do you mean, a *personal* life?” one Black Sheep replies disdainfully when Margaret asks what she plans to do

¹⁰⁹ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 104.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 174.

¹¹³ Kathleen Woodward, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 23.

¹¹⁴ For example, Ferner Nuhn names “having a baby” “the most bourgeois of resources” (“The Lost Generation,” 598), and Samuel D. Schmalhausen cites the “egotism and narcissism of bourgeois family life.” “Psychological Portrait of Modern Civilization,” *The Modern Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1932): 92.

about one.¹¹⁵ Tears are bourgeois by the same rationale, and in jest the Black Sheep call their female colleagues “sentimental bourgeois hussies” for crying at a wedding.¹¹⁶

As this last instance attests, the sentimental poses a particular threat to the novel’s women, whose legitimacy as communists and modernists is contingent on their success in shucking the stigma of sentimental femininity. The androgyny of the female Black Sheep—“exclusive twentieth century product[s],” as Bruno observes, “half-boy, half-girl, born yesterday, of movies, radio and matter-of-fact class-consciousness”—certifies their anti-sentimental radicalism. Female aesthetes are likewise modern only in so far as they reject gendered sentiment.¹¹⁷ “If you go sentimental, you have only yourself to blame,” young Bruno warns adolescent Elizabeth in one of her flashbacks to 1920s suburban Chicago; “throw out the notions that possess you, outmoded superstitions of a bygone day...shake yourself free, Elizabeth, step out boldly like a man.”¹¹⁸ Elizabeth recalls the occasion, but more importantly the discourse, of this explicit tutorial on the feeling rules of the new generation. “Going sentimental,” as Elizabeth learns, means playing the lady’s game, falling for romantic love, and accepting the restrictions of passé bourgeois rules and “slow family life.”¹¹⁹ This is another domain in which it pays to recall Dostoevskian possession: “don’t get possessed” means don’t eat bourgeois morality, and don’t let it eat you. Instead Bruno advises autonomy and masculine freedom: “be light, be free, be casual; why don’t you try an art colony, kid?”¹²⁰ His advice has general utility in terms of artistic and self-determination, but it applies especially to sexuality. According to Bruno emotions are dead weight between lovers. “Read the books, you’ll see,” he says; modern eros is a “small fact

¹¹⁵ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 252.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 272, 235.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 119, 115.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

of science,” a matter of pure physiology.¹²¹ Hard, cold, sharp, and promiscuous, Elizabeth proves an exemplary anti-sentimentalist.

Yet when grown-up Elizabeth, on a steamer back to the U.S. and Bruno, recalls this assault of mentorship, freedom’s connotation has shifted and its foundational negation—“don’t get possessed”—has come true. “Free” means unmoored, unpossessed means isolated, and Elizabeth is all of these: “we care about nothing, believe in nothing, live for nothing, because we are free, free, free—like empty sailboats lost at sea” (forgive the rhyme; the “emancipated lady” has had one too many double scotches).¹²² Free of restrictions, especially those arising from interpersonal relations, Elizabeth “careen[s]” out of control, but importantly, her trajectory points backward in the space of memory.¹²³ As with Miles’s regression to rural New England memories, it is significant that Elizabeth’s mentorship episode takes place in the pre-narrative past and in a provincial locale. A particular insight that Miles has into his own nostalgic flashback is instructive in Elizabeth’s case, too: seeing that Margaret, the native-born New Yorker, “could look ahead...because she was finished with what was past,” Miles observes that he “must go back and go back because he had been torn out, leaving his roots behind.”¹²⁴ Elizabeth’s flight from the bourgeois nursery to cosmopolitan centers and art colonies is the novel’s second instance of affective uprooting, and like Miles’s negated emotional course, hers circles inward and backward through the channels of nostalgia. In *The Unpossessed* the inability to “look ahead”—to take action forward and outward—is thus connected to memory’s recursions. It constitutes a form of temporal negation.

¹²¹ Ibid., 114.

¹²² Ibid., 18, 112.

¹²³ Ibid., 118.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 41.

As a corrective to nostalgia's backtracking, Elizabeth relies on machines to convey her forward: literally the transatlantic steamer that delivers her from Paris to New York and figuratively the express train that in her imagination shuttles between episodes of her life, and especially between sexual partners. Elizabeth's association with the "fast express," which she also calls the "twentieth century sex-express" and "the twentieth century unlimited, hell-bent for nowhere," seems on one hand to convey her status as a modern woman—her freedom of movement and appropriation of masculine power.¹²⁵ Yet whatever freedom may be accorded to the idea of modern, mechanized transport is potentially obviated by the personal confinement and lack of control that mediates the experience of a ship berth or railway compartment. On the fast express Elizabeth is not a self-possessed conductor but rather a "restless prisoner."¹²⁶ "Unlimited" but travelling "nowhere," the "twentieth century unlimited" is clearly a cheat: it achieves high speed but zero velocity. Anti-sentimental geographic flight with "no stops no halts no brooding" is irrevocably paired with confinement and psychic return, and, further, Elizabeth's spatial trajectories all turn out to be circular.¹²⁷ She flees to Paris but returns to New York; she leaves Bruno repeatedly only to come back to him every time.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 111, *passim*, 115. "The twentieth century unlimited" is a play on the 20th Century Limited, the iconic passenger train that connected Chicago to New York from 1902 to 1967, and the train that Elizabeth would have taken when she made her break for the big city. Run by New York Central Railroad, the luxury 20th Century was built by Pullman and travelled the Water Level Route in 20 hours at the time of its inauguration. See Karl R. Zimmermann *20th Century Limited* (St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing Company, 2002), 11. On the twentieth-century connection between railroads and sexual liaisons in silent film, and on the phallic symbolism of the train in cultural representations, see Lynne Kirby *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), especially 75–131. Kirby claims that in the 1920s "the train comes to figure the classical American ethos of mobility in all domains—physical, social, and sexual" (120).

¹²⁶ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 148.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 115.

Waking on the steamer the day of her arrival in New York, Elizabeth conceives of her body as itself a vacant vehicle: “emptiness crept from her chest with a vague ache through her body, as though all her limbs were hollow. It was nostalgia.”¹²⁸ As a corporeal instance of negation, nostalgia thus contributes to the novel’s wider pattern of numbness and negated personhood. Emptiness supplants Elizabeth’s sense of existing as a presence inside her body, delivering her into the curious condition of not being where she is: “whatever bed I wake in I shall not belong there! I shall not be there!” the ache informs her.¹²⁹ “Not being there” in the place her empty body awakes amounts to not possessing her own form. The disaggregation of body from consciousness is indeed a pervasive problem for Slesinger’s anti-sentimentalists (both modern and radical in variety) and paradigmatic of what it means to be unpossessed. Through the figurative prevalence of impersons—mannequins, dolls, puppets, marionettes, statues, ghosts, and corpses—Slesinger suggests that unpossession is a state of affective deficit that fails to meet the minimum requirement for personhood. Sealed off from participation in the world outside the body, impersons also evacuate the world inside the body. Impersons are anthropomorphic shells hollowed of human content.

Examples are worth enumerating because they make evident among Slesinger’s motley cast a fundamental commonality that derives from the era’s programmatic repudiation of feeling. Merle Middleton, the magazine’s bored benefactress, is variously described as made of “papier-mâché,” as “a glacier that tried to melt, a toy doll that wanted a heart that would beat instead of just eyes that closed,” a bloodless “woman caked in ice,” and “a plaster cast of Venus.”¹³⁰ Merle’s son Emmett, containing “hollow after hollow of loneliness,” is “a little ghost of

¹²⁸ Ibid., 145–46.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 227, 166, 254.

something human.”¹³¹ Bruno pitches the revolution as a “ghost brigade...corpse parade...fellow traveler charade.”¹³² He is also “a man of stone” and Elizabeth his “futile replica.”¹³³ Elizabeth is further “a conscious mannequin,” “a brittle tin soldier,” and “a mechanical doll.” Toy innards notwithstanding, she has, by her own account, “plenty of guts”—more than any man, as Bruno concurs—but no “nerve”: that is, no electricity to liven the circuits.¹³⁴ Miles, the “dried-up intellectual husk,” “bob[s] like an empty ghost.”¹³⁵ He also appears repeatedly as a puppet: Bruno jokes that if Miles were presented “on the puppet-stage the audience would boo, demanding a more life-like marionette.”¹³⁶ Playing Blue Fairy to Mile’s Pinocchio, Margaret is to endow him with the feeling he lacks and so transform him into a real boy, but this is a double bind, since to be animated vicariously by Margaret’s emotion would make Miles—at least in his own inveterately anti-sentimental mind—into a puppet of another, plusher kind: “outwardly he would seem then more of a man; he could bow and smirk in public;...he would be the puppet of a man and she could pull his strings, dangle him this way and that. Inside he would be nothing.”¹³⁷

The metaphoric incoherence of these tropes is part of the point. Their excess of signification contributes levity to the novel’s satire of leftist of discourse, but their convergence on impersonality also gravely underscores the novel’s upshot. Despite seeming to invert each other, for instance, ghost and corpse name two angles on the same event: the body’s dissociation from consciousness’s abstract operations. Another form this event takes, more literal and less

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 134, 274.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 283.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 243, 245, 283, 247–48.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 299, 303.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19, 187.

droll, is numbness. Take for example the magazine meeting during which Cornelia, one of the Black Sheep, faints of hunger and the unpossessed look on aghast. Observing a roomful of radicals animatedly debate manifesto rhetoric but fail to respond adequately to the most concrete fact of poverty, Bruno identifies numbness as the fallout of theoretic Marxism:

The uncomplicated physical had no reality for them; its unexpected presence had one chief effect—while their busy abstract minds worked to reconcile it with some preaccepted doctrine, some maxim of their own, their emotions were stricken in a harsh new way which argument would fail to solace; their bodies (his own was numb) were paralyzed by this sudden failure of their minds, this wretched cancelling of emotions they were unaccustomed to.... Bruno knew that before the last ten minutes he had been skeptical even of hunger.... But all the time through the numbness of his body, his own belly ached with a fierce imitation of Cornelia's.¹³⁸

Bruno's idea is tangled—chalk it up to a state of shock—but “the uncomplicated physical” evidently sparks a short circuit in the radical organism. New emotions are evoked, but, “stricken in a harsh new way” (or is it the old emotions stricken in a new way?), they are cancelled; the surge takes with it bodily sensation and mental functioning. The upshot is that intellectuals, reduced to “corpses” and “ghosts,” are rendered paralyzed and/or numb, and at least partly to blame is their emotional ill-preparation for encountering the real, embodied effects of economic inequality.¹³⁹ Despite the slightly hopeful sign of Bruno's bellyache, numbness prevails. “Imitation” as a conspicuous substitute for “empathy” suggests that Bruno is not possessed by any genuinely transitive feeling for Cornelia. He might just be possessed by the ache of

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 183–84.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 183, 184.

emptiness, like Elizabeth before him, but it is also possible that Cornelia has simply reminded Bruno that he is hungry.

Emotional and political failures thus align directly in this episode. When numbness recurs at two other pivotal moments in *The Unpossessed*, characters likewise find themselves physiologically incapable of the emotional permeability or exchange that the scene calls for and, indeed, upon which collective action seems to depend.¹⁴⁰ The inability of Slesinger's numb radicals to embody even their own bodies precludes not only revolutionary action but also solidarity with workers whose economic existence is overdetermined by the body and with each other. Cornelia's faint provokes in Miles and Bruno a numb sense of emergency, but no transformation results, thus affirming Bruno's conclusion that they are "static...ironic ghosts...dead beyond recall."¹⁴¹ As such they continue abjectly in their hermetic isolation. Bruno resumes his "impenetrable personal fog," drinking himself insensible and evading any real exchange with Elizabeth, while Miles, despite a desperate desire for revolutionary possession ("let the struggle be brought to his door, injected in his veins," he pseudo-prays; "let the struggle be his own"), perseveres in his campaign against soft, personal, and corporeal things.¹⁴² To that end, Miles puts himself to bed inching away from his wife, "until his head...had left the pillow quite behind, till it hung like a severed fruit upon the edge," thus achieving the intellectual head's

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth goes numb at her homecoming and Margaret and Miles after her abortion. When Elizabeth's eyes meet Bruno's on the dock, "she experienced a distinct physical shock; she was paralyzed, blood rushing down from her head and settling in legs grown numb and painful" (203). Margaret and Miles leave the hospital in a taxi, "riding home with numb faces" (296). Elizabeth has returned to the U.S. to reconnect with Bruno, but at first sight begins erecting affective barriers. Margaret and Miles, having decided that a baby would be too bourgeois, wind up further isolated and emotionally debilitated after the abortion.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 197, 189.

triumphant severance from the sensual body.¹⁴³ These outcomes lead seamlessly to the cynical outburst of Bruno's final speech: "we come, each of us, believing in nothing...equipped with ...the symptoms...of our own personal disease...and play at making revolutions for a band of workers we've never even seen."¹⁴⁴ He makes clear that political failure has everything to do with insensibility to the world outside the mind. "Are we going to dope ourselves and stuff ourselves, intoxicate ourselves, anaesthetize ourselves against all decent feeling—and meanwhile miss the bus?," he asks; "the answer is: WE ARE."¹⁴⁵

IV. Why We Can't Have a Magazine.

This bleak appraisal has led Slesinger's critics to a near consensus that *The Unpossessed* rejects the revolutionary movement, or at minimum, intellectuals' participation in it. As noted above, Philip Rahv for example queried whether Bruno has "absconded" with Slesinger; as the author's surrogate, Bruno would then seem to speak the novel's truth: intellectual radicalism is not just futile but dead and "rotting in [the] blind alley" of the middle-class bourgeoisie.¹⁴⁶ Indeed the novel offers no direct statement to contest this thesis. As reviewer George Stevens puts it, Slesinger "keeps out of the picture...[and] lets her people present themselves."¹⁴⁷ It does not follow, however, that what her people say represents the author's views or the novel's meaning in any straightforward way. Impersonal narration suggests in fact that we need to look to the novel's larger discursive and formal patterns for its argument. After a brief engagement with the mechanics of Slesinger's narrative impersonality, we will consider *The Unpossessed* as a critique and corrective to, rather than rejection of, radical culture.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 190.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 285.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 280.

¹⁴⁶ Rahv, "Storm Over the Intellectuals," 26; Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 285.

¹⁴⁷ George Stevens, "Afraid to Grow Up," *Saturday Review of Literature* (March 19, 1934): 701.

The Unpossessed is narratively impersonal in that it provides access to character perceptions with minimal stylistic trace of a central intelligence directing the shots. Whole chapters can be understood to transpire through the viewpoint of a single character, and chapters that switch between character consciousnesses employ at least three tactics to avoid signaling a storyteller in charge of narrative discourse. First, shifts in voice zones are often unmarked so that contextual clues alone signal changes in pronoun referents. For example, “he thought of the rainy attic afternoons.... He eyed Margaret with resentment” shifts from one “he” of attic afternoons (Bruno) to another one eyeing Margaret (Miles).¹⁴⁸ In this way the narrative elides the fact that someone is making narrative choices or accommodating an audience’s need for orientation.

Second, as a result of these unmarked shifts, signs of an appraising consciousness are often only retrospectively claimed by a character, thus dramatizing the potential for a narrative center that never quite materializes. For example, consider this paragraph-opening sentence: “whatever it was that he had given her, she returned it to Bruno ten times over now.”¹⁴⁹ The relative pronoun “whatever,” the instance of mild hyperbole, “ten times over,” and the temporal deictic, “now,” might suggest a speculating narrative mind at work, but the thought continues seamlessly into indirect discourse in the next sentence, making clear that the mind grasping this elusive gift is Bruno’s: “We need women, he thought.”¹⁵⁰

Third, narrative duties like assessing a scene or interpreting events are often performed in language clearly identified with a particular character. Take, for example, an instance of direct speech tagged by “said the wind-breaker conciliatingly (jumping his hands on his lap like a

¹⁴⁸ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 84.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

baby).”¹⁵¹ The character metonymically identified by his windbreaker is Jeffrey—the hands give him away—and the focalizer is Al Middleton, who is recognizable by his normative reflex to identify unmanly behaviour and by his preoccupation with Jeffrey’s jacket (he recollects having seen it another day on his butler’s arm: the windbreaker confirms that Jeffrey is the man having an affair with Al’s wife). Although ambiguous moments of stance attribution are not wholly absent from the novel, these tactics constitute a concerted formal effort to avoid cues of authorial empathy or investment and to occlude the fact that narrative language has to initiate somewhere.

Slesinger indeed lets characters “present themselves, but” as Stevens goes on to say, “she has nothing to say about them.”¹⁵² The remark is perspicacious, and it gets at the slipperiness of impersonal narration.¹⁵³ “Having nothing to say” registers an authorial absence that seems to render the novel’s purpose and politics opaque (as we have seen, this is Rahv’s complaint). Where his critique errs—as do others that focus on characters’ “representativeness” or accuracy—is in its expectation that characters are the chief targets of Slesinger’s satire, and thus that their words or personalities should reveal the novel’s position.¹⁵⁴ A shift in critical emphasis from characters to discourse, however, renders visible the pattern of unpossession that Slesinger weaves among various anti-sentimental threads, including leftist values, interpersonal barriers, feeling rules, and empty ghosts. Impersonal narration has a further consequence: it leaves the discourse of unpossession to speak for itself. Slesinger’s use of formal impersonality is crucial to foregrounding the operations of this discourse and its benumbing consequences rather than its speakers. Individuated as they may appear to be, the unpossessed are, after all, lumped together

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁵² Stevens, “Afraid to Grow Up,” 701.

¹⁵³ Rahv more or less echoes the same but in less sanguine terms: “her knife slashes indiscriminately.... Hence we are justified in asking Miss Slesinger where she is in all this turmoil” (“Storm Over the Intellectuals,” 26).

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

in the end. Puppets and mannequins, ghosts and corpses, Slesinger's intellectuals are all variations on the imperson because they circulate the values of unpossession.

Impersonal narration also formally underscores the novel's single moment of combined political and interpersonal possibility in the chapter that concludes the first of the novel's four parts, "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?" Albeit briefly and subtly, Slesinger offers a glimmer of a political alternative—one rooted in collective faith and made possible through the exchange of affect that moves between temporarily permeable bodies very much in the way that impersonal narration is capable of moving discursively between permeable minds. If we are to understand why Slesinger's intellectuals can't have their magazine, this fleeting moment of interconnected consciousness merits examination.

The Unpossessed emplots a connection between distrust of emotion and two modes of regenerative failure: political and biological. By like rationale, emotional profusion, in its brief appearance, affiliates with futurity and regeneration. By juxtaposing the triumvirate's (failed) magazine with Margaret's (aborted) pregnancy, Slesinger installs at the plot's center a familiar literary homology between male textual production and female sexual reproduction.¹⁵⁵ *The Unpossessed* most fully examines the relationship between these two creative and negated instances in the episode of their linked inception as affectively charged ideas. In the chapter, "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?," the title question meets its homologue, "why don't we have children?," and it seems for a moment that Slesinger's unpossessed may in fact get to have them both.¹⁵⁶ In a novel predicated on negation, the chapter stands out for these two affirmative events: the galvanizing of a micro-community poised to act and the re-union of a somewhat

¹⁵⁵ See Susan Stanford Friedman, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," *Feminist Studies* 13.1 (1987): 49–82.

¹⁵⁶ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 82.

estranged dyad in the interest of (to use Margaret's phrase) "perpetuat[ing] themselves."¹⁵⁷

Before this point the Magazine had consisted of a rumor and a filing cabinet; it lacks vitality until Bruno (inspired by a brief impression of Margaret-as-Madonna and an ensuing conversation about the womb's formidable creative power), cries, "oh what the hell...I propose we *have* the God damn Magazine."¹⁵⁸ Inter-splicing Bruno's proposition, Margaret counts off months; when she reaches the ninth, the implication is clear: just as Bruno has resolved to start the magazine, Margaret has decided to get pregnant.

The emotional implications of this scene relate not only to the feelings and ideas that pass among characters but also to the explicit valorization that transpires of women and the feminine. Taken on the levels of plot and character perception, the relation between male production and female production is contrastive, and in this chapter, exceptionally, the female instance is privileged. That is, Margaret's unspoken question, "why don't we have children?," sparks Bruno's perception of the child missing from her lap and goes on to generate a series of creative effects: Bruno champions the Magazine, Miles falls back in love with Margaret, Margaret invests in pregnancy as a *fait accompli*, and the whole group rallies together for a common cause. Thinking "we need women...; we can't get far without them," Bruno articulates one of the homology's possible upshots: creative functions are not only sexually distinct, but female reproduction animates male production.¹⁵⁹ Like Bruno, Miles sees the potential for the primacy of one creative mode over the other, only he anxiously construes the relation as agon—as "womb versus world."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 304.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 85.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 86.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 186.

Characters' emphasis on contrasting sexual functions reinforces the chapter's and the novel's overt reliance on essentialist discourse, which has been the focus of critical objection to *The Unpossessed*. The plot's formal yoking of production to reproduction might seem to betray authorial credence in the sexed division between intellectual and biological creativity, and, further, to give tribute to "the waning cult of Woman," as Trilling puts it.¹⁶¹ It well may do so. Yet reading the essentialism straight flattens the burlesque in which it surfaces. In Trilling's words again, "at least a little irony must surely have touched" Slesinger's gender depictions.¹⁶² To some extent the novel's formal impersonality renders her essentialist intentions undecidable—essentialism is potentially satirized, not advanced; rendered over-the-top, not emphatic—but a more powerful reading takes into account the emotional dynamics at the novel's core, which skew the essentialist thesis and unseat the antithetical foundation on which "womb versus world" is formulated. Indeed, Slesinger challenges characters' explicit essentialism with an affective theory of social genesis that is gendered only insofar as emotion is. A salient aspect of Slesinger's portrayal of the 1930s' emotional paradigm is, after all, the deep metonymy that obtains between women and emotion. If the relation holds reciprocally, that is, if the two mutually recall and characterize each other, then the theory of women's fundamental creativity slips semantically towards a theory of the creative capacity of emotion. "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?" suggests exactly that. The suspension of the usual feeling rules, not the farcical influence of "the womb," accounts for the scene's uniquely positive outcomes in both effect and affect. What follows is an extended reading of that scene, which counters the novel's overwhelming negativity with a feeling-based theory of political action.

¹⁶¹ Trilling, "A Novel of the Thirties," 22.

¹⁶² Ibid.

At the chapter's opening, the crisis of an awkward party silence interrupts the characters' usual mastery over feelings and boundaries. Even as they all recede into private thoughts, they exude feelings that pool tangibly in the room, lend the silence its intensity, and impinge viscerally on each person. Only Norah is peaceful, although the silence keeps her from sleeping. "It welled from all of them. It beat upon her ear-drums. Echoed in her blood," Margaret observes; "to the silence she added her own vindictive emptiness; and heard it slap and wash against the walls."¹⁶³ Miles experiences "concentrated, coiled-up tension" as "the silence stood over him."¹⁶⁴ Jeffrey's mind roams, as ever oblivious to what his subconscious takes in, but his attempt to keep his telltale hands from flapping gives away his absorption of the room's agitation.¹⁶⁵ The silence obtrudes synesthetically on Bruno, who detects "a fearful throbbing in the air, of all their muted instruments" and "fumes of silence [that] rose up from the rug."¹⁶⁶

The silence draws the group into a feeling-centered aggregate, but the individual emotions that collect—fear, terror, pain, despair, and confusion, but also compassion, joy, hope, and satisfaction—have peculiarly little to do with the silence's transpersonal effects. Indeed two modes of feeling develop simultaneously. Even as each person is experiencing particularized emotions within a personal narrative frame, the silence registers as an excess that is common to the group. It is perceived in the body but external to it; the silence moves among bodies, but as amplification, not as content, of emotional states. This distinction between personal and non-personal feelings anticipates recent theories of affect and Brian Massumi's in particular. Described in Massumi's terms, the scene makes visible the difference between, on the one hand, privately and cognitively experienced emotions, socio-linguistically qualified and "index[ed] to

¹⁶³ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 77, 80.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 77, 79.

conventional meanings,” and on the other, “the strength” of the silence’s effect on the body as unqualified intensity.¹⁶⁷ Figured as fumes, haptic pulses, and waves both fluid and sonic, Slesinger’s affect manifests as “vibratory motion” “at the surface of the body, at its interface with things”—some of which happen to be the palpable feeling states of other people in the room.¹⁶⁸ It is significant that both Margaret and Bruno convey the silence’s intensity as “din”: it makes loud the tremors of bodily inter-affectation that escape conscious control.¹⁶⁹

Yet whether loud or quiet, affect does not exactly communicate; the paradox of a silent din is that it moves but it doesn’t speak. While emotion is “intensity owned and recognized,” affect is unpossessed and undesignated feeling.¹⁷⁰ As such, it evades the enculturated reflex that, in the world of *The Unpossessed*, habitually degrades to sentiment any owned and recognized feeling. Affect is “a-signifying”—hence, we might speculate, its imperviousness to feeling rules.¹⁷¹ Indeed accusations of sentimentalism have no purchase on something that cannot enter discourse, that, unlike emotion, has not yet been inserted “into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits; into function and meaning.”¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 28, 24.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 26, 25.

¹⁶⁹ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 79, 82. Strictly speaking, Massumi’s affect escapes consciousness, which poses a conundrum for impersonal fiction. Without an omniscient narrative presence, information about feeling is delivered via free indirect discourse; by this logic preconscious affect should slip through the narrative weave. Yet even as affect escapes awareness, its effects surface. As Deborah Gould argues, “affective sensations, especially when the bodily intensity is concentrated and strong, can stir attempts to figure out what one is feeling.” “On Affect and Protest,” in *Political Emotions*, ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2010), 32. The affective dynamic described here fits somewhere within the intermediary ambiguity of affects acquiring qualification and entering awareness.

¹⁷⁰ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28.

¹⁷¹ Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80.

¹⁷² Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28.

It is important, though, that affect is alien—but not opposed—to narrativized emotion. In Slesinger’s rendering the silent din interacts with precisely those private repositories of emotional investment that in other circumstances are censured as sentiment and quarantined within the personal. Affect sneaks feeling into interpersonal relations through the back door; the effect is so radical that the ur-site of sentimentalism, the maternal womb, serves as rallying point for the hardboiled. As a consequence of suspended feeling rules, characters’ emotional narratives become charged with a common intensity and anchored to collective feeling.

Indeed Bruno’s ongoing trope of the symphony expresses collectivity in consonant but strategically non-feeling terms. Just before the silence sets in, Bruno perceives his friends as a “chorus composed entirely of temperamental first violins,” each of whom was “turned inward on himself” so that his strength “bored like a cancer in the tortured brain; his music bursting and swelling, remained milling and unexpressed in his own private head.”¹⁷³ Individuals are pictured as sealed mental compartments; “their energies combined would make terrific force, a powerful and vital symphony,” but each keeps his energies contained. Bruno uses “music” and “energy” interchangeably, suggesting that what individuals contribute to the “symphony”—and what ails them in hermetic confinement—is something like affect. In “Why Can’t We have a Magazine?,” which experiments with the effects of leaky energy, Bruno hears at least a rehearsal of his symphony; the affective “din at the heart of the silence” amounts to a “tuning-up; the gradual gathering of their separate forces.... [as] the silence grew in volume and intensity.”¹⁷⁴

The valve bursts with Margaret’s exclamation, “God damn it,” which abruptly terminates the silence and forces into discourse a common feeling that all had experienced privately.¹⁷⁵ The

¹⁷³ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 75.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

collective action that transpires in the chapter follows from this collision between impersonal intensity and personal emotion. The reintroduction of speech channels shared intensity into shared meaning, and the disparate emotional narratives in the room gradually begin to converge as characters gain access to and interact with each other's inner states. After Margaret's outburst Bruno is able to discern the baby who is not sitting in her lap. He sees Margaret as a "cheated Madonna" and then not only sends her the assurance that he has felt her feeling but also feels certain of her reception of his message: "he felt Margaret turning as though she knew herself compassionately addressed."¹⁷⁶ Margaret is indeed thinking of babies, and Bruno's speculation is further confirmed when she feels herself "groping through a long dark tunnel; Bruno was pointing the way."¹⁷⁷ Amid much talk of wombs Margaret's passage through "a long dark tunnel" suggests a birth for which Bruno oddly serves as midwife. Meanwhile Miles, who is comically afraid of the word "womb," senses "something new...in the air"; he distrusts it "when people *showed* emotion," and he takes the show as a personal affront—indeed as a conspiratorial violation of the rules that preserve his hard shell: "Margaret and Bruno, building this thing against him. It was unspeakable...this shaking emotion in his face, this dangling the personal before his eyes...his shell was cracking;...its splintered points dug sharply in his guts."¹⁷⁸ His shell penetrated by this antagonistic "thing," Miles surrenders. His cry, "For God's sake!," echoes Margaret's interjection and triggers her sympathetic transformation into a divine figure of radiance and creative grace. A spectacle of affective conversion ensues. Indeed the metaphors proliferate: birth, conversion, and symphony convey analogous feats of creation that are all conditioned by collective attunement to feeling. Which is to say, "faster and faster the music

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 82, 83.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 85.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 83, 85.

played”: Margaret lights the room with her (as yet unspoken) decision to have a child; Miles falls back in love; Bruno pronounces faith in the magazine; all clamor with hope and excitement; and outside the snow that the Flinders’ neighbor Mrs. Salvemini had predicted falls softly, validating not a meteorological prediction but rather an old woman’s instinct for a feeling in her bones.¹⁷⁹

Thus, while the spoken conversation, ostensibly on the theme of wombs, creates a curious chain of non-sequiturs, the silent exchange is coherently and more subtly scored for Bruno’s symphony. The dialogue is rendered decipherable, but also largely irrelevant, by the interpenetration of characters’ mental images and emotions. Slesinger’s impersonal narration performs the quickening of the music by splicing characters’ fragments of speech and free indirect discourse in shorter and shorter succession. The effect is mimetic: as characters’ minds become more immediate to and interactive with each other, they also become more intensively networked narratively. While the majority of the novel’s chapters devote focalization to a single character, “Why Can’t We Have a Magazine?” is one of the few to mediate between multiple consciousnesses. During the silence characters’ private meditations occupy long, uninterrupted paragraphs, but the intervals between minds become shorter as the chapter progresses and emotion commutes more rapidly between them. Impersonal narration thus limns the affective circuitry of characters’ feelings, and increasingly agile shifts in perspective map collectivity’s integration. The language correspondingly places particular emphasis on affective dissemination—on a certain “something...in the air,” “a click, a contact, something human, real,” that “take[s] hold”; on the “free give and take” of intensities that “pour” into the atmosphere, “filtered from” one to another, given and “returned...ten times over.”¹⁸⁰ The “somethings” and “whatevers” attest to characters’ uncertainty about what exactly passes

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 83, 84, 85, 87, 86.

between them even as they can be certain of feeling the vectors of affective exchange. Affect is undoubtedly a real and material thing. Feelings refract and build toward the final pitch of solidarity that registers as both crescendo to Bruno's symphony and climax to the group's vaguely eroticized exchange of feeling. Narratively it registers as a tumult of untagged voices condensed into single paragraphs: "'Then we'll meet' 'no, sooner' 'and decide' 'I'll arrange the printers' 'then Wednesday' 'Saturday,'" and so on.¹⁸¹

In effect Slesinger associates the chapter's two creative achievements—the incipient magazine and the idea of pregnancy—with freely circulating affect. The literal conception and negation of the magazine as manifesto and the baby as fetus are still to come, but this chapter, occurring roughly a quarter of the way through the novel, establishes the affective and embodied preconditions that make such things conceivable to begin with; as such it registers a significant moment of political alternative and a break in the discourse of anti-sentimental radicalism. Notably, Slesinger's version of affective collectivism does not involve "giving one's self away," but like Rebecca Pitts, Slesinger suggests that something like faith underlies rational commitment. A better word than faith, however, might be possession: the incorporation of and into an affectively-charged idea, cause, or community. Conversely, intellectuals' boundaries against emotional porousness register as de facto refusals to embody the revolution.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that *The Unpossessed* rewrites the terms of radical political commitment in the 1930s. Slesinger demonstrates that at base, commitment must be emotional, embodied, and renewed by interior life, and in doing so she advances an argument in good company with other intellectuals of the 1930s who attempted to formulate a leftist position that

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 87–88.

would not, through a campaign against individualism, reenact capitalism's liquidation of individuality and affectively-centered community. If *The Unpossessed* burlesques the modest fact that alive, embodied, and feeling persons are requisite to political action, it anticipates Waldo Frank's argument in his 1935 address to the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, delivered in Paris and afterward published in *The Partisan Review*. Frank intones that “*the whole of man*, heart and mind, subtlest sense and deepest intuition, as well as belly and loin, must partake of [the revolutionary process]—or it miscarries.”¹⁸² Like Slesinger, Frank connects collective failure to lost individuality: “witness the degradation, one might almost say the disappearance, of the *true person* from revolutionary letters as the individual is shrunk from an organic integer of cosmos to a mere quantitative factor of the collective mass, possessing no inwardness—in consequence of which the human mass likewise becomes denatured.”¹⁸³ Granted that by the 1930s Frank was not at the cutting-edge of radicalism, his published speech indicates that he was still part of the political conversation. This chapter's point has been to show that Slesinger was, too, and that in engaging impersonality she attempted to intervene in some of the most pressing problems of her milieu. Where Frank's advocacy for the “whole” and the “true” person aspires to lyricism, Slesinger's satire of that person's disappearance registers in stark and prosaic comedy; unpossessed of inwardness, the person's empty form survives the miscarried, or deliberately aborted, revolution, “bobbing like an empty ghost.”¹⁸⁴

The numb, aborted, and ghostly impersons of *The Unpossessed* hyperbolically realize the consequences of impersonal discourse. Slesinger's impersons register her critique of radical anti-

¹⁸² Waldo Frank, “The Writer's Part in Communism,” *Partisan Review* 3, no. 1 (1936): 15.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸⁴ Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 303.

sentimentalism as an emotionally benumbing discourse that is ultimately counter-productive to the revolution it attempts to initiate, voiding the radical's claim to commitment and, further, the individual's claim to personhood. In showing the damage wrought by her era's programmatic rejection of emotion, Slesinger writes against the grain of modernist sensibility, formulating a third position within the agon between modernism and sentiment. Without exactly recuperating sentiment, she parodies the reflexive impulse to reject it. Indeed she puts two formal modes aligned with anti-sentimental modernism—satire and impersonal narration—into the service of exposing the coercive affective paradigm that anti-sentimentalism communicates. This move is significant, as may be judged by Jonathan Greenberg's claim that "if the sentimental...represents what is seen as most coercive about emotion—its mobilization of feeling for the purpose of assimilating affective life to 'dominant cultural attitudes'—then satire is a major, perhaps an essential component of the modernist resistance to such coercion."¹⁸⁵ Slesinger employs modernist satire as resistance, but she directs it toward anti-sentimentalism itself as the dominant cultural attitude of her age and cultural milieu. In *The Unpossessed* anti-sentimentalism thus takes up the coercive pose and threat to authentic feeling that accounts of modernism characteristically associate with sentiment. In declining to inhabit an embodied voice of critique, the narrative perspective remains immersed amid characters' failures, observing the rules of their impersonalizing discourse and enacting its consequences. *The Unpossessed's* mimetic achievement is to bear numb witness to the casualties of radical impersonality.

¹⁸⁵ Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 14.

Chapter 4: *Nightwood*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and the Impersonality of Suffering

Paupers and bums...are impersonal with misery.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

All of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife.

—Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*

Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) give impersonality one further turn by identifying it with forms of anonymity that are correlated to social marginality. In these two American novels of the 1930s, impersonality registers as the absence of social legitimacy. In particular, these novels probe the anonymous, impersonal dimensions of suffering, and in each novel, impersonality lends suffering an equivocal value. As *Nightwood*'s ersatz doctor Matthew O'Connor elaborates, he has a preference for those "impersonal with misery" because "their good is incommunicable" and therefore out of reach of symbolic cooptation; cut from what our epigraph has as the "dough of suffering," the agony letters received by West's advice columnist Miss Lonelyhearts are compelling precisely for the inarticulate authenticity of their distress.¹ Against psychology's individuating will to knowledge and cynicism's totalizing presumption to already know, these novels emphasize the unintelligible and unassimilable aspects of suffering. Thus impersonality in these novels works counter to the projects of knowledge and rationality with which it is conventionally aligned—and to which modernism formally conscripted it as a mode of idealized access to consciousness. In the face of these conventions, *Nightwood* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* instead dramatize a refusal to make suffering knowable in terms of received epistemological and moral frameworks.

¹ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1937), 32, 52; Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust* (New York: New Directions, 2009), 1.

In terms of narrative *Nightwood* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* are chiefly impersonal in their obdurate refusal to communicate. Famous for bewilderingly anticlimactic endings, they rely on narrative voices that, even amid active interpretations of characters or events, opt not to give away any orienting sense of purpose overall. This policy of non-communication on the narrative level manifests thematically with a focus on charlatans in the advice racket who nonetheless happen not to advise. That is, both novels feature principal characters tasked with—and broken by—the job of doling out guidance but who could be said to fulfill the job only nominally. Thus Barnes and West dispossess their novels of any expectation that literature can or should render conclusions, standards of value, or, still less, consolation. The novel under their manufacture has no answer for those who would wish to know, in the words of one of West’s advice seekers, “what is the whole stinking business for,” or in those of one of Barnes’s, “what am I to do?”² The novels’ reticence in this regard speaks not only to the incapacity of their counselors but an immanent critique of fiction.

Nightwood’s charlatan, Dr. Matthew O’Connor, is not a doctor but a heavy-drinking, potentially malpracticing “medical student” of gynecology. He is a fount of riddles, anecdotes, and scraps of philosophy to whom others look for something like a talking cure, except O’Connor does all the talking. In so far as his stories render conclusions—and these may suffice for those of the novel generally—they tend to be baffling and to pose more problems than they solve. West’s eponymous *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a newspaper advice columnist whose approach to his readers lurches between violent cynicism and delusionary sincerity; in fact, the stronger his resolve to help becomes, the more damage *Miss Lonelyhearts* does. He is evaded by “a sincere answer” for reasons more impersonally systemic than he can fathom, and what passes for

² West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 47; Barnes, *Nightwood*, 84, 93, 125, 127.

counsel in his column are risibly generic instructions to enjoy the senses; contemplate art; or take comfort in Jesus Christ. In each novel, then, the motif of impersonal suffering pairs with a structure of resolutely unfulfilled counsel. In the grip of a newly proselytized therapeutic culture, therefore, these novels noisily reject the paradigm of counsel and, with it, any imperative to interpretation. Correlated with illegibility and anonymity, impersonality instead operates past the capture of rationalization and pathology.

By engaging counsel as a defining theme, Barnes and West take up key concerns of Walter Benjamin's contemporary essay "The Storyteller" (1936). Benjamin seeks to define "the nature of every real story" as "contain[ing], openly or covertly, something useful" that can be passed along:

The usefulness may, in one case, consist of a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today "having counsel" is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others.³

Like West and Barnes, Benjamin connects the incommunicability of experience to forms of trauma that have rendered the individual negligible against impersonal forces. Benjamin's example is World War I, but this trauma can be extended in Barnes to oppressive histories and in West to systemic violence. For both Benjamin and West the failures of advice and narrative are underwritten by the triumph of fragmentary and commodified "information," which finds no better symbol or medium than the modern commercial newspaper that publishes the Miss Lonelyhearts column—a "circulation stunt" that capitalizes on a cultural bankruptcy of

³ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 86.

communication. As Rita Barnard has adeptly shown, Benjamin's storyteller "is everything that West's confused advice columnist strives, and fails, to be," an "antithesis so exact as to make Miss Lonelyhearts almost the photographic negative of Benjamin's exemplary and nostalgic figure."⁴ In *Nightwood* there is an isomorphic similarity in pairing incommunicable experience with implausible but foregrounded counsel. Although O'Connor postures as a guide to Barnes's world of "night," his tour tends only to border on relevance and works most of the time by misdirection.⁵ O'Connor is instead invested in a form of metaphysical anonymity that thwarts the consolations of recognition and exchange.

In these texts Benjamin would also find radically dramatized the quality that he identifies with the generic, storyteller-less condition of the modern novel. Both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Nightwood* formally present a storyteller whom the narratives do not sustain. What uneven signs there may be of a narrative agent to safeguard the experiences conveyed or to give counsel on what they mean are reneged as the novels deteriorate into their particular forms of disaster. In so far as their narrative voices can be described as impersonal, the effect is achieved by different means but notably with minimal or uncertain reliance on free indirect discourse—impersonal narrative's technique par excellence for rendering psychological realism. If by the mid-1930s modernism's employment of impersonality as a mode of idealized access to consciousness had become conventionalized as principally a "stream-of-consciousness" technique, Barnes and West modify its function so as to re-radicalize impersonality's opacity at the novel's authorial center.

⁴ Rita Barnard, *Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture of the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 197, 196.

⁵ For readings of Barnes's tours of the underworld in her journalism and *Nightwood*, see Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011) and Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

They do this by re-invoking the narrator only to impersonalize her as an intransigent dealer in words but not a guarantor of meaning.⁶ Furthermore they distort or occlude access to character minds, which consequently become irrecuperable to the rationalizing reach of psychological explanation. Rendering the problem of counsel constitutive of form as well as theme, both Barnes and West problematize the storyteller in relation to experiences that can be endlessly talked about (in *Nightwood*) or acted out (in *Miss Lonelyhearts*) but cannot be communicated—of violence, exclusion, and modernity’s metaphysical and moral labyrinths.

Undoubtedly these novels find themselves at odds on certain matters of style: *Miss Lonelyhearts* is as clipped as *Nightwood* is prolix; while *Miss Lonelyhearts* is bent on seizing the contemporary in image, catchword, and material detritus, *Nightwood* displays Barnes’s penchant for the archaic and antiquarian, prompting comparisons Elizabethan and Jacobean; and where *Miss Lonelyhearts* borrows the hardboiled sensibility of detective fiction, *Nightwood* casts ornate gestures back toward Decadent Aestheticism.⁷ Nonetheless, they both exhibit a modernist value for concision and exactitude balanced by a flair for metaphor indebted to Symbolism and Surrealism. In theme, these novels register fascination with religious belief (which neither authors nor works actively espouse) in the face of corroded moral authority; and, in the exigency of material dislocations of the 1930s, diagnose spiritual and genealogical disorders.

⁶ Regarding impersonality’s conventionalization, take for instance Joseph Warren Beach’s appraisal of 1932 that “the author’s disposition to keep himself out of the picture is almost universal.” *The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1932), 231.

⁷ On *Nightwood* and Decadence, see Robin Blyn’s excellent “*Nightwood*’s Freak Dandies: Decadence in the 1930s,” *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 3 (2008): 503–526.

From at least the 1960s critics have recognized a certain affinity between *Nightwood* and *Miss Lonelyhearts*, but the resemblance has not often been elaborated.⁸ In 1960 Leslie Fiedler lauded West and Barnes for their attempts “to redeem French horror for the American soul,” and in 1975 Donald J. Greiner tendered these two novels as the originators of a black humor tradition in American literature.⁹ Barnes and West have since made adjacent appearances in a number of critical studies, but they have benefitted from little more than a few sentences’ discussion of their significant convergences. Nancy Bombaci finds that both “fetishize” freakish difference in order to renounce progress and to understand the embodied experiences of marginalization.¹⁰ Jonathan Greenberg hails Barnes and West as both “writers of the grotesque” who further modernism’s satiric task to redefine feeling.¹¹

In all these studies, however, insightful chapters on Barnes and West sit side by side like strangers. Even as they occupy the same chapter in Philip Nel’s *The Avant-Garde and American Postmodernity*, the conversation stalls on their shared acquaintance with surrealist juxtaposition and materialist critique. In Justus Nieland’s *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life*, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Nightwood* come briefly but poignantly into dialogue on the subject of

⁸ Upon publication of Barnes’s *Selected Works* (1962), more than one reviewer noted *Nightwood*’s likeness to *Miss Lonelyhearts*. See Jane Marcus, “Mousemeat: Contemporary Reviews of *Nightwood*,” in *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 195–196.

⁹ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960] (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 490; Donald J. Greiner, “Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* and the American Origins of Black Humor,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 17, no. 1 (1975): 43. Greiner defines black humor first by its harshness as a comedy in which disorder dominates and prevails (42, 44). Among other characteristics, “it makes no attempt to minimize the terror of the post-World War I universe; it uses comedy to encourage sympathy as well as to expose evil,” and it relies on “extreme detachment on the part of the author” and “the comic treatment of horror and violence” (45).

¹⁰ Nancy Bombaci, *Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture: Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Tod Browning, and Carson McCullers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

¹¹ Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xv.

“comic dehumanization,” which Nieland contends both novels use to critique existing forms of sociality and potentially invite the possibility for new anti-humanist ones.¹² The present chapter presumes to renew the connection in order to probe what it may mean to be impersonal with misery or cut from some impersonal dough of suffering, and why Barnes and West construct these conditions as not only “beyond rescue,” in Tyrus Miller’s phrase, but past interpretation, too.¹³

I. Personality in the Twilight

Nightwood opens with the birth of Felix Volkbein, a baron of fabricated pedigree and a congenital reverence for aristocracy that he inherits from his father, Guido, who died before Felix arrived. Guido was an Italian Jew who had contrived to dodge a history of oppression by reinventing himself as an Austrian aristocrat and marrying a Christian woman. Guido hung on to his Jewish heritage by the thread of a yellow and black handkerchief, heirloom of medieval persecution and enduring symbol of “the degradation by which his people had survived.”¹⁴ In Felix this history is expressed via a preoccupation with bowing down before representatives of “Old Europe”; the lived rootlessness of his designated type—the “wandering Jew”; and a vague sense of “disqualification” that *Nightwood* takes as template for social marginalization of multiple kinds.¹⁵ In Berlin Felix first encounters Dr. O’Connor, an American Irish-Catholic, in

¹² Justus Nieland, *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 28.

¹³ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 121ff.

¹⁴ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9, 7. Based on Barnes’s letters, Cheryl Plumb offers a gloss on Barnes’s use of “disqualification” as “a sense of shame, a suggestion that individuals who incurred public dismissal or scrutiny suffered because of what had happened to them or what they were, that is Jewish, homosexual, or alienated from the values of a dominant culture.” Plumb, Introduction to Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*, ed. Cheryl J. Plumb

the company of circus performers who together represent other disqualified castes: chiefly queers and circus freaks. Self-identified as an “uninhabited angel” of “the third sex,” O’Connor presides over the gathering with verbal acrobatics that extend into the Parisian cafes where he and Felix take up a friendship. Robin Vote enters the narrative prostrate, unconscious and without a past, when O’Connor is called away from Felix to administer to her. He brings her to with a showy splash of water, and, upon reviving, Robin captures Felix’s fascination and renews a habit of vacant wandering. Stopping just long enough to marry and bear a child by Felix, Robin leaves, winds up in the U.S., then returns to Paris as lover to Nora, an “early Christian” by type and erstwhile patroness of “the strangest ‘salon’ in America.”¹⁶ A conjugal pause with Nora terminates as Robin resumes her wanders through Parisian nightlife and becomes ensnared by another American, “the squatter” Jenny Petherbridge, by whom she is carted back to the U.S. Finally, a coda reunites Nora and Robin in the decaying chapel of Nora’s rural New York property. There Nora witnesses a strange communion between her dog and Robin, who in the final sequence goes down “on all fours” ambiguously in imitation of, or reversion to, the animal type with which she is often identified.

The majority of the novel is composed of Felix’s and, especially, Nora’s protracted dialogues with O’Connor over the meaning of Robin’s absence. In attempting to apprehend Robin and, in the process, following her into unlit corners of their own experience, they collectively pursue a meditation on “the obscure life,” as Felix terms it—that “errand on which the Baronin [Robin] is going.”¹⁷ At one point prospectively titled *Anatomy of Night, Nightwood*

(Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), xviii. In Felix’s son, Guido (junior), and two figures from O’Connor’s yarns, Nikka and Mademoiselle Basquette, the scope of “disqualification” extends to mental and physical disability and African descent.

¹⁶ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

revolves around “the night,” whose definite article must be understood to indefinitely designate three possibilities held in solution: first, a particular night on which O’Connor first meets Jenny at the opera and believes that he makes Jenny’s initial introduction to Robin (as the narrator has by this time forewarned, however, Jenny “had met Robin a year previously”).¹⁸ On that night, just prior to Robin’s separation from Nora, Jenny hosts a party that devolves into illicit flirtation, hysterics, and a madcap carriage drive through the *bois*. This is the most literal inflection of the novel’s “night wood,” and its importance is underscored in being twice told, once by the narrator and a second time by O’Connor.

Second, “the night” signifies generically as that interval that habitually follows day, filled by sleep or the urban nightlife of intoxication, promiscuity, and dissipation of which Robin is a compulsive habitué. Third and encompassing each of the others, “the night” is also an existential night: a metaphysical topos whose meaning it is the novel’s deliberately frustrated purpose to disclose. In this night are absorbed all features of individuality and such unfathomable forces as animality, depravity, innocence, memory, history, and suffering. By night, disqualification, too, dissolves, so that one who is delegitimized as a derogated type under the daylight-glare of interpretation becomes by night a creature stripped of qualities—featureless, anonymous, and impersonal. Most intensely symbolized by Robin, but not coextensive with her, this night is the realm of Barnes’s impersonality.

The political metaphysics of Barnes’s impersonal night become clearer when it is compared with that posited by Eugène Jolas in his 1932 essay “The Language of Night.” Even as “The Language of the Night” is in many ways “the language of *Nightwood*” as Scott Herring

¹⁸ Ibid., 69. Barnes references the title *Anatomy of Night* in a 1936 letter to Emily Holmes Coleman. Djuna Barnes, Emily Holmes Coleman, G. C. Guirl-Stearley, “The Letters of Djuna Barnes and Emily Homes Coleman (1935–1936),” *The Missouri Review* 22, no. 3 (1999): 139.

contends, Barnes makes certain striking revisions to it that call attention to the implications of impersonality in *Nightwood*.¹⁹ In his essay Jolas ecstatically heralds “a new epoch of the soul” and “new universe” to which a reinvented “orphic language” would serve as portal.²⁰ Jolas posits the “night-mind” as both the realm and receptor of an orphic sublime:²¹

The highly sensitized individual sinks into himself, he tries to penetrate to the unutterable....

He then seeks a sublime individuation which encompasses all the world. When this goal has been reached, he feels the irruption of a higher power. Mystic cognition sets in. The frontiers between man and man fall. Ancient mythologies emerge.²²

Crucially, the night-mind’s mystic vision valorizes individuality by pursuing it to and past its limits. It “proceeds from the depths of personality” and yet reaches out the other side to a transhistorical collective. As Jolas writes, “we need to seek the hidden depths of the ‘I,’” but then “before constructing the new ethos,” “we must need dissolve the personality” in order to access the “vast cosmos [that] lies slumbering in us.”²³ Through this seeming contradiction Jolas affirms both personality and impersonality, opposing them not to each other but instead to the

¹⁹ Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 177.

²⁰ Eugène Jolas, “The Language of Night (1932),” *Critical Writings, 1924–1951*, ed. Klaus H. Kiefer and Rainer Rumold (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 140–142. Critics Louis F. Kannenstine and Scott Herring note Barnes’s debt to Jolas’s “night-mind,” and Herring in particular suggests that Barnes admired Jolas’s “theories on artistic creativity, the unconscious, primitivism, and their relationship to the night,” which were deeply influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of Carl Jung (Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 176). See also Kannenstine, *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 107. As editor of *transition* (1927–1930, 1932–1938), a Paris-based, English-language avant-garde journal, Jolas published several of Barnes’s short stories and a chapter from her novel *Ryder* (1928). Herring argues that both Jolas and Barnes were attracted to the power of an “indeterminate language of the night” as a means to convey an underworld inaccessible to sociological or aesthetically realist exposition (176).

²¹ Jolas, “The Language of Night,” 159.

²² *Ibid.*, 157.

²³ *Ibid.*, 157, 154.

“depersonalization,” “intellectualism,” and “sunken ‘I’” of post-industrial mass life.²⁴ Personality rather is to be “reestablish[ed]...as the primary element of modern life” via anti-rational poetic innovations in lexicon, syntax, and image drawn from “personal and ancestral memories” and “cosmic, mythological forces.”²⁵ This repository clearly draws from Jung’s collective unconscious, and Jolas explicitly champions Jung over Freud for reasons related to impersonality: whereas Freud’s unconscious, as Jolas would have it, is “mostly sexual in character,” full of “the unfulfilled elements of our personal lives,” Jung adds an additional layer of universal “primordial images”—what he called the “impersonal or transpersonal unconscious” and what Jolas endorses as “the continuation of a collective mythos.”²⁶

Jolas’s notion of an “ancestral memory” connecting personality to the psychic origins of humankind is useful for understanding the ideologically more ambiguous “racial memory” of *Nightwood*. Partially in line with Jolas, O’Connor claims that “our faulty racial memory is fathered by fear” of “disorder,” wherein “race” gestures toward some formulation like “the human race.”²⁷ However, the “disorder” O’Connor posits of “a past still vibrating” arises not from cosmic “primordial images” but “an accumulation” of “destiny and history” whose surest gateway is crime.²⁸ Likewise, Robin “la somnambule” embodies something like Jolas’s “primal man,” the “somnambulistic” “visionary of nature,” since her “every movement” reduces to “a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory”; however, she seems to arrive out of

²⁴ Ibid., 154.

²⁵ Ibid., 151, 140.

²⁶ Carl Jung, “The Psychology of the Unconscious” in *Two Essays on Analytic Psychology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 65. See especially chapter 5, “The Personal and the Collective (or Transpersonal) Unconscious,” 63–78. Jolas, “The Language of Night,” 156.

²⁷ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 118.

²⁸ Ibid., 118, 119.

that night incapacitated by it.²⁹ Animated but not inhabited, Robin “was always holding God’s bag of tricks upside down,” as O’Connor puts it: personal consciousness has fallen out, leaving the form of a doll that moves but never fully wakes up. Rather than a prodigy of Jolas’s “night-mind,” who distills into a form of creative individuality “the movement of our pre-conscious and unconscious layers, the inherited symbols of billions of years,” Robin is objectified as an “infected carrier of the past.”³⁰

History enters more acutely into *Nightwood*’s adaptation of transhistorical (and transcontinental) memory in connection with Guido:

The autumn, binding him about, as no other season, with racial memories, a season of longing and of horror, he had called his weather. Then, walking in the Prater he had been seen carrying in a conspicuously clenched fist the exquisite handkerchief of yellow and black linen that cried aloud of the ordinance of 1468, issued by one Pietro Barbo, demanding that, with a rope about its neck, Guido’s race should run the Corso for the amusement of the Christian populace.³¹

The feelings of longing and horror are not properly Guido’s own, related to personal history, nor are they drawn from a universal, mythic archetype; somewhere in between, these feelings are an affective inheritance linked to historically specific events that cast their shadow forward. Guido’s sense of being “bound” by this memory—as though by the rope that bound fifteenth-century Jews—is destined to pass on to his as yet unborn child Felix, for “Guido had prepared out of his

²⁹ Jolas, “The Language of Night,” 157; Barnes, *Nightwood*, 37. “La Somnambule” is the title of *Nightwood*’s second chapter, in which Robin is introduced.

³⁰ Jolas, “The Language of Night,” 157; Barnes, *Nightwood*, 37.

³¹ Ibid., 2. Mia Spiro speculates that Barnes drew this incident from *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–1906). It records “medieval ordinances forcing Jews to wear a yellow hat or yellow badge...to distinguish them from Christians” suggesting that Guido’s handkerchief “allude[s] to a legacy of forbidding Jews to mix with Christians.” *Anti-Nazi Modernism: The Challenges of Resistance in 1930s Fiction* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 166–167.

own heart for his coming child a heart, fashioned on his own preoccupation.”³² The legacy is Felix’s sense of disqualified identity as “the accumulated and single—the embarrassed.”³³ The curious combination of accumulation, singularity, and type (“the embarrassed”) agitate against each other as determinants of identity. Felix reaches through personality not to arrive at the universalizing validity of human archetypes but instead a disqualifying history of anti-Semitism. Hence Barnes’s Jews are impersonal from being twice overwritten—both overdetermined by stereotype and effaced by the palimpsests of racial memory.

Thus revised as “racial,” “ancestral memory” and its mythic impersonality are made complicit with histories of social exclusion and abasement that bequeath to subjects an affective disposition as well as a hierarchical location in the social order. The same could be said of Nora, whose racial memory places her on a different side of history. Although not marked outright by race, she can be identified “instantly as a Westerner,” and just the look of her cues fabled stories of white pioneers colonizing North America:

Looking at her foreigners remembered stories they had heard of covered wagons...; children’s heads, just as far as the eyes, looking in fright out of small windows where in the dark another race crouched in ambush; heavy with hems the women becoming large, flattening the fields where they walked; God so ponderous in their minds that they could stamp out the world with him in seven days.³⁴

The disturbing, if familiar, image of menacing first peoples facing what amounted to their own extermination somehow adheres to Nora’s person—as surely as that of the larger-than-life, (Christian-)god-serving women whose mandate is to “stamp out the world.” Barnes’s pun on

³² Barnes, *Nightwood*, 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

“stamp out” melds creation and destruction as two sides of the American coin. Barnes’s letters acknowledge at least some awareness of American genocide of indigenous peoples, but here the “racial memory” that marks Nora is recalled from the pages of a dominant history that mythologizes an empty, god-given new world in which such shadows can register only at the fringes.³⁵ (It is fitting, after all, that Nora’s eyes glint like “the surface of a gun’s barrel.”)³⁶

Hence Nora’s affective inheritance, in contrast to Felix’s, is a “passionate” heart, credulity, faith in “the word,” and “some derangement in her equilibrium that kept her immune from her own descent,” which is to say that racial memory retains an affective record of racial privilege as well as persecution.³⁷ In the transhistorical memories that Guido, Felix, and Nora embody, Jolas’s anti-materialist underworld of the soul becomes equivocally fused to material underworlds of “hunted bod[ies]” and histories of violent exclusion.³⁸ Barnes’s impersonality retains Jolas’s sense of a mythic past but makes plain the fact that the past continues to function as a force of material violence.

It follows that Barnes’s revisions to Jolas’s night produce a radically different tone. Barnes’s night is darker, but it is also funnier and very often campy. Gone from *Nightwood* is Jolas’s mythic exaltation; where Jolas earnestly projects transcendence, Barnes offers a domain of habituated misery, inflected with irony and the ongoing fall-out of centuries passed. Even if Barnes’s stylistic unorthodoxy achieves the cognitive dislocations that Jolas hails as auger of the

³⁵ In a letter to Emily Coleman Barnes calls out the racism implicit in the Marxist fantasy of “a clean slate” proposed by a friend: “I have no love for a ‘clean slate’ it’s exactly what’s wrong with this damned country, we began with too clean a slate, we even killed off the few writings on that slate, which were the Indians, and what a pretty mess we have made of it. It’s precisely the clean slate that frightens me about this country” (Barnes, Holmes Coleman, Guirl-Stearley, “The Letters of Djuna Barnes,” 136). A related, but less racially determined, sentiment repeats in *Nightwood*’s critique of an American fixation on cleanliness.

³⁶ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52, 51.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

soul's new epoch, the outcome is ambivalent. In reverse of Barnes's campaign to keep secrets out of plain sight, Jolas casts psychic and primordial mystery as secrets to be apprehended and realized: he extols "vision" and "capture of the chthonian universe," and his mystic poet "comprehends the contents of humanity's consciousness."³⁹ If for Jolas images are revelatory, for Barnes an image is, in Felix's words, just "a stop the mind makes between uncertainties."⁴⁰ Whereas Jolas illuminates his night with a beam of visionary enlightenment, Barnes keeps hers strictly under cover.⁴¹

Barnes's re-theorization of night finds mimetic expression in a poetics of obscurity. As critics have noted, *Nightwood* exhibits a will to obfuscation. Barnes is never vague but she is, in Andrew Goldstone's felicitous phrase, "rigorously indefinite."⁴² Within the plot's outline, events are few, but they arise out of a profusion of dense textural detail. Syntax is held in suspension by long and figuratively complex digressions. Elaborate, shifting patterns of image, metaphor, and metonymy confuse figure and ground so that characters and plot alike fade into indistinction and emerge again out of the shadows of Barnes's prose. Take for instance the sentence that introduces Robin:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers,
faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten—
left without the usual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over

³⁹ Jolas, "Language of Night," 157.

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 111.

⁴¹ Teresa De Lauretis renders Barnes's "night wood" an even darker place: "the title's reference to Dante's *selva oscura* is made explicit in the ironic name of...Dr. Matthew Dante O'Connor, who is our guide through *Nightwood*'s modernist hell as Virgil was Dante's." *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 118. The downside of this allusion is its re-colonization of night by moral order.

⁴² Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 133.

their cages at night by good housewives—half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and dishevelled.⁴³

The “confusion” of flora surrounding Robin is syntactic as well as concrete. The modifying clauses that pile up around her effectively conceal her, meanwhile raising the issue of concealment via silencing covers on birdcages and cloaks on urns. Whether the faintly audible birds are metaphoric or actual is undetermined, but their hypothetical cages and missing covers prompt a metonymic sequence that returns to the real in order to cast Robin herself, when she finally claims the predicate, as an object of the same class: the draped effect of “cast over” covers repeats in Robin’s body, “half flung off” the cushions. Unconscious, she is inanimate as they are.

As superlatively foregrounded language and mention of “good housewives” suggest, these dynamics of concealment do not preclude a diegetic speaker. The most pronounced evidence of this speaker can be found in the novel’s opening, where her use of first- and second-person pronouns, “we,” “us,” and “you,” pointedly define her and her audience against a stereotype of Jewish alterity: “no matter where and when you meet [Felix] you feel that he has come from some place—no matter from what place he has come—some country that he has devoured rather than resided in”; of nearly imperceptible public gestures, the narrator describes “a bow very common to us when in the presence of this people.”⁴⁴ This speaker expresses

⁴³ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7, 8. The tone of these statements is wily. Especially in its opening chapter the novel generates a comprehensive portrait of anti-Semitic discourse, but it seems to do so within a frame that also parodies that discourse. This proposition is consonant with Jane Marcus’s landmark essay, “Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman’s Circus Epic,” but remains a point of active critical debate. In *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 221. Extending the work of

interpretive and often ironic judgment, as when eviscerating Jenny: “only severed could any part of her have been called ‘right.’”⁴⁵ Malice is specially reserved for Jenny, but stance creeps into descriptions of many kinds. O’Connor, for instance “got his audience by the simple device of pronouncing at the top of his voice (at such moments as irritable and possessive as a maddened woman’s)”; Nora “had a face that would be evil when she found out that to love without criticism is to be betrayed”; Guido’s “saddest and most futile gesture of all had been his pretence to a barony”; and the “suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that [i.e., Jewish] race” is adverbially certified as “well-founded.”⁴⁶ In extension of this interpretive authority, *Nightwood* brims with generic statements that dispense cryptic wisdom about the world beyond the novel’s immediate events: e.g., “the woman who presents herself to the spectator as a ‘picture’ forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger”; “when a Jew dies on a Christian bosom he dies impaled”; and “those who cannot conceive a bargain cannot be saved or

Karen Kaviola and Meryl Altman, Spiro and Lara Trubowitz do not find the novel’s representation of and discourse about Jews recuperable to parody but instead embedded in complexly racist constructions. Kaviola, “‘Beast Turning Human’: Constructions of the ‘Primitive’ in *Nightwood*,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 3 (1993): 172–185; Altman, “A Book of Repulsive Jews?: Rereading *Nightwood*,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 3 (1993): 160–171; Spiro, *Anti-Nazi Modernism*; Trubowitz, “In Search of ‘the Jew’ in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*: Jewishness, Antisemitism, Structure, and Style,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 2 (2005): 311–334. Robin Blyn’s work on spectacle offers a compelling way to reframe the debate. In a capacious argument that interprets the novel’s manipulations of anti-Semitic, sexological, and degeneracy discourses under the aegis of Barnes’s Decadent “freak show aesthetic of indeterminacy,” Blyn argues that the novel’s strategic “enfreakments” subvert the essentialist languages of oppression that characterize the invert and the Jew and so resist their rationalization (“*Nightwood*’s Freak Dandies,” 510, 513). As Blyn argues in another context, *Nightwood* “insists that narrative, human relations, and political protest, are all possible *only* within spectacle’s frame,” which includes the self-consciously diegetic frame of the novel itself. Robin Blyn, “From Stage to Page: Franz Kafka, Djuna Barnes, and Modernism’s Freak Fictions,” *Narrative* 8, no. 2 (2000): 146.

⁴⁵ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15, 51, 3, 1.

damned.”⁴⁷ The narrator’s use of deontic modality with its proscriptive implications of correctness and social causality gives another index of her propensity for evaluation: e.g., Felix’s mother “had taken the blow as a Gentile must”; and “one should not have thought of [Jenny] in the act of love at all.” Relying on “should” and “must,” these statements rhetorically cue a value system that seems to orient the narrative treatment.

Given these signals of a narrative persona, by what rationale does it make sense to consider *Nightwood* impersonal? This question plays out implicitly in the criticism via associations (or occasionally explicit dissociations) between Barnes and impersonal modes of writing. By her own report, writer Peter Neagoe criticized the novel as being “too personal, romantic and subjective,” and critic Deborah Parsons refers to Barnes’s “far from impersonal aesthetic.”⁴⁸ Against Neagoe and Parsons stand a host of others: Julie Taylor refers to Barnes’s “modernist commitment to impersonality”; Donna Gerstenberger characterizes the narrator as “straight-forward, declarative” and “dispassionate”; Miller finds Barnes’s work “marked by a minimal ‘positionality’ of the authorial subject,”⁴⁹ as though “crank[ed] out” by “a writing-machine”; Greiner observes that “Barnes maintains total authorial detachment”; Marcus remarks on narration “so distanced and detached”; Trubowitz tracks the narration’s erasure of authorship; Monika Kaup calls *Nightwood*’s narration “unabashedly authorial” and yet “‘impersonal,’ detached”; and Herring notes that Barnes’s “commitment to antirepresentation...owes a great

⁴⁷ Ibid., 37, 3, 47.

⁴⁸ Barnes, Holmes Coleman, Guirl-Stearley, “The Letters of Djuna Barnes,” 136; Parsons, “Melancholic Modernism,” *Cambridge Companion to Modernist Fiction*, ed. Morag Shiach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 169.

⁴⁹ Miller’s “minimal ‘positionality’” is one of the hallmarks of his category of late modernism, of which Barnes is one of three exemplary authors. Under this rubric, qualifying texts are distinguished by authors “without determinate social, moral, political, and even narrative location: isolated, in drift, and unstably positioned with respect to the work” (*Late Modernism*, 63).

deal to her impersonal modernist counterparts, Joyce, Eliot, and Eugène Jolas.”⁵⁰

In search of Barnes’s impersonality it is tempting to look toward Eliot in particular because of Barnes’s affinity for high modernism and, especially, Eliot’s direct influence on *Nightwood* as its editor at Faber and Faber and writer of the American edition’s introduction (1937).⁵¹ His introduction famously sanctions Barnes’s distinctive “prose style” that would “appeal primarily to the readers of poetry,” but, lest his appreciation be mistaken for any stylistic semblance between their work, Barnes herself intervenes.⁵² In a 1962 letter she grants that her “manner” has been compared to Eliot but “that’s as idiotic as may be.”⁵³ More specific to Eliot’s doctrine of impersonality, Taylor reports that in the margins of Barnes’s copy of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is inscribed an elegant symbol of her irresolution: Barnes placed a question mark beside the words “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”⁵⁴

As attested by *Nightwood*’s actively judging narrative persona, Barnes’s impersonality must register as an outlier—or better yet, postscript—to modernism’s axioms on aesthetic

⁵⁰ Julie Taylor, *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 5; Donna Gerstenberger, “The Radical Narrative of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” in *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction*, ed. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 137; Miller, *Late Modernism*, 63, 126; Greiner, “Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*,” 47; Marcus, “Laughing at Leviticus,” 231; Trubowitz, “In Search of ‘the Jew,’” 318–319; Monika Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas: Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 107, 68; Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 165.

⁵¹ The specter of Eliot’s impersonality circles multiple recent critical accounts of *Nightwood* but not always with pay off for Barnes’s narrative form. In addition to Kaup, who is taken up below, see Taylor, *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism*; Miller, *Late Modernism*, 121–125; and Nieland, *Feeling Modern* 222–225. The latter two provide more insight on impersonal themes than forms.

⁵² Eliot, Introduction to *Nightwood* by Barnes, xii, xi.

⁵³ Quoted in Daniela Casselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 19.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Taylor, *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism*, 6.

objectivity and injunctions against telling. Neither extinctive nor extractive, this impersonality works instead by a logic of excess, reiteratively layering and layering over images and discursive commitments that are rendered oblique in the surfeit. The narrator plays agent to so many discourses and desires that she becomes, as Robin Blyn describes, an “impenetrable” verbal surface “that refuses to explain.”⁵⁵ As over-signification obscures narrative impetus—much like (as Barnes observes of an acquaintance) “a watermark stronger than the ink that overlies it” will obscure a written page—the narrator comes to have no more ontological certainty than the story she delivers.⁵⁶ Hence instead of excising the diegetic subject *Nightwood* exaggerates narrative mediation, condensing it into an elaborate, opaque design of indeterminate ironies that blends into its own opulent figurations of the diegetic world.

Responding to the “anti-realism” engendered by this excess, Monika Kaup locates Barnes’s impersonality in the neobaroque. She argues that *Nightwood* “makes the personal impersonal and obscure” by means linguistic and figurative “proliferation,” a neobaroque strategy for overwriting the Romantic subject.⁵⁷ In her reading Barnes’s extravagant metaphors, “circumlocution[,] and redundancy” “do more than present a strained, conceited analogy[;] they layer conceit over conceit, without ever reaching a convincing stopping point.”⁵⁸ “Verbal saturation” multiplies semblances and associations but does not ante up its object. Instead it mocks naturalism’s—and, arguably, cultural essentialism’s—pretensions to capturing the real. Kaup takes this strategy as “a rebellion against functionalism” that allows Barnes “to escape the

⁵⁵ Blyn, “From Stage to Page,” 148.

⁵⁶ Barnes, Holmes Coleman, Guirl-Stearley, “The Letters of Djuna Barnes,” 126.

⁵⁷ Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas*, 76, 87. Severo Sarduy’s neobaroque theory equips Kaup to articulate Barnes’s aesthetic effects as an anti-realist strategy of (in Sarduy’s terms) “artificialization” via “proliferation”: the “superabundance” of language produces a “chain of signifiers that progresses metonymically and that ends by circumscribing the absent signifier, tracing an orbit around it.” Severo Sarduy quoted in Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas*, 88.

⁵⁸ Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas*, 86, 107.

realist claims—and undermine the authority—” of psychoanalytic and sexological theories manipulated in the text and, further, to “denaturalize” “language’s utilitarian function as a medium of communication.”⁵⁹ Barnes’s rejection of interpretive and communicative frames is crucial to reconciling the fact that she enlists authorial narration to serve an impersonal aesthetic. Flouting narrative impersonality as this dissertation has defined it, *Nightwood*’s poetics of obscurity achieves impersonality by different means, and indeed it points up the limitations of too literal or too static an idea of the supposed “person” behind the narrative perspective.

Furthermore, *Nightwood*’s narrator eventually disappears into the narrative surface. If the baroque profusion of meanings of the first four chapters can be attributed to a presence stable enough to call a narrator, in later chapters it is eclipsed by dialogue that overwhelms description. The narrator’s withdrawal is orchestrated in particular by ceding space to the surrogate narration of Dr. O’Connor. Comprising half the novel, three chapters—“Watchman, What of the Night?,” “Where the Tree Falls,” and “Go Down, Matthew”—feature the fantastic excursions of O’Connor *tête-à-tête* with, respectively, Nora, Felix, and Nora again. O’Connor’s orations compete with the narrative voice for priority as they eddy around the novel’s key themes. The extent to which O’Connor displaces the third-person narrator can be judged by the fact that critics sometimes promote him to the status of narrator, despite the fact that O’Connor’s discourses appear without

⁵⁹ Ibid., 109. Kaup does not address Decadence as another potential genealogy for the same aesthetic ethos and traits as the ones she attributes to the neobaroque, but there are many points of overlap. On Barnes and Decadence see especially Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Robin Blyn, “*Nightwood*’s Freak Dandies.” Kaup’s point here also merits comparison to AnnKatrin Jonsson, who, working from a Levinasian framework to address *Nightwood*’s ethical anti-representationalism, notes that Barnes’s “narrational excess” “seems to unsay, question, or open up the already said, as if the narrative itself, and not just its characters, enacts an encounter with that which is different and otherwise—with alterity.” “*Nightwood* and the Limits of Representation,” in *Textual Ethos Studies, or Locating Ethics*, ed. Anna Fahraeus and AnnKatrin Jonsson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 254.

exception in quotation marks at the narrator's behest.⁶⁰ The doctor's knowledge of events is also incomplete; for instance, the narrator overmasters O'Connor's version of "the night of nights" when she foreshadows the doctor's incorrect claim that Jenny and Robin met in his presence: "the meeting at the opera had not been the first, but Jenny, seeing the doctor in the *promenoir*, aware of his passion for gossip, knew she had better make it seem so."⁶¹ This information is not in the least helpful at the time it is delivered since its definite reference to "the meeting at the opera" is the first the reader has heard of such a thing. Its effect is rather to assert the doctor's subordination to the narration.⁶² Even so, critics' conflation of the doctor's rhetoric and the narrative instance is instructive: it attests to the novel's adroit weave of figure and ground and uncertain locus of authority if a narrative that invents a character could appear to be instigated by him. In light of their co-implication, the narrative's failures of counsel would appear to be his, and vice-versa.

O'Connor's monologues are largely occasioned by characters who seek his advice, and they structure the novel around the repeated discursive forms of confession and counsel.

O'Connor's association with these forms begins with his appearance in *Ryder*, which consistently depicts the doctor either kneeling at confession or dispensing wisdom, either taking

⁶⁰ E. g., Trubowitz, "In Search of 'the Jew,'" 316. Offering several other examples, Andrea L. Harris notes that the "tendency to privilege Matthew to the point of erasing the actual narrator is a common feature of the criticism up until the feminist revival of Barnes in the 1980s." "The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," in *Eroticism and Containment: Notes from the Flood Plain*, ed. Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 241.

⁶¹ "The meeting at the opera had not been the first, but Jenny, seeing the doctor in the *promenoir*, aware of his passion for gossip, knew she had better make it seem so" (Barnes, *Nightwood*, 89, 69). This is not O'Connor's only factual error. He claims, too of "having picked up a child in transit," whereas the child in question had been among the party gathered at Jenny's place beforehand (104).

⁶² He makes a second error when he claims that the night of the opera the revelers had "picked up a child in transit, a niece of someone Jenny knew," whereas the narrator recounts the child's presence earlier in Jenny's salon (*Nightwood*, 104, 70).

counsel or giving it.⁶³ In the context of Barnes's work, *Ryder's* circuit of confession and absolution is remarkable for its implicit affirmation of the ritual: problems are posed and solved; gentle words are spoken, and, hitting their mark, they conceivably bring consolation. The implication is that even O'Connor's hyperbolically deviant sexuality is available to interpretation and absolution (for instance, he confesses to having sex in a church, catching the man's eye in the midst of his paternosters, no less; Father Lucas's advice is to simply "thank thy Saviour" that the man had proceeded along the rosary as far as he had before slipping back into sin).⁶⁴ There is formal consolation, too, in the plain fact that questions find answers.

Such intelligibility of suffering is distinctly absent from *Nightwood's* plentiful scenes of pseudo-confession. Although *Nightwood* omits literal confession, several other dark spaces suffice to evoke the motif, but only to refuse it symbolic closure. In one instance, O'Connor recalls a dark night of the soul he had spent grappling with Father Lucas's advice to transform his personal suffering by being "simple, Matthew, life is a simple book...read and be simple as the beasts in the field."⁶⁵ Finding a small church in which to "be alone like an animal," O'Connor "kneel[ed] in a dark corner" and, having "tried everything else," addressed his words

⁶³ *Ryder* foregrounds this connection in two parable-like chapters titled "The Soliloquy of Dr. Matthew O'Connor (Family Physician to the Ryders) on the Way to and from the Confessional of Father Lucas" and "Dr. Matthew O'Connor Talks to Wendell on Holy Inspiration." In the former O'Connor divulges to Father Lucas his penchant for "the upright" and having "done it again, and this time it was with Fat Liz, him as keeps bar," to which an unfazed Father Lucas replies, "Go, my daughter...and love thy fellowmen.... Visit me often...and I'll give you comfort and kind words and a little consolation." Djuna Barnes, *Ryder* (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 137, 138. The latter chapter features O'Connor speaking to the alter ego of Barnes's father, who asks, "'Am I a child that I know that I shall die like a child?' 'Yes, God help you...but...I will try to be there,' and [the doctor] put his arm about him. 'I serve children of all sorts,' he said gently" (204).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁵ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 131.

to “Tiny O’Toole”—i.e., his penis.⁶⁶ Said alone in the dark of a corner instead of the co-presence of the confessional, O’Connor’s prayers admit no possibility for closure in forgiveness or counsel: Tiny lays unresponsive in his hand “like a ruined bird,” and a litany of questions for God go unanswered.⁶⁷ In another instance, O’Connor blasphemes the confessional by evoking genuflection in the dark of an altogether different box: “that great secret confessional” of the pissoir where one hears curses in lieu of absolution.

In his colloquies with Nora and Felix, O’Connor plays a priestly role that likewise precludes confession’s formal completion. Ad hoc father confessor of Montparnasse, he dodges, prevaricates, riddles, and retorts but does not counsel. He is the recipient of many problems, but in response he talks for all sorts of reasons save for the sake of communication: he has a “wandering” mind; he talks to relieve his own “mortal agony”; he goes on talking when “embarrassed by Nora’s rigid silence”; and he talks to himself and to compensate for all that god is “keeping hushed.”⁶⁸ He is like Felix’s idea of the French priest who lacks something in rigor and perhaps in decency: “like a full bladder,” the French confessor is “a vessel already filled to overflowing,” who “gave pardon because he could no longer hold.”⁶⁹ Similarly incontinent and “full to the gorge with misery,” O’Connor talks interminably without emitting guidance or, in many cases, even holding up his end of a coherent conversation.⁷⁰ “What am I to do?” Nora asks in desperation; “make birds’ nests with your teeth,” O’Connor answers.⁷¹

Nora seeks her first interview in the middle of the night, in the confessional of O’Connor’s filthy lodgings the size of a “grave,” where she finds her priest rouged and be-

⁶⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 105, 135, 105, 163.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 109.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁷¹ Ibid., 127.

wigged, wearing a woman's nightgown.⁷² In the fragments Nora manages to wedge into the conversation, she tries to fix O'Connor's discourse to the concrete particulars that concern her.

Abridged, the conversation goes as follows:

N: "But...I never thought of the night as a life at all—I've never lived it—why did she?"

O'C: "I'm telling of French nights at the moment."

N: "But, what am I to do?" O'C: "Be as the Frenchman, who puts a *sou* in the poorbox at night that he may have a penny to spend in the morning."

N: "I can't stand it, I don't know how—I am frightened. What is it? What is it in her that is doing this?" O'C: "Oh, for God's sakes!...give me the smelling salts."

N: "What am I to do?" O'C: "Ah, mighty uncertainty!"

N: "What am I to do? Matthew...what will become of her? That's what I want to know."

O'C: "To our friends...we die every day, but to ourselves we die only at the end."

N: "Yes, but—" O'C: "Now, wait a minute! It's all of a certain night that I'm coming to."⁷³

By turns pretentious, gnomic, and irritable, O'Connor's deflections frustrate Nora's every demand for advice or information. The two converse at cross-purposes because she wishes to understand her loss, Robin, and the outcome of that "one particular night" at the opera, while he wishes her to understand something about the impersonal night that would obviate all quests for understanding. O'Connor's purpose is thus couched in a contradiction that centers his discourse: to understand means to stop trying to make sense. Thus because Nora is one to "comb" the night "with the great blind searchlight of the heart," his interventions are in effect a ploy to turn the

⁷² Ibid., 78.

⁷³ Ibid., 82, 84, 86, 93, 96, 97.

light off and let Robin be.⁷⁴ In their second conversation O'Connor makes his case explicitly against knowing: "There is no truth, and you have set it between you; you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known."⁷⁵ However, even afterward Nora reverts to arraying the unknowable in good and evil: "Perhaps, Matthew, there are devils?... Perhaps they have set foot in the uninhabited. Was I her devil trying to bring her comfort?"⁷⁶

As Carolyn Allen argues, Nora's compulsive retelling of her desire for Robin produces "a kind of powerful excess that finally defeats" the confessional and psychoanalytic modes that her conversations with Matthew rehearse.⁷⁷ Yet extending beyond Nora's desire, this parody of her analysis interminable cues a larger formation contra counsel both in and encompassing the novel. For instance, Nora's experience repeats in modified form when Felix seeks the doctor's advice and receives similarly opaque replies.⁷⁸ Counter to the aims of communicating experience, O'Connor suggests he must, "like careful writers, guard myself against the conclusions of my readers."⁷⁹ Scenes of obstructed confession draw attention to the novel's own lack of moral guidance: like the doctor's meandering and cryptic stories, *Nightwood* is an extended and obscure exercise in refusing to give counsel or render assimilable conclusions. O'Connor's claim

⁷⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 148

⁷⁷ Carolyn Allen, *Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 25.

⁷⁸ For instance, Felix asks, "You know my preoccupation; is my son's better?," to which the doctor answers, as though "speaking...to himself," "seek no further for calamity; you have it in your son. After all, calamity is what we are all seeking" (*Nightwood*, 119). In answer to Felix's "why did she marry me?" the doctor's reply is among his most abstruse: "Take the horse who knew too much," who was "in mourning for something taken away from her in a bombardment in the war" (113).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 94.

to “have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it” describes *Nightwood* meta-narratively and in toto.⁸⁰

Yet O’Connor’s obfuscations are not purely negative. In place of counsel he gives an affirmation of the value of unintelligibility. When impersonality is so often marshaled in service of positivist projects of knowledge, it is striking that Barnes calls it to serve against knowledge. A collateral effect of both *Nightwood*’s and O’Connor’s refusal to make legible the meaning of night is that they tacitly decline to either regulate experience or recreate the moral frameworks of disqualification.⁸¹ For as much as O’Connor gestures toward an account of the “third sex” by dabbling in the language of turn-of-the-century sexology, for example, he produces only the cypher of the “uninhabited angel” who “commit[s] the unpardonable error of not being able to exist.”⁸² For himself he prays, “God save the vacancy!,”⁸³ and so in place of explaining the invert’s sexual nature, he mythologizes an absence. Impersonality—and its alias, anonymity—proves a realm of asylum from the possessive grip of interpretation.

Although Nora’s (and, to a lesser extent, Felix’s) obsession with incomprehensible loss tethers *Nightwood* to personal suffering, the novel presents a countervailing impulse to displace suffering’s specificity. On some level the doctor rejects Nora’s grief on these grounds. Whereas, as he would have it, “no man needs curing of his individual sickness; his universal malady is what he should look to,” she (according to him) “thinks there is no lament in this world, but [her] own.”⁸⁴ Taking “beasts in the field” as his model, O’Connor instead privileges impersonal

⁸⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁸¹ As Blyn argues, “O’Connor’s hyperbolic assertions and elusive digressions work to un-fix Robin from the appropriations of Nora and Felix”—“to render Robin indeterminate and, hence, free” (Blyn, “*Nightwood*’s Freak Dandies,” 519).

⁸² Barnes, *Nightwood*, 93.

⁸³ Ibid., 159.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 32, 154.

suffering. For him the Cartesian cogito structures the divide; “to think is to be sick.” To be well is to be other than a person, at least insofar as “personhood” designates the domain of thinking, confessing, and self-possessing existence. In comparison to the human who, in particular, is doomed to remember, O’Connor reflects that “trees are better, and grass is better, and animals are all right and the birds in the air are fine. And everything we do is decent when the mind begins to forget—the design of life; and good when we are forgotten—the design of death.”⁸⁵ Sleep, too, is a form of losing identity in forgetfulness and, with it, the mirage of autonomy: in sleep a person’s “distress is wild and anonymous.”⁸⁶ Given these commitments, it follows that O’Connor both esteems and counts himself among “paupers and bums...because they are impersonal with misery.”⁸⁷ “The pauper” is prototypically defined by her disqualification from identity. The epitome of urban anonymity and faceless suffering, the pauper embodies collective histories of power and desire that the city would as soon forget. In step with O’Connor, the narrator postulates that “those who love a city, in its profoundest sense, become the shame of that city, the *détraqués*, the paupers; their good is incommunicable, outwitted, being the rudiment of a life that has developed, as in a man’s body are found evidences of lost needs.”⁸⁸ As “rudiments” of modern life—detritus that gives human form to an invisible but still present past—paupers have a relationship to the city that approximates that of racial memory to individual consciousness. They are foundational but their relevance is irretrievable—hence “their good is incommunicable” and their suffering beyond consolation. *Nightwood*’s paupers are exemplary night creatures because their misery is exemplary of impersonality’s reprieve from agendas to know, remember, and regulate.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 158, 105.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 52.

Like the pauper, Robin is never concretely legible unless viewed through the normative operations of disqualification. In the novel's many attempts to name her, she is linked to various registers of impersonality, each insufficient in itself, including sleep, animality, primitive memory, statues, and dolls. "The born somnambule," Robin is archetypically claimed by the anonymity of sleep. Some awakening seems immanent so long as she is in love with Nora, since "two spirits were working in her, love and anonymity," but these spirits simply define the two vectors by which she moves.⁸⁹ She is both "beast turning human," seeking safety and domestication with Nora, and human becoming beast, as sure to rejoin night as twilight.⁹⁰ "Outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin"—Robin carries "the quality of the 'way back' as animals do."⁹¹ She also gives the impression of an old garden statue that is less "the work of man" than a record of weather endured.⁹² Hence she is inscribed by suffering that no one can read and that perhaps not even she can remember.

Indeed Robin is not so much read as smelt. Associated with animals, the "nose," and primitive somatics, she has, as Felix recalls, "an undefinable disorder, a sort of 'odour of memory,' like a person who has come from some place that we have forgotten and would give our life to recall."⁹³ More literally, she exudes an odor of "earth-flesh, fungi," both damp and dry, that places her among a series of contradictions incumbent to someone "liv[ing] in two worlds—meet of child and desperado."⁹⁴

More child than desperado, however, Robin is also defined by her innocence and in this regard accords impeccably with O'Connor's theses on impersonal suffering. Indeed, she signifies

⁸⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁹¹ Ibid., 146, 40.

⁹² Ibid., 41.

⁹³ Ibid., 119, 118.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 34–35.

depravity only when interpolated into the normative frameworks of others. As O'Connor puts it, "to be utterly innocent" means to be unclaimed by knowledge—"to be utterly unknown, particularly to oneself." Robin is defined by nothing if not oblivion and obscurity, seeming to have had no "transactions with knowledge" and routinely confounding all attempts to decipher her.⁹⁵ However, in translation from "night" to the morality of "day," she is wrenched from the dark, barely intuited realm of "unicorn[s]" and primordial ancestors to assume the definite form of an unfortunate type: the drunken, inverted wretch skulking home at dawn.⁹⁶

Nightwood elsewhere foregrounds a similar mechanism for producing other types of disqualification: Felix and both Guidos are rendered visible but "embarrassed" as they are read through explicitly Christian essentialism and domination, and the body of the bear fighter "Nikka the nigger" from one of O'Connor's tales is made legible through the discourse of racial slavery and white supremacy, the symbols of which adorn him in tattoos "from head to heal."⁹⁷ In Robin's case, she only experiences shame—being "dirty"—once Nora who had hitherto "love[d] without criticism" judges her a liar and polices her erotic life.⁹⁸ As Robin says in one of her few spoken lines (recalled by Nora in conversation with O'Connor), "you make me feel dirty and tired and old!"⁹⁹ Nora's insistence on interpretation turns physically violent when she finally terminates the relationship. Nora beats Robin awake and seems to realize for the first time what it has meant for the somnambule to sleep: "I saw her come awake and turn befouled before me, she who had managed in that sleep to keep whole.... No rot had touched her until then, and there before my eyes I saw her corrupt all at once and withering because I had struck her sleep

⁹⁵ Ibid., 138, 134.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 16. For Barnes's burlesque of Christian control over Jewish signification see in particular *Nightwood*, 10.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 143.

away.”¹⁰⁰ Thus Nora’s interventions not only produce in Robin distinctly personal suffering but also manifest her corruption.

Nightwood’s final drama relinquishes Robin from the interpretive claims of Nora and Jenny in particular. In their failing attempts to grip Robin, they accuse her of being possessed by “devils” or “unclean spirits,”¹⁰¹ hence the last chapter’s title “The Possessed” designates Robin as the ostensible object of both jealous ownership and spiritual domination. Yet in an important sense the chapter’s upshot is that Robin can no longer be possessed by claims to ownership, knowledge, morality, or even human kinship. In a state of “desperate anonymity” she loses her “motive power” and seems to become wholly dispossessed of the human restrictions against which she has been straining.¹⁰² Dostoevsky’s novel *The Possessed*—otherwise translated as *The Devils* or *The Demons*—is potentially at play here, turning the idea of possession back on the possessors and devil-wielders themselves. Whereas Dostoevsky’s characters are possessed by nihilism and anarchism, Nora and Jenny remain obsessed by a will to know, meanwhile Robin slips away from human habitation, behavior, and companionship. She advances from “unpeopled thoughts” to “an unthinking stop,” and the novel’s perhaps single peaceful moment accompanies her disappearance into nature.¹⁰³ The woods she wanders through assimilate and forget her, so that “the silence that she had caused by her coming was broken again by insect and bird flowing back over her intrusion, which was forgotten in her fixed stillness, obliterating her as a drop of water is made anonymous by the pond into which it has fallen.”¹⁰⁴ This silence is attended by a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 145.

¹⁰¹ Jenny accuses Robin of a “sensuous communion with unclean spirits” (*Nightwood*, 168).

¹⁰² Ibid., 168, 167.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 167.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 168.

certain kind of grace. Yet both the cost and privilege of Robin's renewed innocence is obliteration.

In this state Robin's impersonality is defined against all human frames of intelligibility, and in like spirit the narrative makes no attempt to make sense of her. Barnes's concluding sequence dispenses entirely with the baroque to convey in conventionally impersonal form Robin's wanderings through the woods, installation in Nora's chapel, and encounter with Nora's dog.¹⁰⁵ In place of narrative commentary, interpretation, and figuration, a tableau of precisely choreographed bodies is externally focalized by Nora as she looks on from the chapel's doorway, from which she sees a "contrived" altar of toys, flowers, and candles and Robin in the process of getting down onto her hands and knees before the defensively rearing dog. Their bodies are described in rigorously concrete detail, moving at first in slow motion, and then accelerating to a pitch of running, striking, and biting as Robin pursues the dog, barking and crying as he does. Finally, they "[give] up" to stasis. The closing sentence reads:

He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until, she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees.¹⁰⁶

The scene seems to be terrible—in particular with reference to Nora's vantage and to affective cues of the dog's "terror," "agony," and "misery"; yet the scene grants no psychological access, and it never forecloses the possibility of farce. With her absurd altar and fellow relations with the

¹⁰⁵ A few signs of the narrator remain—the dog's actions are described "as if to avoid something" and as "seem[ing] to be rising," and Robin's "barking" is "obscene and touching"—yet these signs are minimal and also consistent with Nora's external focalization (*Nightwood*, 170).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

dog, Robin appears to bear out Felix's prediction that she would make for herself "a fearful sort of primitive innocence" if no one would give her "permission to live."¹⁰⁷ Robin recaptures this innocence in an uncertain spectacle of atavism and animal sympathy that is to some degree clownish, even if horribly so.

That Robin and the dog both "[give] up" grants them some kind of rest in the twilight of personality but not an escape. Robin's "fearful innocence" is not redemption. O'Connor states that "man has no foothold that is not also a bargain," and the narrator that "those who cannot conceive a bargain cannot be saved or damned": these statements describe Robin's predicament and her immunity.¹⁰⁸ She is suspended from judgment but without a foothold, and she closes the novel as she entered it: prostrate, silent, and both free and bereft of a past with which to bargain.¹⁰⁹ At one point Nora observes that Robin "wanted darkness in her mind—to throw a shadow over what she was powerless to alter—her dissolute life, her life at night," and *Nightwood* grants her that obscurity.¹¹⁰ In this way Barnes moves neither to save nor damn those "disqualified." Rather than recuperating characters to lighted spaces of distinct and rational identity, or even authorizing the qualified optimism that they have been set free of interpretive frameworks, Barnes makes an uneasy case for keeping them in the dark, "obliterat[ed]" "as a drop of water is made anonymous."

II. Miss Impersonality

Anonymous in a different sense, Miss Lonelyhearts takes his name from the advice column that he continually fails to write for the (fictional) New York *Post-Dispatch*. Twenty-six years old

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 32, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 32, 47, 138.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 156.

and college-educated, he is tasked with writing bracing and cheerful bromides for the desperate, disabled, sick, and abused readers who plead for advice that becomes impossible to produce once their letters are “no longer funny” and Miss Lonelyhearts’s repertoire of hoaky Christ maxims has gone stale.¹¹¹ In his own words, the trajectory is as follows:

A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he’s tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator.¹¹²

Coming from Miss Lonelyhearts, the account is strangely cogent. This speech to his girlfriend Betty, for instance, is delivered after a two-day stint in bed during which he hallucinates a frantic project of re-humanizing a pawnshop’s “paraphernalia of suffering” by arranging it into significant forms: phallus, heart, diamond, triangle, square, swastika, and, “definitive[ly],” “a gigantic cross” that must be relocated to the seashore to accommodate its vast but necessary dimensions.¹¹³ The hallucination supplements Miss Lonelyhearts’s explanation above: once taken seriously the letters compel him to encounter suffering on a scale too sprawling, chaotic,

¹¹¹ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 113.

and impersonal to hold in awareness, and even the symbols that might in abstraction represent it become too big to negotiate.

Incapable of offering advice that could touch the impersonally systemic factors that shape his readers' lives, Miss Lonelyhearts responds in kind with impersonality of his own making. When he cannot impose symbolic order and random acts of violence offer no respite, he tries impersonal love under the aegis of a Christ complex. His "all-embracing love," however, is as symptomatic as the "hysteria" he generates by chanting "Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ" to make "the dead world" come alive in his mind.¹¹⁴ For Miss Lonelyhearts, escapes into hysteria, explosions in violence, and the cultivation of agape are all equally coping devices. They constitute less a failed "project," as Nieland contends, "to feel the pain of his mass readership" and "locate a community founded on identity and cemented by sympathy," than a set of self-preservation techniques in a situation of moral triage.¹¹⁵ The novel is a deadpan account of Miss Lonelyhearts's bleakly comic attempts to ward off the affective demands of "genuine suffering" once the joke has worn too thin to serve as a shield. In brief, the plot follows Miss Lonelyhearts as he unravels through adventures that are precipitated by the letters and punctuated by repeated bouts of illness—fevers he welcomes at one point as "mentally unmotivated violence."¹¹⁶ The novel finds its grimly comic end when, after becoming entangled with a column reader and her husband, Fay and Peter Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts "has a religious experience" in which he mistakes an attempt on his life for the chance to perform a miracle.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 8–9.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 115.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹¹⁷ "Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience" is the title of *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s final chapter (56–58).

The letters take their toll on Miss Lonelyhearts in part through sheer quantity: “on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife.”¹¹⁸ The metaphor is curious because in explicit content the letters are intensely particularized. Letter-writer “Sick-of-it-all” is a “good catholic” mother of seven with debilitating kidney pain and a doctor’s warning that another baby could kill her. She refers euphemistically to post-surgery marital rape that has resulted in another pregnancy.¹¹⁹ “Desperate” is a young girl who suffers ostracism and considers suicide because she was born without a nose and fears that she will never find love. “Harold S.” writes on behalf of his sister, who is deaf but interpreted as developmentally disabled (“not very smart on account of being deaf and dumb”) and physically abused by their mother.¹²⁰ A man has done “something dirty to her,” and Harold fears she is pregnant and will be beaten or put again into isolation. “Broad Shoulders” is stalked by her abusive, estranged husband while also managing economic straits. She takes in a lodger and “sowing” to support her family but cannot pay the doctor’s bills for her own or her children’s illnesses. Peter Doyle, who hand delivers his letter in a private interview, identifies as a “cripple” with no education. He works a physical job that aggravates chronic pain, and he cannot afford to take the doctor’s prescription of six months rest. These letters are perhaps “all alike” in the sense that it is overwhelming to read them in one sitting and afterward hard to tell which one wrought what response. Pathos is doughy. Hence the “dough of suffering” would seem to describe Miss Lonelyhearts’s cumulative reading experience, and in particular his affective exhaustion, more than the experiences the letters describe.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 3.

That the letters could all seem the same from the receiving end is undoubtedly a function of genre. The “cookie knife” (now more familiar as “cookie-cutter”) makes clever use of a cliché expressly designed to make more clichés: in this case, it stamps out letters that evoke the heart by assuming a conventional shape. If the “knife” conveys a certain violence, it is all the more to West’s purpose. A doughy immensity of pain and confusion is subjected to the anonymizing edges of the advice genre, from “Dear Miss Lonelyhearts—” down to the plaintive pseudonym signing off. Critics have insightfully read these assembly-line “hearts” to symbolize the commodification of feeling and personal life within West’s ongoing critique of mass culture.¹²¹ However, to dismiss wholesale the letters’ particulars, as one critic does, as a “vulgar cliché,” “legible because reproducibly mass-produced,” only replicates the brutal interpretation of the novel’s newsroom readers, especially Miss Lonelyhearts’s bombastically cynical editor, Shrike, and even Miss Lonelyhearts himself.¹²² It may be the case, as Jonathan Veitch argues, that West makes “the disfiguring operation of the advice column explicit without concluding in disdain for the people themselves”; but then again, West may equally well refrain from coming to any conclusions at all.¹²³ Either way, once included in their entirety, the letters must speak for themselves.¹²⁴

Their repetitions meaningfully describe intractable situations grossly out of proportion to individual agency: children confront adult power and violence; women are trapped by patriarchal assumptions reinforced by masculine violence and religious doctrine; people with disabilities are

¹²¹ Nieland, *Feeling Modern*, 207; Barnard, *Culture of Abundance*, 198.

¹²² Benjamin Schreier, *The Power of Negative Thinking* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 150.

¹²³ Jonathan Veitch, *American Superrealism: Nathanael West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 69.

¹²⁴ As an index of the letters’ sufficient communication, Irving Goffman prefaces his sociological study *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* with Desperate’s note, quoted in full (Bombaci, *Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture*, 35).

targeted by and excluded from social norms and likewise subject to violence; and in almost every case, economic hardship prevails. In the 1932 “Some Notes on Violence” West writes, “in America violence is idiomatic.”¹²⁵ Written in this idiom, the novel moves relentlessly from one axis of social brutality to another. Whether strategic on West’s part or simply contingent on the typical advice-column appeals on which he based the novel, the selection of letters that appears in *Miss Lonelyhearts* schematizes forms of systemic violence, which are then corroborated by events in the novel. To reinforce the sexual and domestic violence outlined by “Sick-of-it-all,” “Harold S.,” and “Broad Shoulders,” *Miss Lonelyhearts* proffers speakeasy misogyny, especially in the form of blithe gossip about gang rapes of women authors; added to this are Shrike’s alleged rape of his wife and Miss Lonelyhearts’s verbal abuse of Betty and “ache to hurt” her.¹²⁶ Harold S. and Desperate tell experiences of disability that become vivid in Peter Doyle’s key role. The institutionalization of poverty suggested in many of the letters is backed by images of destitute urban crowds sifting through the scraps of capitalism. If suffering is impersonal in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, its primary importance relates not to mass production per se but instead to systemic violence.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ West, “Some Notes on Violence” *Contact* 1, no. 3 (1932): 132. This piece was published as an editorial in the journal *Contact* alongside a chapter from *Miss Lonelyhearts*. West co-edited *Contact* with William Carlos Williams, and the editorial begins by asking, “is there any meaning in the fact that almost every manuscript we receive has violence for its core?” West goes on to argue that the quotidian reality of violence in American is constitutive of its moment, both culturally and aesthetically.

¹²⁶ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 13.

¹²⁷ *Miss Lonelyhearts*’s all-WASP cast leaves the question of (non-WASP) race largely unmarked in the novel aside from several details: mention of “niggers” in the service of brutally misogynist dialogue (*Miss Lonelyhearts*, 14), a pair of indigenously-inflected similes (27, 29), and one character’s invectives against the “dirty wop” who impregnated then abandoned her (29). In Veitch’s appraisal, “West had almost nothing to say about the vexed question of race” (134). James C. Davis contests Veitch’s appraisal and offers an inventive reading of the novel’s “implicit concern with race and the color of American identity.” Of most interest is his racialized reading of the novel’s references to colors correlated with Caucasian skin tones. However, in

It is crucial to *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s disorienting effect that West does not provide any perspective internal to the novel that can scan this social landscape. Impersonal suffering is past interpretation because there is no one to recognize it. As Benjamin Schreier explains, "the failure of recognition—the inability to account for suffering in terms that might fix its historical meaning, as the structural effect of some economic, national, institutional, or psychological force, for example—...underlies the book's cynicism."¹²⁸ Schreier does not clearly attribute this failure to the letter writers, Miss Lonelyhearts, or West, but it is important to specify that the novel is fundamentally impelled by a critique of this failure of recognition. Characters cannot see past their immediate and personal causes of suffering, but through their cumulative failures West sketches a fuller picture. The book's cynicism is indebted to the fact that even if characters could "account for" the systemic aspects of suffering, it would not help, precisely because the underlying issues are impersonal.

Nor does *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s narrator offer much insight. West proposes in "Some Notes On Miss L." (1933) a few terse comments on narrative form: "Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald."¹²⁹ The description is well aimed: "bald" is definitively the word for West's sparse, nearly stanceless narrative presentation.

other aspects the evidence for *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s engagement with race is thin, and Davis's account risks recasting the novel's explicit reckoning with disability as a cypher for the degeneracy of racial miscegenation. See *Commerce in Color: Race, Consumer Culture, and American literature, 1893-1933* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), especially 228–241. Davis nonetheless helpfully situates his reading of the novel's racial politics within West's own efforts to neutralize his Lithuanian-Jewish heritage by availing himself of the "invit[ation], however [uneven], into the more capacious definition of whiteness that emerged after the 'new immigration'" (243–244). As Davis goes on to note, "if it was not possible for West to think of himself as white in an unqualified way, his Jewishness did not compel him to identify with 'darkened Hebrews,' 'Negroes,' or other racially marked Americans" (245). These groups are conspicuously unrepresented among the marginalized urban masses of *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

¹²⁸ Schreier, *The Power of Negative Thinking*, 148.

¹²⁹ West, "Some Notes on Miss L.," *Contempo* 3, no. 9 (May 15, 1933): 1.

Miss Lonelyhearts depicts violence with brutal economy, and, save the stray remark on an otherwise depilated surface, it does not interpret. Like Barnes's, West's impersonality does not altogether eschew a storyteller or authorial mode, but it rigorously evades authorizing the narrative's meanings. Unlike *Nightwood*, however, *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s impersonality relies on the extent to which the narrative is channeled through the imperfectly transparent, and often deranged, apprehensions of its protagonist.

Miss Lonelyhearts's close but complex affiliation between narrator and eponymous reflector figure produces what narrative theorists call *reflectorization* as its principal narratological feature. In this mode of "ambiguous mediation," authorial statements predominate but are inflected by the assumptions, judgments, ideological position, or idiomatic features of a reflector's consciousness.¹³⁰ Narrative theorist F. K. Stanzel (1977) first introduced reflectorization as an intermediate zone on a continuum between authorial and figural narrative situations. In a purely figural narrative, "one (or more) reflector figures play a major part in representing events," and so "the mediating narrator is replaced by a reflector [character]... who

¹³⁰ Monika Fludernik, "Subversive Irony: Reflectorization, Trustworthy Narration and Dead-Pan Narrative in *The Mill on the Floss*," *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature [REAL]* 8 (1991/1992): 178. It is also possible to describe this mode with reference to Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). In Cohn's terms, this blend of narrative mediation constitutes "consonant psycho-narration": the narrator does not altogether dispense with an authorial mode but takes the part of an "indispensable accessory to figure-oriented narration"; it is consonant in that the narrator "remains effaced" and "readily fuses with the consciousness he narrates" (26). Yet West's narrator challenges Cohn's binary distinction between consonant and dissonant psycho-narration by combining pronounced effacement (i.e., consonance) with a perpetually almost-ironic distance from *Miss Lonelyhearts* that manifests at times as outright evaluation (dissonance). *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s disparity between narrator and character is not obvious, but the narrator reserves the possibility of ironizing *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s view by means of exaggerating the odd tenor of his mental events or naming their incongruous elements, seemingly beyond the scope of *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s own awareness. For these reasons, Stanzel's more flexible "reflectorization" is preferable.

thinks, feels, and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator.”¹³¹ Whereas in the figural mode the narrator cedes the stage, reflectorization retains a narrator up front to ventriloquize character perceptions, potentially to ironic or critical effect. As Monika Fludernik puts it, the reflectorized “narratorial voice intermittently...adopts...a character’s mental habitus” while maintaining her function of reportage and, most typically (at least in examples favored by narrative theorists), an interpretive stance.¹³² The tonal effect is very often ironic or dissonant, but as Fludernik notes it can also be empathetic.¹³³ These tonal variants help to describe distinctions among reflectorized passages or texts, but they also signal the ambiguity of voice that is the hallmark of reflectorization.

The effaced narrator of *Miss Lonelyhearts* operates much of the time with an incredibly light touch, but it is useful to observe his unequivocal presence in what Stanzel privileges as narrative preliminaries, which set expectations for the narrative’s “mode of transmission.”¹³⁴ West’s opening sentence reads: “The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York *Post-Dispatch* (Are in you in trouble?—Do-you-need-advice?—Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard.”¹³⁵ Expository and withering, the parenthetical aside seems to nod in “your” direction with a facetious offer of assistance at the same time that it both fulfills the authorial duty of explaining exactly what Miss Lonelyhearts does for the newspaper and pegs him as the butt of the novel’s perpetual gender joke. In conventionally impersonal style, when Miss Lonelyhearts turns to look at the lonelyheart

¹³¹ Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, trans. Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik (London: Routledge, 2009), 36; Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 5.

¹³² Fludernik, *Towards a Natural Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 191.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹³⁴ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 155.

¹³⁵ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1.

correspondence, the letters are reproduced verbatim and in italics with minimal authorial intervention; however, when Miss Lonelyhearts turns his attention to the typewriter, the narrator reclaims the perspective to view Miss Lonelyhearts's external appearance and supplement it with interpretive reference to his past: "Although his cheap clothes had too much style, he still looked like the son of a Baptist minister.... [E]ven without a beard no one could fail to recognize the New England puritan."¹³⁶ These moments mark a persistent potential for authorial evaluation that nonetheless rarely manifests in the novel with comparable certainty.

The vast majority of *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s narration is—or is potentially—a reflectorized blend. Indeed, the novel's myopic social imaginary is ensured by the narrator's tight adherence to the constricted field of Miss Lonelyhearts's external and internal perceptions, to the point of compromising the narrator's omniscience. Spare, fact-oriented declarative sentences frame narrative action largely in terms of what Miss Lonelyhearts sees, hears, says, and thinks, but figurative language in particular resonates two ways: as an expressive break with the narrator's veridical pose and a stylized cue to the affect and content of Miss Lonelyhearts's thoughts. The play between these options renders uncertain the tenor of many key moments. Threaded through by the motif of a heart like a "bomb," the fifth chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man," richly illustrates the narrator's complex relay of Miss Lonelyhearts's perceptions. The chapter begins:

In the street again, Miss Lonelyhearts wondered what to do next. He was too excited to eat and afraid to go home. He felt as though his heart were a bomb, a complicated bomb that would result in a simple explosion, wrecking the world without rocking it.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3. Notably, in an earlier version these observations belong to Miss Lonelyhearts as he examines himself in a mirror. West, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb," *Contact* 1, no. 1 (Feb. 1932): 82.

He decided to go to Delehanty's for a drink. In the speakeasy, he discovered a group of his friends at the bar. They greeted him and went on talking.¹³⁷

Narratively speaking, Miss Lonelyhearts's heart is an ineffectual bomb. Only for an instant does it jar the narrator's reportage out of its hardboiled mode. Yet in the space of the metaphor Miss Lonelyhearts seems to erupt into the narrative discourse with force. Presumably he is the one who might desire a complexity so violent as to make things "simple"; but then again, the narrator may do more to distort Miss Lonelyhearts's idea: "wrecking the world without rocking it" could equally mock a sense of inefficacy that despairs of any change short of total destruction.

Whatever its implications, the bomb's outcome could not be more mundane, as the narrator's brisk march forward makes clear: Miss Lonelyhearts simply decides to do what he always does—go for a drink. In this way, the metaphor's delivery entertains the bomb-like heart as a potentially earnest revolutionary image at the same time as it undercuts it as juvenile fantasy.

Yet whether the "bomb" should be attributed to Miss Lonelyhearts in the first place is up for question and remains uncertain when it recurs inside the speakeasy:

Miss Lonelyhearts stopped listening. His friends would go on telling these stories until they were too drunk to talk. They were aware of their childishness, but did not know how else to revenge themselves. At college, and perhaps for a year afterwards, they had believed in literature, had believed in Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief, they lost everything. Money and fame meant nothing to them. They were not worldly men.

Miss Lonelyhearts drank steadily. He was smiling an innocent, amused smile, the smile of an anarchist sitting in the movies with a bomb in his pocket. If the people around

¹³⁷ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 13.

him only knew what was in his pocket. In a little while he would leave to kill the President.

Not until he heard his own name mentioned did he stop smiling and again begin to listen.¹³⁸

Here again narration keeps pace with Miss Lonelyhearts's attention, and topics digress from his immediate surroundings as he quits listening. Since in the first paragraph judgments of his friends—deemed childish, bottomed-out idealists—are difficult to assimilate into the narrator's non-evaluative mode, the passage seems to give a relatively direct transcription of Miss Lonelyhearts's thoughts, potentially in free indirect discourse. The hedge, "perhaps for a year afterward," likewise suggests Miss Lonelyhearts as the source. In the second paragraph, narrative exposition resumes with a summary of Miss Lonelyhearts's drinking, and the description of his smile puts more pressure on perspective by evoking a pointedly external view. However, the smile becomes implicated in Miss Lonelyhearts's seemingly internal destruction fantasy—again via a paratactic elaboration: "an innocent, amused smile, the smile of an anarchist..." (compare the above: "a bomb, a complicated bomb..."). Along with the figurative language and delusionary bomb content, the expressive tag "if only" suggests the narrative voice has again merged with Miss Lonelyhearts's perspective. In the process of looking to someone else like an anarchist at the movies, he has come to feel like a sociopath at the bar—at least until mention of his name snaps his attention back to the present in the third paragraph.

As the scene progresses, the narrative perspective continues to move in and out, alternately nearer and farther from Miss Lonelyhearts. When, in a reverie, "he forgot that his heart was a bomb to remember an incident of his childhood," two things become clearer: first,

¹³⁸ Ibid., 14.

“the bomb” has been an explicit object of Miss Lonelyhearts’s thoughts, not simply a metaphor imposed by the narrator. Second, given that Miss Lonelyhearts has now “[forgotten]” the bomb, the motif has evidently been appropriated by the narrator, who may also have a hand in styling the sentimental but sweet childhood story that unfolds in Miss Lonelyhearts’s imagination and serves to render him slightly (if endearingly) ridiculous.¹³⁹ By contrast, a moment later the narrator abandons Miss Lonelyhearts utterly to his own interpretation as he puzzles over a lump on the back of his head after a punch to the face; “he must have fallen,” but the narrator will not say for sure.¹⁴⁰

These shifts are important because they track a dynamic of irony that is rarely ever assured. Through reflectorization, narrative and character idioms are interlaced such that—despite moments of relative clarity—they regularly produce crux points that foil efforts to interpret. Yet on this question rests no small stake: the novel’s attitude toward Miss Lonelyhearts and his negotiations with feeling. Although intensely reliant on Miss Lonelyhearts as reflector, the narrator maintains a degree of autonomy and fulfills a role that exceeds exposition, even as it is hard in most places to discern exactly what that excess is.

That West’s ambiguous tone is essential to *Miss Lonelyheart*’s project is highlighted by the substantial revisions to point of view that he undertook in transitioning from magazine publication to novel. Between February and October 1932, five portions of *Miss Lonelyhearts* appeared in the American literary journals *Contact* (1920–1923, 1932) and *Contempo* (1931–1934). Carter A. Daniel notes that West’s revisions achieve smoother transitions between chapters and “economy and clarity” overall, but, although unarguably discernible, these changes are ancillary to a more fundamental shift toward impersonalizing the narrative and strategically

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

destabilizing attribution.¹⁴¹ The starkest changes concern experimentations in perspective. While the first published chapter is told in third person (“Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb”), the second and third switch to first person (“Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan” and “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man”), the fourth appears in the form of a dramatic monologue delivered by Miss Lonelyhearts (“Miss Lonelyhearts in the Dismal Swamp”), and the fifth returns to third-person narration (“Miss Lonelyhearts on a Field Trip”).¹⁴² In terms of content, the boldest change was to revoke Miss Lonelyhearts’s personal name, Thomas Matlock, and so reinforce the anonymity and absurdity of the advice columnist. The particular interest of these earlier chapters is the progress they document in West’s search for a formal strategy to realize a story whose conceit and major events were for the most part already identified.

The reflectorized form of *Miss Lonelyhearts* does not emerge until the last chapter that was published in advance, which appears in the novel as it did in *Contact* save for a few minor changes. By contrast, the other advance chapter in third person, “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb,” opens with a distinctly informative narrative speaker and only taps Miss Lonelyhearts as a reflector in the fourth paragraph.¹⁴³ This first chapter is formally striking in the fact that it employs both authorial and reflector modes but for the most part keeps them segregated in

¹⁴¹ Carter A. Daniel, “West’s Revisions of *Miss Lonelyhearts*,” in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 58.

¹⁴² West, “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb”; “Two Chapters from *Miss Lonelyhearts* by Nathanael West; ‘Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan’ and ‘Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man,’” *Contact* 1, no. 2 (May 1932): 13–27; “Miss Lonelyhearts in the Dismal Swamp,” *Contempo* 2, no. 4 (5 July 1932): 1, 2; “Miss Lonelyhearts on a Field Trip,” *Contact* 1, no. 3 (Oct. 1932): 50–57. Miss Lonelyhearts’s “Dismal Swamp” monologue is repurposed as one of Shrike’s long speeches in the novel’s chapter by the same name.

¹⁴³ A case could be made that Miss Lonelyhearts’s perspective infiltrates one paragraph earlier: “Last year, he remembered, the dynamite of May had failed to quicken these soiled fields. It had taken all the brutality of summer to torture a few green spikes through the exhausted dirt” (West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 80). However, the effect is too slight to divert the authorial mode already well established.

separate paragraphs so that (with the exception of authorial topic sentences that often introduce figural paragraphs) the switches between them remain relatively sharp. As a result of these clearer distinctions, metaphors that appear in *Miss Lonelyhearts* as potentially figural peeks into Miss Lonelyhearts's mind instead serve in the *Contact* chapter to reinforce the authority and texture of the narrative voice. In combining authorial and figural modes to achieve the narrative form of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West both impersonalizes the perspective by decreasing the novel's overall reliance on the storyteller and renders Miss Lonelyhearts an ambiguously mediated character. Between the narrator and reflector West installs a variable gap that widens to produce space for irony only to collapse it again into relative neutrality or even empathy.

The result is that *Miss Lonelyhearts* "regularly refuses to provide the affective codes that might give his reader a clue about how to feel," as Nieland argues.¹⁴⁴ Nieland also claims that West "everywhere mocks" his "beleaguered protagonist," which would suggest regular or pervasive cues for contempt. To be sure, the tension indexes the unstable tone that West achieves with *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s narrative form. Yet as a function of West's cagey manipulation of reflectorization, tone also renders the mockery less reliable than Nieland suggests. Taking Shrike's "dead pan" comedic delivery for granted as a correlate to West's own anti-sentimental "zero degree of comic affect," Nieland does not accord any significance to the novel's reliance on Miss Lonelyhearts's perspective in order to indict the very "modes of sympathetic violence" that he enacts.¹⁴⁵ Nieland is not invested in a narratological account but instead gives evidence for ubiquitous mockery with reference to the novel's holistic frame of values, which, as he argues, aligns with Shrike's relentless negativity. Nieland adeptly shows the way that West's anti-sentimentalism critiques the "violence [done] to the human" by the reification of stock

¹⁴⁴ Nieland, *Feeling Modern*, 196.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 204, 216.

protocols for feeling, but he presumes this critique to demolish all potential for authentic feeling.¹⁴⁶ As a physiognomic figure for frozen affect, Shrike's deadpan models "the strategic stalling of feeling's machinery that defines West's critique of Lonelyhearts's sympathetic work"; with an "ethical thrust," the deadpan points the way toward "an alternative form of publicness and community irreducible to humanist notions of interiority and identity."¹⁴⁷ The force of this argument hinges on Miss Lonelyhearts as the humanist dupe of instrumentalizing feeling: Shrike-esque cynicism at his unremitting failures to recuperate sympathy makes way for an undefined public of the future.¹⁴⁸ There is cause to ask, then, what difference would it make if Miss Lonelyhearts were not feeling's dupe, but its hostage? Indeed, Miss Lonelyhearts also generates a share of the novel's anti-sentimental violence, and attributable to him (in some degree of reflectorized potency) are some of the novel's most sardonic lines—delivered, for instance, as metaphors antagonistic to sympathy (like letters "stamped from the dough of suffering" and a heart like a "bomb"). In ceding so much figural space to Miss Lonelyhearts's own revolts against feeling, West plays a much more subtle game than Shrike—one that is not always consistent with Shrike's agenda of totalizing travesty. As Jonathan Greenberg argues, "although West's fiction subjects sentimental expressions of feeling to intense satiric scrutiny, it is no less searching in its scrutiny of satire itself, and of the ironic or joking postures...that dismiss feeling."¹⁴⁹

That West leaves at least the sliver of an opening for narrative sympathy with Miss Lonelyhearts is crucial to the novel's parody of counsel. Indeed William Carlos Williams in a

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 204, 215.

¹⁴⁸ Fiedler sets a precedent for this interpretive theme when he calls Miss Lonelyhearts "the fool of pity" (*Love and Death in the American Novel*, 487).

¹⁴⁹ Jonathan Greenberg, "Nathanael West and the Mystery of Feeling," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 3 (2006): 590.

review of *Miss Lonelyhearts* took for granted that the object of West's satire is the advice column itself:

It must be obvious that no serious advice can be given to despairing people who would patronize and even rely on such a newspaper office. The fact is that the newspaper by this means capitalizes [on] misfortune to make sales, offering a pitiful moment's interest to the casual reader while it can do nothing but laugh at those who give it their trust.

Imagine a sensitive man running such a column, a man of imagination who realizes what he is doing and the plot is wound up. What cure? Why the only cure, so far as Nathanael West is concerned, the only truth possible[,] is 'the truth'—along with the effects of the evil upon his protagonist.¹⁵⁰

Williams's response is notable for prioritizing *Miss Lonelyhearts* as the victim of the newspaper's ideological violence (i.e., "evil"). His advocacy for the "sensitive man" may verge on precious, but it gestures toward the impossible feeling situation in which *Miss Lonelyhearts* finds himself—a predicament West heightened by de-christening Thomas Matlock so as to identify the anonymous protagonist solely by his absurd relation to the newspaper and, more generically, to print. However, in laying blame neatly with the newspaper, Williams also risks repeating an error for which *Miss Lonelyhearts* excoriates Betty: pathologizing individual sickness where social ills are at issue.¹⁵¹ Williams interprets the column readers as "the seriously injured of our civic life," "like the worst of our war wounded," whose despair makes them

¹⁵⁰ William Carlos Williams, "Sordid? Good God!," *Contempo* 3, no. 2 (1932): 5.

¹⁵¹ For *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s critique of diagnosing "illness" in place of moral derangement, see *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 12–13. Although this idea has considerable merit within his train of thought, it erupts on Betty as a non sequitur.

susceptible to the newspaper's ploy.¹⁵² Thus he advances an interpretive agenda that the novel calls into question when it lumps readers into an impersonal dough.

Critic Rita Barnard similarly focuses on the newspaper but draws it into a wider view of cultural failure as “both cause and effect of the general decay of experience and narrative.”¹⁵³ Barnard argues that Miss Lonelyhearts's position “dooms him to be an imposter: he is, ironically, employed to provide counsel by the very institution that menaces the ability to give counsel, to ‘produce’ experience in anything other than the fragmentary standardized form of information” that Benjamin regards as the demise of communication.¹⁵⁴ Citing historian Roland Marchand's coinage of the “advice vacuum” resultant from twentieth-century demographic and social shifts, Barnard observes that “the very fact” that the lonelyheart letters “are *letters*, written in isolation and confusion, already signifies the disappearance of the kind of community of tellers and interpreters in which advice is possible.”¹⁵⁵ Scholars of the advice column might contend that Barnard too hastily forecloses potential advantages of anonymity for constructing new spaces for intimate exchange and identity formation, but her account aligns squarely with that of West, who seizes on the column as a supreme site for staging anonymous desperation in a “dead world.”¹⁵⁶ The advice columnist thus becomes the interface between an alienated mass public and forms of

¹⁵² Williams, “Sordid? Good God!,” 8.

¹⁵³ Barnard, *Culture of Abundance*, 196.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 201, 197–198. Marchand argues that in inviting letters from consumers, early twentieth-century advertising seized on a “vacuum it might fill”: “people seemed to suffer from an insufficient sense of ‘the personal’ in modern life. They hungered to be addressed as individuals, in personal tones.” Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 353.

¹⁵⁶ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 9. On the advice column see, for instance, Barbara Green, “Complaints of Everyday Life: Feminist Periodical Culture and Correspondence Columns in *The Woman Worker*, *Women Folk* and *The Freewoman*,” *Modernism/modernity* 19, no. 3, (2012): 461–485.

exchange “reinstated” by the culture industry, as Barnard puts it.¹⁵⁷ In this sense West’s satire targets neither the advice columnist nor its readers per se but instead a culture so brutally impersonal and impersonalizing as to make people need to believe in the column.

In Benjamin Schreier’s apt formulation, appeals for help in *Miss Lonelyhearts* are “framed by the betrayed expectation of a moral economy.”¹⁵⁸ Hence the sagacity of Shrike’s jibe that “the Susan Chesters, the Beatrice Fairfaxes and the Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America.”¹⁵⁹ *Miss Lonelyhearts* is punctuated by reminders of a recently departed God, leaving a vacancy in moral authority for enterprising institutions like the newspaper to fill. Further, the advice column could itself be cast as a “public confessional,” as it was by the original Beatrice Fairfax.¹⁶⁰ However, West’s pseudo-confessional of the advice column is no more efficacious than Barnes’s varieties. Like Nora, who asks four times, “what am I to do?,” only to receive riddles, maledictions, irony, and eventually silence, the penitents of *Miss Lonelyhearts* who repeat “I dont [sic] know what to do” must subsist on a meager fare of Christian homilies, self-help rip-offs, and aesthetic platitudes addressed en masse. As Miss Lonelyhearts laments, “if he could only believe in Christ” the letters would be “extremely easy to answer.”¹⁶¹ It does not matter that his public may draw no more consolation from Christianity than he does. Thus severed from counsel, the modern ritual of the confession-and-answer column

¹⁵⁷ Barnard, *Culture of Abundance*, 205.

¹⁵⁸ Schreier, *The Power of Negative Thinking*, 147.

¹⁵⁹ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 4. It is interesting to note that this line was attributed to Miss Lonelyhearts, not Shrike, in the first of the episodes published in *Contact*. “Susan Chester Heart-to-Heart Letters” was the advice column for the *Brooklyn Eagle* that served as West’s most immediate model. Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), 109–110. Marie Manning, the journalist behind the Beatrice Fairfax column in the *New York Journal*, is credited as the inventor of the American advice column (1898). See Alice Fahs, *Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 121–123.

¹⁶⁰ Marie Manning, *Ladies Then and Now* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1944), 33–34.

¹⁶¹ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 26.

neither presumes nor requires a shared basis of belief. As in *Nightwood*, confessional form is everything: questions meet answers and any answer but “commit suicide” will do—even suicide (which Miss Lonelyhearts once prescribed in an effort to get fired) is off limits not for any moral reason but because it would “defeat [the] purpose” of increasing the paper’s circulation.¹⁶²

This moral vacuum channels a culture’s worth of suffering onto Miss Lonelyhearts’s desk, and he responds to such cartoonish proportions with cartoonishly physicalized responses. His futile search for “a sincere answer” makes his tongue swell like a “fat thumb” that impedes speech.¹⁶³ He is no match for the inanimate objects that “[take] the field against him,” and he is “decisively defeated by the spring of the alarm clock.”¹⁶⁴ He goes to Betty for comfort, only to grope her and then rage cinema-style “with gestures...like those of an old-fashioned actor.”¹⁶⁵ He takes to bed for multi-day hallucinations, and in his dreams he presides as “priest” over the hack-job slaughter of a lamb in the name of “sacrifice.” His most violent externalization of lonelyheart suffering, however, displaces it onto the stranger out of whom he makes random homophobic sport. In the second half of “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man,” he and his friend Ned Gates find an “old man” sitting in a booth of a public toilet. Posing as sexologists they strong-arm the man to a speakeasy and bully him to serve up his “homosexual” “life story.”¹⁶⁶ To extract the confession, Miss Lonelyhearts weaponizes his craft by “loading his voice with sympathy”; when the man still refuses, things escalate:

he took his arm and twisted it. Gates tried to tear him away, but he refused to let go. He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and

¹⁶² Ibid., 18.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 17.

impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all,
Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband.¹⁶⁷

By way of explanation, Miss Lonelyhearts's feeling is identified with the time he killed a frog after stepping on it: "its spilled guts had filled him with pity, but when its suffering had become real to his senses, his pity had turned to rage and he had beaten it frantically until it was dead."¹⁶⁸ Violence is a device to combat feeling. Similarly his pity for the stranger triggers rage against suffering. Miss Lonelyhearts's brutality targets those who have already been victimized, precisely because their pain, having "become real," impinges on him. As Josephine Herbst writes, Miss Lonelyhearts is "stricken with the suffering of the underdog," and here he fights back: in his own words, he needs "to hurt the pain."¹⁶⁹ He meets impersonal violence with more of the same, routing it through a terrorized stranger. Indeed his violence is impersonal not only because the victim is randomly selected, but also because (whether or not the "old man" is homosexual) it does heteronormative work to enforce impersonal laws of social power. Even more so than in *Nightwood*, interpretation concretely figures here as a form of violence.

In West's fictional world even the personal is foreclosed as a realm of anything but brute physicality, and the novel turns on a particular lonelyheart letter that despite getting "personal" fails to be an exception to the impersonality of the dead world. Miss Lonelyhearts meets his reader Fay Doyle when she requests via lonelyheart letter to "see you personal because I feel almost like I knew you."¹⁷⁰ In seeking Miss Lonelyhearts in the flesh, Mrs. Doyle seems to counter the professional ruse of the pseudonymous advice columnist—especially given that her

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 17, 18.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶⁹ Josephine Herbst, "Miss Lonelyhearts: An Allegory," *Contempo* 3, no. 2 (1933): 4; West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 43.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 25.

request is a thinly veiled invitation to sex. However, her physicality, which as it happens is immense, only amplifies the deadening effect that the anonymous letters have on their columnist. The suffering of her orally delivered version takes on the proportions of her person: “the life out of which she spoke was even heavier than her body. A gigantic, living Miss Lonelyhearts letter in the shape of a paper weight had been placed on his brain.”¹⁷¹ Like the frog and the “clean old man,” her affect impinges on him almost as physically as her body does. Afterward he takes to bed for several days, succumbing this time to the violence of illness and hallucination.

Miss Lonelyhearts ricochets between these forms of violence at one extreme and, at the other, peculiarly self-insulating attempts at impersonal love. The novel’s set piece for the enterprise of agape, or impersonal Christian love, is an extended quotation from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. With a Christ figurine gazing down from the wall, Miss Lonelyhearts takes the book to bed and turns to the teachings of Dostoevsky’s Father Zossima, an unorthodox monk with a saintly capacity for love. Zossima’s message is that if one loves every atom of God’s creation, one will “perceive the divine mystery in things” and “come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.”¹⁷² “It was excellent advice,” Miss Lonelyhearts concludes, as though consulting a self-help manual (and in a sense electing Zossima to serve the function of the Benjaminian storyteller).¹⁷³ However, Miss Lonelyhearts’s agape is a strange beast. The reverse of Dostoevsky’s superlatively open, compassionate hero Alyosha, who is Zossima’s disciple, Miss Lonelyhearts turns agape to his advantage by translating it into the American gospel of success. He envisions a syndicated column and spiritual cachet in return for teaching the world to love. Although he can see that he is “fooling himself,” this vision of

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷² Ibid., 8.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

counsel-as-agape is too thoroughly enmeshed in the “Christ business” of newspaper advice and his own self-diagnosed and self-aggrandizing “Christ complex” to reason his way out of.¹⁷⁴

Most disorienting is the fact that even as agape equips Miss Lonelyhearts with impersonality in the vocationally appropriate pose of sympathy, “[his] Christ has nothing to do with love,” as West’s first-person Miss Lonelyhearts puts it in the pages of *Contact*.¹⁷⁵ He may style himself “a humanity lover,” but this champion of “all the broken bastards” shows few signs of being motivated by selfless, universal compassion.¹⁷⁶ So much is made plain when, after a restorative trip to the country with Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts drives through Brooklyn’s slums and sees from the car window crowds of people who remind him of his readers and prompt him to renew “the Christ dream.”¹⁷⁷ Their “broken hands and torn mouths” “overwhelm” him with a “desire to help, and because this desire was sincere, he was happy despite the feeling of guilt which accompanied it.”¹⁷⁸ This transmutation of feelings is complex, but after the initial stimulus of a sight that stirs him, the circuit closes on his own private feelings. He is happy to have felt a sincere desire; he feels guilty to be happy under the circumstances; but he feels relief to feel anything at all. This is not sympathy reaching out towards the other: it is a drive-by, after all.

These conflicted feelings contain the defining conundrum of the novel. In order to melt the “congealed lump of icy fat” that is his heart, Miss Lonelyhearts needs to feel something real; however, surrounded by mass-culture simulacra (“the business of dreams”) and militant anti-sentimentalism (his friends are “machines for making jokes,” for instance), he can locate the real

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 8.

¹⁷⁵ West, “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan,” *Contact* 1, no. 2 (1932): 18.

¹⁷⁶ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 13. In West’s newsroom cant “humanity” is a dismissive term for the generic impersonality of the masses—as when Shrike dismisses Peter Doyle by saying, “you can know nothing about humanity; you are humanity” (45).

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

only amid the destitution and abuse that overwhelm him and lead to violent purges.¹⁷⁹ Miss Lonelyhearts's tactic of pseudo-agape seeks a way out of this bind by evading intersubjective feeling without resorting to the "joke" that had initially protected him from the problem. However, his agape is perfected only when it solidifies into total impermeability in a mental state he calls "the rock," the principal significance of which is that "he [does] not feel."¹⁸⁰ "The rock was the solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, [and] his self-knowledge" into an impenetrable surface that allows him to "love" without experiencing a thing.¹⁸¹ In this state he can even conduct affairs of the heart: he reconciles with Betty (or more precisely "the party dress" by which the rock identifies her) and convinces her to get married and keep the baby she is going to have. Throughout the rock remains "perfect," which is say, untouchable: "neither laughter nor tears could affect" it.¹⁸²

The satire of Miss Lonelyhearts's agape is incomplete, however, because impersonal love is also the source of the novel's singular moment of tenderness and optimism, which arises in connection to "the cripple," Peter Doyle.¹⁸³ Doyle arranges an introduction to Miss Lonelyhearts at the speakeasy, ostensibly to invite him home for dinner on his wife's behalf but more

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 22, 15. As Greenberg writes, Miss Lonelyhearts "longs for something pre- or extra-rhetorical"—some grip on authenticity that can resist the perpetually de-realizing irony of Shrike (*Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, 121).

¹⁸⁰ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 56. In the conceit of "the rock" critic Ronald J. Palumbo detects biblical references that combine associations of barrenness with Christ's designation of Peter (*petrus* or "rock") as "the rock" upon which to build the church of salvation. "Stone and Rock in West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*," *American Notes and Queries* (Jan. 1976): 75.

¹⁸¹ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 56.

¹⁸² Ibid., 52, 54, 56, 55.

¹⁸³ The pastoral scene with its focus on simple work, fresh food, nature, pleasures of the senses, spontaneous desire, etc., may seem to present another such alternative, yet Miss Lonelyhearts applies a legitimate critique: it does not include his readers. It is a form of escapism that he has conscience enough to find unacceptable. A hint that West affirms Miss Lonelyhearts's appraisal is perhaps implied in the name of the country gas station: Aw-Kum-On Garage (*Miss Lonelyhearts*, 37).

pressingly to get advice. Doyle's verbal account of his case is an inarticulate "jumble," and the letter he delivers by hand is as unanswerable as any other: what he "want[s] to no [sic] is what is the whole stinking business for."¹⁸⁴ Yet as Miss Lonelyhearts reads, an alternative to counsel presents itself:

Doyle's damp hand accidentally touched his under the table. [Miss Lonelyhearts] jerked away, but then drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple's. After finishing the letter, he did not let go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage. At first the cripple covered his embarrassment by disguising the meaning of the clasp with a handshake, but he soon gave in to it and they sat silently hand in hand.¹⁸⁵

The scene is beautifully incongruous. It is earnest and sweet, and under the circumstances of West's narrative, nothing short of astonishing. In the speakeasy of all places—the epicenter of masculine bravado and violence—Miss Lonelyhearts finds a chance to try out his preposterously ungrounded agape, which he "force[s]" as a matter of principle on a person who is painfully alert to any slight against his precarious masculinity. Somehow the gesture is sufficient. As it turns out, the advice columnist is most effective without words. If not exactly communicative, the handclasp produces a form of compensation that runs apace of Doyle's suffering. For Doyle it seems to create the effect of recognition of his systematic exclusions from social legitimacy, precisely because it remains impersonal. As though at random Miss Lonelyhearts finds the right level of particularity at which to encounter suffering, neither the sordid "personal" of his encounter with Faye Doyle nor the overwhelming, abstract totality of the pawnshop. Crucially, it functions independently of interpretation, allowing Doyle to remain untouched in his own narrative of pain.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

The moment proves replicable, but its recurrence in the private space of the Doyle's living room is a shade more parodic. Miss Lonelyhearts is inflated with (and narratively ironized by) "the triumphant thing that his humility had become" and obsesses over a "message" that will broach the Doyles' domestic strife. At the first opportunity he attempts to revisit the agapic conquest of holding Doyle's hand. With behaviorist precision, he reproduces the sympathetic smile from the speakeasy; Doyle catches it and sticks out his hand. Mrs. Doyle walks in on them and supplies the requisite line—"what a sweet pair of fairies you guys are"—to end their reprieve from regulation.¹⁸⁶ From there the evening deteriorates. Miss Lonelyhearts gives a ludicrous, "hysterical" speech that presumes to comment on Doyle's manhood and desire; Doyle steps out for more gin; and Mrs. Doyle resumes her advances on Miss Lonelyhearts, who detaches himself from her clutches with repeated blows.

This calamity of agape feeds directly into the novel's final muted—and as Nieland points out, incomplete—catastrophe.¹⁸⁷ In a feverish state of grace, Miss Lonelyhearts finds himself unified with God in heart, mind, and editorial policy.¹⁸⁸ When Doyle shows up at his apartment with a gun wrapped in a newspaper to avenge his wife's attempted rape (thus she reports her last incident with Miss Lonelyhearts), Miss Lonelyhearts interprets the visit as a sign that he is to "embrace the cripple" and so heal him.¹⁸⁹ Never has Doyle been so insistently interpreted as "the cripple" as when Miss Lonelyhearts identifies him as prospective proof of his own salvation: "he would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole."¹⁹⁰ Miss Lonelyhearts's appropriation of Doyle's disability as the

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁸⁷ Nieland, *Feeling Modern*, 213.

¹⁸⁸ West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 56–57.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

matériel of miracle literally backfires. He flings himself at Doyle to “succor with love” not only Doyle but a host of anonymous lonelyhearted sufferers; after a struggle, “the gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts fell, dragging the cripple with him. They both rolled part of the way down the stairs.”¹⁹¹ So ends *Miss Lonelyhearts*. West’s appalling slapstick stalls mid-stair: to signify the novel’s aborted telos, they do not even roll all the way down. Since it is not clear that Miss Lonelyhearts dies, not even his deluded Christ complex can be affirmed in martyrdom. Thus the closing scene delivers the climax to the novel’s nearly relentless failures of counsel. The final one involves the reader. Not only does West refuse to frame the violence as meaningful, he denies even the closure of saying what the outcome of that violence was.

Conclusion

Life is not to be told, call it as loud as you like, it will not tell itself.

—Barnes, *Nightwood*

To return to Benjamin, these novels are not useful. The consequences they set in motion do not produce a moral, proverb, or practical advice. *Nightwood* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* marshal the novel’s capacities for representation not to offer counsel or even to bear witness, but simply to open a space of encounter that neither deprives nor relieves any being of its anonymity. Thus the forms of suffering these novels present remain unremittingly impersonal, and neither their failed priests for the twentieth century nor the novels themselves can say what is at stake in suffering’s persistent anonymity.

Barnes and West intensify the effect of the impersonal narrative’s unmooring from interpretive mainstays by installing the bare suggestion of a narrator, and hence the possibility of a message that is never borne out. Thus these novels speak back to Percy Lubbock with stories

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

that will not suffer a storyteller to authorize their meaning, but furthermore will not tell themselves, either. These novels' permutations on impersonal form do not abstain from suggesting a person behind the view, but they erode that person's authority to certify what is happening or to shape events into meaningful forms. Guarding against the conclusions of their readers, both novels tellingly end with a visual focus on bodies as lumps of matter that, alive or dead, may or may not still be persons.

The narrator's staged abdication brings certain implications to the fore. Barnes and West suggest that impersonality taken in extremis will not be conscripted after all to the imperatives of intelligibility or justice, even as impersonality is invested with the authority of such epistemic virtues as impartiality and detachment. Without a motive force, impersonality refuses to know or to adjudicate. It can level a steady lens at instances and mechanisms of oppression, but it refuses to interpret or arbitrate. To the reader who would impugn that "still I like to know what is what," these texts offer a provocation akin to the verdict of Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor: "you do, do you?... Well then, that's why you are where you are now, right down in the mud without a feather to fly with."¹⁹²

The ambivalence of Barnes and West presents a fitting conclusion to this dissertation's argument that impersonality in the early twentieth century cannot be pinned down as hazard, opportunity, or any single point in between. Whereas impersonality registers for Lewis and Slesinger as a fraudulent rhetoric and for Woolf as an idealized mode of connection, in *Nightwood* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* it is a protracted state of existence that ultimately will not affirm its valence. The indeterminacy of Barnes and West is conceptually vital in that it does not

¹⁹² Barnes, *Nightwood*, 160.

attempt to arrest impersonality's oscillations. The concept remains resolutely pliable, dispossessed of a doctrine, and poised against final interpretation.

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